

# CITIES Report

## Social Cities of Tomorrow International Conference

*Amsterdam, February 17th 2012*



On Friday, February 17th 2012, CITIES was among the attendees at the Social Cities of Tomorrow International Conference, organised by The Mobile City and Virtueel Platform with the support of ARCAM.

Brought together by a mutual interest in the potential of technology to help describe, understand and communicate about key issues in urban life, more than 190 professionals from across the world explored the possibilities of using technology to support and empower civic engagement. The organizers noted that in an age of increasing localism and desire for community 'ownership' of spaces and places, the task of the 'traditional' makers of cities – urban planners and architects – must be increasingly supported by locally-grounded, flexible initiatives aiming to enable a greater range of citizens to become participate in, and contribute to, urban development and the life in the

city. Digital media enables us to make connections that are spatially unthinkable, as well as providing effective channels for transferring power to the collective.

As the globalized city increasingly offers an intensified experience, social and civic participation is becoming a vital element of democratic design. As Martijn de Waal from The Mobile City argued in the opening talk, the concept of 'social city' means finding flexible alternatives to civic engagement, able to transcend both top-down local authority agenda-setting and enabling wider participation via a bottom-up approach to 'designing' places to live. City dwellers' engagement with their urban environment is complex and messy; one of the key reasons why common perceptions of digital media as 'personal', rather than 'collective' technology, is misplaced.

De Waal suggests we should replace the 'smart city' (infused with technology) with the 'social city' (where technology is used for collective civic benefit). He stresses the urgency of understanding the positive role that digital technology and media can play in creating a sense of place in increasingly disjointed cities, where issues of trust and ownership in relation to 'belonging' and 'roots' underlines an imperative need for participation and transparency in an increasingly connected age. Digital technology transcends spatial and social barriers, and can provide a reliable and constant engagement platform for citizens. The key theme of the conference, therefore, was how we design for ownership of the city in an age of collaborative consumption.

### Usman Haque

The first speaker, London-based designer and architect Usman Haque, raised a different issue. He suggests that the life of the city is more about displaying a platform



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of contingent meetings and actions that foster the unknown, rather than delivering transparency. Haque argued that initiatives such as Pachube.com, his most extensive project to date, have the capacity to both engage disparate city dwellers and to build on the unexpected results of their encounters in the urban environment.

Haque develops both physical spaces and the software and systems that capture the ways that people relate to each other and to their surrounding space. His algorithm-driven systems have several functions: detecting the position in space of a sound, an odour or a temperature, or of physical objects such as cellular phones. Design is conceived as an 'operating system', that enables us to explore the poetry of urban living rather than promoting rationality, literalness and verisimilitude. In this sense, Haque discussed projects that enable users to store, share and discover realtime sensor, energy and environment data from objects, devices and buildings around the world. Pachube is a convenient, secure and scalable platform that helps us connect to and create the 'internet of things'. As a generalized realtime data brokerage platform, the key aim is to facilitate interaction between remote environments, both physical and virtual.

Along with enabling direct connections between any two responsive environments, Pachube can also be used to facilitate many-to-many connections. But the emphasis is less about the data gathered and more about the possibilities offered by the process of collecting data. During a recent workshop in Barcelona, for example, live data about the air and sensory nature of the city was generated by project participants walking on trails across the city; while the Natural Fuse project creates a city-wide network of electronically-assisted plants that act both as energy providers and

as circuit breakers, illustrating the the interdependence between users, material and the environment.



Alper Cugun – Apps for Amsterdam

### Apps for Amsterdam

Usman Haque's themes continued across three showcases looking at the possibilities offered by digital technology for new kinds of engagement with the city. Apps for Amsterdam, presented by Alper Cugun, is a web platform enabling the open use of data from across Amsterdam, using digital technology to improve city-wide communication.



Instant Masterplan

### Instant masterplan

The second showcase, Instant Master Plan, presented by Anne-Marie Sanvig Knudsen, Niels Skovlund



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Madsen and Lasse Andersson, showed how digital media technologies can be used as tools to create new forms of citizen engagement. In Copenhagen, they gather live data and form connections that can help to mitigate against the stark differences between social groups that city masterplanning has created over time.



NetworkLAB

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Presented by Lilet Breddels (Archis) and Alexander Zeh (Smart in Public), NetworkLAB, introduced the idea of tagging objects with a newly-developed prototag by the TU Delft, as well as a project in which Pachube was used to organize an 'issue-community' around the debate on air-quality and the maximum speed-limit on the Amsterdam ring road.

### Natalie Jeremijenko

The second keynote, artist Natalie Jeremijenko, introduced the Environmental Health Clinic. The project approaches health as a factor dependent on external local environments rather than on the internal biology and genetic predispositions of an individual. Jeremijenko suggests that we need to rethink our relationship towards natural systems. Her

projects explore the relationships between nature and technology, using an interface that facilitates new forms of communication, for example using sensors to enable fish in the New York to make themselves 'visible'. The Amphibious Architecture digital-meets-nature project used LED sensors that lit up with the movement created by the swimming fish. The sensors also monitored water quality and 'texted' information about the river. Although unsure of the practicality of such a project, the audience was charmed by the way the project enhanced New York urban life by enabling such unexpected communication.



Give Me Back My Broken Night

### Give Me Back My Broken Night

The next group of case studies complemented Jeremijenko's talk. Paul Clarke and Rachel Feuchtwang presented Give Me Back My Broken Night, a theatre work using mobile technology. A combination of location-sensitive mobile devices and portable projectors are used to create a cinematic experience. The intervention is not location-specific and can happen anywhere in the city, with the audience being asked to engage with the space they find themselves in and design, through the infrastructure provided by the makers, the future of the urban place.

### Homeless SMS project

Ohyoon Kwon from TU Delft presented the London-based Homeless SMS project. Starting from the



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observation that 70 per cent of the homeless in London have a cellphone, the project creators use technology to help them improve their lifestyle by delivering an inspiring quote in the morning and tips and tricks in the afternoon, via both Twitter and SMS. Karli Scott discussed the Urban Revitalization of Social Capital project, a practical approach to civic intervention that analyzes the social conditions in cities such as Rochester and Utica in New York.

Kars Alfrink showed how, in 2009, the social game Koppelkiek helped the inhabitants of the troubled neighbourhood Hooggraven in Utrecht to deliver new social interventions in the urban sphere. Ava Fatah of Screens in the Wild outlined the challenges for designing urban screens, and how they can augment real life interventions and maximize the quality of public interaction.



Dan Hill

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The last of the three keynote speakers, Dan Hill, is a designer and urbanist working on strategic design and urban policy, urban design and urbanism, and

interaction and experience design. His popular blog, City of Sound, explores a range of subtle models for engagement with the urban environment. His presentation assessed the conference ambitions and added new perspectives to those of former speakers.

Hill states that supporting the culture of public decision-making is the real design challenge. Quoting Cedric Price: 'Technology is the answer, but what was the question?', he is critical of the belief that governmental interventions necessarily impact favourably on urban space. He therefore invited the conference to reconsider planning practices and possibilities, stressing that 'the dark matter does matter'. Referring to both the usual invisibles of the metropolis to the much neglected potential of the urban environment,

Hill rounded up event by underlining the beneficial potential of technology to explore new and different patterns of urban life. He ended on a cautionary note, warning of the dangers of the inappropriate use of technology for its own sake, suggesting that its over-enthusiastic employment could lead to the loss of a long-term perspective on cities and urbanity.

### More info

For more details on the conference and videos, please visit <http://www.socialcitiesoftomorrow.nl/international-conference-feb-17-at-the-mc-theatre>

### Additional links we found interesting

<http://www.cityofsound.com/>  
<https://pachube.com/>  
<http://www.environmentalhealthclinic.net/people/natalie-jeremijenko/>  
<http://www.watershed.co.uk/ished/theatresandbox/>



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