

## EXPLORING IN-BETWEEN-NESS: THE EXPERIENCE OF RIDING THE LONDON TUBE

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Research on the design of future technologies has been recently directed toward the identification of what space and place mean in relation to people and ubiquitous technologies. However, mostly the workplace and the domestic sphere have been well defined and studied so far [1, 2] with a smaller number of projects focusing on social spaces [3, 4]. We believe these categories only address a narrow range of people's daily experience. More specifically, the transition from one place to another has not been much considered, yet it is these transitions which structure people's daily life as a continuous flow rather than a series of discrete moments. We are using the concept of in-between-ness to explore these passages between meaningful places and events. In-between spaces such as public transport, lobbies, shopping plazas and underpasses are typically overlooked and relegated to the background; only by virtue of their unimportance are they considered to be related. Rather than classing them as the void between more 'meaningful' places, we are considering them in their own right.

### THE CHALLENGE OF DESIGNING FOR IN-BETWEEN-NESS

With this paper we would like to start a discussion on how the concept of in-between-ness could be addressed when considering the design of future technologies. Despite their perceived insignificance in-between spaces often contain a disproportionate amount of technology. This is due, in part, to the transitional role of many in-between spaces which requires them to display large amounts of public information, and partly to the activities which take place in such spaces; here we can identify waiting as a typical in-between 'activity'. This proliferation of technology makes in-between spaces breeding grounds for the urban noir and we believe it is important for designers to begin to understand these types of 'non-places'.

When approaching in-between-ness, designers need to take into account the complexity and variety of all the situations it can refer to, and to reflect on what exactly it means to be 'in-between'. During this process, it is important to realise that any successful future technology, even if cautiously planned and backed up by a thoughtful design process, will be subverted as well as supported, misused and abused as well as adopted and engaged with. We believe this process of adaptation by users should not be feared by designers but welcomed as a sign of deep engagement with the technology on the part of its intended recipients.

### THE LONDON TUBE: AN EXAMPLE OF IN-BETWEEN-NESS

We began our investigation by analysing what we consider to be an example of in-between-ness, the London Underground, which will be later addressed as *the Tube*. Drawing from existing literature and from our personal history of commuting and commuters, we summarized aspects of the experience of riding the Tube that could better explain what it means to *be in-between*. As Augè [7] says this is a complex task:

It will be probably difficult for the ethnologist, even without leaving the station where he or she usually takes the metro, to construct a unique object from the sum of emotions, calculations and interests that waiting for the next train represents at a given moment for each and all of the travellers, but these subjective and objective elements can never truly be totalized [p49].

However, by participating in the event of travelling by Tube, observing fellow passengers and reflecting on our experiences, we are attempting to identify issues that we believe are relevant to our research interest.

While strictly interconnected with the city that it navigates and it helped develop, the Tube has also a life of its own. More than an ex-polis, this sub-polis filters and delivers a

certain view of the city itself, simultaneously revealing and hiding its contradictions, representing a myth of freedom and a place of fear, exposing people to different lifestyles cohabiting within the city, what we call *alterity*, and to the more or less coherent lifestyle that everyone is encouraged to have, mainly conveyed by advertisements. This constitutes a rich socio-technical system, where technologies such as personal stereos are used to avoid stress but also to avoid undesired human contact. We think of the Tube as representative of the symbiotic relationship between the spatial and the social in our construction of our urban experience; an in-between space subject to ambiguity, miscommunication and general displacement in which strangers share an intimate space yet often seek a minimum of direct social interaction.

### *Tube as network: the socio-economic impact*

In his book 'The Subterranean Railway' Wolmar [6] maintains that

There is something remarkably egalitarian about the Underground [...] but apart from uniting the Capital in unprecedented way and enabling journeys which had hitherto been impossible or incredibly lengthy, the creation of the Underground stimulated the development of the city itself [p6].

Initially constructed to bring people into the City from the newly-built suburbs the presence of the Tube has a powerful socio-economic impact on an area. Proximity to the Tube affects house prices, local retail and leisure economies, provision of public services, social demographics and urban planning. The flip-side to this of course, is that areas which are not on the Tube network such as Stoke Newington and Hackney tend to be poorer areas of the city. However, these parts of town are often adopted by artists and students attracted by the cheap rents. It is probably no coincidence that the project *73 Urban Journeys* [5] chose this particular bus route to study - the No. 73 bus travels from the centre of London to Stoke Newington; with no tube stop in Stoke Newington this route is especially well populated. Even before going below ground we can see the Tube already has its place in the social and economic life of the city, working as both an including and excluding infrastructure.

### THE EXPERIENCE OF RIDING THE TUBE

Investigating the experience of traversing the city by Tube leads us to unravel its primary aspects of in-between-ness. These can be summarised as the conflicting feelings of togetherness and distance which passengers experience, the activity of 'waiting' and exposure to 'other-ness'. We are further interested in how each of these emotions and activities are affected and supported by different kinds of technology. Technology in all its forms, mediates people's experience of travelling by Tube. On one hand, it can make the experience more pleasant, for example the use of personal music players or games consoles, on the other, it can also support isolation as well as failing to reflect the complexity of London and its population.

#### *Togetherness and solitude*

One of the peculiarities of being a commuter in the Tube is the experience of 'collectivity without festival and solitude without isolation' [7, p30]. The Tube is considered to be, in general, a place where people do not socialize or communicate with each other. On many occasions, individuals who have suspended their usual roles and activities, try to externalize as little information as possible about themselves and have mutual attitudes of *civil inattention*. This concept refers to the act of acknowledging the presence of others to show respect at first, and then of avoiding paying attention to them for the remaining time, in order not to be perceived as a threat [8]. The personal stereo, whose use seems to be increasing with the recent success of iPods and other MP3 players, constitutes a good example of a technology which has the dual effect of increasing personal well being and decreasing sociability within the Tube. As Bull [9] finds out

Personal-stereo use enables users to cope with, or deal with, stressful emotional situations through use in situations when they would otherwise feel vulnerable, alone or when they feel they would otherwise be forced to think about unwanted things due to a lack of distraction [p49].

In fact, 'personal stereos are a tool enabling the individual to manoeuvre through urban spaces without coming into direct contact with other people. [...] Users appear to achieve, at least subjectively, a sense of public invisibility' [p103, p79]. The same happens for other types of personal technologies, which create what Gergen [10] has called *absent presence*, which happens when 'one is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere' [p227]. This might account for the high number of iPods, PSP's and even laptops currently in use on the Tube.

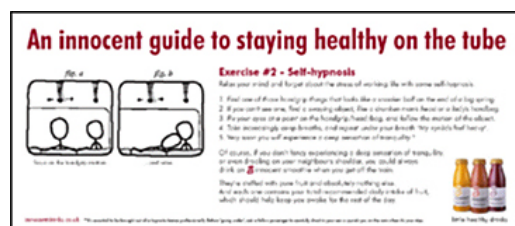
Alternatively it is also possible to find examples of the collective and shared nature of Tube travel. The behaviour exhibited toward newspapers is one example of the indirect social interaction between Tube passengers. Each morning the *Metro* free newspaper is available at Tube stations and thousands of commuters pick up a copy to read on their journey to work. Upon reaching their stop many of them will leave it behind the seat for someone else to read. In this way it becomes a sort of *common good*, which people use and then leave for others to access afterwards.



Newspaper left on seat



Apple ad on escalator



Tube ad for Innocent smoothies

Between togetherness and solitude we can find in the Tube the phenomenon of the *familiar stranger*, happening whenever people share commuting routines. This interesting concept, introduced by Milgram in the Seventies, was recently adapted by Paulos and Goodman in support to the design of a new interactive system.

Familiar Strangers are individuals that we regularly observe but do not interact with. By definition a Familiar Stranger (1) must be observed, (2) repeatedly, and (3) without any interaction. The claim is that the relationship we have with these Familiar Strangers is indeed a *real* relationship in which both parties agree to mutually ignore each other, without any implications of hostility [11].

### *Waiting and in-between-ness*

In the Tube people spend most of their time waiting; first for the train and then for the train to arrive at their destination. Waiting seems, therefore, the spatial-temporal activity that most represents the in-between-ness of the Tube. Waiting is as much a state of mind as an activity; moreover, it can be constituted by a multitude of activities that people perform in order to kill time during these moments of pause. In his work on the Paris Metro Augè describes, how during the journey some people

Knit, do crosswords or correct their papers. Still others, the youngest are absorbed in listening to mysterious forms of music imperceptible to us except a few squeaks caused by poor tuning. [...] There are also those who do nothing, who merely wait, with apparently imperturbable faces on which the attentive observer can nonetheless sometimes overtake the passing of an emotion, an uneasiness, or a memory whose reason or object will never be grasped [pp35-35].

As a result of the enforced waiting within the Tube, people are exposed to the advertising messages and images displayed on the walls and inside the carriages. In this way, people have constant exposure to a message packaged and broadcasted to suggest a specific lifestyle, pushing the idea that we all have to be beautiful, cultivated and well-dressed. While Tube posters convey information on the myriad of events, features and services available in London the image tourists get from the Tube about London from these images could also be misleading, hiding the contrasts, covering up the contradictions, and delivering a picture that reflects how the city could ideally be.

A new generation of advertising techniques already include flat-screen panels placed on the side of the elevator (see Tottenham Court Station in London), with advertisements

following the travellers all the way up and down the station. This hints at the direction technology might take in transforming static spaces into dynamic environments.

### *Exposure to alterity*

Despite the need for preserving a certain degree of privacy and anonymity, the Tube is a space where people are exposed to different types of 'alterity' (otherness). Every day, travellers have the opportunity to observe others from different ages, cultures and race, whose sum constitutes the multiethnic aspect of a city.

This spectacle on the walls is seen not only in the tunnels or on subway platforms; it takes place on the street and yet again in the evening on television. But in the subway, whether as a model or a copy, I grasp it more closely, embodied in my daily neighbours, at the mere sight of whom I believe I can imagine their apartments, furniture, amusements, and even the next vote they will cast [7, p50].

More than in any other place, it is in the Tube that people become aware of the diversity a city such as London presents, a diversity which is often distributed among more or less economically and racially homogeneous residential areas or suburbs. Observing the otherness incarnated in our Tube neighbours, our waiting mates for some time during our daily life, makes us often wonder: what is it that we have in common? And in what do we really differ?

### FUTURE DIRECTION

Overall we believe that a better understanding of the concept of in-between-ness could help designers focus on aspects of everyday life that have been partly neglected so far. Design can target an instance of in-between-ness and aim to deliver a technology that becomes integrated within a certain experience, but it can also help researchers to further explore and reflect on a specific aspect of in-between-ness. From our side, we are currently designing an interactive music-exchange system, called Undersound, based on our exploration of the Tube experience. Through this system we hope to understand more of how the Tube represents an instance of in-between-ness, and to envision how future technologies could enter this complex sub-urban system (meaning that exists *under* the city) and the effects that this intervention might potentially have.

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## **BIOGRAPHIES**

Arianna Bassoli holds an MSc in Communication Sciences from the University of Siena, Italy, where she specialized in mass media. She then worked as a research fellow at Media Lab Europe for three years, in the Dynamic Interactions and Human Connectedness groups, mainly focusing on the application side of mobile peer-to-peer and ad-hoc networks. She is currently a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics and Political Science, in the Department of Media and Communications. Her main research interest is the design of mobile proximity-based applications, technologies that support communication and data sharing among co-located people.

Karen Martin has a BA(Hons) Interactive Arts from Newport School of Art and Design. After graduating she worked as an artist and a web developer before studying for an MSc Virtual Environments at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. She spent one year working at Media Lab Europe in Dublin as a researcher in the Everyday Learning Group. Karen is currently an EngD candidate in an interdisciplinary programme run by the Bartlett School of Architecture and the department of Computer Science at University College London. Her research focuses on the use of technology in public spaces to develop a sense of place and how this might affect social interaction and the sense of community. Her industry sponsor is BT.