Cité Multimédia: Noise and Contamination in the Information City

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Urban Mediation

The information city, like an updated version of the garden city, presents an encompassing vision of an ideal metropolis. Instead of harmonious integration with a green landscape, this urban zone seamlessly fuses with the organic flow of information technology. Yet in the process of wiring our cities toward a global geography, we discover a relationship between urban space and information that is about more than the blissful exchange of data. While Manuel Castells focuses on the "space of flows" in order to characterize the emerging forms of the informational city, the accelerated pace of development, from suburbia to exurbia to inner-city, simultaneously yields an increasing measure of overproduction and obsolescence. The attempt to capture the city through the proliferation of information and its attendant virtual and imagistic mechanisms generates volumes of noise, residue and excess.

The media city as an urban project has been around for at least two decades. Peter Droege writes that as early as the 1980s there was "a wave of highly visible initiatives presented under

labels such as 'information city' or, even more ambitiously, 'intelligent city'."[1] Saturated with

information, the city progresses to a more strategic position, with a larger scope of economic

relevance and renewed production capacity. From Dubai to Shanghai, Flanders and

Hamburg, and from media park to media city, media metropolis and internet city, a new global

geography has emerged. One such media city, the Cité Multimédia located in Montréal, is a

post-industrial landscape reinvented to host businesses working in the information technology

and multimedia fields. As a site for renewed accumulation and distribution, Cité Multimédia

reveals how the urban context thwarts the structuring impulse of information. The attempt to

manage the city to make it legible, informative, and by extension productive, distorts the city

through the transfer between virtual media and urban space. While the virtual is defined by

many as the field of possibility, Niklas Luhmann notes that possibility is actually synonymous

with noise, which in the terms of information theory is the constant source for new information.[2]

Noise is the site of the (necessarily) inexhaustible.

The City in Ruins

Located in the Faubourg des Récollets, Cité Multimédia occupies the area that was Montréal's

first suburb, originally located outside the city walls. As a peripheral zone, its land uses often

fluctuated, and it was originally the spot where less wealthy Montrealers built wooden homes,

which were prone to fire damage and forbidden from the fortified city. Yet this *terrain vague*

eventually shifted to become a more central area in the city's development. Port activities,

including the construction of the Lachine Canal, played an important role in establishing

Montréal as a central North American city in the 19th Century. Industries related to

[1] Droege, Peter. "Tomorrow's Metropolis—Virtualization Takes Command," in *Intelligent Environments: Spatial Aspects of the Information Revolution*, ed. Peter Droege (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 1997), 4.

manufacturing, transportation and storage proliferated in the Faubourg. Yet with the 1930s

Depression, the area declined and lapsed into disuse. The Lachine Canal was closed down in

1959 after the construction of the Saint Lawrence Seaway, and the district was divided by the

construction of the Bonaventure highway in 1965. With these events, "obsolete industries

closed down while others relocated to other parts of the city. Gradually, parking lots took over

after buildings either burnt down or were torn down, rendering it nothing more than a vast

parking lot among a few abandoned buildings."[3]   With this back-and-forth movement between

periphery and center, it is apparent that peripheral zones always exist in complement to

centers, and even give way to centralizing tendencies as cities shift and form new centers.

While a number of information developments have sprung up on urban peripheries, these

locations become new centers that initiate cycles of obsolescence.

At work too, in the movement between periphery and center, is the attempt to control the

"urban dust" that settles in and threatens to overtake the city. Yves-Alain Bois writes in his

discussion of the formless that "to return dead zones to commercial circulation is to try to

prevent the invasion of dust."[4] The city's deserted industrial areas accumulate debris and

discards, all the waste that necessarily accompanies production, and is always an act of

overproduction. Such an entropic view of the city pulls straight from the texts of information

theory, which suggest that the ever-increasing production of information is always

accompanied by increasing degrees of noise. The information city is a then a site of doubly

amplified cacophony.

[2] Rasch, William. "Injecting Noise into the System," in Niklas *Luhmann's Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000).
[3] www.citemultimedia.com. Also see: Malo, Pierre. *Faubourg des Recollets* (Montreal: McGill Architecture Thesis, 1990).

By the 1960s, the Faubourg des Recollets was the site of abandoned foundries, iron scrap yards and endless parking lots—land uses considered incompatible with urban life, even though the processes of urban life generated the conditions of incompatibility. The city, it seems, exerts a gravitational pull, attracting and generating what Bois calls "the noncompatible accumulation of unassimilable waste."[5] Post-industrial districts are especially marked as spaces of waste and abandon, splayed out in an undifferentiated emptiness. The parking lot is the perfect remainder demarcating the post-industrial landscape, as it eats away at the city in between phases of production. Ed Ruscha documents this condition, revealing that although empty, the parking lot is a machine for producing even more waste. This machine, or urban organism as Bois indicates, "always tries, of course, to combat entropic proliferation at the same time that it generates it; as a capitalist enterprise, the city always invents new means of recycling waste."[6] Even as the Faubourg des Recollets languished in a state of abandon for several decades, its eventual reinvention (or recycling) suggested that it was always on its way toward more production, overproduction, and eventually, waste and abandon.

Ruins in Reverse

All of this is to suggest that, in the process of constructing Montréal's Cité Multimédia, the district is ruined even as it is reclaimed. Ruination is inherent to the process, both in the recovery and the projected future. Information as an urban renewal tactic simultaneously presents itself as an even more accelerated course of obsolescence. Prior to the construction of Cité Multimédia, contaminated land was cleaned up and "archaeological digs were carried out wherever the land was excavated in order to retrieve artefacts bearing witness to

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[4] Bois, Yves-Alain. "Zone" in *Formless: A User's Guide*, Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 228.
[5] Ibid., 226.
[6] Ibid.

Montréal's history."[7] Retrieval becomes a way of reshifting the ruins, adding to while

exhuming. A continuous process, as Marshall McLuhan suggests, because through retrieval

we continually add "the preferences of the present."[8] The Cité plays out a process of "ruins in

reverse," as it occupies the ruins at the same time that it is built. This, as   Smithson suggests,

describes a situation where "buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built, but rather rise into

ruin as they are built."[9] All new construction, eventual monuments of the media city, appears

already as a ruined zone.

As the industrial debris is cleared away to remake the district as an information city, the

abandoned sites and parking lots to be cleared appear in sharper relief. These remainders

stand out against development that attempts to rationalize urban plots to increase productivity,

all the while generating even greater stores of excess. In this sense, information, like industry,

ensures a persistent process of contamination. The Cité Multimédia landscape master plan

suggests as much, likening the district to a sullied botanical garden, a site of collected and

confused knowledge that defines a new landscape. In this "veritable vegetable NASDAQ"

("*veritable NASDAQ végétale*") is a system of information exchange and crossover that

parallels the mixed and worldly space of the botanical garden. What may once have been

natural or native to the site gives way to the emergence of a new urban landscape, a site of

contamination and hybridity. The media city becomes a tainted but well-stocked garden,

where the haphazard spread of contagion is essential to its growth (and subsequent demise).

Information is then a process of contamination not unlike urban industry, moving as much by

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[7] Cite Multimedia. "The Multimedia City of Montreal," Metropolis Award (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2001), p.11.
[8] Cavell, Richard. *McLuhan in Space* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2002), 66.
[9] Smithson, Robert. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

virtual as physical means, so that the urban landscape is infected by a new form of pollution while in contact with this viral information.[10]

Information technology then at once confirms as it reverses the ruins. The literal storage sheds, full of debris, are removed to make room for another articulation, or retrieval, of the site that builds up the information city while it frames and files away images of the industrial city. Industrial remnants in Montreal's Faubourg des Récollets were recycled to become an "industrial product." These artifacts, as Beatriz Colomina notes, are "the folklore of the age of communications."[11] The imageability of the industrial ruins was the impetus for art and architecture installations sponsored by an artist organization, Quartier Éphémère. These projects set out to transform the derelict district by investing in abandoned buildings and setting up temporary installations, including several image and sound works in the most monumental of ruins—the waterfront silos.[12] The extraction of images from post-industrial ruins has an even longer history. Attempting to reinvent itself as a post-industrial city (and in time for the Olympics), Montréal set about selectively demolishing its waterfront silos in 1976 to increase the city's imageability. In this way, "the old city offered the greatest visibility on the promotional level and thus contributed in an essential way to the image of Montréal."[13] This process of development by image reveals how the city and its architecture become media. As Colomina notes, this is true to such an extent that the "relationship between architecture and the media," is less significant than "the possibility of thinking of architecture as media."[14] The

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[10] RAM: Ressources en aménagement. *Concept d'aménagement de la Cité du Multimédia.* Rapport Preliminaire (04/07/00), 8.

[11] Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Architecture and Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 181.

[12] Giasson, Isabelle, Cité Multimédia, interview, November 14, 2002.

[13] La Mothe, Bernard. "The New Montreal: A Longstanding Public Project," in *The New Montreal: Major Urban Projects in Old Montreal*, Marc H. Choko, curator (Montreal: Design Centre / UQAM, 2001), 30.

[14] Colomina, 15.

industrial past together with the informational future collapse into a seemingly well-composed scene.

The architectural master plans produced in the process of Cité Multimédia's development play a central role in packaging, conceptualizing and writing the story of the information city. These plans focus on rehabilitating the area by inventorying existing industrial architecture and establishing guidelines for new buildings, but at the same time evaluating which buildings to demolish in order to make room for new buildings with a "contemporary IT look."[15] As a guide to the future city, the master plan seeks to make way for an enhanced presence for Cité Multimédia, and defines specific opportunities to implement IT architecture with the IT look. IT architecture integrated with the more fashionable architectural remnants, however, feeds on the look of industrial ruination, staking out the newest style while incorporating the picture of obsolescence.

The importance of the "look" of architecture speaks to Colomina's statement that "the emerging systems of communication…are the true site within which modern architecture is produced and with which it directly engages."[16] Space becomes fully conflated with communications, where media articulate environments. Lev Manovich, however, goes so far as to suggests that with new media, "space becomes a media type. Just as other media types—audio, video, stills, and text—it can now be instantly transmitted, stored, and retrieved; compressed, reformatted, streamed, filtered, computed, programmed, and interacted with."[17] Like any other medium, space can be easily broken down into bits and transmitted as data. Presumably if space itself

[15] Giasson, November 14, 2002. Also see: Groupe Cardinal Hardy. *Cite du Multimedia*: *Plan de Developpement*, Rapport Final (Janvier 1999).
[16] Colomina, 14.

is so malleable, then the city could just as easily be worked on through a series of digital operations.

Yet Richard Coyne qualifies the assertion that space is just another media type. He troubles the assumption that space can be described and defined in terms of information, and hence transformed through any number of spatial programs—CAD, GIS, VR—which operate on space through a process of "numbers, symbols and relationships."[18] This abstract space of architectural graphics and virtual reality is "stripped of concern," or in other words, "neutralized into pure dimensions. … a container without bounds."[19] Virtual reality alone is evidence of the assumption that information transcends space, which may be freely manipulated and recreated. Coyne writes, however, that the "the inadequacies of a virtual reality in providing totally immersive spatial environments suggest that perhaps space is not, after all, transcended by information."[20] All of this implies that information does not encapsulate space, but instead actually articulates (and depends upon) spatial relationships. While it may appear that the virtual imaginary deployed by new media exceeds space, it is actually more of a vehicle for inhabiting space, which is why it may give us the impression of complete containment. This, as Lefebvre notes, is because a "spatial code is not simply a means of reading or interpreting space: rather it is a means of living in that space, of understanding it, and of producing it."[21]

Wiring the Ruins

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[17] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 251.
[18] Coyne, Richard. "Language, Space and Information," in *Intelligent Environments: Spatial Aspects of the Information Revolution*, ed. Peter Droege (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 1997), 500.
[19] Ibid., 506.
[20] Ibid., 500.
[21] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space (*Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Press, 1991), 47.

The extent to which components of physical urban space serve as a structuring context for information technology illuminates this relationship. Often systems hardware is overlaid on the ruins of the city's earlier technological infrastructure. As Stephen Graham writes, the process of "getting it into the ground" and setting up these systems, is both labor and resource intensive. He notes "it is paradoxical, however, that an industry which endlessly proclaims the 'death of distance' actually remains driven by the old-fashioned geographic imperative of using networks to drive physical market access." Fiber optic cable is often overlaid on existing, obsolete infrastructure, "through the older networks of ducts and leeways that are literally sunk deep within the archaeological root systems of old urban cores."[22] Much like the digging up and retrieving of archaeological remains during the process of clearing land for Cité Multimédia, here outdated urban systems are wired to become the backbone for new communications systems. In all of this, the telematic system is dependent upon the existing spatial fabric—particularly the ruins—to establish the new information city.

The City is the Message

Between information and space, we find that for McLuhan "space was the medium of communication: uttering as outering."[23] He defines a process of space-making through extension, where the nervous system—extended through media—defines cultural topographies. The Cité Multimédia landscape master plan attempts to locate this extension in the processes of information, yet a certain confusion emerges in an attempt to correlate the city, the medium and the message. The plan notes:

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[22] Graham, Stephen. "Communication Grids: Cities and Infrastructures," in *Global Networks, Linked Cities*, ed. Saskia Sassen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 81.
[23] Cavell, 6.

The medium is the message
And if
The city is the medium
Then
The message is
A city[24]

Nearly reading as a logical proof, the statement presents circular reasoning that gives rise to

the question: if the city is the message, are we left with urbanity as syllogism, or are we instead

forced to consider that the message fails to contain the urban medium? So while information

technology, as a means of extension, articulates urban space, it becomes more apparent that

it doesn't contain space per se, so much as draw it out in very particular ways. But neither

does the city pre-exist communication circuits; instead of suggesting an essential entity, urban

excess reveals states of incompletion, materiality, the untranslatable. In an endless iteration,

we must always return to the city as a messy medium that hinders the transmission of

message as absolute information. As Bois writes, "in this sense, the city itself, as a

megalopolis, has become pure noise, pure zone."[25] Noise is characteristic of the urban

medium.

The relationship between city and information is further reconfigured through McLuhan's

suggestion that communication is not about transported information "'from a source to a target,

but a transformation of the source and target simultaneously.'"[26] The city structures

information as much as information contaminates the spatial extensity of the city. Information

does not transcend space, as Coyne suggests, but is made in the process of extending

through and plugging into space. So even when we attempt to distill the city to a plan, a virtual

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[24] RAM, 12. "*Puisque le médium est le message, et si la cité est le medium, et le message une cite.*"
[25] Bois, 230.
[26] Cavell, 5.

tour, or a site of information trafficking, a residue remains. As Lefebvre writes, "communication brings the non-communicated into the realm of the communicated—the *incommunicable* having no existence beyond that of an ever-pursued residue."[27] This residue, or noise, is exactly what McLuhan correlates with the medium, which with its side-effects and unintended changes actually structures a larger environment of communications.   Which raises the question as to whether we would better describe the city through its residue: all that is left over in the process of attempted definition. Entropic increases, which certain information theory defines itself against, lead to noise that is useless, redundant, and interferes with the transmission of the message. But Bois suggests in his study of Bataille, there is reason to be an optimist amid the noise. Here we find what can't be restricted, the inexhaustible and incomplete.[28] What, finally, is the message we locate in the Information City? The medium is noise. Our cities, side effects.

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[27] Lefebvre, 28-29.
[28] Bois, 224.