

Reclaiming Digital Space

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The early digital dream was one that democratically respected its user. However, the rise of smart technologies and behavioral data has put the power of the individual into the hands of markets that track our search histories, purchases and daily domestic lives. Shoshana Zuboff has written extensively on this twenty-first century concern, titling it “the age of surveillance capitalism”¹ where our individual information, produced for free in a relatively lawless internet space, is sold to companies that track, predict and inform our future spending.

The current pandemic, however, has thwarted society into the virtual realm, no longer allowing us the option to avoid the anxieties of digital space. This has indefinitely changed the way we work, learn and interact with others. Society is now on air with schools, workplaces, cultural organizations and even healthcare services moving to virtual space in an effort to maintain physical distancing. However, as society shifts to the digital realm, even more behavioural data and individual information is being produced for free and shared for capital gain. We have transitioned into a space that was not designed to meet societal needs but to fulfill and shape consumer interests. It is time for us to reclaim digital space and use architecture to work towards virtual democracy.

We can consider the ways in which digital space is already being used to manage the volume of people in physical space. For example, screening tool apps use information such as an individual’s symptoms, location and recent travel history to determine whether a test is necessary², reducing the volume of people visiting testing centers and hospitals at a time of influx. Cultural institutions are providing free materials and resources online as museums and libraries face physical closures. Companies are practicing remote work, reducing unnecessary travel and stalling climate change momentum. In these ways, we can use digital technology to manage physical space and inform the future of architecture in a post-coronavirus world.

For architecture, this could initiate a rise in mixed-use developments designed to support working from home, reducing non-essential commutes and lowering carbon emissions. The lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) could inform an increase in makerspaces, providing printing technologies and craft supplies to provide masks, gloves and other equipment that will be even more necessary when public spaces re-open. Looking beyond the post-pandemic time, using digital space to manage physical space can open new collaborations between architects and digital designers to consider the future of the smart city, of user-experience, and of an undeniably changing, increasingly digital world. Instead of seeking to return to our previous “normal”, we can reclaim digital space to provide services beyond the marketplace, and to ultimately create a new normal for the way we live, for the future of architecture as a profession and more topically, for the post-pandemic world.

¹ John Naughton, “‘The Goal Is to Automate Us’: Welcome to the Age of Surveillance Capitalism,” *The Guardian*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/20/shoshana-zuboff-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-google-facebook>.

² “Apple Releases New COVID-19 App and Website Based on CDC Guidance,” *Apple Newsroom*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2020/03/apple-releases-new-covid-19-app-and-website-based-on-CDC-guidance>.