The Impact of Digital Media on Urban Space and Media Facades
Piccadilly Circus

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Abstract

In this essay the influence of new media on designing the urban space will be discussed, particularly the building facades that influence public places. The outdoor advertisement in Piccadilly Circus is used as an example to illustrate this.

Introduction

New media is everywhere, not only at home or on a smartphone but in public places as well. There are many ways new media influence design. It can be in the way buildings or urban space are designed, developed, built and also literally on building facades, like the screens in Piccadilly circus.

This essay will give an overview of the literature on urban space, media facades and the interaction with the online world. Even if buildings are private-owned, they can have a media facade that can impact the public sphere.

One such building with a very famous facade is in Piccadilly Circus. Famous for being one of the first to have illuminated advertisement. But also a good example of how facades change and influence the public space. With the development of new media the advertisement in Piccadilly circus changed as well and makes it a good case to look at the different theories relating to media facades, remediation and convergence to architecture.

Urban Media

Before looking at urban media, let's look at what makes urban media different from media in schools, offices or homes. Fritsch and Dalsgaard (2008) see different social and cultural practises when it comes to urban life compared to domestic life. Dalsgaard and Halskov (2010) see urban space as an arena for information systems. That facades are changing is not a new phenomenon. Architects always have been using new techniques, materials and ways to express themselves (Fritsch and Dalsgaard, 2008). Remediation of screens and facades in the urban area is a natural result of this urge to renew.

Growth Urban Facades

As stated by A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell (2009) billboards are one of the oldest forms of advertisement and their numbers are still growing, outdoor advertisement is in China the fastest growing media form (A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell, 2009). In 2006 $6.8 billion was spent on outdoor advertisement in the US. In England expenses on outdoor commercials grew with more than £250 million between 2001 and 2006 (A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell, 2009). A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell (2009) continue to explain outdoor advertising is growing, because it is harder to reach an audience through the traditional media like television, radio and print. Using outdoor advertisements can help to catch the 'consumers on the go' the passer-by can not block it or skip the commercials (A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell, 2009). Furthermore the quality of screens has been improving from illuminated advertising signs to LED display so more is possible (A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell, 2009).

Outdoor advertisement will continue to grow and diversify as it is one of the best ways to reach the desired audience and integrate market communication, this despite the anti-billboard sentiments, predict A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell (2009).

Remediation in Urban Places

Urban Screens and Convergence to Architecture

A convergence of buildings and new media is taking place, architecture and media technology are melting in each other claims Slaatta (2006). As mentioned earlier architecture is always renewing itself and changing the landscape. Slaatta (2006) describes how the urban landscape changed with the new screen technology becoming the new landscape, and furthermore how it diffuses the border between natural and electronic landscape. "The intentional use of digital screen technology in transparent or fluorescent building

materials for projection of digital images on building facades is changing the meaning of both media and architecture" (Slaatta, 2006, P.1).

Another phenomenon is the way the meaning of cultural work itself is changing media. Traditionally the national broadcaster was responsible for the content on television and one would watch television at home.

Today we watch everywhere and content is coming from different sources as well. Shirky (2010) points out, watching television is no longer one way, everybody is participating and even uploading material mainly on social media and websites like Youtube. To explain this better Slaatta (2006) makes a comparison with Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

> ..."The imagined situation is parallel to the technological vision in the film version of Roald Dahls famous novel Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, where both objects and persons are made able to move between the physical world and the television screen world. Not only does a chocolate bar suddenly appear in Stanley Kubricks 2001: A Space Odyssey. But also Mike Teavee, the incarnated adolescent television consumer, is inserted in a news program. Although there is some slight physical distortion, the technological experiment shows that "it works"... (Slaatta, 2006, P.1).

Slaatta (2006) observes that these new strategies of amusement and amazement draw people to non-existence place on the screen, the traditional way of live broadcasting disappears and you are participant, producer and viewing yourself at the same time. Furthermore Slaatta (2006) argues that the architecture and audiovisual convergence also questions the border between urban and suburban.

The screen itself becomes the landscape, it can even use reflection or camouflage and it integrates with its environment Slaatta (2006). When the screen is invisible it can imitate a surface or reflect its surroundings like skyscrapers, with glass windows, mirroring the nearby buildings floors, windows and decorative elements (Slaatta, 2006). Standing out according to Slaatta (2006) there are active visual borders, displaying advertisement or showing SMS texts.

New Media and Cyberspace in the Urban Space

Lastly it is interesting to look at Graham (2004) comments on new media and the information society. In the 80's and 90's the common believe was that the so called cyberspace and the real world would have no connection, even undermine geographical concentrations in cities (Graham, 2004). But on the contrary new media and urban environment support each other Graham (2004) believes.

He goes on to explains that remediation of everyday urban life is not re-placing old media but using it in different ways, remediating traditional media like TV, newspapers, books, art and so on. In his paper 'beyond the dazzling light' he makes a couple of points to analyse the remediation of urban life (Graham, 2004). In this essay a couple of these points will be further examined and used to analyse the example of Piccadilly Circus.

Firstly the relationship between the new media and the old media, infrastructure, technologies and space is still strong, there is no radical break with the past Graham (2004). He goes on to note, the online world or cyberspace is a also a remediation of the real world Graham (2004).

Another notable observation is banalization, when the novelty wears off, new media is no longer new and become less visible. This already happening with the way it is embedded in everyday life and becomes less visible, Graham (2004) gives the example of electricity or water, no-one gives it much thought. This also touches on what Bolter and Gromala (2003) describe as the myth of transparency to get the user as close as possible to the real thing. Not banalization but so real it is overlooked or transparent like a window. Bolter and Gromala (2003) remark that interaction with the media on the other hand can be described as a mirror, reflecting your actions.

A last point made by Graham (2004) is the growing invisibility of sociotechnical power, he gives a basic example about call liner identifcation, phone systems that judge if the caller is a 'good' or 'bad' customer and based on that needs to wait in the short or long queue. Today the hazard with data and sociotechnical power are even bigger and better hidden.

Piccadilly Circus

One of London's busiest public urban places is Piccadilly Circus, with around 100 million people passing through it each year, this is a prime spot for brands to advertise (Yalcinkaya, 2017).

The advertisement on Piccadilly is more than 100 years old. An overview in the Telegraph (2011) shows the first illuminated advertisements dates back to 1908. Later Nelson (1998) writes at the end of the millenium how the lights are moving with time and switching to digital billboards. Managing Director of the design house Sedley Place Mick Nash is cited in the article saying: "It blends art, science and commerce. We have called it Street Vision because it is a whole new way of talking to the public. It is not TV and not a poster, but a new type of media which cuts across those two" Nelson (1998).

After more than 100 years the place 'Piccadilly Circus' becomes synonymy with the screens on the surrounding buildings, it is part of the landscape. As Slaatta (2006) argued earlier the border between urban and suburban is

disappearing. The points made by Graham (2004) can be applied to the media facade in Piccadilly Circus. The new media on the screens doesn't break with the old, it is still outdoor advertisement but displayed differently. Furthermore the screens on Piccadilly Circus risk to become banal for two reasons, screens are not novel any more and neither is advertisement. Since we see so much of it nowadays it almost turns into a window. People don't notice it any more.

This of course is a problem for the companies advertising, the screens are there to capture the audience. As touched upon earlier outdoor advertisement is still growing, probably and also changing and remediating as we will see.

Three examples used on the screens on Piccadilly circus in the past will illustrated how new media changed the billboards designs.

Interacting with the Billboard

The first example dates from 2009 and is a interactive LED billboard from McDonald's, created by Leo Burnett, still and moving, iconic images are displayed for 40 seconds, to allow people to take pictures interacting with the images, like holding flower as shown on figure 1 (campaign, 2009).

Figure 1: Interacting with the billboard (campaign, 2009)

The pictures on the screen encourage people to interact with the billboard, take poses with a bowler hat or umbrella, or say hi to you mum on Mother's Day. To spread the message you can post you picture or video on social media like Facebook, Flicker or YouTube, spreading the McDonalds Logo over the web (see YouTube video (mcdonaldspiccadilly, 2009)).

This example is remediation of the billboard, not a static advertisment. Instead the pictures are changing and challenging the visitors of Piccaidlly circus to interact with it. The screen is not part of the landscape, it is 'standing out', as Slaatta (2006) describes it, by enganging people. Besides that the advertisement is send into the cyberspace, but the content is rooted partly in a real place -picadilly circus- and partly on a screen anywhere, as long as one has access to social media the picture can be seen.

An other observation is that the spectator is no longer looking at a screen as looking through it as a window, because you need to interact with, strike a pose, it reflects as a mirror, because the pictures depict both you and the billboard.

Being part of the Billboard

Moving forward to 2014 the technique improved and McDonald's launched a new campaign to put people on the screens and become part of the screen see figure 2. This fictional world was called 'little Piccadilly', were invited to create their own avatar on LittlePicca.com and send it to the screen through their smartphone, with 300 million different combinations and real-time weather reflecting the actual weather, you will never see the same thing twice (London, 2015).
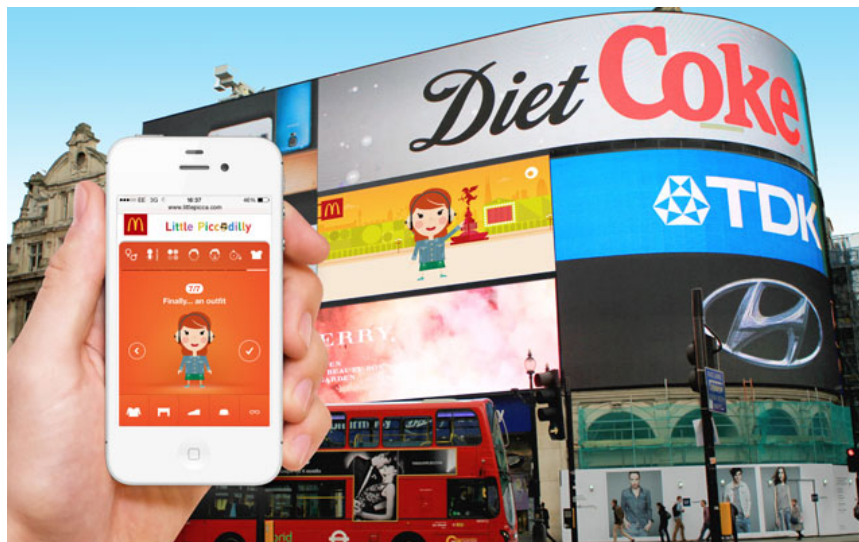

Figure 2: Being part of the billboard (Magee, 2014)

Nathalie Pomroy, the director of marketing at McDonald's, said: "We have embraced recent innovations in the digital media field, and as new trends develop and as the interactive media industry reaches maturity, we will continue

6

to look for innovative ways to communicate with our customers" (Magee, 2014).

This is a good example of remediation and how new media influenced design and tries to stand out. Once more there is also a parallel with the windows and mirror metaphor Bolter and Gromala (2003) explain. Making an avatar and sending it to littlepicca.com people are waving back at themselves from the big screen in Piccadilly Circus. With an avatar you yourself become part of the landscape and we almost like Mike Teavee as we saw earlier. With this new way of engaging people McDonald's brought a new novelty to outdoor advertisement and prevented banality and becoming invisible.

The Billboard is Looking at You

New digital billboards installed in 2017 use recognition technology, so the screens display targeted commercials based on the people visiting Piccadilly Circus (Yalcinkaya, 2017). Furthermore, Yalcinkaya (2017) notes that brands can send specific advertisement to the passer-by, using make, model and colour of the cars or age and gender of the pedestrians. The camera combined with facial recognition algorithm data can make assumptions on visual cues such as hair length and height to guess the demographics of the area and for, instance, display promotions for womenswear if there are more women in the area (Yalcinkaya, 2017). The adverts can be further specified depending on weather, news, sports and social media updates (Yalcinkaya, 2017). However Landtec the owner of the screen is quick to point out "Although the Piccadilly Lights screen will be able to display advertising content that responds to realtime factors – such as the weather or the colour of cars – the technology is not able to recognise individual people or display individually targeted content."

Another change was a new screen that replaced the old. The old screens were divided in six panels, the new screen is wrapped around the building and can show one advertisement as shown on figure 3 but can display different advertisements at the same time. This is something they weren't able to do before, because the six screens were made by different manufactures (Reynolds, 2017).

This example refers to on an other point made by Graham (2004) about the sociotechnical power that is often hidden. The fact that we are guided in what advertisements we get to see and what not, without having any idea we are being watched.

Figure 3: One big screen (Reynolds, 2017)

Why Piccadilly Circus needs a Face-lift

The notion that new media can become part of the urban landscape seems true for Piccadilly Circus. Like Slaatta said: "The screen technology itself is becoming a landscape" (Slaatta, 2006). In this case one might even argue the screen is shaping the landscape. The billboard on Piccadilly Circus is not only part of the landscape, it is one of the landmarks and tourist attractions in London. People go to this area to look at the famous billboard.

Looking at how new media influence the urban environment, the screen in Piccadilly Circus is a good example, because there has been outdoor advertisement on the building facades for more than 100 years. It provides the opportunity to look at the changes over the years and the impact on how the advertisement was displayed. This fits in with the first point made by Graham (2004), that new media is not so different from old media, but merely remediating the old. In other words giving the old billboard a face-lift.

It turns out that this face-lift is a necessity, the main goal for the billboards on Piccadilly Circus is not to be a tourist attraction but to find an audience, to be noticed. As Graham (2004) puts it, new media is prone to become ordinary, invisible maybe. Advertising agencies like Leo Burnett have to come up with new ways to engage people with the brand. The display itself changes as well, the quality is improving from illuminated billboards to digital screens and recently to one big screen that can be split in small ones.

The interaction with the billboards and the use of new media like smartphones is more remediation and shifting between cyberspace and real places.

As explained earlier, new media and urban environment support each other (Graham, 2004). In this case there are not two different separated worlds but they are linked, as illustrated in the example of showing a photo of you on Piccadilly Circus, holding imaginary flowers, to your friends back home via social media. Or making an avatar at home and sending it to the screen in Piccadilly Circus via LittlePica.com.

The new media landscape is not invisible, it stands out. The metaphor of the mirrors and windows Bolter and Gromala (2003) use is already mentioned. However one could argue, that for a lot of Londoners who travel through Piccadilly Circus every day, more is needed to turn their gaze up and change the window into a mirror. One that got heads turned was the display for Armistice centenary, an experience with light and sound and video on the new big screen, to commemorate the soldiers who fought and died in the Great War (Watson, 2018). But it is hard to find other cases that had the same effect in recent years.

Lastly with the recent development of a screen that watches the audience and displays targeted advertisement we enter yet another era. Graham (2004) points at the growing invisibility of sociotechnical power. From the comments on the article in Dezeen by Yalcinkaya (2017) it becomes clear people are not happy with this intrusion in their privacy. Even after reading Landtec's statement that it is facial detection and not facial recognition (Landtec, 2018). It still makes one wonder how much can be seen if cameras and an algorithm can screen the mood (based on whether you are frowning or laughing) and Landtec claims not to save any of the images, but what if the system get hacked? What will the future bring another comment on the in Dezeen website warns that this technology if rolled out in the public space can be even more intimate, if it knows your purchases in the past and starts recommending products to you directly (Yalcinkaya, 2017). These concerns are real and worrying, The power of the brands is growing the more data they gather. They will use it to try to sell us their products, but what if others get their hands on these data, how will they use these data.

Conclusion

Looking back at the stages Piccadilly Circus billboard gone through from illuminated displays to moving pictures and interacting with the public A. Lopez-Pumarejo and Bassell (2009) were right with their predictions, that the outdoor advertisement would keep on growing. It is probably still one of the best ways to get an audience attention. It also shows how new media had an impact on designing facades and what the influence is on the urban space and cyber space. New media is remediated and connected to other media like

smartphones and social media.

The billboards on Piccadilly circus are part of the landscape and for some are almost invisible because they are always there, for others it stands out it is a tourist attraction and invites them to interact. So depending on the audience it is a window or a mirror. The brands are working hard on beining noticed and try to engage the audiance.

The last point discussed, is the hidden cameras behind the display that ovbeserve the audience and target them with specific advertisements. It is clear not everybody is happy with this development. It is important to be aware about this even when one can not see it, or maybe because one can not see it. What if the next upgrade is not a facelift to make the display more attractive and engaging for the audience, but more clever camera's and gathering data devices. What will be the next remediation.

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