

OVERLOAD/ABSENCE: THE COLLAPSE OF SPACE TO SURFACE IN REPRESENTATIONS OF URBAN SPACE

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ABSTRACT

As public space is rapidly diminished through gentrification and privatization it is 'enlivened' by the introduction of large-screen moving images, digital advertising and other mediaization. This is an environment of alternating overstimulation and anonymity in which the hyperactive and featureless landscapes, seemingly opposites, both prioritize the *skin* of architecture and is a manifestation of an intense preoccupation with surface. Using New York City as an example of an older city in evolutionary transformation, the paper will contrast this established urban paradigm with an emergent city like Dubai, where the architecture of surface has been introduced into a 'tabula rasa' environment unconstrained by historicism or gradualism. This paper will also examine the perceptual shift from space to surface in environments of overload and absence and also look at how surface has been used by artists to create new representations of urban space.

FROM SPACE TO SURFACE

The contrast is stark: a nexus of avenues so illuminated by signs and video that the upright can be seen from an airplane. A few streets away the landscape flattens out to corridors of corporate towers anchored by a repetitive streetscape of banks and chain stores. These hyperactive and featureless environments, while seemingly opposite, both prioritize the *skin* of architecture. This is urban space stripped of sense of place as it is amplified by intrusions of electronic media. As more established cities lose the idiosyncratic visual codes that create a complex geospatial identity, emergent cities embrace the architecture of surface. This visual landscape exhibits the characteristics of 'non-space' described in Marc Augé's book *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. It is "space that cannot be defined as relational or historical or concerned with identity and is thus devoid of emotion and memory." [1]

These "spaces of circulation, consumption and communication" lack the organic growth and dynamic chaos that once typified the city. In addition, globalization and the constant mediation of electronic devices causes an individual, in Augé's words, to "*live rather oddly in an intellectual, musical or visual environment that is wholly independent of his immediate physical surrounding.*" This extension of physical and psychological awareness in media has been described by William J. Mitchell as "*the electronic present continuous.*" [2]

The hyperactive landscape of Times Square-type zones and featureless business districts, are perceptually similar – superficial (in the sense of a reduction of nuanced and dimensional space to a two-dimensional plane). This paper will consider the shift from space to surface in historical and emergent cities and examine how the visual vocabulary of surface may be used in formulating new representations of urban space.

THE EROSION OF MEMORY

Landscape is history: memory is inscribed in place. As familiar places vanish, memory becomes myth and an ordinary place is seen through the lens of nostalgia. It is vernacular buildings that create a neighborhood feeling.

In New York, these endangered and demolished landmarks are memorialized in *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York* blog. Jeremiah Moss compiled a 'Master List' of businesses that have disappeared since 2001 and estimates that 6,926 years of history have been lost. [3] Many of these storefronts were the product of an individual sensibility evolved over time: visually unique and evocative of an owner's personal history. It's a cliché to describe upscale stores as having collections 'curated' by the owner. Yet the contents of these neighborhood stores are truly curated, representing a holistic sensibility that is consistent in signage, architecture and merchandise.



Fig 1. Signage, 1996-2001, photograph, Annette Weintraub.

Quirky and eccentric, these shops in their lively use of color, typography and unorthodox construction materials are a form of living folk art.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF REMOTENESS

In contrast to a model of lively street life, high-rise high profile trophy buildings minimize the importance of the street. Designed to be seen from afar, these totems brand the skyline, emphasizing the broad vista over the close-up. Intentionally remote, they are aloof from the city even as they use it as a signifier of their importance. An example of the rejection of street for vista is a Frank Gehry building in lower Manhattan. The second tallest residential tower in the Western Hemisphere, this 76-story silvery column is set on a squat five-story brick base. On the building website, there are no images of the building at street level. Promotional photographs emphasize the tower's sculptural quality by focusing on its crenelated surface or show it in a panoramic establishing shot of the skyline.



Fig. 2. 8 Spruce Street, 2014, photograph, Annette Weintraub.

The upper residential floors are delicate, the silvery skin beautifully modulated in the changing light. At street level, the plain base contains shops, a school and hospital; visually unrelated to the tower that rises above. The base and tower, public and private zones, are separated in blunt economic terms: bespoke design for the tower, a generic box for the public. The building expresses the contradiction of being in the city yet set apart from it. Augé observed that the cinematic long shot captures the aesthetic of non-place, a psychological distancing that expresses ambivalence about the messiness of urban space. [4]

THE PAST AS PASTICHE

Temporal estrangement occurs when fragments of the architectural past are separated from their original context as when developers demolish a historical structure but retain a decorative element as a cosmetic ‘amenity.’

The destruction of St. Ann’s church (1847) to construct an NYU dorm in the East Village of New York City is such an example. All that remains of a lovely Victorian Gothic stone church is a slice of the façade, backed up against a generic brick structure unrelated in scale, materials or geometry.



Fig. 3. St. Ann’s, 2013, photograph, Annette Weintraub.

The amputated fragment is out of place and doubly inauthentic. A failed ‘preservation’ strategy has turned a distinguished building into an ornamental quotation that makes its prosaic replacement appear even more impoverished. The church has been flattened into a single surface; this is the past as pastiche.

THE ROMANCE OF RUINS

As established cities are stripped of history, there is a temptation to romanticize the past. This is a psychological mechanism for confronting loss. There is voyeuristic satisfaction in meditating on the remnants of a vanished culture while enjoying the spectacle, as in Piranesi’s 18th century etchings of decaying Roman ruins. ‘Urban exploration’ is a way of connecting with the past and experiencing a vicarious authenticity of place.



Fig. 4. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/memoriesbymike/>, 2013, photograph, Creative Commons license.

Transgressive acts of incursion into inaccessible places such as abandoned power stations, train tunnels and sewers are photographically documented in what is now ironically called ‘ruin spotting’—a term that expresses the complexity of a guilty pleasure. These landmarks of early industrial architecture contrast starkly with the conventional urban landscape. Built on an imposing scale, they are visual confirmation of a vibrant industrial machine; they expressed boundless confidence in the ascendancy of capitalistic culture by referring to the magnificent public works of ancient times.

Paul Raphaelson’s photographs of the abandoned Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn convey the duality of former grandeur and current desolation. At its peak, Domino refined over half the sugar used in the United States. Now, although partially landmarked, the site will largely be replaced by a residential tower. Raphaelson’s images show the immense halls and intricate mechanical workings of the plant. The austere open spaces elevate its utilitarian function and its patinated abandoned machinery remind us of the temporality of even the most ambitious undertakings. [5] The anxiety about time expressed by contemplating ruins or imagining the utopias of the future is a way, in Augé’s words, to “grasp in the present a lack that structures the present moment by orienting towards the past or the future.” [6]



Fig. 5. Domino Sugar Refinery, Brooklyn, 2014, Paul Raphaelson, photograph, image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6. Domino Sugar Refinery, interior, 2014, Paul Raphaelson, photograph, image courtesy of the artist.

RENDERING AS REALITY

Architectural renderings and depictions of urban space in video games present opposing images of the city: utopian vs. dystopian and real vs. fictive even as they use a common set of 3D rendering conventions. Video games use iconic New York locations in a filmic way, employing a shorthand of easily read symbolic visuals including graffiti, yellow taxis, dimly-lit industrial streets and glowing signage. The strong sense of urban atmosphere of these establishing shots moves the narrative forward as much as the game action itself: this is the city as stage set.

The image of New York locations in films such as *Taxi Driver* or *Escape from New York* is clearly related to the New York of *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Crysis 2* video games. As games critic Jim Rossignol has noted, “New York City has become gaming’s ideal and idealized urban environment and it has done so by becoming re-fictionalized and reimagined. The finest example of a city yet given to gaming, that of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, isn’t really New York at all and yet it is more like New York than ever before.” [7]

While the city in *Grand Theft Auto IV* has been art directed with Edward Hopper-like solidity and depicts a somewhat contemporary New York, *Crysis 2* remakes New York into a ravaged city of the

future evocative of Piranesi. Impressionistic in approach, with richly detailed textures and extreme level of detail, it severs foreground and background, placing chunks of skyline rendered in extreme perspective outside of the field of action. The use of haze and atmosphere references painters like Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, creating a feeling of melancholic despair. This game presents a dystopic vision of the city; aestheticizing devastation much like ruin porn photography and depicting the city in extremis, in a dark future of social, political and ecological deterioration.



Fig. 7. *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s Star Junction, 2008, video game still, image courtesy of Rockstar Games.



Fig. 8. *Crysis 2*, 2011, video game still, image courtesy of Crytek.

Architectural rendering is capitalism’s “good” twin to the “evil” twin of video games. Video games depict claustrophobia and grittiness; architectural renderings emphasize spectacular vistas and improbable pastoral elements. Well-ordered compared to the deliberate disorder of games, these representations are utopian, presenting the city as gleaming surfaces and clearly framed viewpoints.

Architect’s drawings conflate wishful thinking and practical information. These renderings are not only a way to view a building in situ before construction, but are an aspirational sales tool that promotes an urban lifestyle. Flipboard’s *Skyscraper City* is a catalogue of this seductively rendered aesthetic. It becomes difficult to tell if one is looking at a photograph or a rendering, since a seamless set of conventions of surface emphasizing

reflected light, strong diagonals and glittering materials are ubiquitous in architectural, gaming, photographic and filmic depictions of urban space. [8] Architectural renderings lack the chaos and human presence of video games and their emotional dimension. They depict a world of surface perfection in which the anarchy and confusion of the city is sanitized and spatial representation is condensed to a set of conventions; space is downsized to surface.

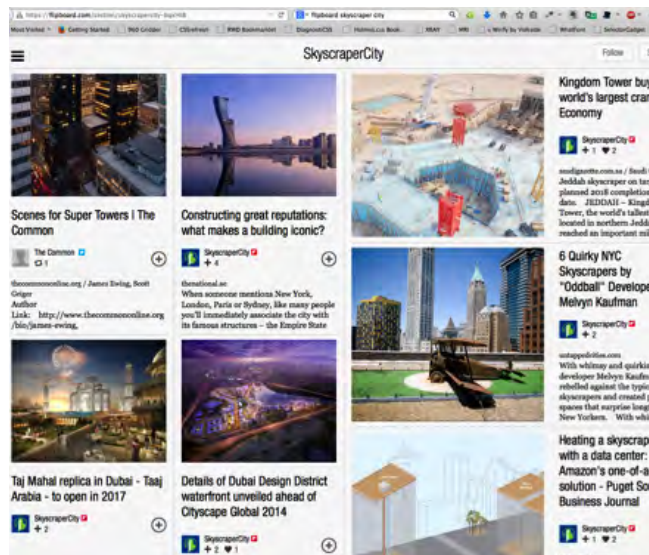


Fig. 9. Flipboard's Skyscraper City, 2014, screen grab, image courtesy of Flipboard.com.

EMERGENT URBANISMS

While the shift from space to surface in urban centers like New York is dislocative, emergent cities like Dubai present a different model. Rather than displacing the past, the architecture of surface has been implanted in a tabula rasa environment unconstrained by the political gradualism and physical (or often financial) limitations of established cities. There is a contrast between internationalist and indigenous architectural forms, but there is little 'middle distance' of existing development to disrupt. The modest scale and indigenous materials of traditional districts and the bold novelty of new construction are set apart geographically and temporally.



Fig. 10. Dubai from Vu's Bar, Emirates Tower, 2013, WatchfulMind, photograph, Creative Commons license.

Very much as in Las Vegas (also best photographed at night), accelerated urban development takes place in an 'empty' environment that doesn't displace traditional visual codes. The trophy buildings of Dubai's iconographic skyline are measured only against each other and world records for height, scale and daring and the luxury of seemingly endless space permits experimentation and hyper-sized projects that would be unthinkable and politically impossible in older cities.



Fig. 11. Dubai at Night, 2010, Kamel Lebtahi, photograph, Creative Commons license.

While 20th century cities contest radical change and Dubai embraces it, it is in China, where ravaged historical districts and new construction are cheek-by-jowl, that the violent uprooting of visual codes and established social communities is clearly articulated. Demonstrating neither the negotiated shifts from space to surface of New York or the exuberant expansion of Dubai, the rupture in China reads as entirely brutal.



Fig. 12. Demolition in Shanghai, 2010, Bert van Dijk, photograph, Creative Commons license.

BEAUTY IN NON-PLACE

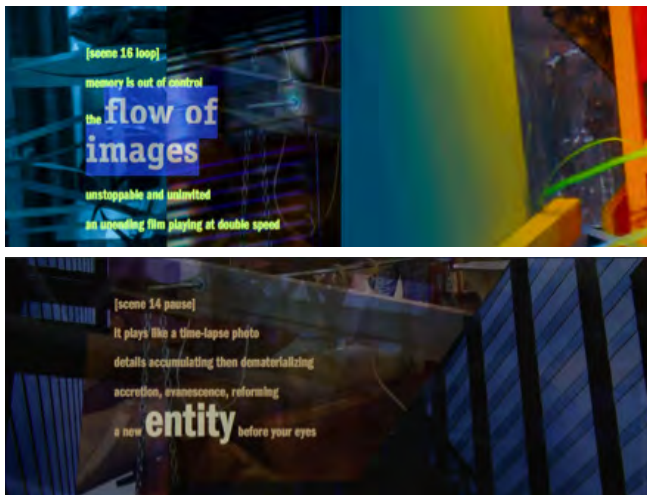
Marc Augé described the "dilemma of artists doomed to seek beauty in non-place." The reshaping of the city as surface is an opportunity for rethinking representation of urban space. Perhaps

an urban landscape focused on exteriority is more readily understood in extreme close-up or zoomed out into the global perspective of Google Maps.

THE GRANULAR LANDSCAPE

The increasing blandness of once richly complex streets has caused me to view at urban space differently. Pictorial elements that read as compelling are not the visuals so emblematic of the environment of non-place, but small material details that convey a granular sense of the complexity of the whole. It is the middle distance that reads as banal: the close-up and extreme vista both contain information and reveal underlying structures that can be extrapolated into a new mapping of the city. To explore this notion of city as surface, I used a series of generic urban visual elements to create a series of animations exploring surface. The panning movement in these animations correspond to the experience of optically scanning a vista, placing the viewer in the landscape, as in an establishing shot in film. *Slide Stories* is a web-based work that uses the insignificant detail of urban landscape to construct underlying narratives of urban space. These small image fragments, meaningless in isolation, in aggregate construct sense of place. [9]

Slide Stories is composed of seven sequences, each of which explores a different visual and thematic narrative of urban space. Each scene of *Slide Stories* consists of an extreme horizontal panorama, one or more overlay images, a text and a track of ambient sound. As the animation loops, the image is reframed and the path and juxtaposition of text and image changes so that the viewer experiences a different conjunction of elements. The panning is slow and out of phase so that each iteration reveals a slightly different part of the whole.



Figs. 13, 14 *Slide Stories: Blink* (screenshots), 2012, Annette Weintraub, Internet project, Image courtesy of the artist.

The scenes of *Slide Stories* vary in visual theme and underlying narrative and explore issues of materiality, spatial geometries, the transformative effect of artificial light; the warmth of organic

materials; and the transience of the urban environment. Using devalued commonplace material detail, *Slide Stories* poetically reconstitutes urban space through surface incident.

PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION

Satellite images present a global perspective; a flattened view of earth that renders architectural elements graphic. This perspective shift emphasizes the commonalities of structures; most buildings are rectangles when seen from space. GoogleMaps turns space into surface: height and volume are undifferentiated, while color and pattern are critical. *Every Outdoor Basketball Court in Manhattan* (2011) is a digital print by Jenny Odell from her series Satellite Collections. These prints extract a set of architectural structures of similar function from Google Satellite View and aggregate them in a set that articulates their incremental similarities and differences.

As Odell states, "*The alienation provided by the satellite perspective reveals the things we take for granted to be strange, even absurd. Banal structures and locations can appear fantastical and newly intricate. Directing curiosity toward our own inimitably human landscape, we may find that those things that are most recognizably human are also the most bizarre, the most unlikely, the most fragile.*" [10]



Fig. 15. *Every Outdoor Basketball in Manhattan*, 2011, Jenny Odell, digital print, Image courtesy of the artist.

Odell's images are painterly geometries, abstractions that play with small contrasts of shape and color. Detached from context, the images show identical structures whose marginal differences collectively reveal much about culture, industry and economics; even as they remain indecipherable they charm us with their eccentricity.

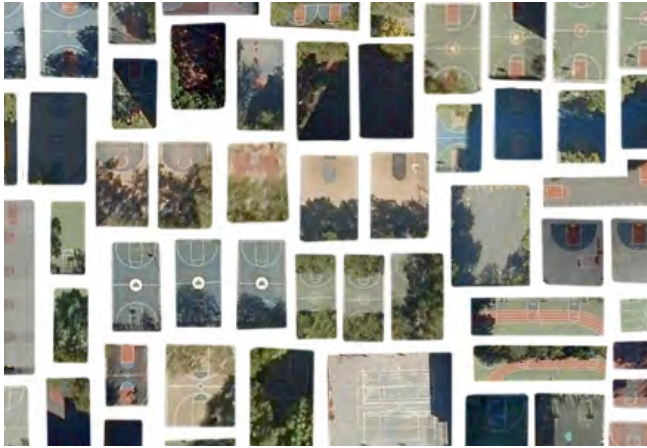


Fig. 16. *Every Outdoor Basketball in Manhattan* (detail), 2011, Jenny Odell, digital print, Image courtesy of the artist.

ANIMATING SURFACE

Dynamic movement is an essential characteristic of urban space. There are characteristic urban rhythms: the energetic streaming of traffic or the flocking movements of pedestrians in space. By obliquely capturing this dynamism, the underlying patterns of a space can be revealed. Noah Klersfeld's video work, *Times Square (NYPD)*, breaks up the action of several video clips into the tessellations of a rotated grid; It presents a slice of the city in fragmentary glimpses seen through a banal section of chain link fence. The moving image elements are drawn from one or multi-channel videos, small slices of which are placed in selected negative spaces of the chain link. The effect is of a constant play of solid and empty, static and dynamic, extended in time.



Fig. 17. *Times Square (NYPD still)*, 2014, Noah Klersfeld, video (5 minutes), Image courtesy of the artist.

Klersfeld describes his work as "temporally redistributing the activities taking place on a snowy afternoon in New York City. *"Focusing on the city's epicenter of tourism and media saturation, the video unifies the vast array of activities by confining everything (people, snow, cars, trucks, buses, digital signage) to a series of identical "viewports." The result is a spatially ambiguous depiction of the urban environment, weaving together multiple timeframes*

into a singular form." [12] By inserting slivers of video into a static field, Klersfeld transforms the haphazard movement of the street to surface, encoded so recognition hovers barely above the threshold of perception.

REIMAGING INDETERMINATE PLACE

Perhaps it is not beauty that artists seek in Augé's indeterminate place, but a lens through which to reimagine place in a devisualized landscape. In an urban environment stripped of history and cultural identifiers that proudly embodies the stylistic conventions of real estate marketing and 3D rendering, sense of place is provisional. The transitional spaces of circulation, consumption and communication that Augé saw as emblematic of non-place are no longer merely peripheral or connective, they are the substance of our space – it is as if the once interstitial spaces had absorbed into themselves the islands of matter that they connected. Artists' responding to the phenomena of non-place are using fragments of visual incident, variation in material surfaces, analysis and extraction of underlying pattern of the landscape to reformulate a vision of urban space that explores its essential dynamism and acknowledges its constant evolution and remaking.

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