

Table of Contents

What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate: Architecture and Situated Technologies . . . 1

What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate: Architecture and Situated Technologies

ByTed Byfield

Last autumn's conference, Architecture and Situated Technologies, at the Villard House in New York sought to rescue technologists and architects from their industry controlled and conceptually rigid engagement with each other. With the current euphoria around situated or context specific computing apparently creating new opportunities for dialogue, Ted Byfield asks whether this intersection is really something new, or whether architecture itself is not the ultimate situated technology

Manhattan's skyline, seen from within, can seem a bit like a first-person shooter at times, with mazes of vertiginous walls of glass, steel, and stone – not much sky or line, really. The occasional break tends to attract associations, however tenuous, with freedom. Take the Villard Houses, for example: six brownstones in Midtown at the corner of 51st Street and Madison Avenue, united by a seamless Renaissance Revival ('post-neo-', it would be now) facade, enclosing a courtyard at once dapper and grand (enough to make some 'weep with joy', according the *New York Times* in 1993). Despite the heavily ornate iron gate that separates the yard from the pavement, this wholly private space is in many ways more open than the occasional cramped little public/private atria and courts salted amongst Midtown's skyscrapers in exchange for corporate tax abatements.

villard house

Image: Villard House, New York City

The houses were built by the New York architecture firm McKim, Mead and White in 1884 under commission from a railway impresario who went bankrupt soon after. Since then they've served many functions, notably a Women's Military Services Club, where over a quarter of million women in transit bedded down in the last years of World War II. Later, ownership passed to the publisher Random House and the Catholic Archdiocese. In the mid-70s, real-estate developer Harry Helmsley (legendary mostly for his monumentally bitchy wife, Leona) tried to gut them to build a fifty-story hotel. His initial plans were scotched by preservationists who were still traumatised by the loss, a decade earlier, of another McKim, Mead and White creation, Penn Station. Thanks to their efforts, the houses' interiors remain – more restored than intact.

Unfortunately for their intended beneficiary, the public, the interiors aren't all that useful. Their proportions, small-and-tall chambers connected by grandiose transit spaces, are better suited to fin-de-siecle high society than to contemporary sociability. For exhibitions and conferences, Helmsley's corporatist minions would probably have done better.

You're unlikely to hear such a blunt statement in any architectural milieu, least of all in the Villard Houses – which is a shame, since one of the tenants is the Architectural League of New York. This venerable civic entity proclaims as its mission the kinds of things you'd expect: promoting, creating, exploring, fostering, etc. The Leaguers' awkwardly gracious surroundings both help them (architects tend to be a posh set) and hinder them (not everyone else is) in their efforts to preserve the idea of architecture itself against the barbarian discourses sapping away at its ubiquitous walls and gates.

True, architecture still has the trappings of a viable activity: schools that train and grant degrees, professional groups that accredit, and things that get made and stay put. But the history of the Villard Houses (and the landmarking movement that rose from the dust of Penn Station's demolition) show architecture from another angle: not the line that connects the architect's creativity with the objects we

live with but everything else, everything after that – a negative nexus of private ambition and social need, vicissitudes in private finance and public policy, the messy overlays of historical periodisation, imagined identities and contingent uses, and so on. And then of course there's the mundane fact that the vast majority of current architecture (in America at least) is the by-product of the CAD-prescribed assembly of prefab materials in accordance with legal specifications. And all of this increasingly dependent on periodic waves of capital taking refuge from other falling markets – with little or no regard for how profit-maximising strategies translate into inhuman human settlements. If economics is the dismal science, then architecture is the case law of unintended consequences.

There's nothing *wrong* with any of this. Every creative discipline has had to confront its own native forms of these kinds of dilemmas, and most have grappled with the loss of their heroic foundation myths (authorial intent, say). But if a conference hosted at the Architectural League, 19-21 October 2006, is any indication – and it is – academic architecture still has barely scratched the surface of this turn of events.

Take the conference's name for starters: Architecture and Situated Technologies. How is it that 'technologies' are so broad that they need to be narrowed (could anyone really put on a conference called Architecture and Technologies?), whereas architecture – heroically singular – could remain self-evident, monolithic, and universal? You know...*architecture*.

Fortunately, many of the views of architecture presented by the speakers were a bit closer to what your basic PoMo might hope for: multiple, reflexive, historicised, and so on. Thus, throughout the event, there was lots of doffing of hats to non-artefactual constructs of architecture – as event, as performance, as process, and/or of course as *practice*. In some cases (notably Sheila Kennedy's [<http://www.kvarch.net/>] quick survey of the cultural imagery used to promote electricity in its infancy), subtler understandings of current architectural activity were neatly informed by coherently defined historical research. In other cases (for example, one co-organiser's litany of references in his opening talk, which included *inter alia* the Situationists, Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe, the Blinkenlights project [<http://blinkenlights.de/>], the mobile phone and 'mobile social software', and the Waag's Amsterdam Real Time [<http://www.waag.org/project/realtime>]), 'eclectic' historical references just took a bad situation and made it worse.

At root, the conference was ill-conceived – or, to use the term bandied about in the organisers' opening remarks, 'underspecified'. A key point, which is painfully obvious but seemed to elude the event as a whole, is that if ever there's been a 'situated technology' it *is* architecture. What other human endeavour that abides by the laws of physics (a good baseline definition for 'technology') meets the spec set out by the organisers, when they defined these technologies as

incorporating an awareness of cultural context, accrued social meanings, and the temporality of spatial experience...

privileg[ing] the local, context-specific and spatially contingent dimension of their use[?]

But the organisers had something very different in mind – something very vague, it seems – when they defined 'situated technologies' as the antithesis of architecture: 'mobile, wearable, networked, distributed and context-aware devices', and 'embedding computational intelligence into the built environment' (i.e., architecture) in ways that 'account [for] the social dimension of human environments and [allow] computers themselves to vanish into the background' (i.e., architecture).

Just why this figure/ground relationship is a problem isn't entirely clear. According to the organisers, architects have been largely absent from this discussion, and technologists have been limited to developing technologies that take existing architectural topographies as a given context to be augmented.

But that still doesn't explain why it's a problem.

The conventional explanation has to do with the fact that, in the design fields now, ecumenical formulations about the virtue of interdisciplinary this and collaborative that have become dogma (and questioning their validity is therefore heresy – if anyone dared do it). Depending on how precise you like to be, the belief that the creative practices somehow form an organic whole might be traced back to the Bauhaus, or to Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, or to Da Vinci's polymathy, or to the muses of ancient Greek culture – to name a few obvious examples.

On the other hand, US (and maybe other) financial markets have been roiled over the last decade by the torrents of capital surging from tech-led stock markets to real estate and back again; so, clearly, someone has been acting on the assumption, irrational or otherwise, that architecture and technology exist in a zero-sum relation. It would be crass to suggest that this latter aspect, money, might have been a driving force of the conference – but only because, as John Berger found on publishing *The Success and Failure of Picasso* in 1965, it's crass to suggest that the romantic heroism of modern creativity might be substantially shaped by money. Not *wrong* – just crass.

With the possible exception of Eric Paulos from Intel's Urban Atmospheres group, [<http://www.urban-atmospheres.net/>] who genially played the token Industry Guy, the conference speakers came from the cultural rather than the capital camp: there wasn't a fat cat (or even a fat-cat watcher, like a niche journalist) to be found on the roster. This seemed especially odd because the conference statement was very explicit that, 'to the extent that early adopters of these [situated?] technologies have focused on commercial, military and law enforcement applications, we can expect to see new forms of consumption, warfare and control emerge.' But, in the now-familiar gesture of urban renewal, rather than actually asking the denizens of this terrain what they think, the organisers immediately went on to say that the conference 'seeks to occupy [sic] the imaginary...and propose alternative trajectories to their development.'

Of these two aims, *seeking the imaginary* was definitely the first choice. After the presentations broke, there was some funny talk over drinks about the best ways to clear technological art through customs checkpoints (one speaker said that inspectors chuckle sympathetically when you say, 'I don't know, it's supposed to be some fucking *art* piece...'); but the post-9/11 blurring of 'technology' in travel – where hypertechnical surveillance and scanning techniques have become 'safe', whereas simple human dignities like shoes or a bottle of water have become 'dangerous' – went ignored in the conference's program.

The same was true of just about any other 'situated' technology you might care to mention, in large part because the conference was mainly organised around the architectural understanding of 'site' as a particular geographic place. But technologies, by definition, work anywhere they're deployed – and in doing so help to drive the metastasising idea of 'site' toward the model used in cultural criticism, where 'sites' (usually hotly contested) are discursive or linguistic. Some speakers attended to this, notably Anne Galloway [<http://www.purselipsquarejaw.org/>], who talked about the plight of the 'dividual' in the face of multiple, distributed forms of authority, about the reduction of human freedom to exercises in convenience and the consequent devolution of risk from producers to consumers. But she was also clear that her contributions to the conferences were qualitative and social-scientific; as such, she was a bit of an outlier for architects wanting to talk about architecture. Thus, there was much

more talk about the ‘metapolis’ (a dense settlement in which traditional assumptions about a social fabric are dissolved and disintegrated by delocalising technologies) and the ‘internet of things’ (beloved by multilateral and multinational entities) than there was, say, about the experiences of its denizens who increasingly experience life as overlaid ‘sites’ of various institutional operations.

This isn’t to say that that conference’s second aim, *alternative strategies*, went ignored. They were proposed, or at least alternative hopes were invoked – for example, when co-organiser Trebor Scholz neatly summed up his introductory remarks by exhorting the assembled crowd (of several dozen people) to ‘support DIY, speak clearly across disciplines, create alliances, and support demands for transparency.’ But, as the political dictum goes, hope is not a strategy; and against the tiresomely menacing backdrop of producers, warriors, and cops, the many ideals urged upon the audience throughout the conference didn’t seem likely to go anywhere.

Scholz no doubt meant, in his summary, that people should do those things *outside* the conference; but the fabric of the conference was very much defined by how well most of the speakers did it *within* the conference. That had benefits: many of the speakers were adept at relating the issues and dynamics of their respective discipline(s) to those in other fields. It also had drawbacks: many of the speakers were adept at relating the issues and dynamics of their respective discipline(s) to those in other fields.

Thus, for example, Natalie Jeremijenko [<http://xdesign.ucsd.edu/>] launched off on a high-speed constitutional, sprinting nimbly across the more interesting disciplinary issues that Scholz complained about – the idiocies of technological determinisms writ small and large, ‘ridiculous’ conventions about the user (experience, -centered design), the fundamental legitimacy (and quantitative supremacy) of museums as public spaces, the ‘baloney’ of design philosophy, the ‘oppressive, stupid, wrong’ pseudo-universalism of cognitive psychology, and designers’ failure to roundly declare their own normative measures (which needn’t be quantitative). And Usman Haque [<http://www.haque.co.uk/>], with elegant brevity, translated the phrase he’d been given by the organisers, ‘technology and users in public spaces’, into ‘instruments and producers of the commons’ – and made what could have been airy-fairy ideas become ethereally concrete as he spoke of his mass-participatory projects Sky Ear and Open Burble, among others. But whatever energy the individual speakers sparked tended to dissipate as the show-and-tell presentations, which are a staple of a practical trade, piled up.

If the aim of the conference was to convene a sort of analogue of the first Macy conferences, at which ‘cybernetics’ coalesced from wildly disparate fields (and that spectre was invoked early on), it failed: interdisciplinary *is* the new discipline. A motley bunch of codgers engaged in a parochial pissing match over who’s field is better would have been much more provocative. But if, on the other hand, the aim was more modest – say, to jumble together an interesting sample of people mostly working in the ambiguous field of technological installations – it was a fair success. For the most part, their successes had less to do with situating technologies than with assembling technologies in more or less ad-hoc situations. And, more specifically, their successes stemmed from the trust they placed in their public – as agents, as participants, as contributors, as collaborative producers. But in the construction of the conference as a meeting of the mind between architects (who’ve been ‘largely absent’) and technologists (who’ve ‘been limited to developing technologies that take existing architectural topographies as a given context to be augmented’), these contingent social constellations were strangely absent. This didn’t leave much room, or time, for anything very generative to happen between them.

It was no doubt due to the awareness of this weakness (in no way unique to this particular conference) that the organisers scheduled a day for the speakers to collaborate on projects more practical than talking. The event, variously billed as ‘City Encounters’ (and even less fortunately as an ‘ideas potlatch’) was to be

a gift giving between participants. These gifts will become the basis for an extended exercise in imagining how specific situations, different users and situated technologies engage one another in particular locations in New York City. The workshop's results will be performed to a public audience at the end of the day.

It's certainly possible that a lot of very vital generation happened; I couldn't attend the public presentations, so I can't say. Reports from those present were ambivalent, in that grateful it-was-more-fun-than-I-expected sort of way. Aside from sixteen pix on Flickr [<http://www.flickr.com/photos/situatedtechnologies/sets/72157594341728357/>] – and unlike MP4s of some of the conference presentations [<http://www.situatedtechnologies.net/?q=node/2>] – there isn't any public documentation at all of the three group projects.

It'd be easy to take this lack of public manifestation as a sign that the projects didn't amount to much – but doing so would assume that some sort of public monument or memorial is the mark of success. For architects, that may be so; but for technologists, who tend to be more comfortable with the idea that a 'structure' is a formal nexus of procedures of participation, it's far from self-evident. That may not be very satisfying, it's true; but it could well be that 'situated technologies' – which 'privilege the local, context-specific and spatially contingent dimension of their use' – just aren't.

Architecture and Situated Technologies, 19&-21 October, was a 'co-production' of the Center for Virtual Architecture [<http://cva.ap.buffalo.edu/>], The Institute for Distributed Creativity [<http://distributedcreativity.org/>], and the Architectural League of New York [<http://www.archleague.org/>]

Ted Byfield <[tbyfield AT panix.com](mailto:tbyfield@panix.com)> is Associate Chair of the Communication Design and Technology Department at Parsons the New School for Design in New York City; he co-moderates the Nettime-I mailing list.