

POLYTECHNIC OF TORINO
FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE 2
Degree in Architecture
Honors theses

The virtual city: sociological and communicative aspects

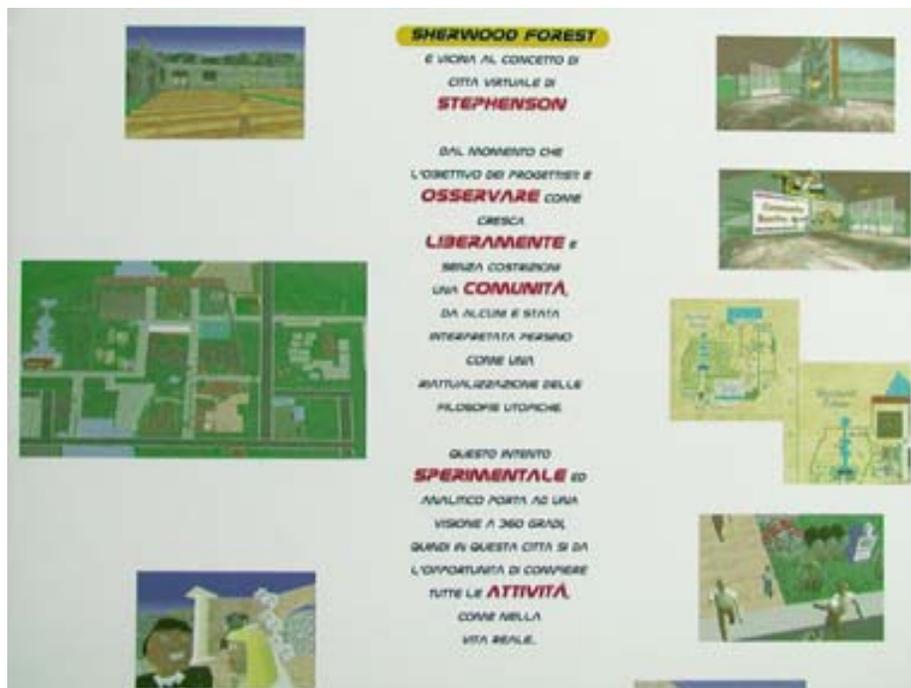
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Today, together with the diffusion of computers, we are also seeing the birth and development of a new means of communication: Internet, an instrument by means of which we can dialogue with other users through the computer (Computer Mediated Communication).

It is precisely this new type of communication that is analysed and studied in this thesis, both as regards the sociological aspects of the methods of interaction between the users, as well as the communicative aspects which the virtual cities, the spatial contexts for these interactions, adopt to favour the development of relationships among their citizens.



The virtual cities represent the "where", the spatial co-ordinates that allow the development of the interaction and experience of the subjects. At first, perhaps due to habit and cultural instruction, when one hears of virtual cities, one has expectations, because to the term "city" one associates a specific meaning and a certain image. One expects to find futuristic buildings constructed by means of computers, among which one moves de-materialising and materialising with the help of a tele-transporter, almost as though one had entered into the scene of a science-fiction film; or, at the other extreme, one may expect to find the city in which one lives every day. Not finding a corresponding notion on the Internet, these expectations are invariably unmet. One occasionally finds

oneself faced with three dimensional languages which in reality do not give any extra information, or with simple lists of names such as could be written on a piece of paper. Subsequently, however, analysing them more deeply and getting to know them better, one understands that the choice of terminology was determined by the desire to make a new and abstract reality seem familiar; to help the visitors find their way and recognise their surroundings. This new entity, by mutating a terminology belonging to the real world, reveals a place where a number of services, a quantity of information and cultural heterogeneities can be found, which are offered by real cities, probably even at a level which is superior compared to those real cities. At times, one would rather use the functional aspects of a real city than the formal ones.



The principal function, in fact, of these virtual cities is to provide a point of reference for meeting inside this infinite, and therefore dispersive, territory of the Internet. Favouring the interaction and association of the individual, the cities thus allow him to become part of a community to all effects; because the ability to identify oneself with a territory is fundamental to the development of social relationships and the sense of belonging to a community. On whatever scale in which one operates, the element which brings navigators together is the fact of being real subjects who decide to project themselves, to insert their own image in the internet, aware of thus becoming visible and attainable to an enormous number of users. As is known, in fact, the peculiarity of the Internet is its ability to allow a universal communication, always within reach, without limits of time or space. This communicative choice is popular, and has been put into practice of late, for example, both by many cities which have entered into the so-called Civic Networks, and by museums or other cultural bodies which have decided to open themselves to the public

on-line. People do not navigate in the internet just for the sake of hanging around in non-existent cities; it is certainly possible to visit occasionally for curiosity, to immerse oneself for a few hours in a reality different from one's own, conscious, however, of the degree of fiction in which one moves. The principal aim for the navigators, however, remains a practical one; to be able to avail of all the services offered by the city without moving from home. Users tend to want to carry out an ever increasing number of activities on the Internet: purchasing goods through e-commerce, finding a job, reading newspapers from all over the world, or researching information on any subject.



It could be said, therefore, that it is Reality which is sought in the Internet. In spite of all the doubts and criticisms of the interpersonal relationships established on the Internet, it must be admitted that people chat for the purposes of meeting other real people, who would otherwise remain inaccessible, and that the virtual city represents the context in which all this can be established.

Internet really transmits the sensation of being in front of a window open on the world, but not on a virtual world, rather on the real one.

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