

# Virtually Home!

Contributed by doesi  
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A new concept

of inside and outside

and what it means

to be ...

VIRTUALLY HOME!

## REGARDING INTERACTIVE COMPUTER GAMES

In 1997 we were invited to produce an art project in a well-known "techno" club in

Munich in connection with a symposium on electronic music. We decided to recreate the premises of the club – including all the works of other artists exhibited there – in the 3D-modelling program of the Ego shooter game Marathon.1 We installed numerous monitors and projectors on the spot in the real room, and allowed anyone to play who wanted to. The aim of this LAN game was to kill aliens and other opponents with an arsenal of martial weapons.

The aggressive situation required maximum alertness. Any distraction could mean your own virtual death. Real space merged into virtual space in front of our eyes. After the game, no one could go round the corner in the real room without some palpitations&hellip;

Even if LAN games are different from MMOG (massive multiplayer online games) such as Second Life in having other players simultaneously present in the room, where you remain anonymous and singular, the experiences we had are applicable to virtual worlds such as Second Life:

- 1) In the club there was a double floor that led to the loss of the genius loci, and gave rise to a new mental map.
- 2) Our whole spatial perception was reduced to audiovisual elements. All other senses of spatial perception were largely blotted out. We realised that the success of AV "spatial creations" lies in them being easily controllable in comparison with the physical architecture.
- 3) The interaction generated an undertow that affected our thinking. As in driving a car, it gave us a restricted field of action that required total concentration and instinctive thinking. Associative thinking was replaced by instinct and quick reactions. Daydreaming when driving causes accidents.

We soon realised that it's a myth to think that interactive spaces necessarily lead to more creativity. Quite the

contrary &ndash; our experiment showed that the capacity for personal spatial ideas and intuition was inhibited. This is incidentally how interactive environments also differ from the classic cinema experience. Films create freedom for your own associations and memories by what they don't show and by what, like editing techniques, separates and links time and space. Here, the difference between gaming and playing is discernible. Playing has to do with inventing and is less rule-bound than gaming. In other words, you can

only imagine what is not there. The more you show, the less the rest has to be imagined. The less you have to imagine, the easier you are to control.

## ARCHITECTURE'S SECOND LIFE

What was missing from Second Life was the storyline. Unlike in Marathon, there was not even a target, a high score. No one understood what the game was about. So why all the media hype about Second Life? What's the plot in Second Life?

The answer is obvious &ndash; the narrative element of Second Life is reality itself. In Second Life, we look at a scene which is more than a metaphor for reality. It is both &ndash; reality and metaphor at the same time! Alongside the self-dramatisation by means of avatars and buildings as alter egos, it is about social adaptation. Put more precisely, Second Life is not about producing architecture or chatting about important things but about &ldquo;playing at architecture&rdquo; and &ldquo;playing at communication&rdquo;. In Second Life, stage sets are produced for an absurd theatre reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet's Last Year in Marienbad.<sup>2</sup> Three-dimensional self-portraits and dream houses come up if, like Jeff Bridges in The Big Lebowski, you fly over a landscape that oscillates aesthetically between Bob Ross and The Sims. Anyone who wakes up for the first time in the architecture of virtual exile is inevitably reminded of David Lynch's surreal scenario in Lost Highway. Gaudy though the world in it seems, it is nevertheless affirmative. That is why most of the avatars look like Pamela Anderson and Brad Pitt, gestures are standardised, most of the buildings are ordinary suburban houses or fair stalls, and the whole space is a mimetic doll's house. Moreover, everything is there to play a role &ndash; as with a doll at the psychiatrist's. It is as if the architecture itself is lying on Freud's couch because in reality it is undergoing a serious identity crisis provoked by media-based spatial awareness. That is sufficient reason to examine the results of the first Architecture and Design Competition in Second Life. As part of Ars Electronica in Linz, an international jury selected four winning projects from 126 submissions, and after a public vote prizes were awarded at the Zeche Zollverein in Essen. All the works came from professional architects and designers. The jury (Pascal Schöning and Shumon Basar from the London-based Architectural Association, Melinda Rackham of the Australian Network for Art and Technology, Tor Lindstrand from the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm and architectural curator Mathieu Wellner) focused on projects that were formally largely abstract, invited other users to get involved or were simply more exciting than reality. So what reality might that be? What sort of reality is it where terms such as &ldquo;mixed realities&rdquo;, &ldquo;augmented realities&rdquo;, &ldquo;virtual spaces, &ldquo;hybrid spaces&rdquo; or &ldquo;the metaverse&rdquo;<sup>3</sup> have become commonplace? In what form do these amorphous concepts reveal their importance for our reality and our awareness of space? What role does the aesthetic aspect have? Numerous projects succumbed to the lure of a formal &ldquo;anything goes&rdquo;, and let rip an orgy of forms. Unencumbered by static and commercial constraints, Sullivan's dictum that &ldquo;form follows function&rdquo; seems to have degenerated into farce. What function could that be, anyway? What are the functions and effects of designs in virtual space?

By definition, virtuality specifies an imaginary entity or one made specific via its characteristics. Though it is not physical, it is present in its functionality or effect.

Max Moswitzer's White Noise project tackled this notion by means of ironic detachment, which is also why the jury selected it. He compiled a constantly changing architecture from freely disposable elements called &ldquo;freebies&rdquo;. Magnified three-dimensional everyday objects such as skateboards, bottles, transport vehicles, chairs, teddy bears and lots more shine white like skeletons. It is the result of a cheerful shopping round for shapes that subsequently, bleached out like dead coral, have a different story to tell. Inevitably one is reminded of a rubbish tip from Julian Opie's Workshop. You sense an echo of figures from classical antiquity, whose virgin white has survived into modern architecture as a concept of beauty,

even if we meantime have discovered that the figures were originally colourfully painted and decorated. White Noise is a neo-antique collection of objects whose graphics, skins and textures got lost on the way. The technically most innovative projects largely ignore mimetic architecture and see themselves as three-dimensional interfaces. Meylenstein's project Living Cloud is a virtual house in the shape of a cloud that always surrounds you and changes as a result of social contact. However, the cloud also shrouds its avatar, thereby generating a small protective zone. In his Seventeen Unsung Songs, Adam Nash produced a lyrical garden of sounds

whose elements change and generate sounds on contact. DC Spensely's project Full Immersive Hyperformalism

is likewise a three-dimensional collection of interactive spots embedded in an orthogonal "space frame". It is one of those projects that foreshadow the future potential of virtual three-dimensional worlds as interfaces to real spaces. It is easy to imagine that they could function as intelligent remote controls for real spaces or like threedimensional telephones. As with all Web 2.0-driven media, all projects involved something we might term "the virtual home";

## WELCOME TO THE BASTARD SPACE

I launched this competition because, as a result of my own work in art4, I came to the conclusion that computer games such as Second Life no longer just copy the world but a creeping inversion process is taking place. I am reminded of a comment by Walter Benjamin in 1929 that has perhaps become a central metaphor of our basic cultural situation these days:

"When two mirrors look at each other, Satan plays his favourite game and opens a perspective on infinity."

Our own position lies somewhere between these two mirrors looking at each other. We are permanently faced with reality and its images in the media, which mutually reflect each other. In the force field between these two poles, a new awareness of space is generated in which the absence of presence has become normal. Where are you actually when you ring from a mobile? What reality are you in when you have your iPod in your ear and the acoustic space is uncoupled from physical space? What space are you in when you play a computer game, surf the net or in the future take a GPS - linked electronic shadow with you as an avatar?

That these are not minor questions is shown by the example of American GI s who said that, when they shot at Iraqis with loud music in their headsets, they felt like in an action film. Clearly they were occupying two spaces that emulsified with each other to create a new, distorted reality. How hard this parallelism and simultaneous irreconcilability of spaces can hit is also shown by the last telephone conversations from the World Trade Center on 11th September.

It would seem that, wherever physical and media space fuse, new spaces also evolve. They are spaces that are sometimes present, sometimes absent, but are generally mobile and roam across the continents at diverse speeds until they burst like soap bubbles – at the end of a phone call on the motorway.

Let's call them "bastard spaces"!

## GOODBYE PRIVACY

What we describe as public space is the sum of all bastard spaces. Public space is largely a media construct involving an economy measured in purchasing power, production runs and viewing figures. Where there are cameras, where the assembled contents are edited, is the actual meaning of what we term public space. What did the voices of millions of people protesting against the Iraq war on the streets of our cities achieve in the face of Colin Powell's successful Photoshop fiction of virtual nuclear launching pads? A grainy satellite picture of scarcely recognisable vehicles was repeated so often until a fear-filled space was generated in the western hemisphere that ultimately led to a war where force was anything but virtual.

Urban planning with bombs.

Unlike self-controlled bastard spaces such as telephones or iPods, whose space-generating power you manage yourself, the supervision of "public" space lies outside our own field of influence. It is media operators who have power over contents and broadcasting times. They are the architects of public space.

In public space, people become consumers, focus groups and "eyeballs";<sup>6</sup> Individuals can now set about putting themselves across publicly via MySpace, YouTube, Second Life and soon MyWorld as well – so as thereby to regain justification for their existence as political individuals. It is clear that this privately changes the meaning of the term for good, because anyone who puts himself into the media is exposed to observation and monitoring. Ars Electronica

in Linz, which sponsored the first competition, has therefore focused strongly on the "goodbye privacy" theme this year.

## ICONOMANIA

Let us therefore look back at the other side of Benjamin's mirror, contemporary architecture. As architectural theoretician Anthony Vidler puts it, it creates a feeling of the uncanny, seeming fretful and creating nowhere to establish a home. Manifestly, alienation is at work in modernism.<sup>7</sup> In the mirror image, we see a contemporary architecture that, as French author Michel Houellebecq critically observes, is only concerned to "erect shelves of the social supermarket";<sup>8</sup> What we have is contemporary architecture that is now vastly more subject to commercial considerations, as competition jury member Tor Lindstrand soberly summed

up: "Excel has had a greater impact on contemporary architecture than Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Frank O. Gehry have managed together."<sup>9</sup> But it would be presumptuous to ascribe this development to architects, as fewer than 10 per cent of buildings in Germany are actually built by architects. What we have is a kind of Sim City — urban planning based on urban economic simulations, and individual buildings are stylistic variants optimised per square footage and classified as residential, commercial and industrial zones. Whereas private architecture largely takes root in amorphous settlements and gated communities, commercial zones in the city are shaped by iconographic iconoclasm. The efforts of star architects cannot escape this either, even if they want to. Their work is, in Guy Debord's phrase, categorised as "places-to-be" architecture or "cultural theme-parks".<sup>10</sup> The same

process can be followed in the breakneck development of cities in the Middle East, Lagos and Shanghai. Iconographic towers, airports and artificial palm islands reminiscent of creative terraforming in Second Life are walk-in super-symbols — copy/paste architecture that is easy to locate on Google Earth.

In 1972, in *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*<sup>11</sup>, Izenour, Scott and Venturi described the iconography of the modern business city in terms of the Las Vegas Strip. They show how a city develops to accommodate cars. The function and message of a building should be immediately recognisable from the road. Six years later, the conclusion of Jean Baudrillard's "agonny of the real" was that America had become Disneyland.<sup>12</sup> With the democratised view of the globe from the cosmos, one might add: Earth has become a computer game!

Looking at Google Earth has destroyed all the magic in the view of Earth that Neil

Armstrong gave us. The image of Earth is in danger of getting worn out from over-use. John Berger's comment on this effect was that, if everything that existed were constantly being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless. The globe and all its cities are accessible from everywhere. From the screen, you can zoom from level to level, as in the Eames's Powers of Ten. It's only a few clicks from the real image of Darfur, New York or Kabul to a little home of your own somewhere on the three-dimensional playing field. In passing, you also see the urban zones that, as Mike Davis described in *Planet Slum*, are expanding most rapidly worldwide. In Google Earth, we experience a global exhibition every

day without having anything to do with it. It is the extension of Malraux's idea of a museum without walls. It is a cool look at ourselves, with the detachment of a glance at an exhibit in the curio cabinet.

## DOPPELGÄNGER

Back on the ground, we may note a strange transformation of the old architectural fabric. With the total marketing of cities (e.g. Edinburgh), even historic buildings become "branded builds" or Venturi's "decorated sheds" or "ducks". Particularly buildings that were hitherto vehicles of cultural identity become three-dimensional symbols of themselves at a 1:1 scale. The absurd thing is that, the more historic buildings are renovated and prettily floodlit, the more synthetic and alien they look. The Acropolis, Castel Sant'Angelo, Munich's City Hall, the Eiffel Tower or even less well-known buildings look like fakes with an artificial patina. The cultural substance of historic buildings is obscured by their plastic, stage-set appearance.

Like an ephemeral graffito, the physical building acquires a spectacular doppelgänger that is disconcertingly beautiful and yet uncanny as well 14.

Historic city centres are transformed into history lands with attached shopping malls. Behind them flourish, artificially air-conditioned, a similar range of shops in every city with branches of global brands from McDonald's to Gucci, bludgeoning shoppers with "functional music". Strangely enough, the artificial identity and alienation frequently associated with the concept of "urban periphery"; thereby also creep into the heart of the city. Push and Pull!

For Rem Koolhaas, shopping has become the final activity of mankind. Shopping zones are systems controlled down to the last detail, where nothing is left to chance. They are labyrinths with carefully choreographed orientation points — the products. The more time you spend in them, and the more convenience the space promises, the greater the turnover of goods. Convenience is another word for total control, but it is nonetheless perceived as pleasant because people are released from all responsibility for anything as long as their credit cards will stand it. Airports are perhaps the best example of this because they are transit areas and at the same time the shopping zones with the highest turnover per square foot. For art historian Max Schich, airports are liturgical areas with specific sequences and rituals, the purpose being the Eucharist. Secularised man experiences transubstantiation at the moment the plane's wheels leave the runway. It is not so very different with virtual spaces through whose corridors we can let ourselves be teleported motionlessly in every direction. Second Life provides the right picture for the narcissistic desire to fly. But before the traveller can take off at the airport, he has to pass through various checkpoints. Strict behavioural rules and guidance systems operate to channel him as quickly as possible from A to B. Even so, he has to keep pausing and waiting — the underground garage, check-in, body check, baggage screening, finally finishing up in the duty-free zone. Restaurants and shops form an outlet to an apparent autonomy of controlled opportunities for choosing between KFC and Rolex. Both Second Life and airports are convenience spaces that deprive us of any responsibility. In Foucault's terms, these spaces are structurally reminiscent of a prison. But in contrast to "real" prisons, they are happy imprisonments because they operate not with repression but with seduction. In marketing, there are two fine terms, "push" and "pull". "Push" means the real prison you are warned against in American schools with the words: "Take responsibility for your life, or others will do it for you." In the worst case, people are told when to get up, what to put on, what to eat, etc. "Pull" means the immediate promise of happiness that can be redeemed by buying something. The greatest feeling of happiness is an almost infantile feeling of security when the responsibility of accepting responsibility is

taken from you. And what for, anyway? Everything is only temporary, everything is flexible. One is oneself only a node in a loose network. The spiritual link between virtual and real worlds is affected by portable media such as Blackberries, laptops, iPods, etc. These tools can best be seen as "spaces in transit". "Spaces in transit" are spaces we know that give us a feeling of home. Favourite music in your ears,

and familiar names and pictures on the screen, form an emotional interior within a Teflon coated external space. If you link the metaverse with the portable medium and a GPS system, your own body will always be accompanied by a digital alter ego. We carry our virtual homes around with us like snail shells. With a radio-frequency chip in our electronic or biometric passes (e-pass, electronic passport, eID), we are already carrying our virtual persona around with us, like an electronic shackle. The fully immersive three-dimensional variant is now in its genesis, with Orwellian potential. In the second life of architecture, a new meaning for the terms inside and outside opens up to us shortly before takeoff. In bastard space, inside and outside become processes, because they involve a spatial awareness that is governed by the medium. As on a Möbius strip, the concepts of inside and outside are replaced by the terms attraction and repulsion, or "pull" and "push". Surrounded by Benjamin's mirrors along the Möbius strip, eternity has already begun. But anyone who waits for the Resurrection in the second life of architecture hasn't understood

anything. So how can one find meaning in all that, in the middle of Satan's favourite game?

Perhaps we can find an answer in Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities, [16] in which he has the Great Khan looking up in his atlas the maps of cities that are threatened with nightmares and curses — Enoch, Babylon, YahooLand, Butua, Brave New World. In it, Kublai Khan says:

"It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us."

And Marco Polo goes:

"The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many:

accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.&rdquo;

Stephan Doesinger, Space Between People, Prestel 2008