
The beach beneath the cobblestones

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ABSTRACT. The beach beneath the cobblestones is observed to develop strategies and knowledge about public space under new conditions. This paper investigates the collective imaginary created by the users of a social dating network to understand the contemporary city and the impact of the use of technology. The city of Paris serves as the area of study. Like people who experienced May 68, we know that the desires of citizens may lead to incredible changes in the understanding of the complexity of the city. The users of a gay dating network, called Grindr, revealed landscapes to us allowing us to build desired territories, formed by the beach they showed to us and the cobblestones we were located at. The public spaces studied through the lens of the collective imaginary can function as powerful amulets, reveal new ways of behavior or become the scenarios of a balanced contemporary neighborhood.

KEYWORDS. intimacy, digital device, collective imaginary, neighborhood, public space, gender

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The beach beneath the cobblestones has been the title we wanted to rescue for this article about technology and its influence on urban space. This title is based on a slogan inseparable for everybody from the riots of May '68 in Paris. France was in a situation of economic crisis, following an earlier industrial prosperity. Young people felt excluded from society and called for changes to improve their future. During these riots they demanded to discover the beach beneath the cobblestones, knowing that hope was in the cold and hard streets of Paris. Fifty years later, we recur to this slogan in order to find a potential city within the existing city.

Citizens search again for hope in the hostile city through technology and mobile devices. There is a desire to find new spaces to interrelate, other than the public space offered by the city. Other ways to express intimacy that has been taken away in many urban areas. In recent years social networking has revolutionized personal relations generating an impact on the use people make of the city.

This article is built around a cartography (Fig. 1), which was developed using the city of Paris as a laboratory and the social network, called Grindr, as a tool. During three days our itinerary led us through the 5th, 6th, 12th and 13th arrondissements. We created a profile within the social network and logged in with our smartphone. On the itinerary, we captured data from users logged onto the network. Furthermore, we observed the urban settings we found ourselves in. Grindr is a social gay dating network with over 20,000 users in the city of Paris, being the 7th city with more users in the world after London, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sydney and Chicago¹. The success of this application compatible with any smartphone, consists in the use of GPS as a tool to link people with the same needs. When you log in, Grindr shows you the people close to you, telling you the distance at which each user is located as well as their photo and other details of their profile (Fig. 2).

Our approach to explore Paris with a digital device, a smartphone, made us part of the intimacy shared among the inhabitants of the city. The gay dating network users revealed landscapes, allowing us to build desired territories formed by the beach they showed us and the cobblestones we were located at. This beach helped us generate new forms of knowledge about public space, interpreting this reality shared through our smartphone. We started off with the gray existing city to end up representing the potential city in technicolor.

How could the specifics of each parisian scenario be perceived? For the cartography we reviewed the profile photos of users, deleting their bodies and focusing on the rest of the image. These landscapes formed by the background of the profile photos, helped us to constitute the collective imaginary in which we were located on our itinerary, thus generating the desired territories. Multiple views for different situations. From within the itinerary, we chose three scenarios to think about the desired territories: the Catacombs, the Pantheon and the Place de la Sorbonne, to develop hypotheses about the functioning of the beach that social network users revealed to us. Is that beach an amulet of desires? Is that beach a detector of new patterns of behavior? Is that beach the scene of a digital neighborhood?



Fig. 1

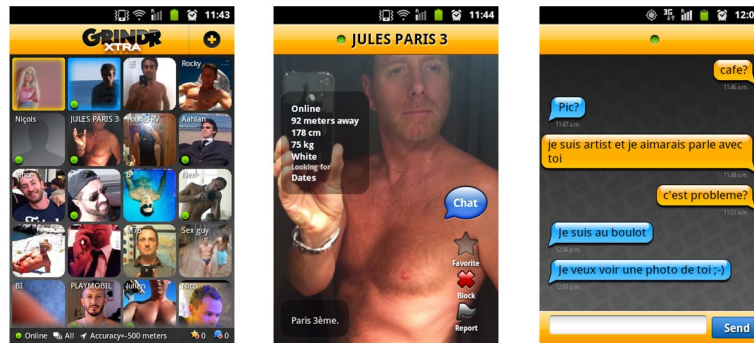


Fig. 2

Catacombs

How would a territory made of the best of each landscape look like? Our desired territories were built with the landscapes that all users showed us, in the urban settings of reference. We understand the desired territory as the sum of the landscapes of each social network user. Treating the backgrounds of the profile images as elements with mystical and powerful properties for other citizens, we may be able to define a territory created with the best of each user, able to fulfil all their needs. At the Catacombs we observe the special qualities of each landscape to build a Chinese dragon with urban powers.

Chinese dragons are mythological creatures from oriental cultures, rulers of weather and water. They owe their power to being a mixture of the best of each animal, they are able to swim in the sea and fly in the sky. It's a good idea to create something with the best of everything, why not a territory? Chinese culture seek in their dragons figures which meet all the wishes. Their mystical nature is made of multiple properties. We can attribute characteristics or powers to the landscapes that users showed to us. If we add the powers of each landscape, the territory generated at the Catacombs becomes a product of multi-element nature.

Above the Parisian underground galleries, the catacombs, the landscapes of our experiment can be of any colour and twist in many ways, left or right, face up or face down, have more or less feet, hairy armpits or not. Adorned with a bright compass rose within our system, they have the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Tokyo, the power to move us anywhere on an aircraft, strong and healthy as the muscles of a cultivated body, the toning spirit of a gym, refreshing as the plunge in a pool, bold as a graffiti and as magnificent as an image of mount Everest. All together resting on a floating anti-slip tile path that remind us of the warmth of a kitchen.

The territory is to be the summed-up powers of every landscape of this digitally found collective imaginary. The way we appear on a social network is not random. It is a consideration how we want to be seen, and in case of our application how we want to be desired. What leads us to put one photo or another? Based on how oriental culture built up their mythological figures, it is the best of ourselves, the most interesting potentials that we show on the network. A trip to Tokyo demonstrates our interest in seeing the world and a picture of us in the kitchen shows a direct accessibility. Could we set up an urban landscape through the sum of personal potential?

In our case, we achieve a multitude of potentials which help us to set up an instant collective imaginary, that contrasts with the inert information of a panoramic view of any parisian scenario. A picture of the Catacombs is the mono-culture of information, yet our collective imaginary represents the poly-culture through the democracy of different points of view. The citizens of Paris shared their potentials showing the image of how they want to be desired, how they want to draw attention on themselves and satisfy their desire. At that moment the different layers of the global city are closer than ever and the existing multiplicities between them manifest urban diversity.

How changes a routine if we add mystical and powerful components? Our users find innovation in their smartphones, the mystical component of social network interactions changes their routine. Will all this power be projected onto the city or does it stay internal to the social network? How could we turn it into active and powerful matter to design the city? We set up six categories in our cartography to classify the collective imaginary detected by our mobile device:

- Fashion: group of trendy symbols such as tattoos, piercings, styles ...
- Nature: group of users presenting themselves in natural landscapes like forests, beaches, paradise locations ...
- Domestic: users pictured in their kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms ...
- Social: users were photographed with others
- Artificial: users are found in artificial environments such as swimming pools, jacuzzis, squares ...
- Urban: landscapes of well-known cities without reference to the geolocation of the user, London, New York, Tokyo ...

We used these categories (Fig. 3) to carry out a count of the items of each data collection, in order to instantly represent the user- desired territory. This digital collective imaginary informs us about the desires of citizens. It is time to update the imaginary with which we design cities, to recognize the different social layers in urban space.

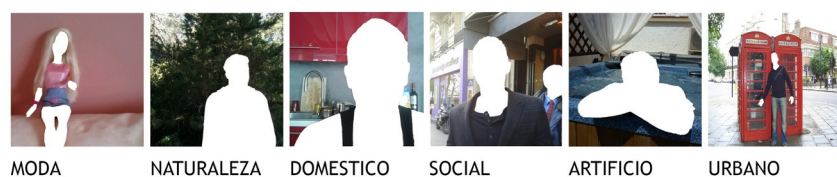


Fig. 3

Pantheon

Let us have a closer look on the objects that played a mayor part in the landscapes with which we construct the desired territory. Can these objects reveal patterns that help us to better understand the role of these users in the city? In the second scenario chosen, the Pantheon, we deepen the look on objects of the landscapes

shown by users to think about the impact on the urban space of a digital social network.

"We build for new patterns of life."²

How can we talk about patterns of urban behaviour of city users that we have contacted with our smartphone? Is their being gay and male something extraordinary? How could we speculate about their use of the city through their instant intimacy?

During our experiment we became aware of a reality through the actions of a group of male homosexual citizens. We approached the intimacy of the hypermasculine. Through their gender performance⁶ we will be able to determine other patterns in urban areas. Michel Foucault found in homosexuality a way to subvert new styles of life. The social network Grindr helps us to make visible new of expression in urban space. Urbanism stopped seeing society as a male-female social construction in their most classic way, which has limited the diversity of roles that make up the urban fabric, to detect the queer, encountered outside the system of representation that expresses the social diversity.

The definition of a space is determined by its use and initial configuration. The street is only a public space when it is used as a place of interaction among citizens. There are spaces with initial characteristics, birthmarks, that are never used accordingly or its use being re-configured over time. Space is not empty, but a sign of individual identity³.

"As George Chauncey has indicated "there are no gay spaces: there are only spaces used or occupied by gays and lesbians. Space has no natural, inherent meaning, nor an intrinsic private or public status."⁴

Beatriz Preciado uses this quote to discuss the configuration of space: a space can not be gay, nor can it be female or male. The character of a space is determined by its initial conditions and the use way we use it. Each profile picture says something about the difference between the users who actively participate in the city. Difference lies somewhere between some-thing and no-thing, it is looking for mimesis, imitation. Difference is a strange imitation that imitates nothing, it ignores the imitation, we may talk about a non-imitation, setting an original state⁵. Each of the profile pictures is a non-imitation of the last one. Each image sets an original state, leading to the revelation of the body and its desires. The strange, the queer is the singularity of each image.

Difference is to understand man and woman as singularities that can not be identical, universal rules create spaces of inequality. The solution is not to see us all equal, but to see the singularities that make the difference between men and women. The social construction of gender roles designated areas for them and set priorities according to sex. When these gender constructions only respond to a patriarchal heterosexual model, we create dichotomies: male-female, male-female, based on universal rules. We must seek the cracks within the dichotomies to find unlabelled spaces, distended and distorted forms, helping us to produce spaces of difference.

In urbanism, usage patterns are generalized in order to plan the city. Given our hypermasculine data, it is difficult to define the patterns of behaviour with precision, according to the symbols in shared landscapes. This points to the complexity with which the city is built. When defining patterns of behaviour, we raise questions rather than statements. If our data reflects the desire ... A desire of what, of whom, by whom? Following the traces, left behind by users on the digital territory, would it be possible to guess an urban behaviour?

Sorbonne

At the Place de la Sorbonne, we attend to actions contained in the landscapes. Citizens in motion, taking part in the mechanisms of urban control, will search other public spaces to continue to express their own sexuality, because their spaces of sexual liberation have been globalized or gentrified. Users share their intimacy with us, using a space that is not visible to everyone.

"It's, oh, so quiet / It's, oh, so still / You're all alone / And so peaceful until..."⁷

As in the video of the artist Bjork, "It's oh so quiet", all is quiet until ..., in her case, she falls in love. A new reality begins and everyone becomes her ally, singing and dancing. Urban space cannot be considered an empty stage, but a platform that supports the weight of human sociability. Once we are in real urban space, ceasing to be designers, we recognize the manifold heterogeneity of actions and actors⁸.

Jane Jacobs led us to observe the movements of the inhabitants of the sidewalks, not being a dance where everyone lifts their feet at the same time, but telling us about details on how urban order on the streets is established. Each invader of the sidewalk, known or unknown, will have a role and interrelating they form a choreography that will give us hints of the diversity of the neighbourhood⁹. In the ballet of Hudson Street, Jane Jacobs distinguished between the known and unknown, attributing to the last a value for the order of the neighbourhood. Nobody knows if they will pass through again, but their instant participation configures the interlinks of a balanced neighbourhood. Are the dancers of our digital sidewalks known or unknown? In our territory, we were unknown but with our lectures we produced a new value for the digital neighbourhood.

How was the contact between our dancers/ users? Our list is made up of people who know each other and people who don't. After having a few chats with users, we noticed that the majority of them take part in the digital space from home or from an enclosed space. Having an application that lets you meet people and know approximately where they are located, it seems absurd to use it indoors, as we were told by some users.

Did we really capture instants of intimacy in our experiment? Intimacy, according to Jose Luis Pardo, is a mode of life that is not private nor public. It lacks political existence and is in contact with the raw forces of nature in a vulnerable situation. Pardo considers the city as the facade for the free exercise of power. Privacy is the authentic, original, while public life is un-authentic, emerges as something secondary and derivative. In our experiment the eternal public-private dichotomy becomes public-intimate, according to Pardo's observations.

"Because having the right to keep a secret is not equivalent to have a secret to keep."¹⁰

Is the city able to give us intimacy? The city offering us the right to intimacy does not mean we actually have intimacy. As an institution, the city can only take away intimacy. The gay district of Le Marais pretended to grant intimacy but the only thing it did for many homosexuals was to identify and remove anonymity. But intimacy means not to identify oneself with anything or anyone, and not be identified by anything or anyone. Today Le Marais suffers the process of gentrification which restricts any expression of intimacy to privacy, the Marais corresponds to one single identity.

The application users are linked by the bond of male homosexuality, but each one shows a unique behaviour which manifests when they compare themselves to other

users. Users are happy to see lives similar to theirs, but always leave space for the question "who am I".

In our social network there is a good neighbourhood relationship among users because they share one matter, not all. They are good inhabitants of the digital sidewalks in the eyes of Jacobs and Pardo. Just as a real neighbour would call the police if there is something wrong in his neighbourhood, in this digital social network there is the report button when someone corrupts the rules of coexistence. Confidence grows with more and more contact, by sharing a few things in spaces propitious to casual encounter. In the social network studied in this article, Grindr, confidence is built in the same way.

With new glasses detecting another reality, we took part in scenes of digital life of social network users. Humans (users), non-humans (devices) and communication (common aim of social network) configured geolocated urban instants. The parisian scenarios revealed other "non-scale" dimensions within conventional urban settings. Through the details of each scenario we can reflect on the impact of social networks on relationships among citizens (Fig. 5).

We were made participants of their intimacy in a space that is not visible to everyone. The square was crowded. We were on the boulevard Saint Michelle and it was Friday afternoon. We were incapable not to look at our mobile phone and try to locate the user among the the people sitting on the terrace around us.

Like people who experienced May 68, we know that the desires of citizens may lead to incredible changes in the understanding of the complexity of the city. We must pay attention to the beaches that manifest themselves every day. Our experience in Paris has shown us hidden properties in institutionalized scenarios. The public spaces studied through the collective imaginary can function as powerful amulets, reveal new ways of behaviour or become the scenarios of a balanced contemporary neighbourhood.

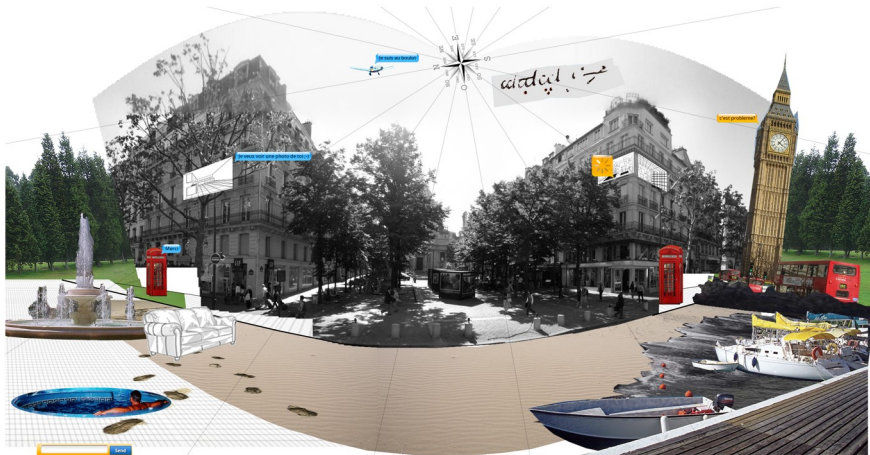


Fig. 5

Notes

- 1 Data provided by Grindr in 2010.
- 2 Scott-Brown, 1969.
- 3 Pardo, 1992. 19.
- 4 Preciado, 2000.
- 5 Pardo, 1992. 189.
- 6 Butler, 2006.
- 7 Lyrics from the song "It's oh so quiet" by the artist Björk, in her album Post of 1995.
- 8 Delgado, 2011.
- 9 Jacobs, 1961.
- 10 Pardo, 1996. 256.

Legends

- Fig.1 Cartography's web site.
- Fig.2 Grindr social network's screen-shoots. From left to right: personal home page, user image profile, chat between users.
- Fig.3 Data base of the experiment superposed to the itinerary in Paris.
- Fig.4 Landscapes's categories.
- Fig.5 Sorbonne's desired territory.

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Biography

Ana Belen Lopez Plazas is an architect, graduated from University of Granada's School of Architecture in 2007 with honours for her final thesis "Management of Productive Landscapes". She represented the School of Architecture of Granada in the Exhibition of Final Thesis at the IX Spanish Architecture and Urbanism Biennial in Madrid in 2007. She taught at the University of Granada during the workshop Disidencia o Resistencia and was a Jury Member of the final thesis projects jury at the School of Architecture and Landscape in Bordeaux, France.

She collaborated with Martin Lejarraga Architects in Cartagena and Ecologic Studio in London. In 2009 she started Lab33, together with Joachim Kraft, a Laboratory of Creative Processes, where they develop projects based on contemporary innovation and creativity, incorporating a reflection on nature, technology and society.

Her work covers architectural as well as urban projects. She has been awarded in several competitions as European 9-Lisboa and the Third Edition of the Mediterranean Landscape Award 2011; and published in the magazine Future and in the Catalogue of Good Practices for the Landscape in Periurban Areas.

She studied a masters program Master of Projects of Advanced Architectural (MPAA) at the School of Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Madrid.

At present she is to start her PhD at the same university. Her research is orientated to landscape and urbanism, with a focus on gender, city and technology.