Urban Informatics Research Lab, Queensland University of Technology

As told by Mark Bilandzic and Marcus Foth

How do you describe your lab to visitors? The Urban Informatics Research Lab brings together a group of people who focus their research on interdisciplinary topics at the intersection of social, spatial, and technical research domains—that is, people, place, and technology. Those topics are spread across the breadth of urban life—its contemporary issues and its needs, as well as the design opportunities that we have as individuals, groups, communities, and as a whole society. The lab's current research areas include urban planning and design, civic innovation, mobility and transportation, education and connected learning, environmental sustainability, and food and urban agriculture. The common denominator of the lab's approach is user-centered design research directed toward understanding, conceptualizing, developing, and evaluating sociotechnical practices as well as the opportunities afforded by innovative digital technology in urban environments.

What is a unique feature of your lab? The lab is unique in its mix of people with backgrounds in diverse fields such as architecture, software engineering, human-computer interaction, urban planning, cultural studies, and anthropology. Being part of the School of Design at Queensland University of Technology allows our lab to embrace the creative energy of a range of disciplines across technology, social media, digital fabrication, and urban design.

The lab currently comprises 35 members, including six post-docs and 17 research students, as well as research interns, assistants, and affiliated academics from across QUT. The lab's team is transdisciplinary in that it consists of and collaborates with people such as architects with degrees in media studies, software engineers with expertise in urban sociology, interaction designers with a grounding in cultural studies, and urban planners with an interest in digital media and social networking. The lab provides an ideal environment for a dynamic and vibrant research culture to flourish. The lab's research

culture includes a regular seminar series, weekly team meetings, an annual retreat, and mature mentoring arrangements.

Describe a day in the life of your lab.

There is no typical day. Every day is different. But in general, we all read a lot of academic papers, articles, and books on our subject matters. We spend lots of time outside the lab conducting fieldwork and user studies “in the wild,” hanging out with prospective users in their typical social environments or workplaces, trying to understand their motivations as well as their everyday issues and struggles. Then we get back to the lab, sometimes with the people we met, and sketch out new design ideas and build prototypes that we can observe users’ reactions on. Those activities vary a lot, often driven by co-design, spontaneous intuition, and sometimes iterated in daily or weekly cycles. One day you read a paper on cultural theory, and the next day you find yourself with a soldering iron in your hand—that’s quite common for us.

What is one feature of your lab that you could not do without? People in the lab usually have a dedicated interest or area of expertise, which can be technological (e.g., iOS development, open source hardware) or related to a particular methodology or theoretical framework. Because everyone knows each other, it is easy to get creative input and competent feedback.

What is one feature of your lab you want and do not have? Longer days. There are so many cool ideas, but there is only so much we can handle at a time. Alternatively, an army of minions to help us prepare for world domination!

How would you describe how people interact in your lab? We have a very informal, open, and friendly culture. There’s harmony but also

a good deal of creative friction, debate, and discussion. During lunch and our weekly Friday Rumbles, there are hot discussions, and viewpoints are challenged critically and constructively. Having a tech nerd, an architect, and a cultural theorist sitting around a table can be quite exciting. We regularly find our horizons being widened in many directions. The lab extends these interactions to external partners internationally through remote collaborations, so although at times members may be physically distant, through the use of technology they are virtually co-present.

What is the one thing you see as most important about the work you do there? Our research coincides with a historic moment: Cities house the major infrastructures as well as the majority of the world’s population. Urbanization presents many complex challenges that we are extremely passionate about. This inspiration has seen us become one of the foremost research labs in Australia and the world in the area of urban interaction design and ubiquitous computing, and an international thought leader and early adopter of the notion of urban informatics—now embraced by universities (e.g., NYU, CUSP) and industry (e.g., Arup, McKinsey) worldwide.

We regard technology not as an end to research, but rather as a means to provide new tools that enhance the human condition. In order to create and design innovative, interactive, and intuitive technology, we need to study and understand the richness and sometimes messiness of human life and the nature of all its challenges and issues from a range of perspectives and facets. We believe this is best achieved in a collaborative and participatory manner. This thinking is a crucial element in the DNA of our lab.

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