

Critical Urban Media Arts:

An Experimental Workshop in Urban Research, Mapping and Representation

Presented by The Spatial Information Design Lab
Columbia University School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation

Instructors: Jesse Shapins and Brian House
TA: Matthew Pauly

A New Urban Language

Over the course of the summer, we have engaged in a series of urban research experiments designed to introduce multiple methods of critically investigating and engaging the city. To begin, you chose a specific site within New York City to declare as your territory. Through seven exercises you have defined new words specific to this space through text, photography and video in the *Periplurban* dictionary.

To begin thinking about the dictionary as a mode of representation, let us begin by investigating a traditional dictionary's self-understanding. The *Oxford English Dictionary* presents two related, but distinct definitions of the word "dictionary":

1. a. A book dealing with the individual words of a language.
2. a. By extension: A book of information or reference on any subject or branch of knowledge, the items of which are arranged in alphabetical order; an alphabetical encyclopædia: as a Dictionary of Architecture, Biography, Geography, of the Bible, of Christian Antiquities, of Dates, etc.

With these two directions in mind, two critical questions arise: Which type of dictionary is *Periplurban*? Is it a project concerned with language or is it an "alphabetical encyclopedia"? Unlike an encyclopedia, *Periplurban* makes no proclamation of comprehensive and authoritative knowledge, but instead focuses attention upon subjective interpretation. By establishing a framework that does not ally itself with the dictionary tradition in-line with the encyclopedia, but instead being "a book dealing with the individual words of a language," *Periplurban* provides an opening into the domain of urban subjectivity. The larger goal of our collective investigations has been to begin re-defining what is a city, and in this process, we have been creating a new urban language.

The final project draws upon your rich database of knowledge and media to create a series of design interventions in physical and virtual space. Using the new language you have created, the core component will be an SMS-based walking tour of your territory that poetically connects the words you have defined.

SMS Urbanism

SMS is the first communication technology intrinsic to the mobile phone. Today, you have broadband video, interactive widgets, cameras, and GPS all running on sleek devices like the iPhone. But the essence of mobile technology — access to people or information in a physical context — was established and is most readily approached through SMS and its humble 160 characters of text.

Aside from the fundamental feature of mobility, there are two features that make text messaging particularly suited for projects engaging the urban environment and that you should consider in producing your final project.

First, audio and visual media, whether photos, video, or graphics, attempt to draw one in to a virtual experience that is removed from the physical environment — text-messaging does not. By remaining

minimal and context-specific in its communication, an SMS adds new information to a recipient's present situation. So many media initiatives that are ostensibly about place involve people walking around staring at small screens wearing headphones, oblivious to their surroundings. Text-messaging doesn't let you get away with this. It allows the experience of the city itself to become the focus of the intervention, not the technology.

Secondly, since text-messaging is silent, it is a private form of communication that can take place in public space. Tim Etchells writes about text-messaging that "messages go direct to the phone of an individual, direct to a 'place' which is normally occupied by that person's friends, family or lovers. To create an art work for this context is an invitation, one could say, to whisper in the ears of strangers as they go about their daily business."

Walking Poetry

Walking enables the new language for your territory to be spoken and read. Michel De Certeau writes, "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. It is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language). It is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language)."

Use the words in your territory to write a poem that will be read via text messaging and experienced by walking through your territory. The walk should provide an experiential tour of the multiple layers of physical, social, historical and fictional qualities you have identified through your research.

You will use a set of new features on the *Periplurban* website to write your poem. To initiate the process, click the button "Script Walk" on your territory page. The main elements of the walk will be short messages (160 character maximum) associated with the words in your index. These messages will be defined in the "TXT" field for every word. In between the messages associated with each word, you will be able to write directions to guide people from one word to the next.

Your messages should engage directly with the physical environment and all five senses. Invite people to smell, touch, taste, listen and look. Draw people's attention to specific visual cues. Utilize the performative instructions you created to propose actions. In order to make your walk effective, you will need to write extensively on location. While your Walking Poem can be as long as you want, it may be no shorter than 20 messages.

Use the sample scripts provided to guide your writing.

Territory Mapping

The last element of your final project is a PDF that can serve as a guide for users visiting your territory and experiencing your Walking Poem. The PDF will be available to download from your territory page so that users can print it out and take it with them. The document should include a new conceptual map of your territory and set of instructions for reading the Walking Poem. The dimensions of the PDF should be 8.5" x 11." It should be a minimum of one page, but can also be longer if you desire.

Conceptual Map

Revisit your initial territory map after now spending weeks deeply engaging and analyzing the space. Re-create the diagram to reflect your Walking Poem. The new map must include each of the dictionary words you use in your Walking Poem.

Starting Location

Where should someone go to begin your walk? How will they know they're in the right place?

Starting Instructions

We will email these precise directions to you on Tuesday, August 6th.

Summary of Final Project Requirements

To begin your final project, you must complete all previous exercises from the semester. This means you will need to **define**, **map** and **cross-reference** a minimum of 60 words in your territory using each of the methodologies introduced. These include:

- Mini-Ethnography
- Performative Instructions
- Archaeologies of Urban Imaginaries
- City Symphonette
- Territory Stories

Mapping

You must choose a specific location for each of your word's. Use the Google Map interface within *Periplurban* to pinpoint an exact spot on the map.

Cross-referencing:

Words within a language never exist in isolation. To push the *Periplurban* dictionary beyond an "alphabetical encyclopedia" we have introduced a new feature that allows for words to be cross-referenced. Use this new feature to relate your words to other definitions in your territory, as well as the territories of other students.

Note: The cross-referencing feature will be introduced on Tuesday, August 5th.

Your **Walking Poem** must include:

- Minimum 20 messages
- Messages that engage each of the five senses

Your **Territory Map PDF** must include:

- New conceptual map
- Each dictionary word used in your Walking Poem
- Description of your territory
- Starting location
- Starting instructions

Schedule

Wednesday, July 30th :: Final Project Introduction

- Introduction of Final Project brief
- Begin working on SMS Walking Poems

Friday, August 8th :: Final Project Mid-Review

The focus of your Walking Poem is the experience of users outside, on the street. As such, instead of a regular in-class review of work, we will arrange individual meetings with each student on location in their territory to test and provide feedback on the your progress. For this meeting, you must have completed:

- Initial draft of Walking Poem using the *Periplurban* website
- Initial draft of Territory Map PDF

Wednesday, August 20th :: Final Project Due

All material for your final project must be completed by 9 am. This means you must have finished:

- Defining, mapping and cross-referencing 60 words
- All edits to your Walking Poem messages on the Periplurban website
- Uploaded your Territory Map PDF to Periplurban

Friday, August 22nd :: Final Review

In order to prepare for the review, each student is assigned to review another's Final Project. This review must include a critique of the experience of the Walking Poem on location, as well as the database of definitions online.

Review Partners:

Wei-Ju reviews Joshua
Joshua reviews Priscilla
Priscilla reviews Wei-Ju

The format of the final review will be:

- 10 minute student presentation of their territory, highlighting:
 - Examples of definitions from each exercise
 - A sequence of cross-references
 - Illustrated walk-through of excerpts from SMS Walking Poem
- 3 minute response by assigned student
- 20 minute discussion with feedback from guest critic Mark Shepard