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Pixel + Space Management

The Mise en Scène of Worlds of Experience in Real and Virtual Space

In our affluent post-capitalist society in which basic existential needs are satisfied with plenty to spare and the workaday world is seen as sobering and disillusioning,¹ people have a growing demand for emotional stimulation—in concrete terms, the value of money earned for services rendered is exchanged for emotional consumption experiences. Thus, the new type of “experience consumer” is no longer even looking for reality, for authenticity, but rather for perfectly staged illusions. And this is precisely what he is getting on a large scale: by 1998 there were already over 30 larger theme parks in France, about 20 in Great Britain, 15 in Spain, 10 in the Netherlands, seven in Switzerland, five in Belgium and three such larger-scale parks in Denmark. If the statistics are to be believed, then 22 million Germans (roughly one of four) and 2.6 million Austrians (approximately one in three!) make the pilgrimage to these worlds of experience every year. Within the EU, the annual number of visitors to these theme parks is estimated at about 150 million, which is still relatively few in comparison to the 250 million visitors who were counted back in the mid-1990s at around 100 larger theme parks in the US.



Disneyland, Anaheim

Anaheim / Orange County Official Visitor Guide

It's True because It's Real!²



Cover des Diesel Magazines IT'S REAL: TOMORROW'S TRUTH TODAY

But the supply of superlatives being offered for sale has long since gone beyond “parks.” The synthetic has transcended the sharply defined walls of the parks to encompass the real world itself in the form of a big show where reality becomes a spectacle and the real becomes a theme park that never closes. Visitors to theme parks are forced to leave the premises at the end of the day and once again plunge into the maelstrom of real life, but now life as a whole is being transformed into a sort of entertainment medium. Like in a blood transfusion, here too we have the transfusion of the real with the one difference that what is left following the prostitution of the imaginary is merely a simplified, idealized version of a hallucination of what is real. All facets of life including politics, religion, education, literature, commerce, architecture and urban planning—simply put, the lot of it—are being successively transformed through the intentional utilization of dramaturgical techniques

into branches of show business that strive above all to reach an adventure-hungry public and satisfy its needs. The latest ad campaign for Diesel jeans can be cited as an example of this phenomenon. On TV and in “It's Real,” a glossy magazine handed out for free, consumers can follow in highly realistic detail the career of Joanna, a singer who just moved to the big city. The choice of the completely fictional dramatis personae and

the everyday locations—which reflect the living circumstances of our anonymous masses today—enabled the public to identify with the plot being staged, to thus be enchanted by the show and ultimately to become latently enamored of Diesel brand jeans.

In the fields of architecture and urban planning, the ambitions of Disney Enterprises can be cited first and foremost in this respect. The great pioneer and initiator of the imaginary has now gone beyond the phase of the simple, enchanting backdrop to integrate the real world itself into its synthetic universe—for instance, New York City's Times Square! Once a rundown area full of sleazy dives and porn shops, under the management of Robert A. M. Stern, the district is being transformed into a (Disney controlled) center for theatre, entertainment and advertising.³ And the case of Times Square in New York is by no means unique. The current renewal movement in American urban planning—the “New Urbanism”—is following this example. In accordance with the Disney syndrome, entire regions are being transformed into an urban world full of reminiscences recalling the entire spectrum of urban development cultures of the North American *Gründerzeit*, even if Disney itself is not in on the particular deal. Celebration and Seaside are only the best-known examples. In them, staged elements and aspects of real everyday life are blended together to such an extent that the *mise en scène*—the staged setting—can no longer be identified as such.⁴

“With a well-made film, you can quickly reach an audience of millions in the Internet,” declared Viennese filmmaker Virgil Widrich. “And you can tell longer stories. After all, six minutes on TV is rightfully expensive.”⁵



Foto: Warner Bros

Dreharbeiten zum Steven Spielberg's Film
A.I. – Artificial Intelligence

The advertising campaign in the US for Steven Spielberg's recently released film *A.I. – Artificial Intelligence* represents a new phase in the campaign of conquest by the synthetic. Now, the trend toward theatrically staging all aspects of life has penetrated the virtual world like a cultural Ebola virus. Early this year, thousands of Internet users entered a world specially created in the WWW to search for Evan Chan's murder. Here we have the core of that unorthodox and gigantic marketing strategy that gets a curi-

ous public completely wrapped up in a highly involved detective story featuring a plethora of “real” but nevertheless totally fictional persons and places. For example, on the basis of clues found on film posters and in trailers, users come upon the private website of a certain robot therapist named Jeanine Stella. From there, they are linked to the homepage of the (fictitious) “Bangalore World University” where she teaches courses attended by some of the school's 1.3 million students. These links substantiate the impression of the actual existence of these people and places. The feeling of reality and of being a part of it in “real time” have been even further intensified by the makers of this staged world in a wide variety of ways: for example, you can actually call up telephone numbers that are posted all over the Web and hear the recorded messages they play. All those who had registered with the anti-robot movement “Unite and Resist” received a phone call on April 13, 2001; a metallic voice told them “We are watching you. Have a nice day.” In short, Steven Spielberg's film and PR campaign are attempting to establish a connection between a staged presentation in the medium of film and the real, material sphere via the interface of cyberspace (Internet) and thus demolish the physical barriers that previously set apart all such staged events. He thus anticipates what seems to be establishing itself at present everywhere around the world on a smaller scale.



Harrods, London

Without actually noticing that it is doing so, the unnaturalness of the way consumers partake of such events—their yearning for the surrogate—is undermining seemingly everything that we have been accustomed up to now to refer to as civilization. In 1968, Robert Venturi with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour elaborated on the meaning of iconography in the context of Las Vegas.⁶ Around 25 years later, due to the changes Las Vegas had undergone, Venturi had to revise his hypothesis—namely, that we

are now witnessing a shift away from the symbol and towards the scenario.⁷ Today, another five years later, Venturi's thesis can be countered by the hypothesis that we are experiencing yet another shift: from the use of scenery, the patently obvious staging of the real, to the hallucination of the real, the imagined conception of a reality.

In the staging or providing the *mise en scène* for an audience, architecture assumes a very special role. Memory research has amassed more and more evidence that when a person is attempting to locate something or to find it again—that is to say, when one needs to navigate—one needs, for mnemonic reasons, the capacity to establish spatial relationships. This applies to (staged) real spaces just as it does to virtual spaces, and it is precisely for this reason that, despite their particularly fantastic contents, they are oriented upon the model of architecture. It is therefore strange that, in the face of these facts, the architect at the beginning of the 21st century appears to be blind to the enormous consequences that these trends are having in all aspects of life. For instance, anyone rummaging through records of the ANY conferences, one of the most significant platforms for contemporary architectural discourse, will not come across a single essay on this topic. Rather, research makes it quite clear that public interest in architects who are not ambitiously striving to carry favor by producing “entertainment architecture,” as Charles Jencks once formulated it so appropriately,⁸ is increasingly being overwhelmed by infatuation in those who do. Which is why, for instance, Zaha Hadid, one of the most important contemporary architects, lost a competition for the high-rise block on the corner of 42nd Street and 8th Avenue (Times Square, New York) to D'Agostino Izzo Quirk Architects (Retail/Entertainment Architects).⁹

In the shadow of the image engineers, we architects are increasingly losing ground. The pressing question that thus arises is about the causes of the architects' current situation. Many contemporary currents are leading to a basic disparity with respect to the efforts of the image engineers. The basic intention behind these image engineers in conceiving such staged worlds is the creation of a (or another) reality of whatever kind. This means that their combined efforts are geared toward constructing a reality, regardless of whether this is possible either historically or scientifically, or staging such a thing and presenting it to the viewer in a manner that is as realistic and credible as possible. What is necessary in order to make this happen—regardless of whether in a virtual or real space—is the goal-oriented management of pixels/spaces, or the deployment of special mechanisms. The following discussion will elaborate on this in the context of current efforts in architecture.



Casino Venetian in Las Vegas

Reference / Absence of Reference

The construction of staged worlds is a matter of making that which is to be convincingly conveyed come as close as possible to the real facts—in other words, that there is a close causal connection between what one is saying and what is being represented. To make this possible, the image engineers help themselves to rhetorical mechanisms that are sufficiently powerful and expressive to generate an effect. In short: essential to the success of a construed reality is both its comprehensibility as well as its credibility, i.e. the ability to believably communicate the construed reality. The production of inter-subjectively comprehensible references by means of code—regardless of whether these are connected to the language or to the form etc.—are therefore accorded particular attention, since one cannot decode something one has never seen before.

In contrast to the so-called ‘visual arts’ such as painting or film, the process of mediation in constructed settings (in so far as these are not merely a matter of a backdrop) is slightly more complicated since that which is constructed is representative in two respects. We know that structures that are built, like all products of a culture, cannot escape their nature as objects that convey a meaning. Neither words nor images, not even a minimal gesture, can be seen as “neutral” or as free from intention or the slightest significance. “Form” always implies a relationship to an intrinsic reference.

The entire palette of recreational parks, whether those by Disney or the developments of the New Urbanism (*Celebration*, *Seaside* etc.) and the urban entertainment centers (Universal City Walk, Canal City Hakata/Fukuoka), makes it clear that the application of generally comprehensible codes on the level of the architecture (surfaces and building types) to urban development (types of urban space) comes into play. Accordingly, it is no surprise that, for example, in *Celebration* or *Seaside* recourse is made to the traditional European town, one that communicates the difference between representative public and private buildings in an easily understandable form.

This ‘constructivist’ vision of reality is not foreign to architects since it has been one of the most basic intrinsic positions in architecture (since the Renaissance at the very least) and still is, at least for all those who adhere to some extent to the uncritical postmodern line of thinking, such as Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, the architects of *Seaside*, or even also Leon Krier, for instance, with his recently planned Poundbury Project,¹⁰ a new district in Dorchester. After all, the architectural discourse has always determined with which reality architecture ought to dictate the figurative relationships or, rather, how they ought to be encoded or represented. If, up until modernism, the reality of what was built was sought in the past, and this provided sufficient proof of its truthfulness, then modernism attempted to mediate a future reality, the ambition of which was to create a new society, a new human being and a new physical reality. They sought to buttress



Casino *Venetian* in Las Vegas

Foto/Plan: The Celebration Company

their “truth” through the use of technological means. Nevertheless, that which is “real” has always been represented in selective fashion. In order to now more concretely elaborate on the development of discrepancies or the disproportion between the intentions of architects and those of the image engineers mentioned above, we need to take a closer look at contemporary endeavors in the field of architecture—namely, an examination of the so-called “line of deconstruction” as well as the (new) line of post-realism (as this will initially be referred to in the absence of a more appropriate term).

Deconstruction

The credibility of staged artificial worlds very much depends on what is being represented in the first place, from the efficiency with which the representation enables its appearance to come across as plausibly and realistically as possible, and from the mechanisms employed to make such an effect possible. Therefore, very close attention is paid to the skillful use of allusions. Post-structural and post-modern critics attempted to develop a series of instruments that enabled them to operate outside of existing relationships of cause and effect (“form follows function”). To do this, they appropriated the techniques of linguistic deconstruction or the play with difference to reveal latent, suppressed or sub-conscious content. A considerable portion of post-’60s architecture concurred with this line of argumentation. Essentially, however, two divergent approaches to a solution can be identified in the emancipation of functional determinism: on one hand the European approach with Team 10, Archigram and Archizoom, who expressed their revised stance toward orthodox modernism by exercising restraint toward spatial determination in the design process, and, on the other hand, the initially American line of thought represented by the New York Five or architects like Venturi and Moore, who confronted the manipulation of language through their ideas of “play” and “ambiguity.” In Asia, mention should be made here of architects like Isozaki, Shinohara, and Kurokawa who, trained in the metabolic discipline, sought alternatives to the structuralist models by means of random processes and by taking refuge in the subversion of language.

In the 1980s, research in this direction experienced a more or less personal change of direction through the work of Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind and Bernard Tschumi. In contrast to the previous generation, though, these so-called “deconstructivist architects” did not carry on their work so much with a regard to the manipulation of language but rather by developing a series of techniques that allowed them to keep their work on an abstract level in order to escape the recycling of architectural language practiced by their colleagues. Thus, all efforts on the part of this group of architects are primarily geared toward changing architecture in such a way that it no longer functions as a source for references.

If working on architecture typically implies a tendency toward the mediated, the simulated, and the virtual, then, with the emergence of post-structuralist and post-modern criticism, or with the “deconstructivist” shift in the 1980s at the latest, the entire discourse became chaotic if not incomprehensible due to its abstract character. In short, the impossibility of constructing a generally comprehensible and coherent reality explains the discrepancy between the conceptual aims of architects representing this view of architecture and those of the image engineers of the stage-managed worlds.

Post-Realism

Of course, the deconstructivists’ position does not cover the entire field of contemporary architectural production. For this reason, I would like to discuss here an architectural current that in no way utilizes the techniques of deconstruction and nevertheless

succeeds in stripping architecture of all references. What this means is that this group of architects will also not be able to fulfill the criteria for a successful *mise en scène* of (another) reality. In order to portray the characteristic traits of this position, a slight excursion is necessary.

As already mentioned, the constructivist vision of reality is one of the most intrinsic architectural positions. In a kind of tautology, reality is represented in two respects—that is, also through the configuration of the building. Today, the entire spectrum ranging from the image engineers of staged worlds to the uncritical postmodernists operate to a certain extent within this field. As Disneyland's castle clearly shows, the detailing of the stone, for instance, and its structural applications (vaulting, arched doorways etc.) are intentionally employed as rhetorical devices in order to suggest the respective reality to (preferably all) viewers in a generally understandable form.

The critical side of postmodernism has demonstrated in exemplary fashion that the relationship between the viewer and the construed image does not always have to be successful in the sense of their providing a credible illusion; rather, each respective element of a construction can (or should) stand in opposition to one another, thereby exposing the construed character of the illusion. In other words, the rhetorical means employed may indeed establish any number of allusions (to a given reality), but in the final analysis the overall composition of the staged setting tends to proceed toward its destruction. (An illuminated emergency exit sign—undesirable but required by law—in the “Realm of the Egyptians” at the World of Living infotainment center is an appropriate example here.)

To get back to stone as a rhetorical device, it is necessary here to make reference to both Karljosef Schattner and the university buildings in Eichstätt he planned in the early 1960s and the Tavole House in Italy designed by Herzog & de Meuron in the 1980s. In both buildings, the masonry works as a “local” element and a reinforced concrete frame as an “international” element, playing on one another in such a manner that both the wall and the frame have an almost schizophrenic relationship to one another. As Wolfgang Pehnt¹¹ and Alan Colquhoun¹² have already discussed at length elsewhere, it is almost impossible to read the building as a synthesis. Just as the arrangement and the joints in the dry stone walling still directly allude to local conditions or an architectural tradition, so the stringent geometry and materiality of the (reinforced concrete) frame itself allude to its own cosmopolitan origins.

This means that the codes employed indeed fulfill their respective roles as references, but they (quite deliberately) render impossible the construction of a coherent reality.

Since the early 1990s a tendency in architecture has become discernible, the aim of which is to take the employed materials to such extremes in their application that they abandon any functions except for the one of pure “being”—including that of referent. The stones employed in the wall of the Dominus Winery in Napa Valley planned by Herzog & de Meuron have been lent such a strong physical presence, both through the fact that they have been left in a natural state as well as in the way they construe the wall itself that their reality is no longer perceived in the sense of a representation, but is realized in a kind of shock. The character of “stoneness” is, in a manner of speaking, no longer applied as an image but embodied by the strong presence of the stone itself. The altered intention in the conception becomes clear—namely, to get away from reality as an effect of rep-



University Eichstätt, Karljosef Schattner

Foto: Klaus Kinold

resentation and to move towards the real as trauma. A similar approach is to be found in the oeuvre of Rem Koolhaas since the early 1990s. Examples of this include the Congrexpo in Lille (e.g. the upholstery in the lecture hall) or the Educatorium of the university in Utrecht. In contrast to the way Koolhaas goes about his work, Herzog & de Meuron go beyond the level of pure materiality and take even



Foto Hisao Suzuki

Congrexpo, Lille, Rem Koolhaas/OMA

the structure of the building to such an extreme that what is perceived by the viewer is solely embodied by the structure itself. Koolhaas once commented on the work of the two Swiss architects in the following words: "A space is a space is a space."¹³ In this context, we can now also see the distinction to the minimalists. The work of the minimalists is different from that of the groups of architects discussed here in that their intention is not necessarily the "laying bare" of the architectural elements on the level of pure being as a goal in itself. Rather, since this architecture is the result of a very individual and reduced aesthetic sensibility, the employment of references is not excluded or is even considered desirable. The work of David Chipperfield (e.g. First Church of Christ), for instance, or of Alvaro Siza (e.g. the church in Marco de Canaveses) reveal a whole series of images or recognizable motifs that establish allusions to tradition or locality despite their geometric abstract-based premise (Chipperfield) or transformed state (Siza).

In summary, it can be stated that the current change in intentions in the conception of architecture—namely from reality as an effect of representation to the real as trauma—renders it extremely difficult (post-realism) if not impossible (deconstruction) to stage virtual world/realities. The discrepancy between the efforts of the image engineers and these architects cannot merely be reduced to the altered relationship to the constructed and its ability to function as a possible vehicle of references, but is additionally based on the following disproportions:

Determination / Indetermination

The architect's ability to construct an environment and to understand the cause-effect relationship of design decisions in their respective temporal contexts has long numbered among the definitive and determinative practices of the discipline. The type and extent of formal—and subsequently, functional—decisions within a project thus provide very clear information as to whether conservative or progressive forces are at work. Their aim is the emancipation of architectural production from fixed determinates to create maximum freedom for the unfolding

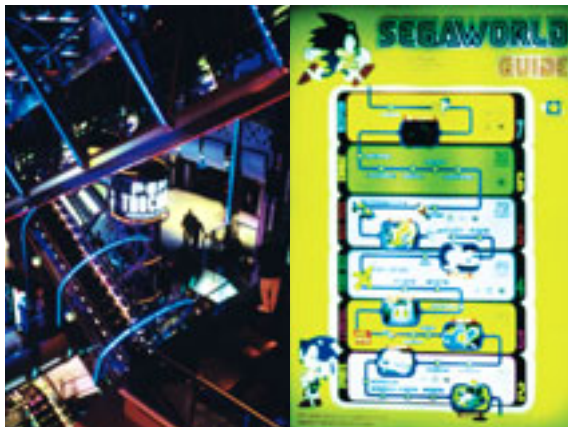


Foto: Michael Shamiyeh

Segaworld, London

ing of the various ongoing processes. What therefore suggests itself is to investigate the conceptual approaches of staged worlds with respect to this criterion.

"When I look for urban archetypes they are not things, they are sequences."¹⁴ Jon Jerde

The endeavors of the image engineers run totally contrary to the avant-garde efforts of architects. In fact, the image engineers employ spatial structures in an attempt to specify so precisely the sequences that visitors experience that they can view or perceive the *mise en scène* only from very specific points. A glimpse behind the proverbial scenes would turn the illusion into a flop. If active participation of the visitors is permitted or desirable—in contrast to the passive state of the pure observer—then these sequences of events are

usually also programmed via spatial structures in such a way that they underscore the “authentic” character of the staging instead of threatening its credibility. A look at the basic typologies of contemporary staged (real) spaces such as malls, urban entertainment centers, theme parks etc., as well as the countless virtual spaces supported by game engines reveals that the public is meant to move through these only on precisely determined paths that severely restrict their movements.



© Disney

Disneyland, Anaheim (1998)

Isolation / Integration

The decisive criterion for the credibility of a (staged) reality is the construction of a coherent image. This means that the respective elements of the representation may not make contradictory statements since this would reveal the artificially staged character of the representation and lead directly to the failure of the illusion. The fact is that one can maintain the control over the coherence of a staged setting only on one’s own turf but not in the adjacent surroundings. So a very commonly employed mechanism to protect against elements from the surroundings that destroy images or have an adverse effect on them is the spatial and visual isolation of these staged worlds from their immediate environment. To cite a single example: Disneyland in Anaheim is so totally separated from the (real) outside world that visitors can see only the respective world within and the sky above it. This deliberate isolation was threatened once back in 1966 when the local authorities received an application for permission to build a hotel in the immediate proximity. It was only on the basis of Disneyland’s economic significance for Anaheim that the firm succeeded in preventing the proposed development by convincing the authorities to veto the project.¹⁵

Even the various staged worlds within theme parks are separated from one another by facades (of buildings) or landscaping and can only be reached via strictly defined portals. Somewhat different though equally effective are the isolation strategies of the constructors of the staged worlds in cyberspace. Before gaining entry into this other world, the screen usually goes black and thus causes the “windows” of others worlds of work and play to fade out.

In contrast to the image engineers’ efforts to achieve isolation, the endeavors of architects since the end of the 1990s have shown a clear tendency towards integration into the immediate surroundings—on one hand, because the spatial and functional integration of the surroundings was recognized as necessary for the existence of their own agenda, and on the other hand by the shift toward infrastructural architecture, the aim of which is to dispense with buildings and the unavoidable boundaries and limitations that these

represent in favor of a formless, continual and environmentally integrated “lava-like” topography that allows any number of real (i.e. not staged) events to unfold “freely.” Worth mentioning in this context are works by Rem Koolhaas (Yokohama Urban Ring), Alejandro Zaero Polo (Myeong-Dong Plaza, Seoul), Peter Eisenman (Northern Derendorf), and Ben Van Berkel (bus terminal, Arnhem), as well as, subsequently, those of Bernard Tschumi (Parc de la Villette) and Enric Miralles (Mollet public park).

Epilogue

It is the unexpected reality at the beginning of the 21st century that now, following the agricultural and industrial ages, we are living in the age of the experience—obviously the last phase of social modernization. The consumption of experiences, the perpetual search for thrills, fun and more fun has become the chief activity of humankind. What has gone unnoticed is that the unnaturalness of this activity is undermining everything that we had been used to calling civilization; it is shifting the parameters and silently establishing an unavoidable paradox—a system of simultaneous over-saturation and malnutrition. Sometimes, whether in cabarets or in popular theatre, we are blind to that which most endangers us—namely, those very forces that determine our fate—and this can also be said of the situation of architects vis-à-vis the consumption of experience.

The methodological differences between architects and image engineers testify to the fact that it will become increasingly difficult for architects to operate in real and virtual worlds. Pixel and space management, the indispensable prerequisite for the success of worlds of artificial experience, has been left to the image engineers. For a profession that also has an interest in continuing to work in the future in terrain whose magnitude is ceaselessly expanding and continues to establish itself to an ever-growing extent, the question that thus arises is where to start without toadying to the market or distorting the actual aims of architecture.

This text is based on an essay that previously appeared in Architektur Aktuell Nr. 4/2001.

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