

# MARSHALL MCLUHAN' LESSONS FOR DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE PRACTITIONERS

**Dr. Robert K. Logan**

Professor Emeritus 2005, Department of Physics, University of Toronto

## {ABSTRACT}

The insights developed by Marshall McLuhan that might be of use to design and architecture communities are gathered in this presentation. They include his notion of visual and acoustic space, hot and cool media, the Global Village, the reversal of cause and effect, the role of the artist in society and the do-it yourself (DIY) culture. We discuss here on how the multi-sensorial of acoustic space leads to multi-sensorial architecture and design. We exploit McLuhan's understanding on the role the artist plays in society to make concrete suggestions for the engagement of designers and architects.

## {KEY WORDS}

McLuhan. Space. Architecture. Design.

## {RESUMO}

Os insights que Marshall McLuhan desenvolveu que poderiam ser úteis para as comunidades da arquitetura e design estão reunidos nessa apresentação. Esses abrangem a sua noção de espaço visual e acústico, os meios quentes e frios, a Global Village, inversão da causa e efeito, o papel do artista na sociedade e a cultura do faça-o-você-mesmo [DIY-Do it yourself]. Aqui discutimos como a multi-sensorialidade do espaço acústico conduz ao design e arquitetura multi-sensorial. Exploramos o entendimento de McLuhan sobre o papel que o artista desempenha na sociedade em fazer sugestões concretas para engajamento de designers e arquitetos.

## {PALAVRAS-CHAVE}

McLuhan. Espaço. Arquitetura. Design.



Marshall McLuhan had insights for all professions but one of the areas of particular interest for him was the work of the artists, a category, which also embraces architects and designers. He used an extremely open definition of an artist, namely he suggested that the artist is a person who is expert in the training of perception. He also identified the artist as the person "in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness (McLuhan 1964, 71)." This definition therefore should include the readers of this journal. Perhaps even more appropriate for those in the field of architecture and design is this quote also from *Understanding Media*, "The artist leaves the ivory tower for the control tower, and abandons the shaping of art in order to program the environment itself as a work of art (McLuhan 1964, 70)."

Let us see what guidance McLuhan has for the artist who wants to leave the ivory tower to sit in the control tower. The first hint comes from McLuhan idea of the reversal of cause and effect. "Effects are perceived, whereas causes are conceived. Effects always precede causes in the actual developmental order (McLuhan and Caston 2003, 303)."

McLuhan (1964, 68) also saw the creative process of both the inventor and the artist as working backwards from the effect they wanted to create to the causes that would lead to the desired effect.

In the arts this meant starting with the effect and then inventing a poem, painting, or building that would have just that effect and no other. (McLuhan 1964, 68).

This was the technique he used himself in his scholarship, "I begin with effects and work round to the causes, whereas the conventional pattern is to start with a somewhat arbitrary selection of 'causes' and then try to match these with some of the effects. (Molinaro, McLuhan & Toye 1987, 478)".

In planning the effects one's design to is to have for its users McLuhan provides another key piece of advice, namely that all our technologies including our living and working spaces are extensions of our bodies. "All media are extensions of some human faculty- psychic or physical (McLuhan & Fiore 1967, 26)." When McLuhan uses the term media in this context he is also referring to all forms of technology and tools and hence dwellings and buildings. McLuhan uses the terms media, technology and tools interchangeably. For him a medium is any extension of ourselves that intermediates our interaction with our environment. A car, a house and clothing are all tools or technologies but they are also media. Therefore our homes, our offices, our work spaces should all be considered extensions of our bodies and therefore be designed ergonomically to enhance the functions we need to perform within or working and living environments. The architect or designer should therefore realize they are designing a service and not a product. McLuhan was the first to point out that in the electric information age products become services. "All the industries of our time are service industries." "This is where we are heading under electronic information conditions. Products increasingly are becoming services (McLuhan, McLuhan and Staines 2003, 99)."

In addition to the designer and the architect providing a service there is the danger of providing too much service. We need to realize as McLuhan pointed out long ago we live in a DIY (do it yourself) culture. So the designer or the architect must leave some room for input from the user as the gap between consumer and producer is rapidly closing in this our digital age, something that McLuhan identified long ago. "As technology advances, it reverses the characteristics of every situation again and again. The age of automation is going to be the age of 'do it yourself'." The architect or designer should allow for the participation of the client not only in designing the living space but also so that once the professionals are totally finished with their work, there is room for the client to add their personal touches in the spirit of DIY. This is to create the living or working space as a cool medium not quite complete that the client or user can fill in and participate in the construction of their living or working space. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition'. "High definition is the state of being well filled with data.... Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience (McLuhan 1964, 36)." The space that is designed for the client should not be over designed but designed so that the interior space can be flexibly re-arranged to suit the moment.

One of McLuhan's key ideas is that in the transition from the mechanical era of print and mass production industry to the era of electric and digital media and customization we also move from visual space back to the acoustic space that characterized oral culture before the advent of writing and now characterize our times. The media of our communication affect our senses and sensibilities. "Any technological innovation in any culture whatever at once changes all sensory ratios. New technology inevitably creates new environments that act incessantly on the sensorium (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 136)" The static rectangular enclosed shapes of visual space give way to the dynamic open contours of acoustic space.

The acoustic world, which is the world of electric simultaneity, has no continuity, no homogeneity, no connections, and no stasis. Everything is changing (McLuhan 2003, 226).

Psychologists tell us that acoustic space is spherical because we hear simultaneously from all directions. It has no lines of direction. It contains nothing; it's a physical entity defined by these dynamic forces (McLuhan 1969, 112).

Visual space on the other hand is linear, sequential, static, uniform, continuous and connected.

The visual sense, alone of our senses, creates the forms of space and time that are uniform, continuous and connected. Euclidean space is the prerogative of visual and literate man. With the advent of electric circuitry and the instant movement of information, Euclidean space recedes and the non-Euclidean geometries emerge. (McLuhan 1966)

Visual space is the space of detachment. Audile-tactile space is the space of involvement.

Men live in round houses until they become sedentary and specialized in their



work organization. Anthropologists have often noted this change from round to square without knowing its cause. The media analyst can help the anthropologist in this matter, although the explanation will not be obvious to people of visual culture... A tent or a wigwam is not an enclosed or visual space. Neither is a cave nor a hole in the ground. These kinds of space -- the tent, the wigwam, the igloo, the cave -- are not "enclosed" in the visual sense because they follow dynamic lines of force, like a triangle. When enclosed, or translated into visual space, architecture tends to lose its tactile kinetic pressure. A square is the enclosure of a visual space; that is, it consists of space properties abstracted from manifest tensions... A square moves beyond such kinetic pressures to enclose visual space relations, while depending upon diagonal anchors. This separation of the visual from direct tactile and kinetic pressure, and its translation into new dwelling spaces, occurs only when men have learned to practice specialization of their senses, and fragmentation of their work skills. The square room or house speaks the language of the sedentary specialist, while the round hut or igloo, like the conical wigwam, tells of the integral nomadic ways of food-gathering communities. (McLuhan 1964. 118).

With the return to the acoustic space of electric media the curvature of our buildings is making a comeback in structures like the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the new City Hall in Toronto. Visual space is container like whereas acoustic space is network like. This is being reflected in our design and architecture.

For McLuhan the acoustic space of both oral culture and today's electrically configured world are multisensorial and therefore invite multisensory participation of users that designers and architects would be well advised to consider with the inclusion of acoustic elements such as water fountains, wind chimes, ambient music (and I do not mean Muzak), olfactory elements with flowering plants into and a variety of tactile experiences in terms of furniture and flooring.

In my research for this article I found an ally, Jasper Schaap, a student in 2009 in Architecture at Delft University of Technology who wrote a posting on ([http://www.designyourownmind.net/?pageOn\\_c\\_id=2](http://www.designyourownmind.net/?pageOn_c_id=2)) entitled Towards a multi-sensory perception in Architecture. He wrote,

In order to stop the alienation of architecture, we must strive towards a higher awareness of multi-sensory perception in contemporary architecture... If architecture played more on the senses, architecture would become less of a flat visual image, as it is today. If we succeed in enticing the senses, people can participate again in their surroundings and regain their identity in the contemporary world.

Jasper Schaap made no reference to McLuhan but I am confident having worked with Marshall that he would have agreed with and endorsed these remarks as do I.

Let me conclude by discussing the implications of McLuhan's notion of the Global Village on architecture and design. In the mechanical era where the norms of visual space dominated architecture people lived in isolated private self-contained enclosed spaces. This organization of dwellings is breaking down as McLuhan observed because "the new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village." There is

no privacy in a village whether the traditional kind of oral culture or today's global variety. Our designs are beginning to reflect that with the return of common areas where neighbors can socialize and be able to look after each other. Some of today's well designed condo communities operate as mini-villages. People are returning to the centre of our towns and revitalizing neighborhoods with a greater sense of community. Neighborhoods in Toronto call themselves villages as my googling Toronto village revealed: Forest Hill Village, Church Wellesley Village aka Gay Village, Liberty Village, Mirvish Village, Seaton Village, Victoria Village, Mount Pleasant Village, Bloorville Village, Bayview Village, Bloor West Village, High Park Village, Baldwin Village, Davisville Village, Village by the Grange, and the there are the ethnic villages of Toronto: Little Portugal, Little Italy, Corso Italia, Little India, multiple China Towns, Korea Town, and India Town. This list is by no means complete so apologies if your village was not mentioned.

## {REFERÊNCIAS}

McLuhan, Marshall. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1964. *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill. (The page references in the text are for the McGraw Hill paperback second edition. Readers should be aware that the pagination in other editions is different. To aid the reader in calibrating note that Chapter 1 *The Medium is the Message* begins on page 7 in the edition I have referenced.)

\_\_\_\_\_. 1966. "The Relation of Environment to Anti-Environment." *University of Windsor Review*, 11:1 (Fall), 1-10; reprinted in: Matson, F. and Montagu, A. (eds) (1967). *The Human Dialogue*. New York: Macmillan, 1-10; reprinted in: Moos, M. A. (ed) (1997). *Media Research: Technology, Art, Communication: Essays by Marshall McLuhan*. Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 110-20; reprinted in McLuhan, M. (2005). *Marshall McLuhan Unbound*. Eric McLuhan (ed.), Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1970. *Culture is Our Business*. New York: MacGraw Hill.

McLuhan, Marshall and David Carson. 2003. *The Book of Probes*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press.

McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. 1967. *The Medium is the Message*. New York: Bantam Books.

McLuhan, Marshall, Stephanie McLuhan, David Staines. 2003. *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Molinari, Matie, Corrine McLuhan, and William Toye (eds). 1987. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Texto enviado em abril de 2013

Aceito em maio de 2013

