



What an Urban Planner Should Look Like in the Internet Age

EMILY BADGER 7:00 AM ET 7 COMMENTS



John Tolva, the Chief Technology Officer for the city of Chicago, gave a talk several years ago to a room full of architects in which considerable confusion ensued. "I kept saying, 'information architect,'" Tolva recalls. And the first question that arose from the audience at the end of his talk: "You don't mean *real* architects do you?"

That's a fair question coming from anyone who's spent 10 years in training and passed a licensing exam to earn the right to that title ("There certainly aren't any celebrity information architects," Tolva adds). But our experience of physical cities is now so frequently mediated by digital information – by real-time bus arrival apps, or QR codes on building facades, or WiFi hotspots in unexpected places. Conversely, it would be nice if some of the best elements of the built environment could better inform the digital one (if we created broadband connectivity, for instance, that is as robust as an urban street grid).

Maybe the two jobs really aren't so different – or, at least, they're becoming more closely related than ever.

"We are wrong to treat them as two totally separate things," Tolva argues. "I see a lot of people in information disciplines trying to resolve problems that architects of the built world have already solved." Traditional architects (we'll go with "traditional" here instead of "real") have spent centuries figuring out how to create successful public spaces. But information architects still regularly struggle with this question online.

Take Facebook. It's a public space in the sense that you can't expect the information you put there to remain private. But Facebook doesn't allow for the kind of random and diverse interactions you'd have on a sidewalk (or on Twitter, for that matter). Tolva describes private malls and some suburban communities as a kind of simulated public space. They may have some of the trappings of public space – fountains, benches, street musicians – but they're also highly controlled environments. Facebook's approach to digital space, to [borrow from Tolva's blog](#), is "essentially suburbia: a gated network of affinity that disallows chance encounter and serendipity."

Facebook looks different when you think about it through this lens. And the same becomes true of our

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cities – and buildings and parks – when we think about them as platforms for information. Perhaps, then, it's time for building designers and information designers to get to know each other better, maybe even blend the edges of their professions.

"This is a plea – and I make it frequently – for a discipline that doesn't really exist yet," Tolva says, "a merger of urban design and urban planning with urban informatics, with networked public space."

Tolva is touching here on a number of ideas we've broached before. The unevenness of digital information [has real-world implications in cities](#). The tools that we use to access it (smartphones, laptops, WiFi) will demand [changes to the physical environment](#). And social norms about privacy in public space [are all evolving as a result](#). But it's helpful now to pause and think about *who* should be addressing all this uncharted territory (and whether those people exist yet).

"The real opportunity is in thinking about how many points of tangency with the online world are actually becoming embedded in physical space," Tolva says. He is specifically not talking here about government data portals that contain information about the physical city. "This notion of e-government – even coming out of my mouth, it seems quaint – is you interacting with your city in front of your computer. But that's not how we experience cities. Or, it's not the best part of cities."

The best part of cities is on the street. And in the future, your experience of the street life of cities could be enhanced if buildings and stoplights and bus stops and parks all gathered information and spoke to each other (and to anyone who wanted to listen). So what do we call this new job, the architect of everything?

"Part of the problem is it doesn't have a good name," Tolva says.

Information Builder? Digitect? Urban Interaction Designer?

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