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Introduction—The Urban Dilemma:
A Communication Reality

In Hugo's (1978) *Notre-Dame of Paris*, there is an extended section in book 5 titled "This Will Kill That." It is a communication theory primer written in 1831 describing events of the 16th century. Somewhere earlier in this volume, the archdeacon has said, "This will kill that. The book will kill the building." Hugo explains,

> As we see it, this thought has two facets. Firstly, it was the thought of a priest. It was the alarm felt by the priesthood before a new agent: the printing-press. It was the terror and bewilderment felt by a man of the sanctuary before the luminous press of Gutenberg. It was the pulpit and the manuscript, the spoken and the written word, taking fright at the printed word. . . . It meant the press will kill the church.
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> But beneath this first and no doubt simpler thought, there was in our opinion, a second, newer one, a corollary of the first less easily perceived, but more easily challenged, an equally philosophical notion, no longer that of the priest alone but of the scientist and the artist too. This was the presentment that as human ideas changed their form they would change their mode of expression, that the crucial idea of each generation would no longer be written in the same material or in the same way, that the book of stone, so solid and durable, would give way to the book of paper, which was more solid and durable still. Seen thus, the archdeacon's vague formula had a second meaning: it meant that one art was going to dethrone another art. It meant, printing will kill architecture. (pp. 188-189)

The important insight that is explicated is the notion of a symbiotic relationship existing between invention and institution, between individuals and their social perspectives. The moveable type of Gutenberg had an enormous effect on future social developments. Whereas "printing will kill architecture" is a hyperbole, it inspires us to an addendum: "Electronic space will kill the map." The traditional spatial dimensions of the urban place are

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obliterated in cyberspace. Geography becomes irrelevant; it is transmogrified from a location to a directory—a list of functions united through nodes and gateways. Ironically, global association redefines local orientation. Global becomes local because local is defined by ease of access to formerly distant points. As global is perceived as local, global is homogenized. We are coupled to sources of information with no location and establish nonphysical relationships constructed in the new geography of connections.

In describing Oakland, California, Gertrude Stein (1937/1971) said that "there is no there there." Given its aspatial nature, that description would be appropriate as descriptive of cyberspace. Yes, there is no there in cyberspace, but there is connection, affiliation, and even community for some. Yet, in the rush to understand, explore, embrace, or indict the there of cyberspace, one truth has been neglected: The aspatial and spatial sites of interaction are not severable.

In his introduction to *Flesh and Stone*, Sennett (1994) describes the new geography and the nature of speed in relationship to the human body.

> The technologies of motion—from automobiles to continuous, poured-concrete highways—made it possible for human settlements to extend beyond tight-packed centers out into peripheral space. Space has thus become a means to the end of pure motion—we now measure urban spaces in terms of how easy it is to drive through them, to get out of them. . . . The physical condition of the traveling body reinforces this sense of disconnection from space. . . . The traveler, like the television viewer, experiences the world in narcotic terms; the body moves passively, desensitized in space, to destinations set in a fragmented and discontinuous urban geography. (pp. 17-18)

If urban geography is discontinuous, if there is no there, then what is there? We move to media communities or cyberbia or virtual neighborhoods. Or, more accurately, it is the presence of such nonpropinquitous electronic affiliations whose presence invites those who can afford it to flee from the physical responsibilities of public space and community. It is a trade-off.

Yet, is it not strange that the metaphors of public space guide and govern cyberspace; the infobahn and the information highway thrive as the street is criminalized. Mitchell (1995) suggests that the "designers of public cyberspace" ought to look at public spaces such as Central Park (at both its failures and successes) in creating a user-friendly environment.

> Just as parks and squares must be pleasant and welcoming to a diverse population in order to function effectively, so must the interfaces to public areas of cyberspace: an interface that depends on cryptic com-

> mands and arcane knowledge of computer technology is as much a barrier to most people as is a flight of steps to a park user in a wheelchair. People must also feel secure and comfortable—not subject to hostility, abuse, or attack. And more subtly, but just as importantly, the cultural presumptions and cues that are built into an interface must not discourage potential users. (p. 128)

The irony is superb. A deteriorating urban park is to be used as the model of adventures in cyberspace. It is within this strange technologically advanced world, and realizing that there are many ways to view the urban dilemma, that the editors issued a broad call for manuscripts more than a year ago.

> The state of the modern urban landscape suggests many reasons for despair and some reasons for hope. The streets have been abandoned to cars and the disenfranchised. Retail functions behind closed doors with transactions under the scrutiny of security guards. Public space has been de-emphasized and made plausible only when controlled. The mall and suburbia transform economic and social life. A vital social life offered by an urban environment replete with busy streets, markets, parks, promenades, and squares has long been a defining characteristic of urban culture. However, commercial and public uses of media technology from telephone and computer and cable seem to be facilitating intra-organizational and intra-group communication away from the structures of urban life. Despite these pessimistic conditions, the urban scene also percolates with less visible cultural and economic vitality generated largely by recent immigrant groups. . . . This issue will be devoted to an interdisciplinary examination of the urban landscape with particular emphasis placed upon the role of communication in creating, maintaining and changing the past and future condition of cities. . . . Possible topics include, but are not limited to, the following: public vs. private life, the relationship of urban and media developments, special urban populations, the symbolic function of the urban landscape, social networks, gender variables, politics and urban spaces, public rituals, performance in public spaces, the regulation of communication opportunities in urban environments. (Staff, 1994, pp. 250-251)

What we got in response were methodologically diverse papers as well as the following:

1. inquiries and manuscripts from social ecologists, architects, urban planners, sociologists, environmental psychologists, and linguists but fewer reactions from communication scholars;
2. reactions representing urban constituents, particularly the homeless, the ethnic, the AIDS-plagued community, and the poor; and

3. interest and inquiries from well-established communication scholars, particularly those interested in urban communication, media and violence, and history.

What we did not get were the following:

1. analyses that linked the development of media technology with present and future urban conditions;
2. prescriptive and paradigmatic examinations of the urban life; and
3. positive or optimistic visions of a future in which division and class and ethnic warfare are replaced with creative cooperation and integration, in which urban life is seen as dynamic and vital rather than as a phenomenon of the past.

The editors believe that quality-of-life issues must be integrated into future telecommunication planning and that telecommunication planning must be seen in relationship and in concert with urban planning. We see the need for a regulatory shift from the division of land-use regulation and media policy to the concept of zoning ecosystems, an approach that looks at human settlements, be they spatially or aspatially located. We believe that a critical situation faces urban and suburban America, and we wonder whether that realm of crisis and development ought not to be a vital concern of communication scholars. What is it that our research and insights can provide as potential solutions and answers to alleviate the current malaise? Why were there so few responses from communication scholars in reacting to the call for papers?

We believe that the fragmented discipline of communication is not producing scholars with the necessary background or mindset incorporated during graduate study. And we cannot produce such scholars as long as the wars of identity are being fought within and without. A communication perspective must be placed within the vision of urban planners, an approach that would integrate the values of social interaction into the myriad regulations and policies of governing bodies (from zoning to licensing, from media regulation to First Amendment issues, etc.) and that would serve to advise employers that the human factor ought to be considered and can be economically viable as the corporation is transformed into a nonplace high-tech environment. We think—and we hope this special issue of *Communication Research* will support this assertion—that a communication perspective plays a major role in the transmogrification of the city and the resultant dilemmas.

In an endeavor such as this, many colleagues have been called on for guidance, feedback, support, and critical reviews. A special thanks to the

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As you read the following articles, one challenge should be kept in mind. How do we step outside the critical theoretical domain and stumble into the proactive, strategic, pragmatic world? Could we initiate legislative, economic, and technological recommendations in which public social interaction is simply not unplanned fallout or a byproduct but rather is choreographed into the 21st-century communication landscape? We believe that the communication scholar has much to offer and should play a prominent role in the rejuvenation of urban life.

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