

PROVISIONAL TITLE: Neighbourhood Markup Language (NML)

INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC SPACE

The meaning of public space has been shifting over the past century. A public used to be a relatively homogenous group of people sharing a history as well as a physical place. Shared place mirrored shared traditions, shared beliefs, shared way of life. In today's cities, the diverse ethnic mix of most neighbourhoods strips away many of the bonds that used to unite a community. Now we have very diverse perspectives coexisting in a shared physical frame. I take public, for my purposes, to refer to a collection of individuals linked predominantly by shared physical context and physical systems.

PRIVATE

is a slippery word. It scales from personal inner life, to intimate social space, to clubs of shared interest, to the whole corporate sector. I will use it predominantly in the most personal sense.

CONVERGENCE

Integration, miniaturization, standardization, possibly homogenization. Convergence is happening in hardware devices, in data structures and media formats, in business and entertainment culture, in unified utility resources like the internet.

PORTABILITY AND LOCATION

Convergence in general has diminished the significance of physical location. But portability and ubiquitous access has the inverse implication as well. It allows you to work, communicate, research anywhere, but in practice you are always doing this precisely 'somewhere', and in bald physical terms, the precision of this locality increases as the size of the device decreases. The addition of a GPS device into the convergence mix makes locality an issue again.

Portability allows for the spontaneous creation of zones of private space within public space. Private reverie has always been a component of public space but portable devices seem to be encouraging a new kind of virtual privacy which carries with it an unconscious anti-social quality. Interpersonal distance is magnified as through a backwards telescope.

Corporate convergence via mergers and acquisitions homogenizes the physical context of social space. Local stores are being taken over by global chains. As local character slips away, the significance of shared community space is devalued.

So I come to the following questions: Does the model of a community based in shared physical context rather than shared interests, belief and background have any

continuing value? And if so, how can technologies that by their nature reduce the significance of locality be used to preserve the value of the public space of local community?

I will hazard an intuitive, subjective opinion that the answer to the first question is 'yes'. My project seeks to address the second.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

I am not, by nature, a utopian dreamer. But I felt compelled in this instance to propose a constructive project with a positive slant. I decided to try and imagine a new kind of social frame, a way of reactivating the shared experience of public space, enabled by the properties of convergent devices.

In considering the issues raised by the project themes, particularly the implications of communications networks and devices with respect to locality, I found myself returning again and again to the persistent, spatial scent-based animal communications networks, like the rich (to dogs) olfactory mappings of urine marked trees and fire hydrants and the marker trails that lead ants to food and back to the nest. And so I am proposing a system for annotating physical space. The project is provisionally and not entirely satisfactorily titled "NML: Neighbourhood Markup Language".

All content in the proposed system is addressed (for both saving and accessing) using the GPS determined location of the reader/writer. A message, image or sound saved from a certain location is only retrievable by someone physically located within a certain radius of that same position... it can only be summoned up in its physical and social context.

Annotations might include reminder notes left for oneself or friends (perhaps encrypted), personal observations, public notices, sounds, historical or architectural notes (official and personal), memorials, recommendations of interesting side-streets for the casual walker, exchanges of views on local issues, a story, a game, personal tours, markers for a treasure hunt.

Access is possible from any wireless networked portable computing device with a GPS unit. The user would be able to configure the device to continuously scan the content attached to the immediate vicinity for the presence of annotations, with customizable filters to reduce local data clutter to those of greatest interest to the user. Things already accessed would be marked as read and filtered out as well, unless intentionally called up. As the aim is not to further fragment public space by encouraging people to walk around with faces glued to small LCD screens, audio would be a preferred format for the annotations.

The device would indicate, perhaps through vibration, when data comes into range. On the other hand, a discrete but distinctive audible indicator (the social calls of crickets or frogs?) might be interesting as a signifier of data reception. Having a sound that is

not personalizable might result in a positive confusion: "It was not my device, but then what is here that someone else is interested in..." Browsing or searching the entire set of annotations for one's current position would be possible through a familiar web-style interface.

Access would often be a private experience. On the other hand, two or more people in the same location at the same time with compatible filters might suddenly find themselves considering the annotation and its context in parallel... somewhat like what already happens in exceptional circumstances like a fire or a traffic accident, but potentially much more frequent.

Newsgroup-like discussions might exist, but the willingness to flame might be tempered by the requirement of physical presence to make one's response, returning the sense of consequence to the expressive act.

Management of local annotations would ideally be a shared community responsibility. Hate-graffiti and slander are inevitable and are components of any public space. Inflammatory remarks and overt advertising could be flagged, or segregated. Censorship would be discouraged. A controlled context for local advertising would be necessary, to prevent persistent abuse of the system by aggressive local retailers. One could voluntarily subscribe to local vendors notes, but unsolicited advertising would be filtered out. Some sorts of annotations would be assigned a life-span, items with ongoing interest retained and others archived or deleted.

The project is designed for a point in the future when virtually everyone is carrying an appropriate accessing device with appropriate access. (I don't own a cell-phone, portable computer or palm-pilot.)

David Rokeby, September 20, 2001