



# Habitele: mobile technologies reshaping urban life

Dominique Boullier

► **To cite this version:**

Dominique Boullier. Habitele: mobile technologies reshaping urban life. URBE, 2014, 6 (1), pp.13-16.  
<hal-00973088>

**HAL Id: hal-00973088**

**<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00973088>**

Submitted on 21 May 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



## Editorial: Seção Especial

### Habitele: mobile technologies reshaping urban life

Editor convidado: Dominique Boullier

PhD in Sociology, HDR in information and Communication Sciences, master degree in Linguistics, professor in Sociology at SciencesPo, CEE, Medialab, Paris - France, e-mail: dominique.boullier@sciencespo.fr

“Habitele” is a neologism that seeks to account for the anthropological mutation we are experiencing, when two thirds of human beings have become equipped with a mobile phone (6.8 billion subscriptions, i.e. approximately 4.5 billion individual users — figures of 2013). The “connected being” status changes our mood, based on an alert state of mind, on permanent awareness. It changes our way of interacting in everyday life, our coordination skills, because of traceability technical possibilities. But it also offers the opportunity of switching between social worlds we are affiliated to, be they socio-demographic features or precarious tastes that connect us to an ephemeral community.

A long time ago, the city created these opportunities of experiencing various social worlds, sometimes completely separated for the same individual, provided that he moves from one social world to another by foot, by car or by any other means. Belonging to various social circles, as Simmel (1972) put it, was not so relevant as long as you stayed in the same place and community forever and this is why the city changed the very meaning of affiliations.

Now this switching of social worlds is made available immediately and without moving, only by using a personal phone, in which we record the whole list of our contacts. These affiliations create a new web of relationships, some of them supposedly private, others deliberately public, these boundaries being more and more blurred and challenging the rules of privacy. These affiliations may rely not only on mobile phones *per se* but also on other physical and virtual service access devices such as credit cards, keys, dedicated applications, credentials of various kinds, which tend to assemble in the mobile phones, but have not yet fully converged. It is this global environment of digital identities that constitutes the habitele (BOULLIER, 2011, 2012). These personal resources which are carried close to the body require terminals disseminated all over the city in order to deliver the access power they are supposed to give. Public spaces and urban design have been affected by this proliferation of access control devices (barriers, digicodes) and by ATM or booths of various kinds for getting services.

Coining a new concept was required in order to avoid being trapped either in the innovation frenzy (more and more apps) or in the repetition of post-modernism and individualisation mottos. The concept of “habitele” is connected to the anthropological tradition of analysis of “habit” (in French, different from the technical devices called “clothes”) and habitat (to be distinguished from the technical process of lodging since habitat involves a co-influence of the container and the inhabitant. We may add the concept of

“habitable”, in French, often missed in social sciences, which does not mean the car as a vehicle but as a personal bubble in which we inhabit. It has also a strong affiliation to the philosophy of globes and foams of Sloterdijk (2011). The habitable concept seems rather akin to the “Personal Data Ecosystem” that is becoming a major theme in Identity Management, from the ICT as well as from the business and innovation perspectives. But habitable does not cover exactly the same fields and was coined fifteen years ago (BOULLIER, 1999) in order to account for our ability to create a whole new envelope, which is related to the idea of an ecosystem, yet with important differences: habitable is much more distributed; also, it is not limited to the digital world.

Habitable is following the path of anthropology, philosophy or psychology that tried to understand the process of appropriation of space, of environment, of any ecosystem, in order to make the world “one’s world”. Habitat, which is not only an ecological term but may encompass “lodging” and “settlement” as long as they are appropriated, was the main concept to be addressed. From Heidegger (2001) to Radkowski (2002) and Latour (2005), thinking about habitat helps us understand the very process of coupling human and environment, human and technology, since these shelters are tangible entities and, at the same time, encapsulate so many intangible features, very significant for the humans who inhabit them, who come to feel comfortable within, to feel “at home”. Both human and non human sides are affected by the experience of inhabiting. Settling down and lodging do not account for the process of habitat, where a deep and lasting mark is left on each of the terms of the relationship. The etymology itself (*habere*) is meaningful, since the habituation process, which requires time and constant interaction, is at the core of all these processes of appropriation. *Habere* was a key word for Tarde (2010), who asked for a wider use of “havings” instead of “beings” for characterizing humans because it would oblige us to think in transitive terms (to have something) and not in essence terms.

Habitable is used to label the various distant connections with various social worlds, that we are able to handle by carrying devices and traces that keep us in touch with them. These devices and traces are usually assembled in bags and wallets, and they need to stay strongly connected to the body, in order to be called for in case of emergency. These bags, wallets and their contents must be considered the “extended” version of habitable, while the “restricted” version of habitable includes only devices and traces that encapsulate an explicit personal form of ID. Handkerchiefs or books are not carrying our IDs as do credit cards, access cards, legal IDs and phones for instance. These devices and traces help us feel a sense of personal security, since we carry all our affiliations that are the very constituents of our identities. And at the same time, they affect our behaviour by obliging us to carry bags and wallets, and to depend on them for any kind of connection to our social affiliation. One can easily pretend to be a member of, but it will not be proven until one is able to display the membership card, or the VIP phone number in a directory to call for help. All access technologies as well as IDs are also access keys to social worlds, operational devices as well as legal proofs of these affiliations that may become unusable without these tangible proofs.

This phenomenon of the portability of IDs of various kinds is a rather old phenomenon. It depends on the extension of a society and on the complexity of its inner affiliations and the city was shaped by many of these access controls or affiliations displays. Yet, the role played by these tangible devices and traces was rather underestimated in historical or anthropological works and, when studied, not considered as a single set of assembled traces of affiliations, as a specific envelope, although bags and wallets were displaying their everyday importance. The mobile phone and its evolution towards a smart phone extended in a tremendous way the sphere of social worlds that one carries. Social networks accounts and profiles, IDs and credentials that web users disseminate while shopping on line or chatting or subscribing to news sites, for instance, must be considered as the “augmented” version of habitable. And these connections occur right in the midst of urban activities, sometimes directly related to the activity in which the body is involved in the setting, but sometimes intruding or disrupting completely urban activities. This observation may cast more doubt on the real “presence” and “co-presence” of inhabitants in public or private spaces: they can always refer to other engagements while being physically present in any setting. What is the status of this city created on line by the interactions of urbanites between each other or in relationships with data centers and

service providers? Can we still account for the city as this environment made of concrete that is supposed to constrain our activities? Is there any urbanism or urban life on line as well or is it totally disconnected?

These questions might have well be kept in a sphere of technical gurus or marketing issues. But the change of scale in the number of people equipped with these digital devices all over the world obliges us to think the phenomena in a different way. This change of scale is exactly what McLuhan (1964) meant when he coined his expression: “the medium is the message”, as he said for TV as well as for electricity. In the newly connected world, the revolution is not what people may talk about but the very fact of being connected with so many people (potentially), stemming from so different social worlds, at the same time and sometimes in the same places. The only fact that two third of human beings own a mobile phone (and, more and more often, even severalones) is revealing the real value of this change: the mobile phone is the device and the trigger of the personal globalization. Which means that, as individuals, people share the same equipment and can use it to connect to each other (provided they can afford it!) while experiencing very different styles of uses depending on their various social affiliations, expertise and resources.

This issue of **urbe** will investigate all these stakes of habitele in the city through a number of case studies that have in common the crossing of boundaries between what is supposed to be urban and what is supposed to be online activity.

Paola Pucci uses a large dataset of mobile traffic from a Telco in India to map the urban practices of commuting, moving from one place to another but in the same time from a social world to another (the switching process of habitele). However these social worlds refer to practices that are more intertwined than usually thought and more temporary: the waves of urban activities may be better traced by telephone data than usual surveys because they aggregate a large amount of very fine grains.

Nancy Odendaal offers an extension of this study of the entanglement between people and things, referring to the Actor Network Theory framework. She studies focus groups of immigrant informal traders in Durban, South Africa and demonstrates the agency of technology in helping transcend territorial barriers. This approach is more oriented from “within” the urban experience but it is worth combining methodologies to circulate between levels, scales and social worlds and to observe access opportunities changed by technologies.

The empirical study of bikes rental system, Velib, in Paris by Dominique Boullier and Maxime Crepel displays the new layers of the city as an information system, strongly connected to the delivery of a very physical service of bikes and stations. But this study will reach another level in combining macro and micro level by accounting for the experience of an individual user equipped by a mobile phone and a credit or transportation card. The very portability of these devices and the personal data ecosystem that they encapsulate reveals the two-sided city (physical/digital) in bodies and individual experiences.

Darren Reed and Mark Johnson combine two field studies on voucher apps and social uses of information technology at work to reconsider the status of “local” as usually thought. While being involved in urban activities of various kinds, users become accessible to solicitations from shops located in their area or by colleagues. The traditional local or distant status of persons and organizations does not apply anymore: the personal profile, made of tastes and habits (for vouchers proposals) or made of professional status, intrudes in the supposedly public space and constrain people to react as if they were affiliated on a permanent basis to these features. The public game of “faces” is not sufficient anymore to know who is exactly interacting in the urban environment we share.

Polise Moreira De Marchi focuses on the cognitive technologies that are used to locate phone users as was documented by previous papers in this issue. Here, the emphasis is put on the quality and features of interfaces design. The maps aggregate significant information of Sao Paulo and act as messages that introduce to specific experiences of the city, especially when combined with other media. The gaps between languages and representations may appear at this time and demonstrate the agency power of each interface design.

This issue aims at introducing the discussion about habitele in its relevance for urban theory, by describing each mediation that is used to make connections and blur frontiers between urban and digital

environments. Urban life is definitely reshaped as a mixed experience depending on our skills to design envelopes and to combine affiliations of various kinds while moving around the city.

## References

- BOULLIER, D. **L'urbanité numérique**: essai sur la troisième ville en 2100. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999.
- BOULLIER, D. Habitele virtuelle: une nouvelle enveloppe pour commuter, notre téléphone portable. **Revue Urbanisme**, n. 376, p. 42-44, 2011.
- BOULLIER, D. **From personal data ecosystem and mobile phones to the general theory of habitele**. Invited talk in UC Irvine, May 18th 2012, Institute for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion. Available at: <[http://stream3.es.uci.edu/tltc/Production/IMTFI/20120518\\_Boullier.html](http://stream3.es.uci.edu/tltc/Production/IMTFI/20120518_Boullier.html)>. Accessed: Oct. 24th 2013.
- HEIDEGGER, M. Bâtir Habiter Penser et L'Homme habite en poète. In: HEIDEGGER, M. **Essais et conférences**. Paris: Gallimard, 2001. p. 170-193, 224-245.
- LATOUR, B. **Reassembling the social**: an introduction to actor-network-theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- McLUHAN, M. **Understanding media**: the extension of man. London: Routledge, 1964.
- RADKOWSKI, G. H. de. **Anthropologie de l'habiter**: vers le nomadisme. Paris: PUF, 2002.
- SIMMEL, G. **On individuality and social forms**: selected writings. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1972.
- SLOTERDIJK, P. **Bubbles**: spheres I — microspherology. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.
- TARDE, G. **On communication and social influence**: selected papers. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.