The Cornell Journal of Architecture 8: RE

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A-Locations/Pre-Occupations

John Zissovici

Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path — . . . rocks, waterholes — and so singing the world into existence.[1]

. . . the constructed nature of its reality...
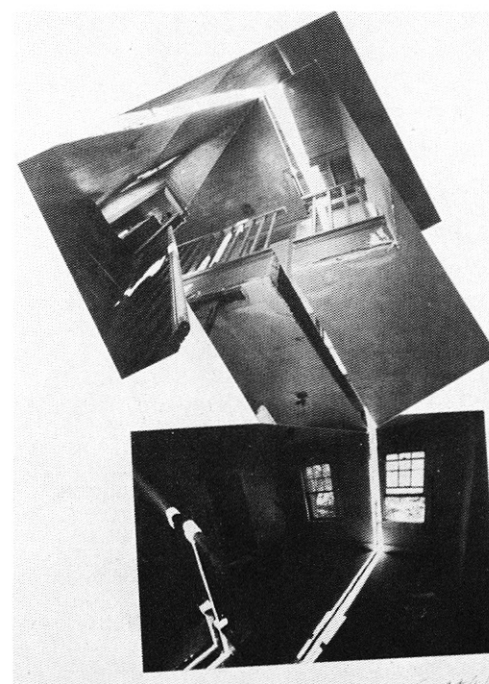
Splitting, Gordon Matta-Clark, 1974

"Already . . . in advance, the image owed something to this moment."[2]

The mythical landscape of the twentieth century can be thought of as the vast fields and streams of images of the world, into which the reality of the world has been transformed in the media. Through the persuasive and pervasive repetitiveness with which society proliferates representations of its values, the mythical landscape of modern life has acquired its own naturalness. The rocks and waterholes of the old myth have been replaced by signs and representations. As technical and scientific progress allows for the unlimited transformation of nature, technology – the mechanism through which the world as image is perpetually reaffirmed by the media – is revealed to be both perpetrator and hidden ground of our mythical landscape, this 'second nature'.[3]

"Myths [today] are nothing but this cease-less . . . insidious and inflexible demand that all men recognize themselves in this image . . . which was built of them one day as if for all time. For the Nature, in which they are locked up under the pretext of being eternalized is nothing but a Usage. And it is this Usage, however lofty, that they must take in hand and transform."[4]

The interruption of the endless flow of images and the appropriation of a fragment of this new landscape for closer examination, reflect both the central concern and field of operation of the architectural problem. The explorations of this fragment aim to expose the constructed nature
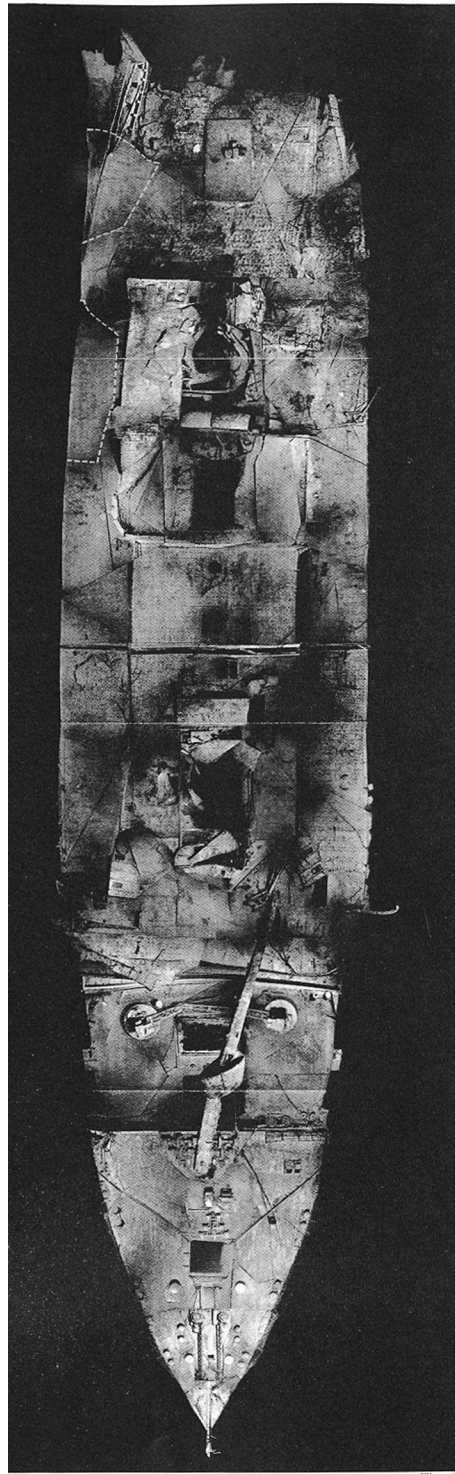
Fig. 1

of its reality, and its subsequent relocation within the framework of architectural production is set before the students as the focus of the studio.

The projects start out by taking one of two photographs of 'lost' objects and transposing it into an 'accounting', a dramatic discursive action that builds upon the image's internal structure by retracing the paths of its becoming. While this exercise seems to solve no immediate problems (the projects merely fill the void that precedes their existence), expansive mappings enable the ambiguities between the object and the representation to emerge in concrete form. Through speculative proposals for the occupation of these forms the projects mirror the formations of myths, and so become predictive myths "that you can actually live by: how to cope with . . . the whole series of enciphered meanings that lie half-exposed within the urban landscape, within the communication landscape we all inhabit and to some extent contribute to."[5] Like all myths, they stand as "exemplary models for all significant human activity."[6] Their lessons are like an after-image, a reverberation of all that has been set in motion. Our engagement, or reading of these projects, can be seen as a ritual re-enacting, an active participation in the myth.

Each student begins with one of two images of lost ships, victims of man-made and natural disasters. These are put forth to challenge investigations into the nature and role of representation in the context of a 'museum/monument' as well as in the architectural production.

Fig. 2

Dear John,

In issue 4 of The Cornell Journal of Architecture, *your text, "A-Locations / Pre-Occupations" described the "mythical landscape of the twentieth century" as a landscape transformed by the media of images and signs. In the 20 years since the publication of that issue, the century's clock has moved on, and with it, the role of the image in our world has proliferated to the extreme. The question for you is simple:*

Mythical landscapes of the twenty-first century?
—Eds.

John Zissovici

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SurfaceCities

Renovating the Image of the 21st-Century City

> *I say therefore that likeness or thin shapes*
> *Are sent out from the surfaces of things*
> *Which we must call as it were their film or bark*
> *Because the image bears the look and shape*
> *Of the body from which it came, as it floats in the air.*
>
> T. Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura,* first-century B.C.

Lucretius's notion of high-speed atomic particles that emanate from objects and enter the eyes to cause vision and visualization is an apt topological model for the mediated, pixelated nature of our current condition. Today, digital images of the city on the luminous liquid crystal display screens of mobile communication devices have acquired a similar role to his "likeness" in visualizing the city. To understand vision as "seeing" (the city) through the mediating images on the screen confers the digital image the same elevated status as Lucretius's "thin shapes." The digital image has become the necessary transitional state of things before they enter our consciousness; that is, the image on the screen is the precondition for visualizing the city.

The cumulative effect of this increasingly mediated experience is to temporarily transform the city itself into an imagescape, a "reality-effect … a dissociated system, a puzzle the observer [is] unable to solve without some traffic in light or the appropriate prosthesis … and to demonstrate … 'mechanically' that man should experience the world as an illusion of the world."[1] The prosthetic hand-held mobile communication device with its glowing LCD screen is the device that solves the puzzle of the city. It is also the medium for reimagining it.

Contrary to the city seen through the mirrors and lenses of the viewfinder of an analog camera, the digital city as it appears on the LCD screen is already a supplemental layer, an excess manifestation of the city, which can only exist temporarily in the real time and space of the city. This transient digital image of the city is also open to being augmented by other image layers before it enters our consciousness.

These new image layers correspond to whatever view appears on the LCD screen as it can now be linked to the original image irrespective of camera orientation. This phenomenon, called augmented reality, originally seen on TV in 1998 as the virtual yellow first-down line**,** was the initial intrusion of the virtual into the "real" image world. The effect of the stable yellow line within shifting perspectives is made possible by digitally linking the various broadcasting cameras to a virtual field that is "aligned" to the actual field of play.

The yellow line, which changes position as the teams move back and forth across the field, is located and "drawn" on the virtual field, then superimposed onto the image of the actual field. This enhancement of the televised image created the illusion for the TV audience that the movable yellow line was actually on the field, but in fact was invisible to the spectators at the game. The ubiquitous virtual yellow line is by now an integral part of all NFL games broadcast on TV.

Augmented reality, however, is a term that wrongly and unfairly reduces the digital image's role in making reality more real: wrongly because it assumes the mere augmentation of an image of reality, and unfairly because it fails to capture the full potential of the image as an integral part of experience. (All NFL fields are now equipped with multiple giant screens that display the real-time televised image with the virtual yellow first-down marker.) At the same time this phenomenon is still widely seen as a lamentable condition, a devaluation of the "real" at the expense of the "authentic," mainly attributed to the commercialization of the public sphere. This point of view contributes to the divisive, dead-end, this-or-that, architecture-or-its-representation discussion and fails to acknowledge the extent to which the mediating digital image is not merely a precondition for "seeing," but has already been absorbed into everyday experience.

Detour

Rome, the unlikely model for the future city, provides an unexpected example of the dynamic way in which images have come to insinuate themselves into the fabric of the city and its citizens' lives. The proliferation of idealized full-scale images of facades in front of buildings was initially a pragmatic response to the problem of having large numbers of Rome's buildings in the historic center under renovation, hidden from the eyes of expectant tourists. Stretched over construction scaffolding, the silk-screened images on scrim—replacements for the ubiquitous cheap green protective nylon mesh—appear as masks, temporary substitutes for the facades.

To pay for the expensive and expansive images, themselves often advertisements for pristine future historic facades, and to defray the cost of the actual renovation, a certain percentage of the image facade is allowed to be occupied by income-producing advertising.

The setup of scrim with picture-in-picture images, its supporting scaffolding that structures the space of renovation, and the veiled building facade hiding the building's occupants, is a mise-en-scène endlessly repeated around Rome, temporarily suggesting the image of modern cities like New York or Tokyo, but still uniquely analog, low-tech, and Roman.

Grafted onto the building's mask is the ever-changeable advertising chip that records the city's shifting taste in fashion, art, politics, and inevitably religion. Meanwhile, the mask allows the face/facade to remain expressionless, a true reflection of Rome's generally stoic response to the often turbulent interaction between the forces that use the city as their background.

The graft/augmentation starts out as the inset stretched canvas, the implied movie screen, all promise and potential. The duration of its blank state seems to follow no discernible pattern, turning expectation into its own spectacle. Nothing will ever be projected here except the shadow of the lights intended to confer on any future image eternal visibility.

This being Rome, the tensions between the graft, the mask, and the face are most evident when churches are involved. The first advertisement in Rome announcing the coming of the film version of *The Da Vinci Code* appears within the image of

the church of San Pantaleo. Over a close-up of Leonardo's *La Gioconda,* her mouth covered by a triangle of texture, is written, "This is how they obscure the language of man." A few days later, after strenuous objection by the Vatican and much debate in the press, the image was replaced by a funerary black scrim with a satanic morphing moiré effect. On closer inspection, it is evident that the original image was merely turned inside out to face the interior of the church, as if impossibly rotated around the central seam. An even more subversive reminder of *Il codice da Vinci,* now spelled backward and barely visible still haunts the Piazza San Pantaleo.

Meanwhile, inset into the mask of an apartment building on the Largo Argentina, a mere five blocks away, a new, more secular-looking ad for the movie appears overnight, and remains in place for the duration of the film's showing. This new graft, transformed suddenly from its months-long state of whiteness, now appears to have been poised as a strategic trump card in a long-anticipated war. The battle for the hearts and minds of the people of Rome is played out in/on images, in real time and real space. As the presence of the bright yellow bus advertising "Tours of Christian Rome" suggests, the bland image of Tom Hanks with his French co-star, as well as the censored blackness in the mask of San Pantaleo, have already been absorbed as contemporary detours updating the city's Christian history.

This ongoing dynamic urban spectacle plays itself out in the image projected from the city's historic facades into the contemporary public sphere. The surplus space created by the projection accommodates the work needed to maintain the illusion of Rome's eternity.

The persistence of this multifunctional infrastructure for simulation, communication, and labor, well beyond the few-years-long rush to renovate Rome's decaying image for the millennium, attests to its integration into the enduring image of the city and all facets of its public life.

With the partial disappearance of countless buildings behind their own representations, the city, its image, and its inhabitants must now be reimagined in real time, on site, building by building, as one moves through the city encountering the scrimmed ghosts of blurred lives and buildings. Each building under renovation, with its excess imagery and space, acts as a trigger for speculation.

APPliedCITY

The LCD image in the city renders every point in the city into a potentially mediated experience and temporarily transforms the city into a mediated field of actions. Like its Roman and pre-Roman precedents, the potentially layered image on the LCD screen is now inserted and experienced in the city in real time and on location, merely by turning the device on. Because of its small size, the screen image is never immersive, never replaces the city, which surrounds it. It is a digital pixel of, and within, the larger world, now with the power to contribute to the creation of an alternative landscape of image surfaces.

Because each image is also a directional view from a specific location, it can be linked to countless supplemental layers of images, texts, and numbers selected to contribute to the image space of the city. Each applied new layer starts out as a virtual framework, a schematic version of the city, like the virtual "field" on which the yellow line is drawn, that is constantly realigned with the city and its digital image on the screen. New layers are selected manifestations of these APPliedCITIES and can be overlaid onto the plan, displayed with the screen in the horizontal position or as views with the screen held vertically. Movement between these two modes of representation is as simple as rotating the device from the horizontal to the vertical position.

The actual city is a joystick for navigating the virtual realm, as movement through the physical city is translated into movement through the APPliedCITY, made possible by various tracking technologies. Scripting the relation between the scale of movement in the actual city and its virtual counterpart allows movement by foot, bicycle, car, subway, or even vertically by elevator, to correspond to all scales and axes of movement in a parallel virtual model. For the moment, the most radical inversion necessary for reimagining our relationship to the city takes place as the city becomes instrumental in accessing parallel virtual realms linked to it.

The TEXT APPliedCity exploits the actual city as an infrastructural surface for posting virtual message layers by its users, a spatialization of texting to correspond to the scale of the city. It would create new features and paths of reading, or identify unexpected locations of gathering for shared public virtual reading. These virtual surfaces could also be the first subliminal suggestion for transforming features of certain parts of the actual city. *Project by Roger Mainor and Anahita Rouzbeh.*

The HISTORIC APPliedCity superimposes previous actual and unrealized versions onto the image of the contemporary city as plans and views, both equally productive in speculating about the city over time. The device is able to record the movement of this APPliedCity's explorers into a cumulative, ever-changing map of attempts to retrace the historic layer. Along with the superimposed views, these would reveal spatial and temporal convergences or disjunctions with the contemporary city. *Project by Ryan Drummond.*

The SUBWAY APPliedCity would alleviate the spatial and sensorial deprivation of the subway journey by linking its trajectory to movement through a variety of parallel APPliedCities based on existing or fictional features of the unseen city. The static scene of the subway car would be enhanced by corresponding to virtual journeys through APPliedCITIES on the screen, alternative narratives, whose moments of intersection with the subterranean trip, recorded as virtual memories, would later be sought out for "verification" in the actual city. *Project by Sarah Haubner and Konrad Scheffer.*

The SKYSPHERE APPliedCITY is a social networking application that allows its users to generate a constantly mutating aerial panorama, virtually mirroring their city from above; a fluid record of their numbers and location, a reflection of shared paths and districts of participation. *Project by Xiaoben Dai and Moritz Schoendorf.*
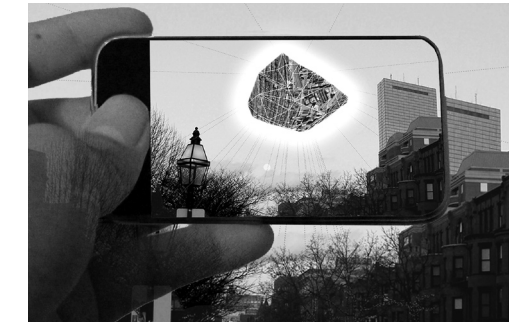
As a receptacle for supplemental layers of images, a dynamic device for locating and navigating text-images in real time, on site, this new mediated city recalls an earlier role of the city as a mnemonic device, an ordering structure for a set of loci, physical locations where images are deposited for later recall. Yet in their more expansive role, mnemonic devices were also intended to aid in the combination of ideas that leads to invention. With its ability to combine layers of historic, analytic, and speculative images and data of the city drawn from an increasingly vast depository, the APPliedCITIES[2] are conduits to insights and discoveries, leading to infinitely varied discourses that alter the way the city is used, remembered, and therefore imagined. Like the temporally ambiguous scrim images of facades in Rome (are they a historic, pre-renovation record, or projective of a future state?), with their ever-changing advertising chip, the layered images on the screen expand the experience of the city into a multitude of temporal and spatial dimensions.

Each of these mediated experiences is centered on looking, *"an obsession in which real time is suspended while, as in dreams, the dead, the living and the still unborn come together on the same plane,"*[3] and creates its own unique layered set of memories of the city.

Each APPliedCITY is a mise en abyme of the actual city, a mise-en-scène of a new city. The insertion of the excess imagery disrupts our experience of the city, which is continually visible to us and allows us to reimagine it digitally.

The pervasive presence of digital images of the city within the urban environment links the digital and actual manifestations of the city into a constantly mutating, interdependent relationship that destabilizes the "real" versus "virtual" argument. Like in Rome, it is in the alternate (rather than augmented) reality of the space between the city and its image, that a renovation of the image/idea of the city can be performed. Unlike in Rome, the deployment and lifespan of

the layered image on the LCD screen is fully in control of the individual user ready to disappear as soon as the device is turned off. The mediated city only really exists when seen on site, on the screen as an image. Its effect, however, like Rome, is likely to be eternal.

APPendix

Many of the ideas developed here come out of a graduate studio co-taught with Yanni Loukissas. Students proposed applications for mobile communication devices as a way to explore the impact of new technologies on the way we create images of cities, in contrast to Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* from 50 years ago. The images of APPliedCITIES are student projects developed in the studio.

Endnotes

1   Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 5.
2   SurfaceCities Studio, Department of Architecture, Cornell University, Fall 2009, http://www.surfacecities.com.
3   W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo* (New York: Random House, 2005), 15.

Michael Ashkin

with Nathan Townes-Anderson

Michael Ashkin has exhibited nationally and internationally, including in Documenta 11 in 2002 and the Whitney Biennial in 1997. Most recently, in 2009, his work was the subject of a solo show at Secession in Vienna. Ashkin is currently director of graduate studies in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning's Department of Art, at Cornell University.

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Resolution (Western Sahara)