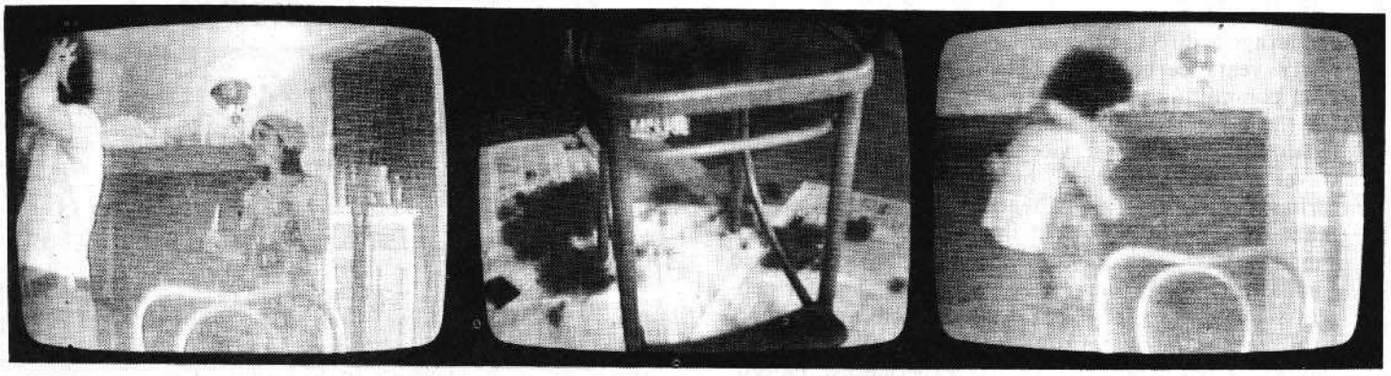

During the 1980's an indirect by-product of a universally-accessible urban communications medium was the gradual replacement of the former two party political structure with a political environment containing a multiplicity of active interest groups each possessing differing value patterns and community myths. In some cases political associations coincided with physically identifiable communities, while others cut across separate communities. Interactive broadband communications networks permitted these groups to coalesce, separate, and recoalesce around particular issues as the need for effective action demanded cooperative group efforts.

One of the many proposals for government reform that had enjoyed public popularity during the Great Debates of 1976 was a voter response feedback system. As in earlier proposals, it had been suggested that the system could be implemented through two-way cable. At that time, however, cable linkages had been made with only a small proportion of the total number of households. An argument at that time against the system was that such a readily available access to a voting mechanism would effectively discriminate against those who did not have cable. By the late 1980's, however, cable penetration had approached ninety-five percent and the voter system became politically practical. By that time since the hardware was essentially in place, all that was necessary for full implementation was a computerized accounting apparatus. However, once the system had been in operation it soon became clear that a simple yes-no response to proposed policies and candidates was entirely inadequate. Such a system of "feedback" had been based on the notion of "feeding" reactions back up to representatives and administrators involved in public policy-making. What was needed, it was claimed, was an interactive, truly participatory structure that would give individuals and groups the opportunity to originate and present proposals. This subsequently brought about a movement during the early 1990's to replace the system of representation with more direct and cooperative decision-making mechanisms.

The development and proliferation of interactive cable communications as an urban information utility influenced the development of more fluid, diverse, and participative social environments during the late 1970's and 1980's. The 1990's began to see the impact of ubiquitous information access on the physical environment. Static, fixed, and technologically obsolescent building forms were increasingly replaced by flexible, user-controlled environments. One manifestation of this was the construction of basic life support infrastructures providing water, climate control, waste recycling, and communication services which would be designed to last for a relatively long period of time. Attached to these infrastructures or service grids could be virtually an infinite variety of housing types which would either be designed intentionally with short life spans or with the capability of being modified when the needs of the inhabitants changed. Many forms of shelter and community facilities even became entirely mobile, some entirely self-sufficient, others requiring links with service networks. Urban architecture like communications had become more process-oriented, individualized, adaptive and diverse.

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed a general trend toward more dispersed, polynodal patterns of urban habitation and away from large concentrations of population. Several large urban complexes like New York and San Francisco were maintained because of their unique qualities, but were considerably diminished in population, as they became simply alternatives in a wide range of urban configurations. Locational decisions and choice of lifestyle became based more upon preferences for different environmental or cultural characteristics rather than upon economic determinants. The majority of people were engaged in such activities as interpersonal care and development and cooperative crafts and it was discovered that these activities could be performed well in smaller urban units.