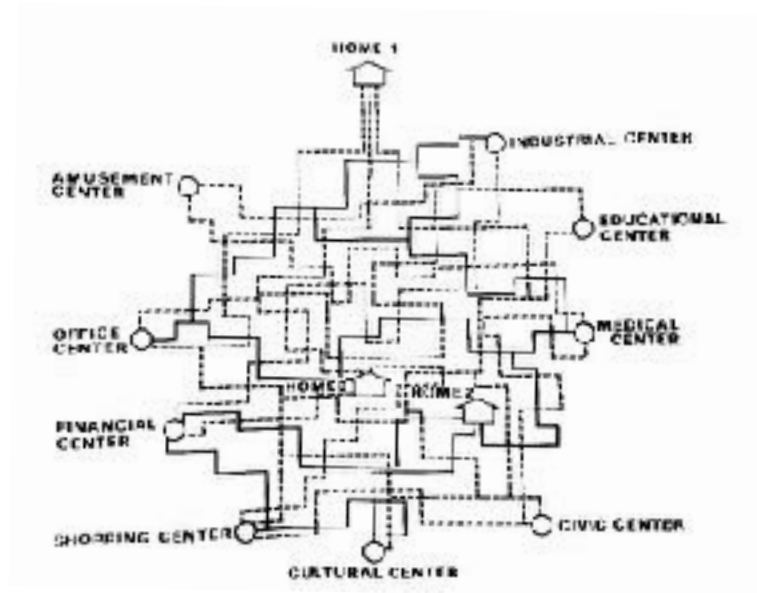# the internet as a city

kalli+sam+agnes+gary

welcome
thanks for coming
who we are

architecture and urbanism as an analog for thinking about the web in particular issues of decentralization on the web.

how do we want to live together?

SAM

Why architecture and urbanism?

throughout history many competing ideas and motivations for the structures that govern how we live together

why might we think about cities and internets in a similar way?

architects + urbanists have had to think about social behavior as a function of spatial relations for a long time.

The city offers a familiar way of examine the organization of elements, zones and systems, while also offering narratives about how spaces function, how people interact within them and through them.

This gives us vocabulary for organizing space and understanding how the infrastructures shapes our social interactions, a strong parallel with our concerns for how the decentralized web might be developed beyond just terms like centralized decentralized and distributed.

for example distinctions between public and private; the formation of community and how that might scale; whether governance should be centralized or decentralized, how access is produced or restricted to different services.

urban networks
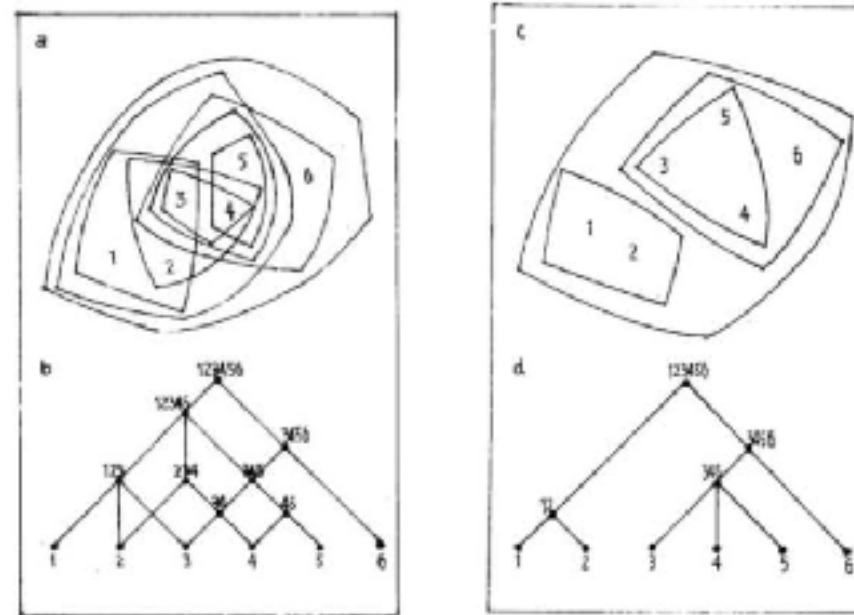
GARY

in his 1965 essay *the city is not a tree*, Christopher Alexander explores the idea of the city as a set of overlapping and intersecting networks — a semilattice — rather than the zoned and branched version envisioned by the construction of 'districts'. This came at a time when the new science of cybernetics was finding applications to social theory and urban planning, and aims to substantiate ideas about control and flow from a mathematical basis.

>> e.g. 19th century paris
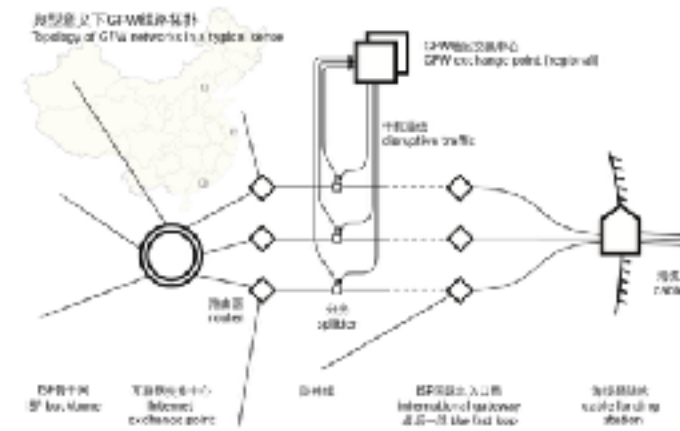
Different city layouts produce different forms of urban interaction. E.g. Famously, Haussmann's centralized, radiating plan for late 19th century Paris razed the dense, knotty ways of medieval city, and produced long, broad boulevards. After decades of political unrest and revolutionary riots in which citizens barricades the narrow streets, Haussman produced wide, straight boulevards that were impossible to barricade, while accommodating military maneuvers, artillery fire and easy surveillance. (Can we perhaps think of deep packet inspection, or aggregated data channels, in a similar way?)

>> e.g. chungking mansions

AGNES

Self-organized structures such as Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong demonstrate what can happen when the original intention of a structure or system gets subverted by its environment. In this case, in the overwhelming density and expense of Hong Kong's property market, plus a melting pot of immigrants from all over the world, meant that a cheap residential housing block became a mixture of markets, hotel rooms, restaurants, brothels, gambling dens, a constant flux modular, unofficial goods and services all operating out of individual apartments.

a parallel can be drawn between self-organized, modular structures like chungking and websites like craigslist/backpage. modular infrastructure used to market goods and services of varying degrees of legality, with fairly little oversight or overarching control. unregulated, with a utilitarian interface. organic adoption.

>> e.g. shoreditch

at the other end of urban appropriation is gentrification, where previously poor or deteriorated urban neighborhoods are dominated by an influx of more affluent residents, pricing out, sanitizing and whitewashing the existing communities. for example, the old east end of london, particularly shoreditch — a once working-class area now dominated by trendy coffee shops, ??? and most recently box park

what is the internet equivalent of gentrification. the recent SESTA/FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) bill, which made internet platforms such as twitter, squarespace liable for sexual content produced by their users. This has resulted in a mass 'shadowban' of sex workers from twitter, who had previously used the site as a safe way to find and screen clients. now sex workers have turned to aus servers of Switter, run on mastodon and how to fight this?

>> questions
. what environments do these architectures respond to?
. what forms of life do they produce?
. what/whose interests do they serve/address?

KALLI

what circumstances do these architectures respond to? whether in internets or buildings, designs are called forth by circumstances, such as the needs of a particular community, scarcity of resources/access, or the desire for certain ideals. *what forms of life do they produce?* why is the culture of reddit distinct from Medium, twitter or facebook? why does wikipedia succeed? why do certain platforms turn "toxic"? do we want the different things from a library, an archive or a database, on the internet as we do in the city? **the point here is that these "structures" produce cultures, through a combination of communities, modes of interaction, and underlying infrastructures.** We can draw a clear parallel with architecture here, no? *what/whose interests do they serve/address?* the above and its relationship to power, esp. salient in dWeb context.

drawing exercises

workshop is split into two parts: a set of short drawing exercises then longer building exercises, intended to explore the experience of the internet through the lens of cities.

1. the website as a building

. write down 3 websites on pieces of paper
. fold them and put them in the middle

doesn't need to be literal. questions: how does this website make you feel? How would you move around it? How would your interactions with other people be (if any)?

1. the website as a building

. reach into the middle and pick one
. if you don't know it, pick another

. how does this website make you feel?
. how would you move around it?
. how would your interactions with other people be (if any)?

doesn't need to be literal. questions: how does this website make you feel? How would you move around it? How would your interactions with other people be (if any)?

1. the website as a building

. draw the website as a building
. talk within the group about what you drew

doesn't need to be literal. questions: how does this website make you feel? How would you move around it? How would your interactions with other people be (if any)?

1. the website as a building

if time then share with the wider group

2. walking/browsing

. each group has a number of printed squares from google maps

. each person takes a square, and draws a walking route on it

. describe the browsing experience that you interpret with the route taken

2. walking/browsing

. which kinds of urban spaces engender which kind of movements?

. do you browse differently in an internet 'suburb' than an internet 'park'?

. what is the internet equivalent of a bridge / roundabout / expressway / metro stop / dead end?

2. walking/browsing

long read   solving a problem   social media hole

which kinds of urban spaces engender which kind of movements? Do you browse differently in an internet 'suburb' than an internet 'park'? What is the internet equivalent of a bridge / roundabout / expressway / metro stop / dead end?

3. building

make sure there are groups!

3.1. placing exercise

. each group member is assigned a different role: public user, state, private owner, architect/builder

. take it in turns to place blocks, trying to maximize their respective priorities.

. either add a piece or change a piece, per turn

each group (/group member?) places blocks according to a different set of interests. for example, a private owner might want to have maximal control over user data/traffic, a state agency might want to maximize the possibility of surveillance or regulate certain aspects of the design, a user might want to retain full control of their data while having full access of the platform's benefits for free, while the architect needs to satisfy these interests effectively while maximizing the platform's ease-of-use. Each set of aims would be aligned with a different kind of morphology, e.g. a black-boxed commercial platform might be a fully vertical stack with a government back door represented by an additional outgrowth, or p2p/softstack might be a scatter of clustered objects, etc.

e.g. public user (wants affordances, privacy), state (wants governance, control), private owner (wants to monetize), architect/builder (needs technological feasibility and efficiency)

the cards are just guidance: they show how the actor can act, form allegiances, be imaginative with the game.

3.2. exploration exercise

. talk about the internet structures described by the city you have built

. who browses the city?
. what is represented in the buildings?
. what qualities does this city/internet have?
. tell a story about your city

invite people to talk about their cities

3.3. decentralisation

. how would you decentralize control in your city?

. work together to do it

3.4. collaboration exercise

. negotiate the joining of your cities.

. how do the networks scale?