

Building the city of tomorrow

Designers gathered in Portland think up ways to make the urban experience more interactive

Plenty of fretting has been done over how computers will affect cities, from theorists who believe urbanity as we know it will change to economists who contend laptop-toting creatives will build a new generation of city states.

But a growing movement of designers is looking at the role technology might play in creating new kinds of interactivity between the city and its inhabitants. Last week, Portland got a taste with the 2005 Computer-Human Interaction conference.

Hundreds of designers working in everything from interactive TV to DJ-ing to "using cell phones as civic intermediaries" attended the conference under the theme of "Technology, Safety, Community." Of particular interest, however, was a workshop titled "Engaging the City: Public Interfaces as Civic Intermediary" taught, among others, by Michele Chang, an Intel interactivity researcher, and Chet Orloff, director of the Museum of the City.

Over two days, participants from Europe and the United States took a quick lesson in Portland urbanism, fanning out to Portland State University, the Cultural District, the Brewery Blocks and the central east side. And then they tried to invent new ways of using interactivity to enhance people's experience of the city.

The ideas ranged from tongue-in-cheek to potentially very useful, blending anthropology with design. These are folks who have come up with ideas like garbage cans that document what's thrown into them (trash heaps having always been archeologists' gold mines) to teaching science to teenage girls through live-action reality games.

A group exploring the Pearl District, for instance, noted residents' deep love of their new neighborhood and invented a concept for a cell-phone device that would help them find places like the Pearl in other cities. A group visiting the Cultural District thought the Portland Art Museum could get over what one designer called its "red-velvet ropes and \$10 admission" by sending images to small projectors for beaming on the neighborhood sidewalks. A group tackling the Brewery Blocks hatched what they described as a "hopscotch game" of puzzles and trails to follow via cell phones and PDAs to get visitors beyond walking "just on the sidewalks between stores."

Arguably, the most prescient idea, however, came with one group's exploration of the area around the future Burnside Bridgehead project. Discovering the famed skater-built skatepark beneath the Burnside Bridge led to interviews with the skaters on how they feel about the large-scale housing and workspace development likely to rise just steps away. While some of the architects involved with the Bridgehead project have proposed bleachers for the public viewing of park, the skaters themselves like being hidden. As one of the group's members, Tom Jenkins of the Royal Art Academy, put it, the skaters "are an autonomous, self-policing community" and the park is their "intimate, outdoor living room."

And so Jenkins and his colleagues proposed not an interface but a distraction: an outdoor, DIY amphitheater in the Bridgehead development, equipped with a permanently installed sound system where aspiring bands could simply show up and plug in.

Call it a potential central east side -- and new generation's -- answer to Pioneer Courthouse Square.