

From control rooms to situation rooms

José Pérez de Lama / hackitectura.net, 2009

1/ Maps and control rooms

In a lecture entitled *Enclosed by images*, given in Sevilla in 2007, Beatriz Colomina directed our attention towards the works of Charles and Ray Eames and their connection with what she called *situation rooms*. She further identified these productions with the origin of the world of images that we are inhabiting in the present.

Professor Colomina explained the secret participation of architects and designers, such as Buckminster Fuller, in the production of the concept, and the development, of the first modern *war rooms* during World War II, rooms with maps and projections that enabled the military and political leaders to monitorize and direct the war's theater of operations.

These rooms were directly related to the control rooms of fordism, where the command and control of the great industries and energetic plants was performed, but also with the cartographies that were historically used to plan military strategies and tactics, and with the urbanistic maps used in the 19th and earlier 20th century to plan and control the territorial transformations that lead to the development of the modern metropolis.

In 1959, Charles and Ray Eames, together with Buckminster Fuller and other collaborators, installed in Moskau a media device that, after Colomina, was directly inspired in Fuller's war experiences. It was a huge geodesic dome, incorporating 7 large scale screens on its interior side. On these screens, the Eames projected *Glimpses of the USA*, an audiovisual production composed by simultaneous and extremely fast – for the age – series of slides, showing the Moskovite public the technological and industrial in the United States. Given that the USSR, that had recently launched the Sputnik, was in front of the technological and military race, the Eames' diaporama focused on presenting an image of technologies serving daily life, as conceived by the American Dream – kitchens and automobiles occupying a paramount place – thus, incorporating mediatic production of subjectivity, as we understand it today, into the context of situation rooms.

Advancing the texture of our contemporary condition, the speed and simultaneity of images, their immersive character and the subsequent impossibility of concentrating in a single linear discourse, in the sense that it might have had until then, were central parts of the Eames' communication-and-production of subjectivity concept. Colomina describes their mediatic device as a devastating arm in the context of Cold War.

This new media-architecture of the Eames and Fuller in Moskau is not only composed by tectonic elements; in this new architecture, space, as understood in a traditional sense, is assembled with hardware, software and images to produce a new experience of the world (1).

2 / From control rooms to situation rooms

Since then, situation rooms have multiplied and diversified, multiplying as well their capabilities. Continuing with the classic model (that associated with the red telephone in Kubrik's *Doctor Strangelove*, 1964), we find control rooms in nuclear power plants, in television studios or in the ISS (International Space Station) control center. However, the project to command and control faces processes unfolding away of the linear schemes of the world of fordist industrial production. These processes have become reticular, with continuously variable geometries, proliferating, virical, catastrophic... We find the new situation rooms in the traffic control centers of the posmetropolis, in rooms that centralize border control in the Straits of Gibraltar or the US-Mexico border, in the police central stations of cities like Los Angeles with their networks of CCTV cameras, helicopters and rapid deployment units... (Soja, 2000). And we have to suppose that they can be found as well in the centers *trying to manage* communication and energy networks, multinationals, stock exchanges and the new wars such as those taking place in Irak, Gaza - and the so called, during the Bush years, global war on terrorism.

Another outstanding aspect, is the exponential growth of the operation rooms capabilities to gather data and to act remotely and in real time, - due to the combination of data digitalization, proliferation of communication networks, electronic miniaturization (sensors and actuators) and wireless communication (satellites, cell phones, etc. - Mitchell, 2003).

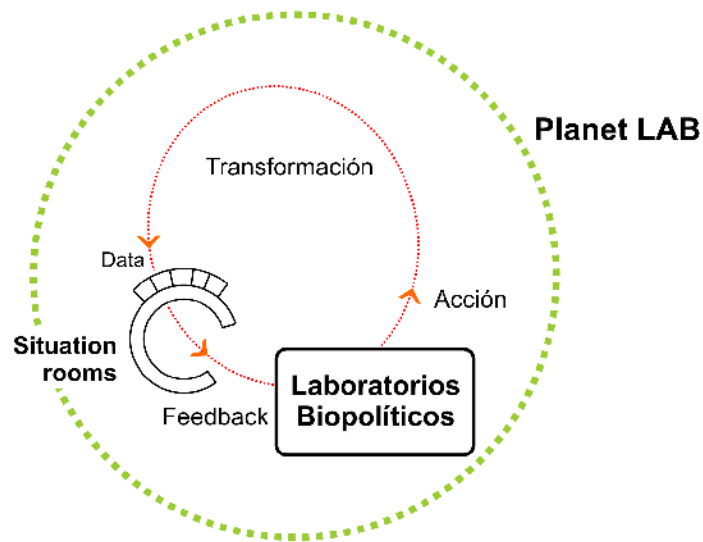
The ways to perform in this new reticular, global, complex scenario are new, too. Instead of the tree like systems and direct cause-effects linear relations, new concepts and tools have emerged, such as strategic planning, asymmetries, externalities, competitive advantages, attractors, catalysts, enzymatic action, swarm architecture, self-organized processes, protocols, p2p communication, social networks, living systems... (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; De Landa, 2001; Johnson, 2001).

William Mitchel, MIT Media Lab former director, has pointed out the apparent paradox of the informational city, where the trend is not towards the centralization of control, but rather towards its distribution (2003); the way it has occurred in the WWW, where, as its main inventor and promotor, Tim Berners-Lee writes, the main effort has been to keep it out of control, - that is beyond any centralized control -, so that it could proliferate and become richer in complexity and diversity (1999).

3 / Global laboratories

It is pertinent to remind Bruno Latour's speculations about the laboratories of the present. According to the French thinker, there has been a qualitative transformation in the conditions of experimentation and laboratories. While through Modernity experiments were carried out in closed spaces and reduced scales, the complexity and speed of the present has determined that nowadays, experiments truly relevant for the world transformation are taking place in a 1:1 scale, in a global scale, and that all of us are, without choice, taking part in them. The author refers us to issues such as climatic change, capitalist globalization, the emergence of new forms of citizenship, the explosion of megapolis, the economic crisis... Latour's answer to this situation is to reclaim a system of control and monitorization of these processes, that makes them visible as experiments involving all of us, - and to reclaim that the decisions guiding them are taken in a global democratic way. In some occasions, Latour has proposed the concept of a *parliament of ideas*, where

participants would include governments, social organizations, technical experts, agents directly affected – human and non-human... (Latour, 2001).



Situation Room | diagrama 01
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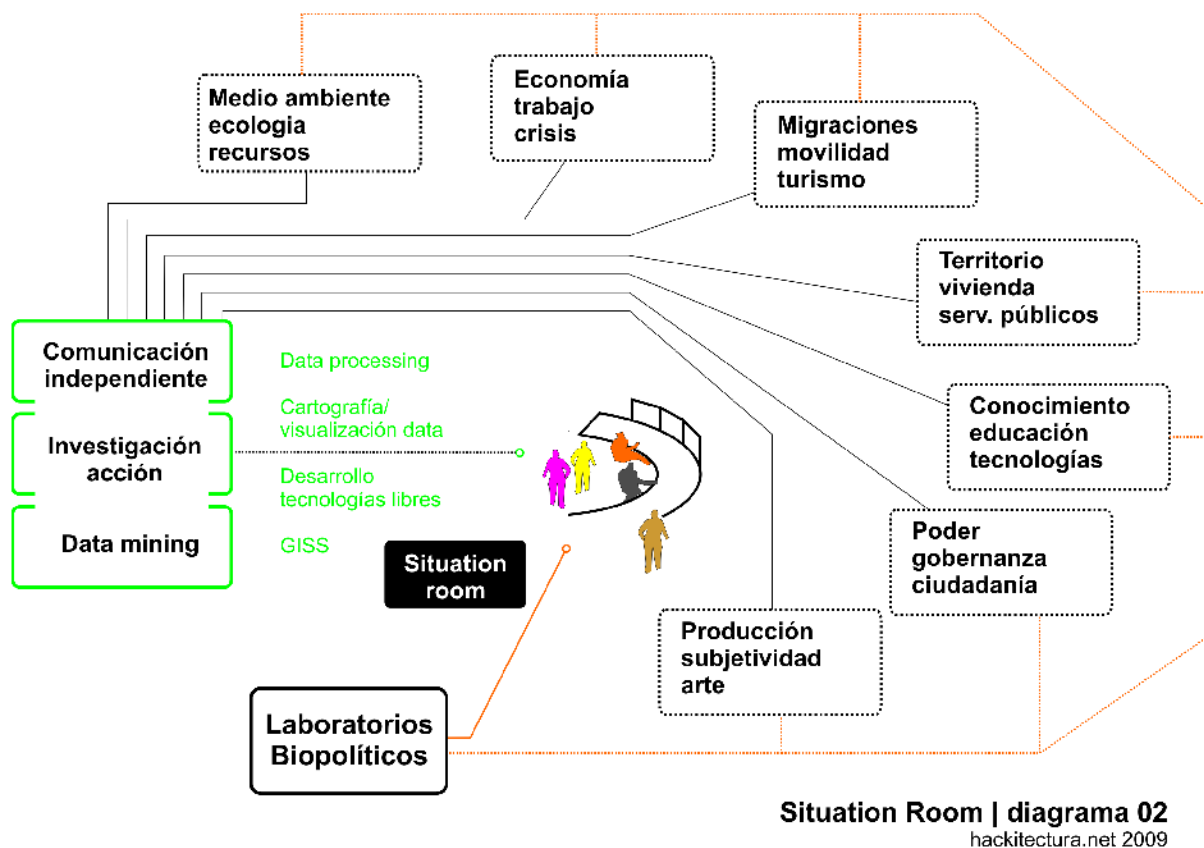
4 / Citizens' situation rooms

Departing from this context, at their intervention at Gijón's LABoral in 2008, Pablo de Soto and hackitectura.net presented a simulation of a new media-architecture concept of situation room. The device evokes formal and visually the conventional image of situation rooms. However, it proposes some differences.

The first difference is that it proposes an architecture of open source, therefore available to be freely used and replicated by the citizenship.

The second consists in its insertion in a different *machinic filum*, as Deleuze and Guattari would have described it; a *hacker machinic filum* that proposes the assemblage of the knowledge and experiences accumulated by the social movements during the last decade: medialabs and hacklabs, vj culture and free visualization tools, autonomous mapping projects, independent communication practices.

The third one consists in its design to become part of distributed networks. This idea of situation room is not proposed as a central command and control node, but as a multiplication of devices that together constitute a distributed network of social action spaces, - biopolitical production labs (Lazzarato, 2006)-, dedicated to research-action, communication, network organization and to the *feedback* management of their transformative action inside the world; an ecosophic machine for *cyborg becomings* of the multitude.



Notes

(1) In 1958, a year before the project in Moskau by Buckminster Fuller and the Eames, Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis built the Phillips pavilion at the universal exhibition in Brussels. At ZKM, this project is presented as the first multimedia building in history. Other interesting cases in this genealogy, are the media-architecture experiments of the underground collective *The Merry Pranksters*, carried out in California during the first half the 1960's. The latter connecting directly with the California hacker culture and through this path with hackitectura.net's Situation Room project. A detailed study of these practices, from the architectural point of view, is developed in my PhD Thesis (2007).

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