



Introduction: The Multi Plication of Data

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Data is the currency of the information age. While we bear witness to this every day in the targeted ads we confront when we open our computers or turn on our smart phones, it is even more invasive and ubiquitous than it seems. It is constantly being produced, stored, duplicated, and exchanged. The challenge of this information surplus is how to process it into something meaningful.

Most of the data we store is not worth the computational power or energy required to classify and organize it systematically. Moreover, the continuous accumulation of data creates an ever-entangling, disconnected web that increases in complexity over time and further complicates any useful distillation. Complication, after all, is the multi-*pli*-cation of various, discrete complexities. And as Greg Lynn notes, “to become complicated is to be involved in multiple complex, intricate connections.”ⁱ Such complexities challenge all forms of systematic organization—even processes that are rote for computers.

The traditional approach to data storage has always been one of classification. But for data to be more useful beyond simple tagging and recollection, one needs to understand its complexity—that is, the various attributes and peculiarities that are specific to and that might not be easily defined by a single category. Furthermore, data is rarely static, and as information changes over time, it further defies conventional cataloguing logics. The key to unlocking its usefulness is to sort data using new methods that allow previously disconnected information to co-mingle and form connections across categories. Such strategies provide constant feedback as data

mutates and transforms. Who knows what will emerge from these new mixtures, and that is exactly the point.

In his book *Radical Technologies*, Adam Greenfield notes:

*Most of the world’s data—and virtually all that’s germane to systems that operate in physical space and in real time—does not happen to reside in the neat tables or crisply cellular structure of any databases, and never will. So the new way of handling such situations is to look for emergent patterns in previously unstructured data, like a large body of text, a series of images, or indeed a real-time video feed...As they are iteratively resolved in ever higher fidelity, the patterns themselves begin to suggest the questions that might be asked of them.*ⁱⁱ

The papers from this year’s TxA Emerging Design + Technology conference all tackle this theme in one way or another. The challenge facing contemporary architecture practices is not how to collect and organize data, but how to sift through large amounts of disparate things, bring new connections to the fore, and then to figure out what to do with them. This new frontier of information-based design unlocks hidden narratives and sheds light on the unrepresented. These new combinations can break boundaries, collapse hierarchies, and set up design possibilities that traditional classification techniques would never allow. As these papers prove, once data is free from its categorical shackles, these revelatory discoveries can inform new materiality, promote social agendas, and increase disciplinary overlaps. We can recover a generative and creative intelligence in data that has been buried up until now.

ⁱ Greg Lynn, “Architectural Curvilinearity: The Folded, the Pliant and the Supple,” in *Architectural Design* 63: *Folding Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1993), 27.

ⁱⁱ Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 2017), 211.