"No place like e-topia"

Review of *e-topia* by William J. Mitchell

by

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Since the publication of *Cyberspace: First Steps* nine years ago (itself predicated on Marshall McLuhan's prescient, pre-computer, pre-Internet *Understanding Media* of twenty seven years earlier), the flow of non-fiction books about our digital, networked, globalized, and virtualized/dematerialized future has not abated. Our newspapers are full of it, and our general-interest magazines and professional journals are full of it too.

Who does not know that we have entered the Digital- or Information Age, equivalent to the Industrial Revolution in its power to transform lives and landscapes? This new age, furthermore, will generate untold wealth. "Business at the speed of thought" (the title of Bill Gates' latest book) will dissolve all national boundaries, eliminate all sludge, friction, and waiting. In the new, "networked economy," physical proximity—or the lack of it—will all but cease to be a factor in communications between people and between machines. Social identity, social interaction, and geography will become further uncoupled from each other as more and more of us are turned into nomads—wandering, driving, or flying, but "feeding our heads" always and wherever we may be from an ocean of digital information wirelessly, democratically, the same everywhere.

It is easy to get dizzy thinking about such matters. A few hours spent in the hyperactive pages of *Wired* magazine will double the effect. And yet, for all the attention it is receiving, it's hard to state clearly what the coming of the digital age will mean, or ought to mean, for architecture and urban design. Will buildings be swept up, and turned to glass and twinkling dust? Or will they be left behind in the new economy, safeguarding some outmoded, brick-and-mortar notion of "reality"?

At the scale of architecture, it seems clear that the digital age is ushering in new potentials of artistic/formal invention...as well as new potential for economic efficiency in the design and production of (already-too-efficient?) buildings. Guess which will dominate.

At the scale of the city, however, the impeti are more difficult to discern: both greater and less centralization? Greater and less homogeneity? Almost certainly: new patterns of work and living, dwelling and transportation.   Many treatises on the subject have come from sociologists and cultural geographers (most notably, from Manuel Castells, Saskia Sassen, and Edward Soja, not to mention more delirious writers like Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Henri Lefebvre, and Pierre Levy) none of whom tackle the question of the physical design of cities under the new digital regime.

Enter William J. (Bill) Mitchell, Dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning, with the field pretty much to himself and two books on the subject: *City of Bits* (1995), and his latest and in many ways better *e-topia* (with the winsome subtitle, capturing a bit of Star Trek patter, "urban life, jim—but not as we know it").

E-topia is the more fully worked out of the two books, as befits the passage of time. Where *City of Bits* abounds in futurist gee-whizzery ("soon we'll be able to x...," "already we see y...") *e-topia* takes a more measured view. Unfortunately, the literary style of the early chapters of *e-topia* chafes, even as Mitchell introduces the subject: "You say you want a revolution? You want digital technology to deliver new and improved cities? Well, you know, most of the things promised by the digerati just haven't been up there with liberty, equality, and fraternity." Or when he warns the reader not to "...look here for techno-triumphalist, macho-millenial prophecies of a glittering, go-ahead cyberfuture." Or when we learn how information is now "whizzing round the world at warp speed, and in cortex-crackling quantities...in a global process that is just booting up." A tin ear for language is no crime. Nore is a high tolerance for the day's clichés ("Silicon is the new steel, and the Internet the new railroad") and mixed metaphors (today's global currency trading "is really just an early straw in the digital wind. There is much more in the works"), but Mitchell here seems bound and determined to write an airport best-seller for the middle-aged executive reader ("new urban infrastuctures tend to be Viagra versions of older, tireder predecessors that cannot quite do the job anymore"), with all the requisite exclamation marks and alliterative neologisms and talk of "radical transformation" of culture and society that he *says* his book forswears.

It is in later chapters of *e-topia* that Mitchell finds his *metier*. Hyperbole falls away as he provides what is a thorough, and often insightful, survey of how non-local information, once it becomes as cheap and as plentiful and, in a certain way, as unremarkable as water or electricity, will make a difference to how we live. We will soon not have to choose between spending our days embedded in local community environments and spending them in some far-away factory or office downtown, essentially among strangers and without a stake, as citizens, in how these places look and operate. (At least, not those of us wealthy and literate enough to be what Peter Drucker calls "knowledge workers")   Environmentally, opportunities for differentiation increase. When we can shop for everything online (and here we must imagine Internet connections a hundred times faster than the ones we have now),

local stores—even malls and megastores—will lose customers in droves...unless they reconsider in depth what engagement with the local population and local physical environment really offers.

And then there are interface opportunities. Mitchell is less interested in cyberspace—that polyverse into which the world's TV and computer screens act as windows—than he is in how the tides of information from afar this world: not just focally, as when we pay rapt attention to a screen of unfolding information or entertainment, but peripherally, as background—whole walls turning themselves into light shows, mood projections, ambient environments: not light bulbs, not plaster, and not paint, but "pixels, pixels, everywhere." (One thinks of Fremont Street in downtown Las Vegas, with its three-million LED, barrel-vaulted arcade, as an early example.) At the smaller scale, networked digital devices infiltrate everywhere. Not just your pager and cell phone and PDA merged into one, but everything from your door-key to your credit card to your microwave oven is "smart" and can be "talked to," becoming, as Mitchell puts it, "a tangible, local delivery point for an indefinitely extensible, globally distributed pool of resources and services" that knows who and where you are.

Mitchell's survey is more comprehensive than this review can summarize. From it all, two generalizable insights stand out. First, that devices like cell phones undermine the traditional city's orchestration of people's likely location. One need not have spatial habits—favorite cafés, park benches, clubs—and the city need not provide urban concentration points such as public buildings, parks, and squares, if one is always and everywhere available by phone, or online, and if all face-to-face meetings can be precisely pre-arranged as to time and place. Under these circumstances, should one choose to meet "in public," other people become wallpaper, mere atmospherics. From this and other observations, Mitchell draws a larger conclusion about the future of cities and what will help shape them. He calls it a new "economy of presence." We are beginning to have, Mitchell says, many more choices as to how we come into contact with one another, with full, face-to-face (and body-to-body) contact as the ultimate and utlimately scarce "good." From now on, not just celebrities and CEOs will assidously ritualize and control when, and who, and how, and how richly others can reach us, but we all will. Call me, fax me, page me, or e-mail me, speak to my assistant, agent, message-service, voice-mail or PDA. Who shall give my car phone/cell-phone number to? I have a Web-presence, a mail-presence, a voice-presence, a video- presence, and media-presence as well as to some a physical one.

Where do I live? Where am I now? Who wants to know?

E-topia raises such questions, and it is essential for architects to confront them. For once upon a time, architecture and the layout of cities answered them as surely as did well-understood hierarchies of power and class. As the world changes, so do the reasons for having places at all. It becomes essential that we recover from the traditional environments that we know and love what is best in them, and to do so

with sufficient attention to detail as to avoid inauthenticity. It is to Bill Mitchell's credit to show that the coming "Digital Age" will throw not just architects but everyone into a re-evaluation of what we want from real places. Our choices have never been greater.•