Creating Connection in a Digital Society


By
Mariah Bennett

2018

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

Markus Berger
Associate Professor, Department of Interior Architecture,
Secondary Thesis Advisor & Thesis Chair

Stefano Corbo
Assistant Professor, Department of Interior Architecture,
Secondary Thesis Advisor

Jongwan Kwon
Critic, Department of Interior Architecture,
Primary Thesis Advisor
Acknowledgments:

Ernesto Aparicio
Critic, Department of Graphic Design,
Consultant, Graphic Design

Nick Heywood
Critic, Department of Interior Architecture,
Adviser, Writing and Thesis Book

Kaitlyn Palmer
Critic, Department of Interior Architecture,
Consultant, Structural Engineering

Stephen Turner
Critic, Department of Interior Architecture,
Consultant, Energy, Systems and Sustainability

Dorothee King
Lecturer, Department of History of Art and Visual Culture,
External Advisor
I dedicate this book to my dear friends Laura Rodriguez and Gabriel Parker. Thank you for being with me every step of this crazy journey.

You are loved and appreciated!
“I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.”

— Albert Einstein
Abstract

Introduction

22 Technology definition
24 Technology? So What?
A Conversation with Gen Z
26 Digital Timeline
(past, present, future)
28 Why Humans Choose Technology over people?
30 Statistics
34 An App for social relations: Alone Together, A future in the making
38 Connection
40 Survey Results
Are You Lost In The World Like Me?
Moby & The Void Pacific Choir, 2016
tract
The digital revolution has greatly affected the way we engage with each other.¹ We choose virtual friends over real life ones as we go through our daily lives.² According to the 2016 Nielson report, the average American spends four-five hours a day using social media, with teens spending an additional three hours a day.³ This is an average of 28-56 hours a week dedicated to Twitter posts, swiping on Tinder, Snap chatting, checking Facebook, or liking on Instagram, the equivalent to a part time job. According to countless studies, the digital age has made it hard for teens, young adults, and even adults who grew up before the digital age to communicate in the real world, forcing us to cling more to our ever-present glowing rectangles.

rather than engaging with the people and spaces that surround us. 4,5

Interaction in public spaces has been replaced with virtual connections. As the world continues to evolve with technology, architecture must be adjusted to overcome our diminishing desire to communicate directly with each other. We must design architectural elements that give us the opportunity to reconnect with ourselves and each other.

The ruined façade at 35 Weybossett in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, stands between two streets where people are constantly moving. This is a perfect location to create an opportunity to disrupt this technological parasitic relationship, by inviting individuals, if only for a moment, to reconnect with their senses and engage with one another.

5 Barnhizer, Stephanie. “Social Skills? There’s an app for that”
Introduction
uction
Technology:
the application of scientific knowledge to the practical aims of human life or, as it is sometimes phrased, to the change and manipulation of the human environment.
Technology? So what? A Conversation with Gen Z

As a millennial, technology is a constant part of my life. My dad is a tech whiz and I remember fondly helping him build and repair computers throughout my adolescence. I learned PowerPoint in middle school and got my first cellphone. When I think back, my childhood was pretty similar to my parents. Our house in Fort Worth had a large backyard and me and my cousins would spend hours outside playing, and that's where I learned to rollerblade, skateboard, swim and how to ride a bike (though I'm not the best). Summer was the worst! Not just because of the stifling summer heat but because there was no one around. Families in our neighborhood would one by one go away on vacation, and since cellphones weren't big when I was a kid, I would have to wait until school started to get the scoop on break-ups, why Christina got shipped off to boarding school and the new kids that moved into the haunted house down the street. I built a treehouse, had a garden, played hopscotch, learned all the jump rope songs, lassoed the older neighborhood girls passed down to us, and I passed those same songs down to the little girls two years younger than me. Overall I would say I had a great upbringing that has molded me into the person I am today. Technology didn't play a significant role in my early upbringing.

But my sisters have a different story...

We are from two distinctly different generations. I'm a true millennial, born in 93, while my little sister Heather is Gen Z born in 1999, and my baby sister Candace is a Gen Z but more like Gen, born in 2002. Technology has played various roles in all of our lives. Whether through phone usage, social media, or tech savviness we all feel technological pressures differently and aspire to very different careers.
I never thought about how much the advancement of technology in our generations affected us until I started teaching students Candace's age. This past summer I had the opportunity to co-teach prospective high school students in a summer design program. My co-teacher had a strict no-cellphone-during-class policy, so the breaks for the first few weeks were completely silent as most of the students were fully engaged with their cellphones. I didn't notice until one day I was looking for a student, and inquiring the students left in the classroom and got nothing. The students were too engaged in their individual texts checking their social media to heed my inquiry. I walked up to one of my students, tapped them on the shoulder and asked if they had seen their peers. Their response was "uhh... oh... no I haven't seen them," eyes going back and forth from me to their phone. In my head I thought, "Seriously? you can't get off your phone for one minute to engage with me? Is what you're doing really that important?". I instantly thought of my mom and how upset she would get when my little sister would do the same thing at the dinner table. Making almost the same comment, while I on the other hand was fully immersed in a conversation with my parents and my phone dead upstairs.

For the duration of the summer I compared myself to the generation I was teaching. They were bright and talented, but their social and presentation skills were seriously lacking. They had no problem sending me elaborate emails offering excuses for not attending class, but when it came to class presentations or moments of being put on the spot they would get very shy, flustered, or nervous. At their age, I was shy, flustered, and nervous but this was something different. They had trouble talking to real life flesh and blood humans.

Engaging with them was no easy task, as I was lacking in comparison to what their phone seemed to offer during the break. It took some time but I was able to connect with a few students and when we would talk I covered everything from design ideas, Netflix recommendations, and gossip about things happening to students in other programs. When the summer was over I was never ignored by the entire class again for the rest of the summer, but that one small incident made me reflect on how attached to technology we are, myself included.
Technology invades the domestic space.

Technology is a curiosity and is starting to be explored.

Technology is used for academia and has little impact.
Technology is everywhere and begins to connect us around the world.

Technology becomes fully integrated into our daily lives as we live in a more digital society.

Technological growth explodes allowing us to have seamless communication around the globe.
Why do Humans Choose Technology Over People?
When it comes to human interaction, technology has spoiled us. We can maintain virtual relationships without getting too close, but still consider the people we know digitally on Facebook “friends.” Our digital life gives us the ability to pick and choose what we want to expose of ourselves, creating a somewhat distorted mirror of the life we live day to day. Technology has seeped its way into our daily life, making it undetectable from us and odd not to be voluntarily consumed by it.

Text and email have quickly morphed the way we communicate with each other. From break-ups to engagement announcements, we have slowly replaced the beauty of face to face and verbal communication with a virtual screen limiting our human interaction.

“It’s not a technological problem we have it’s a human one”

– Black Mirror, (White Christmas 2014)

Technology isn’t a bad thing, but we are caught up in the ability to connect, see, and talk virtually to people around the world, and as a result we have slowly are starting to lose ability to talk and connect with individuals in the real world.

---

1 Levy, David. “Love + Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot relationships”

2 Black Mirror, USS Callister (2017) Season 4 episode 1

3 Turkle, Sherry. Reclaiming Conversation

But are we really attached to our phones?

Smart Phone Ownership in the United States

Gender

87% Men

89% Women
Smart Phone Ownership in the United States

Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Smartphone Ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recall something that happened when your phone died that you didn’t expect.
“Disappointment, Frustration, Anger”

“I woke up from anxiety in the middle of the night because I was afraid my analog night table alarm clock wouldn’t go off.”

“I’m kind of paranoid of my phone dying so I’m quite diligent to keep it charged. It’s been a long time since it’s happened and I didn’t have a charger on me. The last time it happened was because it was so cold out but it turned back on after it warmed back up.”

“I can’t remember the last time my phone died - I won’t let it!”

“I woke up from anxiety in the middle of the night because I was afraid my analog night table alarm clock wouldn’t go off.”

“My phone has never died”

“I tend to keep my phone charged at all times. It’s been a long time since I’ve gone out and let it die in public.”

“I rarely let my phone die. When it happens it is unexpected.”
Alone Together, A future in the making
After observing how much my students were attached to their phones, I started to reflect on my own personal usage this past year. When I moved from Texas to Providence my phone usage increased drastically. I was in a new place, acclimating myself but still wanting to be in constant contact with people and the environment I left behind. No longer having a car, I walked or took public transportation. In this new environment it seemed more socially acceptable to wear headphones and ignore everyone instead of trying to converse with strangers. I created a personal bubble like what most others had created for themselves as well. We were all on the bus but no one said a word.

Moving through Providence together yet disconnected from one another. When my headphones were broken or I forgot my phone at home or studio, it was the worst. I could no longer avoid eye contact with strangers or homeless people asking for money. I felt exposed without my personal bubble my phone had created for me. But at the same time, those walks from my studio or home phoneless were a lot more interesting. With the disruption of my "digital bubble" I created for myself came the reactivation of my senses. I felt more human. Paths that I consistently took were filled with sights and smells that lay dormant when I was immersed in my music or checking my Twitter or Facebook. Through inconvenience I was able to see, feel, touch, and smell things I had constantly ignored on my everyday journey. It was refreshing.
The digital bubble had not only impaired my senses but my social skills. Short conversations where I didn’t have to think were simple while long conversations took more effort and I was rusty. I didn’t realize how bad my social skills had become from my increased digital usage until I went to the airport to fly home. Before I made it out of Dallas/Fort Worth airport my personal digital bubble was popped. Whether it be sitting next to someone who wants to chat the entire four hour flight home, or the couple interested in why I moved to Providence, to the stranger complaining as we waited for our ubers. I could never not nod a conversation and I repeatedly felt awkward with my lenses down. Being in such a dependent relationship with my phone for even a short time made me feel what a lot of younger generations are experiencing as they get older, problems connecting and communicating with real individuals.
The digital revolution has greatly affected the way we engage with each other and its starting to become problematic. Younger generations lack social skills, public conversations are declining, and it seems like we are more content with being alone together than engaging with one another physically. Apps created for autistic individuals to help develop social skills are now being sought by the younger generation as a result to the addictive reliance on technology and decline of understanding and reading other humans.

Yet we continue to push and integrate technology into every corner of our lives, including spaces in which we naturally engage with one another. Grocery shopping has been replaced with online delivery, waiters and waitresses are becoming robots, and Uber drivers with self-driven robot cars. How do we remain human in a society that is going completely digital and stripping us of ways in which we can engage physically?

2 Barnhizer, Stephanie. "Social Skills? There's an app for that!"
Connection
a relationship in which a person, thing, or idea is linked or associated with something else.
Recall your favorite moment in public with a stranger.
At a hotel in Austin I was waiting for the restroom and ended up having a really good conversation with a stranger, Denki, which ended up with us exchanging contact information. We were so engaged in our conversation we lost the urge to pee.
“..no particular one time...just a lot of good moments, making a connections is something I enjoy”

“...Generally, I don’t engage with strangers very much because it can get creepy quite quickly! I was waiting for the bus in Providence near where I live and another person waiting there asked me if I knew when it was coming. We started talking about how irregular the schedule is and complaining about how cold it was—literally freezing. We laughed together and it made the waiting less awful!”

“I get a Smile from the stranger especially when I feel bad”
“Sat on a train for four hours with an older woman who ended up telling me all of her family’s secrets because she knew I didn’t know her and we’d never see each other again”

“A guy with a puppy hit on me, so win-win:;)”

“I gave someone directions in the city. She didn’t speak much English so I walked with her to her destination. She was so happy and grateful”
Survey Monkey Responses

“I met someone at the formal ball at katsucon, and we danced a lot together! We then hung out after the ball...and the next day...and then went on a date...”

“I’m a people person. I usually have conversations with energetic, positive people. I’ve met this couple at the mall. He saw me holding my camera and we started a conversation about photography. Turned out he was a photography aficionado and a executive member of an online company. We connected really well. Now we partnered up and things are going extremely well! Moral of the story is a simple “hello” and a hand shake can change your life!“

“When they make eye contact as I’m walking and i smile back and then they smile too.”
“I just recently visited Morocco. In the Medina, one of the shops I went into was an instrument shop. The owner and I ended up playing the violin and oud together, only speaking the language of sound. It was one of my favorite moments with a complete stranger.”

“Me and this stranger both bitched about missing the train out loud so we hung out until the next one came by.”
I once shared an apple, bite for bite, with this woman
disrupt

(verb)  dis-rupt | dis-rupt |

1. b: to throw into disorder
2. to interrupt the normal course of unity of
Scale
Reflection
Transparency
Framing
Light
Circulation
Material
Planes
Role reversal
(viewer/observer to performer)
Participatory design
Sound
Illusion
Ergonomics
Disruption in Architecture Timeline

1950

1954

1991

1997

1993

2003
Framing-Role Reversal
Rear Window

wall between viewer and spectator is broken

Spectator becomes part of performance
The Binoculars Building
Frank Gehry
Los Angeles, CA (1985-1991)
Storefront for Art and Architecture
(Facade Renovation)
Steven Holl, New York (1993)
Light

Jubilee Church
Richard Meier
Rome, Italy (2003)
City Museum
St. Louis, Missouri
1997
Sound
Cornea Ti
Mainz School of Design
Ensemble Modern
Frankfurt
Frankfurt 2014
Transparency
Perfect Home / Passages
Do Ho Suh
(2015/2017)
Material

Ethereal Installation
Snarkitecture
2015
Participatory Design

Museum of Ice Cream
Los Angeles
Maryellis Bunn (2016)
Reflection-Illusion

Dulwich Pavilion
Dulwich Village,
London (2017)
W(ego)
The Why Factory
2017
The Mechanical Garden
(MoMa Proposal)
Ibañez Kim Studio.
New York, New York (2012)
The Mechanical Garden
(MoMa Proposal)
Ibañez Kim Studio.
New York, New York (2012)
Recall a time in which your personal bubble was disrupted
One night while waiting for Risal rides, headphones in and I just happened to catch a glance of a guy trying to get my attention. He was saying words but I couldn't understand him so he breathed on the glass and wrote out I love your hair. It was such an interesting experience and exciting experience. Not the fact that he liked my hair, but the great lengths he went to in order to communicate with me. It was actually kind of adorable.
“I was walking through my home town and a young guy running toward me on the sidewalk paused and yelled “Yeah! High Five!” and I gave him an epic one and he just kept on running. It was pretty funny, awesome and memorable. Definitely put a smile on my face for the rest of the day.”

“Waiting in line at a concert a group of us just started a party where we were.”

“I met a friendly group of people at a bar when I went alone. I was invited to sit with them and we chatted. That same night I met a stay at home mom who was also an artist. We had some compelling conversation as well.”

“A woman came running up to me on the beach and pointed out that there was a whale breeching a little ways off shore. I’d been at that beach probably 100’s of times, but had never seen anything like it”.

Survey Monkey Responses
“I was upset and I went to a coffee shop and a girl asked “Long day?” so I said yes, then she gave her cookie to me and say “This is my favorite and it always help. Everything will be alright”.

“One time one a sidewalk I couldn’t figure out if I should walk to the right or left side of the person coming to my direction and it ended up confusing both of us and we kept shifting right and left of each other (while still walking) and he laughed and yelled, “Hey! Thanks for the dance!” It was super cute and it made me laugh.”

“someone gave me a tissue for my bloody nose and we talked for about ten minutes”

“I had a stress cry while I was pumping gas, and the stranger did the sweetest thing. He wrote “It’ll be okay!!” on a sticky note and put it next to my window.”
“My husband and I met on a subway platform. He dropped his phone in the tracks but I saw him peering over the edge, so I peeped to see what he was looking at, and I asked him how that happened. And that prompted a whole conversation, and one thing led to another...and now we’re..."
t on a subway platform. He dropped his phone in the tracks which I didn’t see, the edge so I peaked to see and saw his phone there. So opened, which prompted a one thing led to another... we’re married”
35 Weybosset Providence
National Bank Facade

Site location map

Original facade
Addition proposal

1930
This site holds the remnants of the original Providence National Bank. Built in 1930 by Wallace E. Howe, the building was expanded in 1950, giving it a Federal Style facade facing Weybosset St. After getting preservation status and saved from being demolished it now exists as just a facade and neighbor to a parking lot.
Site Analysis

Site radius of current human interaction

Potential Site Extension
Key Pedestrian Traffic for intervention
Current Pedestrian Circulation
Site Entry

Current Pedestrian Circulation

Pedestrian Walking Path

Site View Points
Sun Path
Front elevation
Human Interaction Analysis

the passerby

the lovers

the artists
Using the senses as a form of disruption, causes individuals not only to focus on their senses but gives them the opportunity to connect with themselves and others as they move through the space.

This design labyrinth starts on the first floor by choosing one of the five entrances that each represent one of the five senses. Individuals then embark on their journey to experience as many of the senses as possible in each of the various rooms. The second floor creates opportunities for one to travel up and down the stairs in an effort to immerse yourself in as many spaces as possible.
existing

addition
The 5 Senses

Program Sequence
Second Floor
Third Floor
Sections
Section E
Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"
“This is our moment to acknowledge the unintended consequences of technology to which we are vulnerable, but also to respect the resilience that has always been ours. We have time to make corrections and remember who we are—creatures of history, of deep psychology, of complex relationships, of conversations, artless, risky, and face to face”

- Sherry Turkle
Conclusion

Living in a world that is moving towards a completely digital society, we must remind ourselves we are humans and not robots. Outside of our tiny rectangle phone screens or computer screens there is a physical world for us to enjoy, thrive, utilize, and connect with ourselves and one another.
Annotated Bibliography

RISD furniture graduate thesis that tackles the issues of communication in our current society. Her thesis looks at how furniture can physically make individuals engage with one another from writing on tables in restaurants to public benches that let you draw with strangers.

Love and Sex with robots paints an extreme scenario that seems not so far away. As people continue to become more attached to technology it predicts that one day individuals will fall in love with robots.

Alone Together identifies that our lack in social communication is due the increasing digital age. In this book she uses her research to expose how emotionally invested we are as humans are to technology and our digital life online in comparison to reality.

The Social Life of Small Spaces observes architectural elements such as scale, ergonomics, and circulation to address how humans react to public spaces. Scale for how individuals navigate the space, circulation for the quantity of people who occupy, and ergonomics for how individuals sit, converse or engage with each other.

This book explores architecture and the notion that it can be a mediator of social power. Framing Places explains that our daily lives are framed within rooms, windows, doorways, and streets in the cities we live in. It’s as if architecture is created to have the inhabitants move a certain way and display themselves in various ways to the people around them.

This article analyzes how our constant time spent on social media is effecting how we connect with each other. It reflects on how the only way for us to correct this issue is to personally commit to doing so meaning turning our phone off and limiting phone usage with other

In this particular episode a man who works to make “cookies” more submissive is also coach to individuals who lack social skills. In this particular future world not only can you copy yourself but the “facebook block” is real and shows just how easy and emotionally deadly it is to be blocked by loved ones as well as everyone on the planet.


In USS Callister the mastermind behind a popular online virtual game is an awkward social pariah in reality but in his own created digital world he holds the individuals from his job hostage punishing and acting out the emotions that he fails to indulge in the real world.


In the TED talk Sherry talks about her book Connected, But Alone and the importance of how our digital lives are effecting our real life ones.


In this video William Whyte explores why humans are drawn to specific aspects in public social spaces. This video looks at various parks in New York and dissects why and why not certain things work in this spaces creating a laundry list of elements needed in order to draw traffic and create a place in which individuals will congregate.


Statistics on phone usage in North America, specifically millenials.


Technology
Image Credits


Thank You

A special thanks to everyone who had a hand in helping me with my book.

My wonderful advisor Dorothee King for your constant inspiration. Nicholas Heywood and Jongwan Kwon for your patience and guidance. Emily Cornell Du Houx for being an awesome editor.
My friends Jabari Zuberi, Laura Rodriguez, Naketa Medcalf, and Natis White for your support.
My personal cheerleader Gabriel Parker

Spotify and Ira Glass at This American Life for making those all nights more bearable

and my bad ass graphic designers
Annaka and Olivia

None of this would have been possible without any of ya'll.

-Maniah