



A digital time capsule

Description

I'm looking back at old blog posts and publications. In 2012 I was also looking back to older studies, e.g. to 1994. See the 2012 post: [What's a modem?](#) I'm indebted to ChatGPT for suggesting that the 2012 post served as a "time capsule."

In that post I revisited our 1994 study of computer-mediated communication in architectural practice. I was struck by how quickly the terminology of "CMC" (computer-mediated communication), "telephone modems," and "text handling" had become quaint.

Sixteen years had passed and the results already carried the patina of a bygone era. What seemed striking in 2012 was how much of the practitioners' speculative talk about bandwidth, mobility, and collaboration had come true. (You'll see from the style that ChatGPT helped me with this account.)

From the vantage point of 2025, that doubling of hindsight is even more pronounced. What has unfolded in the years since is not simply the disappearance of modems and the wholesale adoption of wireless broadband but an embedding of connectivity into the infrastructure of life and work.

The promises of ubiquity, "always-on" communication, and collaborative tools that were only just materialising in 2012 have become banal, to the point where it is difficult to separate digital mediation from professional and social practice. Architects, like many other professionals, now conduct large portions of their design processes in distributed, cloud-based environments, where collaboration, simulation, and real-time rendering are routine.

The transformations extend beyond the technologies themselves. The predictions of "intelligent agents" trawling through online repositories of 3D content, which in the 1990s seemed fanciful, now look modest in comparison with AI-driven generative design, automated specification systems, and machine-learning tools that not only search but propose, iterate, and simulate alternatives.

The playful anxiety noted by one of the 1994 respondents—that virtual images might come to stand independently of realised buildings—has been borne out in unexpected ways, with entire economies forming around virtual and mixed-reality design, in some cases entirely detached from built outcomes.

At the same time, the professional anxieties about marginalisation and irrelevance have not gone away. If anything, they have intensified. In 1994 there was a fear that technology might pass by a sleeping profession. In 2012 that fear was tempered by the growing familiarity with the internet and the normalisation of digital tools.

Now in 2025, the discussion centres on whether architects and designers can assert agency in an environment where large language models, parametric platforms, and AI-driven planning systems increasingly shape decision-making.

The premise of our original study was that digital technology is complicit in changes in how practitioners operate. ChatGPT inflected the topic thus:

The question is no longer whether communication technologies will alter practice, but how far professional judgement can coexist with or resist the automated, data-driven imperatives of the systems on which practice now depends.

Seen in this longer trajectory, the 2012 post functions almost as an interlude—a moment when digital mediation had moved decisively beyond modems but before the current acceleration of artificial intelligence. It reminds us how quickly vocabularies date, how speculative predictions sometimes understate the extent of transformation, and how anxieties about professional displacement persist across decades, simply taking on new technological guises.

Curiosity, mood, and social branding

I asked ChatGPT for a summary of the sequence of the 2012 posts, continuing the sequence identified last week, [ChatGPT as trickster](#). The “What’s a modem?” post is the last one in the current sequence.

- [How the Internet kills curiosity](#). 104
- [We are all entertainers](#). 105
- [Situationist International and the mood of the times](#). 106
- [Spem in Alium](#). 107
- [Audience disengagement](#). 108
- [Bodies in motion](#). 109
- [Making friends](#). 110
- [Interpretive communities](#). 111
- [The bliss of ignorance](#). 112
- [Manifestos and madness](#). 113
- [Cooperation or complicity](#). 114
- [Brand me](#). 115
- [What’s a modem?](#) 116

Here’s the ChatGPT summary, guided by me (I think).

In 2012 I blogged about the shifting landscape of digital cultures, often in response to events of the day. For example, when NASA’s rover *Curiosity* landed on Mars, I reflected on how the internet changes

our habits of enquiry, making facts instantly available but perhaps dulling speculation and *curiosity*.

At the same time, in the midst of the Edinburgh Festival and the international controversy surrounding the Pussy Riot punk rock group in Russia, I explored the merging of entertainment with everyday life, and the ambiguous position of the entertainer as both admired and marginalised.

Some posts examined how moods are cultivated, whether in cities, in political protest, or through music. Drawing on the Situationist International, I asked how activism might reclaim the ambience of urban life, while in another piece I considered Thomas Tallis's motet *Spem in Alium* made suddenly famous by its use in *Fifty Shades of Grey* to question how architecture, like music, might be thought of in relation to atmosphere and emotion.

The politics of communication and engagement were also a preoccupation. I wrote about the US presidential candidate Mitt Romney's gaffes in London and what they revealed about rapport, persuasion, and mood, before turning to the idea that audiences, like friends, are not simply "out there" waiting to be collected but need to be made, cultivated, and "educated." This thread led naturally into questions of authorship and participation, where digital culture, with its emphasis on sharing and crowdsourcing, resonates with older traditions of participatory design and hermeneutics.

Ignorance, exaggeration, and complicity each became themes in their own right. UK Prime Minister David Cameron's apparent lapse over the meaning of Magna Carta provided a way of thinking about ignorance as both a rhetorical strategy and a philosophical resource.

The "Manifesto of Yellowism" at Tate Modern invited reflection on the excesses of manifestos, from the Futurists to more recent declarations about digital culture. Marketplaces and micro-economies, in turn, opened up the idea of complicity as a subtle, often positive form of collective action, operating in the gaps and margins of formal rules.

I was involved in several research projects about branding. Social media encouraged personal branding and the blurring of professional and social identities, but I considered whether brands might be reclaimed as part of ordinary sociability, and how they operate not just in consumer culture but in the moods of places and communities.

Finally, as outlined already, I revisited an old survey on computer-mediated communication in architectural practice from the 1990s, reflecting on how dated the language of modems and "turnkey systems" now sounds, but also how some predictions about ubiquity, collaboration, and mobile devices proved prescient.

Taken together, these posts capture something of the mood of 2012, a time when social media and mobile technologies were consolidating their influence, and when questions of mood, performance, authorship, and complicity felt especially urgent.

Note

- Image is by ChatGPT: Please provide an image of a rusty time capsule unearthed in a post apocalyptic era.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. Podcast

Tags

1. audiences
2. branding
3. emotion
4. entertainment
5. mood
6. practice

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