MULTIPLICITY

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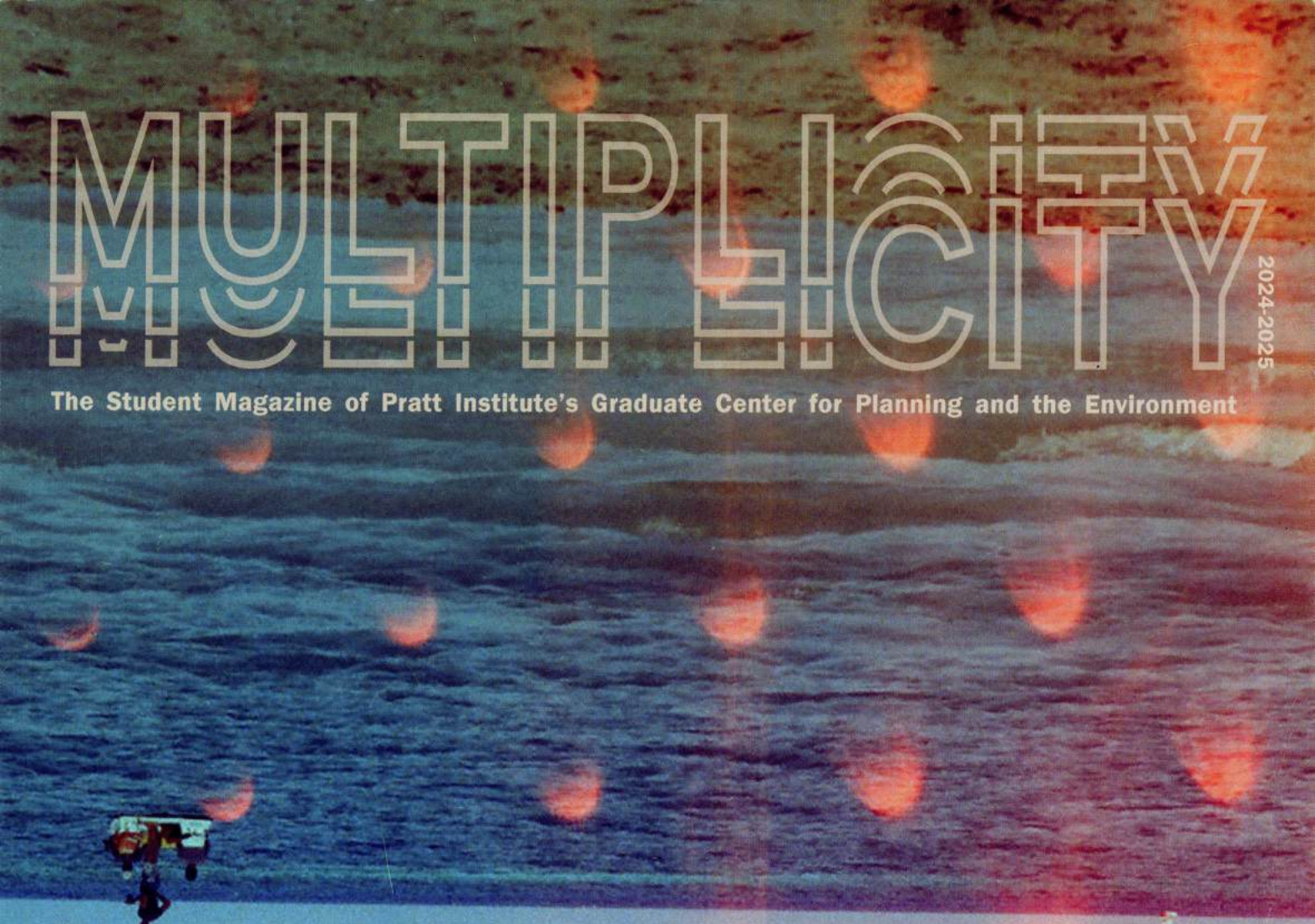


Bottom-Up
Top-Down

Community Memory terminals being used by the public
Source: Computer History Museum

Alternative Places:
Community Building and Visioning in 1970s San Francisco

by Isabel Campbell-Gross

Driven by the do-it-yourself ethos of the 1970s, a former student of Buckminister Fuller moved into an abandoned candy factory in San Francisco's SoMa District, eventually becoming a thriving intentional live/work community. Named Project One, it stood in sharp contrast to the "back to the land" nature of communes at the time. Instead, it was defined by its urban location and the innovative projects it housed. Initiatives like Resource One and Community Memory evolved from this unique setting, utilizing new technologies to directly engage with and support the surrounding community. Inspired by new ways of living, members of these initiatives were deeply optimistic about the future they hoped to facilitate, looking to use these new tools to help both cement social cohesion and drive social change.

Professor Mike Tully, Visiting Assistant Professor in Communications Design at the School of Design at Pratt Institute, has worked over the past five years to compile these stories through archival and oral history research.

We discussed this journey, what his research has revealed, and how these projects connect to understandings of placemaking and community building today.

What prompted the beginning of this research and what has kept you continuing this research?

While traveling for work in Venice, Italy in 2019, I was reading Jenny Odell's book How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy. I found the arguments within Odell's book particularly captivating within the setting of my trip. Given the many labyrinthian paths of Venice, I often found myself bound to my smartphone directions for navigation, closer to the omni-present technological attention economy Odell takes up in her book.

One evening while reading at dinner, I arrived at a section of the book that mentioned the Community Memory Project, a group operating in the Bay Area in the 1970s which had created computerized bulletin boards available to use at publicly accessible "terminals." Unlike the contemporary algorithmic experience of information, the content of the terminals were hyper-localized and determined entirely by their location and the communities that utilized them.

As Odell puts it, Community Memory was "a social network that was completely grounded in space and time, something that you had to travel to in order to use, that worked slowly." The group's creation was received with unexpected, creative, and long-lasting enthusiasm. I was captivated. The group's work seemed shockingly ahead of its time and compellingly rooted in public space and communitarian values—almost a response to contemporary social networks and their obvious and/or complex drawbacks.

The book's mention of the group is brief, almost like an expanded footnote, so I knew I would eventually want to learn more. To my frustration, very little information was available online in cursory searches. A little over a year later, I was given a brief in my first workshop as a graduate student at Yale School of Art to research and create a narrative project around a historic student- or artist-led resistance group. With dedicated time, I was surprisingly able to uncover more than I had anticipated and compiled an experimental publication on the group.

Following the workshop, I kept researching, leading to further engagements to continue advancing or sharing this knowledge through writing, artist residencies, and lectures. I'm currently working on a longer-form publication that might have other offshoots. In a way, I have found this research similar to walking the streets of Venice for the first time, taking delight in the surprises that seem to await around each new corner.

Telegraph Ave Co-op terminal, ca. 1984
Source: Computer History Museum

What set Project One apart from many of the intentional communities of the time was its uniquely urban location — why do you think this was appealing to those who lived/worked there?

Project One is where the Community Memory project originated. Of the many residents of Project One that I've spoken with, common threads appear throughout their stories. When joining One, many were young—either students in college, dropouts, or recent graduates. That is often a charged time in a person's life. The social and cultural backdrop of their time in the early 1970s was also very charged.

The invasion of Cambodia and the Vietnam War were raging. On the heels of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, countercultural movements in the Bay Area—the women's rights movement, the gay liberation movement, the hippie communities—were gaining more widespread momentum.

This moment in time spawned a number of intentional communities, often associated with the back-to-the-land movement. However, among residents at One, there seemed to be a pervasive desire to change society from within rather than starting over outside. Many were interested in how the cultural fabric could be amended or evolved through direct participation or collaboration with like-minded individuals. The community members at One seemed particularly interested in how their interests, skills or trades, could be used as tools to reinvent culture, starting mainly with themselves, and then oftentimes with their immediate surroundings in San Francisco.

How do you think this urban environment affected how they approached their own work?

The urban environment of Project One created a number of circumstances for its community to navigate. Firstly, they had to build out the environs of their abandoned warehouse from scratch. This critically meant that those people with skills in architecture, construction, and electric engineering were teaching people with no knowledge of those trades how to install sheetrock, build walls, install lighting, and so on. This led to skill-sharing and co-education as incredibly normalized facets of life because of the strong desire of many community members to reshape society at large, this also meant that Project One began to function like a beacon to the outside world attracting more people who were interested in being involved in intentional community.

This magnetism was notably more accessible given its urban location in San Francisco rather than a more secluded rural setting. Likewise, this allowed for the residents at One to access their surroundings in San Francisco more readily. Given their interests in and participation in social movements, this inspired lots of public outreach for their work across areas like alternative schooling, creating access to social resources through technology, or community organizing.

Can you speak to the thinking behind the creation of Resource One? How did it reflect the ideals of its members?

Resource One formed as a timely reaction to the cultural moment. The initial members were dropouts of the Computer Science program at Berkeley. The group was looking to utilize their skills for social change—building communication networks that could be used for activism and community organizing. Resource One was also fundamentally representative of the evolution of technology, as it was built upon the San Francisco Switchboard group housed at Project One.

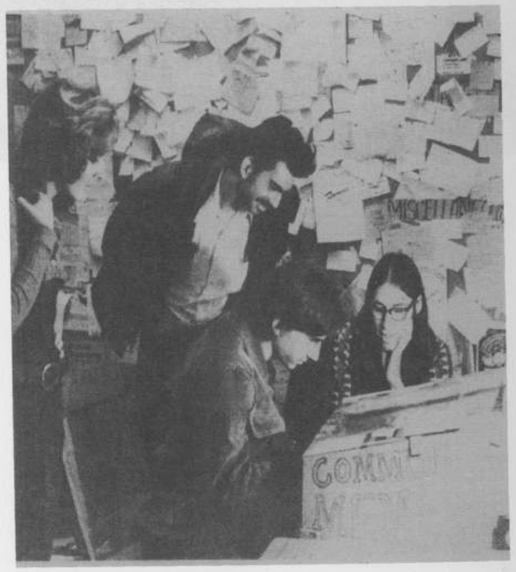
They mobilized new ways of communicating for organizing across the city. Instead of just phones or more traditional analog methods, they advanced how networked technology could be put to use in organizing. This was prototyped through larger projects and cultural moments—forming the Social Services Directory for residents of San Francisco, organizing communities and activists for cleanup efforts after the oil spill in the San Francisco Bay in 1971, and so on. Their ideals were actively and intentionally embedded into the tools they built and guided their very design, circulation, and use.

In many ways, Community Memory can be seen as a community building project. Was this consistent with the beginning vision for the project and did it evolve over time? Can you see remnants of this type of engagement on the Internet today?

Community Memory, as both an outgrowth of Resource One and its own endeavor, evolved over time although was generally anchored by core ideals and members. Their perspectives on the project were very much shaped by Ivan Illich's Deschooling Society and an attitude of putting resources in the hands of people who could use them. When the project was first publicly installed in 1973 at Leopold's Records in Berkeley, the group was expecting failure in some form. To their surprise, people who were completely unfamiliar with computers or networked communication were enthralled with their terminal. Not only were a high volume of messages posted, but users became very creative in how they were using the system.

Over time, with new iterations and locations of the terminals, the vision for the project evolved in tandem with how it was being used amongst its audience. Changes to the system were not issued at breakneck speed like modern commercial technology companies, but rather at slower and more deliberate intervals.

While it's not a complete one-to-one comparison, I see a kindred ideology in contemporary internet entities like Are.na in empowering users and approaching their platform as mindfully, deliberately, and openly as possible.



First Community Memory Terminal at Leopold's Records
Source: Computer History Museum

Community Memory terminal in the Berkeley Laundromat, 1990
Source: Computer History Museum

What can we (or have you) learn(ed)from the work of Community Memory? You have spoken about these various projects with students and in classrooms — what has seemed like the most resonant to students?

One of the lasting impressions of the Community Memory project to me is that, despite your deepest skepticisms as an individual or group making something, a thoughtfully and deliberately planned project will take on its own life upon being handed over to its audience and there is a real power in embracing that. Quite often creative endeavors tend to be highly controlled, but by placing faith in a communal process to lead to new territory, expectations can be surpassed by all those involved.

When I have lectured about this group in school settings, I find that students are often responsive to this story of young people who were dissatisfied with culture at large and made an effort to incur change through their own means and creative capacities. I can see the excitement in the students' recognition of exercising agency, which can be all too often unencouraged in institutional settings.

It reminds of the lasting resonance of the well-known quote attributed to Arthur Ashe—"Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can."

Photography by Gwen Bell
Source: Computer History Museum