

HARD SHOULDERS SOFT VERGES

interactive illustrations by Ben Hooker and Shona Kitchen.

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HARD SHOULDERS SOFT VERGES Proposal

For this project, we are primarily concerned with examining technological mediation of social behaviour and cultural meaning.

Description of project

HARD SHOULDERS SOFT VERGES

The basic question we would like to address is "Can digital technologies be designed for public spaces so that they enhance, rather than distract from, the culture and aesthetics of their surroundings?"

There is growing interest in deploying digital technologies in public spaces, where they offer a variety of benefits such as interactive access to information, support for community cohesion, and a variety of commercial possibilities. Examples of existing or proposed systems range in scale and function, including ATM machines, internet kiosks, networked café tables, and animated billboards. While useful and effective for many purposes, we feel these represent a narrow range of the possible forms, functions, and cultural roles that future public uses of technology might take.

Existing examples are characterised by generic forms and functionality meant to be equally applicable in many situations. Focusing on generalisation in their initial development, however, means that opportunities for devices that respond creatively to their surroundings, both in terms of their physical appearance and the functions they offer, are likely to be overlooked. The result is that animated billboards and internet kiosks alike are difficult to situate well in existing spaces, and instead seem imposed on the environment. Rather than extending public spaces, they offer a choice to escape them, encouraging users to shift their attention from their physical surroundings to disconnected virtual worlds.

HARD SHOULDERS SOFT VERGES will explore possibilities for creating synergy between the virtual and physical to develop new roles, applications, and configurations of digital technologies in public spaces. Taking a site-specific approach, we will propose ways of using interactive electronic systems to enrich and extend existing physical spaces in the city. The result will be a new palette of design possibilities that can be applied by future designers of political, commercial, or cultural public displays.

A series of different sites have been chosen in London from areas in the outer suburbs through to the inner city. Associations between aspects of each site's spatial and social characteristics will be

used to stimulate the designs of alternative landscapes. The proposed systems will combine real and virtual elements to create changeable landscapes, encouraging people to rethink everyday journeys through the city by providing alternative thoroughfares and viewpoints within the built environment. With interactivity based on changing temperature, traffic patterns, light, or sound, the systems will reflect animate and inanimate flows. We will explore how to direct attention to existing details of sites, suggest narrative possibilities, and create imaginary extensions of the environment. In each case, our approach is to explore ways to amplify the richness, intricacy, and narrative possibilities of existing spaces by extending them electronically.

HARD SHOULDERS SOFT VERGES will be carried out using design as a form of research, in which proposals and concepts are developed to provide a foundation for subsequent analysis. This allows the forms, functions, and cultural meanings of public uses of technology to be explored simultaneously. Creating proposals targeted narrowly at specific contexts will allow us to explore ideas and possibilities that a more general approach would overlook. Our belief is that the results will nonetheless be generalisable: that by articulating the issues and rationale involved in the designs we will be able to draw general lessons for future public technologies to be used in commercial and civic contexts.

The Results

The primary deliverable of the project will take the form of interactive web-based illustrations which propose ways of overlaying existing physical spaces in the city with interactive electronic environments. This is a cost efficient and compelling way to develop concept designs for interactive systems, allowing researchers, practitioners, and the general public to comment on the proposals.

Project objectives and goals

- To develop new ways to amplify the richness, intricacy, and narrative possibilities of existing spaces by extending them electronically.
- To use a site-specific, design oriented approach as a method for exposing broader issues for future public technologies to be used in commercial and civic contexts.
- To develop interactive, web-based illustrations allowing researchers, practitioners, and the general public to comment on and develop the proposals.
- To develop a new palette of design possibilities that will inform, guide, and inspire the industry.

As digital technologies expand from business and laboratory settings into public spaces, our homes, even the things we wear or carry with us, the role of designers in shaping their aesthetics, functions, and cultural roles is becoming increasingly important. It is no longer enough for devices merely to work or even to be easy to use; they must further appeal to the public, speaking to the values we have in our everyday lives.

More specifically, the HARD SHOULDERS SOFT VERGES project will allow us to explore the future of technologies deployed in public spaces in a way that is usefully unconstrained by immediate commercial requirements. This will allow us to leapfrog current conceptions of information kiosks, digital advertising, electronic notice boards, and the like, to consider technologies that integrate more subtly both with their surroundings and with peoples' lives.

The results will have several kinds of payoff. The proposals may form the seeds of new applications of commercial value. Second, they will raise new issues and ideas for researchers, both in their content and in the strategies used to develop them. Finally, they may provide the basis for a discussion with the wider public about their attitudes towards existing technology, their aspirations for their lives, and the new possibilities that technologies could potentially offer.