

Branded Meeting Places

Description

Branded Meeting Places

Ubiquitous technologies and the design of places for meaningful human encounter
Designing for the 21st Century Initiative

Also see [final report](#).

Meetings are now less constrained to offices, shops and fixed points of service, and can take place in a range of environments, including branded places: coffee houses, transportation hubs, customised meeting places, and informal, locally-branded spaces. People are drawn to places that have particular meanings as loci of human encounter. Communications technologies are implicated in this move into the variegated brandscape.

We gather evidence for these assertions about the rise of branded meeting places, examine the suitability of branded spaces for human encounters (eg meetings amongst business associates, between service providers and clients), and develop strategies for improving the technologies that support them. In the process we will critically examine and analyse branded spaces, theories about their formation, and how they operate as loci of human encounter.

Key Research Team

- Richard Coyne Architecture: School of Arts, Culture and Environment
- Robin Williams Research Centre for Social Sciences/ISSTI
- James Stewart Research Centre for Social Sciences/ISSTI
- Mark Wright Division of Informatics
- John Lee Architecture: School of Arts, Culture and Environment and HCRC, Division of Informatics
- Penny Travlou OPENspace, Edinburgh College of Art
- Stacy Boldrick VARIE Conference organisation

The project builds on the success of the existing Non-Place network cluster in bringing together researchers and practitioners from geography, architecture, urbanism, graphic design, sociology, cultural theory, human-computer interface design, communications technology, and information science. The proposal is forward thinking, addressing 21st Century issues of place, branding, new environments for work and interaction, and mobile technologies. The project uses design as a core aspect of its methodology, deploying iterative development of a system that assists meetings, and from a toolbox of components. The proposal engages with the sociality of space, and the commercial aspects of branded space in the global marketplace and in the new technological landscapes of the 21st Century. That something has been 'designed' often functions as a brand identity, serving to communicate design as a value, and Design21 is a branded initiative promoting forward-thinking design partnerships. In focussing on brand, the project has been formulated to maximise the opportunity for reflection, taking account of social change, and with an eye to economic opportunity in a global context.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our work on non-place highlights the importance of identity, trust, and efficiency in the design of both static and transient environments in which humans interact and transact business. These concepts can be discussed as issues of branding: identifying with a brand, developing trust and brand loyalty, brand as a shortcut to service expectation. With increasing online commerce the place, the commercial site, sometimes acts as a site of entertainment, diversion, touristic interest, and/or chance human encounter (Kozinets, et al., 2002): eg the celebrated Apple Store in Regent Street, Selfridges in the Birmingham Bull Ring. Groups of people identify with particular branded spaces and congregate there. It is not only youths who “hang out” in branded spaces. We take branding to include these meaning-rich, symbolic, alluring and commercial qualities of a place that support people’s desire to be there, and provide a performance setting, sometimes independently of the tangible, material or informational resources that the place provides.

The project is informed by the experience of our Non-Place cluster project of the enabling and disabling aspects of conspicuously branded “non-place” sites as workshop venues: a B&Q superstore, Stansted airport, an elite modernist conference site, and a boardroom lined with paintings by Sir Henry Raeburn (1756-1823).

We hypothesise that it matters where they are when people meet, that branding is an important aspect of place, and that technologies have a major role to play in mediating brand and meaningful human interaction.

Our research questions identify three important aspects of branded meeting places.

Brands and groups

1. How do branded spaces influence small group interaction, cohesion, conflict, resolution, and power relations between participants? How do branded places influence group decision-making?
2. To what extent does the introduction of branding improve customer satisfaction and staff morale in organisations and bureaucracies?

Branded documents

1. What is the relationship between documents (both paper and digital) and brand? How do documents relate to service provision in branded places?
2. How do branded environments support or hinder document handling and service provision?
3. To what extent can the branding of a place be subjected to automation, customisation, dynamic interaction, and how can these interventions influence the use for such spaces for human encounter?

The changing brandscape

1. Branding often pertains to a fixed, pre-decided unit of social meaning, applicable to objects of mass consumption? To what extent can branding empower local, non-commercial, transient and minority constituencies?
2. What are the cultural precursors of branding (symbols, monads, memes, mythotypes), and how can these inform contemporary encounters in spaces?

3. Branded spaces are carefully controlled by particular commercial interests, configured through agreement between brand-holders and licensees (eg Easyjet's inflight sale of Carte Noire coffee). What does unintended, conflicting and subversive branding contribute to the qualities of a place as a site for human encounter?
4. The brandscape is characterised by movement from one brand context to another. How is this movement negotiated? How do brands interact with each other and with interstitial, unbranded spaces?
5. What are the disruptive effects of mobile digital technologies on brand and the spatiality/temporality of place? How can these characteristics be brought into the design of branded meeting places?

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Excellent work on brandscapes dates to the work of Sherry (1987), drawing attention to the mythopoetic origins of branding (Belk, et al., 1989). Our project builds on this research to embrace the role of ubiquitous technologies. We also consider the branded aspects of the ordinary and everyday places of human interaction. Our work builds on concepts of non-place (Augé, 1995), which we have advanced through several studies relating to information systems (Turner/Davenport, 2005; Laegran/Stewart, 2003), urbanism (Coyne, 2006), the voice (Coyne/Parker, 2006), transience (Cairns, 2003), and social learning (Williams, 2005). Network participants at Bradford University (Peter Excell) have examined club cultures with high disposable incomes, a pro-technology orientation, ubiquitous information needs, and mobile phone dependence.

The audience for the project outcomes includes: brand owners, managers, creative agencies, mobile marketing specialists, designers of mobile systems, client and user groups, including clients of public services. The topic of branded spaces is highly relevant to a global, international constituency, particularly with the emergence of new (viral) technologies and marketing strategies (Moore, 2003; Anon, 2005). There is a call for greater participation in design; market voices call for a similar recognition of 'interactive consumerism'.

RESEARCH METHOD

Our studies focus on a software and infrastructure system known as Spellbinder (Mobile Acuity Ltd). Spellbinder is a technology that enables digital content to be 'embedded' into images of physical places. Users of mobile phone cameras can 'unlock' or 'release' information apparently embedded in otherwise flat and unprepossessing graphical images, such as logos, symbols, codes, poster content, and brand identifications. The system uses a server and database of images and content, and sophisticated pattern recognition algorithms to match captured images to data records. A mobile phone user photographs an image of a designated object (poster, label, sign) using their camera phone and sends the image to the server. The content associated with that image is returned as text, graphics, web content or a voice message. The software deploys a highly reliable smart pattern matching algorithm that accounts for different angles of view and noisy data. The user can also store content associated with that site, available for someone else to collect when they too visit the site and take a picture of the object. The commercial application is for brands, logos or any graphical image, either extant or planted in the environment by advertisers, to be deployed to trigger communication flows between consumers and providers. Spellbinder constitutes a disruptive innovative medium that suggests interesting linkages between the physical and the virtual, images and brand symbols, and

connects with contemporary cultures of ubiquitous mobile technologies and the web.

Study 1: Brands and groups

- Participants at a meeting use the basic Spellbinder capability to leave messages behind for other visitors to the space, and other meeting participants.
- Use of Spellbinder for wayfinding, recognising the formative influences of arrival and departure as placial experiences.
- Digital graffiti: participants at a meeting have a facility for sketching on physical surfaces. They photograph these on their mobile phones for storage and retrieval on the server. The sketches are later modified and other resources attached back at the office.

Discussion points: other applications, group interaction, cohesion, conflict, decision-making, power relations, morale, customer satisfaction, bureaucracy, new styles of meetings, asynchronous meetings, hotspots, catalysts of gathering, spontaneous meetings.

Study 2: Branded documents

- The unobtrusive/ambient meeting: Conduct a meeting in which the only documents provided are pages of icons and symbols (brands). Meeting documents are “unlocked” when the brands are photographed.
- Virtual meeting secretary: Use of automatic communications from server to phone to manage aspects of a meeting, and triggered by photographing pages from a lexicon of symbols or other visual cues.
- Printed documents have a signature, ie the pagination, paragraph configuration, tabulations, graphical elements. Use Spellbinder to attach supplementary information to printed documents, and to track paper documents.

Discussion points: other applications, document handling and tracking, automation, letterheads and logos, bureaucracy, agendas, minutes and private memos, hidden agendas, the personalisation of space, secretive and unobtrusive meetings.

Study 3: The changing brandscape

- Combinations of images: Program the server to recognise combinations and sequences of images, ie meta-patterns, as a means to identifying a meeting location or event.
- Transition zones in places (thresholds) and transitions between meeting events: Such moments and events can be identified with images or icons, which unlock information or provide occasion for depositing records/memories.
- Story-telling in places: Use of Spellbinder to construct narratives where places and actors are accessed as branded entities.

Discussion points: other applications, brand and empowerment, the local and the global, the interstitial.

Some experiments will assume the character of games or role plays, with varying degrees of relevance and applicability to actual meeting situations. With an eye to the future (our 2020 vision), the studies will be relevant to technological developments that are still at a nascent stage, and that have yet to come to the market. In every case, our intention is to use these studies to elicit insights into branded meeting

places, from considerations of literal brand symbols, to the branded character of places and events, deploying a research by design methodology.

Bibliography

- Anon., "Power at last", The Economist, 31 March, 2005, 1-1.
- Augé, M., Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. J. Howe, Verso, 1995.
- Belk, R.W., M. Wallendorf and J.F. Sherry Jr, "The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey", Journal of Consumer Research, 16: 1, 1989, 1-38.
- Cairns, S., Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy, Routledge, 2003.
- Coyne, R., "Space without ground", in M. Bain (ed.), Architecture in Scotland, Glasgow: The Lighthouse Trust, 2006 (to appear).
- Coyne, R. and M. Parker, "Voices out of place: Voice, non-place and ubiquitous digital communications", Mobile Understanding: The Epistemology of Ubiquitous Communication, Passagen Verlag, 2006, 171-182.
- Fournier, Susan (1998), "Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research", Journal of Consumer Research, 24 (March), 343-374.
- Holt, DB, "How Consumers Consume: A Typology of Consumption Practices", Journal of Consumer Research, Vol 22, 1995, pp 1-16.
- Kozinets, R.V., J.F. Sherry Jr, B. Deberry-Spence, A. Duhachek, K. Nuttavuthisit and D. Storm, "Themed flagship brand stores in the new millennium: Theory, practice, prospects", Journal of Retailing, 78: 1, 2002, 17-29.
- Laeگران, A.S. and J. Stewart, "Nerdy, trandy or healthy? Configuring the Internet café", New Media and Society, 5: 3, 2003, 357-377.
- Laurier, E. & Philo C. (2005) The Cappuccino Community: Cafes and civic life in the contemporary city, Final Report to the ESRC. Department of Geography, University of Glasgow
- Moore, R.E., "From genericide to viral marketing: on brand", Language and Communication, 23: 3, 2003, 331-357.
- Sherry Jr, J.F., "Cereal monogamy: brand loyalty as secular ritual in consumer culture", 17th Annual Conference of the Association for Consumer Research, 1987.
- Sherry Jr, J.F (1998), ServiceScapes: The Concept of Place in Contemporary Markets, ed. NTC Business Books: Chicago, 109-146.
- Turner, P. and E. Davenport, Spatiality, Spaces and Technology, Kluwer, 2005.
- Williams, R., J. Stewart and R. Slack, Social Learning in Technological Innovation: Experimenting with Information and Communication Technologies: Edward Elgar, 2005.

Date Created

March 1, 2012

Author

rcoyne99