

Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Architecture and Virtual Space¹

Geoff Matthews
University of Humberside

Abstract

Architecture, in one sense, has become part of the media: it has an aspect which is symbolic and semiotic, which is as 'real' in photography, film, television, advertising, computer games and literature as it is in our experience of landscapes, buildings and machines.² But, I shall argue that the media, in one sense, have also become part of architecture, they have an aspect which we perceive as continuous with Cartesian space, and through this pseudo-physical presence they help shape and programme the space of habitation.

Reality and Space

At no time in the past have we been so thoroughly informed about the present. Neither have we ever been so thoroughly confused by the means by which we are so informed. Wherever we go we are surrounded by the images and sounds of parallel realities, including our own part of the world viewed from remote times and places, other parts of the world as they were in the past, and fictional places that exist only in the collective conscious (or unconscious). These co-existing fragments can be anything from a fraction of a second to centuries old and they are available in kaleidoscopic possibilities through the technological mix of the mass media. The ubiquitous aura of audiovisual and electronic information constitutes the common (if not always shared) software of our present - the material of leisure and pleasure as well as of our understandings (legitimate or otherwise) of who we are and where we are.³

The question I wish to address here is one of physical interface. Interface in the built environment where actual space - the physical, geographical notion of architectural space - is enlarged by virtual space - various media spaces. I will be concerned only with the architectural accommodation of the media as virtual spaces: I will not be concerned with the potential contents of those spaces which may pollute as easily as enhance the environment. The street, workplace, home, shopping centre, museum, etc, are increasingly dependent upon embedded forms of mass communication for their meaning and utility. The question is really about the contiguousness of the technologies that make up and control, or allow us to make up and control, the different kinds of

¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the *4D Dynamics* conference held at DeMontfort University September 1995. Proceedings edited by Alec Robertson and published by DeMontfort University (pp.115-19).

² Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. MIT, 1994.

³ Raban, J. *Soft City*. Collins Harvill, 1989 and Poyner, Rick. *Nigel Coates: The City in Motion*. Fourth Estate / Blueprint, 1989.

space that we inhabit and the implications of this phenomenon for architectural design.

Opening up actual space: a post-architectural revision

In pre-modern tradition we understand by ‘architecture’ the art of the master builder (Gk *ἀρχιτέκτων*). Although this meaning survives (just), modernism has added new meanings, for example, the idea of architect as ‘social engineer’,⁴ and in late-modernism what one might call ‘the pharmacy of free capitalism,’ the architect as one who fills out and prepares prescriptions for service space.⁵ Debates about what architecture has become, or is becoming, have led to several formulations of a postmodern architecture based on a number of quite different philosophical positions - radical relativist, pluralist, neo-conservative, anarchist, etc. Jean-François Lyotard,⁶ Jürgen Habermas,⁷ Ihab Hassan,⁸ Fredric Jameson,⁹ Charles Jencks,¹⁰ Kenneth Frampton¹¹ and Paolo Portoghesi¹² each present different ideas of postmodernism but two central strands emerge: (a) there is a demand for a communicative architecture - whether it be through double coding, narrative layering or participative process, architecture becomes centrally concerned with the need to communicate, and (b) in postmodernism, architecture becomes a critical and wilful art of resistance, play, and evasion, rather than an art of building masterfully, even when it pretends to a condition in the past.

Opening up virtual space: an archaeology of media

Post-industrial society is characterized by its reliance on the new electronic technologies to achieve intimacy and communication.¹³ Television is a common denominator. It gives us a multifaceted view of the outside world which is wholly structured by the medium itself. But television provides another almost universal experience; the invasion of the home by a virtual space.¹⁴ Through mass literature, advertising, packaging, and product and service spin-offs, etc. television has become enmeshed in everyday experience.

⁴ Hatch, C R. *The Scope of Social Architecture*. Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984 and Saint, A. *The Image of the Architect*. Yale University Press, 1983.

⁵ Discussion of Pharmakon (Gk) in Brogan, W. ‘Plato’s Pharmakon: between two repetitions’ in Silverman, Hugh J. (ed.) *Derrida and Deconstruction*. Routledge, 1989. pp.7-23.

⁶ Lyotard, J-F. ‘Defining the Postmodern’ in Appignanesi, Lisa. (ed.) *Postmodernism: ICA Documents*. London: Free Association Books, 1989.

⁷ Interpretation of Habermas (incl. ‘Moderne und Postmoderne Architektur’) in Rose, Margaret A. *The post-modern & the post-industrial*. Cambridge University Press, 1991. pp.85-94.

⁸ Hassan, I. ‘The Question of Postmodernism’ in Garvin, H R. (ed.) *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*. Bucknell University Press, 1980. pp.117-26.

⁹ Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991.

¹⁰ Jencks, Charles. *What is Post-Modernism?*. Academy Editions, 1986.

¹¹ Frampton, K. ‘Towards a Critical Regionalism’ in Foster, H. (ed.) *Postmodern Culture*. Pluto Press, 1985. pp.16-30.

¹² Portoghesi, P. *Postmodern: The Architecture of the Post-industrial Society*. New York, 1983. See: ROSE, 1991, pp.152-8.

¹³ Brzezinski, Z. *Between Two Ages: America’s Role in the Technotronic Era.* ? 1970; Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. Bodley Head, 1970; and Bell, D. *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*. Harmondsworth, 1976.

¹⁴ Hayward, Philip. (ed.) *Culture, Technology and Creativity in the Late Twentieth Century*. John Libbey, 1990, p.11 and Brown, P. *ibid.* pp.238-9.

Add to these the video recorder, the satellite dish, and the personal computer with its modem and the television has achieved a thoroughgoing connectedness that none of its precursors can match. However, through photography, radio, cinema, and stereo audio we can trace the origins of the various virtual spatialities that constitute this invasion.

In its early days, Photography was thought of as ‘drawing with light’.¹⁵ Its shallow perspective made few intrusions on the actual space of the viewer - the landscape as a frozen moment in a window or the self-portrait as a reversing mirror. Full-colour photography and graphic reproduction at immense scale, have changed the principles little and the impact only a little more. Holography has the capacity for forward projection and for the carving out of space. But its images as yet have limited power to animate space.

Radio demands the imagination of its listener, but generally leaves the body and its actual space untouched. Orson Welles’ production of *The War of the Worlds* is cited as an exception.¹⁶ This was no hoax and no fraud but the art of word-pictures and sound effects stretched to its limits. 60 years later we accept that radio creates a reality, expect subversion of its conventions and look to decode it from within rather than with reference to an absolute reality.

The cinema building ring-fences an actual space for the purposes of enactment or exhibition. Via a lighting effect the invasion of virtual space is enhanced by the total retreat of actual space. However, film has made a liberatory leap into everyday life - the media exhibit in the museum, the movie fragment in the live event, the mood effect in the consumer space - and has become subsumed in the televisual panoply, a miniaturized, convenience insert available to all sites of ‘the box’.

The virtual audio space created by stereo hi-fi is situated between the stereo speakers in a space belonging to the personal present. Multi-speaker installations and digital audio have made the invasion all pervasive. Our heads swim in an audio sea which is undifferentiable from the audioscape marked out by visible and animate sources which produce rather than reproduce sound.

Today it is the very space of habitation that is conceived as both receiver and distributor ... the control screen and the terminal which as such may be endowed with telematic power - that is, with the capability of regulating everything from a distance ...¹⁷

Communicative Environment: a history of superspatiality

In post-War regeneration, ideas of society, economy and environment have taken on a systematic and latterly an ecological tenor. Elements are seen not only as interdependent but also as interactive and intercommunicative, that is, not only as mutually responsive but also as purposefully engaged in the exchange of material, energy and information. On the global scale architecture

¹⁵ Héliographie (Fr.) See: Gernsheim, H & A. *A Concise History of Photography*. Thames & Hudson, 1965, p.20.

¹⁶ Broadcast in October 1938, script by Howard Koch.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, J. ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’ in Foster, 1985, p.128.

is one of a range of human micro-tactics, along with agriculture, militarism and industry that has the potential to create local pattern and structure. If we consider what has happened to the sky-scraper the nature of its increasing complexity emerges.

The Western Union Building opened in 1875 in New York - the first modern skyscraper - was an iron-framed ten-storey building clad in solid brick and stone, and completed with a lift and water and waste systems to which were later added gas and electric for lighting.¹⁸ These integral systems were concerned with the communication of specific forms of energy and matter, but not of information. As a functioning system, therefore, its complexity was largely determined by the communicative activity of a highly mobile, but essentially independent, human element - the building itself was little more than a shell. The skyscraper has become an intricate steel and concrete lattice, of over one-hundred stories, clad in light-weight alloy and glass.¹⁹ And one-third of the volume of the building is given over to systems and services. Such a building is alive with electrical energy and humming with the thousands of conversations (face-to-face □□□ é and digitally encoded) taking place every second of the day, between its human, electronic and mechanical elements, in an interminable web of crosstalk.²⁰ The communicative environment has a pervasive quality that also extends to the shop, the street and the home. In each case there has been an historical transformation from the condition of habitable space to that of communicative environment. I would point to the spatialities of this transformation through the following experiments and projects.

Anthony Caro's sculpiteure represents an adventure in free communicative space - viewers must view each other in and through the work to grasp its measure.²¹

The folies project of Bernard Tschumi represents an experiment with communicative space carried out across several orders of scale - the cityscape, the building, and structural detail. Their system relies on an experiential code that harks back to narrative logic, the promenade cinématique.²²

In a collaboration between Groninger Museum and the City's Planning Department five architects - Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi - were each asked to design and build a pavilion which would experiment with the conjunction between media art, architecture and context. This was seen as the city and the museum seeming to 'merge into one another'.²³

In Japan the tradition of multi-use buildings and 'the philosophy of controlled excess' have transformed some quarters of Tokyo, into interactive spatial

¹⁸ Hitchcock, H R. *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. 3rd edn. Penguin, 1969, pp.318 & 335-8.

¹⁹ Sears Building, New York.

²⁰ Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank, see: *The Architectural Review*. 1070, April 1986.

²¹ Moorhouse, P. *Anthony Caro: Sculpture Towards Architecture*. London: Tate Gallery, 1991.

²² Papadakis, A C. et al (eds.) *Free Spirit in Architecture*. Academy Editions, 1992. pp.10 & 13.

²³ Papadakis, A C. (ed.) 'What a Wonderful World: Music Videos in Architecture', *New Museums*, Architectural Design Profile 94, Academy Editions, 1991, pp.64-73.

continua of the public and the private, the actual and the virtual.²⁴ When Nigel Coates began to work in Tokyo he discovered that the software city was real,²⁵ a twenty-four hour phenomenon, connecting every window, door, display, sign, incident and event, in a montage possessing non-finite, non-sequential video logic or exhibition logic. The strategies of fragmentation, overlay, and repetition, characterize video and the postmodern Tokyo street but originate in exhibition.

In 1967 Umberto Eco proposed three possibilities for an exposition of the future: the collection of symbolic objects; the educational instrument; and the exhibitionary experiment, and he clearly favoured the latter. In multiscreen audiovisual presentation he saw not only the spatial implications and the creative potential but also the democratic nature of the communication.²⁶

Expo '92 at Seville saw the apotheosis of the multimedia exhibit. A high percentage of the pavilions were, for the first time, dominated by programmed, largely automatic, electronic shows. The three-dimensional product display, once upon a time the *raison d'être* of the exposition, was relegated to a supporting rôle and in some cases completely dematerialized. The British pavilion, much lauded for its architectural contribution, actually deserved higher praise for the quality of the multimedia show and the way in which it was 'humanized'. Live actors (navigators) guided each group of visitors through and performed as part of the multimedia show. The achievement was much misunderstood, and all the greater since the architect had designed an anti-exhibition, anti-media building.²⁷

The Luxembourg pavilion at Expo '92 Seville created a giant black-box interior entirely devoted to a virtuoso multi-media exposition in three-dimensional kinetics, projected light, audiovisual media and spatial illusion stretching up five storeys in height. This could be read as the coda to quarter of a century of experimentation, not at universal expositions but in a succession of innovative public events and entertainments, commercial promotional events, and museum and heritage developments. But perhaps it would be better to see it as standing on the threshold of a new set of possibilities.

The Luxembourg pavilion came close to achieving fluid and discontinuous spatial experiences. Technical means such as flat-screen technology, holographic movie projection, and high-definition virtual reality promise to make possible a move beyond the invasion of actual by virtual spaces, to an equality of spatial presence, to a superspatiality. One further example of the transformation of the condition of habitable space to that of communicative environment will serve to wrap up this excursion into the post-Architectural past.

In the autumn of 1991 during London's Japan Festival, the Victoria & Albert Museum hosted the *Visions of Japan* exhibition. 'Dreams', the third and final

²⁴ Into Japan. *The Architectural Review*. 1137, Nov 1991. pp.58-60.

²⁵ Coates, N. 'Street Signs' in Thackara, John. (ed.) *Design After Modernism*. Thames & Hudson, 1988. pp.95-114.

²⁶ Potter, N. 'Power to the People' *Design Week*. 5 Mar 1993. p.8.

²⁷ Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyper-Reality*. Trans. William Weaver. Picador, 1987. pp.303-5.

section of the exhibition, stretched the available technologies to their limit in the attempt to achieve a contiguous virtual space. Using liquid crystal projectors, Toyo Ito projected a flood of images and sounds of Tokyo onto a specially constructed polycarbonate wall and onto the floor. 'Ito's room explores the breaking point that he fears we may reach from saturation by information technology',²⁸ an exhibitionary experiment conforming to Eco's third possibility for the future of the Expo. 'Dreams' formed the concluding part of an exhibition in which the weaving of cultural mythologies and electronic realities was a progressive theme. The first section of the exhibition, 'Cosmos', designed by Kuzuhiro Ishii, created a classically controlled space that provided glimpses of other spaces through slatted screens. This became a game of divisions and perceptions carried out in the architectural language of actual space. Movement and ideas of transformation were introduced by solidly actual means, the mechanical devices of a rotating temple pillar and a folding tea house. In the second section, 'Chaos', designed by Osamu Ishiyama, the exhibition's largest space was conceived as an assemblage of exhibits each complexly layered with clashing colours, images, objects, sounds and 'heady fragrances.' In the exhibition as a whole, therefore, an experiential sequence can be discerned which led from reassuring images of solidity, tradition and 'symbolic allusion' through stimulating images of complexity, contradiction, discontinuity and 'shallow seductiveness' to confusing images of the immaterial made material, a loss of self, and total simultaneity - what Ito described as 'nirvana wrapped in white noise'. This sequence involved a parallel exploration of spatial modes - actual, interpenetrative, virtual - and narrative modes - coherent symbolism, conversational incident, stream of consciousness, and from this one can see how 'a breadth of fluid and discontinuous spatial experiences' can become a realizable architectural language, not only for the museum and the exposition, but also for the shop, the street, the home, and the post-industrial workplace. The narrative idea of architecture has been elaborated, broadened, softened, opened up to embrace the software world of the media and the computer and all the possibilities this presents to invade the body (architectural space) and multiply its realities.

Conclusion

An archaeology of the media reveals the persistence of forms of virtual space - photographic, holographic, audiomatic, cinematic, cybernetic. A history of the architectural accommodation of these forms of virtual spaces reveals the increasing importance of communicative interests and the diminishing relevance of purely physical spatial relations. I conclude that there is a new architecture which takes a tactical approach to the accommodation of virtual and actual space. It is not concerned at all with monumental statements, with static forms. It is concerned with invoking the event, with organizing the movement and interaction of people and information, with 4-D Dynamics.

In *Refining Designing* C Thomas Mitchell made a similar observation and traced three defining aspects of the new design: participation, contextualization and intangibility.²⁹ Let me push this one stage further by qualifying each of these

²⁸ Best, S-M. 'Clash of Symbols' *Design*. Nov 1991. p.48.

²⁹ Mitchell, C Thomas. *Redefining Designing: From Form to Experience*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993.

aspects. Participation is not conceived as a front-end process anymore - it extends into an indefinite, conversational future. Contextualization means not only the subject-centred perceptual considerations entailed in ambience but the physical and social ones entailed in spacing, communicativity and interactivity. A focus on the intangible, on the design of the human experience, may diminish the importance of the physical environment too much. What is required is a recognition that there is no rational connection between the control of physical conditions and the experiences of the inhabitant. The real creativity is that of the inhabitant, the architect is just one more inhabitant.

Many exhibition designers allow experience to grow out of interpretive structure. This is necessarily a virtual object - its materiality is secondary to the communicative possibilities it presents. As interpretive structures have become more open-ended, fragmented, and plural in conception, open to the possibility of a conversational future and of being interactively restructured, exhibition designers have adopted radical procedures in organization and visualization. They reflect a move from serial to parallel programming, from repetition to free variation, from composition to assemblage, and from specification to creative direction. However, exhibition is no longer a special case. All communicative space, in postmodern terms, all architecture, presents the same opportunity. The new design, therefore, proceeds to dematerialize actual space and to structure virtual space in ways which serve the intersubjective needs of a fleeting population. The types of spaces and communicative elements that are to collide in a particular architectural or exhibitionary construct should be dependent upon dynamic, interactive and theatrical conceptions of human life. To achieve this the development process should extend into an indefinite participatory future by establishing seed structures and open systems, and facilitating their colonization, adaptation and transformation in use. The architect may initiate certain moments but actual space on its own is dead space, marked by absences, the absence of the living reality of the virtual. Sooner rather than later, the body snatchers must be invited to invade.