

# Engaging the City: Public Interfaces as Civic Intermediary

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## ABSTRACT

This two-day workshop will advance discussion on the role of public interfaces in engaging citizens within the urban context. The aim is to determine how technology can help to develop cities that address the needs and reflect the desires of its inhabitants. The challenge for the HCI community is to design more effective public interfaces that provide citizens with more active access, authorship, and agency. The workshop's field research component will involve visiting the city of Portland as a case study for processing and refining these theoretical considerations.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces — collaborative computing, theory and models; Categories and subject descriptors: H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: User Interfaces — theory and methods; General Terms: Design, Theory; Keywords: civic engagement, public interfaces, urban computing

## INTRODUCTION

Long the focus of study in the social sciences [3, 7, 13], urban experience is fast becoming a focal point for HCI researchers, serving as a metaphor for mass interactions, a symbol for the complexity of systems, or an alternative to the controlled environment of the lab [2]. Urban based investigations use the city as a site for eliciting public narratives [8, 12] for raising public awareness [1, 6], or as a medium for expression [9, 14].

As the urban becomes an increasingly explored avenue for socio-technical research, there is the risk of approaching the city as simply a backdrop, a site for exploratory activities that presumes a dense population of users without considering the more complex aspects of city life – its citizens and the places in which they live, work, play, and are governed. The organizers of this workshop aim to shift the research perspective from the architect's plan view to a street level view of the city, where interactions are understood not just *situated in*, but *part of*, the city. By reorienting ourselves, we move beyond the city as a muse to the city as a resource for exchange between geophysical space and its inhabitants.

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Technology offers ways to deliver knowledge of the city – with respects to history, urban design, architecture, sociology, governance, and commerce – but is also an evocative and informative means by which a city's visitors and citizens can retrieve such knowledge while also manipulating it. Representing the fields of urban planning, history, museology, sociology, and HCI, the authors of this paper propose a workshop to examine current work addressing digitally mediated experiences in cities, with a specific focus on the notion of “public interfaces.”

## DEFINING PUBLIC INTERFACES

Public interfaces can be defined as services ranging in intentions, but all sharing a common grounding in raising public awareness. The following areas of focus demonstrate different means by which to interface with the public. Each project provides insight to this workshop's theoretical questions of access, agency, and author/audience.

*Mobilization.* Interfaces that have a mobilizing effect, seek to aid a community in accessing resources and organizing towards a common goal. While addressing very specific and immediate needs within a community (e.g. the Speakeasy [6] project which improves an immigrant community's access to social services), the question arises: What can be gained by considering issues of intention and scale in a broader public context?

*Discussion.* Prompting civic dialog, Goldberg's Publivision project is an online forum for discussion prompted by observed activity made available by a live web cam trained on a public plaza in Berkeley [4]. The creation of a virtual public channel raises issues of subject, object/content and contributor relationships and how to create a channel between the observed and the observers, thus providing for reciprocity.

*Presence.* Through a variety of technological means, the invisible is made visible and offers feedback on social [11], environmental [10], or technical [14] states. Access models range from the individualized, private view afforded by Paulos & Goodman's Jabberwocky to the more public views of Moriwaki and Iossifova's wearable displays. How can future visions of participation and

access be informed by the relationship between the public and the individual?

*Public authoring.* Public authoring projects give voice to individuals [8] as well as groups [1]. With public authoring tied to physical locations, how can the growing repository of annotations, either personal or more general be leveraged as a resource for public exchange?

## THEORETICAL ISSUES

### Access

Certainly no technology or system can facilitate every aim and audience. However, when we consider a citizen's right to shape their cities, we must define active engagement as an issue of access to participation. There are many opportunities for access which capitalize on points already basic to the urban experience: physical points idle time, social points, and technical points. How can these access points be supported and extended by the affordances of system design? The success of such endeavors rests on making information relevant while considering different audiences with varying concerns, technological aptitudes, and access, thus overcoming many of the barriers to participation.

### Agency

In many fields, the concept of agency refers to delegation of task and the resulting power structure [5]. In the context of HCI, agency can be related to the concept of "empowering the user to act". How can we make a repository accessible and available so that it inspires action—in the exploration of space and contribution of differing points of view? Bringing together various perspectives, including social science, design and urban planning, allows for a common solution and movement from everyday experience towards issues of policy and design.

### Author/audience

In traditional forms of broadcast there is a one-to-many relationship. Likewise with curatorship, an officially designated author makes decisions as to what and how information, objects, and ideas are presented. To critically examine this relationship between author and audience, we must look to cases where the audience as a whole represents the author. In such instances, the dynamic can address system design where many voices – as well that which makes up a city (buildings, streets, interactions) – become the resource *and* the consumer.

## WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES AND GOALS

The two-day workshop will be comprised of participant presentations, structured field work, and discussion towards future considerations for public interface design. In order to create a common point of reference, we will take full advantage of the conference host city, Portland, OR. We will visit and observe local sites as a basis for group discussion on urban experience, civic engagement,

and the design of public interfaces - focusing on the theoretical design issues of access, audience, and agency.

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