
In his new book *Placing Words: Symbols, Space and the City*, William Mitchell explores how the contemporary urban context affects the meaning of a message. He does so by looking at some recent events and socio-technological phenomena through a series of thirty-two essays composing the central part of the book, entitled “Text and the City.” All articles were originally written as monthly columns for the *Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Journal* from February 2003 to May 2005, except the first which was published in *Scientific American* in December 1997.

The general intent of the author is to provide a view of twenty-first century architecture and cities, which holds that the contemporary architect must abandon the modern idea of architecture, famously announced in Le Corbusier’s *Towards a New Architecture* (1923) as a play of forms in light. According to Mitchell, the built environment has to serve as “the constructed ground for encountering and extracting meaning from cross-connected flows of aural, textual, and graphic, and digital information through global networks” (p. 19). The city is not only a shelter, but also a setting for communication in which communities are constructed. Therefore urban space must integrate the multiplicity of media and the ever-changing data flows with built environments in order to support interaction between different communities by providing them with urban contexts for communication.

This account of the role of the built environment, in which the urban context and media come together in the construction of meaning, introduces a variety of subjects from cultural studies, politics, interaction design, marketing, media theory, communications, architecture, and urban studies, making the book of interest to many different audiences. Although most essays were originally written for an architectural journal, none of the specific disciplinary topics is deeply explored. Instead, *Placing Words: Symbols, Space and the City* is to be understood as an inspirational text for a more interdisciplinary discussion of media and the built environment.

The author does not use bibliographical references such as footnotes, endnotes, or texts cited. For this reason it is hard for the reader to understand the selection of specific examples and stories, or to further investigate certain topics that might be of interest. Keeping in mind the origins of the texts, the relaxed writing style, and a certain looseness in the selection of topics is understandable. However, Mitchell’s user-friendly style may distract the reader from the main points in the essays because the author often takes up secondary topics with equal emphasis.

It is relieving to observe Mitchell employ the methodology he does in this book. The essays are grounded in personal experience, opinions, memories, and actual events and so address smaller and more concrete topics. Larger concepts naturally emerge in-between these stories, but they are suggestions or questions rather than conclusions. In his previous texts, Mitchell often speculates about broad concepts relating to the emerging technologies and their future social and cultural consequences. In *Placing Words: Symbols, Space and the City*, speculative theory is replaced by experiential evidence: By questioning his own everyday actions and habits and commenting on local events and news, the author adopts the role of a commentator looking at the media and the city here and now.

The part of the book that offers the clearest argument and the most logical flow is the introduction. It helps the reader link the many themes explored in the central part of the book. This opening chapter is a walk though the history of media in the urban context, starting from face-to-face interactions by the means of spoken word and body language, continuing with communication through spatial organization of objects or spaces, messages written on objects, and the spatial and temporal displacement of messages as an effect of telecommunications. Finally, the journey through media history ends with ubiqui-
tous and networked digital technologies. Such a logical and clear, albeit short, beginning might make the reader desire a more profound analysis of some concepts that are raised, such as the urban *mise-en-scène* and the cognitive function of architecture as a “glue for communication that holds communities together” (p. 12). However it works well as a warm-up and an explanatory introduction for what follows.

The central part of the book is a heterogeneous assembly of articles ordered in a chronological progression of described events. The short articles are composed of personal stories, opinions, and commentaries on recent political events, natural disasters, visited exhibitions, or history of media. These stories are fuzzily linked by some more general themes which reappear throughout the book such as the ways in which media in the physical context affect the production of meaning and the power structures they support. The underlying themes connecting the essays vary in their content and level of development of the argument but none presents findings of any significant detail.

The approach the author often uses throughout the book is that of posing crucial questions and suggesting alternatives to existing situations related to media practices in the urban environment. How do we create an urban context which accommodates new meanings and stimulates their production, Mitchell asks. Ubiquitous computing has created a continuous media space in which the perceived surroundings have radically changed and are incessantly and dynamically changing. The challenge for designers, architects, and media practitioners is to generate settings that may adapt to the continuous informational flows. One of the design problems is that often the new medium is used in an archaic way. In the essay “What Does a Pixel Want to Be?”, Mitchell describes the use of LEDs as scrolling text with a reference to the classical architectural frieze.

The comparisons between current and past phenomena and the references to urban history and the history of media are sometimes written in an overly relaxed manner. In the essay “Smackdown In Cyberspace,” the comparison between Howard Dean on the Internet and Plato in the Agora seems at least over-simplified. Mitchell treats with more success the historical evolution of media in relation to moral obligations. He argues that the difference between the “discrete media spaces” (p. 14), created for example by means of book reading or storytelling, and continuous media in the ubiquitous computing world creates new kinds of responsibilities. The article “After Tsunami” describes how a geographically distant natural disaster affects us more strongly because it is communicated pervasively and in real time. It shows that a displacement in space but not in time creates feelings of moral obligation, confirming the ethical consequences of McLuhan’s (2001) idea of “the global village.”

The autobiographical finale named “Carriage Return” is a stand-alone essay, originally written for Sherry Turkle’s *Evocative Objects* project. In it, the author takes a trip back in time to his childhood and recounts how the introduction of the train and the text in his life created additional meanings both for the Australian landscape and the written word. The experience of reading on the train enabled the construction of new meaning by overlaying the text and the landscape, while in his writings the motion of the train translated into the flow of text, and the rhythm of the train became the rhythm of the poetry.

In the past, both architecture and media were seen as the carriers of meaning and often as expressions of power. Today architectural and media practice have to come together in order to deal with more dynamic phenomena of construction of meaning, visible and invisible networked data flow. If the meaning of symbols in space, including words and images, is constructed by interaction with their surroundings, the role of architects and media practitioners is to create or to enrich the context for communication flows.

*Placing Words: Symbols, Space and the City* hopes to stimulate a more effective and conscious creation of the urban environment as a machine for the production of meaning that affects the social and cultural dimensions of everyday life. Mitchell would probably be more successful in accomplishing this goal if he linked it to a clear research agenda.
Although this would provide the reader less space for imagination, it would suggest more concrete directions for the future development of practice around the topic of the urban context and media and the research findings that might support it.

References

Karmen Franinovic
Concordia University