

Underground & About Town (After Dark)

Johanna Brewer

University of California, Irvine

Department of Informatics

5059 Bren Hall, Irvine, CA 92697-3440

johannab@ics.uci.edu

INTRODUCTION

Computational technology has clearly moved off the desktop and into our everyday lives. Arguably, it has been there in some form or another for quite some time now. Recently, though, the CHI community has been exploring how technology features not just in the workplace, home, and “third spaces,” but within the urban landscape at large. Indeed, “urban computing” is an increasingly important focus of research activity. But on further reflection it is easy to see that a study of Harlem at night might produce quite a different set of concerns than Hyde Park on a summer weekend. When we gloss “the city” as one homogenous entity we overlook both the spatial and temporal diversities present between and within the various urban settings which we are designing for. In this paper, then, I will try to highlight a few of those different experiences present within a single city in which I have recently conducted an ethnographic study [1], London, and to motivate why that diversity is significant.

In order to develop a deeper understanding of London, I focused my study on a specific setting which is often metonymous for the city itself, the Underground. Almost 3 million people use it every day, and the popularly-held view is that “everyone rides the Tube.” Indeed, studies such as that of Vertesi [3] showed that the Tube was such an integral part of the way in which Londoners conceived of their city, whether they were frequent riders or not.

The study was broken up into two intensive three-week sections. The first half was mainly devoted to different techniques of participant observation. We engaged in both photo-documentation of various types of journeys (collecting over one thousand photographs) and object shadowing. In the second half of the study we conducted interviews of 19 participants who represented for us a theoretically interesting sample, rather than statistically general one. We chose participants who had a unique perspective on the Tube and tried to elicit their personal experiences of riding, focusing specifically on the feelings brought up by different sorts of journeys.

One of the most interesting findings of this study was the way in which our participants conceived of London transport as exhibiting distinguishable temporal rhythms. The Underground does not run 24 hours a day as the subway in New York City does. From about 12:30 until

5am the Tube lies dormant, and the only available public transportation in the city is the “night bus.” Many of the daytime buses do not have nighttime counterparts, but there are also night buses which run along routes not present during the day. These night buses run during the gap when the Tube is closed, but arrive far less frequently (i.e., about twice per hour at any given stop). During our interviews, our participants invariably referred to the distinct characters exhibited by the different modes of transport during different times of day. Given the topic of the workshop, I’d like to focus here on what happens after night falls.

UNDERGROUND & ABOUT TOWN AFTER DARK

Like other cities, London has typical work-day rush hours, but it also has a somewhat unique event that some of our participants have referred to as “the last rush hour.” The last Tube and the closing hour of most pubs occurs at the same time—which begot which, we cannot say—but this has the effect of a late night (often drunken) surge towards the more expedient public transport.

One of my participants, Andrea, who lives outside of the city and only occasionally takes late-night transport, tells us of her experience in the crush of humanity trying to get home:

I think when I was coming home from a concert ... we had to wait for the Tube, because when you come out of a concert, there’s loads of people all trying to get on the same Tube so they had to shut the station and then you get on the Tube. [There was a woman] just going on and on about how long she had to wait, and just going on and on. [She] was very, very drunk, [and had] obviously been at the same concert, but had been drinking all night. –Andrea

She is rather neutral in her discussion of the situation, but my participants had a range of attitudes towards the rowdiness of the last Tube—for instance Manny:

I think when I probably first came back to London – I was born in London and I moved away in my early 20’s – I came back and I was going up to see some friends in North London and I got on the Tube at night and it was like a big party and lots of people had cans of beer and everyone was drunk and having a great time and there was a bloke playing the bongo drums and I just thought wow this is great. I was so glad I was in London. –Manny

The liveliness of these late-night journeys can inspire a sort of excitement—the feeling of being part of a large, dynamic community of revelers. Indeed, many of our participants enjoyed this time because it represented a shift in the social atmosphere:

If you are on the train really late, and this is more prevalent on the busses really late at night after everyone is drunk, that no eye contact, no talking rule goes out the door. It becomes really loud and sociable. –Fred

While Andrea, Manny and Fred tell us of how they witnessed a change in social interactions, some of our participants actively engaged in this practice:

When people are coming home clubbing on a Friday or Saturday night that's always the best time to be on there because you actually start talking to people. I've been on there late at night and there were these two middle aged quite drunk ladies sitting opposite me and my friend. And sort of got to talking and she was hiccupping and hiccupping and I was like, "Excuse me if you hold your breath and swallow 7 times you know you can get rid of it." It worked for them. That's the kind of conversation I like on a Friday or Saturday night when you are coming home. It's quite fun. My friend's boyfriend was talking with this American girl. She had a really tiny skirt on so me and my friend's boyfriend were sort of looking at her thinking, "okaaaay." And all of a sudden he just blurts out, "I like your handbag." And she's like, "Yeah okay I like your ice creams." 'Cause he's got these shoes designed by Pharrell Williams called Ice Creams. Stuff like that. I love it. You go during the day and people do the whole the fake sleep thing. I do not get that. They pretend to be asleep and they just close their eyes and sit looking really stern. –Carey

Carey really enjoyed talking to strangers on the Tube, and so for him, late night journeys were his favorite. The idea of people intentionally ignoring one another, a practice which he roots firmly in the daytime, is something he takes offense with. While some of our participants found these moments exhilarating, others were frightened. One woman asserted that she would never sit on the upper-deck of a night bus because:

Night buses can be quite dangerous, [but you can] sit downstairs and get off quite quickly. –Sandra-Dee

Beyond fear, though, the night bus also engendered other difficult emotions among some of our participants:

I mean when I first left the university I was on the dole for about a year ... and I used to chug around in the buses and then I got a job working at the local car park, which was shift work, so I was basically working from 6 in the morning till 2 in the afternoon, then 2 in the afternoon until 10 at night, and it just felt completely different like if I came off the shift and then got the bus, it just felt different because I was actually a working person taking the bus. I wasn't somebody with government handouts taking a bus. I felt more comfortable. I felt happier doing it. –Maxwell

The temporal rhythms of the city are inextricably tied to the personal rhythms of the inhabitants. Beyond just the functional nature of Maxwell's journeys, his experience of them changes greatly after he finds a job. Though he is still taking the bus at night, it feels different for him. It becomes a different kind of journey, one that he feels is more legitimate. This mingling of people riding the night bus for different reasons was also pointed out by Manny:

Yeah, like taking the night bus home at say 6 in the morning or something there's some people going to work and you are going home. There is this kind of little cross-over and they are the first people going to work and you are the last people coming home and they kind of meet. –Manny

Manny speaks with a bit of shame about being on that other side of the coin. Coming home at 6am, facing the people beginning their days while you are just ending yours, can be somewhat awkward. Contrastingly though, when describing a man she saw reading a novel on the last Tube, Kylie commented with a teasing note in her voice:

You haven't been out. –Kylie

As rhythms of work and play collide, the transitions are not perfectly cut and dry. Some passengers regard the others as being out of synch, and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

It is, however, this diversity of experience that presents an under-explored space for research and design. As day turns to night, and back to day again, as week slides into weekend, the city changes. Rather than attempting to design for a static urban entity, I propose we look more deeply into the differences that each city presents and, rather than design over them, leverage them. From this brief look into London transport, we can see that the social climate of the city rhythmically transforms itself, and where interfaces that support cocooning [2] might be appropriate for day-time, designs which rely more on situated social interaction might be more sensible for the night. As night falls on the city, our interactions with one another change—it is only sensible, then, that our interaction-designs ought to as well.

REFERENCES

1. A. Bassoli, J. Brewer, K. Martin, P. Dourish and S. Mainwaring. 2007. *Underground Aesthetics: Rethinking Urban Computing*. Special issue [Urban Computing] of IEEE Pervasive Computing.
2. Mainwaring, S., Anderson, K. and Chang, M. 2005. *Living for the Global City: Mobile Kits, Urban Interfaces, and Ubicomp*. In Proc. of UbiComp 2005 (Tokyo, Japan).
3. Vertesi, J. 2005. *Mind the Gap: The Tube Map as London's User Interface*. Position paper at CHI 2005 Workshop on "Engaging the City" (Portland, OR).

BIOGRAPHY

Johanna Brewer is a PhD student in the Informatics department at the University of California, Irvine working with Paul Dourish. She holds and MA in Computer Science as well as BA's in Computer Science and Philosophy, all from Boston University. She is interested urban computing, particularly in the design of technologies which can forge new types of connections between people and transform or reinforce old ones. Her dissertation research centers around how an examination of mobility in urban spaces, specifically the London Underground and the Orange County Transit systems, might help to inform these designs.