"The Reactivation of the Public Place"

By: Bret Dougherty

From San Francisco squares, to Roman piazzas, to markets in Carrboro, North Carolina, the public place either provides a space for people to interact with each other, or provides a community space to use as a tranquil escape from a quicksilver speed society. Yet, a problem of many public spaces over the last few decades is that public places in the form of parks, piazzas, and atriums have been decaying as vast desolate and isolated spaces.

The problem of decaying and isolated public spaces is not a new issue. However, a possible solution to the problems of inactivity in public spaces may be through "wi-fi" in public places.

Wireless fidelity, or better known as "wi-fi" emerged during two movements that occurred in cities throughout the United States over the past two decades, the rise of wireless technology in public places and revitalization of many older city centers. Both movements are extremely important with regards to how public places are utilized in cities today and in the future.

The technological rise was seen when physical space and the cyberential realm merged through the use of a networking standard, known as, 802.11. The 802.11 standard currently uses three channels, 802.11a, 802.11b, and 802.11g, that transmit a radio signal through the airwaves. The signal, which was designated for low-power unlicensed use by the FCC in 1985, allows computers with compatible devices to connect with each other and with the Internet through access points connected to wired modems or routers. The signal is supplied by low-power 2.4GHz microwave band, the same wavelength used to power garage door openers, microwaves, and cordless telephones.[1]

After the designation of 802.11b, a small contingency of FCC visionaries began pushing to open the radio spectrum by allowing a legal loophole for experimentation. Soon after, a lobby movement was initiated by Apple Computer. Apple devised a plan to establish base stations, where an inexpensive wi-fi card could be plugged into a laptop provide Internet access up to 11 megabytes per second (150 faster than a dial-up modem). Apple's innovative ideas soon influenced the FCC approving more bandwidth to the formerly

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[1] Flickenger, Rob. "802.11b Tips, Tricks, and Facts." O'Reilly Network. Ed. O'Reilly. 2 March 2001. 23 Feb. 2005. <http://www.oriellynet.com/pub/a/wireless/2001/03/02/802.11b_facts.html>

unlicensed spectrum, and in 1999 Apple introduced the "Airport" 802.11b networking software and access point to market, at a relatively affordable price point of $300.[2]

The new affordability of constructing a wireless access point now allowed people, towns, schools, neighborhoods, small businesses, and almost any other kind of community organization, to have the opportunity to network wireless technology within distance of 200 to 300 yards. As a result, within range of a wireless node, a wide array of on-line activities related to work, play, hobbies, and social interests could be accessed immediately free of the physical place restrictions. Wireless technology provided a gateway for people to enter freely a portable virtual world.

In a public place, that virtual world may be entered via three types of wireless coverage,`hotspots', wireless zones, and wireless clouds. "Hot-spots", which provide coverage for isolated areas, are usually found in a building, café, store, park, or a small public place, and they have become the most pervasive and commonly used term to describe a wireless coverage area. The term "Wireless Zones" is used to describe a conglomeration of hotspots that cover a large area such as a mall, convention center, or small business park, and the area is usually managed by a login system (requiring a username and password). The primary trait of a wireless zone is that the coverage area does not have to be contiguous, where a user may be able to change geographic areas without losing service. Yet, the contiguous coverage trait for a zone also separates it's description from wireless clouds.

Wireless clouds are among the fastest growing wireless coverage solutions for cities and public places today. Clouds offer contiguous coverage over a large portion of a city or geographic area, with few or no gaps in service or connectivity. For this reason, the cloud is the most significant step toward ubiquitous wireless coverage for urban communities today.[3]

For all its emphasis on the virtual realm, the dotcom boom of the late 1990s also brought about rapid revitalization of many older urban districts across theUnited States. An influx of young, well-educated, technology-savvy helped transform once blighted areas such as South Park in San Francisco, Pioneer Square in Seattle, and Union Square in New York City into vibrant neighborhoods with cultural identity and institutions. This infusion of new blood helped turn these areas into enclaves of what Richard Florida termed "creative classes" of people.

According to Florida, the new 'creative classes' of people are society's engines of creativity and innovation, and as a group they tend to shun the conformity and boredom of suburbia for older urban neighborhoods that were once either isolated, crime infested, or economically desolated. The newcomers have contributed to a transformation of many dilapidated, once blighted urban areas into new, hip, and culturally inventive areas. Their

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[2] Flickenger, Rob. "802.11b Tips, Tricks, & Facts" O'Reilly Network. Ed. O'Reilly. 2 March 2001. 23 Feb. 2005 <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/wireless/2001/03/02/802.11b_facts.html>
[3] Mobile Media Consortium. Ed. Shamp, Scott and White, Bailey. November 2004. University of Georgia. 11 March 2005.   <http://www.mmc.uga.edu>

careers reflect their lifestyles, and these new inhabitants that work in creative industries such as advertising, design, higher education, finance, hi-tech, and the fine performing arts. As a group, these "creative class" individuals are demanding amenities from their communities to feed their cultural drives and career choices.[4]

A key component of these revitalized public districts is the public gathering places that are often in the form of parks and plazas. From the early stages of modern civilization, public spaces have been essential connectors of the urban experience.[5] Whether the public space is a square, park, boulevard, library, museum, or an outdoor café, the major challenge for public spaces is to serve as a place in which connections can be made among and between local individuals, communities, and businesses. In recent years, the old places in which street life unfolded have become backdrops for blogs, email, and microsites, as the demand to mesh the city's traditional spatial realm with fast-paced virtual technology. This demand is not without a less civic twin; just as some see wireless network technology as a means of energizing public spaces, others have used the same technologies to retreat from public places into isolating virtual worlds.

With new forms of technologically-enabled social life, emerging public places have created a groundswell of conversation among development corporations, planning boards, and parks and recreation departments across the United States, how can cities turn isolated parks and public spaces into vibrant centers for newly redeveloped and future planned neighborhoods; how can they attract people to use a public place in a society that has directed people away from the outdoors, and how can wireless technology be used to attract users to revitalized public places?

Answers to these questions may be through the convergence of these two movements in New York City.

Over the last several years, innovators in New York City, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Portland, Oregon have been forging community hotbeds promoting free wireless high-speed internet access for people in public places. Small communities made up of techies, radio buffs, and artists have formed innovative ways to transmit wireless access across high frequencies. One group, NYC Wireless, a community volunteer think tank of wireless users and beta testers, is a major force behind this campaign.

Founded in 2001, the mission of NYC Wireless has been to promote open public wireless spaces throughout New York City for the purpose of bringing free broadband wireless access to public places such as parks, coffeehouses, building places, and public meeting spaces.

The community organization has been installing wireless access points in public spaces, and according to co-founder Anthony Townsend, NYC Wireless is a company defined by

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[4] Florida, Richard. The Rise of The Creative Class. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
[5] Graham, Stephen, ed. The Cybercities Reader. New York: Routledge, 2004.

designing customized wireless networks. However, that definition is only held to the limits of "anywhere a bum can sleep".[6]

"Warchalking" in Bryant Park

William Whyte would have been a great bird-watcher. The practice of watching bird movements takes hours of observance, and the recording of sudden movements shows that each movement stems as a reaction to a sudden stimulus or as a movement for a sense of purpose. However, Whyte probably would have been frustrated by how fleeting an observance session can be with birds with the possibility of sudden flight at any whim. Perhaps, that's why William Whyte was a better human-watcher.

Using New York City as a laboratory for observing activity throughout the 1970's, Whyte left a legacy of observing human social behavior by gathering a group of young research assistants to conduct studies on pedestrians in small public places. With his assistants, Whyte spent countless hours with his 8MM camera filming and shooting photographs of pedestrian behavior in small urban public places such as plazas, parks, and seating areas to create a breakthrough film and book called *"Social Life in Small Urban Places."*

Throughout his studies, Whyte was convinced that amenities such as good seating, good food, fountains, and areas for public access are just some of the many prerequisites for solid urban design to work in a public place, and he reported his findings through simple statements of "people tend to sit most where there are places to sit"[7] and "what attracts people most, it would appear is other people." It was findings that he warned wouldn't "strike you as an intellectual bombshell."[8]

Whyte, who died in 1999, established an unofficial set of guidelines and principles for creating successful and enchanting public spaces. Despite his well-founded and well-documented principles, he and his young protégées often were amazed at how few places were created to attract people. Following his findings, Whyte once said. "It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people - what is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished."[9]

Two decades ago, that statement could have been easily applied to Bryant Park in New York City.

During the pre-Guilliani clean-up years of New York City, Bryant Park was widely known as "The Needle Park of Midtown". In spite of the bustling activity on surrounding streets and the adjacent New York Public Library, the park itself was plagued with

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[6] Townsend, Anthony. Personal Interview. 7 Nov. 2003.
[7] Whyte, William. The Social Life of Small Urban Places. New York: Project for Public Places, 2001.
[8] Whyte, William. The Social Life of Small Urban Places. New York: Project for Public Places, 2001.
[9] PPS.org. "Why Many Public Places Fail." Project for Public Places. Ed. Fred Kent. 22 Oct. 2003. <http://www.pps.org/topics/gps/failed_place_feat>

neglect and desolate pedestrian activity. Due to major threats of crime stemming from robberies and drug dealing, commerical vacancies within the area were consistently on the rise, and few people working in the area would venture into the park during lunch breaks, let alone during the hours of the night.

In 1981, Whyte and his research assistants who formed Project for Public Places created a report *"Intimidation or Recreation"* that detailed the major problems occurring throughout the park. The immediate responses to the report forced the steps to create a plan to clean up the park. The plan addressed issues such as opening the park's dark entrances, removing hedges from along the interior to remove the threat of lurking felons in the shady bushes, and creating a far more enticing environment to invite people into the park.

To address the Whyte's claims, the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC) was formed in 1982 to create new uses in order to entice new employers and new retail businesses to the area. The BPRC's main purpose of the clean-up process was to utilize the Park as the lead effort to create a focal point for the area's economic revitalization efforts.

From the BPRC's onset, it created a partnership with the New York City Parks and Recreation Department to clean up the park's façade and environment. After cleaning out the drug-infested park through redevelopment stages that consisted of path improvements, monument renovations, and better police patrols for the park, the BPRC followed Whyte's guidelines of providing a good mix of amenities such as eating, seating, and privacy for people to enjoy the park. The organization replaced a foreboding stone entrance with two kiosks that houses refreshments.[10] [11] They also installed a café/restaurant area to attract lunching and breaking business professionals in the area.

By the mid-90s, tourists from Times Square and the newcomer lunch crowd stemming from the new employers in the area began to utilize the park frequently. To accommodate the pedestrian traffic, the BPRC created a public seating area made up of moveable steel

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[10] Project for Public Places.org. "Why Many Public Spaces Fail." Project for Public Places 22 Oct. 2003. <http://www.pps.org/topics/gps/failed_place_feat>
[11] Project for Public Places.org. "Why Many Public Spaces Fail." Project for Public Places 22 Oct. 2003. <http://www.pps.org/topics/gps/failed_place_feat>

chairs and tables to surround the park's inner perimeter. The purpose of the seating area was to create a setting that would allow the business professionals in the area to meet outside of their cubicles located in the mammoth towers surrounding the park.

Word of the renovated Bryant Park quickly brought awareness to hundreds of people in the area, and passers-by, lunch-goers, and tourists began to utilize Bryant Park throughout the day and early evening. Within a decade, the clean-up process had transformed the park into an attraction with new consistent traffic flow throughout the day. [12]

Since the 90s, groups have consistently utilized the park for community gatherings, impromptu meetings, and away-from-the cooler discussions. However, during the summer of 2000, gatherings of self-proclaimed techies and artists began to assemble in the seating area of the park to promote their new tech wares and new gadgets and to attract people to grassroots tech communal gatherings. One of the group's new projects was the ability to share free Internet access with each other over simple radio connections provided by innovative placements of network nodes throughout the park. By the end of the summer in 2000, Anthony Townsend, an MIT doctoral student and lecturer at NYU and Terry Schmidt, a New York City contract network consultant, christened this freestyle wi-fi community organization into NYC Wireless.

After consistent monthly meetings, NYC Wireless used guerilla marketing techniques to generate publicity and awareness for free wireless Internet usage around New York City in public places such as Grand Central Station and Tompkins Square Park in the East Village. Tactics such as "Warchalking" – the use of a set of – a set of symbols chalked on a sidewalk or wall to notify a user of a node, foretold of free wireless nodes in an area.[13] (12)(Taylor, Time Online Edition) Communal events called "Wireless Park Lab Days" showed off innovative ways to provide free wireless signals to users in public places. One creative example was the creation of a small wi-fi node to a bicycle that was used to create a portable wi-fi node by roaming throughout the city and giving users wireless access within a 100 ft. of the bicycle.[14]

By 2001, NYC Wireless had attracted a fairly large following and a considerable amount of publicity buzz within a short period of time. That year the BPRC approached Townsend and Schmidt of NYC Wireless to install a wireless network that would enable laptop users in the park to access broadband internet usage.[15]

Despite NYC Wireless's initial excitement, the group was reticent and mulled over the relative costs and benefits for the group and Bryant Park. Because the BPRC is a private organization running a public facility, the group had a fair degree of apprehension

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[12] Project for Public Spaces.org. "Great Public Spaces, Bryant Park) Ed. PPS.org. 22 Oct. 2003. Project for Public Spaces. < http://www.pps.org/gps/one?public_place_id=26>
[13] Taylor, Chris. "Wireless Society: Tales From the Hood: 'I've Been Warchalked!'" Time Online Edition 3 Nov. 2003. 12 Dec. 2003.
<http://www.time.com/time/2003/wireless/article/tales_from_the_hood_i01a.html>
[14] Townsend, Anthony. Personal Interview (7 Nov. 2003)
[15] Bryant Park.org. 2003. 22 Oct. 2003 <http://www.bryantpark.org/amenities/wireless.php>

concerning the BPRC's intentions to create a free wireless park. After all, very few organizations were aware of how to build a network, much less create a groundswell conversation and attract a community of users to utilize the service like NYC Wireless could. [16]

With the invitation to build a network for the public, NYC Wireless presented the BPRC with questions such as: Is this service going to be designed for the public wireless user? If so, would the Bryant Park Development Corporation charge for their service as were many Starbucks and Internet cafes? How could NYC Wireless create a community experience for the park users in Bryant Park, and how did the Restoration Corporation plan to service, maintain, and upgrade the network?

The BPRC assured NYC Wireless that it wanted to create the wireless service to provide an amenity for park users, not for the purpose of a revenue producer for a private development corporation. The BPRC's feeling was to give away the service as an amenity to attract people to the park's and it's seating area. Perhaps this could drive people to the traffic area of the Park, and it would drive customers into the surrounding street level cafes and lunch spots within the surrounding park radius.

With these assurances in tow, NYC Wireless agreed to volunteer their creative expertise and their beta testers to build the wireless network from scratch. After countless volunteer hours of testing and development, NYC Wireless built a very affordable private network that anyone with any wireless card to gain free high-speed internet access within the park's perimeter. [17]

Within months, people could be seen utilizing the park as a place to hook up online throughout the day. Even lunch-time business meetings were conducted with a laptop at the center of the metal tables provided in the park. In fact, the summer of 2004, during the weekly "HBO's Summer Movie in the Park", many laptops were seen glowing throughout the park as day dwindled into the night. The amazing success of the park's consistent wireless access proved that meetings can be conducted within a park if the right setting is provided. However, what has been more remarkable for many veterans of the area to see is the transformation of activity that has come into play within the park. The park, which used to hail meetings that exchanged dime bags of different substances, now hails meetings that exchange management strategies, objectives, and goals over laptops and lattes.

The Public Wireless Boutique

Urban parks in cities across the United States – each offers different attractions and amenities that attract people into the area. Yet, many parks are plagued with inactivity and a paucity of users. Can wireless network technology be used to attract additional

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[16] Townsend, Anthony. Personal Interview. 12 Nov. 2003.
[17] Townsend, Anthony. Personal Interview. 7 Nov. 2003.

pedestrian traffic. If so, is the Bryant Park model useful as a general example for the technology-enabled revitalization of public places?

From his days with NYC Wireless, Townsend, believes that he may have found the answer with Union Square in Midtown Manhattan.

"New York City is a great laboratory because of vibrant public places and a proliferation of devices such as PDAs, cell phones, and laptops. So when considering a place to install a wireless technology strategy, the types of neighborhoods and spaces need a good mix of eating, seating, and people walking around the area. Most importantly, the area has to have a young hip crowd…..In Bryant Park, you have businesses and tourists that are crossings paths through the park. With Union Square, you have hip professionals and most importantly students, who are very related to each other in terms of demographics and familiarity with wireless technology. That's what makes it work."[18]

Townsend may be correct with his example. Union Square is a good example of the hip cultural shift that Florida explained with *"The Rise of the Creative Class"*. Due to the area's proximity to NYU, The New School, Washington Irving High School, and other cultural amenities surrounding the park that can attract students and young professionals to the area, the park is able to draw a highly educated crowd that is familiar with high tech tools such as wireless access. As a result, the mix of the culturally cool young crowd and their high-end laptops present a natural fit to meet the demand for wireless access to create a valuable amenity for the changing demographics and psychographics for the area. (Author's Note: For more examples, please refer to the Case Studies 1 & 2)

Joel Kotkin in his book, *"The New Geography"*, postulates that "the new economic role for center cities can be best described as a boutique. Cities are becoming highly specialized places almost totally dependent upon the information services, high-end services, and tourism.",[19] and he states that "hope for central business districts from Houston and Los Angeles to Baltimore and Boston lies not in clinging to the industrial-age paradigm of high-rises or massive factories but in rediscovering their preindustrial role as centers for the arts, entertainment, face-to face trading, and the creation of specialized artisanal goods and services."[20]

With that said, could the postindustrial public places of attractive, culture-driven, single-friendly neighborhoods such as Atlanta's Midtown, San Francisco's South of Market, Boston's North End, and Chicago's Seward Park, act as public wireless boutiques for a city's changing clientele in the future?

The Digital Amenity

For quite some time, people have placed the roots of public place neglect and isolation upon several factors. In the post World War II era, many American cities suffered an

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[18] Townsend, Anthony. Telephone Interview. 12 Nov. 2003.
[19] Kotkin, Joel. The New Geography. New York: Random House, 2000.
[20] Kotkin, Joel. The New Geography. New York: Random House, 2000.

exodus of middle and upper-middle class residents, leaving scores of center-city districts economically depleted. Many of the great parks and urban spaces developed in the late Nineteenth century were virually abandoned in this period as people moved to the suburbs. In more recent years, other causes have been identified as depleting the vitality of urban public spaces. Telecommuting, internet gaming and television, private gyms, and demographic shifts in communities, are just a few of the amenities that have been blamed for a diminution of the public realm in an era of changed activities and voracious demands for time and entertainment. Despite the easy calls to blame on a changing society, many community leaders are asking what will blend people's uses of technology and demands for time and entertainment in order to revitalize and attract new users to public places.

An example may be found in university life on today's campuses across the United States today. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, whether in the caverns of the Graham Porter Student Union or the in the sunshine of a Spring afternoon, students utilizing wireless technology throughout the campus are able to work anywhere anytime. The UNC Chapel Hill campus - rated the 5th most wired campus by *The Princeton Review,* -advances it's wireless technology uses through a university policy that requires every incoming student, regardless of income, to own a laptop. Since the mid-1990s, enrolled students must either buy their own computer or purchase a $2,000 laptop from Dell or IBM through the campus's computing initiative that embraces the philosophy that all of student life should be connected with technology.[21]

(Photos: Bret Dougherty, Student Laptop Life at Graham Porter Student Union, UNC-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC)

Online activities such as Instant Messaging, emailing, blogging, checking bank balances, online shopping, or writing papers throughout the campus are as prevalent an activity as discussions upon basketball or a night out on nearby Franklin Street. An explorative walk through the leafy campus with good weather displays students' independence surrounding their uses of technology. Students are constantly on chatting on cellphones, organizing with their PDAs, listening to their iPods, and most prevalently gazing at their laptops that are connected to UNC's campus network via a wireless connection. With the independent behaviors that are available from the technology uses on campus, students are bred upon

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[21] Davidson, Paul. "Campus Life Now Tethered to Gadgets". USA Today.com 25 March 2005. 5 April 2005. <http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2005-03-25-campus-tech_x.htm>

the fact that work and play does not lie in the normal work-week hours of years past. They're able to access notes, class lectures, emails, and discussions with professors 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, and more importantly it allows them to interact with others during times in the semester that in the past they would have been pinned down to a specific, confined, indoor location.

This type of freedom to access information at any time and any time has instilled the philosophy that Pekka Himanen termed, in*"The Hacker Ethic,"* the `Sundayization of Friday'. Himanen's term describes the dissolution of the boundary between time and leisure. A purpose is achieved through the best form of time optimization intertwined with a flexible work schedule brought forth by the freedoms of access at any time, which leads to Sunday becoming more and more like Friday.[22] Over the past decade, several graduating classes of students have been weened upon the "Sundayization of Friday" philosophy stemming from the freedoms that laptop computers can provide with regards to physical space, and they realize what a luxury they have.

As UNC-Chapel Hill Graduate Student, Tola Oguntoyimbo explains.

"After working in the `real' world, I've realized that the advantage of utilizing a laptop to access a wireless network at any time is a luxury. There's more self-discipline and fun to the classes that I teach because people are not tied down. If I want, I can bring my work outside with a laptop. If I want, I can bring my laptop to work with a group at any time and at any place on campus with online access…It still amazes me. Yet, when I finish here, I know a major benefit to my life getting a high-speed connection at cool places could be ending…That's a tough loss for me." [23]

As these students are logged off the campus network when they graduate into cities across the U.S., they will be among the new higher knowledge immigrants who understand the freedoms of information and communication unhitched from the desk. With online habits from laptop use and free wireless access ingrained in them throughout their formative years, will these new public place users give up the freedom that a laptop provides as they replace the urban pioneers of neighborhoods? If so, and if access is not available for them, will these new consumers of urban space generate enough word-of-mouth buzz to influence public places to install wireless technology to attract younger people and other laptop users to their areas?

The answer appears to be - Yes. With technical skills and gadgets in tow, it is quite apparent that accessibility is a necessary component to how urban dwellers live their lives in cities today.[24] As the new influxes of talent have assimilated into these neighborhoods, the new laptop aficionados have joined the masses of people who have created a laptop culture in Internet cafes, coffeehouses, parks, and other public meeting places in major cities, and they are joining forces with people who are not only sharing their likings for

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[22] Hiamen, Pekka. <u>Hacker Ethic</u>. New York: Random House. 2001.
[23] Oguntoyimbo, Tola. Personal Interview. 3 March 2005.
[24] Graham, Stephen, ed. <u>The Cybercities Reader</u>. New York: Routledge, 2004.

single-life in a city environment, but who are also wanting to have digital freedom surrounding them at all times.

"Where Coffee is Served"

Howard Rheingold in his book *"Smart Mobs"* states that "the best way to find public wireless Internet access in a new city these days is to go where expensive coffee is served."[25]   That statement is not a bold proclamation in a world that finds many privately held public places offering wireless access in order to meet the demands of the new netizens of knowledge-based communities.

Private public places through the form of cafes, markets, and restaurant chains such as Starbucks cafes, Chelsea Market in New York City, Atlanta Bread Co. in Charleston, South Carolina, and nationwide Schlotzky's Delis are offering wi-fi services for free. For example, Starbucks offers wireless access for a fee throughout it's 2,600 stores, many cafes, restaurants, and coffee shops have found that a less expensive wi-fi infrastructure that pays for itself with the extra coffee, extra sandwich, or the extra soft drink that is sold when a user is using the service in a location.[26]

Yet, many municipalities and private entities are heavily debating whether or not they should install wireless access for users. The questions that they are exploring are centered upon - who is using wireless access, how is wireless access being used, and are people coming to the area just to use wireless?

With those questions in mind, Weaver's Street Market in Carrboro, North Carolina may provide answers.

Case 1: Weaver Street Market, Carrboro, NC

Weaver Street Market is a co-op market that has become a main-staple within the Carrboro community. Located in downtown Carrboro near the border of Chapel Hill, the building is attached to several storefronts and is fronted by a large outdoor commons area that resembles an urban park, which is a focal gathering point for the Carrboro community that often finds kids playing, guitar playing, hula-hoop dancers, and people seated among scattered picnic benches.

Although Weaver Street Market is widely known for it's natural foods and natural produce, the Marketplace also contains a café-restaurant dining area, a bakery, a lunch-line, and a picnic area located on the side of it's building. As a indoor-outdoor public space, Weaver Street Market is an excellent example of Whyte's priniciples of a successful public space because it provides food, seating, retailing, and toilets.

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[25] Rheingold, Howard. Smart Mobs. Cambridge: Basic Books, 2002.
[26] Hamilton, Anita. "Wireless Society: Starbucks Unwired" Time Online Edition 3 Nov. 2003. 12 Dec. 2003. < http://www.time.com/time/2003/wireless/article/starbucks_unwired_the_c01a.html>

With the wide array of activity ranging from grocery shopping, to studying, and to eating and drinking, it is no wonder that the Street Market has become a public group gathering space. However, with wireless access installed this past year, Weaver Street Market has become more than just a community meeting place, Weaver Street Market is now a public work-station for many people in the community.

Stemming from the intent of the previous questions above, I polled twenty-five users at Weaver Street Market on two different weekday afternoons about their user experience at Weaver Street Market. Here is a short description of the following questions and a short summary of the responses addressing each question.

(Photo: by Bret Dougherty, Woman working on a Laptop, Weaver Street Market Commons, Carrboro, NC)

How much time do you spend using wireless when you're working with your laptop in a public place?

Out of the 25 people that were polled, the users responded with a range of 5 minutes to 3 hours of time. However, while observing the afternoon activity of most users, it was discovered that the average time of the 25 users is estimated at 45 minutes of online usage time. A strange occurrence is that people had no idea how much time they had actually spent while working online. Often, when a person was asked how long of time was spent while working on their laptop, the replies were off in estimates of 15 minutes or more. However, the observation discovered at Weaver Street Market is that people predominately worked for lengthy periods of time that would consist of an hour and a half or more.

How much do you spend, in terms of dollars, at the café while utilizing wireless access?

Although many technology pundits would believe that wireless access would create a windfall of dollars for a café area's bottom line, the answers that were received from this question did not lead to that suggestion.

The survey of 25 people found that the average amount of dollars spent during a wireless user's visit is less than $4.20, and the amount of trips to Weaver Street Market's coffee counter averaged between 1 to 2 trips per visit. Although four of the people surveyed stated that they did purchase items while they utilized wireless access in the area, ten users mentioned that they had spent $7 to $10 during their visit.

In terms of work, is your work mostly using online or using software programs such as Word documents, PowerPoint programs, or Excel spreadsheets?

Many of the people at Weaver Street Market were either students of UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke University, or alumni of other universities within the area, and many of the people surveyed were working on online accounts and online activities based upon their academic programs. Yet, 8 out of the 25 people surveyed did explain that they had worked on Microsoft or Apple Mac programs while they sat in the commons area.

Out of the 8 responses, 6 people explained that regardless of whether online access was available, they would continue to bring their laptops to work on various projects because of the community that congregates at Weaver Street Market and it's commons area.

Do you prefer working with wireless access inside or outside in a public space?

Overwhelmingly, all people at Weaver Street Market stated that they would much rather work outside than inside. However, they did state that their responses were based upon weather conditions such as cold temperatures, breezy winds, or sessions of rain.

From the findings, many people surprisingly did not list sun to be a factor with working with laptops. While working in the sun, an observer of conditions for laptop culture would think that glare from the sun would be a major obstacle for wireless users. Yet, when the topic of a glaring sun or the lack of shade to shield a screen was introduced in the discussion, most people stated that it would not affect them, and they wouldn't mind it if they could just work outside.

Case 2: Panera Bread Company, Chapel Hill, NC

Panera Bread Co. based in Richmond Heights, MO has embraced free wi-fi as a marketing tool and plans to offer wi-fi service in most of its 600 bakery/cafes. At a Panera Bread restaurant in Chapel Hill, there are several seating areas along with booths, a leather couch, and several tables that contain four wooden and padded seating chairs at each table. Although the location is a restaurant that caters to a upper-middle clientele, the environment is extremely inviting as a gathering place to work.

Between 11:30AM to 2:00PM, the Chapel Hill location's seating area is filled with people either chatting in groups, working on paperwork, or tapping at keyboards of their glowing laptops. After this 2PM, the lunch crowd empties, but several lunch crowd stragglers stay behind. More often that not, a few of these lunch-crowd stragglers continue to work behind their laptops.

Ron Shaich, Panera Bread's, Chairman and CEO, says that he views wi-fi as an amenity because it retains and attracts customers at a `minimum cost'. In terms of marketing, he believes wi-fi as a fixed cost, and he dismisses any discussion of ROI on a wi-fi network, by asking `What is the ROI on a bathroom?"[27] With that said, I surveyed several groups of customers on several different afternoons and on different workdays. Here are a few of the responses to the questions that I addressed to 25 Chapel Hill Panera Bread Co. customers.

(Photo: by Bret Dougherty, Group Project working at Panera Bread, Chapel Hill, NC)

How much do you spend, in terms of dollars, at the café while using wireless access?

The answers to this question were quite low when comparing the responses to the Weaver Street Market users. 17 of the 25 users estimated their purchases in terms of dollars between $3-5 while spending an observed average amount of one hour and seven minutes of time while working on a laptop.

The low dollar amounts that the customers stated allow for criticisms of the theory that wireless as an attraction will generate revenue. However, 19 of these users also stated reasons that why they visited the Franklin Street Panera Bread location was due to the location's wireless access.

Why Panera Bread for wireless?

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[27] Brewin, Bob. "Free Hot Spots Pay Dividends." Computerworld.com 20 Oct. 2003. 8 Dec. 2003.

Many of the users that used Panera Bread's wireless network stated that Panera Bread allowed for parking along with it's access. Many users also explained that they enjoyed lunches that Panera offered.

Also, the wireless users did differ in demographics from the Weaver Street Market wireless users. The age demographic of the Panera Bread Co. ranged from years 25 to 38, while the age demographic of the Weaver Street Market user group ranged from years 19 to 55. Although all of the users in both places had used wireless access before, 20 of the Panera Bread wireless users were professionals while 23 of the 25 wireless users polled at Weaver Street Market were either students or University affiliated.

An interesting quote from Osweldo Urdapi of Durham, summed up the benefit of Panera Bread Wireless with this statement. "I work on-the-road in sales, but this is my home office." Urdapi visits the Panera Bread location on Franklin Street an average of four days of week.[28]

Do you prefer working with wireless access inside or outside in a public space?

As in the Weaver Street Market case, users unanimously stated that they would prefer to work outside. Yet, despite clear sunny days during different time frames during various weekdays in Spring weather, users did not work outside. When users were questioned- Why do they not work outside? Many of the responses stated wind, bright sunlight and cool weather as their concerns. These responses varied significantly from the responses from Weaver Street Market.

The responses may also be due to provided electrical outlets and padded seating within the location.

(Photo: Bret Dougherty, People working on Laptops at Weaver Street Market Commons, Carrboro, NC)

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[28] Urdapi, Osweldo. Personal Interview. 7 March 2005.

With coffeehouses, markets, and restaurants, implementing wireless nodes and zones to create an amenity to attract consumers, - should parks, plazas, and other public-realm spaces emulate private entities and utilize wireless use as a marketing tool to attract new users? According to the Project for Public Spaces, the non-profit organization that branched off from Whyte's projects and continues Whyte's work, Bryant Park is now used by some New York City real estate agents as a "marketing tool." [29] Could technology be one of the amenities to attract the community members that have a new sophistication based upon digital freedom? Possibly, however, there is an argument to make based upon one of Whyte's main simple principles for a public place to succeed. "What attracts people most...is other people."[30]

People are People?

Whyte's people attraction principle forces us to take notice of small places such as small parks in New York City or large public places such as Chicago's Grant Park, UNC-Chapel Hill's campus, or Charleston South Carolina's Merion Square. With newly wired places such as Yerba Buena Park in San Francisco, the campus of University of Georgia, Tomkins Square Park in New York City, and Republic Square Park in Austin, Texas in mind, cities and campus leaders are asking a common question – Should management of public places redesign their places in order to meet the needs of the laptop generation?

For example, if in a city park, should an old Field House be redesigned? Should benches, tables, and seats be provided? How about changes in the campus facilities? For example, the changed student lifestyles are not the only major shifts that campuses have seen. While observing the student life at UNC Chapel Hill, a quick glance over the campus's past decade shows the campus partaking in a multi-million dollar expansion that started at the end of the 1990s. By the year 2025 rolls around and the construction surrounding the expansion is finished, will students with new gadgets and changed behaviors require large public facilities, and will the places that are renovated today be outdated in the future?

Dr. Tom Campanella, a Professor of City and Regional Planning at UNC Chapel Hill feels that this can be answered simply by looking at who is using the laptops.

"Wireless is definitely changing the way people are engaging in terms of interaction with each other, but just because people are working on laptops, doesn't mean that we have to abandon the design of public places. A place has to work for human beings regardless of wireless capabilities…So, before we design to accommodate the cyberspatial realms, let's keep Whyte's theories for good public places in mind first."

As mentioned before, amenities such as good seating, good food, fountains, and accessibility are just some of the many prerequisites for Whyte's philosophies to work. Whyte's principles such as providing chairs to public places to "enlarge choice: to move

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[29] Project for Public Spaces.org. "Great Public Spaces, Bryant Park) Ed. PPS.org. 22 Oct. 2003. Project for Public Spaces. < http://www.pps.org/gps/one?public_place_id=26>
[30] Whyte, William. The Social Life of Small Urban Places. New York: Project for Public Places, 2001.

into the sun, out of it, to make room for groups, move away from them,"[31] and adding appetizing concessions because "if you want to seed a place with activity, put out food,"[32] have provided a very simple but solid foundation for landscape architects and urban designers to follow for the shaping of good public places. With the subject of wi-fi, Campanella feels that the same philosophies should be closely adhered to when retrofitting public places for wireless users.

"We have to stay focused providing the amenities for people as physical beings first and foremost. For wireless to work, there has to be food, drink, and adequate seating for people to find the space comfortable and accommodating providing the amenities for people as physical beings first and foremost. For wireless to work, there has to be food, drink, and adequate seating for people to find space. People have to not only enjoy the space with wireless, but they also have to find that the environment provides a good place to simply be."[33]

A return look at the Bryant Park model of revitalization may be a solid choice to create enjoyment for the human element. The combination of technology with other amenities such as food, drink, and seating without creating major alterations to the original physical design of the public space was implemented, and it achieved the objectives for designing a public space for today's urban professionals and students to use. Townsend explains.[34]

"What's great about the Bryant Park example is that in determining the best setting and environment for a wireless public space for business, there aren't really any physical requirements involved. Only shade, shelter, and power AC outlets are really needed…..When you think about the architecture of a public wireless space is to create the place form of a cubicle. That's why the surrounding chairs and tables within the park are so vital to creating that cubicle design for wireless activity to work."

Creating the form of a outdoor cubicle may work. However, if public places were to create places for the new digital culture while pondering the human elements of a public place, is there a danger of the role of a public place changing? One of the main purposes of a public place is to allow people to gather for the purpose of interaction. In terms of fostering interaction, there are many supporters who believe that new technologies are only furthering the impersonality of today's society as age-old face-to-face interaction yields to the new methods of linking individuals and events together in a virtual world.[35] With that belief in mind, a question that emerges is – If wi-fi is installed in a park, plaza, or square, will the interaction that occurs in that particular public place become decayed with people "digitally zoning out" with their online work?

Campanella believes that is a good question to address before the choice to provide wireless access is implemented in a major venue. "When you really break it down, a

[31] Whyte, William. The Social Life of Small Urban Places. New York: Project for Public Places, 2001.
[32] Whyte, William. The Social Life of Small Urban Places. New York: Project for Public Places, 2001.
[33] Campanella, Thomas. Personal Interview. 14 Nov. 2003
[34] Townsend, Anthony. Telephone Interview. 12 Nov. 2003.
[35] Graham, Stephen, ed. The Cybercities Reader. New York: Routledge, 2004.

person tapping into cyberspace is only partly there in the present. Yes, the person is taking up physical space. However, that person is just not there in terms of presence. There is something bothersome about that, and there are some hindrances toward interactions if wireless is provided in a public place…..Cities are great because of their allure and the possibility of interaction at any moment, but by allowing wireless technology to come into public places, you really cut into that potential."[36]

To support Campanella's point, there are many pundits who share the fear of an interactive exclusion from people "digitally zoning out" within a public place. However, should the pundits against wireless technology in public places be annoyed because someone is really `not there'? Is there really something missing when people are zoned out with laptops, or to expand the subject more, zoned out with cell phones?

Mark Slouka in his apocalyptic 1995 book *"War of the Worlds"* warned that "first-hand experience has joined the list of endangered species. Like hermits peering out of their respective windows at the passing world, we're being reduced to watching the world through the electronic windows of the television screen and the computer monitor (for which we can now buy fake stick-on window frames complete with trees, flower boxes, and swept-back curtains.) And we're getting used to it."[37] With Slouka's warning in mind, is the real world within a park going to pass us by while we're immersed in the digital world? In terms of serving the amount of diverse users in a mass market, a look toward stadiums and arenas in municipalities may help to answer the question.

On one hand, teams and organizations such as the Seattle Mariners at Safeco Field, the San Francisco Giants at SBC Park, and the Houston Astros have installed wireless nodes to enchance the game experience and to cater to the business needs of their clientele that pays for the high-priced season tickets in order to add to the bottom line and also to generate support for the team. For example, in Houston at Minute Maid Park, the Astros launched a free wi-fi service at the All-Star Game in 2004. During the 2004 playoffs in October, 613 fans clocked 1,500 hours of connection time during the nail-biting moments of the Astros run at the National League Championship.[38]

However, tech aficionado and billionaire owner of the Dallas Mavericks, Mark Cuban, who made his billions in the online world is ironically not buying wireless, and he supports the the `digitally zoning' out argument at the Mavericks' American Airlines Arena. Yet, that may be due to precautionary logic. Cuban proclaims "We want people into the games, not upset because someone spilled a beer on their PDA or because they

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[36] Campanella, Thomas. Personal Interview. 14 Nov. 2003.
[37] Slouka, Mark. War of the Worlds. New York: Basic Books, 1995.
[38] Hansen, Evan. "Headline Central: More and More Stadiums are Going High-Tech" SportsBusinessNews.com 21 Dec. 2004. 21 Dec. 2004
<http://www.sportsbusinessnews.com/index.asp?story_id=40352>

missed a play because they were checking stock quotes. We have talked about it , but it's not going to happen during a game. It's my call, no one else's for Mavs games." [39]

Supporters of the argument seem to be more disturbed because people are not present to what many believe is most important in a public place, the natural environment. Yet, in order to soothe their fears, perhaps the proponents of the argument could look at the answer to the question: Does a person, who works in a public place with a laptop, share the same spatial realm as a person who is reading a newspaper, a novel, or a pad of notes?

An obvious answer would be to say "the same realm." However, wi-fi opponents could quickly point out that their irritations are initiated by those who handle cell-phone calls in public, gaze out the window, or read newspapers during public interactions. The irritations stem from the likelihood of delaying the kind of `quality encounter' that one anticipates in communication with one another. Their inclination to the inattentiveness of a `busy' person indicates something about the conversation or the encounter that screams `not important', `too busy for you', or `no' to a request.[40]

Yet, according to Townsend, he thinks this type of counter reaction to wireless technology is too simple of a response. "People who are upset with wireless users in a public place is a knee-jerk reaction to people bringing work to the public space. My belief is that anything that can be used to break down the barriers to using a public space is a good deterrent for neglected public space…..Quite simply, if municipalities and organizations want people to utilize public space, add more services." [41]

It's obvious that people do thrive in public places such as squares, shopping malls, cafes, squares and in the streets, people will always turn to urban life in order to work and network because the virtual world is interdependent upon physical settings.[42] Yet, places attract people because they are not only inviting, but because they also create experiences for people to transfer to their virtual world.

The added dimension of wireless technology to a public place will not reactivate a public place by itself. However, if technology is viewed as an amenity, it can be added to the repertoire of features that have been proven to drive activity and life into physical spaces that need to be tailored in order to fit today's lifestyles. Regardless of dissenting viewpoints, digital technology has changed the urban environment and it has changed the meaning of place and public place. Perhaps it's time that we look to use technology to reactivate our new public places. Places that now partner with the tools of today to establish places for the future.

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[39] Hansen, Evan. "Headline Central: More and More Stadiums are Going High-Tech" SportsBusinessNews.com 21 Dec. 2004. 21 Dec. 2004
<http://www.sportsbusinessnews.com/index.asp?story_id=40352>
[40] Graham, Stephen, ed. The Cybercities Reader. New York: Routledge, 2004.
[41] Townsend Anthony. Telephone Interview. 12 Nov. 2003.
[42] Mitchell, Bill. E-Topia. Cambridge: MIT Press. 1999.

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