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hunch



After Erasure

Interview with Hani Rashid of Asymptote at the Berlage Institute, 30 May 2001

Your work combines "reality" and "virtuality," which seem to be uncombinable. Can you define the limits of each of these realms in terms of architecture?

I am not sure what you mean by *limits*. I'm not looking for the limits, but rather the limitlessness of different territories. There are people who would say that building is the limit of architecture, but that's not true. More and more, architects are being commissioned to build other worlds including virtual reality environments. When I look at other disciplines such as the automobile industry and their standards and procedures for design, I'm amazed at how they have already embraced computerized technologies and fabrication techniques, and at how those aspects have impacted new designs and implementation methods. For some reason, in our own discipline — particularly in the arena of "building design" — there are limits. I think there is a deep-set inability for people involved in those industries to understand that the so-called limits can be transcended when we embrace certain aspects of automation and new digitally infused methodologies.

What is the relationship between the real and the virtual in your architecture? Are you searching for a *scale-less space*?

Our search is for hybridization, where reality and virtuality collapse into each other, or where we start to make vivid the distinction between these two "realities." In this way one can borrow from the other and the overlap becomes the real goal. The notion that physical architecture can be transformed by the attributes of the virtual — manipulation of the temporal, scalelessness, flux, mutation and so on, is paramount to Asymptote's work.

In a virtual building do you borrow images from reality? Is this the case in the Stock Exchange project?

What we tend to borrow from "physical" space is what we already recognize and know and comprehend. The main reason that we managed to be involved in the world's first large-scale virtual reality environment for business purposes, is because we took this approach of borrowing without mimicking the "real." We tried to figure out how to make the New York Stock Exchange operations people comfortable with these new forms of representation. We also were quite intent on helping them understand how the VR environment could seamlessly mesh with their "real" condition and spatiality. We continuously worked in opposition to the cliché virtual reality which tries to make places look like they are supposedly seen in "reality," which is false

Right: NYSE Virtual Trading Floor and NYSE Command Center

The Virtual Trading Floor is the first business application of an interactive virtual architecture. Displayed on the trading floor on an array of nine large flat-screen high-resolution displays, the project enables day-to-day monitoring as well as crisis management of all aspects of NYSE trading floor activity. After the design of the Virtual Trading Floor, the New York Stock Exchange commissioned Asymptote to design a new Advanced Command Center for the 2,000 square-foot NYSE floor, completed in February 1999. Flat-screened monitors float off an illuminated curved blue glass wall, over a double-curved meandering work surface. Ribbons of text on various surfaces express the different flows of the trading floor. This "Theater of Operations" has launched the NYSE into the 21st century. — Asymptote

You mentioned the notion of "games," and this can suggest the sort of computer games in which swarms of helicopters are able to shoot and fly simultaneously. The Stock Exchange suggests games as well...

Do you envision the opportunity to use computer power on an urban level to simulate scenarios that can help in judging or manipulating urban planning?

In the Virtual Guggenheim, did the artists also participate in the designing of the space?

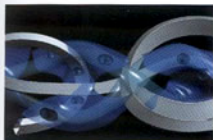
anyway. That strange game between reality and virtuality is important to us; it is an inspired territory in which to work.

One mustn't forget that all these technologies came out of military research. This doesn't necessarily mean that it's a negative thing, in fact it's quite the contrary. It's true that our virtual Stock Exchange is defined by military jargon such as HUDs (head-up displays) and "fly-throughs," the same language and tools used by military pilots to navigate enemy space is here utilized to navigate through data fields and information-scapes. The people working in the Stock Exchange move through data and also need to be alerted to deviations, abnormalities and anomalies; they too need to make quick decisions.

For the Guggenheim Virtual Museum we took a completely different approach: we tried to retrieve something of the surreality of architecture and questioned the viewing of art within space as we know it. We wanted to do something on the Internet that would transcend physical architecture on many levels, such as form based on the ambiguity of time, the transformation of geometry according to program, and the manipulation of reality.

Absolutely. I think that our experiments and others that people are carrying out right now are perhaps only gestural and embryonic in their present state. I was in Alaska a few weeks ago looking at the second largest supercomputer complex in North America. It's located in an unbelievably strange place outside of Fairbanks. I was able to manipulate three-dimensional perfectly ray-traced environments with my hand and body. The calculations were so perfect and since they were accomplished in real-time, I was able to create a very real immersive world immediately. I think that in terms of the Stock Exchange project — which is really just about mapping data — extrapolating out to urbanism, to cities, to scenarios for growth and so on, is definitely on the horizon. Having said that, it is important to understand that one can generate a lot of theoretical projects with these technologies. Having real clients with courage and vision like the NYSE who want something very particular and "cutting edge" forces the architect to become extremely precise, and adopting a rarefied problem-solving mentality. These clients really have no desire to be overwhelmed with sexy imaging or computer-generated forms; instead it's critical that everything created is perfectly usable and understood. In fact, we really began to understand the poetry in the functionalist axiom "form follows function" — and we found ourselves walking into worlds full of devices and utilities — useful, usable and as a result, new and aesthetically exciting.

At times we worked more as curators for the Guggenheim Virtual Museum, as the idea of such a place is still quite enigmatic to many at the institution. We enlisted artists, and encouraged them to dismantle the virtual galleries, reprogram them, and find ways to inhabit these new spaces. What is intriguing in the virtual museum is that it's essentially made of pixels and certain computer-generated entities. It's effectively a type of spatial and interactive envelope, where the forms emerge as what we recognize as architecture as one manipulates it over the Internet. Our role was to form a place for artists to



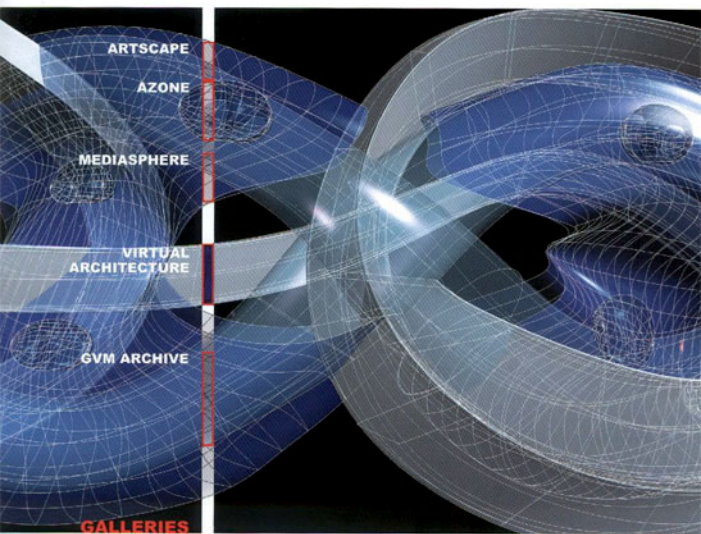
work and exhibit: "Okay, you're an artist. The Guggenheim commissions you. Here's your gallery or perhaps your own museum wing, or more appropriately your pixel real-estate. Now develop your work within that environment as you would or wouldn't in a physical one." And instead of the traditional gallery, which you enter and find paintings on walls or sculptures, here artists could effectively manipulate the gallery itself, perhaps even change the architecture.

So you created a place, a kind of habitat?

There is a sense of "being-in" that technology, since we already believe that technology is spatial and can be inhabited. It's a sort of attractor, the way that a built museum is an attractor for the physical world, inviting us into galleries to be curated, to be talked about.

Let's pick up on the notion of building. Do you believe that you are building?

There was a time in our studio when we were so obsessed with physical modeling that we really saw our models as "buildings" — and we put everything into them as physical structures. It's the same with our virtual, pixel-based works like the Stock Exchange. This project was a three-year effort, with countless people involved — engineers, consultants, and even behavioral scientists and physiologists. In essence we have been working on a building, albeit constructed of polygons instead of concrete.



Guggenheim Virtual Museum

The GVM is a new, entirely virtual museum commissioned by the Guggenheim to house art that is created for digital and interactive media. Its premise is the belief that the Internet can truly become a site of collective experience. The architecture of the GVM is an interactive and fully navigable real time three-dimensional entity. The project has prompted a reinvention the architectural brief, and provided an opportunity to investigate the possibilities of architecture where gravity, materiality, scale, and geography no longer apply. Interactivity coupled with 3D modeling and the effects of image, sound, movement, and light generate a fluid and fluctuating environment that can respond to the user's navigational paths and adapt continually to its changing contents. — Asymptote

I meant real physical buildings.

Architects build, and we are building all of the time. At Asymptote we are involved in a couple of "real" building projects. However I think that this kind of thinking, this obsession with the architect as a "builder" of "real" buildings is a leftover, a syndrome, of a certain trajectory from the Renaissance to our own Modernity. The notion of the architect as builder is a Ruskinian idea where the architecture occupies the pinnacle of the pyramid of the arts. With this diagram in mind architects believe that building, beyond everything else, is a validation of the architect's artistry. Well I don't buy that argument. I work hand in hand with programmers, engineers, sociologists, mathematicians and others, and they all occupy that same territory and we are all in effect equalized by virtue of the technologies we now have at hand. What's interesting about our time is the fact that the industrial age and its techniques are well behind us, while all these new technological possibilities are out in front of us.

What is the profile of your office? Is it made up of all architects? Do you have specialists? Is everyone able to use complex animation software?

I am convinced that the specialists who are best equipped to deal with these complexities are actually architects. We have an interesting capability to multi-task. However not all architects embrace that; at the office we are constantly working with web-programmers, web- and graphic designers who actually think like architects; they have a terrific impact on the actual architects on our staff.

Is this a new notion of the "architect," or is it the classic definition?

The concept of the architect as an instigator of utopian ideals, as one who proclaims "the way to make our buildings; the way people should live" is not appropriate in this age. Architects are more like independent filmmakers than gods. When I work with my group at Asymptote, be that on an Internet project or a building design, I can't proclaim, "I'm the architect, this is the way I insist we do this or that." Instead, I am better off pleading ignorance and discovering new things. Often I'll say, "it's amazing. How do you do that stuff?" I really want to know more about the tools we are incorporating into our practices and become part of the process — not be the process. Don't get me wrong, I still believe the architect is a necessary evil, the way the director of a film is, so that someone takes responsibility for all those things being brought together into one cohesive entity.

You work in territories nearly separate from the notions of architecture in which you've been educated. How do you see your relation with your teachers?

I encountered a real problem at a certain point with my teachers who were for the most part the kids of the '68 generation. The avant-garde — let's say, Rem, Libeskind, Eisenman, and so on, who have, needless to say, done a remarkable job of clearing the terrain for my generation — Greg Lynn, Lars Spuybroek, and so on. A number of these people, especially Coop Himmelblau and Libeskind, were quite explicit about *finishing* architecture — architecture as something to be eradicated and cleared away. The death of architecture almost became a cliché by the time I was in graduate school at Cranbrook in the mid-eighties. There was this terrific mechanism of erasure already in place. As a student, it looked to me that we couldn't just continue that erasure. It would have been redundant for my generation to go on with the clearing of Modernism and the even more problematic postmodernism that followed.

So how did your generation find its own way?

We had no choice but to build new entities, but the question was what they would be. What happened in our generation which was pivotal and interesting and maybe a clear break, was the advent of digital technologies in our working methodologies and theory. At a certain moment, 1995 to be precise, my colleagues and I were all in our early- and mid-thirties, and there was this onslaught of the digital coming towards us in many guises. All of a sudden, we had the unprecedented ability as a generation to manipulate images and form, to form new types of experiments and to consider these new media and their implications on architectural thought and production. We were also steeped in the older methodologies and uniquely situated as a bridge generation in architectural history. I think that this was the critical break where these new technologies and capabilities allowed us to manipulate time-based objects, images, narrative, effectively make the notion of collage something complete and from the twentieth century. You see much of architectural radical thinking of the past few decades has in many ways centered itself about the notion and theory of the collage and montage and now all of that has changed. We are really able today to integrate new media into the architectural process and not just see it as a theoretical pursuit.

You mention that these cleansing processes from the previous generation forced you to position yourself. In Holland it seems that the young generation has problems in trying to define itself. What do you think?

Yeah, what absolutely fascinates me about the Dutch scene is that the younger generations can't let go, can't kill their fathers and become "authentic." There's this thing called the global-local condition, and if the young Dutch architects could see themselves from the perspective of the global condition they would realize that they probably have something very compelling to offer in a completely different direction. In the local scene it seems that they keep saying the same things all over again.

In 1994, when I had been teaching at Columbia for almost five years, there was a show in New York of young Dutch architects including Ben van Berkel, Winy Maas and a few others. I was amazed; by Dutch standards I was a failed architect because I was 32 and hadn't built ten buildings! Young Dutch architects get thrown so quickly into practice that they have little time to play, and I believe that's frustrating for many of them as their careers move on. In contrast at that time we had a little studio with little overhead, and nobody was ringing the phone so we had a lot of time to play. We started to do many small experiments with projections onto strange new structures we called Optigraphs and the Hyperfine Splitting Series. And those experiments and the luxury of time we had to do them were incredibly important in the formation of our ideas and the body of work we are involved in today. That's what allowed us to move away from a normative practice and discover territories where most of my teachers had never been and few practices had yet discovered.

Are you proud that humans are still better chess players than computers?

I believe we always will be. I've always been convinced of that! It's an interesting question in terms of what I'm doing. The basis of what we do is really about being an architect who uses technology, as opposed to the idea of technology driving the architect.