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The New Sphere of Knowledge A proposal for a monastery of the 21st century

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1. There are fundamental misunderstandings relating to the development of new information technologies. First, those technologies are broadly perceived as a means to save labour-time, generate more economic value, and lead the world from a industrial society to a so-called "knowledge society" which is in fact purely market-driven and profit-maximising. The underlying assumption is that the revolution consists merely in a translation from analogue to digital form which will bring extraordinary economies of scale.

2. While everyone speaks of Multimedia, they inevitably treat these developments as if it were a one-stop phenomenon relating to a single medium. Computers, for example, are actually devices for linking a great number of modalities: typed to printed, oral to typed, typed to oral, etc. This helps explain why the rhetoric of the "paperless society" completely missed the mark.

3. A fundamental consequence of this multi-modality is that computers challenge us to do much more than simply translate from one medium to another. They require a complete reassessment of interpretation in all its forms. Giving individuals power to express their own position means an extraordinary increase in the number of positions and new needs to establish criteria for distinguishing between these positions. The rhetoric speaks of computers in terms of quantity (number of GBytes etc.), while the new area of study is actually in terms of quality. We need electronic equivalents for authenticity, reliability, excellence. This means more work, not less work.

4. The market model thinks purely in terms of the cheapest solution. It tends to focus on machines and infrastructure rather than content. Excellence and quality are never the cheapest solution. They are always "uneconomical". Boards of management would have vetoed all the great monuments of culture as unproductive, be it the Vatican, Angkor Wat or the Pyramids. The market model tends to support the production of postcards and kitsch in supermarkets or appropriate outstanding cultural achievements in new forms. In the emerging multimedia world, the market driven approach consequently tends to rely only on existing examples rather than providing channels for the creation of new content.

5. The revolution lies more in the network linking computers than in computers themselves. The Network gives new meaning to Aristotle's phrase that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This "whole" has two vital aspects:

First it gives individuals potential access to materials dispersed in various libraries, museums, and other cultural and scientific institutions. As such, it transforms the meaning of collective memory. Second, it provides a framework where individuals separated by space and time can share the thoughts, interpretations and intuitions concerning this cultural heritage in order to arrive at new solutions, proposals and ideas.

6. In the Middle Ages, the essential strands of the Judaeo-Christian heritage and the Graeco-Roman civilisation were transmitted, reflected upon and ultimately transformed through the diligent, profoundly searching efforts of thousands of monks. The monasteries themselves underwent a complex evolution. Early examples typically sought places away from the large cities, in order to explore new combinations of work, study and spirituality, while later orders (eg. Franciscans and Dominicans) returned to play a vital role in the emergence of city-states and early modern urban life. None of these efforts would have satisfied a modern business plan and yet they created a new context for civilisation, which enabled the development of the modern world, including business.

7. The transformative process of the Middle Ages provides both a continuity and a separation between the slave cultures of Antiquity and the new freedoms of Modernity. At the heart of this process was a spiritual core which defined an incessant quest for truth and understanding as a means of praising God and manifesting the inherent potentials of his creation. This required enormous patience, dedication and a complete commitment which had nothing to do with deadlines or "the bottom line". Rather than delivering imperfect, simulative, deceptive and ultimately harmful results, the quest was guided by criteria of inner coherence and values that transcended the limits of time. They focussed on content and substance rather than appearance and effect.

8. Marshall McLuhan suggested that such a transition was brought about in part through changing media, in moving from oral culture to manuscripts, printed culture and, more recently, media such as radio and television. Whence the idea that the medium is the message. The advent of the computer, characterized by the buzzword "multimedia", has added something fundamentally new to this discussion. For it is no longer a simple question of one medium replacing another, rather a challenge of creating new connectivities among all existing media. We speak of convergence as if everything were being reduced to a single entity, whereas in fact convergence links a series of divergent and seemingly opposed media. A new challenge lies in integrating the combined capacities of these media. A single medium is no longer the message. Multi-media in its deeper sense means multiple access to knowledge.

9. We need to study the new messages which arise from these combinations. This requires much more time, given the increasing complexity of connectivity. More elements mean more relations. More interconnections mean more interpretations.

10. Malthus feared that the problem lay in producing enough. The modern world faces a very different problem: We are extremely wealthy - we have overproduction of everything, especially information. We are so focussed on production that we have no time to reflect on the products of our efforts. We could potentially satisfy every need in terms of production, but because we give ourselves no time for reflection, we are less and less able to fulfill the tasks of meaningful combination. We produce data, information, at best knowledge, but increasingly no wisdom. Our attention is so focussed on production or preventing overproduction, that our wealth is ironically making us poorer from day to day. Without time to assess our achievements, they threaten to become wasted wealth.

11. We need to reflect upon the extraordinary changes that are in the way which are transforming the human - machine interface on all fronts. The market rethoric is concerned only with producing the next CD-ROM or similar product. The market rethoric speaks of electronic commerce. Very few individuals have recognized that these latest developments and technologies will fundamentally alter the very meaning of production and change forever our notion of what it means not only to do business but to live meaningfully.

12. In addition to reflection, we need a new space spared and isolated from the currents modes of production to explore and realize the potentials of the materials around us - the virtual and the physical, since they are beginning to interact in new ways. No business plan can be drawn, no results can be foreseen, but we feel that we are in desparate need of a place leading to wisdom which will become a respository of new faith, hope and love with respect to the enormous heritage which is there but to which we have neither practical nor personal access. We need to supply this place with facilities to access the cultural heritage of mankind and deliver practical examples and applications of new tools for knowledge, meaning and wisdom). Earlier models focussed on the patrimony of a given nation, or a specific culture. Needed is a new space which embraces and respects all the cultures of the world, not just the great religions and famous civilisations, but also the lesser known tribes, the forgotten groups, the local communities. We need to understand the interconnectedness, not just between high and low culture, but also between universal and particular, between global and local - how the uniqueness of the everyday can find its proper place in a world where global standards connect us all.

Vienna, Monday 13th of October 1997

Urban designer and philosopher Paolo Soleri, the Cosanti Foundation and the residents of Arcosanti invite you to an experiential conference on cyberspace, arcology and human evolution. Join us for a weekend of critical discourse, music, immersive media, and the experience of Arcosanti, a prototype 21st century town in the Arizona high desert.

Paolo Soleri Presentation: The Paradox Project

Panel Discussions

Ambient Salon, Techno Concert/Dance, River Walk Café at Arcosanti Cuisine

P.S. 24 July 2003. Since this was written there are electronic monasteries such as that of Christ in the Desert (<http://www.christdesert.org/pax.html>;
cf. <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.08/es.cybermonks.html?pg=2&topic=>)
and electronic texts (See: www.eulogos.org). An electronic abbey Network (EAN) is also reported to be evolving.