




DAVID GALES

# Design DIGI



# AND THE TAL AGE

**urban media OPEN UP NEW  
POSSIBILITIES FOR EXTENDING  
THE INFLUENCE OF DESIGN INTO  
THE public realm.**

“Public space is dead,” Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas proclaimed during a conference at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design in spring 1999. His observation was based on the rapidly increasing allure of cyberspace, which he termed a “universal city that exists wherever we are in the world.” Seven years later, the powerful draw of the Internet and other forms of digital media intensifies with every new technological advance, putting the world at our fingertips through an array of miniaturized devices.

The Institute of Contemporary Art is due to move to its new home on the Boston waterfront this fall. The building will have translucent walls that will be illuminated at night, providing outside space for performances and digital projection.

DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO ARCHITECTS

## NO ONE WOULD DENY THAT THE PUBLIC REALM HAS BEEN PROFOUNDLY ALTERED BY THE UBIQUITY OF TECHNOLOGY THAT ALLOWS PEOPLE TO SHIFT TIME

and place and absent themselves from the public moment, not only in their homes and offices, but also in cars and on the street corner. As younger generations—those technology natives who have grown up with dual citizenship in actual and virtual communities—enter more fully into public life, this reality will continue to reshape notions of public and private space.

Yet, Koolhaas's remarks have proved premature because champions of civic life have begun to co-opt the very technologies that threatened to keep people in front of their private screens and out of the agora.

bandwidth available to the home. Imagine an Imax-meets-the-Web immersive, interactive space.”

Welcome to the advent of urban media—the integration of media and technology that is creating new forms of communication designed specifically for public places. Urban screens that identify, entertain, or educate are being networked to form communication systems that capture the public imagination with multimedia narratives. With the maturation and convergence of multiple forms of media technology, sophisticated digital displays are now a programming option for museums and parks,

as well as retail and entertainment districts. Improved affordability allows designers to combine architecture, digital sound, visual imagery, and lighting to create communications platforms that can be leveraged to build a sense of community, as well as used for commercial purposes.

If Times Square or the Las Vegas Strip comes to mind, think again. In those bright, media-packed environments “every sign is screaming for itself,” says Don Richards, principal of Foghorn Creative in San Francisco. “The new environments replace the simple signage model with one that borrows from broadcast, where there is a constant stream of complex but controlled programming to create a media model with a juxtaposition of program elements that allow for multiple, coordinated messages.”

What these environments do share with other bright, sign-saturated locales from Broadway to Tokyo's Ginza district is that they are at high-density

crossroads. The people coming together or passing through provide a large audience for a constant flow of information, whether for commercial or not-for-profit purposes. The challenge for developers of the physical environment from the buildings to the screens, as well as for the content developers who create the digital messages, is to keep the message from becoming virtual clutter or another piece of video wallpaper. Giving primacy to the content is a prerequisite to coalesce communities, whether citizens or shoppers.



**A media-enhanced public plaza at Fashion Show, a regional mall located on the Las Vegas Strip, includes a 500-foot “cloud” with aluminum skin that functions as a sunshade by day and a canopy of projected images at night.**

What is happening in a select number of public gathering places reflects the predictions of media artist and researcher Michael Naimark, presented in the Van Alen Institute's November 1999 report *Digital Dilemma: Where Is the “Public” in E-topia?* “At best,” he wrote, “bold new forms of the virtual and actual community will appear: Imagine actual public spaces wired together by ultra-high-bandwidth network connections, where actual neighbors are co-present with virtual ones. Imagine a public space for 100 people tapping 100 times the

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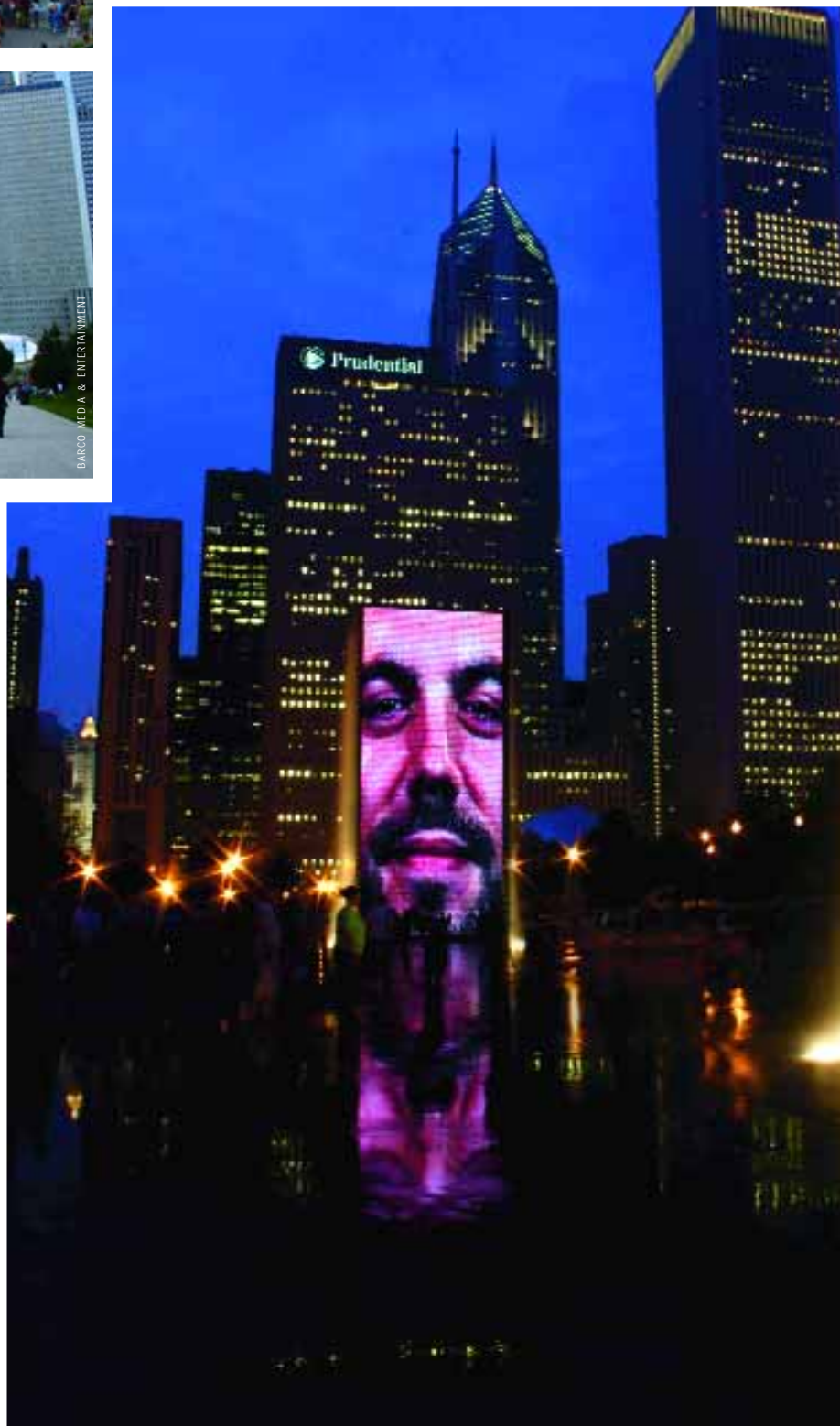
**Crown Fountain, in Chicago's Millennium Park, includes two 50-foot glass block towers at either end of a reflecting pool. As conceived by Spanish conceptual sculptor Jaume Plensa, video images are projected over water cascading down each tower; water can also flow so that it appears to be spouting from the mouths of a collection of faces of 1,000 Chicago residents.**

"We need to think in four dimensions to create a meaningful experience," explains Richard Orme, president of Orme + Associates Inc. in Los Angeles and a pioneer in the design of these environments. "We have to take a holistic approach that will allow for change rather than a linear one that ends when the project is built. Digital media are fluid and instantly refreshable for the needs of context over time."

While the marriage of digital media and architecture presents a loss of control for the architect at one level, it opens up new possibilities for extending the influence of the design into the public realm. As Orme notes, "The integration of architecture and digital media makes it possible for us to create new value—artistic, cultural, educational, and commercial."

Early adopters of the new technologies include retailers who have seized the opportunity to build brand awareness with media-saturated environments. Randy Byrd, principal at Sensory Interactive in Pasadena, Maryland, predicts the rise of "multimedia campaigns based not on point-of-purchase advertising, but on sharing corporate philosophy and goals with potential buyers. Nike is one of the best examples of this." By incorporating digital media in their stores and offices, companies like

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## THE CHALLENGE IS TO KEEP THE MESSAGE FROM BECOMING virtual clutter OR ANOTHER PIECE OF VIDEO wallpaper.

**A large-scale media platform at Victory Plaza, the open-air entertainment and retail district located at the heart of the American Airlines Center at Victory Park in Dallas, will include static, digital, broadcast, and interactive media elements.**

Apple, the Gap, and Bloomberg help to establish a shared culture among buyers. Byrd cites the advantages of this approach. “When you create a marketing platform that runs through an entire project, the media are scalable to the needs of the environment or the event,” he says.

The larger the project, the greater the opportunity to develop a dynamic narrative on multiple screens for multiple purposes. One of the first large-scale explorations of the synergy of new media, architecture, and communication strategy occurred with the redesign and expansion of Fashion Show, a regional mall located on the Las Vegas Strip amid the glare of competing commercial messages. The Rouse Company, which built its reputation on creating retail centers with a strong sense of connection to community, searched for a way to make the project belong to this most transitory of environments.

Deciding to build a campaign on the existing name of the center, the company pursued a makeover that integrated a sleek, modern, architectural aesthetic with an equally state-of-the-art communication platform. Instead of using a volcano or pirate ship, the mall entices shoppers off Las Vegas Boulevard with a media-enhanced public plaza. Suspended 150 feet above the street is a 500-foot-long “cloud” with aluminum skin that functions as a sunshade by day and a canopy of projected images at night. Five projectors located in glass cubes on the plaza are each capable of projecting a 70-foot-square image on the underside of the cloud. In

addition, there are four 24-by-43-foot light-emitting-diode (LED) monitors on an elevated track, or “media curve,” capable of displaying individual images or creating a 172-foot-long digital canvas.

Inside the mall, multiple displays are capable of broadcasting events and content from the fashion runway and from around the

fashion world. Ome, who designed the project in conjunction with Los Angeles–based Altoon + Porter Architects, sought an interplay between the media and the physical environment to leverage the developer’s ability to provide sponsorship opportunities for tenants, retail brands, and others, which in turn would generate additional revenue streams for the project. With the sale of the Rouse Company to General Growth Properties of Chicago, the concept lost a champion; time will tell how the new owner adapts the media platform to its own business model and messages.

The success of sponsorship sales and advertising at the American Airlines Center at Victory Park in Dallas spurred Hillwood Capital, based in Dallas, to investigate the potential for a large-scale media platform for Victory Plaza, an open-air entertainment and retail district located at the heart of the project. The result is the Victory Media Network, a technologically sophisticated combination of static, digital, broadcast, and interactive media elements to be integrated throughout the property. The scale and scope of this undertaking are unprecedented and could elevate public expectations and understanding of urban media in many ways.

Rescaling the new media model for a much larger public space ups the ante for the infrastructure investment, which in turn requires a business model that will create value in multiple ways for developers. “We are developing a revenue model built on sponsorship sales to forward-thinking companies that want to be a part of

this exciting new form of communication,” explains Kristin Gray, director of business development for Victory Media Network, which is part of Hillwood, a Perot Company. “We also understand that there has to be a mix of programming—commercial and not-for-profit—for the media platform to win a strong following. Hillwood is in this development for the long haul; we want to create not only differentiation for ourselves, but to provide a legacy for the city of Dallas.”

Hillwood has been intimately involved with all aspects of the development of the media network, from infrastructure to content development. “We are helping to define a whole new media category that is immersive, entertaining, and educational,” notes Gray. “We want to be sure that all the content is high quality and high definition, whether it comes from a sponsor or from a community agency, so we are working with outside agencies to develop material.”

The extensive network will create all-day demand. It is “a lifestyle-magazine approach to the screens with intriguing and engaging content—digital art from local and national artists, cause promotion, community events, visual candy, as well as sponsorship programming that underwrites the platform,” Gray says. “The ebb and flow of the programming should reflect changes in the traffic throughout the day, moving from news to culture to entertainment.”

To achieve this, 11 individual LED screens, totaling over 4,600 square feet, will be constructed at Victory Park, offering potential sponsors an innovative platform to communicate messages to consumers. The Victory Media Network will comprise a multimillion-dollar collection of design and technology components, including two fixed 20-foot-square tower displays, a digital portal, and eight movable 15-by-26-foot LED walls installed in two four-panel groups that will face each other across the 100-foot wide Victory Plaza.

Digital kiosks will be located across the entire development, disbursed media hydrants will provide ready access to power and high-speed data connections, and wireless data connectivity will provide network access throughout the district. Supporting the entire platform will be a network infrastructure with a fiber-optic backbone connected to a network head end located adjacent to the plaza.

Scheduled to open late this year, Victory is keeping a number of creative organizations busy. Kevin and David

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Goddess, creative directors at Spark, a New York City-based agency, say they are migrating with their clients from small screens to larger ones as they work to extend brand identity into the architectural realm. “We are working on details like the use of color palettes and logos and the look and feel of the visuals that subtly let visitors know where they are, to the creation of a five-minute spectacular that will be a signature moment for the space,” they say.

Still others, like Foghom Creative’s Richards, are busy adapting the technologies that have been used for years in purely commercial ventures to fit the new media mix. He hopes to see “the first great digital gallery” at Victory, he says. Meanwhile Sensory Interactive’s Byrd delves into the commercial possibilities, seeking to determine how

many sponsors it takes to create a successful platform.

Other projects also are paving the way, albeit in a less ambitious fashion. While small in size, Spanish artist Jaume Plensa’s Crown Fountain in Millennium Park in Chicago, which combines glass bricks, LED display technology, and flowing water, has had a major impact on the concept of public art. In Vienna, local architects and engineers Naumann + Partner recently completed the design of a new headquarters tower for UNIQA Group with a shimmering glass facade that at night turns into a venue for a light show—a digital performance that combines public art with a subtle reinforcement of the UNIQA brand identity. In September, the Institute of Contemporary Art is scheduled to move to its new home on the Boston waterfront. Designed by New York City-based Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the building not only will include a digital media center where patrons can get access to digital artworks, interpretive material, and the Internet, but also its translucent walls will be illuminated at night, providing outside space for performances and digital projections.

The timing is considered auspicious for the ascendancy of urban media. A confluence of factors points toward a newly digital public realm. Social factors include the widespread public acceptance of digital media and technology in everyday life, coupled with the resurgent popularity of public spaces. Economic factors include the decreasing costs of the hardware and software needed for large-scale presentations, advertiser thirst for new and innovative promotional opportunities, and the developers’ need to differentiate their offerings. Finally, technology has established media and production standards, and created high-capacity digital media storage capability, high-speed data networking and wireless communication, high-definition video production and imaging, and high-quality video display screens that are bright enough for daylight applications.

The future of urban media seems far less like *Blade Runner* or the empty space described by Koolhaas, and a lot more like the energized, connected public realm envisioned by the creators of today’s new venues. Stay wired. **U**

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