

## Manuel Castells, “Space of Flows, Space of Places: Materials for a Theory of Urbanism in the Information Age”

By the standard measure of scholarly influence -- how many times scholars cite each other's books or articles -- Manuel Castells is the single most influential sociologist alive today. His writings have addressed a wide range of topics, but a consistent theme has been the interplay between urbanism and social movements -- how individuals come together into collectives to advocate for social change. In recent years he has turned his attention to how information technologies interact with urbanization to create new socio-spatial forms and meanings. As LeGates and Stout note, he has been described as “the first great philosopher of cyberspace.” This reading selection offers a short summary of wide-ranging themes that Castells has explored in several lengthy books on the network society and what he calls the ‘informational city.’ The most famous part of this analysis -- in part because it is the easiest for the largest number of people to remember -- is his distinction between the “space of places” in which people's experiences and activities quite literally *take place*, and the “space of flows” of the increasingly rapid movements of capital investment, communications messages, and people going from one place to another. Once Castells introduced the idea of this distinction, the idea really took off: it became almost impossible to look at any local place in a city without also asking yourself about the “space of flows” that were coursing through that locality.

### Questions

1. Castells begins his chapter with a bold declaration -- space does not simply reflect society, it expresses society -- and then proceeds to identify thirteen major changes that mark the rise of a new urban world in the Information Age. Can you identify one or more of these changes that resonate with your own experience of a city?
2. To theorize the spatial transformations of urbanism in the Information Age, Castells proposes “three bipolar axes” (think of the axes I presented in our lecture on suburbia) related to function, meaning, and form. **Function** refers to the continuum between the local and the global: cities are communication systems that link up the local and the global. **Meaning** refers to the continuum between individuation and communalism -- the interface between individuals and larger social groups defined by shared identities; cities are the crucible in which the stresses and tensions of large numbers of individuals and groups are forced to coexist and negotiate individual and collective identities. These tensions been transformed by the third axis, relating to **Form**: this is the continuum between the space of places and the space of flows. “Cities are structured, and destructured simultaneously by the competing logics of the space of flows and the space of places.”

Castells explains further: “From the point of view of the urban experience, we are entering a built environment that is increasingly incorporating electronic communication devices everywhere. Our urban life fabric ... becomes an e-topia, a new urban form in which we constantly interact, deliberately or automatically, with online information systems, increasingly in the wireless mode.”

How has constant interaction with online information systems shaped your experience of city life? Can you identify moments when changes in network technology or practice have led to distinct changes in your experience of the urban?

3. Castells writes that media have constructed “a kaleidoscope of variable content depending on demand, thus reproducing cultural and personal diversity rather than overimposing a common set of values. ... the fragmented metropolis and the individualization of communication reinforce each other to produce an endless constellation of cultural subsets.” Can you cite examples from your own experience of how this media kaleidoscope shapes urban experience?

4. Castells writes, “Public spaces, as sites of spontaneous social interaction, are the communicative devices of our society.” Discuss.

5. In the final sections of Castells’ chapter, he analyzes how planning, architecture, and urban design relate to the three bipolar axes of function, meaning, and form. The primary function of **planning** is to link the space of places of city-regions to the space of flows of economic competition, while ensuring de-segregated schooling, affordable housing, a diversity of land uses, and widespread availability of child care. The role of **architecture** is “marking places in the space of flows, with the creation of symbolic meaning through building designs that “stir a debate that marks space a living form.” The risk, however, is that celebrity architecture and globally-recognized buildings (such as the Bilbao Guggenheim museum) become tourist attractions and create “new cathedrals of the Information Age, where the pilgrims gather to search for the meaning of their wandering”; in other words, Castells is concerned that architecture can become so prominent with globally-recognized images that disconnect the local space of places from the accelerating space of flows. Finally, **urban design** involves the “socio-spatial treatment of urban forms” beyond the scale of individual buildings, in the entire fabric of a city-region. Here, the most important function is public space, which “is the key connector of human experience, opposed to private shopping centers as the spaces of sociability.” Important features of good urban design are “the spontaneity of uses, the density of the interaction, the freedom of expression, the multifunctionality of space, and the multiculturalism of the street life.”

How would a Castells-inspired urbanist make sense of the “space of place” and “space of flows” in Vancouver’s latest internationally-known development project -- the Trump International Hotel & Tower Vancouver, which includes “allotted jet hours” for private jet service, along with “a chauffeured, bespoke Rolls Royce car service?”



**“The New Twist on Luxury”:** Trump International under construction, Georgia Street, Vancouver, September, 2013 (Elvin Wyly). With allotted private jet hours and private Rolls Royce limousine service, the project evokes Castells’ reminder that the “analysis of networked spatial mobility is another frontier for the new theory of urbanism. ... How we relate to airports, train and bus stations, to freeways, to customs buildings, are part of the new urban experience of hundreds of millions.” But how many of those hundreds of millions get allotments of private jet hours?

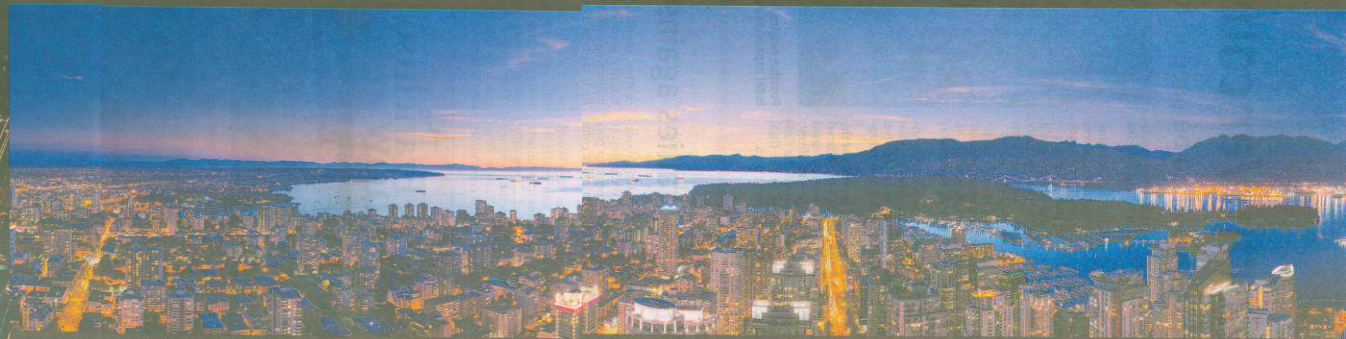




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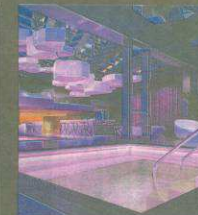
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