

# The Cultural role of Architecture Conference

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Paper title: **reset button** Place in the digital age

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## Start

The computer is to contemporary society what the machine was to modernism this statement from **Christine Boyer** has a profound effect on the way we currently engage with our built environment.

The architecture and urban issues that come with this digital era have an affect on our public services, the character and content of spaces and our control and access to power. They have a very real effect on the way we view, and engage with our surroundings. Disciplinary spaces once described by **Foucault** are now dislocated and hidden within electronic global networks with less tangible systems of control.

This paper involves speculating on how technology and communication have affected public space and gain importance over material form. Our cities are now saturated and we no longer have a grounding to engage with our urban environment. Our culture is now one of simulation we are dislocated from space. The uncertainties now accompanying contemporary culture effect the material reality of our urban centres.

We will attempt to explore the need to readdress what **Paul Virilio** calls our overexposed city and the flattening process of mass culture which seeks to reduce everything to one vast commodity.

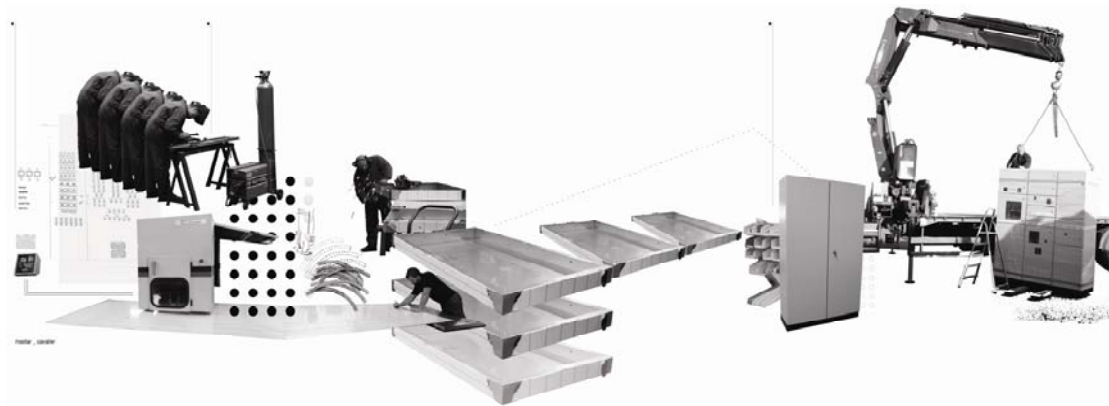
This inescapable logic of a single commodity goes beyond the progression of its tools and methods. Automation, simplification and routine are inevitable consequences of it, and serve to aid a mass society, mass production, mass consumption, and a mass culture. Technology has imposed itself in such a way that it mediates the way we experience the world to a degree never before seen.



Ryan Fuke, High Street shop fronts

Within this culture advertising, whether it is retail, Television, imagery, or billboards all demand our attention and have influence over us. **Venturi** and **Scott Brown** who concluded in the late sixties that, in the brutal automobile landscape of Las Vegas, the power of architecture to communicate was being eroded in the face of competition from the language of advertising. The effects of this can be clearly seen today. Our city streets are now littered with advertisements, calling out for our attention and arresting our thoughts.

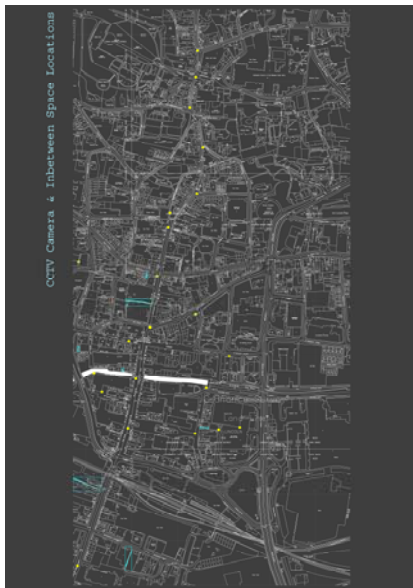
**Walter Benjamin** pointed out that the contemplation and stepping back to form a distanced view of the city could no longer be harnessed.



Tom Woodcock, The logic of the machine

Our cities are rendered numb; unable to communicate through the shouts of a system based on production and consumption. We have failed to develop a critical understanding of the internal logic of these new devices, even though they have become our every day tools. **Martin Hediddegger** saw the world as conforming to a technological template, where humans are taught to think and act like machines, and where we become secondary to the technology. We are now expected to adapt and conform to the technology that is introduced to us.

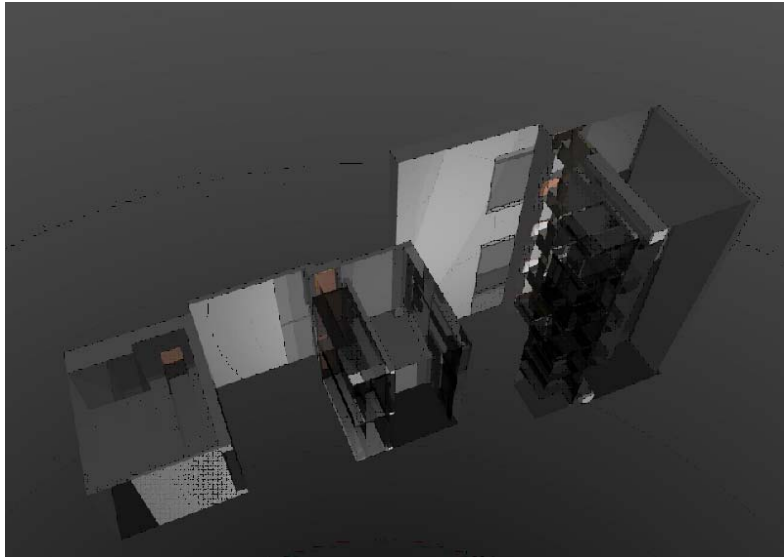
## Run programme



Carl Fox, location of CCTV, Lincoln

**Fouco** has left us with the realisation that power and surveillance are tightly bound up together and indeed it is the need to control, either by the state or other institutions that may be the most decisive characteristic of this digital age. Technologies and communications have now made it possible to gather information on a large scale over a wide population. This information can then be used to identify, follow, manipulate, and regulate the masses. The more information that is gathered, the more it can be used and administered, control of information is control of power.

But unlike **Fouco**'s portrayal of society the exercise of power today is less tangible, disguised and difficult to identify because its agents are rarely self-aware. Its influence has become more difficult to discern and to resist. It is everywhere and nowhere, assumed ubiquitous or, alternatively, assumed absent. The elusive quality of power has made people feel like insignificant cogs in a giant machine whose workings are incomprehensible. Activities that once took place in the public realm, the streets, and squares are being sacrificed to redundant zones of oversight and exclusive control. This threatens the free exchange of ideas and engagement.



Chris Murch, Shop Entrance: transition from public to private

Many of our urban spaces can now be considered hyper real in what **Jean Baudrillard** has called “the death of the subject”. When something is produced artificially it does not come to be regarded as unreal. Public spaces are increasingly being replaced by privately produced and privately owned spaces of consumption. Access to these new spaces comes with at a price. Conditions apply in these places ensuring the high levels of control necessary to prevent unpredictability.

This lack of stability discourages engagement. The city no longer evokes our involvement. There are now few public spaces remaining to escape from loci of consumption, their role has been compromised, the rising tide of uncertainty has transformed them into spaces of exclusion as well as inclusion.

### Reset

“The challenge of our time” according to **Paul Ricoeur** is “how to become modern and return to sources.” The human spirit needs to be renewed amidst the current tendency to push technology further and further irrespective of the costs involved.



Karl Fox, left over space and lead cast

**We need to engage with division, conflict, decay and explore the unwelcome truths in order to respond to living with uncertainty. We would argue the need an architecture that accepts the different voices that make up the urban condition and through their interaction creates a dialogue with the city.**

**In today's climate of intense change, our relationship with society has been restructured; we now find it harder to navigate. In our modern world of flux the relationship between self and ground, solid and void is becoming more ambiguous we have become lost with out a reference point to orientate ourselves.**

**Technologies and communications may have created new and powerful experiences that are visually stimulating from a distance, but they are sensually remote. People have now lost their sense of self and become swallowed in the flow of the city. We have paid a price for our rapid technical and scientific development, and that is a progressive alienation from our world. Now that the world is measurable, defined and calculated, awareness that once provided us with a sense of meaningful belonging has been replaced by superficial activities.**



Mike Cadwell, removal (Bridge Box)

**We believe there is a need for a removal in order for an internal authority to be developed to aid knowledge of ones self and achieve some degree of autonomy that would allow us to steer through this new shifting terrain of change and uncertainly.**

### **Shut down**

**In this paper we have tried to pose the need for a reflection. The use of complex computer systems has changed the way we engage with our built environment. Disciplinary spaces that once combined discourse and architectural programs are in various stages of dis solution. Technologies and communications have allowed an extraordinary new power to be built, and within this new power we are rendered lost.**

**Now media dominate our lives and value is now placed on consumption. This excessive stimulus has led to the saturation of our cities. We are disengaged from our surroundings. This system which places importances on speed, power, and manipulation has resulted in a lack of stability; the built environment is now becoming fragmented. This has manifested itself in the growth of privately owned places and a reduction in the number of public spaces. These places for consumption are a means of escape from the real but the creation of such places only reduces our ability to interact.**

The need to maintain some degree of autonomy can be seen in the work of **Mike Cadwell** who removed the occupants of his building projects from “The real and complex world” in order to give them a new outlook on life when they return. It is this ability to address this sensual knowledge to resist the massification of our real world that is missing. Self-autonomy for the individual has now become unattainable. **Charlene Spret nak** has also called for a change in our society in order to pacify what she calls harshness. **She** suggests we need help to,

“Nourish wonder and hence to appreciate difference, the unique subjectivity of every being and community, thereby subverting the flattening process of mass culture. Such awareness keeps hope alive. It protects consciousness from becoming so beaten down that it loses a grasp of what is worth fighting to defend.”



Ryan Fuke, Tapestry of Building elevation

The growth of private spaces, an increase in unreal places, and the dematerialising of buildings has meant that the ability of architecture to communicate has been greatly reduced. Much of the physical building in our built environment has been submerged into the industrial system, and within this system architecture has been reduced to a consumer article or commercial add-on.





Tom Woodcock, Printing machine

**The machine may have evolved to the computer but the message is the same. In our commercial climate driven by capital, technology and communications are replacing the value of building. Architecture is now less and less able to provide a sensual knowledge of ones surroundings and no longer able to engage us in dialogue.**

**We need a genuine reflection on content, which is disengaged from the demands of society there needs to be a separation. The Dutch group, **Doog Design** believes that as the mainstream gets a tighter grip on culture we need a new system of values. This system places importance on quality as opposed to quantity. It emphasises simplicity to the complexity of the world around us. It seeks a sensual knowledge as opposed to values of flow and the real, as opposed to a hyper real.**

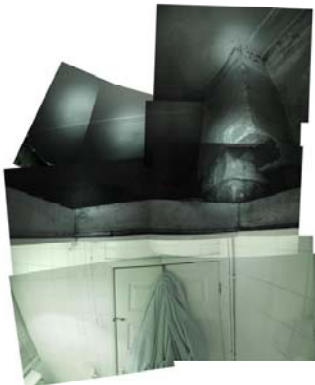
**Our complex lives today derive from routines, which have little to do with being awake and conscious of the moment. Technology and communication has allowed us intellectual insight into the physical nature that makes the world function. It has also brought with it many conveniences however, in accepting the convenience of the modern world there has to be recognition that something fundamental is lost.**



Scott Raper, War bunker Spurn point

**Lewis Mumford**, at the end of his analysis of *The Myth of the Machine* stated that,

"Though no immediate and complete escape from the ongoing power system is possible, least of all through mass violence, the changes that will restore autonomy to the human person all lie within each individual's soul once it is roused. Nothing could be more damaging to the myth of the machine, and to the dehumanised social order it has brought into existence, than the steady withdrawal of interest, a slowing down of tempo, a stoppage of senseless routines and mindless acts."



Christos Paschoudis, Attic above bathroom

There is a need to restore equilibrium, the industrialising of our culture is an established fact and while there is no desire to dismiss technology in society, there is a need to address this loss. There is a need to encourage enrichment in our lives, to have a better understanding of our sense of place. The Norwegian architect **Sverre Fehn** best sums it up as he stated,

"When man conquered darkness the latent generosity of night ceased to exist"