Aarhus Internet Cafe

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Consider the internet cafe. No, not your local coffee shop with wifi, but the internet cafe, equipped with desktop computers and screens for public use at a fee by the minute or hour. The *cybercafe*, as it was. In an age of 5G and ubiquitous digital connectivity, the internet cafe is a vanishing relic of an early millennial moment when the internet revealed itself as *place.* Today, most are free to browse the web in the comfort of their homes: curtains drawn, in the basement, or nestled behind the digital veil of iPhone's privacy mode. Such confines spatially enable our equally secluded media bubbles. On the web, we seek out digital communities of consensus, reinforcing our social and political ideologies, or trolling those who do not share our views. To that point, social scientists in the United States have found a robust correlation between the number of broadband providers in a region, broadband media access, and partisan division.[1] Similarly, researchers at the New York University Stern Center for Business and Human Rights have concluded that social media has significantly amplified what they term "affective polarization" – a form of political animus so extreme that one sees the ideological other as an existential threat to one's country.[2] But if we look back at cyber history – squinting – we might see the internet cafe as a complexly negotiated social space that could complicate our divisively siloed media habits. We might then also understand the internet itself as a social space – one coexistent with the space of internet access. In this light, the internet cafe recalls its Habermasian namesake as a venue for the emergence of public life through encounter with difference, virtual and IRL.

MEDIA ARCHEOLOGY

EXTENTS's Aarhus Internet Cafe is a critical recovery of the early cybercafe. Designed to interrupt the pathologies of our present techno-spatial cultures, the project draws on archival research into the qualities of several early internet cafes that emerged in the twilight of the 20th century. Our research and design methodology has been deeply influenced by theorists and practitioners of media archaeology. Key scholars in this discourse include Siegfried Zielinski, Erkki Huhtamo, Thomas Elsaesser, Anne Friedberg, Jussi Parrika, and others.[3] A heterogeneous and interdisciplinary method of study, media archaeology often complicates modernist narratives of seamless technological progress through the

study of obsolete, aborted, or lapsed media formats, their materialities and protocols. In doing so, media archaeological theorists shift media studies away from routinised focus on the form and content of dominant media formats, and towards the conditions of emergence of forgotten episodes of media development. To this point, in an early essay defining his conception of media archaeology theorist Erkki Huhtamo noted:

> *Registering false starts, seemingly ephemeral phenomena and anecdotes about media can sometimes be more revealing that tracing the fates of machines that were patented, industrially fabricated and widely distributed in the society – let alone the lives of their creators – if our focus is on the meanings that emerge from the social practices related to the use of technology.[4]*

Such focus on obsolete technologies or 'false starts' in technological development is not in the interest of a nostalgic obsession with the past, but rather to denaturalize conceptions of the present as an inevitable outcome of progress. Indeed, Jussi Parikka notes: "What should have become clear by now is that, while media archaeology writes histories of the present, it is also looking for alternative presents and pasts – and futures."[5] This interest in alternative temporalities often leads media archaeologists to conceive of complex conceptions of time, from the millennia-long duration of non-linear media emergence carefully analysed in Siegfried Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media*, to Huhtamo's conception of *topoi*, or thematic loops of recurrence in the development of media technologies across eras.[6] Parikka summarizes: "What media-archaeological practices are good at doing is forcing us to think about time as pleated. Outside the linear 'earlier-later' time axis, this shows that time spreads in all directions."[7]

Importantly, as a loosely-defined and heterogenous sub-discipline, media archaeology gathers both scholars and creative practitioners under its mantle. As Parikka makes clear, aesthetic and artistic production has been core to the development of media archaeological discourse: "Media archaeology has never been only a pure academic endeavour, but, from its early phases in the 1980s and 1990s, has also been a field in which media artists have been able to use themes, ideas and inspiration from past media too in order to investigate what the newness in 'new media' means."[8] Thus, with this project we join a legacy of aesthetic practitioners, such as Paul DeMarinis, Zoe Belott, and David Link, whose work has been discussed by media archaeological theorists.[9] Distinct from the above practitioners, we enter this

discourse as architects, bringing heightened attention to the spatial cultures of technology. While architecture has its own contested legacies of mobilizing history and precedent as impetus for design, stepping outside of our discipline to draw on media archaeology allows us to centre myriad ways that techno-cultures and spatial cultures have richly intertwined and recurred non-linearly across time, while also reflecting on striking similarities between mythologies of technological progress between architecture and media. Moreover, drawing on the non-linear conception of time within media archaeology allows us to design for revisitations of past-futures in order to resist the hegemonic naturalisation of technological progress, at a time when the emergence of a big-tech oligarchy and what theorist John Chenney-Lippold has termed 'silicon valley futurity' makes exclusive claims on our planetary future.[10]

A BRIEF MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE INTERNET CAFE

In a common narrative, the internet is portrayed as a singular global entity that usurps and homogenises cultural and geographic differences. Tied to that notion is the idea that the internet emerged exclusively through the march of technological progress. But countering these narratives, internet historians have pointed towards historic place-based social and material conditions as formative of a richly heterogenous internet.[11] By borrowing the methods of media archaeology to look back at episodes of such heterogeneity in the emergence of the early internet cafe, we seek to recover past-futures of the internet that might challenge the naturalisation of our contemporary and often-pathological spatial cultures of internet consumption. We have concentrated our study between the years 1994 and 1995, before spatial habits around internet usage were normalised. In this brief temporal window, cafes emerged with subtle but compelling attributes that could be valuable hacks for spatially re-socialising the internet.

In some accounts, the internet cafe was first imagined in 1994 by the British artist and technologist Ivan Pope. Commissioned for the influential *Towards the Aesthetics of the Future* show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, Pope's *Cybercafe* – a term he created – was simply composed of LAN-wired Apple computers for public use, presented on cafe tables. That early installation was followed later the same year by the first commercial cybercafe, Cyberia, also in London.[12] Soon after, cafes quickly emerged globally.

Our research has focused on journalistic accounts of the emergence of internet cafes, or cybercafes, drawing primarily on archival databases of newspapers in the English-speaking world. We have found productively awkward attempts to contend with the materiality of digital infrastructure, and compelling bodily and visual relationships between cafe occupants. For example, an establishment simply called *New Internet Cafe* in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1995 featured custom-made tables with CRT monitors and CPUs recessed below a glass table surface, insisting on the social norm of eye contact between cafe patrons, while integrating internet browsing functionality [fig. 1 and 2].[13]
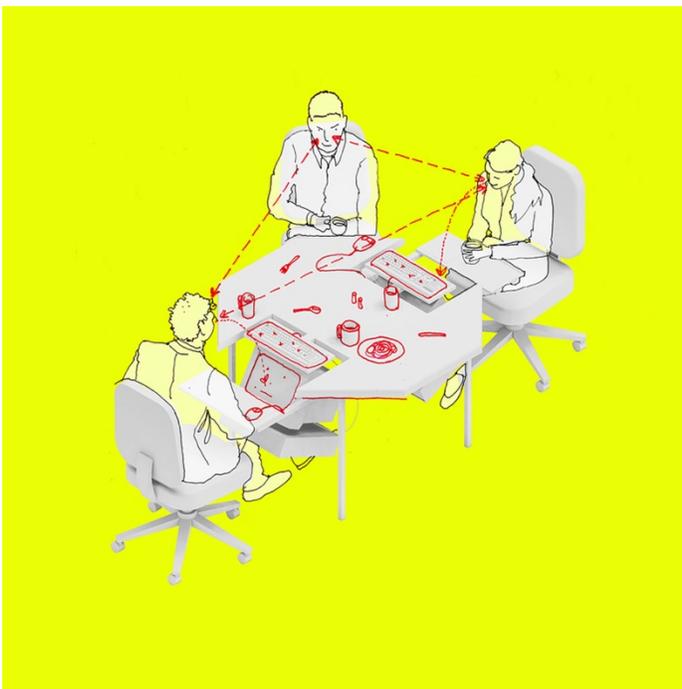

Figure 1. Diagram showing computers at *New Internet Cafe* in Johannesburg, South Africa recessed below a glass table sur Face so that eye contact could be maintained between cafe patrons while browsing the internet. (Illustration by author.)

Figure 2. *New Internet Cafe* in Johannesburg South Africa, 1995. (Image © Drusilla Menaker.)

Meanwhile, a 1995 cafe in Frankfurt, Germany named *CybeRyder* demonstrated a starkly contrasting model of how internet connectivity would enter social space. The Frankfurt cafe featured a grid of atomized internet access kiosks, each a kind of totemic figure gathering a CPU in a tall tower, topped with a CRT monitor, and with a small surface for a keyboard, mouse, and coffee cantilevered off of the central tower [fig. 3 and 4].

Figure 3. Diagram showing a grid of atomised internet access kiosks at *CybeRyder* in Frankfurt, Germany that allowed some users to view the screens of the users in front of them.
(Illustration by author.)

Figure 4. *CybeRyder* in Frankfurt, Germany, 1995.
(Image © The Associated Press)

The figural totems are organized in the space so that each user can see the screens of the users in front of them, inadvertently creating a one-directional hierarchy of surveillance and privacy.[14] Elsewhere, we have found cafes exhibiting uncanny moments when computers appear anthropomorphized, and quietly radical attempts to hybridise and overlay the cultural activities of drinking, dining, and computing. For example, New York's 1995 *@cafe* in the East Village included four-top tables in which three seats were occupied by human patrons, while the seat typically held by a fourth human was occupied by a shared CPU and monitor [fig. 5 and 6]. The keyboard and mouse were inserted on a crowded tabletop, amidst a field of cups and plates, forks and knives – conflating and confusing the social protocols typically prompted by tableware and consumer technology [fig. 7].[15] One more compelling example is *Cybersmith*, from Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1994. There, computers were integrated into what otherwise appears to be the counter at a local bar. Patrons occupied counter seating, passing glances at one another, while a bartender stared down, serving drinks and spilling tea [fig. 8 and 9].[16] These examples join many more that we have uncovered, analysed, and diagrammed, in order to critically recast characteristics of these early internet cafes in our design for the present.
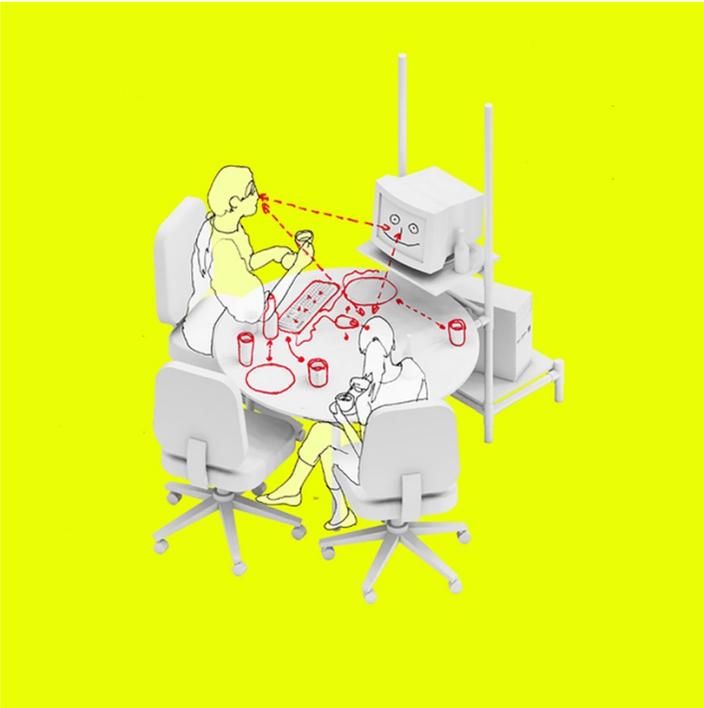
Figure 5. Diagram showing a computer at the *@cafe* in New York, New York occupying a seat at the table as if it were a fellow patron. (Illustration by author.)
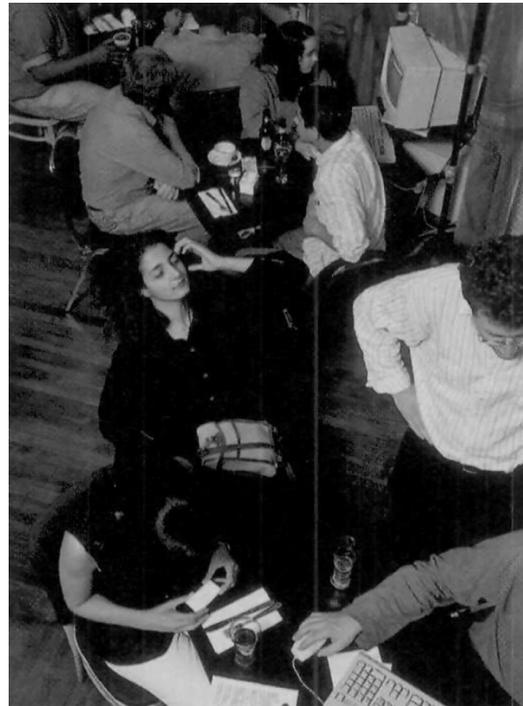

Figure 6. *@cafe* in New York, New York, 1995. (Image © Newsday/Ari Minz.)

Figure 7. A mix of computer-related and dining-related objects populating a shared table at the *@cafe*, conflating the social protocols of computing and eating. (Image © Newsday/Ari Minz.)
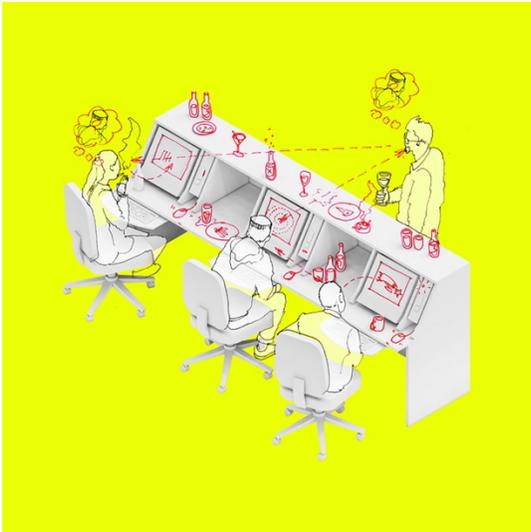
Figure 8. Diagram showing computers integrated into a bar counter at *Cybersmith* in Cambridge, Massachusetts that allowed patrons and bartenders to exchange glasses and glances. (Illustration by author.)

Figure 9. *Cybersmith* in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994 (Image © The Associated Press.)

THE AARHUS INTERNET CAFE

Drawing on our analyses, we designed and constructed an internet cafe intended to intervene in 21st century digital habits, spatially re-socializing the internet by staging critical relationships between people, technology, and food. Our cafe recasts conditions we observed in Johannesburg, Frankfurt, and elsewhere through a novel approach to surface, structure, and equipment.

Beginning with surface, we combine rectangular and circular tabletops to both leverage and subvert the ways each shape conditions behaviour. Circular tables naturally support collective discussion since all participants face one another, while rectangular tables tend to orient users forward, limiting interaction to adjacent or opposing sides. This forward-facing bias also makes rectangles conducive to computer-based work. Additionally, rectangular tables are often associated with a social hierarchy (see 'head of the table') or etiquette (see 'elbows in') that is less common in circular configurations.

In our internet cafe, we shear some of the rectangular tabletops off of their frames and insert circles into the voids created by those shears in order to destabilize digital and dining habits, and to create visual and spatial relationships across surfaces and guests that draw on qualities of the cybercafes we studied. This slippage between surface and structure prompts users to question their behaviour against a literal frame of reference and reorganise themselves around the technology. One circular surface even functions like a rotating tray sometimes found on large restaurant tables, which we customise to hold a computer among shared platters of food. As the circle revolves, the screen becomes visible from multiple angles, redistributing attention. We drilled small holes describing grids into some surfaces, creating continuities between tables, further extending visual relationships, and demarcating zones for potential gathering. In addition to these dot patterns, the circle recurs throughout the cafe – in glassware, mousepads, brackets, and spacers – conflating eating and computing through geometric correspondence. We also distribute an array of forks, cups, and other dining-related objects across the tables as a way of overlaying cues for one cultural activity onto another, like drawing a basketball court on a football pitch.

Supporting these surfaces is a heterogenous mix of structural systems, including wood members, T-slots, angles, and pre-drilled aluminium extrusions, hacked to playfully unite through custom-designed brackets. Hybridising systems makes our cafe appear less rigid and more provisional, echoing the destabilizing effect of our loosely arranged tabletops. T-slot and pre-drilled aluminium extrusions were chosen because of their adaptability and association with 'do-it-yourself' culture. With T-slot rails, for example, components can be easily mounted along their grooves. Applying this system to our cafe enables us to repurpose a ceiling-mounted mesh tray typically used to manage cables as table-mounted storage for utensils and plates. In other words, the latitude afforded by our hybrid construction helps us further combine digital and dining protocols in unconventional ways.

Custom brackets not only hold the structure together but also emphasise moments of material assembly, like where metal meets wood or where surface meets structure. Finished in bright orange, they call attention to how the cafe articulates digital and social connection through the celebration of atypical physical joints. The brackets also reinforce the project's DIY ethos by signalling, in the spirit of early computing and hacker culture, that the system is modifiable with simple hand tools.

Since our cafe aims to re-socialise the internet, its equipment only loosely resembles the kinds of computers and accessories found on desks today. Instead of heavy tower units and monitors, we opt for mini-computers and lightweight screens – comparable in size to a coffee cup and a serving dish, respectively – that patrons could easily reposition. Each station includes a wireless mouse and a mechanical keyboard whose audible keystrokes subtly define space through sound. While most machines are new, a single CRT monitor is installed beneath the bar counter, reproducing a condition we observed in the Cambridge cafe. Just as the CRT monitor's phosphor-coated screen presents today's internet differently, a customised Linux operating system with minimalist windows and nonstandard controls defamiliarises web browsing on every computer. Ultimately, our internet cafe invites visitors to share a table with friends, strangers, and tech – to sign-in, browse, and celebrate connection: digital, social, and tectonic.

Is our return to the internet cafe merely a nostalgic longing for a bygone era? Does hardwiring technology into the dinner table only exasperate our Digital Stockholm Syndrome?[17] We recognize that our project begs these questions, and we find critical importance in their consideration. We also recognise a latent cultural desire – a 'structure of feeling' in Raymond Williams's sense of the term[18] – that yearns for an alternative relationship to digital technology, as evidenced by the emergence of products related to digital detox, digital wellness, and even phone distraction management. Within this context, our media archaeological recovery of the early internet cafe seeks to challenge, or "counter-enshittify,"[19] the naturalised, corporate-regulated, and often-pathological spatial cultures that characterise internet consumption today by offering an alternative model for connection in a digital age. Our project learns from the past in order to reimagine digital life in the present. We hope our project prompts still more questions: *What if the internet was a place? What if the internet had business hours? What if a person's online beliefs could be tested more frequently against offline discussions with those with differing viewpoints? What if we could have an active role in shaping how technologies serve us?* To ponder these questions together, we suggest returning to the internet cafe.

Notes

[1] Yphtach Lelkes, Gaurav Sood and Shanto Iyengar, "The Hostile Audience: The Effect of Access to Broadband Internet on Partisan Affect," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 61, no. 1 (2017): 13.

[2] Paul M. Barrett, Justin Hendrix, and J. Grant Sims, *Fueling the Fire: How Social Media Intensifies U.S. Political Polarization – And What Can be Done about It,* NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, September 2021.

[3] Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (MIT Press, 2008).

Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (University of California Press, 2011).

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Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Polity Press, 2021).

[4] Erkki Huhtamo. "From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes toward an Archaeology of the Media," *Leonardo*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1997): 223.

[5] Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?,* 12-13

[6] Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (MIT Press, 2008).

[7] Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?,* 147.

[8] Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?,* 2.

[9] These artists have been discussed by Parikka in particular. Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?,* 136-158.

[10] John Cheney-Lippold. "The Silicon Future," *New Media & Society*, vol. 27, no. 7 (2024): 4164-4180.

[11] Janet Abbate, "What and where is the Internet? (Re)defining Internet histories," *Internet Histories*, vol. 1, nos. 1-2 (2016): 8-14.

[12] Magda Romanska. "Cafe Culture History, Part 5: The History of the Cybercafe," Arts Emerson, March 23, 2012, https://artsemerson.org/2012/03/23/cafe-culture-history-part-5-the-history-of-the/.

[13] Drusilla Menaker, "Africa yearns to go on-line," *The San Francisco Examiner*, December 31, 1995, 12.

[14] Mieke Giani (Associated Press), "Internet cafes hit Germany," *Star-Gazette*, November 17, 1995, 22.

[15] David Garrick, "espresso@cafe.nyc," *Newsday*, May 1, 1995, 52.

[16] Richard Lorant (Associated Press), "Cafe offers cappuccino and computers," *The Press Democrat*, February 14, 1995, 8.

[17] This is a term coined by architectural historian Mark Jarzombek. See: Mark Jarzombek, *Digital Stockholm Syndrome in the Post-Ontological Age* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[18] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press. 1977), 128-135.

[19] This is referring to the term "enshittification" borrowed from journalist Cory Doctorow. See: Cory Doctorow, *Enshittification: Why Everything Suddenly Got Worse and What to Do About It* (Macmillan Publishers, 2025).

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