

DIGITAL OCCUPATION

AUGMENTED REALITY AS CONTESTED SPACE

Sara Dean & Andrew Herscher

The capacity to construct and inhabit physical space in the city is granted by political, economic, and social structures, each of which is made manifest in law, policy, policing, custom, and architecture alike. The architecture that constructs the city, then, is itself a construct of wealth, power, privilege, and ownership.

“Augmented reality” is a recently-developed term for the supplementation of physical space by digital media. This supplement produces spaces that are at once three-dimensional and immaterial; through smart phones and other roving devices, digital media can be viewed, walked through, investigated, and engaged.

The powers of the city have begun to domesticate the specter of augmented reality: these powers include the state, techno-corporatism, consumer capitalism, and most of the thought leaders who are developing ambient media, pervasive computing, smart cities, everywhere, and other intersections of physical and digital structures. If all goes according to their plans, the answer to the question that this technology typically prompts—“how will augmented reality change the reality in which we live?”—will be “not much.” The visible but immaterial presences produced by augmented reality will continue to be used to advertise consumer products, train unskilled labor, and perform other functions associated with extractive capitalism.

But the domestication of augmented reality does not negate its potential as a political agent in the city, acting outside of these agendas. The technology of augmented reality, that is, allows for a visual occupation of physical space that is unchallenged not only by ownership, law, and policing, but even by atmosphere and gravity. The imagery and data

that augmented technology makes visually available are indifferent to their physical location and to the politics, privacy, and programming of that location. Augmented reality thus offers new possibilities to advance a right to the city.

Detroit Resists’ digital occupation of the U.S. Pavilion utilizes the socio-economic asymmetry between the physical occupation of urban space and its technologically-enhanced visual occupation as a political and design opportunity. In doing so, it directly locates art, design, and activist communities in a space built by the academy of architecture to speculate on its own future by speculating on the future of Detroit. The digital occupation of the U.S. Pavilion thereby instrumentalizes the gap between the invited and uninvited inhabitation of the pavilion for political protest and resistance.

The occupation of the U.S. Pavilion by a non-physical installation instantiates a counter-politics that invalidates normative equations of space, material, labor, and the power to be seen and heard. The occupation is built on the basis of geospatial coordinates and software platforms; it is a construction of code, imagery, effect, and proximity. Through augmented reality, points and lines were digitally dropped on the surface of the Earth in order to decolonize the U.S. Pavilion and open it up to a counter-spatiality repressed in conventional architecture’s imaginaries.

Jacques Rancière has famously pointed out the ways in which political systems are, among other things, aesthetic orders within which certain “distributions of the sensible” are defined and enforced: what can be seen and what cannot be seen are simultaneously political and aesthetic concerns. Augmented reality

does not necessarily disrupt hegemonic distributions of the sensible, but it does offer possibilities for disruptions that are unavailable in physical space. *The digital occupation of physical space is not structured by the same rules as the occupation of physical space itself.* Operating within this discrepancy, digital occupation offers new possibilities to contest existing distributions of the sensible by including images and words that these distributions would otherwise repress, neglect, or annihilate.

DETROIT
October 17-19, 2014



**BLACK
FARMERS
& URBAN
GROWERS
CONFERENCE**

Western International High School
1500 Scotten Street
Detroit, Michigan 48209-2139
Bugs.Detroit2014.Outreach@gmail.com
www.blackurbangrowers.org
313.731.2268



WANTED

FOR CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY



IF SPOTTED: #WHEREHOMRICH