Book review

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Alessandro Aurigi, *Making the Digital City. The Early Shaping of Urban Internet Space*, Ashgate, UK, 2005, 224 pp., \$ 99.95, ISBN 0-7546-4364-6

Making the Digital City is about the early efforts made by public and private institutions to implement digital public spaces in European cities during the initial years of the diffusion of the Internet to the public. The swift popularization of the Internet in the second half of the 1990s produced a social effervescence which led to new initiatives in cities. The troubles and fragmentation of the contemporary city, on the one hand, and the belief in the huge powers of information and communication technologies (ICTs) associated with the Internet hype, on the other, resulted in a new urban paradigm which considered cyberspace as the best tool to get citizens together for the exercise of local democracy and for the revitalization of their urban environments. At the same time, activist groups and media- and culture-oriented institutions were eager to explore the social possibilities of the electronic networks through the promotion of virtual communities.

Within the frame of the policies for the transition towards the Information Society, the European Commission granted considerable funds to ICT-related projects to support the social and economic regeneration of cities. The enthusiasm of activist groups about virtual communities, the hopes that local authorities pinned on the new technologies, and the availability of European funds resulted in many new projects to develop different types of digital cities. It was evidently worthwhile to explore, analyze and document this novel urban process. Alessandro Aurigi has done just that, presenting his findings at several conferences, and publishing them in journals and as chapters of books.

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This is also the topic of the author's doctoral dissertation at the University of Newcastle, entitled "The First Steps of Digital Cities".

The clearly organized book is divided into three parts: the context in which to understand the phenomenon in European cities; the empirical exploration carried out by the author; and the lessons drawn from these experiences. The first part depicts the relationship between technology and cities, explaining how the early digital cities process was shaped by visions of technological determinism, and emphasizing its socially constructed character. It also establishes the four main issues for a typology of digital cities: ownership; informativeness; social access and participation; and 'embeddedness' (or 'groundedness'), its relation with the real city. The emphasis on embeddedness, a logical option for an urban planner, is what differentiates Aurigi's analyses from other academic attempts to categorize the different types of digital cities and virtual communities.

The empirical part contains the results of the survey carried out at the beginning of 1997, which included 213 digital cities functioning in cities of at least 200,000 inhabitants from countries of 'Europe of the Fifteen'. The survey was useful to show the diversity of initiatives and the shallow scope of the projects; in most cases they were merely 'digital brochures' to advertise the cities for tourism or marketing purposes. Twenty of these projects were considered good practice examples by the author, who selected two 'embedded' projects for the in-depth studies that are also included in this part of the book: Bologna Iperbole in Italy and the Digital City Bristol in England.

The lessons from the case studies included in the final part compare the struggles about control, leadership, self-promotion, and the dilemmas regarding public and private/commercial interests and different visions of the city. It also contains a comparative summary regarding economic development, relation with the physical city, access and users, and support for the public discourse. The comparison is useful as a means to clarify the main features and the evolution of these two cases. The conclusions are not surprising: a wide heterogeneity of initiatives; low levels of discussion; no physical initiatives (apart from public terminals); lack of involvement of planners for regeneration or urban revitalization; and few projects that could be considered as good practices. Even the latter were affected by the visions of technological determinism which were common during that period: "*digital cities were very much a 'pushed' technology – something that was not being asked for by citizens, and not necessarily that way – rather than an innovation 'pulled' by grassroots' needs.*" (p. 203).

Making the Digital City is an academic book with a reliable methodology and a well-designed survey. Written in a clear style, it is without doubt a useful resource to understand the difficult issues which are at stake in this sort of urban initiatives. It largely fulfills the two purposes that the author states in the preface: to give a snapshot of the early history of digital cities process in Europe; and to convince us that these types of initiatives are socially shaped. However, there is something missing in the book – attention to the huge transformations that have occurred since then. As the author acknowledges,

the role of ICTs is now different from what it was during the early days of the commercial Internet. As familiar devices and ordinary tools of daily life, they have lost their initial shine. People are now very much aware of the intrinsic complexity of ICT-related projects. Even Europe has ‘grown’ from fifteen to twenty-five countries. Although we agree with the author that the principles and dilemmas exposed in the book remain relevant, the book raises questions about the evolution of the digital cities process which are only vaguely addressed. Aurigi suggests that the changes might have affected the viability and survival of many initiatives, that there might still be a role for digital cities, and that new initiatives will probably be more ordinary, while he recommends further exploration. Without the need for a very deep exploration, the book would have greatly benefited from a longer epilogue or a complementary chapter addressing these issues.