The Algorithm that Ate the Street
A Recursive Urbanism

The Algorithm that Ate the Street is the name for a current line of Recursive Urbanism (RU) research carried out by Paul Guzzardo. The research examines the skirmish between the street and advancing digital code. A recent Algorithm iteration consisted of a set of eight storyboards and the video short Read the Bubble. Both were presented and displayed at an Annual International Conference of the Architectural Humanities Research Association. Paul Guzzardo aims to use blockchain technology to make recursive urbanism accessible to larger audience.

EARLY PROBES AND STORYBOARDS

1937: McLuhan’s Prophetic Posse
Before he was internationally known as a “media guru” Marshall McLuhan was a little known professor at Saint Louis University. While at the school from 1937–44 McLuhan organized a posse of collaborators. One was the Jesuit Walter Ong who would later write: “If the human community is to retain meaningful possession of the knowledge it is accumulating, breakthroughs to synthesis of new order are absolutely essential.”

McLuhan’s posse wrote code. The posse hammered out an early code, an essential language if we hope to retain meaningful possession of knowledge. The posse’s code predicted that media technologies would create “interconnected cities” and an “interconnected us.” McLuhan not only foresaw what fifty years later Guzzardo and others would call data glut, but he offered a prophetic description of a World Wide Web. McLuhan coined it the global village.

1996: Another Posse
Guzzardo used McLuhan’s code and two St. Louis shuttered shoe factories to assemble and launch a posse of researchers. The factories were Walk Over Shoe and Buster Brown Shoe. Both shoe buildings were flagships in a once vibrant American garment district. Guzzardo’s Walk Shoe posse include the teenagers Paul B. Davis and Joe Beuckman. Davis and Beuckman made music hacking into obsolete 8-bit computers. Later they gained national attention for their Beigs Art Collective. Working alongside them was the patina colourist-artist Robin Nelson. The fifth in that posse was the International renowned Hindustani musician Ustad Imrat Khan. Guzzardo was then Khan’s agent and a scribe for the Ustad’s autobiography.

A second creative assemblage was housed three blocks away in the Buster Brown building. It’s where Guzzardo set up a street front Media Lab that operated off and on for three years. Starting in 1996, and continuing in the years that followed, Buster Brown was home to jockeys, programmers, designers, actors, musicians, graphic artists, urban planners, and developers. All the players shared a gradual awareness of the digital whirlpool we were bobbing in. Some of their efforts (research) worked, some not so well. But each bolstered the other, each with a different way of using the street to see “the algorithm around corner.”

Guzzardo was there early on. His career intersected with the exponential rise of the machine, those algorithms that ate the street.

PARTY WALLS
There were three Washington Avenue monumental party wall projections: The Living Wall was in 1997. The closing episode of the Jerry Seinfeld show happened in May 1998. Last was Postcards from the Global Village: Postcards was a December 31, 1999 Millennium New Year’s Eve Remix Bash. It was global send-off party that winked at St. Louis’s McLuhan heritage. It was timed as McLuhan was being dusted off and revived. Wired Magazine had just declared McLuhan its digerati programmers. They assisted in RU development and DSLB research. They worked closely with Guzzardo in the development of probes and storyboards. This was a unique moment. It may have been the first time ever a posse grabbed the street as a platform to examine big data and machine learning.

EARLY PROBES AND STORYBOARDS
An abridged list of recursive probes and performativity storyboards follow. All involved a changing cast of disc/video party walls projections, and a street theatre lab. All of it happened when machine learning and coding algorithms were beginning to take over not only urban planning, but our lives.

Guzzardo’s RU probes and the storyboards looked to the street as an anchor, a lodestar to keep us grounded while being “slammed by this gale force of code.” The 1996–2005 research led to a RU toolkit. In a line of 2018–19 UNESCO presentations the toolkit was given the name “Digital Street Lab in the Box” or the DSLB.

POSSES, AND KIT AND FOREGROUND PLAYERS, POSSES, AND KIT AND BACKGROUNDBACKGROUND STREET
The street was Washington Avenue St. Louis, Missouri. In the first half of the 20th century the Avenue was the axis-axel of the St. Louis garment district. A generation plus later the street was the stage for RU research. Washington Avenue was used as a probe into what Hannah Arendt called “a space of appearance.” The early probes occurred between 1996 and 2005. They included a media nightclub, multimedia theatres, party walls projections, and a street theatre lab. All of it happened when machine learning and coding algorithms were beginning to take over not only urban planning, but our lives.

Guzzardo’s RU probes and the storyboards looked to the street as an anchor, a lodestar to keep us grounded while being “slammed by this gale force of code.” The 1996–2005 research led to a RU toolkit. In a line of 2018–19 UNESCO presentations the toolkit was given the name “Digital Street Lab in the Box” or the DSLB.

A BACKGROUND STREET AND FOREGROUND PLAYERS, POSSES, AND KIT
The street was Washington Avenue St. Louis, Missouri. In the first half of the 20th century the Avenue was the axis-axel of the St. Louis garment district. A generation plus later the street was the stage for RU research. Washington Avenue was used as a probe into what Hannah Arendt called “a space of appearance.” The early probes occurred between 1996 and 2005. They included a media nightclub, multimedia theatres, party walls projections, and a street theatre lab. All of it happened when machine learning and coding algorithms were beginning to take over not only urban planning, but our lives.

Guzzardo’s RU probes and the storyboards looked to the street as an anchor, a lodestar to keep us grounded while being “slammed by this gale force of code.” The 1996–2005 research led to a RU toolkit. In a line of 2018–19 UNESCO presentations the toolkit was given the name “Digital Street Lab in the Box” or the DSLB.

A BACKGROUND STREET AND FOREGROUND PLAYERS, POSSES, AND KIT
The street was Washington Avenue St. Louis, Missouri. In the first half of the 20th century the Avenue was the axis-axel of the St. Louis garment district. A generation plus later the street was the stage for RU research. Washington Avenue was used as a probe into what Hannah Arendt called “a space of appearance.” The early probes occurred between 1996 and 2005. They included a media nightclub, multimedia theatres, party walls projections, and a street theatre lab. All of it happened when machine learning and coding algorithms were beginning to take over not only urban planning, but our lives.

Guzzardo’s RU probes and the storyboards looked to the street as an anchor, a lodestar to keep us grounded while being “slammed by this gale force of code.” The 1996–2005 research led to a RU toolkit. In a line of 2018–19 UNESCO presentations the toolkit was given the name “Digital Street Lab in the Box” or the DSLB.

A BACKGROUND STREET AND FOREGROUND PLAYERS, POSSES, AND KIT
The street was Washington Avenue St. Louis, Missouri. In the first half of the 20th century the Avenue was the axis-axel of the St. Louis garment district. A generation plus later the street was the stage for RU research. Washington Avenue was used as a probe into what Hannah Arendt called “a space of appearance.” The early probes occurred between 1996 and 2005. They included a media nightclub, multimedia theatres, party walls projections, and a street theatre lab. All of it happened when machine learning and coding algorithms were beginning to take over not only urban planning, but our lives.

Guzzardo’s RU probes and the storyboards looked to the street as an anchor, a lodestar to keep us grounded while being “slammed by this gale force of code.” The 1996–2005 research led to a RU toolkit. In a line of 2018–19 UNESCO presentations the toolkit was given the name “Digital Street Lab in the Box” or the DSLB.

A BACKGROUND STREET AND FOREGROUND PLAYERS, POSSES, AND KIT
The street was Washington Avenue St. Louis, Missouri. In the first half of the 20th century the Avenue was the axis-axel of the St. Louis garment district. A generation plus later the street was the stage for RU research. Washington Avenue was used as a probe into what Hannah Arendt called “a space of appearance.” The early probes occurred between 1996 and 2005. They included a media nightclub, multimedia theatres, party walls projections, and a street theatre lab. All of it happened when machine learning and coding algorithms were beginning to take over not only urban planning, but our lives.

Guzzardo’s RU probes and the storyboards looked to the street as an anchor, a lodestar to keep us grounded while being “slammed by this gale force of code.” The 1996–2005 research led to a RU toolkit. In a line of 2018–19 UNESCO presentations the toolkit was given the name “Digital Street Lab in the Box” or the DSLB.
“Patron Saint.” Postcards from the Global Village worked. It slipped past colonial TV, picked nibs and fired off to the electronic bubble’s radical world, its inhabitants who do not technically connect and don’t currently prevent the programme from functioning. Instead, they indicate weaknesses in design that may be slowing down development or increasing the risk of bugs or failures in the future. When code is slow, thoughtlessly designed mess that’s hard to maintain, programmers talk about stench. The metaphor becomes offensive, the swell of gases that rise from rot and decay.


Guzzardo’s recursive urbanism research needs to address this glaring deficit if it hoped to move forward. In his hunt Guzzardo seized on an old idiom, one he credits to Ustad Imrat Khan. The idiom is the grave merry man. Here is a definition:

“Grave merry man” is a man (or woman) with easy gaitey of spirit, one might almost say a man of spiritual elegance, a man who feels himself to be living in invincible security; but he is also a man of tragedy, a man of laughter and tears, a man indeed, of gentle irony, for he sees through the tragically ridiculous masks of the game of life and has taken the measure of the cramping boundaries of our earthly existence.

Grave merry man is more than a stilted catch phrase. Grave merry is code. It is a code to navigate and map the existential consequences of living in the digital world. Grave merry code fuelled the RU probes and the storyboards. Interestingly, the person who Guzzardo credits for revealing that code came from a world far from a 1990’s digerati stage. And while Imrat Khan - the musician who traced his lineage to the Court of Emperor Akbar, whose father performed with Rabindranath Tagore, and whose brilliant brother erstwhile Vilayat is over known for his bout with Paul Shankar and George Harrison - would hardly seem to the person to offer a path through the digital glut, in fact he did. Guzzardo, a co-author on Khan’s unpublished autobiography, Taaseer: The World of Indian Classical Music, credits Khan’s code of rhythmic cycles - cycles of multitudes, plurality, repetition, and Khan’s algorithm of beauty - known as the nine Sanskrit Rasas - as central in the development and design of the probes and storyboards. Guzzardo was there early on. His career intersected with the exponential rise of the machine, those algorithms that eat the street.

Recursive Urbanism worked the street as a stage to deal with “the digitisation of everything.” As three-dimensional culture descended into two-dimensional digital apparel RU grabbed the street to activate and sustain civic reflexivity. It explored new creative spaces - episodic niches - as accessories into existing communities. It showed how in an era of quickening and fragmentation these interstices might offer us a foothold, an anchor to meet the task we face.

Research Objectives

Paul Guzzardo maps the devolving state of the American public sphere. He is interested in epistemology and where urban designers, traditional creative practitioners, and collectors fit, and or don’t, in a zoomed out digitised culture.

Address

Geddes Institute for Urban Research
University of Dundee
Nethergate, Dundee
DD1 4HN

Bio

Paul Guzzardo is a lawyer and media artist/artist based in St. Louis and Buenos Aires. His new media praxis probes the effect of emerging digital information archives on the design and occupation of public space. His work examines the relationship between this current wave of digital information technology and the street.

Collaborators


Reference


Read the Bubble: https://vimeo.com/372813824

Guzzardo, Paul Guzzardo

Personal Response

Why is recursive urbanism the answer?

Tools change tool users. As machines got faster, smaller, and cheaper, Recursive Urbanism used an old tool, the street, to observe how digital tools change us. With its embedded histories, traditions, and myths, Recursive Urbanism worked the street as a stage to deal with “the digitisation of everything.” As three-dimensional culture descended into two-dimensional digital apparel RU grabbed the street to activate and sustain civic reflexivity. It explored new creative spaces - episodic niches - as accessories into existing communities. It showed how in an era of quickening and fragmentation these interstices might offer us a foothold, an anchor to meet the task we face.