

Digital City

Geert Lovink

Creating a Virtual Public
The Digital City of Amsterdam

WHAT IS A 'DIGITAL CITY'?

Digital Cities or 'freenets' are freely accessible and free-of-charge information systems on the Internet. They are a local assembly of 'virtual communities' (Rheingold). Their common interest is their geographic position and native language. Since January 1994 Amsterdam has had such a digital city. It was founded by 'De Babe', a centre for politics, theatre and culture, and the 'Hacktic' group (computer hackers, operating the 'XS4all' Internet server). The project was started on the occasion of the municipal elections held at that time, and had the initial aim of conducting an experiment about the relationship between citizens and politics in the electronic age. Shortly afterwards, the discussion about planning the 'data highway' in Holland became more intense. For many people 'dds' was the first contact with the Internet. The system was so well received that it soon collapsed under the onrush. Currently ddsAmsterdam has 20,000 'inhabitants' and up to 4,000 log-ins per day. Since October 1994 the system has been running on World Wide Web and inhabitants have the possibility to create their own homepages. The 3.0 version (June 1995) puts even more emphasis on an individual positioning of the users in order to increase diversification within the expanding system. In the following text a number of alternatives and dilemmas are illustrated to give you a direct impression of the questions which can arise in the planning of public networks.

NOT AN ELECTRONIC DEPARTMENT STORE — PUBLIC DOMAIN

The Digital City is not a self-contained department store or shopping street. It is a public domain which provides access to commercial systems and services, but does not force you to buy and does not charge fees at the entrance gates. Just as walking around on the streets is free, access to the digital city must be free. There is freedom of speech. Via the 'street' you can log in to other systems where you have to pay for retrieving information, but this is independent of the public space in the net. If this fundamental difference between public space and private sphere ceases to exist, a digital city will have no *raison d'être* — it would simply be a computer network like all the others. A Digital City can rent out 'selling space', but it cannot be reduced in size. Commercial systems, on the other hand, would not even contemplate whether they have an 'exterior' or not — all they might do is to promote others by allowing them to place an advertisement in their system. According to Joost Flint, one of the system coordinators along with Marteen Stikker, the Digital City can be seen as an answer to the imminent commercialization of the net and as a trendsetter: "dds creates no market. In this sense we are hippie-tourists, getting to know a faraway land. I hope the Digital City will remain a space for non-commercial information, with free access and possibilities that go beyond those of commercial systems. It is nice for people to know that they are not 'monitored'. In other Internet systems every step you take is registered. The information is sold to a direct-marketing agency. Privacy will become a topic of discussion at some point."

THE DIGITAL CITY AS A METAPHOR

Rob van der Haar is one of the designers of the interface for the digital city 3.0. In his presentation 'The City as a Metaphor' he illustrates, "Why should we name an electronic environment 'Digital City'? First of all because the name could serve as a metaphor: it

explains unfamiliar things by means of what we already know. The behaviour of the Digital City must therefore be guided by the target group's image (mental model) of a real city. This does not automatically entail that a Digital City must be the exact copy of a real city. Quite the contrary, phantasy cities like Disneyland and symbolic cities like Jeffrey Shaw's 'The Legible City' have a much greater appeal to our imagination. In certain areas a Digital City can very well divert from the user's expectation pattern — surprises and discoveries are an invitation to come back to the city." Part of the Digital City's success is surely connected with its name. The city metaphor not only supports the recognition process but is also a very productive formula, stimulating the creators' and users' imagination. The 'city' attracts ideas and provokes the hatching of wild plans. This metaphor permits working on a strict, clear plan, where functionality and user-friendliness dominate, as well as on a maze of alleys and small streets, where dark, illegal and adventurous things happen. A city can be as rich (and poor) as life. Exclusion mechanisms cannot be applied effectively because of the target-oriented complexity of the structure. The intransparency protects the inhabitants against the destructive side of transparency and omnipresence. In computer terminology this means that cool high tech is softened by human excesses and unpredicted deviations. The city hall, as well as the sex and coffee shop, has to offer their services. You can go to school or you can skip class. The Digital City does not have to be clean and healthy per se. There must be anonymous places. The system is constantly rebuilt with cumbersome construction sites and broken up roads. In literary critique, the metaphor is a familiar problem. It is the task of literary science to transfer its knowledge into cyberspace and to critically examine the use of metaphors within systems like the Digital City. The city metaphor has found its way into cyberspace at a time when the city of Amsterdam has ceased to exist as an administrative unit and has dissolved into a region ('ROA'). Even in the reactionary concept of a city-state we see that the city redefines itself as a condensed infrastructure, comprising faraway suburbs, airports, industrial areas, edge cities, highways, trade centres and outskirts. The traditional city, on the other hand, had a clear border (and identity). The digital city as a metaphor that has returned can offer a certain amount of protection against the high-resolution power of new technologies. Apart from utopian features it also conveys nostalgic ones. It wants to resurrect the lost splendour of the city, not by covering up existing constructions with postmodern facades or by increasing protection, but by consistently expanding its artificial character: digital constructivism.

THE DIGITAL CITY IS A KIND OF PUBLIC SPACE

The Amsterdam philosopher Rene Boomkens has studied the 'disappearance of public space' for years. Mediatization has led to a different use of space -an extreme example of this is Baudrillard's envelope apartment. An unattached space between two points, with no movement at all. The space becomes increasingly bare and empty as the computer screen swallows all functions of space. The metaphor of humans as an extension of the plug goes back to the beginning of this century and can be found in the works of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin. According to the Belgian philosopher Bart Verschaffet virtual space began with the invention of the mailbox -the first object in space for which form is irrelevant. The slot in the mailbox is the prehistoric analogy for the plug. Public terminals are the interfaces between real and virtual cities, between the concepts of 'cyberspace' and 'public space'. Since the early days of the Digital City public terminals have played an essential role in the experiment. People without computers are able to access the system as well. The Digital City should become visible and perceptible in material space. The terminals have a well-contrived design — exploring the Digital City has been made attractive. In other places a further step was taken by opening 'cybercafes' providing a larger number of terminals and assistance in using the net. However, Joost Flint does not see any connection between the changes in public

spaces and the development of Digital Cities. "I think that, if people enter virtual space because the streets are no longer safe, we have to stop the Digital City project. Local authorities normally regard such systems as a possibility for spreading information and of integrating citizens in the administration. They consider it an information channel and do not see any connection with public space."

IS THE DIGITAL CITY A MEDIUM OR A FORUM?

The Digital City (like the politico-cultural centre 'De Balie' and 'XS4all') does not want to promote certain ideas, but stimulate and organize public debate. It does not want to vote for a certain party but gather the players involved in a social issue around a table. As for the organization (or 'art') of the debate, a lot of experience has been gained and we see this knowledge return in the Digital City. By emphasizing the platform function it could be avoided that the system assumed a primarily information-generating role. Instead, we got the flow of information from various sources moving towards dds — information that often already existed in digital form and was sometimes even available in a network. The digital city is global in its connections, national in its language and local in its basic information. In the first stage the global possibilities played a dominant role. Joost Flint: "The Digital City has a local function and I don't think that this was of lesser importance in the beginning. Everyone agrees that communication with the politicians did not work in the first months. But nobody considered this a disaster. The experiment was justified because local elections were taking place at that time. The gap between citizens and local authorities was the only argument that prompted people to give financial support. If we had argued that it would benefit everyone to get acquainted with the Internet, we would still be having discussions. One year ago the state refused to provide information on the Internet or send its mail via Internet. This has changed. Local, national and international broadcasting stations have produced documentaries on dds. In this sense the Digital City has become a catalyst for a comprehensive campaign on the possibilities of data communication." Without the publicity the Digital City would not have become such a success. Even now the presentation of the project in other media is an important task. But is the Digital City itself not a medium, which can report about its possibilities without television or radio? Data networks are part of the media in the widest sense. As a new medium, nets are connected to the old media through technical and ideological "interfaces". We find radio in the form of Internet talk radio, video and TV in the QuickTime movies; the 'Gutenberg project' takes care of the digitalization of books, newspapers are published in the net, paintings are scanned into the system and shown on the World Wide Web, a variety of digitalized photographs are circulated. Friedrich Kittler calls this the 'Mufti-media system'. To establish such connections between the row of data from various sources appears to be merely a technical matter. But behind the selection of data stands a solid editing policy. Nevertheless, the 'Handboek Digitate Steden' (February 1995), commissioned by the Ministry of Economics, does not mention any editorial office. The Digital City does not want to be one among the many newspapers or just another group hosting various programs. The editing of computer systems has not yet been defined. Once the network stops expanding and all the connections have been established, the media characteristic returns. Joost Flint: "For me the digital city is not a medium and it has no editor. But there is a management. The city metaphor might sometimes be misleading. The system is, one could say, not organized democratically. It is a project, managed almost like a company. The managing group establishes the framework conditions ('do not exceed 1 MB ... ') but we do not want to determine what information is going where. Some users think they must have the final say. I read the newspaper but I do not dispute its property. I go to the library but do not feel like I own it — it is annoying if a small group tries to dispute your authority over a facility which is offered free of charge". The digital city has an empty centre, with 'virtual

communities' grouped around it, but dds itself is not a group with a discernible style. Inhabitants cannot be forced to communicate with each other, but one hopes that they will be able to arrange something. In the beginning new virtual communities will remain in the shadow of the system. Communication cannot be planned from above and even an attractive design is no guarantee for success. The Digital City will always have teething problems. The net is an 'instable medium' (V-2) par excellence, which is constantly renewing itself. The users will get used to that and take advantage of it. The permanent upgrading also assures that the inhabitants remain curious and return to the system. Joost Flint believes that the interface has to change constantly. "It will become increasingly personal. Soon you might be able to say who you regard as your friend, so that you can search the city for people you know. Or you find out where things are happening. A city that changes from day to night. The successors of netscape will make it much easier for you to see moving images. Currently, the Internet and the Digital City can be received via telephone, but moving images and the possibility to send are supposed to come." The possibility to develop information and communication systems that take a completely different direction and refrain from metaphors should be considered. If cyberspace wants to grow up, it will have to distance itself from worldly and historic metaphors and develop its own system of rules and traditions which no longer refer to 'real life'. Commentators on the Digital City very often describe the options offered as banal and lacking imagination. They consider it a little too simple to copy the existing environment. The 'city' is something you visit, you do not 'live' there. The open character of a city means that you have to make an extra effort to feel at home and to contribute to a discussion or other public activity. It is not certain that the 'city' will lead to lasting identification. This will surely not be the case if 'freenets' increasingly develop into virtual desks for administrative bodies such as the revenue office, city hall and police.