

MEIPI: SYNERGY BETWEEN DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL NETWORKS

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www.meipi.org

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Meipi is a map (wikimap) where users can upload multimedia files linked to a precise place in the city such that the images, personal impressions, sounds, stories, and surroundings perceived by local residents can be shared in an immediate and everyday way with one's own neighbours.

It aims to develop processes by which the network becomes a catalyst fostering social relationships that allow us to know our neighbours better, thus strengthening community and a feeling of belonging to it.

It defines a new kind of user with another quality different than users of all other Web pages: this user is interested in a real, physical space, which is represented in MEIPI. The user's options and actions will always be related to that place (the user's neighbourhood and city).

To date, various projects have been started. We would like to highlight three of them: a project called *Todo Sobre Mi Barrio* (*All about My Neighbourhood*) (www.todosobremibarrío.com), which is being carried out in collaboration with the **Laboratorio Urbano** collective and with support from the new **Intermediae** centre, and two others that started with the collaboration of the architectural firm **Ecosistema Urbano**:

- a. One in Madrid in the Universidad neighbourhood (<http://barriouniversidad.meipi.org>)
- b. One in Santiago de Compostela (<http://santiago.meipi.org>) with support from the **Centro de Arte Contemporanea de Galicia** (CGAC).

At present, we are working on a creating an *Open Source* package with the code used on the page for that people who know how to do programming can create their own personalized meipi. Until then, and without needing to understand programming,

one can use **meipimatic**: a creator of meipis. With meipimatic (www.meipimatic.org), any user can simply and instantly put together a collaborative map (meipi) (just like making a blog).

1. WHAT IS MEIPI?

Meipi can be defined as a local collaborative page for self-publication and the search for information referenced on a digital map. In its simplified version, we define it as a collaborative digital map for new forms of citizen participation.

This map allows users to upload multimedia files linked to a precise place in the city such that the images, personal impressions, sounds, stories, and surroundings perceived by local residents can be shared in an immediate and everyday way with one's own neighbours.

It's a voluntary or automatic system for assessing information and participants that guarantees the quality of the contents and ensures participants' trust.

It aims to develop an interactive platform which, directly or indirectly, is capable of strengthening citizen participation in the social and cultural life of their neighbourhoods (cities).

It aims to develop processes by which the network becomes a catalyst fostering social relationships that allow us to know our neighbours better, thus strengthening community and a feeling of belonging to it.

Meipi defines a new kind of user (for now, let's say a "user/citizen") with another quality different than users of all other Web pages: this user is interested in a real, physical space, which is represented in MEIPI. The user's options and actions will always be related to that place (the user's neighbourhood and city).

In sum, a meipi can be considered as a search engine, a collective blog, a digital map or a local communication system, characterized by four key elements: 1) the active role of the user, who can be reader and author; 2) the local nature of the information; 3) the geo-referencing of that information on a map of the neighbourhood or the city; 4) system for assessing information and participants that guarantees the quality of the contents and ensures participants' trust.

2. BETWEEN PHYSICAL SPACE (CITY) AND VIRTUAL SPACE (THE INTERNET)

A very important characteristic of this project is that it is interested in a clearly defined, limited physical space, a neighbourhood or a city. For quite some time now, we have been reflecting on the new model of urban life and the influence new technologies may have on it. Our training as architects and urban planners leads us to think in terms of spaces, and talking about urban spaces, the first thing that comes to mind is public spaces. Historically, what has separated urban and rural life is the quality of their public spaces. They are where the social, cultural and economic meetings and exchanges of a city take place –which are information exchanges- so they are the reason for people to live in a community.

Jona Friedman explains in *Utopías realizables (Achievable Utopias)* that a group of people living in a space constitute a city if at least a certain number of encounters occur among them per units of space and time; according to Friedman, if the number of encounters is over a certain number, then the information exchanged becomes noise. The Internet complements the job of physical public space in that it organizes this information, facilitates its exchange, and separates them depending on the receiver's interests.

Currently, public space is experiencing a huge change. It is being abandoned in favour of new private spaces that offer us safety and services in return for money. Many activities that people used to leave their homes to do can now be done conveniently from the home.

But if we don't leave our houses, who uses public space and more importantly, what is its purpose? Can we still define it as the space for social relationships?

Currently, we increasingly use the Internet to communicate and connect with others, forgetting about relationships in public space. There are many reasons for this phenomenon and they are still hypotheses to think about in an attempt to understand this reality.

In this process, many people think the Internet is to blame in part. In our opinion, the Internet is not the cause of the change in the way people relate to each other. Instead, it is the most immediate way to practice these relationships, a process that had already begun prior to mass Internet use. We think its use has been limited to the attempt to offer what was lost in public space: a safe, anonymous meeting

ground. With Meipi, we mean to use the Internet in more innovative way. We are not going to replace the physical or reinforce the virtual; instead, we will attempt to create a bridge between the two worlds.

The Internet has been used so far mainly due to its ability to bring what used to be far away much closer. Now it is beginning to be used on a scale much closer to home, such as within a neighbourhood or city. Using the Internet on such a small scale can actually be of great interest.

When the Internet is related to a specific space, the way it is used changes. The Internet can be defined as the virtual space *par excellence*. What would happen if we manage to get that virtual space to relate to a real space? In this case, we are not talking about just repeating or simply representing a virtual dimension in real space; we are referring to the possibility that a connection exist between the two spaces, allowing the changes and events that happen in one to influence the other.

The rules of co-existence allow us all (or almost all) to benefit from the development and quality of our community. However, the tendency to enshrine our homes like personal kingdoms is transforming cities into simple containers for persons who only benefit from the city's infrastructures and density for work and the cultural events available. It almost looks like social aspects, and therefore, the quality of public spaces, no longer have a place in the collective imagination when it comes to assessing a city.

Today politicians prefer to reduce the resources earmarked for managing public spaces in favour of offering increasingly varied and widespread cultural activities, which contribute very little to the vitality of those spaces.

What about the spaces for socialization or simply social relations? They are being privatized, structured, measured and controlled. Areas outside the home are now used exclusively for transit, whereas before, they were used for productive activities, then for trade, then for free time. Nowadays, they are only used as a means of getting to all those activities.

2.1 SOCIAL NETWORKS

The same thing is happening on both the Internet and in public space. We are increasingly less interested in non-specialized spaces. Instead, we look for places with very clearly defined characteristics, where we know will we find certain types of people.

On the Internet, in the late 1990s, many of us spent hours chatting to just anybody in open chat rooms. At present, with social networks, things are changing. On these networks, we don't want to talk with just anybody; I'd rather meet my friends' friends, or people who share certain interests of mine.

A social network comprises two things: a display of each user (a personal description) and a system that allows us to make contact (friendship) with other users, that is, the network (communication).

The space has been transformed into a network, a flow. When all these things took place in a tangible space, it was almost always a public space. That was where people displayed themselves and where they met and communicated with others. Nowadays, it is unlikely that we are able to recognize people in public areas as being "display", or else it probably doesn't seem sufficient. Before "wasting" our time on someone, we want more information about them or the assurance that they are a friend of a friend, or people we know.

We are becoming accustomed to being able to deal with and trust people we already know something about, or with whom we share certain ideas and tastes. We are increasingly unwilling to "take a risk" or be unpleasantly surprised.

2.2 PUBLIC SPACE

We not only relate to others in public space: we also act. That is, that is where we manifest our identity, or, more precisely, where we can *freely* manifest our identity.

One's behaviour in public space is free by definition. Once restrictions or limits are placed on that behaviour, the result is its elimination. That is, due to its very nature, I can act out my identity in public space, provided that I want to. My freedom is limited only by complying with the law.

A rather curious phenomenon is that a great many people no longer have the slightest interest in expressing their identities in that space. And considering that a public space is built out of the sum of the identities of the people who fill it, we realize how important it is to understand the reasons behind that phenomenon. As urban planners, we can only think about how to give people back their desire to express their identity in these spaces, something that *social networks* already do.

However, *social networks* are available only to those with Internet access, just as bars and leisure centres are only open to those who buy something there, and if that's not the case, then the owner's rules impose certain limits. Public space is the only place I can express my identity with complete freedom.

3. MEIPI IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

One of the problems in modern life is the disappearance of what is defined as "neighbourhood life". Nowadays, we may recognize the faces of our neighbours but it is unlikely that we have any relationship with them. If we don't know our neighbours, it is almost impossible for "neighbourhood life" to exist. Public spaces have historically fulfilled the function of containing the meetings and relationships among neighbours. When neighbours are strangers to each other, it is much harder to have relationships in these spaces. Our neighbours were what made public spaces in our neighbourhood safe, and today this no longer is the case. We look for that safety now in private social spaces, like bars, commercial centres and leisure centres. A meipi can be used as a catalyst for social activities for the cultural life of a neighbourhood or a city.

On the part of the local administration, it may be difficult to take steps to revive life in public spaces, precisely because the roots that historically sustained them have grown weak. When the administration tries to achieve that goal by financing cultural activities in the public space, the effects are ephemeral because the local residents did not create the use of the space themselves. The most effective steps to take would be fostering local initiative, through voluntary organizations and associations. That way, those roots are "watered" directly, and will grow strong again. In order for that to happen, first of all, local residents need to know one another.

A meipi is a useful tool for taking action in these processes and so offer opportunities for neighbourhood social and cultural life to develop. Our aim is not to provide an alternative for traditional meeting places among neighbours. It is a tool that makes it possible to rebuild the social networks needed so that neighbours can take back the streets in their own neighbourhood.

A meipi allows neighbours to get to know each other better, and it allows those who want to tell more about themselves to do so, remaining as anonymous a level as they choose. With time, it may allow the social networks that normally give life to a

neighbourhood to be rebuilt. City councils can use them as a participation tool, using them as a platform to open up public debates in which a large number of citizens can take part. An Internet connection is all that is needed.

4. MEIPI AS AN ANALYTICAL AND RESEARCH TOOL

Another view on the usefulness of this tool has to do with the possibilities for analysis that it offers to professionals who study urban phenomena: urban planners and other experts, politicians and local administrators.

All the information one can find on a Wikimap is clearly spontaneous in nature. Citizens add any information they want, and the map then serves as the memory of local history. This characteristic may be extremely valuable as a basis for certain analyses or research, given that in general it is quite difficult to obtain totally objective data in this matter; that is, information not influenced by any process of approaching citizens.

Its use may also be of interest to politicians. Although generally, public administration (and politicians in general) do not have much interest in a place characterized by maximum freedom of expression, especially due to the likelihood of seeing ideas there that are contrary or alternatives to what the City Council's position. Nonetheless, if we turn that fear around, we may realize that it could be advantageous to know what local residents think about policies being carried out, knowing in which areas more will be accomplished by consensus, and where we are facing more opposition. In sum, we can offer a map with consensus by subject area. The map will graphically show us the most active points in the city, the points with the most cultural activity, the points where more relationships among neighbours are developed, and the users' activities.

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