

# (Im)Mobile Nation

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## Abstract

*Cityspeak* and *Citywide* are sibling projects that explore *situated wireless*: mobile networked technologies used in relatively immobile contexts to augment conversations among people located in the same space. *Cityspeak* uses large-scale public displays to host text messages sent by participants' mobile phones and wireless PDAs, using prompts and subtle provocations to encourage participants to talk to one another about the particular context in which they find themselves. *Citywide* moves the locus of interaction to the personal space of the laptop screen, where participants enter a chat environment focused on a particular hotspot or group of hotspots. We have created over a dozen *Cityspeak* installations in contexts ranging from workshops to festivals to nightclubs, and *Citywide* has been active across Montreal's free wireless network since the spring of 2007. Here we review our experience with these two projects, discuss how they are effective at promoting conversations about a particular space, and contemplate how they may evolve in the future.

## Introduction

What is radically new about mobile technologies? What new possibilities do they open for (re)engaging with others and ourselves? These questions are what launched the *Cityspeak* and *Citywide* projects at Obx Laboratory for Experimental Media.<sup>1</sup> For the past three years, we used these questions to guide our intuitions and suspicions about the potential within mobile technologies for new modes of social interaction. In the process of developing the projects we refined the notion of *situated wireless*, or the use of such technologies to reinforce localities via site-specific interventions rather than as nomadic nodes on a dispersed, decontextualized network.

Cell phones and laptops enable anytime, anywhere access to data from around the globe, but they are equally useful for deeply exploring the specifics of a particular location. How can mobile input methods be connected to public displays for site-specific explorations? *Cityspeak* and *Citywide* are interactive text

projects aimed at altering and augmenting locations where the global becomes local.

## Cityspeak

*Cityspeak* is an interactive text installation that can be accessed by sending an SMS message with a cellphone, or inputting text through a web form with any web-ready device. On the display itself, messages first float in the foreground, then get pulled into a chaotic mass at the bottom right before being integrated into a history of old messages scrolling in the background. The history is constantly updated as new messages are sent, providing contextual information that new senders can reinforce, denounce or ignore.

## Screens: Façade 2.0

We live in societies which are enveloped in and saturated by the media: most importantly, it is difficult to escape the influence of the screen which now stares at us from so many mundane locations—from almost every room in the house to doctor's waiting rooms, from airport waiting lounges to shops and shopping malls, from bars to many workplaces.<sup>2</sup>

Nigel Thrift proposes that the capacity of real-time media to affect urban inhabitants is a product of the inability of the viewer to choose *not* to attend to the message being broadcast. Moving screens are an integral part of a commercial content continuum in which we bathe everyday. The result is that we suffer the media rather than consume it.

*Cityspeak* is designed to be displayed on public screens in order to take advantage of this growing omnipresence and to explore the still-emerging affective qualities of these screens. From Greek monuments to Medieval cathedrals to Modernist skyscrapers, spatial (infra)structures are created in order to touch the viewer emotionally, inspiring fear, respect, or admiration. Up until recently, the façade of such constructs have been fairly static, their content hard-coded into stone, concrete and steel. With the advent of screens on top, beside, or completely replacing the façade, we are seeing more ephemeral messages that transmit the soup of the day, the hot *flavas* of the co-opted underground, and the fleeting desires of fashion. This ever-changing face of the postmodern façade threatens to relegate it to a vacuous, Baudrillardian hyperreality.<sup>3</sup> Public screens are 'Façades 2.0', constantly updating themselves with broadcasts that alter our perception of time and place, suggesting that our wardrobe out of date, our computer equipment obsolete, our cars so last-year.

Yet we are not Luddites: we want to bend screens to other ends, not dispose of them. *Cityspeak* intervenes to provide a channel for talking back to these urban

screens, to shout up against the sensory overload and counter the passivity of simply putting up with the screens shouting down at us.

### **Threat of Text**

While the number of large-scale public screens is growing, the percentage supporting non-commercial use remains quite small.<sup>4</sup> Most big screen content is pre-programmed, so of that small percentage there is an even smaller number that invite the audience to interact in real time,. Moreover, the few real-time interactive works that do exist are seldom text-based. As we pursued public display options for *Cityspeak*, we realized that the literal nature of text is perceived as a threat.

Many venues have expressed interest in the idea of *Cityspeak*, but when learning that it trafficked in real-time text messages venue operators often became resistant. Their resistance was due to concerns about slander, obscene language and the fact that work such as this—which empowers end-users to deploy their personal mobile devices to inscribe urban surfaces and enact an agenda different from the standard commercial one—is perceived as risky. We interpreted this resistance as informal confirmation of the perceived power of employing text in this manner.

### **Future steps**

Perhaps public space is a fiction, the spatial projection of a democratic ideal yet to materialize. Our final *Cityspeak* installation will test this notion. It will be at Victory Park, in Dallas, Texas.<sup>5</sup> This new residential hotel, shopping, and sports complex, featuring a façade with eight large-scale (15 by 26 ft) moving screens, epitomizes the contemporary tension between public and private: the plaza in the middle of the complex is city property, but it is managed by the complex developers. Part of our interest in mounting *Cityspeak* at Victory Park is precisely because it is not clear whether this plaza is a public space—defined simply as an inclusive, heterogeneous, and uncensored space for free interaction<sup>6</sup>—or a private consuming environment which *emulates* public space but comes complete with pervasive camera surveillance, strict regulations of façade appearance and private security responsible for the removal of the unwanted or unsavory. We plan on using *Cityspeak* to push on the question of how such spaces are perceived, used and managed.

### **Citywide**

*Citywide* is the result of our work on *Cityspeak* leading us to focus on the interaction between mobile technologies and a particular place.<sup>8</sup> Through our participation in the Mobile Digital Commons Network (MDCN) we were introduced

to Île Sans Fil (ISF), the free wireless collective in Montreal.<sup>9</sup> We were engaged by their vision of wireless access points as community nodes around which various sorts of grassroots activities could be organized and presented, and by a use profile that suggests interesting congregations of people. We wondered how we could reach these people with a version of *Cityspeak*'s shared space for public commentary that would be appropriate to the character of the various ISF hotspot locations.

*Citywide* is the product of that curiosity. *Citywide* is a local chat interface for each ISF hotspot, designed as an additional layer of communication to support the micro-communities that form around the cafes, bars and bookstores that host nodes on the free wireless network. It is the specificities of each location that struck us as more lush terrain for mobile communities than the abstractions of a global village where anyone anywhere can be anything.

### **How it Works**

We designed *Citywide* specifically for people using laptops. The application interface is written in Flash to allow it to be run on any browser, and the backend connects together people accessing the net through the same wireless access point.

*Citywide* works like any chatroom. One can send a message, select a thread to respond to, and view previously written messages. However, access to the chatroom is restricted to users logged-in via a given hotspot. In other words, only the people at Café Laïka can enter the Laïka *Citywide* chatroom, and only the people at Café Utopik can enter the Utopik chatroom.<sup>10</sup>

Visitors can access *Citywide* via the login page that ISF uses to authenticate users onto their network. Each ISF hotspot has a customized homepage, including a shoutbox. When a user sends a message via the shoutbox she gets taken to the *Citywide* chat space, where she exchange messages with other users at the same hotspot. The *Citywide* interface allows her to personalize the appearance of her text messages, and to get an overview of the number of messages sent from all users and the total number of users for the past twelve hours.

### **The Future of Situated Wireless**

At the time of publication, *Citywide* has just been launched over all 106 Île Sans Fil hotspots. This initial deployment will serve as a test of the capacity of situated wireless to forge or reinforce interaction between loosely-coupled co-located users, as well as provide data to compare with our experience with *Cityspeak*. In both works, users are anonymous to other users (unless they choose to declare their real identity through message content, or, in the case of *Citywide*,

username.) Yet their messages are public in different ways, with *Cityspeak* providing a display space that is public to everybody regardless of whether they are participating, and *Citywide* providing a display space shared only by the users.

Both *Cityspeak* and *Citywide* use physical location as a starting point, an asset to reinforce, a fertile space of potentialities. In these ways *Cityspeak* and *Citywide* invert the anywhere/anytime promises of wireless mobile technology hinted at by McLuhan and commoditized by commercial carriers. If mobile devices are used to access the same data from anywhere, they come to act as blinders or filters suppressing the difference between places. Our experience with these projects leads us to believe that mobile technologies can be used to re-embody and re-situate space, not to dislocate or erase it. If mobile tech can be used to reassert the specificity of place and those present in it, they would function as a lens, a flashlight, a means of augmenting instead of replacing. This is the rich terrain of mobile art we are interested in exploring further.

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