Technological Subjects / Corporate Landscapes

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1   LANDSCAPE AS METAPHOR AND STRATEGY

The most striking transformation effected by digital technologies is a widespread change in our perception of materiality, space and information which affects directly or indirectly how we understand architecture, habitation and the built environment. The human mind can now perceive a new spatial form, one which derives from the television and computer screen but which has expanded far outside the technological surface. Through the digital interface perception is now in a state of flux where the only dominant landscape seems to be one of difference. Cultural and national boundaries are now easily being transgressed by the new economic order of multinational corporations. Power has clearly moved beyond that of the state, inscribing the local into the global in ways never before possible (Everard, 2000). Moreover, theorists such as Haraway (1991) or Plant (1998) argue on another lever, that the boundaries between people, their bodies and the outside world are being significantly reconfigured. In the situation of ever-eroding boundaries of exclusive objecthood or coherent subjecthood, a new consciousness of boundaries that expand far beyond the body is played out through the production and consumption of extended electronic space. Castells (1996) suggests that a 'space of flows' is emerging to dominate and subordinate the old 'space of places', allowing any scale of organisational structure to be more flexible in relation to real-space geographies.

The manifold artificial environments created through virtual technologies, like televised space and VR landscapes, are not only simulations of 'other' spaces, they are also dynamic environments wherein social and cultural developments become fluid and meaning gets constituted (Shields, 1996). We are confronted with a complex set of interrelations between virtual landscapes and the global restructuring of physical conditions, resulting from global economic markets, urban-regional development and advanced telecommunication. This has a particular impact on the way we form, perceive and inhabit the contemporary city. Virtual technologies and spaces have slowly and imperceptibly developed for many years, while during the same period conventional urban spaces in most Western cities have declined in popularity. Christine Boyer (1994, 1996) has argued that the cities of the 1990s are becoming fictional as they start to represent the collective, mediatised memory of the populaces in which the new technology appeared. In our media-saturated culture critical engagement with the city has turned into action at a distance. Michael Sorkin (1992) shares Baudrillard's position on the 'hyperreality' of simulated environments in Variations on a Theme Park and has suggested that the postmodern city is prone to Disneyfication. Deyan Sudjic (1993) has noticed the way in which major international cities are starting to resemble one another through the erasure of difference. Saskia Sassen (1992) has taken this observation one step further, suggesting the remarkable similarity between postmodern cities arises from their position as command posts in international finance and advanced services for business.

It is curious that while digital cities narrate the dematerialisation of physical space and chronological time, space has become a dominant issue both within the research labs of information technology and within cultural criticism. Comments on the effects of new technology on the cityscape are marked by an ambivalence which has characterised the Western discourse of the city as an imaginary place for centuries (e.g. Lynch, 1960; Healey, 1995). In this tradition cities have often been described as, on the one hand, sites for the fulfilment of unspeakable desire, and, on the other, locations of inevitable catastrophe, individual and universal. For example: The city in the Third World is generally considered an anomalous, 'unnatural' space. It circulates in the West as symptomatic of both a collapse of Western order and as geographically distant, virtually unreachable. It is this unheimlich quality which perhaps accounts for its ability to function as a sign of destructive human capacity projected by a Western imaginary unable to come to terms with its own intensifying urbanism. Some of these ambivalent cultural fantasies might be taken on board and rewritten in digital space. Nevertheless, there seems to be a whole array of new (imaginary and real) qualities in the digital spacescape, architectural or otherwise, that require completely new models of explanation. As the role of this emerging space in identity formation, in community relations or in global political reform is at present generally unknown, any analysis of how its effects will take place needs to be framed in the wider cultural, political, technological and economic context in which we live our lives.

A spatial notion that might be compatible with such a conceptual framework is arguably the metaphor of landscape. Landscapes allow for a multi-dimensional and multi-positional set of interpretations of contemporary processes of digitisation, mediation and globalisation. As a sufficiently generic spatial term they address both the continuity and interrelation of hybrid spaces and the multi-facetted contiguity, difference and identity that is continuously formed within them. What is necessary, though, is to locate particular ways of utopian desire that are central to visual representations of contemporary landscapes and architectures. Modern architectural dreams have often employed landscape as a response to the impossibility of our desire for eternal unity and salvation. We find such a response inscribed in many modern architectural utopias from Le Corbusier to Hilberseimer or Gropius. Characteristic for our current cultural condition is a radical rewriting of these ideas and intentions given the influence of newly emerging qualities and perspectives brought about by the promises of cyberspace, globalisation and digitisation. How do current technological and social changes inflict on the phantasmaticly unifying foil of landscape?

In order to expand on this by ways of using the production and circulation of images in contemporary culture, I will now consider the Millennium Dome and Koolhaas' project Schiphol2 and argue that beyond their attempts to explore and perform the diversity of current cultural conditions both instances must also be understood as expressions of political struggles over the distribution, appropriation and disavowal of space, and that these struggles are codified in discourses of human reunion and peaceful cohabitation. Any reading of the complex and contradictory imagery offered by contemporary corporate landscapes, such as the Dome or Shiphol2 requires a contextualisation at the intersection of urban spatial practice, of the performative qualities of landscape and of modernistic concepts of salvation and reunion.

In conjunction with the proliferation of images in and outside the new media we are about to learn and to understand how we are actively involved in a constant and mutual exchange with images that come in all formats and from all fields of interest, in order to remake the world in the shape of our fantasies and desires and to narrate the stories which we carry within us. The dissolution of a stable category of the self within this process is both experienced as pleasure and threat. Thus, within the very condition of a dissolution of stable, solid places, an equally effective desire for a geographic standstill has emerged. Instead of fully committing ourselves to the dynamics of a word saturated by digital technology that no longer requires any specific social places, and instead of producing cartographies of *in*determinate sizes, we start over to construct miniatures of social places, that are substituting, representing and holding together the ideas of unity and universality. London's Millennium Dome, Hannover's World Fair, EXPO 2000, themed shopping or urban entertainment centres are the same immediate results of a development that has also brought about e-mail, e-commerce and e-topia.

In this very situation of far-reaching material and psychological changes due to the impact of digital technologies, a strategy of maintaining and rewriting of 20 century modernistic dreams is effective. The popular cult of the Great Exhibition, the World's Fair, and of cultural authenticity serves as a counter-measure for the disintegration of traditional boundaries. In this whirl of anxious arenas and amidst its "global villages", the notion of landscape has returned into the practice of architecture as a powerful ideological instrument. Landscapes reflect in a respectively specific way universal wholeness. Apart from that, they also allow for an extraordinarily multiple set of interpretations, offering readings and understandings of contemporary processes of digitisation, mediation and globalisation.

2   NARRATIVES OF REUNION AND SALVATION

Drawing on these ambiguities I want to look at Rem Koolhaas' proposal for a new Dutch airport in the North Sea that opens up possibilities for a conceptual link between the facts of the current electronic revolution and modernistic utopia: According to the proposal that Koolhaas has made, Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport should be relocated to a man-made, 100 square kilometre island. Koolhaas' model is not limited to just a new airport, but shows a whole dynamic city with different kinds of urban conditions, with businesses and red light districts, industrial zones, golf courses, religious headquarters, housing and even an emergency exit. Most revealingly, maybe, this idea comes in conjunction with the proposal for a city of megastructures on the site of the old Schiphol which could accommodate enough of suburban Holland to give a real green heart back to the Netherlands. Koolhaas' proposal is far more than just a relocation of an airport. It is a modernistic utopia of new beginnings and a modernistic narrative of doomed endings. Suburban Holland gathered together in a densely planned city would be the social counterpart of the capitalistic island in the North Sea that is virtually built around an airport.

Graph 1: Schiphol-Project, Rem Koolhaas, 1999

The proposed Shiphol is a permanently virtual project as to the experiences of our own bodies. Like most fantasies of sci-fi architecture in the 1950ies and 1960ies, Ron Herron's *Walking City*, Michael Webb's *Sin Centre* or Constant's *New Babylon*, it will never be bodily experienced by us. But unlike these utopias, the idea of forming an integrated whole is grounded in a partial repetition of the already present, without embarking on the sedimentary conflicts that reside in any form of urban or post-urban life. Turning a blind eye on these dynamics the artificial island becomes an instrument and a symbol for reorganising a disunited post-industrial society, turning it into a perfectly rendered image of unity and reconciliation. The project separates the interwoven space occupied by social welfare state and the space of late capitalistic information society, aiming to reunite them in a newly laid out horizontal order. In an essay about fresh conservatism in the landscapes of normalities Roemer van Toorn, the director of theoretical studies at the Dutch Berlage Institute, has termed this phenomenon characteristic of a cultural condition, in which deregulated capital and social state perfectly complement one another. Its future is being generated as an extended present that seeks no decisions apart from framing the given contradictions in assumptions of utopian collectivity regardless of their incompatibilities and employing technology instead to find a solution.

The circular platform of the Schiphol project and its condensation with the mainland into a consolidated whole produce a background fraught of meaning against which the utopian life of Shiphol can be unfolded. The project is communicated in a very graphic way, in which the construction of unity *(consisting of capitalistic island and social mainland)* is framed by a central question which reads: Tunnel or bridge? The complex issue of building a link between both parts is thus being displaced and rendered as an economic question of the implementation of traffic solutions in post-urban landscape. There is of course a good share of irony in this exaggerated rationality that mediates the utopian project. On the other hand it also confronts us with questions about the function of rational dominance in balancing the threat of a technologically determined future in general.

In order to assess its dynamics we probably have to take into account that any spatialisation of order is an internal part of our own subjectivity and not a totality that would exist outside of our body and its activities. Within the processes of spatialisation, experience does not exclusively consist of linear tracks and clearly visible directions, but also of the insecurity of our memories, of a variety of alternatives of equal standing, of the existence of paths leading to objectives that might be completely different from our initial goals. We could therefore frame the salient rationalisation in the graphic representation of the Schiphol project not only as being in accordance with a fictitious reconstruction of total urban space, but also as supporting a balancing act, that makes a hypothetical triumph over the worrying insecurity of the future seem to be within reach. The vision of the projected new Schiphol can thus be described as both an architectural embodiment of narratives of reunion and salvation on one side and an expression of uncertainty, anxiety and doubt on the other side.

What comes to my mind when considering this relationship is the late 1930ies film *The Awful Truth,* starring Cary Grant as a married man, who is divorced for formal reasons, and while being divorced reflects about the complications of marrying the same partner again, which is what he wants to. So, he starts asking himself if the future situation with his partner will ever be the same, if it will have to be slightly different. Can he ever be one again with his partner as he was, but in a different way? He starts out to embark on the thorny issue of understanding not only to desire the same in the face of difference, but also difference within the same. What I am arguing here is the fact, that the components of this ticklish relationship between sameness and difference have again become strangely unfamiliar to us with the rise of immediate global interaction, with digitisation and the virtual space of the computer.

Former clear-cut spaces that have developed in long-term social negotiations and that could have offered an arena for identification have given way to a new set of doubles, surrogates and simulacra. How will it be possible in the future to recognise the same? What if we don't recognise it, despite occupying the same space? I do not want to moan about loss in any kind; what I am arguing is rather that certain new impossible targets for identification have emerged in the digital age, such as an almost flawless work of our memories, a demand of maximum authenticity of experiences or a belief in the possibility of immediate experience – the thrills that we strive for in the consumption of live-events.

3   ONE MILLENNIAL CULTURE

To embark on this I want to turn to the second example, the Millennium Dome, by starting with the most obvious point, the Disneyfication argument: My take on this issue is quite similar to those of scholars like Norman Klein or Neil Leach who have expressed that Disneyland is arguably no antithesis to the reality of the western world, but rather the condensation of values that are central to its development. However artificial or fraught with hyper-reality these hybrid forms of collective sentimentality and commercial calculation might be, they are always an internal part of our culture.

Perceived against this backdrop it even seems to make sense that a former Disneyland manager had been given a decisive position to make the Millennium Dome a success. In technical terms one could also be inclined to approve of the then newly created advertising slogan which reads: *You are just minutes away from another world*, as a new tube line in fact brings visitors to the Dome within minutes, once they are on the tube. This bears a scaring similarity though to the high speed Eurostar train (in the case of EuroDisney in France) as well as to the tunnel-or-bridge speculations in the Dutch Schiphol project. In all three instances superior technologies frame the ritual of speed and transgression that overshadows any possible contents of the respective miniature worlds.

While in Rem Koolhaas' scheme the airport is after all the central trigger of growth and urban development, in the Millennium Dome 14 themed zones remained scattered around a central absence. In this absence acrobats performed a high energy show with dancing and spectacular visual effects, framing (or framed by – who can tell?) a cheesy boy-meets-girl story, while the tent-like zones gathered around this performance place conjured up archetypal notions of collective togetherness around a communal fireplace. No doubt this image must have been disappointing for anyone who was looking for a notion of future landscapes. This massive void of content in a happening that should have delivered at least a glimpse of the future, has – as one critic in the British art magazine *frieze* expressed it lately – ensured that a whole set of modern dreams were left behind in the 20th century. The bridge between the collectively global and the individual, that was so much sought after has turned into an unfavourable joint between a bodiless universe and an atomised subject. Instead of marking the radically unmarkable beginning of a new millennium, the Millennium Dome gave rise to likewise utopian speculations about endings of modern utopia.

Inside the Millennium Dome the *Body Zone* consists of a 27 metre high hybrid human body. It is a cityscape in its own right, a giant model of a man and a woman, which real live humans can walk through and around. Inside, where the two halves become one, the Body frames two major exhibition floors, linked by lifts and an escalator. In the design a neon aura between the two figures aims to represent energy, while a necklace of scrolling messages signifies collaboration. One foot is lifted dynamically in the air, while the other remains grounded in its surroundings, the life-size body in the hand-held sphere aiming to represent destiny.

Graph 2: Body Zone, Millennium Dome London, Branson Coates, 1999

As the architects, Branson Coates, claim, this final version of the Body Zone is derived in part from an Etruscan funery monument (a star exhibit in the Villa Giulia museum in Rome) of a smiling husband with his arm around his wife. While this image seems to offer a specific notion of harmony, it may also seem a bit odd to celebrate the new millennium with something as uncanny as walking through an enlarged, giant tomb. There is always something blind about building utopian visions of the future, that keeps the dread behind the benign and valuable surface, and maybe this is the case with the Body Zone as well. Interestingly, in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud has given an account of one of his own dreams, in which he himself had been in an excavated Etruscan grave. Freud read the aesthetic pleasure that unfolded in his dream as a subconscious defence strategy against the horror of isolation, death and bodily dissolution. The most dreadful situation, thus, turns into an utmost valuable experience. Anxiety is being rejected by the experience of taking part in an important historical moment. In London's Millennium Dome we could deliberately walk into such a giant tomb that "reunited" and "buried" more than 3000 visitors an hour.

This sense of uncanny nostalgia of corporate landscapes is reflected in the slogan created for the Millennium Dome: One amazing day – one amazing team. One day, one dome, one collective experience. The omnipresent number 1 speaks for an insatiable desire to constantly rewrite the utopian narrative of one world even as we enter the 21st century.

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