

THIS WEEK COLIN KEAYS examines the repercussions of the ongoing digitisation of the urban environment, raising important questions about the public sphere, one's agency within it, and the potential of digital tools for change.—EDS.

A RE-ORIENTATION TOWARDS THE DIGITAL

Colin Keays

HOW WE TRAVEL, communicate, eat and date can now be controlled by a series of tapping, zooming and scrolling rituals. From booking a taxi from wherever we stand via Uber, to finding an apartment for a city break with Airbnb, rapid technological advancements have suffused our surroundings with a dense layer of digital interaction, giving a new level of choice to users. Technology has woven itself so tightly into the ways that we interact with the city that the digital space we experience, through pixels and notifications, is often inseparable from the one rendered in bricks and concrete. But this sense of endless convenience at our fingertips disguises an increasing concentration of power by major tech companies and the mediation of our every urban experience by the private sector. As network technologies infiltrate our cities, how have they contributed to the erosion of what is left of the public sphere?

The privatisation of public property is nothing new. Much of Britain's housing stock went out of state hands and into private ownership with the advent of Margaret Thatcher's Right To Buy policy in the 1980s. More recently, there has been a lot of controversy over the ways in which 'public' spaces are increasingly created by, and in the stewardship of, private developers. In some *privately owned public spaces*, particularly in Britain, property managers have been able to apply different rules and regulations to their spaces than those found in truly public land. Such rules typically exclude the most vulnerable members of the population. That so many interactions with the city are



now happening through technology—and therefore via tech companies—it can be understood that an entirely new portion of the city sits within the private domain.

This orientation towards the private sphere can be understood from a secondary perspective. When one operates as a user, rather than a citizen of a city, the very experience of publicness is altered; in orienting ourselves towards digital systems, it is not necessarily the physical space itself that becomes privatised, but our very *experience* of that space.

As Georges Teyssot reminds us in *A Topography of Everyday Constellations*, 'private' began as a negative concept deriving from the Latin 'privare', meaning to deprive someone of something. His negative notion of subtraction would therefore indicate the public realm, whether in the abstract or manifesting in the city, as being more inclusive. Public space, says Pascal Gielen in *Performing the Common City: On the Crossroads of Art, Politics, and Public Life*, provides a platform to meet 'the alien, the strange, people with different ideas or beliefs'. However, there are a number of systems and infrastructures already in place which limit such interactions, reducing the diversity of residents that are allowed to use a particular space. As the experience of public space is increasingly governed by algorithms

created by private companies, this process of exclusion is intensified.

Contemporary neoliberal models of the city rely heavily on corporate forces to grow, creating an environment that champions the individual consumer above all else. Perhaps the fact nearly everyone has access to technology in their pocket is symptomatic of this. While on one hand we are connected to each other more than ever through technology, on the other our relationship to our immediate environment is fragmented.

Consider, for example, apps using geospatial technology such as Google Maps, available on nearly all mobile devices since 2008. Traditionally, when navigating an urban environment, one might find their way in relation to their surroundings by cross-referencing a map to physical landmarks and street signs. Google Maps has completely inverted this. By putting a geolocate blue dot at the centre of each map, our experience of the city no longer is about *where we are* in relation to our urban surroundings, but *what those surroundings are* in relation to us. It is worth asking if this (literally) self-centred view of the city constitutes in part the individualisation of public space. Moreover, users are likely to navigate based upon suggestions from the app—nearby cafés, bars, and museums—which are ranked and

recommended through pattern recognition and algorithmic processes, and which ultimately serve private sector interests. This means our relationship to public space is increasingly defined by commercial interests, which in turn continually redefine our parameters of choice.

Interestingly, 'the pale blue dot' used by Google Maps has a strong semiotic connection with the photograph of the same name taken by NASA's Voyager 1 in February 1990, in which Earth appears no wider than a single pixel. This photograph is often recognised as the impetus for our collective philosophical reflections on the diminutiveness of humanity in relation to the universe. It is therefore no small irony that the instrument of the individualisation of our cities should be one's very own blue dot.

What if, counter to its intended use, Google's blinking dot served as a reminder of the minuteness of each user as an anonymous point of data within an infinitely larger data network? A network that functions not as a benignly indifferent void but a system of surveillance? Consider the fact that by using these technologies to guide us through our environments, users automatically consent to the real-time logging and storing of our movements and routines. Then consider that it was recently revealed that even when location settings are turned off, Google still tracks users through their smartphones. This raises important and often troubling questions about our privacy, and the ownership of our data.

Issues of accessibility also arise when a private technology company takes over the role of providing public services. On one hand, they can provide a more rapid solution to problems where elected officials might be slow to act due to layers of bureaucracy and a lack of funding. One the other, this outsourcing arguably reduces the necessary demand and pressure on government authorities to perform.

Just last year the Chinese bicycle sharing company Mobike launched in Manchester, marking their European debut. This coincided with the city's first elected Mayor, Andy Burnham, who had promised an 'iconic' bike hire scheme for the city in his election manifesto weeks earlier. After Burnham initiated a large public works program to make the city more bike-friendly, Mobike stepped in to provide over two hundred bikes, hoping to add a further thousand in the near future. However, just over a year after it was launched, the scheme was pulled from the city, with the company citing vandalism and theft.

This case illustrates the dangers in relying



on profit-driven entities to provide public services: when something is no longer profitable there is little will, loyalty, or incentive to continue. For Manchester, this ultimately deprived the city of a public bike share altogether.

There is arguably a somewhat limited demographic of the public towards which such digital systems are targeted: smartphone users with disposable income. To ride a Mobike, for instance, a user must be in possession of a smartphone which is connected to a bank account. Similarly, Google Maps outlines the busy hours of businesses based only on the localised proximity of other Google users at that time, not local knowledge. But how can a small number of software developers be assumed to know what is right for every global user, their unique needs, environments, and cultural practices?

The tendency to concentrate only on a privileged demographic with access to certain technologies and networks in the first place, to sideline local knowledge, and to elevate the perspective of a select few software developers will ultimately have real world consequences on local economies both social and financial. Those left partially or entirely out of these networks will nonetheless begin to see their environment reshaped with no say towards it. This reconfiguration of the public space will make it inherently more homogeneous.

Yet there is still hope that the disruptive capabilities of digital technology can be used to effectively 'hack' existing power structures within public spaces. For example, in their performance *Tiananmen SquARed*, exiled Chinese artists 4 Gentlemen used the augmented reality app Layar to recreate iconic moments from the Tiananmen Square student protests of 1989. The geolocate software allowed them to superimpose 3D models of the statue *Goddess of Democracy*

as well as the courageous Tank Man over the exact spots upon which they stood in 1989, which one could view by any smartphone through the app. Using the framework of an open source software they were able to get around strict censorship and barriers to tell an important piece of history, thus reasserting the role of public space as a place of action.

With interactions between users and cities increasingly mediated by technological platforms, our understanding of public space is being recalibrated to align with commercial interests. Immediate access to all sorts of services puts a focus on the individual; paradoxically, by accessing these services each user becomes but one small point of data amongst billions. In this ocean of data a user is no longer simply connected to and participating in the immediate networks of one's city but larger, more prevalent global patterns, which in turn feed an increasingly algorithmically-determined urban experience.

It has been well-documented that the dominance of the property developer in spatial development and the subsequent growth of privately owned public spaces reduces the diversity of those who have access to vast areas of the city—this process has today been accentuated with the arrival of network technologies. Such mechanisms of exclusion are antithetical to the notion of public space. It is therefore not enough to fight to keep the physical spaces of the city in public hands—citizens must take the initiative to challenge the privatisation within the digital realm of our environments as well, asserting our agency as technology users in the same way that a voting public would.

If the digital layer with which we interface with the city can be seen as a form of urban space in its own right then it demands adequate regulations in a way that might counteract the failed models of the deregulated neoliberal city. Public space must remain an open civic arena for anything, from chance meetings to mass protest, whether digital, augmented or concrete—it must be defended.

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Above: A glitched landscape in Apple Maps.
Front: Goddess of Democracy, Tiananmen Square, 1989.