THE CYBERPLACES OF SPACES

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ABSTRACT:

There can be no hiding the fact that the world is indeed morphing into the digitally enhanced society our sci-fi forefathers\(^1\) had always dreamed of. Increasingly, the idea of a seamless co-existence of the physical world to that of the virtual, cyber, is within our grasp\(^2\). In fact we are already living in a time where the phenomenon of going online (into a virtual place) has become entrenched into our everyday existence of socializing, working and doing basic transactions\(^3\).

Indeed, the portal into this virtual, after-reality is as simple as plugging your digital gadgets into the right nodal LAN points, of which have become very much a part of our physical landscape. As such, every space is a potential portal, may they be cyber cafes in airports, up in an airplane, at home, school or even at work. In this sense, the geographical aspect of where we choose to enter the after-realm is not so much an issue anymore. *The Net is ambient - nowhere in particular but everywhere at once.* \(^4\)

Mobility of the physical body from its geographical restrictions is greatly enhanced as the physical self is liberated from its virtual roaming. In fact, cyberspace has been seen by some to be a disemboding experience with transcendental and liberating effects.\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Sci-fi icons of the era as conjured by these pioneers. Eg. 2001: A Space Odyssey where it had 2 always been Man and Machine.

\(^2\) Some have managed to depict the co-existence of the Man and Machine in the form of cyborgs in 'Aliens', 'Neon Genesis: Evangelion', 'Ghost in the shell'. However, it is noted that there are some who have gone the other way, suggesting the separation of the conscience totally from the 'meat machine' - Neuromancer, William Gibson, 1984. And in some instances like in Darth Vader, George Lucas's infamous antihero in Star Wars who through the episodes depict his struggles and wavering convictions towards his Master the Emperor who gave him a new tease of life through his black life support suit, fusing his physical body into a life into 'slavery'.

\(^3\) The accessibility into this virtual realm of information is of course very much influenced by the opportunities, resources and circumstances of the individual. The idea of the Internet may well not be a priority in some P World countries where food and water scarcity and political instabilities still remain as crucial national issues.


\(^5\) Along this line of thought towards this transcendental effect of the human conscience from the physical self which harbors philosophies of finding 'enlightenment' through new technologies, it would be prudent however to consider the dangers lurking in these sort of preoccupations. In our digital times, we're now not talking about the liberated self as depicted in the traditional religions of Buddhism or Christianity. As depicted in Babylonian times in Christian scriptures, human's exaggerated self-confidence, boosted by the ease of data exchange and technological advancement culminated into the manifestation of the Tower of Babel, can only lead to destruction, followed by the proliferation of languages and myriad tribes and nations.
Nevertheless, the virtual realm is still very much 'tied' back to the physical realm we live in, very often mimicking the real life protocols for communication and reality. It is thus with this premise that the dissertation begins, exploring such a virtual reality which is superimposed on the physical reality and very much entrenched in our everyday living.

Importantly, the crucial link between these two worlds will be that of interfaces and how user-friendly and reliable they are in providing a seamless existence. Integral questions on how cities and urban life interrelate and 'extend' into the virtual realm with the proliferation of electronic networks in all walks of life and at all geographical levels will be explored.

Will this virtual landscape make our cluttered physical realm obsolete, so that we will no longer need to venture outdoors, content instead to surf the ubiquitous World Wide Web for all forms of work and pleasure? What happens when cities move away from an economy involved with the production and circulation of material goods to one increasingly geared towards the production and consumption of 'symbolic and 'informational' goods? How does the move from physical, local neighborhoods towards the specialized social communities online affect the social life of cities? Inevitably, the role and solutions of both urban designers and architects as they engage with these issues in the process and making of the physical environment will be re-evaluated in this new information age.

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