

Mediated Ekistics: An Urban Communication Perspective

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Abstract

Marshall McLuhan, media theorist, known for his assertion the “medium is the message,” argued technological innovation was the driving force behind political, economic and social transformations. This extended to a concern with human settlements, the planning of places and cities. His relationship with Constantinos Doxiadis included participation in the Delos Symposium (1973) and published contributions to Ekistics. In a letter to McLuhan, Doxiadis noted McLuhan’s work was “‘essential’ to a reconsideration of human settlements.” Today this relationship takes on greater significance, a fact not unnoticed by those in the field of urban communication, which is an interdisciplinary perspective emphasizing the centrality of communication and technology in the understanding of the urban settlements.

Planners, architects, and those studying human settlements recognize that space is the creation of social forces, shaped by the needs and expectations of users who today live in media filled environments. The humans in human-centered design are media dependent if not media addicted. New spatial forms must account for the elevated value people now place on temporal, aspatial proximity at the expense of some degree of physical proximity. This human-technology association encompasses more than smart cities and data-driven solutions. The impact of dematerialized spaces of interaction on the design of sustainable settlements needs consideration. This article revisits the relationship of media visionary McLuhan, examines media developments from 1973-2024, and adopting an urban communication perspective, considers the goals of Ekistics in light of what has been called the “reconstruction of space on the basis of digitalization.”

Keywords: media, digitalization, global city, global village, McLuhan, Doxiadis

Introduction

It was a hot Summer evening in Athens in 1991 and we climbed up the hill towards the Doxiadis building. Our fledgling interest in place and human interaction led to a recommendation that we talk to Panayis Psomopoulos. We did not know what to expect when we entered the building. We met in the editor of Ekistics office, a room filled with cigarette smells and wall to wall volumes. At that point we did not know that the man smoking two cigarettes at once had any connection to media theory and Marshall McLuhan. Our meetings with Psomopoulos spanned 3 years. He would fall asleep during our dialogue during each of those meetings, wake up to pick up on his remarks as if no time had transpired. These colorful interactions were punctuated by probing questions as to why two media scholars were so interested in the work of Ekistics. In subsequent meetings Mr. Psomopoulos produced a special issue of *Ekistics* dedicated to the work of one Marshall McLuhan. He suggested we might be interested in this fellow media theorist.

Gary Gumpert, a graduate student in radio and television at Wayne State University, living in Detroit in 1960 was asked to work with Marshall McLuhan on a television program entitled *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. This was prior to the publication of the influential book by that name which was published in 1962. The budget for the production was

\$615. This was preserved in a kinescope which included McLuhan’s introduction of repeatability and assembly line orientation toward human interaction. McLuhan also dealt with an interest in the relationship between urban neighbors. This program began an unpredictable and enduring relationship between Gumpert and McLuhan. In retrospect that early program developed into a smoke-filled dialogue that led Gumpert down a path studying the nexus of place, neighbors, community and media.

These interconnected histories led to an inquiry into the relationship between Constantinos Doxiadis and Marshall McLuhan and between the science of human settlements and media theory. In retrospect, what we took from their work led to initiatives which developed into the field of urban communication. We know that Doxiadis read McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* which led him to write that he had read the book and “saw ideas in it that are ‘essential’ to a reconsideration of human settlements” (Wigley, 2001). As Mark Wigley remarks in his seminal work entitled *Network Fever* (2001), “McLuhan had no problem seeing his work in that light” (p. 85). Indeed, in 1963 McLuhan noted that he was “completing a book which included matters of immediate concern in housing and town planning” (As cited in Wigley, 2001, p.86).



Doxiadis invited McLuhan to join a host of intellectual luminaries attending the Delos conference in July 1963. This meeting aboard the New Hellas provided an eight-day boat trip brought together over thirty leaders from diverse fields. That year the group included Margaret Mead and Buckminster Fuller and other notable intellectuals. While the relationship of Fuller and McLuhan has garnered some attention, the relationship between McLuhan and Doxiadis has been somewhat neglected, certainly by media scholars. This is an examination into connections and relies heavily on the voices of the protagonists.

McLuhan and cities

While McLuhan may be best known as a popularizer of media theories or cultural prophet, his collaboration with town planner Jaqueline Tyrwhitt during the 1950s shaped the trajectory of this work which encompassed urbanity. Along with colleagues including McLuhan and Sigfried Giedion, a Swiss art historian and architectural critic, Tyrwhitt co-founded, the Explorations Group at the University of Toronto. "Drawing upon Giedion's concern with the humanization of urban life, Tyrwhitt helped formulate a methodology that used the urban environment and architecture as the framework to analyze the effects of media" (Darroch, 2008).

Jaqueline Tyrwhitt's interdisciplinary perspective spanned connections with Lewis Mumford, Walter Gropius, Sigfried Giedion; and anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, as well as McLuhan and Constantinos Doxiadis. It has been argued that she was a lynchpin, "unique among contemporary thinkers in art and architectural history, urban planning, and media studies" (Darroch, 2008). Tyrwhitt and Doxiadis started a publication in 1955 which grew into *Ekistics*. It was originally a bulletin with the aim of informing architects and planners in developing countries of advances in the profession around the world (Doxiadis, 1965).

Publishing a very useful article exploring the relationship between Tyrwhitt and McLuhan, Michael Darroch notes: By 1953 McLuhan's letters revealed his concern for the "importance of city life and urban history for the study of media and communication" (Darroch, 2008, p. 156).

McLuhan suggested to Tyrwhitt that the initial social organization of city spaces was related to the translation of audible forms into spatial forms. The result of this translation is "writing" of all kinds...he claimed that orality had previously locked society into a world of time, removed from any spatial control. Speech represented the greatest of all mass media (Darroch, 2008).

Darroch notes:

The McLuhan-Tyrwhitt correspondence is particularly valuable, as it reveals McLuhan's nascent thoughts about the effects of new media on the transformation of cultural space and related transformations in urban design. Most important in this regard is his suggestion that the organization of town spaces was related to writing, the translation of audible forms into spatial ratios. While not yet articulated fully, these reflections already imply the concept of "audible space," which would become central to McLuhan's analysis of media (Darroch, p. 157).

McLuhan was also said to be influenced by Sigfried Giedion, with whom he corresponded beginning in the early 1940s. Giedion called for greater, more analytical awareness of objects in everyday life. His book *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) was said to have influenced McLuhan's study of media (Darroch, 2008). In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan explores the change in human consciousness that has attributable to the ascendancy of the phonetic alphabet and the printed book. "By translating all human experience into the visual, linear, sequential form of written sentences, and by mass-producing the result with the aid of the printing press, Western man has tended to alienate himself from deep involvement with his environment" (Compton, 1965). In his analysis of McLuhan's relationship to architecture and environment, Larry Busbea notes:

Theorizing environment was not simply a diversion from McLuhan's "main" body of thinking about media; rather, it was completely coincident with and integral to it. For several years, it would appear that he saw these terms as synonymous. As early as the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan said he could have used the term "environment" in place of galaxy (Busbea, 2015, p. 4).

By the 1960s McLuhan expressed the notion that the traditional city was being "displaced by the electronic extensions of the body that have constructed a 'global village' in which traditional conceptions of space have been overturned. This already existing electronic village calls for the construction of a new form of physical world city by planners. According to Darroch, McLuhan wrote Tyrwhitt a letter on December 23, 1960, prior to the publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, in which he explored the "city as *sensus communis*, a cultural space that fosters the constant and simultaneous interplay of our senses" (Darroch, 2008, p. 166).

Now that by electricity we have externalized all of our senses, we are in the desperate position of not having any *sensus communis*. Prior to electricity, the city was the *sensus communis* for such specialized and externalized senses as technology had developed. From Aristotle onward, the traditional function of the *sensus communis* is to translate each sense into the other senses, so that a unified, integral image is offered at all times to the mind. The city performs that function for the scattered and distracted senses, and spaces and times, of agrarian cultures. Today with electronics we have discovered that we live in a global village, and the job is to create a global city, as center for the village margins. The parameters of this task are by no means positional. With electronics any marginal area can become center, and marginal experiences can be had at any center. Perhaps the city needed to coordinate and concert the distracted sense programs of our global village will have to be built by computers in the way in which a big airport has to coordinate multiple flights. (McLuhan, 1987, pp. 277-278).

A global consciousness suggested awareness on a new human scale. McLuhan clarified his conceptualization of the term environment in his article in *Perspecta* entitled, "The Invisible Environment: The Future of an Erosion" (1967). He noted "in the case of environments that are



created by new technologies, while they are quite invisible in themselves, they do tend to make visible the old environments" (p.163). Much like the digitally connected, internet dependent world, he recognized that "the really total and saturating environments are invisible" (p.163).

The connection between McLuhan's concepts and the discourse on human settlements can be seen to lead to a concern for the increasing domination of the global city. But it is a mistake to read McLuhan as solely focused on the importance of the global city when he was part of a group of thinkers associated with networks. Human settlements are seen as a network of interconnected settlements and surrounding rural areas interwoven to form an ecosystem. Within this network smaller settlements and rural areas are recognized as playing an important role in the global village.

To McLuhan, it was the new electronic environment of networks which could extend and change the human experience. Networks of communication were fundamental to McLuhan who presented his work framed in terms urban planning on the second day of the eight day Delos symposium boat trip (Wigley, 2001). He insisted, "in a paradoxical twist, that the latest technologies have expanded the body so far that they have shrunk the planet to the size of a village, creating a 'tremendous opportunity' for planners (Wigley, p. 86). Doxiadis was drawn to the importance of networks. According to Wigley:

This concern for networks became clearest in the "City of the Future" project that Doxiadis launched in 1960 and kept working on until his death in 1975. First published just a month before the Delos event, it predicts the emergence of a single city covering the whole earth like a lava lamp network, a fluid biomorphic growth extending itself everywhere. The modern architects' fantasy of free-floating generic forms that could be dispersed anywhere on the planet gives way to a single planetary scaled dwelling: "a continuous network of centers and lines of communication" in which "all parts of the settlement and all lines of communication will be interwoven into a meaningful organism" (Doxiadis, 1963, p. 116).

To Doxiadis, both cities and architecture must turn to networks as he warns "To survive the global explosion, architects must be as networked as the spaces they produce" (Wigley, p.88). The Delos symposium culminated in the participants signing on to the Delos Declaration that endorses "Doxiadis's vision of a single global city growing out of control, with the human species portrayed as the victim of the uncontrolled growth of architecture" (Delos Declaration 1963). To Doxiadis, McLuhan's global village suggested the Ecumenopolis, cities interconnected in one continuous network or universal city which, despite its size, would "retain its human content" (Doxiadis, 1968, p. 10; Doxiadis & Papaioannou, 1974). The concept of Ecumenopolis foregrounds technology along with population growth and portends our present era of globalization. Ecumenopolis reflected Doxiadis' optimism for a better future and formed the reason for the need for ekistics. The Ecumenopolis concept was criticized and rejected by critics including Lewis Mumford who decried the fatalism

of the notion and others who did not subscribe to the paradigm as a whole (Mumford, 1967; Anthony, 1969).

The appeal of McLuhan's arguments to Doxiadis can be seen in that Doxiadis saw human settlements as "a continually evolving 'organism,' at once biological and technological, a technology with a biology. On the one hand, he keeps referring to the city as a body with nerves, arteries, and heart and uses the growth and multiplication of organic cells as a model—presenting images from biology textbooks to clarify the behavior of urban form" (Wigley, p. 87). To Doxiadis, human settlements were "unique biological individuals" so he advanced the need to develop a scientific field of study which became ekistics.

Fundamental to McLuhan's approach to the effects of media was the concept of figure/ground. He believed that to understand the meaning of an effect (i.e. figure) first the environment (i.e. ground) in which it functions must be considered. "The true meaning of any 'figure,' whether it is a person, a social movement, a technology, an institution, a communication event, a text, or a body of ideas, cannot be determined if one does not take into account the ground or environment in which that figure operates. The ground provides the context from which the full meaning or significance of a figure emerges" (Logan, 2011, p. 2). McLuhan focused on ground rather than figure, ground being not only the physical environment but the less visible in which figure occurred. McLuhan's ability to make predictions about the future emerged from his concern for the more subliminal ground (Logan, 2011). According to McLuhan, [C]hanges occur in the ground before they occur in the figure. We can project both figure and ground as images of the future using the ground as subplot of subliminal patterns and pressures and effects which actually come before the more or less final figures to which we normally direct our interest (Logan, p. 2; Molinaro, McLuhan, Toye, 1987). Many of the predictions he made concerning decentralization, changing roles producers and consumers, and the role of knowledge as a force in the economy he associated with electronic communication have proven prescient in the digital age.

This concern for figure-ground led McLuhan to become critical of Ekistics. In a letter written to Jaqueline Tyrwhitt March 24, 1972, he opined Ekistics magazine failed to adequately account for the importance of how the figure ground relationship is an essential component of any culture. He argued that systems people merge figure and ground translating the cultural ground or the ground of any situation into a figure by a statistical approach which failed to provide a gestalt, or a figure-ground interface.

Senses and the city

The biological turn expands when considering McLuhan's concern with the relationship between technologies and the human sensorium. "The effects of media, according to McLuhan, are registered primarily on the human senses. But this effect is not simply an impression on the sense(s) to which they directly appeal. Instead, a given medium's effects typically register on a different sense altogether, and it is this displaced sensory impact that is important" (Friesen, 2011, p. 1). The effect of a given medium may actually be counterintuitive as McLuhan suggests a



medium of print effects hearing and touch not only sight. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan suggests the effect of a medium on the senses can be understood in the context of their interrelationship:

...any medium which singles out one sense, writing or radio for example, by that very fact causes an exceptional disturbance among the other senses... . We may be forced, in the interests of human equilibrium, to suppress various media as radio or movies for long periods of time, or until the social organism is in a state to sustain such violent lopsided stimulus. (McLuhan, 1964, p. 9).

In personal correspondence to one of the authors of this article (1963), McLuhan noted: "the advantages of the concept of the Extensions of Man is that everybody can see at once that any extension modifies the existing sense ratios, whether in the individual or the society.

In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan expands the notion of senses to the human nervous system with all technologies (e.g. media) becoming an extension (externalization) of the human. The book extends the eye, with the wheel being an extension of the foot McLuhan. So, media and technologies in general are used by humans to extend their bodily capabilities into the environment. McLuhan calls the media "extensions of man" in so far as they increase the limits of a part of the human body which in turn modifies consciousness by altering the ratio between the various senses. This allows McLuhan to claim, for example, that "Our new electric technology now extends the instant processing of knowledge by interrelation that has long occurred within our central nervous system" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 249). So, media amplify some senses which consequences felt in diverse aspects of human civilization and institutions. The impact of any technology or medium should be understood as social and personal (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7).

Wigley cites a letter McLuhan wrote shortly before the Delos symposium in which he argued the extension of the human nervous system bore directly on human settlements as the electronic age "confuses the problems of living space" (Wigley, 2001). But for McLuhan the senses require a cosmopolitan center (Friesen, 2011).

Concern for the senses in architecture is not new as evidenced by sensory architecture and design. Textures, light, sounds, smells strongly influence the experience of place. From noise reduction to the smell of familiar foods, senses are stimulated in the environment shaping how one feels about a place.

One architect dealing with the senses influential to some in urban communication is Finish architect Juhani Pallasmaa in his *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Pallasmaa expresses an unhappiness with contemporary architecture which he associates to a tyranny of technology. He underscores the importance of sensing a city asserting a problem exists due to a preoccupation with the sense of sight in architecture. This echoes McLuhan who noted new technologies extended one sense to dominate the others. He too was concerned with the overpowering of the eye over other senses "The

interiorization of the technology of the phonetic alphabet translates man from the magical world of the ear to the neutral visual world" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 21). When considering experiencing a city, Pallasmaa argues for a holistic architecture which encompasses a multi-sensory approach. He argues, today, "[t]he hegemony of vision has been reinforced in our time by a multitude of technological inventions and the endless multiplication and production of images" (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 21). Once again one is reminded of McLuhan's comments on repetition and repeatability. The Gutenberg press extended the effects of the phonetic alphabet through "repeatable type" in which "the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 62).

Both McLuhan and Pallasmaa can be said to be concerned with the alteration of sense ratios. As we have entered an age of Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality will there be or has there already been an effect on our senses? Is the sense of sight extended or altered when AI apps generate images from text prompts. What is one's relationship to sight when image generation is at our fingertips and the images seen are of our (albeit assisted) prompts. What effect on hearing when large language models like GPT-4 produce human-sounding text and seemingly engage in interaction? AI researchers are working to replicate the senses. While smell and taste have yet to be greatly affected as of now, work is being done on that front including the creation of digital scent technology. Virtual meals, already being developed, will offer the taste of food through electro-stimulation of the tongue. The sense of touch is being extended through tactile interfaces. The simulation of textures and weights are entering immersive digital worlds. From gamers to doctors learning procedures through lifelike surgical simulators, haptics are changing. The interaction between the senses and technology continue to evolve. Amplification or augmentation of the senses through AI is yet another step in the fusion of the biological and the digital.

The relationship between technology and the senses is taking a new direction. Like human senses offering experiences and perceptions, advanced sensor networks are constantly being developed. Vision systems include surveillance cameras are commonly used. Algorithms process visual sensor data enable for such applications as security systems and traffic control. Audio sensing technology can capture sound frequencies undetectable by the human ear to reveal information about events of an environment. Olfactory sensors are used in manufacturing industries, to test food quality, for clinical diagnosis and for environmental controls. Digital taste sensors are used in pharmaceutical and food industries mimicking the human taste palate. Touch sensor technologies are being developed for diverse factors such as temperature, shape, texture, and directional forces. Digital sensing technology raises new questions about extension of man.

McLuhan's concern for cities melded with his ideas on education. He believed the metropolis to be a classroom, an idea introduced in the publication of "Classroom Without Walls" in *Explorations* (1957). In this work



McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter emphasized the view that electric media would reconfigure the parameters of education, an idea extended in *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media*, a co-authored textbook developed for high school students, McLuhan offered a praxis-oriented approach to the city by providing essentials and exercises for students. In a proposal mentioned in correspondence with Tyrwhitt in 1953, McLuhan introduces the notion of using city life for pedagogical purposes (Friesen, 2011). *City as Classroom* "suggests a pedagogy of the senses" (Friesen, 2011).

The urban communication perspective

The influence of Marshall McLuhan and the architectural/human settlements turn his work took, particularly with his engagement with Constantinos Doxiadis and Ekistics, has shaped our view of what has become known as urban communication. Emerging from McLuhan's understanding that electronic media fundamentally alter human settlements, "urban communication foregrounds communication in the study of the urban landscape. The communication lens offers valuable perspectives and methodologies for the examination of urban and suburban life" (Drucker & Gumpert, 2023, p.1). Our definition of urban communication conceptualizes the city as:

[A] a complex environment of interpersonal interaction, a landscape of spaces and places that shape human behavior, and an intricate technological environment. "Urban Communication" examines the complexities of the city and community from diverse disciplines and multiple points of view. It is not a discipline but rather constitutes an interdisciplinary perspective from which critique, analysis, and recommendations emerge (Drucker & Gumpert, 2023, p. 1).

The concept of "Urban Communication" brings together distinct disciplines which share overlapping areas of concern and methodologies but retain aspects of their unique perspectives, literatures and methods. It can be illustrated as a "Venn Diagram with a series of circles that overlap, with the common center demonstrating an area, sphere, or zone of commonality and the non-common areas representing distinct disciplines. In the case of "Urban Communication" it is a three-dimensional Venn diagram in which the concept of communication is altered by the nature of place and technology" (Drucker & Gumpert, 2023, p. 1). The fields applicable to these shared concerns include geography, sociology, computer science, media, communication, architecture, planning, psychology, design, journalism, law, etc. Each approaches the urban from what those engaged believe to offer unique insights.

"Urban Communication" changes as physical and media environments evolve and progress. Urban communication emphasizes "the centrality of communication as implicit in examining the urban" (Drucker & Gumpert, 2023, p. 1). Urban Communication builds on the insights of many including urbanists, technologists, sociologists, artists, film makers, architects, urban planners as they are concerned with human settlements which have become increasing urban phenomenon.

Urban communication is built on a foundation which relies on McLuhan's global village and Doxiadis's ecumenopolis. Urban communication assumes "technology is the dominant influence in altering the fabric and nature of communication from the beginning of civilization as the speed and nature of communication was enhanced with the increasing rate of invention" (Drucker & Gumpert, 2023). The relationship of person to place and the supremacy of place in shaping human settlements, institutions and communities has been defined by the means of communication which provides connection. Urban communication is concerned with the role of interpersonal face-to-face interaction and the effect of technologies, particularly media technologies, on person / environment / place relationships. This perspective can be traced to McLuhan's perspective on the nature of mass and interpersonal communication technologies and his concern for cities.

The relationship of McLuhan, Doxiadis and Ekistics provides a basic unifying concept of human settlements which has been fundamental to the development of the growing work in urban communication. All are interested in the confluence of technology and human experience. These different roads all lead to what is needed for a humane urban condition.

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