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E-TOPIA "Urban life, Jim—but not as we know it"

William J. Mitchell
(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999)

A Review by Elizabeth W. Morris, PhD.

E-topia heralds the coming of "electronically serviced, globally-linked cities." The urban landscape of the 21st century, Mitchell says, rests on "ubiquitously present telecommunications networks, smart machines, and intelligent buildings," combined with redesigned systems for water, waste, energy, and transportation. This new urban layer, manifests "community without propinquity," breaking up traditional urban patterns and social relationships, and demanding new kinds of skills and visions by urban planners and architects.

The author describes a wide variety of new digital technologies with suggestive questions on their implications for changing the physical and social experience of the urban environment. He ranges freely (and lightly), across theory, technology, and visionary hype, while seeding the text with references to Aristotle, Plato, Mumford and McLuhan, and figures made familiar by WIRED magazine such as Ted Nelson, early proponent of computers as a tools of personal liberation, and Nicolas Negroponte, founder of MIT's experimental Media Lab. While no theory is applied consistently, Mitchell does invoke themes from classical urban theory: the value of the agora, the public meeting place, and the nature of community relationships ("without propinquity") in the emergent e-topia.

For Mitchell, all digital technologies are converging in the "mother of all networks," the World Wide Web. On-board car navigation systems, bar code reading toll booths, parking meters that track cars moving in and out of spaces, with wearable computers and digital body art, online bookstores, just-in-time warehouses, and a host of other real and emergent technologies — these are the building blocks of the e-topian smart environment. Here design marries digitalization to embed and extract information seamlessly from clothing, cars, homes, hospitals, streets and highways.

E-topia is written for "architects, urban designers, and others who care about the spaces and places in which we spend our daily lives." Mitchell strives to alert urban professionals to the design implications of new technologies, while also giving technology professionals a chance to

consider the broader effects of their work. The book is most valuable to people unfamiliar with new telecommunications technologies, or unfamiliar with classic themes in urban theory, and to anyone interested in making connections between the two.

Mitchell began writing on computer-aided architectural design in the 1970s, and has published several books on that topic, as well as contributing photographs to a book on *The Poetics of Gardens* (with Charles Moore and William Turnbull, MIT Press 1996). As a professor and recent Chair of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT, he has had years to observe the work of his colleagues at the university, where many prototypes for artificial intelligence, robotics, virtual environments and learning networks were developed.

Mitchell writes elegantly, with a dramatic, and distinctly nonlinear style. The book reads like a well-designed web page, organized into a Prolog and 10 chapters, with intriguing subtitles such as "March of the Meganets," "Software: New Genius of the Place," "Homes and Neighborhoods," "The Teleserviced City," and "Lean and Green." It ends with extensive and intersecting set of notes and an index of names. However, the density of materials - sometimes overlapping - makes it difficult to summarize key points or know what information is completely presented.

Despite an ironically titled prologue, "Urban Requiem," Mitchell predicts not the death of the city as we know it, but a new kind of urban overlay. Familiar forms of the home, office, street, neighborhood, downtown, and region will co-exist with new virtual spaces and exchanges built with broad band width wireless and fiber-optic telecommunications systems, linked by "increasingly indispensable software" interfaces. This overlay produces new urban patterns: "live-work dwellings, twenty-four-hour neighborhoods, loose-knit, far-flung configurations of electronically mediated meeting places, flexible, decentralized production, marketing, and distribution systems, and electronically summoned and delivered services."

He envisions "lean, green cities that work smarter, not harder." Smart environments capture and provide information about their users; they enable exchange of ideas, products, culture —the urban currency — while reducing the use of resources, and unwanted interactions, freeing time and energy for other, hopefully new and improved, purposes. For example, urban development has typically destroyed the old to make way for the new. In the future, he says, wired buildings could be redeveloped for new purposes by reconfiguring their digital infrastructures, rather

than being torn down.

On the social effects or costs of these changes, Mitchell has little to say. What are the costs of such changes: the loss of local jobs in particular places and the creation of new jobs elsewhere; the relocation of work from face-to-face commercial district to windowless office and monitored phone conversations. In fact, issues of social control, or the effects of economic class on one's experience in the new urban districts, are weakly acknowledged.

This is somewhat ironic, since the introduction traces the book's origin to a conference on the "Digital Divide" at MIT, that was itself generated in response to Mitchell's earlier work *City of Bits*." *E-topia* acknowledges social inequalities, but its primary message is that new technologies offer interesting opportunities to do things differently, and possibly, better. "Maybe" Mitchell writes, "homes and workplaces, transportation systems, and the emerging digital telecommunications infrastructure can be reconnected and reorganized to create fresh urban relationships, processes, and patterns that have the social and cultural qualities we seek for the twenty-first century" (7).

Mitchell refers frequently to recent research and theories of the urban political economy, including critiques of new technologies and global capital such as Manuel Castells' trilogy on the network society and the informational city. These citations serve more as an intellectual backdrop, however, rather than providing the reader with a sense of theoretical or historical grounding.

More references to classic urban sociology, and more elaboration on the pros and cons of new technologies would be needed to make *E-topia* a more useful text for students in urban studies or environmental design. For example, in Chapter 8, "Reworking the Workplace," Mitchell observes that civic leaders face life or death choices in the competition for capital among communities. Cities that win, he says, will do so by attracting and retaining the human resources required by global corporations and new technology industries, who might then be persuaded to invest in local education and environmental quality. In Chapter 9, he describes a new urban service sector (plumbers, doctors, copy centers) with 24/7 customer access using digital communications technologies (pagers, voicemail, cell phones, web sites). What is the connection to the work cycle of basic industry, or corporate "talent" multi-tasking with other parts of the globe on a daily basis? Several places in the book refer to new 24-hour districts resulting from economic demand/technological

access. But why and how do they differ from the 24-hour truck stop, bus station, and red-light districts described by J.B. Jackson, and the Chicago school urban ecologists? And what steps should civic leaders and designers take to support or sustain a 24/7 economy? We are left to fill in many blanks.

E-topia's strength lies largely in the author's ability to link computer technologies and architecture, where he has some first hand experience. Mitchell's discussion of other technologies, however, is sound, but selective, perhaps this is the result of the author's reliance on MIT researchers. For example, while once widely admired, the Media Lab is past its prime, as its own founder has acknowledged, as Silicon Valley eclipsed the east for innovation in the last decade.

Mitchell wrote *E-topia* in response to discussions generated by his previous work *City of Bits* (MIT Press 1996), and there is considerable overlap in the technical material in the two works. *City of Bits* offers a more systematic grasp of the technologies and its relationship to architecture and design. It has a strong internal structure that carries the weight of its ideas well: each chapter provided a series of parallels between urban & architectural forms and the constructs of information architecture and network planning. *City of Bits* was apparently a team effort, with a large number of students who created a web site, which is still an excellent way to read the book. It has links to other active web sites on the ideas and research cited (although some of these now require a second round of links to reach the most current information.)

At times, *E-topia* reads like a series of out-takes from its predecessor. Without the hypertext links, the material lacks depth, although the end notes do take up some of the slack. In a web site, these endnotes would have been the richest source of links. In addition, *E-topia's* structure doesn't quite hold up to its wide coverage of topics. *City of Bits'* parallel structures and the easy access to menus made it easy to know where you were and where you were going. *E-topia,* although also made up of many smaller parts, covers topics in several parts of the book, but there is no way to follow the development of ideas from one section to another.

These shortcomings reflect the limitations of the medium. Mitchell's two works provide a case in point of a problem planners often face: creating and managing complex, interweaving, and changing sets of information such as a general plan. Mitchell could have gone even further in bringing the future forward, by building on his first book with updated links, rather than covering much of the same material from a different

theoretical perspective. Mitchell says smart buildings can be re-wired and updated without starting over every time. Perhaps we need a *City of Bits, version 2.0* in order to realize the full scope of Mitchell's e-topian vision.