

Book Review

Bucher, Ulrike and Finka, Maros (eds.) 2008. *The Electronic City*. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.

256pp. Paperback. EUR 25.00. ISBN: 978-3-8305-1452-7.

Fábio Duarte and Rodrigo Firmino

Postgraduate Program in Urban Management, Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (PUCPR), Curitiba, Brazil.

duarte.fabio@pucpr.br and rodrigo.firmino@pucpr.br

The most noticeable advance in notions of space may be the inclusion of a powerful social/cultural aspect to the construction and organization of spaces and places. According to these ideas, space cannot be analyzed or even understood just as a physical entity, separated from time and, consequently, separated from social aspects of particular communities or societies. Many scholars have been working on this type of ‘unitary space’ where there is no separation between physical, mental and social elements of space (Lefebvre 1991). In general thus the idea of an interdependent and dialectic space made of inseparable complex structures of objects and actions, of territory and society (Santos 1994) has become more and more accepted.

Therefore, the parallel idea of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) imposing deep transformations in the urban realm is almost a direct and academic extension of the recognition that we live in an information society. In his trilogy of already classic books, Manuel Castells (starting with *The Rise of the Network Society* in 1996) analyzed social, economic, political and urban aspects to demonstrate that ‘information’ makes the structural column of contemporary societies, especially those types of information supported by networks of ICTs in a global scale. Castells’ success is rather based on his ability to summarize and put together the elements of discussions that have been around for some time in a profusion of fields, than on the idea of being the first to highlight the power of information. Thus, the fact that ICTs are capable of altering the urban world should be only a presupposition, and not the core subject of recent debates in urban studies.

Important rising questions about these transformations in urban space are: how do they happen, and where do they take place? Attempts to address these questions could be divided in three types of approaches. First a conceptual or theoretical one, seeking the understanding of how ICTs could share responsibility in the challenges posed to the definition of key urban concepts such as city, space and place. Secondly, an experimental one, where ICTs take part in functionally-uncompromised projects, which own their success to the risks taken. This sense of freedom allows these projects to advance in the construction of urban spatialities that, in their turn, question conceptual and perceptual basis of what we believe is the urban space. Finally, a third approach through case studies can show us how ICTs have been appropriated by planners and local authorities in the analysis, construction and management of contemporary cities.

The book *The Electronic City*, edited by Ulrike Bucher and Marós Finka, is organized in thirteen chapters that address some of these aspects. But just as this book, dozens of others (and, in fact, hundreds of them if we consider publications in different languages) are annually published, presenting themselves to discuss the same issues. Thus, what is special about *The Electronic City*, which would convince readers to read it? What is its novelty, if any?

Duarte, Fábio and Rodrigo Firmino. 2009. Review of Bucher and Maros’ *The Electronic City*. *Surveillance & Society* 7(1): 78-80. <http://www.surveillance-and-society.org> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© The author(s). 2009 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



This book is made of papers originally presented at a conference of the same name, which took place in Bratislava, in the Czech Republic, in December 2005, as part of a European Commission funded program called Future Urban Research in Europe (FUTURE). Therefore, the book presents major editorial challenges from its own roots. An edited book is always accompanied by the ambiguous meaning of diversity. On the one hand, it has the power of gathering different points of view, and on the other, it brings the risk of excessively divergent chapters with no common points for discussion, or even worse, with no respect to a clear editorial line. The challenge is even bigger if one considers the edition being made with papers originally written for a conference, which gathers independent works to be discussed in a few days – and frequently once.

In this sense, we consider the lack of a coherent editorial line as one of the weaknesses of *The Electronic City*. The book clearly lacks a unified narrative, with a conceptual or methodological structure of what authors from different disciplines could connect to. This is made evident by the absence of an introduction (it has only a preface of one and a half pages) and epilogue or conclusion for the book, two important parts of edited books that could have given some common grounds to the apparently unconnected chapters. As already mentioned, the influence of ICTs in urban societies is not an issue in itself, but something that should be taken as an *a priori* point for discussion. And if this is the case, this book would be valuable enough as an important testimony of the state-of-the-art about the implications of the so-called electronic city in Europe. Or, it could be read as an edition showing how the European Union forums of debate are looking at this new ongoing urban reality.

The book has two major types of chapters: conceptual or theoretical discussions mainly based on a literature review, and narratives based on descriptions and analyses of case studies. In the first chapter, Frank Eckardt gives a conceptual basis about the electronic city when he argues, inspired by Borden and Friedland, that the debate about this subject “should stress, however, the refusal of any theoretical conception, in which ideas, discourses and pictures of a city are linked in a direct and causal line to and the appearance of the physical environment of the city” (p.9). Interestingly, he also puts that hybridity is a crucial concept which should support all discussions about the ‘E-city’. In his view hybridity is a key “to understand the interwoven relation between the virtual and the real” (p.10).

This is, actually, one of the strengths of Eckardt’s paper, that is, bringing the concept of hybridism to the core of the debate about the E-city, of assuming in the opening pages of the book, the important relational interdependence between physical and electronic aspects in the constitution and understanding of contemporary cities. However, perhaps due to the fact that it is an introductory chapter, which stems from a conference, unfortunately the author does not explore in depth any of the ideas mentioned in the paper (from hybridism to the cyborg city). This has at least two downsides. For readers familiar with these discussions, the chapter ends up being frustrating, as they would expect more exciting, if not innovative, points of view. And for those unfamiliar with the concepts raised in this opening piece, trying to use it as a conceptual basis to interpret the case studies presented in the other chapters, the excessive number of references and citations might well get them stuck by the middle of their reading. An illustration of this overdose of references that makes the text a little bewildering is the fact that from sixteen pages that make the chapter, six are dedicated to list the bibliography.

Another contribution that has a more conceptual argument is Beata Sirowy’s ‘Renegotiating Place’. In the author’s own words, “the central question of this paper is to which extent the development of information and communication technologies has changed the way we relate to urban places” (p.45). Sirowy delivers a piece that puts together many references preoccupied not only with the way places are influenced by ICTs but – which is rather intriguing from a theoretical point of view – how the very meaning of place (and this can also be extended to the other two terms that form the spatial triad, territory and space) has been transformed with the recent developments in ICTs. At the end of the chapter, though, the all-in-English 27 bibliographical references seem to support the author arguing that “the rapidly developing information and

communication technologies can be incorporated on both sides – either enhancing the physical places and encouraging social and political participation, or – alienating the individuals from their actual settings and sustaining the consumer spaces of spectacle” (p.63). There is nothing wrong with this statement. And this is quite appropriate for one of the introductory texts of a following series of case study reports, but not enough for a piece that has no commitments with cases. It could, instead, help to develop a more comprehensive understanding of place (territory and space) in the age of the E-city. This is an example that an excellent text for a conference does not necessarily make a book chapter of the same importance. The author mixes up an interesting list of references while raising many complex questions without having the strength to discuss and relate all of them with the same enthusiasm (which, in a conference, could make a good debatable presentation).

Many other chapters are dedicated to reporting case studies, which allow readers to get familiar with experiences where ICTs play a deliberate central role in the analysis and constitution of informational, social and political arrangements in different contexts. A good example of this approach is Sara Wilford’s discussion about issues of e-government and privacy centred on the management of UK’s controversial proposal for national identity cards supported by a central database. The author, interestingly, turns the main arguments about e-government from participation issues to the ones related to social control, to the point of arguing that “e-government is a contributor to the surveillance society with government access to personal information becoming freely and comprehensively available” (p.134).

Among the case study chapters, applications and methodologies are presented in different contexts and with a variety of functionalities, from art projects to administrative or management usage, such as the Web-based SoftGIS described by Maarit Kahila and Marketta Kytä, that instigates readers curiosity to see further developments and other examples (available at: <http://www.softgis.fi>). This is also the case for participative territorial management, addressed in more than one chapter, but notably in Francesco Rotondo’s paper about collaborative planning in Italy. Rotondo shows how a group of six small municipalities in the provinces of Bari and Brindisi (Italy) has made use of ICTs as a sort of functional infrastructure for building collaboration in decision-making processes. And thus, arguments such as to say that technologies and the internet could eliminate the friction of distance – which would sound naïve (or at least outdated) in a more conceptual approach – suddenly make sense for particular cases. This is justified in the context described by Rotondo, when stakeholders realized that “to promote the PAU [*Parco Agrario degli Ulivi secolari*], where the territory concerned included six municipalities in two different provinces, the distances among the various participant groups would have created even more difficulties in setting up brainstorming sessions with the farmers and agronomists. Moreover, the possibility of participating without having to travel allowed handicapped subjects to take an equal part in the process” (p.237).

At the end of a book review, readers want to feel impelled to consult the commented work or at least to get a critical and objective opinion from the commentators. Honestly, despite the quality of some conceptual chapters, the fragmented structure of the book and, mainly, the lack of a clear editorial line that could weave all chapters into a more consistent and unified narrative, takes away the potential relevance of this book to become a work of reference. A few case studies stand up. But, certainly for this, the proceedings of FUTURE’s event would deliver the message for researchers and city-makers just as efficiently.

References

- Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
 Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of the Space*. London: Blackwell.
 Santos, M. 1994. *Técnica, Espaço, Tempo: Globalização e Meio Técnico-Científico-Informacional*. São Paulo: Hucitec.