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Virtual city today

A brief note on contemporary virtual dwelling

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The themes examined in this essay regard the subject of online virtual city in its multiply spatialisations and present the state of the art of the phenomenon and some interesting experiments in progress. The various declinations of the virtual city (from *Active Worlds* to *Second Life*) present us with interesting interdisciplinary workshops. Worlds to be inhabited through representations, that amplify and experiment with techniques of spatialisation, systems of visualisation and narrative methods that make use of interactivity, hypertext and simulation. My aim is to analyse the exploration and invention of a space of relation, to be experienced in multi-linearity and simultaneity, perceived through "fusion" rather than "distance" (prospective model), as part of an active fruition, far from the idea of the spectator who observes outside the scene.

Keywords: virtual worlds, virtual city, virtual living

1. Introduction

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This short note summarises selected results from a vast work of research (still underway) curated by the author – entitled *L'architettura della Città Virtuale. Rappresentazione è Conformazione*¹ – and examining the multiple declensions of relationships between architecture and digital technoculture, in relation to the representation and conformation of inhabitable online environments.

2. The idea of the virtual

I will begin by clarifying a few theoretical presuppositions underlying the research, beginning with the idea of the virtual city.

To architectural research and education, the idea of the virtual city may be studied, surveyed, designed and inhabited as a sort of infinite category of ideas, similar to a meta-design, present throughout the history of representation.

In relation to the historical-cultural period in which it is described, the virtual city presents itself in diverse configurations. From the “analog to the digital” there are countless examples from many different periods: the biblical metaphor of the Tower of Babel; the Ideal City of the Renaissance; the radical Archigram City; the Liquid City of the early third millennium, moulded by contemporary technoculture; pixel art and the game city (New York, Venice, etc.) designed by the Berlin-based collective eBoy; the info-aesthetic cities of Fumio Matsumoto; the configurations of cyberspace designed by Marcos Novak; etc.

Limiting ourselves to these observations reveals the natural virtual dimension inherent to the design of inhabitable spaces, in all of their conformations: for their intellectual, utopian and ideal dimension; for the creation of our existence in the so-called “real world”; for representing cyberspace; etc.

Freed from an exclusive link to the world of information technologies – which often conceals a banal mass media simplification – and liberated from the distracting dualism “analog-digital”, what emerges is the deeper, timeless meaning attributed in architecture to the term virtual; a potential interface of cognition-design present throughout the history of creativity, in all of its multiple declensions, from the arts to the sciences.

The structure of the research is fundamental: in didactic practices it helps trigger elaborative processes referred to historical approaches, decontextualised by passing fads; triggering laborious comparative-relational tasks for representing apparently antithetical meanings (real and virtual, antique and modern, etc.), dialectic couples that through contemporary culture can be integrated, made to recognise one another and create further images.

Contemporary virtuality, improved and “reinvented” by the information revolution and in part moulded by the “city of bits” (from social networks to virtual worlds), must be read as a direct continuation of this historical process, which not always constitutes a flight from reality, but perhaps an improvement of it; virtual, in this context, signifies above all “broadening the horizon”.

Updating studies of the virtual city, the greatest opportunity introduced by digital technoculture appears to lie in its contribution to broadening the capabilities of our senses to observe our everyday reality or our unconscious dreams, to forecast and design the world to come.

¹ The publications that synthesis this line of research – curated by the author, and which can be summed up in the title *L'architettura della Città Virtuale. Rappresentazione è Conformazione* (*The Architecture of the Virtual City. Representation and Conformation*) – witness to the participation, in various roles, of well-known scholars and young researchers, are: M. Unali, *Pixel di architettura*, ed. Kappa, Rome 2001; Livio Sacchi and Maurizio Unali (eds.), *Architettura e cultura digitale*, ed. Skira, Milan 2003; “La Città Virtuale”, edited by M. Unali, in Various Authors, *Dalle città ideali alla città virtuale. Viaggio nel mondo fantastico del Disegno dell'utopia*, edited by Carlo Mezzetti, ed. Kappa, Rome 2005; M. Unali (ed.), *Lo spazio digitale dell'architettura italiana. Idee, ricerche, scuole, mappa*, ed. Kappa, Rome 2006; M. Unali (ed.), *Abitare virtuale significa rappresentare*, ed. Kappa, Rome 2008; M. Unali (ed.), *New Lineamenta*, ed. Kappa, Rome 2009; M. Unali, *Atlas of Virtual City. Il disegno della città virtuale, fra ricerca e didattica*, in publication. I also mention the important role of the website www.lineamenta.it (since 1999), an online laboratory for architectural drawing and design dedicated to communicating and experimenting with new models of representation conceived above all for digital space, in all of its multiple declensions. The site allows visitors to expand on the issues examined and access other information, from research to education.

3. Didactics, drawing and utopia

The significances to didactics of processes of ‘virtualisation’ present another issue of great interest.

For example, in the teaching of architectural design, the theme of the virtual city allows us to confront the complexity of the disciplines of representation with a broad and open mind, uniting the practical with the theoretical, techniques with methods; but also, in the more specific dimension of design as expression, from the representative and conformative, to the iconic and symbolic.

In the most interesting experiments in contemporary virtuality, representation, lightened of the load of being a “tool for”, is the space of design, it is free thinking; it triggers, verifies and experiments with new creative processes that introduce ideas for reconsidering the methods of modelling architecture and, in so doing, also re-launching the widespread practice of utopian design.

Concepts such as the ideal city, utopias, the avant-garde, through creative processes of evaluation, amplified and introduced by digital technoculture, thus find further significances, evolving the idea of architecture and its representations.

This appears to reinforce the choice to study the virtual city within the evolutionary context of inventive design and the creation of architectural utopias.

4. Dwelling ‘online’

Architecture, above all as the art and science of modifying space, has always been the ideal laboratory for experimenting with diverse conformations of dwelling; each period of human civilisation is characterised by its own idea of space and, as a consequence, by an equal number of ways of representing, designing and inhabiting it.

By extending the concept of dwelling, what transformations are induced by today’s idea of representing virtual space (digital in nature) – from the offline to the online of the World Wide Web? How is it evolving?

For the architect these themes prefigure a threshold of discovery and the conquest of a further space to be designed, generated by the dialogue between architectural culture and digital technoculture.

These ideas have transformed architectural thinking and triggered original sources of inspiration for research, renewing the traditional field of architectural application.

Architecture has thus expanded its confines toward extensive spaces, for the most part still undesigned, populated by various communities in need of thematic spaces to be inhabited online.

This is a territory for architecture similar to a landscape to be modelled, no longer definable as an abstract laboratory of experimentation, but instead as a space that belongs – even if with different characteristics – to the real, physical environment in which we live.

With a great deal of simplification, on the one hand we find the “real city” with its technological, multimedia setups, on the other the “virtual city” found on the Web; from the variable surfaces of urban media buildings, to the hypersurfaces of cyberspace, interactive surfaces of communication and information, an expression of one of the new “substances” of trans-modernity.

5. Exempla

As it is emerging, the idea of the virtual city – a transposition through the technoculture of cyberspace of the significances we attribute to the concept of the city of the analog world, in historical tradition – presents us with interesting projects for virtual contemporary dwelling, defined in various typologies accessible online.

As one example, I present the denominations we employed to classify the results of a recent survey of architectural spaces created using digital technologies and accessible online.

They allow for a possibility to recognise the idea of a city, the design of a community, the values we attribute to models of associated life: the axonometric city; the alphanumeric city; the analog city or the avatar city; the online city of art, virtual museums and the city of music; the city of articulation; the city of

assimilation; the city of cyberspace; cyberpunk city; the city of (virtual) conflict; the city of cooperation; the city to be constructed; the deconstructed city; the city of e-commerce; fantasy city; the city “city for kids” and the city of teenagers; ludens city; instant city; the “generative” city; the info-aesthetic city; the city of information; the legible city; the liquid city; sci-fi city; the city of sex; the city of substitution; the city of sport; the city of stratification; the city of superheroes; the city of techno-religion; the city of virtual tourism; the Uchronic city; etc.

To broaden and further investigate the survey of the virtual city, I suggest readers refer to the bibliography presented at the end of this text and to visit the website www.lineamenta.it.

6. Today

In the world of research and education, as in everyday life, the risks of slipping into the banal rhetoric of cyberspace and becoming lost in the void of technology remain high.

Today, decades after the information revolution, many of the novelties presented by virtual worlds, nurtured by scholars, net gurus, architects and web designers, appear unable to maintain their full range of promises or, at least, not all that was taken for granted by many cyber-architects has come to pass.

In fact, we are forced to accept many results that differ from the opinions of the futurologists or passionate cyber-fans of 1990s who, during the hottest period of the information revolution, forecast a rapidly approaching future diverse from the idea of the city, made possible by the polyhedral potentials offered by the net and new technologies.



Despite the countless conquests of understanding and the exceptional experiments to be found in many declinations of the virtual city, many of the design ideas presented continue to reveal technocultural shortcomings, some even “basic”.

Yet it is precisely from these considerations that we must start out again with renewed energy – in research, in education, in operative practice, as part of continuous process of interdisciplinary comparison – re-reading, above all, the best experiments, indicating the critical elements and highlighting possible evolutionary scenarios.

More precisely, we must delve on one hand into the work of historicisation, on the other into that of research and experimentation involving the idea of the virtual city, its role as a medium for expanding our vision and a laboratory for testing hypotheses of spaces – imaginary, symbolic, in which to design metaphors, place hopes, dreams, play with utopias, fantasies, to elaborate things that have been seen, heard and touched – inhabitable through representations. We are still far from a diffuse creative culture founded on models of representation, considered specifically for the characteristics of digital spaces.

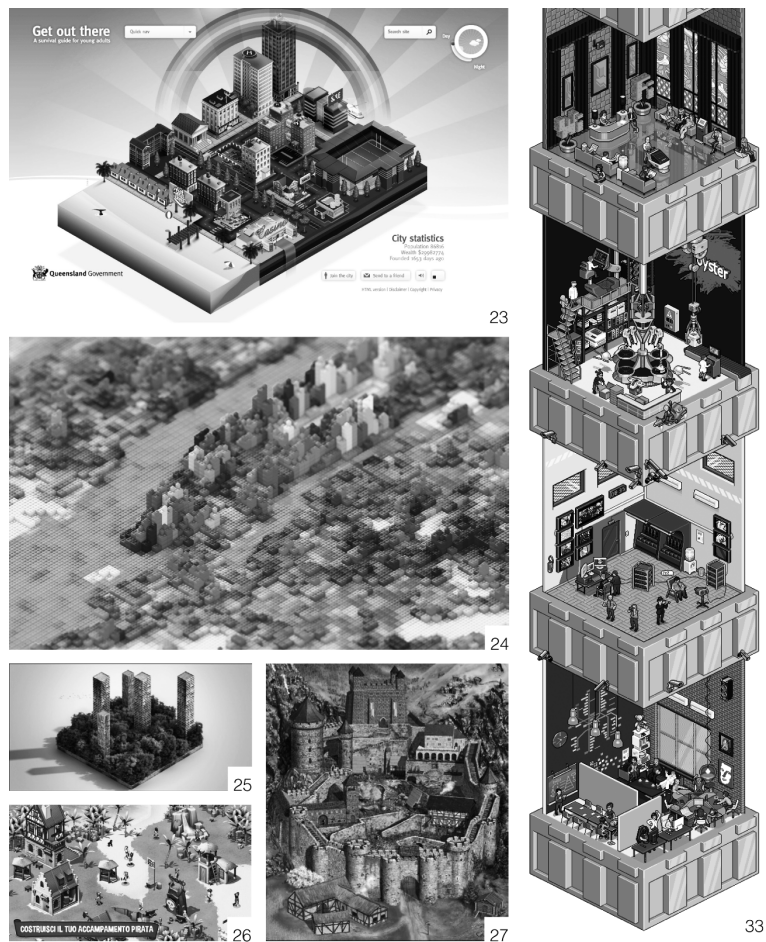


Figure 1. *The 2,5D City*, survey rel. 2013, ed. G. Caffio. In this page details from: 23. Garth Sykes, *Get out there - Queensland Government*, web site 2009, www.getoutthere.qld.gov.au; 24. J.R. Schmidt, *New York City*, illustration 2012, <http://cargocollective.com/jrschmidt/Lego-New-York>; 25. SHD, *Lost City Isometric*, 2012, <http://dribbble.com/shots/713514-Lost-City-Isometric>. 26. PLAYMOBIL *Pirates*, videogame for iPhone and iPad, Gameloft 2012; 27. *Lords & knights*, videogame for iPad and iPhone, XYRALITY 2011, <http://lordsandknights.com>; 33. Megapont, *Oyster Tower*, 2011, http://megapont.ru/pixel_art_41.html.
In the previous page: 27. *New York online interactive map*, <http://youcity.com>; 24. *Shanghai isometric map*, <http://shanghai.edushi.com>.



Figure 2. *Second Life*, survey rel. 2013, ed. A. Maiolatesi. In this page details from: 38. Tribute City Island, [http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/WW2 TRIBUTE/138/127/28](http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/WW2%20TRIBUTE/138/127/28); 43. Amusement park Hobo Island, [http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Fossil Bay/69/134/62](http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Fossil%20Bay/69/134/62); 39. London Island, <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/TARDIS/212/85/70>; 44. Forgotten City Island, [http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Forgotten City/200/178/80](http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Forgotten%20City/200/178/80). In the previous page: 05. Cocoon Island, <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Strand/143/125/39/>; 06. Installation titled “Circo Volante”, <http://slurl.com/secondlife/MiC/179/211/38/>; 32 The Abyss Island, [http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/The Abyss/96/136/237/](http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/The%20Abyss/96/136/237/); 33. Munchkin Island, [http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Magic of Oz/128/137/24/](http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Magic%20of%20Oz/128/137/24/).

The “familiar” dimension of the digital that unites at a universal scale – born as a democratic laboratory of connectivity at the urban scale, representing also one of the most evident transformations of the electronic era of the Global Village – and the promising “new frontier” of the virtual city, other than multiplying the number of its citizens (more and more often only clients, in a world of consumerism), has not always managed to promote innovative design ideas; an analogous fate awaited the evolution of the interactive representation of spatiality for videogames that, while improving systems of action and tools of interface and increasing profits, in terms of spatial research and its depiction has taken very few steps forward. In other words, limiting the examination to these brief notes – the list could go on and on – the virtual city is now in an evident condition of stalemate.