

Exurban Noir

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“Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps, and the hanging garden of the Great Khan’s palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we cannot know which is inside and which outside.”

- Italo Calvino

ABSTRACT

Where are our beautiful, delicious urban technologies that will sooth the souls of our communities, generate the playful neo-geo-landscapes, and celebrate our omni-connected harmony? Contrary to these optimistic and homogenous visions of the technology futurists, we claim that beneath and around this utopian veneer of urban technologies lurks a dark and strange world driven by very different human needs, values, and desires. Places filled with not just one type of person but with many different kinds of people with different sensibilities. These differences create urban environments with conflict, struggles, mystery, worry, doubt, and deceit – urban noir. We draw upon two key bodies of work in this workshop. First, we are theoretically grounded in the notion of *splintering urbanisms* [3]. Second, to help participants experience and design for the lived experience of environment, we draw on the methods of *design noir* [1]. The *Exurban Noir* workshop combines the two into an approach we refer to as *exurban noir*. As designers, builders, theorists, and practitioners of our future technological urban lifestyles, we must open our minds to experiences and draw inspiration from *every* facet of urban life. Let us leave behind our fetishes for glossy designs, efficient location systems, and harmonious urban scenarios. Using the workshop as a two-day outpost, we will come together as a community and freely explore the inspirational exopolitan environment of the OC.

Author Keywords

Urban computing, Exopolis, Exurban noir, Heteroglossia, Splintering urbanism.

INTRODUCTION

The movement of computers off the desktop and into our

homes, cars and pockets has encouraged us to think more deeply about the relationship between computation, interaction, and the spaces in which they arise. Urban computing in particular exhibits a concern with the relationship amongst our information technologies, our mobilities, infrastructures and the built environment. The *Exurban Noir* workshop at UbiComp this year provides a unique opportunity to examine a burgeoning contemporary urban form, variably referred to as the “edge city”, “postsuburbia”, “exurbia”, or as Edward Soja [9] puts it, “*exopolis*, the city without... city-full non-city-ness.”

The *Exurban* workshop seeks to include a wide range of risk-taking urban practitioners that will undertake a two-day active exploration of exurban noir. Whether we like it or not, as urban designers and researchers we are contributing in unknown but significant ways in choosing our future technological urban lifestyles. Are we making it better or worse? For whom? And when? It may be years if not decades until we can make claims and measure our successes and failures, however, we owe it to our research community to look more deeply and take risks to arrive at alternate designs, alternate lifestyles, and alternate goals. With Orange County, the ultimate in exopolis, as a backdrop, we will collectively undertake this challenge of the understanding the relationship between future technology comforts and social discontent.

Exurban noir rests strongly on two different but not unrelated traditions. The first is the idea of *splintering urbanisms*, a term that addresses the importance of networked infrastructures such as computing, communications, transportation and utilities in shaping the power geometries of contemporary urban life [3]. For some these technologies create spaces of flow, connection and mobility while for others they throw up barriers.

“For different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. The point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn’t, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to these anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving end

of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.” [7]

The power geometries described here may splinter any single metropolitan area, juxtaposed spatially but experienced quite differently by different members of society. – all people might be created equal but not all people have an equal experience in the urban environment.

The second thread in the workshop is inspired by film noir and by the design practice of “design noir” [1] Drawing from film noir the focus on characters, lives and emotions often missing from mainstream films of the post WWII era. It has been these same kinds of people and emotional experiences that have been absent from mainstream ubicomp design. Design noir helps us understand the inverted side of design, designing not for what sells but for revealing look at human needs and design.

EXURBANISM AND O.C.

Since the 1880’s Southern California has been the subject of various booster myths promising a sunny, affluent utopia. Yet, since at least the 1930’s, Los Angeles has also been a backdrop for a starkly contrasting noir sensibility, evident in films such as *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner*. Tourists drawn by booster ads and traveling by train pulled slowly through LA’s red light district before arriving at their destination [4]. In 1955 Disneyland opened in Anaheim, then an Orange County suburb of Los Angeles. A utopian urban space, it can arguably be understood “by semiotic comparison with the world directly outside of it, the suburban sprawl of Los Angeles.” [2] By the 1990’s, travel brochures describe all of Orange County as “a seven-hundred-and-eighty-six-square-mile theme park – and the theme is ‘you can have anything you want.’” [9]

So where hides the dark, disaffected underbelly of the theme park? Does the caricature of urban noir, dwelling in the mean streets and dark alleys, hold? Pike [8] explores the image of above and under-ground cities, and the traditional role of the underground as a site for invisible work, the domain of an underclass, dirtier and more dangerous than the city above. However, the metaphor of the vertical city is no longer adequate to describe contemporary patterns of production. Magazine articles from the early 80’s describe the noir of New York’s Lower East Side, “poverty, punk rock, drugs and arson”, as “ambience” [10] (noir being the theme of that particular theme park), and the underground utilidors of Disney World, far from being invisible or stigmatized, are now relatively open to tourists. At the same time, and less visibly, Disney World negatively impacts the surrounding community, remains immune to local taxation, and profits distant partners. Polarization between rich and poor, powerful and exploited, can no longer be adequately understood as something that happens in the dark underbelly of the city, but rather at different times of day at the mall, on the bus routes between Santa Ana and Mission Viejo, in the relationship of Orange County to far-flung but connected regions in Mexico, Taiwan, Vietnam.

Ubiquitous information, communication and technology help create new power geometries and spatial logics, splintering our cities along infrastructural fault lines. Rather than a neatly divided city above and below, or inside and outside, our technologies help us form a far more complex mesh of interconnected networks, and the spaces between. Exurban noir is no longer composed simply of material deprivation, the disaffection of poverty or social exclusion, but also, as Graham and Marvin [3] point out, “marginalization from the ability to use and configure networked infrastructures and technologies.”

EXURBAN NOIR AND DESIGN

Exurban noir is not a new design genre, but rather a mood, style, point-of-view, or sensibility of urban design. Like film noir, the exurban noir deals in the perspectives of the criminal, hopeless, angry, greedy, violent, misogynistic, suspicious, disenfranchised, anti-heroes in urban design. Like design noir [1], it is about a *personal or emotional experience* that is not often portrayed in mainstream design, a close view of “everyday life, where complex emotions, desires and needs are played out through the misuse and abuse of electronic products and systems”.

It is in Orange County, the backyard of Disneyland that we want to understand not the typical Disneyland view of the future technologies, but rather seek to understand different points of view from the lived experience of the OC. We hope that the concepts that emerge reflect the resultant tensions and insecurities of our times, and counter-balanced the optimism of digirati of San Francisco, London and Tokyo, or the techo utopianism of Wired. What is Orange County like for those who aren’t affluent 20-somethings? What does navigating Orange County feel like for those often left out of urban technology designs: first generation Vietnamese immigrants, 70 year old grandmothers using canes and living off a fixed income, Latina maids, people who don’t own cars, and others outside of the mainstream world of planned communities, art galleries and upscale malls.

Concepts developed will be given in the *first person narrative like the film noir genre*, rather than as an abstract invisible designer narrative. The concepts will express a personal point of view, grounded in the very real social worlds of people not comfortable in air-conditioned offices, in universities or in industry. We will attempt to capture a world of privilege and poverty, extremes of connection and disconnection, mobilities that may be discretionary, forced or unattainable – a world of multiple, layered meanings in which, for some, it is a struggle to survive. Upon completion of the workshop, we hope participants (including ourselves) will have a sensitivity to what is not typically talked about or represented in future technology concepts. We are not anticipating that everyone will go away and do urban noir work – no! We want to use the opportunity of the workshop to let us be free to talk about it, (a sort of Urbanites Anonymous: “Hi I’m Eric and I make furry, cute, beautiful urban objects and want to

stop...”) with the goal of deepening our understanding of our own work and providing different perspectives on the urbanisms we think we’re familiar with. It is hoped that this sensitivity will enable participants to design a better techno-future for all.

LET’S GET DIRTY

The workshop is planned to run over two days, with a significant amount of time involving actively engaging the exurban environment through “deep exploration” and urban actions. Attendees will give a brief 10 minute presentation on the morning of the first day, stating their interest and trajectory within this topic area, followed by a discussion and strategy session on the issue of urban noir as a practice. On the afternoon of the first day we will venture out in groups with people native to Orange County who might have alternative views on the city and richer than a tourist view. On the morning of the second day, we will adventure into our own groups of 4 into and across “The O.C.” to collect, discover, uncover, map, spy, follow, trace, etc. in an effort to construct a discourse through doing. Participants will get dirty and hands-on with the urban environment. On the afternoon of the second day participants will discuss their findings through a series of “visual speculations” assembled from their experience of Orange County. The tangible outcome of the workshop will be a series of designs, scenarios, and/or artifacts that will introduce the UbiComp attendees to the notion of the exurban noir through a composite poster of workshop projects.

GOALS OF THE WORKSHOP

The goal of the workshop is *not* to provide general-purpose holistic solutions to problems within the complex social, cultural, political, and economic ecology of urban life. Rather, we hope to expand the vocabulary of potential urban technologies, enabling a wider range of choices as we form our future urban lifestyles. Our final designs are intended to provoke open ended discussions around urban technologies rather than present “killer apps” or final solutions. By exploring the exurban noir we hope to initiate a dialog aligned with new urban territories and contexts. By examining the “worst possible” technologies [6], when participants complete the workshop, they will also have learned to understand how to develop the best possible technologies.

Taking the above perspectives as a springboard for discussion and action, this workshop has the following aims:

- To elaborate new methods and models in design practice, like exurban noir, that can be added to the design toolbox to create future urban applications, environments and lifestyles.
- To bring together a multi-disciplinary group of practitioners to discuss how our future fabric of digital and wireless computing will influence, disrupt, expand,

and be integrated socially, personally, and politically into urban techno-scapes.

- To grapple cognitively and experientially with the exopolis as an urban form.
- To extend the discourse of locative media and technologies and their relationship to urban space and practices as a maturing dialogue, raising issues that are reflective of this.
- To develop an agenda for future collaborations, research and design in the area of urban computing and identify critical opportunities in this space.

WORKSHOP ORGANIZERS

The organizers of this workshop come from a wide range of backgrounds, including anthropology, computer and information science, architecture, psychology and urban design. Together they have considerable experience in workshop organizations across several disciplines. Their diversity of perspective will foster an inter-disciplinary call for participants from a range of communities of practice via personal contact and email distribution lists. Further, their diverse backgrounds will lend to a balanced selection process, as well as, an interdisciplinary approach to the workshop.

PARTICIPATION

Selection of Workshop participants and presentations will be based on refereed submissions. Authors are invited to submit a two page position statement in the ACM SIGCHI conference publications format. Position statements are encouraged to be provocative and will be used during the workshop to guide and disrupt our views of exurban computing. They may include personal experiences, performances, studies, or individual urban projects. Position statements should have only one author, and should include a brief biography. Selected participants will be invited to present a short position statement, and should come prepared for a physically active two day workshop in, around, under and through “The O.C.”

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