

# The Algorithm that Ate the Street

## A Recursive Urbanism

Paul Guzzardo's work examines the intersection of artificially intelligent machines and the City Street. The impact of each on the other is explored through probes, or what he calls *The Storyboards*. Guzzardo's storyboards simultaneously examine and sketch the digitisation of the human experience. As artists, architects, and writers explore the world of "machines and us," Guzzardo is keen to find a workable response to this dizzying dynamic. He calls it *Recursive Urbanism (RU)*.

**T**he *Algorithm that Ate the Street* is the name for a current line of *Recursive Urbanism (RU)* research carried out by Paul Guzzardo. The research examines the skirmish between the street and advancing digital code. A recent *Algorithm* iteration consisted of a set of eight storyboards and the video short *Read the Bubble*. Both were presented and displayed at an Annual International Conference of the *Architectural Humanities Research Association*. Paul Guzzardo aims to use blockchain technology to make recursive urbanism accessible to larger audience.

### A BACKGROUND STREET AND FOREGROUND PLAYERS, POSSES, AND KIT

The street was Washington Avenue St. Louis, Missouri. In the first half of the 20th century the Avenue was the axis-axel of the St. Louis garment district. A generation plus later the street was the stage for RU research. Washington Avenue was used as a probe into what Hannah Arendt called "a space of appearance." The early probes occurred between 1996 and 2005. They included a media nightclub, multimedia theatres, party walls projections, and a street

theatre lab. All of it happened when machine learning and coding algorithms were beginning to take over not only urban planning, but our lives.

Guzzardo's RU probes and the storyboards looked to the street as an anchor, a lodestar to keep us grounded while being "slammed by this gale force of code." The 1996–2005 research led to a RU toolkit. In a line of 2018–19 UNESCO presentations the toolkit was given the name "Digital Street Lab in the Box" or the DSLB.

### 1937: MCLUHAN'S PROPHETIC POSSE

Before he was internationally known as a "media guru" Marshall McLuhan was a little known professor at Saint Louis University. While at the school from 1937–44 McLuhan organised a posse of collaborators. One was the Jesuit Walter Ong who would later write:

*"If the human community is to retain meaningful possession of the knowledge it is accumulating, breakthroughs to syntheses of new order are absolutely essential."*

McLuhan's posse wrote code. The posse hammered out an early code, an essential language if we hope to retain meaningful possession of knowledge. The posse's code predicted that media technologies would create "interconnected cities" and an "interconnected us." McLuhan not only foresaw what fifty years later Guzzardo and others would call *data glut*, but he offered a prophetic description of a World Wide Web. McLuhan coined it the *global village*.

### 1996: ANOTHER POSSE

Guzzardo used McLuhan's code and two St. Louis shuttered shoe factories to assemble



Top left: Paul Guzzardo with Ustad Imrat Khan.



and launch a posse of researchers. The factories were Walk Over Shoe and Buster Brown Shoe. Both shoe buildings were flagships in a once vibrant American garment district. Guzzardo's Walk Shoe posse include the teenagers Paul B. Davis and Joe Beuckman. Davis and Beuckman made music hacking into obsolete 8-bit computers. Later they gained national attention for their Beige Art Collective. Working alongside them was the patina colourist-artist Robin Nelson. The fifth in that posse was the International renowned Hindustani musician Ustad Imrat Khan. Guzzardo was then Khan's agent and a scribe for the Ustad's autobiography.

A second creative assemblage was housed three blocks away in the Buster Brown building. It's where Guzzardo set up a street front Media Lab that operated off and on for three years. Starting in 1996, and continuing in the years that followed, Buster Brown was home to

a posse of tech-code wizards. One of the collaboratives was Mira. Mira was founded by James McKelvey and other Washington University researchers. The teenage Jack Dorsey, the future Twitter and SQUARE co-founder, was then a Mira application (app) designer. While at Buster Brown Guzzardo joined forces with an ever-changing line of the

jockeys, programmers, designers, actors, musicians, graphic artists, urban planners, and developers. All the players shared a gradual awareness of the digital whirlpool we were bobbing in. Some of their efforts (research) worked, some not so well. But each bolstered the other, each with a different way of using the street to see "the algorithm around corner."

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digerati programmers. They assisted in RU development and DSLB research. They worked closely with Guzzardo in the development of probes and storyboards. This was a unique moment. It may have been the first time ever a posse grabbed the street as a platform to examine big data and machine learning.

### EARLY PROBES AND STORYBOARDS

An abridged list of recursive probes and performativity storyboards follow. All involved a changing cast of disc/video

### PARTY WALLS

There were three Washington Avenue monumental party wall projections: The Living Wall was in 1997. The closing episode of the Jerry Seinfeld show happened in May 1998. Last was *Postcards from the Global Village: Postcards* was a December 31, 1999 Millennium New Year's Eve Remix Bash. It was global send-off party that winked at St. Louis's McLuhan heritage. It was timed as McLuhan was being dusted off and revived. *Wired Magazine* had just declared McLuhan its



"Patron Saint." Postcards from the *Global Village* worked. It slipped past colossal TV, pickled nostalgia, and techno community scroll. It demonstrated how street probes and storyboards could use recursion and performance to fashion an agora where reflective citizens gather.

#### A NIGHT CLUB

1997 and 1998: The Walk Over Shoe factory turn into the hip nightclub, Club Cabool. Cabool was a St. Louis first; first with ADSL broadband (Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line), first with web cameras, first with online voyeur-watchers, first with jockeys perched on a scaffold mixing - remixing web sites and sending it out on the Internet. The club, a theatre for recursive play and a burlesque cruncher for thoughts, generated storyboards. In the face of a slamming data glut the storyboards were face-shields.

#### SECRET BAKER CYCLE

2002-2005: The goal here was to reach out to a broad audience with "a story board-story telling" tool. The Secret Baker Cycle was the tool, a tool wielded by fifty some artists over the years. Secret Baker was constructed as a mosaic, culled from thousands of pages of the FBI files of Josephine Baker, Walter Winchell, and J. Edgar Hoover. It treated these three historical figures as allegorical characters in an "information age morality tale." The cycle critiqued big data and the national security state. The Secret Baker storyboard venues included theatres, cinemas, concerts halls, nightclubs, galleries and of course the street.

#### THE THREAD: MYTHIC BLUEPRINTS

Nested in myth, Guzzardo's storyboards (sometimes named epic triage stations) are an alternative to the traditional urban planning briefs. They suggest a new mythic stew, a mythic blueprint as a firewall against what Guzzardo's Blockchain colleagues term "cultural code smell." A little background is helpful here. Code Smell is an old programming term, defined as:

In computer programming code smell is any symptom in the source code of a programme that possibly indicates a deeper problem. Code smells are usually not bugs - they are

not technically incorrect and don't currently prevent the programme from functioning. Instead, they indicate weaknesses in design that may be slowing down development or increasing the risk of bugs or failures in the future. But when code is a slow, wretchedly designed mess that's hard to maintain, programmers talk about stench. The metaphor becomes olfactory, the swirl of gases that rise from rot and decay. *Coders: The Making of a New Tribe and the Remaking of the World by Clive Thompson.*

## Machines cannot be stopped but maybe we can find a way to hold onto our humanity as they advance.

Guzzardo's probes and his storyboards make use of myths. Myths are stories that contain the seeds of new intelligence. They offer a defence against decadence, decay, and a loss of imagination. They offer a shield against cultural code smell, a.k.a. those algorithms that eat the street.

#### THE GRAVE MERRY MAN

Like Guzzardo, the art historian and author of *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* Claire Bishop explores the cross-over of art and artificial intelligence. Bishop was one of the first to write that while artists were embracing digital techniques, few were stopping to ponder the meaning and consequences of viewing the physical world through a digital lens; and few examined how the digitisation of our existence changes us fundamentally as human beings.

Guzzardo's recursive urbanism research needed to address this glaring deficit if it hoped to move forward. In his hunt Guzzardo seized on an old idiom, one he credits to Ustad Imrat Khan. The idiom is *the grave merry man*. Here is a definition:

"*Grave-merry man*" is a man (or woman) with easy gaiety of spirit, one might almost say a man of spiritual elegance, a man who feels himself to be living in invincible security; but he is also a man of tragedy, a man of laughter and tears, a man indeed, of gentle irony, for he sees through the tragically ridiculous masks of the game of life and has taken the

measure of the cramping boundaries of our earthly existence.

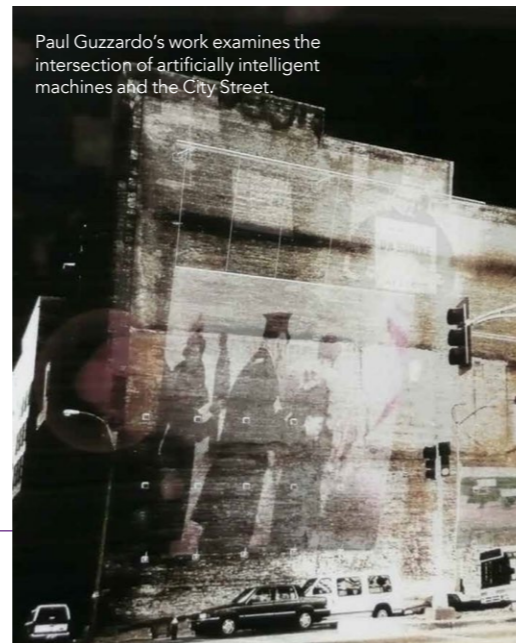
*Grave merry man* is more than a stilted catch phrase. *Grave merry* is code. It is a code to navigate and map the existential consequences of living in the digital world. *Grave merry* code fuelled the RU probes and the storyboards. Ironically, the person who Guzzardo credits for revealing that code came from a world far from a 1990's digerati stage. And while Imrat Khan - the musician who traced his lineage to the Court of Emperor Akbar, whose father performed with

Rabindranath Tagore, and whose brilliant brother sitarist Vilayat is ever known for his bout with Ravi Shankar and George Harrison - would hardly seem to the

person to offer a path through the digital glut, in fact he did. Guzzardo, a co-author on Khan's unpublished autobiography, *Taaseer: The World of Indian Classical Music*, credits Khan's: code of rhythmic cycles - cycles of multitudes, plurality, repetition, and Khan's algorithm of beauty - known as the nine Sanskrit Rasas - as central in the development and design of the probes and storyboards.

Guzzardo was there early on. His career intersected with the exponential rise of the machine, those *Algorithms that Ate the Street*. The probes and storyboards he's researched offer a creative way to examine how streetscapes and digital landscapes intersect. And how that crossing bears on what it means to be human.

Machines cannot be stopped but maybe we can find a way to hold onto our humanity as they advance.



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# Behind the Research Paul Guzzardo

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W: <http://www.secretbaker.com/recursive-urbanism.html>

## Research Objectives

Paul Guzzardo maps the devolving state of the American public sphere. He is interested in epistemology and where urban designers, traditional creative practitioners, and collectors fit, and or don't, in a zoomed out digitised culture.

## Detail

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#### Bio

Paul Guzzardo is a lawyer and media activist/artist based in St. Louis and Buenos Aires. His new media praxis probes the effect of emerging digital information archives on the design and occupation of public space. His work examines the relationship between this current wave of digital information technology and the street.

#### Collaborators

Rocio Agra, Gustavo Cardon, Robin Nelson Crocker, Paul B. Davis, Lorens Holm, Rodrigo Martin Iglesias, Lucas Magurno, Jon Phillips, and Clément Renaud.

## References

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Read the Bubble: <https://vimeo.com/372813826>

96 Algorithm: <https://vimeo.com/541084217>

96 Algoritmo: <https://vimeo.com/577563293>

## Personal Response

#### Why is recursive urbanism the answer?

// Tools change tool users. As machines got faster, smaller, and cheaper, Recursive Urbanism used an old tool, the street, to observe how digital tools change us. With its embedded histories, traditions, and myths, Recursive Urbanism worked the street as a stage to deal with "the digitisation of everything." As three-dimensional culture descended into two-dimensional digital apparel RU grabbed the street to activate and sustain civic reflexivity. It explored new creative spaces - epistemic niches - as accessories into existing communities. It showed how in an era of quickening and fragmentation these insertions might offer us a foothold, an anchor to meet the task we face. //