

# Where actual is not factual: Times Square in the era of Post-Truth Politics

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## ABSTRACT

In the era of ‘Post-truth politics’, political and activist statements related to administration issues of different regions on the Earth started to appear on the big digital screens of Times Square, New York City. In this paper, we investigate this phenomenon and focus in particular on the role of the screens content (semantics) and the screens material property (ie light) in conveying the message and the construction of the notion of ‘reality’. Examples such as ‘Midnight moment’ and campaigns such as ‘Free Balochistan’, ‘Call for Trump’s Impeachment’, ‘3 Billboards are explored and outline how billboards could be used rather than an advertisement. Based on our preliminary data collection and analysis of light measurements in the Times Square, we found out that during nighttime the square is occasionally brighter than daytime and it seems that the intensity of light during nighttime, contributes to the change of time perception materially.

We suggest that the amount of nighttime illumination in Times Square may contribute to the reconstructing the notion of reality.

## Author Keywords

Media Architecture, Digital screens, Post-Truth politics, Reality, Artificial illumination.

## ACM Classification Keywords

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## INTRODUCTION

McLuhan’s well-known phrase, ‘the Medium is the Message’, reminds us the way in which information is communicated plays a significant role on how we receive the message from this information [15]. In Times Square,

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the mutuality of the materiality of the screens and the content of screens stands out from similar public spaces.

In this paper, through the example of Times Square, we discuss the contribution of big digital screens in public spaces in the reconstruction of the notion of “reality”; as a content distributor in the virtual world and an image-holder in the actual urban environment.

The notion of post-truth (a detailed definition will be addressed in the next section) will guide our argument while questioning the correspondence between reality, materiality and meaning.

During night-time, the Times Square of New York seems to be one of the brightest open-air public spaces on the planet. To support this argument, we carried out in situ measurements using a lux meter and found out that the brightest moments of the night are brighter than some moments during daytime. By mutating the perception of time, this situation may provide a suitable environment for speculation through the content.

We investigate the types of socio-political content in the Times Square and focus predominantly on the political statements including: 1) First, Balochistan advertisement that appeared on the new years eve of 2018, 2) 3 Billboards advertisement and subsequent movement throughout the US and UK, 3) the call for an impeachment of US president by an American businessman, and finally, the installation ‘Centipedes’ of Midnight Moment by Times Square Arts in March 2018. We distinguish these contents and the statements they make in 4 different categories; 1) raising awareness (Free Balochistan banners), 2) propaganda (the call for impeachment), 3) protest (3 Billboard movement (which extends to other states of the United States and the UK)) and 4) art and the example of how art influences the policy-making directly or indirectly (Times Square Arts March 2018 installation).

The main contribution of this paper will be to reveal a correlation between materiality and content with a focus on political statements.

## BACKGROUND

Media offer, in general, different qualities of communication through an *imaginary* world. Perhaps one of the oldest way is *communicating* through image making with architecture. One may trace this back to the cave paintings; iconography has been used to speculate about

reality for centuries. People believed if they picture themselves capturing the hunt on the wall; reality seems to follow fiction. Paintings were used in churches to educate the masses, and the mother of billboards were created out of stone walls. Then, light was only introduced to these material ‘billboards’ through the introduction of glass. When the glass is stained, the backlight has been welcomed to the scene. Image-making came through a long way while yielding the methods to generate visuals. In today’s world, how an image is being produced is very different than a few decades ago [8]. Further, new realities are offered, sometimes by augmenting the existing surroundings (AR), or by replacing the actual one and transporting the users to the virtual world (VR), and sometimes by mixing them all. Although the subjects are digital images, using the word *reality* to describe emerging forms of interactions in everyday life gives a clue to a relationship with space as inhabited and experienced place rather than a two-dimensional representation.

In this paper, we introduce ideas and concepts that may help us to understand where the notion of reality sits, and where it is heading within the context of Times Square. Light, media, architecture and politics will have their place while the emphasis will vary from perspective to perspective.

### Reality as Post-Truth Politics

Oxford Dictionary defines the word *post-truth* as “*Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.*”. It highlights that in the era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion one desires [22]. With the rise of Post-truth politics, the selection of the word *post-truth* as “the word of 2016” is a statement itself that draws attention to the subject [29]. Furthermore, recent movement speculative realism stands with its name dedicates to *hack the reality*. Zeitgeist creating an environment where the trustworthiness of reality being questioned.

### Reality as Media Architecture

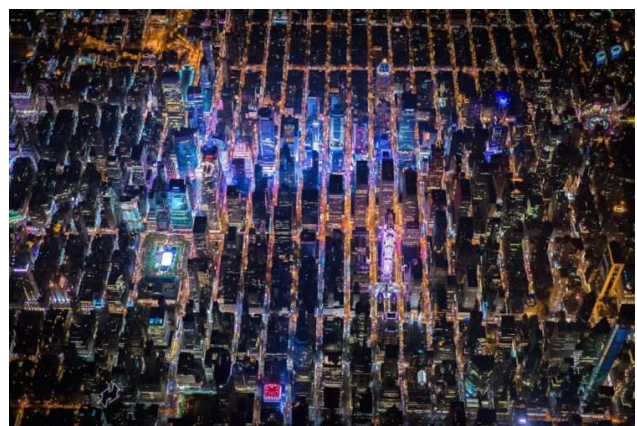
Within over a decade of ‘Media Architecture’ research, the curation, management and function of the public spaces affected and augmented by the digital tools has been investigated through exploring the screens, intangible materiality as content and material property [10,14,16, 28]. Public spaces with big digital screens provide a suitable environment for the distortion of reality, in both material and symbolic ways. Materially; for instance, by providing extra light, the big digital screens may change the perception during night-time as if they extend the day cycle, if not shifting it. Keeping the concept of light pollution in mind, the necessity of having nighttime illumination as a catalyser of social interactions is mentioned by Mulvin [9]. It is not a coincidence today’s Times square locates where Luna (moon) Park concept appeared in Coney Island. On the other hand, symbolically, the screens depend on the

content and position, screen spaces burst the filter bubbles [20]. Foth et al. [12] exemplified how urban screens can be used to expose people to the subjects they are not interested in immediately. Memarovic et al. pointed out the potential of bringing outer world to the ground of a screen to connect different cultural groups. By doing so the local life and the experience of the place would be enhanced [16]. Vande Moere et al. [20] defined how the environment of the digital screen effects the message conveyed by it. There are numerous examples for both material and symbolic situations. However, the Times Square stands out by providing material and symbolic examples together. The material environment of Times Square has a symbolic meaning for the citizens of NYC and visitors from all around the world. We suggest this specificity mutates the experience.

### Reality as Light

The light illustrates a unique position, showing matter qualities, but not leaving any traces behind, enables us to see- yet it does not require a payback, a one-way flow from the source to our optic lenses, organic or inorganic. Coming from any light source, as long as the source is strong enough to provide, it enables vision. Today, light sources are numerous, as well as the eyes ready to capture. Most cities on the planet augment their urban environment with various illumination sources. The Times Square of New York represents one of the peak points of nighttime illumination with its concentrated layout within .25 square miles. Although, studying light requires a wide investigation with various sections [30], we will focus on perceptual aspects of the subject.

In this paper, we will investigate Square’s material (illumination related) distortions with the data captured in-situ in February 2018 and its symbolic contribution that draws on the world politics via the digital content of the big screens.



**Figure 1. Night time illumination in Times Square makes the place brighter than the sometimes of the day during the night. creates a suitable environment to reconstruct the notion of reality.**

## **TIMES SQUARE**

The Times Square has been influencing everyday life in NYC since its conception [24]. From the urbanistic point of view, its location within the famous Manhattan grid intersects the diagonal of Broadway Avenue and makes it a natural destination for whomever would like to go from north to the south of the island. It works as a shortcut for those who do not want to use sides of the rectangular building blocks. Therefore, the existence of Theatres can be linked to this urban condition, which creates a natural pedestrian flow. The Broadway effect has been studied by scholars and revealed having somewhere anything can happen in the city prepares the citizens of that city for unusual occasions [16]. With its relatively short history and the on-going transformation in recent years, it requires another level of understanding and investigation of the urban realm created by this particular environment.

### **Times Square: Layout and Visitors Flow**

There are 37 screens with various layouts and sizes [25]. However, the venues around the square (behind the screens) are very small with limited number or no seating. There are chairs spread around the square in the open-air but during winter the weather makes it difficult for people to use. The TKTS stairs. The central stairs placed in the southern part of the square that contains the ticket office for the Broadway musicals, is the most popular (providing an elevated view).

According to the data captured by Times Square Advertising Coalition in June of 2017, New York citizens visit the Times Square approximately every two weeks [25]. Non-resident visitors are likely to return every 19 months [25]. The average age in the square is 32 years old, and 48 per cent of those are people with college degrees. Visitors spend around 8 min looking at the screens [25]. According to this, placing an image in the Times Square means something different than placing the very same image anywhere else in the world.

### **Times Square: Screens Content**

The Times Square doesn't stand out for its protesting qualities, however, more recently, and with today's connected world (more than ever), the digital screens in the square are being used as an international platform for statements- albeit a very expensive one. Funding is an important aspect to materialise these attempts and make these statements appear on the big screens. Any statement shown in the Times Square, however, needs a considerable financial support (through a body of funding or even through hacking). Within this context a question springs to mind about the intention of developing content to be broadcast on Times Square for instance, like the ones that relate to the violation of human rights (Balochistan) and raising awareness to this topic, instead of supporting the cause directly.

In this paper, we will outline examples of paying and making a body of funding paying, while hacking stay as an unexplored option.

### **Times Square: Light**

Our measurements of brightness with a Lux meter showed that night-time might be converted into day in the open air. Consistency was achieved by using an imaginary grid that is placed on top of the existing plan, and subsequent measurements were made. Directionality is the key element determines the result. The distance from the closest obstacle such as buildings, walls and even kiosks, effects the estimation. Artificial illumination of the space is already changing the perception of time converting the daytime into the night. We suggest that, as people's senses already overwhelmed by the amount of light, they become more open to believing what is not a fact.

Although it is not new to use light during night-time, the very same method can result in something different when it is used with different intentions [7]. Billboards have been used for advertisement for decades. However, the use of digital screens and the design of a variety of contents is relatively refreshing. One might interpret the Times Square as a vertical newspaper with its varied sections that relate to the audience. Defamiliarizing the existing definition of the place with unprecedented content will be investigated in the coming section of the paper. We will focus on four different ways of digital screens usage; the number might be widened in future research.

### **Times Square and the notion of reality**

According to McLuhan, the medium in use prepares the audience for the upcoming message. The hyper environment in Times Square, with its overwhelming light intensity, which is close to pollution, prepares minds for the spectacle. Mitchell struggled with the trustworthiness of the digital image [19], however, he did not seem to mention the trustworthiness of actuality. A digital image of an object offers other qualities than the actual object itself, with its indexical existence it provides reproducibility [8, 19], and with mainly the availability of an Internet connection, the image could be transported anywhere within seconds [8, 19]. One might say that the *global village* has happened [15], and we suggest that further research is crucial to understand the dynamics of it.

To place anything on the screens of the Times Square is an *open call* for the people of the world to investigate the claim of the image/statement further. One might say that non-NYC visitors who will see the messages when they visit the square, are people with privileges. On the other hand, and as a certain level of privilege and intelligence is concentrated in New York since the beginning of the 1900s [24], and it seems that the locals of New York, like non US visitors, are not a prototype of the general public in America neither. In the rest of the paper, we will discuss how the situation of the production and experiencing multi-



reality via media could be understood in the post-truth era. Reality is no longer *one*. So are those banners that resemble invitations to participate in the reconstruction of *reality* or a didactical to widen propaganda will be the question to answer. In the following section, we will introduce emerging usages of the screens in Times Square with the focus on the integration of world politics. Interestingly, not only the world coming into Times Square, but also it seems that the Times Square is moving out.

## EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF CONTENT IN TIMES SQUARE

### Raising Awareness: Free Balochistan

World Balochistan Organization (WBO) has been running a campaign to raise awareness to a violation of human rights by Pakistan's Army [2]. After the first time the advertisement appeared in London in late 2017, which was consequently banned by Transport of London (TfL) due to the protests from the Pakistani Officials [ref], WBO placed digital banners over some billboards in the last week of 2017 [3] above McDonald's at Times Square. Obviously, the images have passed a control committee and made their ways to the urban realm. While the appearance of the widely criticised fast-food company and a political statement for actual people who are in probable suffer is worth a further discussion, here we will focus on the message (Situation of Balochistan) and the medium (digital screen in Times Square) used. The image consisted of the slogan “#FreeBalochistan From Human Right Abuses by Pakistan” with the logo of WBO [3]. A Twitter page that claims to be WBO shared the photo of the image (Figure 2: right) several times, and also tagged professional journalists such as Anderson Cooper to reach more people.



Figure 2. FreeBalochistan Ads on London Caps (Left); and FreeBalochistan Banners at Times Square in the New Year's Eve of 2018 (Right) - funded by World Balochistan Organization (WBO)

Although the actuality of the content requires much more rigorous research about the subject, the existence of the message in Times Square at the New Year's Eve provides exposure on people's filter bubbles [12]. Therefore, it expands the agenda of perhaps the world's most famous

public space and invites the passers-by to contribute today more than any time globalised network of reality as McLuhan suggested half a century ago.

### Protest: 3 Billboards

Protesting is inherently a one-way communication style and it seems to relate, with its performative qualities, to orality more than literacy. In fact, protesting might be considered as secondary orality as Walter Ong defines it [21]. Although it looks like in many parts of the world protesting will stay on the street -linked to the moment- *social protesting* is appearing steadily in the in public squares and streets. Albeit, virtual public spaces provide a platform for debate [6], actual ones expose the passer-by [12]. Virtual statements in actual public spaces (one might define them as *passive activism*) are also making their way through the public realm via billboards, guerrilla advertising and graffiti. One recent example is *Three billboards outside Ebbing Missouri*, which put a spotlight on billboards with its success in both Golden Globes and Academy Awards. Subsequently, Outdoor Advertising Association of America hired Extra Credit Projects (ECP) to design billboards that will support the movie during March 2018 [11]. Promotional banners (Figure 3: right) placed nationwide including the Times Square [11].

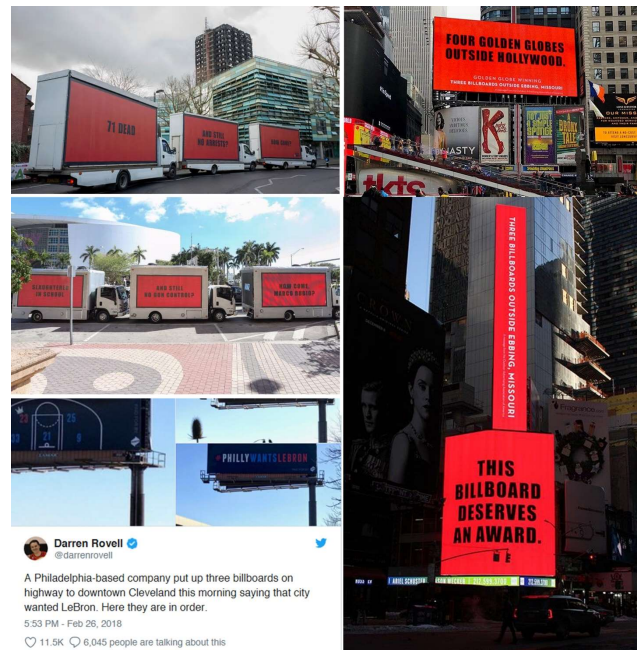


Figure 3. 3-billboards-style Protesting Grenfell Tower fire investigation (Left Top); 3-billboards-style Protesting massacre in a school in Florida (Left Center); Call for LeBron James (Left Bottom); 3-billboards-style Advertisement for Billboards usage in Times Square (Right)- funded by Outdoor Advertising Association of America

According to Shandra Martinez from mlive.com, ECP's creative director and principal stated, “As long-time billboard ambassadors, we felt this was a great way to highlight the simplicity, relevance, and effectiveness of the

outdoor medium". Accordingly, Rick Robinson who guides the campaign, outlined how billboards can be considered as cultural currency.

Francis McDormand also emphasised the power of billboards in the interview she gave after she received an Oscar for her role in the movie [23]. As an activist, rather than an actress, she showed how to be tuned with novel methods of protesting. She mentioned the growing trend of hiring billboards by various groups to make statements concerning their past and potential future. Namely, Grenfell tower fire which caused death of 72 people and many injuries in July 2017, was questioned by Londoners, using the same tactics through placing 3-billboards-style banners on top of trucks. The Guardian (UK) published an article about how Grenfell Tower fire investigation, and promoted the protest in virtual environment [17]. Besides, CNN politics updated its readers by showing the protest of Senator Marco Rubio about the massacre in a school in Florida [1]. Moreover, the movement expanded to the sports world, Darren Rovell –an ESPN Sports Business Reporter- shared how locals of Cleveland placed banners that are calling LeBron James to their state team [17]. Despite, the concept of billboard was promoted by a billboard association, flow left the borders of Times Square and expanded in various places across the world. Furthermore, 3-billboard movement distinguishes by being printed (rather than appearing on a digital screen) that would point out another way of mutuality for materiality and symbolism.

#### Propaganda: Call for Trump's Impeachment

Tom Steyer, a Democratic mega-donor [5] hired billboards in Times Square and declared that he would spend \$20m to advertise a petition that calls impeachment for current US President Donald Trump. Mr Steyer extends his campaign by calling ordinary American citizens to act "Join us and tell your Member of Congress that they have a moral responsibility to stop doing what's political and start doing what's right." With his assumption of what is political is not the right thing, Mr Steyer makes two statements at once. The first one is inherited from the medium he used—advertising a democratic stand by using billboards, the second one comes through the content—politics should be rescued from the politicians.

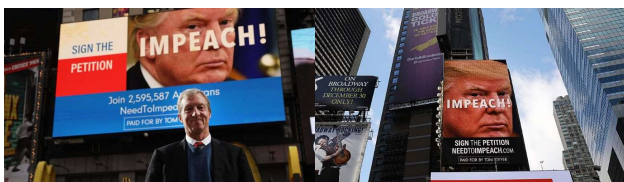


Figure 4. Call for Impeachment- funded by a Democratic mega-donor named Tom Steyer in Times Square

The billboards are prepared in campaign style and unveiled on November 2018. They ran at the New Year's Eve of 2017 (10 minutes every hour) [5]. Subsequently, they provoked Trump to make statement on Twitter.

*Need to Impeach* (the official group funded by Steyer) expanded the campaign to TV, and ads showed on Fox New's Fox&Friends program, known that Trumps follows [5]. Comparable ads were shown in the very same show to reach Trump and has been subject to humorous statements. Digital billboards as provocation and propaganda to start a conversation seems worked in this case. Although campaigning through billboards is not something new, having them in Times Square has been used to move out-world departing from the ground of the screen.

#### Art: Midnight Moment

Every night since 2012 (except New Year's Eve and holidays) Times Square's screens are synchronised to show a silent exhibition of three-minutes moving image which is selected by the Times Square Arts committee and presented by the Times Square Advertising Coalitions [27]. The committee makes an open call for participants and selects candidates from the submissions. On their website, they state that the content cannot include a religious symbol nor can it be overly political [27], even though most of the time -as art dictates- the subject might be related with politics. In March of 2018, an artist from Turkey was welcomed with a video about Taksim Square, *Times Square of Istanbul* [26]. The Times Square Arts gives the following explanation for the artwork "Transportation hub, tourist destination, and site of New Year celebrations and political demonstrations. The aerial view shows it post-pedestrianisation and pre-renovation, stretching temporality to illustrate the natural traffic patterns of pedestrians and birds."



Figure 5. Taksim Square on top of the Times Square, March 2018 Midnight Moment Installation by Erdal Inci- funded by Times Square Arts. Although the Taksim Square is referred as the Times Square of Istanbul, it does not contain digital screens that may create a surrounding effect, which demonstrates the convertibility/mutuality of material and symbolic values of a phenomenon.

With the recent developments of the area (named mega projects, political transformations, economic instability, etc.), something can be said about this juxtaposition. We have not contacted the selection committee to learn what their motivation was to select this art piece for March 2018, but it should be safe to say it was not a coincidence with the Middle East struggling with all possible forms of difficulties and perhaps not only Taksim Square is the Times Square of Istanbul, but also Istanbul was the New York of the last millennia with its highly composite demographics.

## DISCUSSION

The notion of *reality* was investigated in Times Square through exploring the role of the big digital screens content (semantics) and the screens material property (ie light) in conveying the message and the construction of the notion of 'reality'.

The examples in this paper have been chosen to point out how political statements can be demonstrated via digital images in actual public spaces with material screens. Materialization of the governmental power has many examples and easy to spot, while immaterialization of the very same power inherently hidden and hard to realize. Any material production makes a statement, for instance, to place city halls to the city centre was not only to provide convenience but also to visualise the presence of the governing institution. However, virtual public spaces seem to provide a platform for sharing and distributing messages. Messages going viral proved their powerful effect in the last decade. Subtle media management is not something authorities are unaware of, while users might be. In other words, a negotiation of power and the types of methods used to make statement is important to be effective (medium is the message).

As Mitchell foresees in his book: *City of Bits* [18], "*if equality of opportunity and symmetry of participation are valued, then all classes of users (not just privileged groups and institutions) should be able to create as well as receive information; this means that the infrastructure has to provide two-way digital pipes and allow anyone to set up a server.*"

A billboard in a public space might still be oriented to a specific group. However, the digital images on the screens in the Times Square can travel instantly all around the world, and the ones who cannot visit the actual square can still receive the message—without the distortion of reality caused by the light pollution of the actual space. It might be a privilege to have the right to be a part of the administration of a state, most of the time to be included in the decision making all one can do is voting. With virtual public spaces and the communication revolution, the ways of governing have been changing [18]; digital making is cluing the situation for over a decade so far [7]. Since media is the one of the only true influencer, the prophecy of storytellers ruling the world seems around the corner.

The flow of information -trustworthy or not- starts with the political open calls in Times Square, and to complete the circuit most of the people have the necessary equipment in either their pockets or in their everyday environment. Some might say the accessibility is not enough, and that would be well said. Accessibility does not mean that one will do the research, however, to be able to do the research sooner or later means one can contribute with something.

## What is real?

With the post-truth politics and emerging forms of alternative realities, *the reality* might be the least trustworthy concept of everyday life. Existing body of literature [6, 10, 12, 16, 20, 28] have been debating about digital screens' materiality and content. While hardware defines a material reality, phenomenological aspects of the subject are as real as the screen itself [14]. *What is the real reality* is being a question raised all around. While the existence of content in an actual screen on a public place defines a situation of reality which is already confusing, faking the message through the medium is overwhelmingly complex, and eventually, which one is more real is yet to be answered if ever could be.

Although the concept is extremely broad, in this study, we examined some aspects of it via Times Square's materiality and distinguished content. While the brightness of screens is mutating the notion of night, political statements on the banners drawing the attention of the world's citizens to hidden truths. Truth can be converted depending on the point of view while facts are the only thing we have left at the end.

For instance, Balochistan might be the place, which needs support the most, however, having a banner at the Times Square is sceptical by itself. Although there are some attempts to enhance the variety of content, one might say Times Square does not stand for minorities and the sake of commonwealth. It is a place that is known for its capitalist qualities and advertisement background. Furthermore, placing a banner in The Times Square is not something could have been managed without funding, which means people who hired the screens decided to spend a certain amount of resources of their people to advertise their problem, instead of providing immediate in place solutions. Likewise, 3 Billboard promotions are funded by the Outdoor Advertising Association of America. Perhaps their motivation was to popularise billboards to make a profit, rather than pointing out its potential to politicise publics and bursting filter bubbles. Anyhow, it sprang a movement -almost a fashion- that supported, albeit unintendedly, further protesting movements.

Although placing political statements, through images that are defined as art or banners about recent public events, still represents a form of advertisement, the potential beneficiaries are meant to be groups that cannot seek justice for themselves. Times Square hosting statements from all around the world, the ratio of the private benefiteres to the public ones might not be high enough to make a difference, yet however rarity provides the surprise effect. If political statements would become ubiquitous, then screen blindness might reappear in different forms, this time in meaning (content) as much as in form (digital materiality).

## CONCLUSION

The question of whether it is same to fake or hack *reality*, either with content or it means something else to distort

materially the actual space of the content-meeting attempted to answer through the example of Times Square. Architecture inherently dedicated to change the reality of immediate surroundings. The urge of avoiding external conditions of the atmosphere caused to search for a barrier or built one. Architecture stands to change- or further, it distorts. Anything in an artificial environment is under the effect of its surroundings -also what is artificial depends on the background of the experiencer, to the today's *citizens* of the world, the natural environment might feel like artificial, while cities define the natural- when the environment pushes the boundaries of the ordinary. Moreover, the light with its intensity seems to change the perception of time in this specific location. Perhaps the most powerful of all the senses, seeing, existentially depends on presence of light.

This paper tried to reveal the contribution of materiality (in content, meaning, and material property) in the reconstruction of public opinion via digital images on digital screens in public spaces. However, not only where the reality is heading with the recent ways of production, but also the trustworthiness of existing knowledge requires further investigation.

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