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JAMES COOK
UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

Time Travel on the Instalment Plan: The Index and Future Form in Building.

Adam Brown

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Introduction:

In photographic theory and criticism, the malleability of digitally encoded images frequently leads to an opposition between a trustworthy past, in which technological images were for the most part traced from the Real and a future in which images will be forever falsified, as if analogue technology carried a promise of the Real which digital does not. There are dissenting voices: Kris Cohen, critiquing the rise of photoblogging on sites such as Flickr (Cohen 2005) rejects this hackneyed polarity since the explosion of candid, unmanipulated photography made possible by online social networking reinforces the importance of the photographic act of witnessing. Jenna Ng (in Sutton *et al*, 2007) also underlines the importance of the 'real' in digital video capture, another infrastructure which captures huge amounts of information, and stores it at comparably low cost. Central to both their arguments is the idea that, whether analogue or digital, the technologies in question still make use of media which 'stencil' an image of the visible onto a recording surface: the fact that in the case of the digital image, the surface is an electronic sensor makes no difference to

the ontological status of the image in question. This function of the technology is still central to those practices grouped together under the 'photographic', regardless of what technologies emerge. For Bazin, (1967) Barthes (1993) and Flusser (1987), amongst almost all other writers on the subject, this function of the apparatus engendered an irreversible cultural shift, which doesn't reduce in significance now the images produced can be easily manipulated or falsified.

The architectural image seems (to me) to have a very particular ontological status in itself – at the same time a model, a program, and a record. Encountering a glut of digital images of buildings produced in advance of their construction, I found myself increasingly unable to tell the difference between projections of future buildings and images of those already in existence. This category of image, wholly computer generated, is precisely that which is referenced to prove the existence of the shift which I am attempting to critique: the ability of contemporary imaging technologies to emulate the appearance of the real is held to prove the end of the indexical contract. I wish to make a counter argument, that the amount of money, time and effort which is spent on producing a facsimile, not of the world, but of a photographic image of the world, proves the increasing importance of the basic act of 'stencilling' the image off the real (Bazin, 1967).

Digital imaging – and this category covers a range of technologies - is positioned somewhere between a depicted past and a projected future, but the rupture is not nearly so clear-cut. The causal chain of visual production dictates that one can never *depict* the future, only generate projections. The 'reality' of the future has not yet come into being from which an image can be stencilled. However, in the production of renderings of future architectural projects, digital technologies *depict* the future as if it existed already. Furthermore, treating imaging technologies in isolation is to overlook the increasing seamlessness of the network of which they are a part, in which such technologies are becoming ever more symbiotic with construction processes which are developed precisely to maximise the potential for the imagined to become real.

When K Michael Hays argues that architecture has now entered fully into the realm of the new communications and entertainment industries, (Hays, 2001) he is focussing on Architecture with a capital A - the work of Gregg Lynn, Frank Gehry, Herzog and de Meuron and their ilk. The images I wish to examine are not of the architectural megaproject, nor any grand utopia: in the design and construction of the contemporary residential project, these projections are small leaps into the future at a mundane level, which may or may not come into being, but which are created in the hope or gamble that they will. Small as they seem, they represent a huge industry of speculative building which has more economic value than all the architectural megaprojects in the world put together.

The camera is laboratory: building is a network.

Each camera is a laboratory consistent with Latour's definition:

'A present day laboratory may still be defined as the unique place where a text is made to comment on things which are all present in it.' (Latour, 2008)

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, he defines a laboratory as a location within which ground is prepared so that certain material processes can not only be repeated but seen to be repeated, and the truth of their repetition verified by human agencies who one intends to recruit as allies. That the camera is a laboratory is underscored by the fact that it is impossible to understand what a photograph is without understanding what a camera is. The role of the indexical is such that – when we look at a photograph – we not only interpret the content (the iconic meaning) but also give assent to both the fact that 'This has been' (Barthes 1993) and that 'this event was considered worthy of photographing'. Knowledge of the functioning of the technological apparatus and its social role makes this contract possible. John Tagg's critique of Barthes emphasis on a phenomenological 'real' (Tagg, 1988) emphasises the importance of the photographic as a social contract. Discussion of the Real – and of truth, belief and credibility – is such a major functional part of the contractual relationship that is photography, that it hardly matters whether there is any Real there to stencil off. The photographic process generates a Real which is presumed to be the referent.

In looking at images of developments currently in the process of construction, it is possible to say (once we have got past their iconic meaning), 'That *will* be'. Its material existence is not in question – the money has been invested, a programme of construction is under way, and in a year's time the building will be erect and fully occupied. Considering the building as self contained object elides the complexity of the idea of the building as network. Again appealing to Latour, building is a system or network, which includes its representations, its pre-construction and its post-construction phase, its social context and changing meaning. Significant too is the development of rapid and reproducible building techniques, technologies and materials, which contain within themselves the program for more buildings like this to be constructed. The process of pre-imagining - or *visualisation* - seems to be as much part of the construction process as the casting of concrete, or the glazing of the structure. The phase of *imaging* the building is essential to its construction. Speculative building depends for its success on the relationship between building and imaging, in full consciousness of its relationship towards its audience

Case Study: The Highbury Stadium Development.

fig 1: rendering of Highbury Stadium pitch, which has been turned into a formal garden (garden design by Christopher Bradley-Hole)

As an example of the kind on influence I am talking about, let's examine a project in London: the redevelopment of Highbury Stadium, formerly a football ground, now retaining its form but undergoing conversion into flats, and the famous pitch undergoing landscaping of the most formal kind.

For the purposes of this paper the Highbury development mobilises issues of multiple histories, cities as playspaces and a curious spin on the idea of architecture as spectacle. The site undergoing redevelopment was originally conceived as a site of spectacle. Looking at visualisations of the interior private garden which will take the place of the pitch, and to which the public will only be able to see by a right of way retained along one side, one can see a complex relationship of views. From each of the flats surrounding the pitch, the owner-

occupiers will be able to gaze over this view in a strange reconfiguration of the panopticon. The importance of this central visual feature to the appearance – and hence the value – of this development – depends upon retention of the function of the pitch as a site of spectacle. Such a spectacle subsumes desire, self-projection, and identity in a complex mesh the psychology of which could be the subject of another paper. From the terraces formerly tribalised by fans, the new cadres of owner-occupiers survey their property in an architectural configuration that places itself and its inhabitants centre stage. It is like the set of Rear Window turned inside–out. The communal experience of the stands has been replaced by the individual, sound insulated living unit, and the crowd now watches itself with a peculiar narcissistic gaze.

As the new occupants move around the central garden, unless they slip into one of the carefully designed bowers which allow a degree of privacy, they are fully under the gaze of their neighbours, who can presumably deduce the rising or falling value of their investment based on the kind of people they observe. Residents take to the pitch as *players*, in the idiomatic sense of having had the nous to make a canny investment.

Unusually for an English residential property, for which the desire not to be overlooked is a key consideration, Highbury stages the act of overlooking and the condition of being overlooked by referencing the iconic status of the site. This cleverly elides negative connotations of intrusion and curtain twitching by preserving the spectacular function as a key element of the building's form.

The purpose of the computer-generated images under discussion is wholly to mobilise investment and support for the properties depicted, by the use of both content and style. They are designed to appeal to specific identifiable audiences - investors, purchasers, local authorities and media – for whom the issue of credibility is central, if differently inflected in each case.

Exploring the techniques exploited by the designer to create this impression of a possible reality, one key feature is the introduction of elements which are introduced after the form is finalised. Trees, people, texture, details are added which render the scene habitable.

fig. 2: rendering of interior courtyard, Highbury Stadium Development

The designer creates a field of details, which indicate habitability, and without which the image would appear sterile, too perfect, a design and not a possible habitat. Such details *stuff* the image (Barthes, 1993), introduce the impression of plenitude, from which each individual viewer can abstract his or her *punctum*.

The viewer is acknowledged in the generation of fake chance events, features which have no structural function.   These elements are deliberately introduced so that the viewer receives the *sign* of indexicality, so that they believe either (a) that they are looking at a possible real photographic image – an image 'stencilled off a future real', or that the developer has such confidence – and such competence – so as to have imagined every detail, to have already conceived all of the elements necessary to produce a habitable space.

The craft of the renderer is to create a simulacrum which is seamless – as is the classical photographic image showing a 'decisive moment' – but allows for the substitution of the social details introduced by the designer, for those in the imagination of the potential purchaser.   The viewer performs the operation of looking at an inhabited space and imagining it uninhabited. Paradoxically, the more the image exploits the appearance of the Real to generate interest and credibility - the more effectively the viewer can remove the traces of other people's actions from the image and replace them with their own. The image is crafted with the intention of the viewer projecting themselves into the shot, in the spirit of Derrida's comments in *The Truth in Painting* that attribution is appropriation: 'it is due to me because it is due to *a* me'. (Derrida, 1987) In the more *architectural* architectural renderings produced to foreground major development projects, for example those produced by Foreign Office Architects, London relating to the 2012 Olympic stadium, the human figures introduced into the image are self consciously architectural 'showroom dummies'. In this other

order of images – designed to be viewed by an architecturally literate audience – form is foregrounded absolutely. The status of the human figure in these renderings is as contingent object – background. The viewer does not imagine him- or her-self as one of them, but in the position of the architect, one of de Certeau's strategists, looking on, able to perform the substitution.

The placement of people in such images is significant. In Sutton, Brind and McKenzie's introduction to *The State of the Real*, a survey of current positions on the real and its representations in the wake of the 'digital revolution', the example of Courbet's *Stonebeakers* (1849) is referenced to illustrate the impact of the photographic on painterly composition. (Sutton, Brind, McKenzie, eds, 2007) The artless placing of figures, suggestive of the newly discovered shock of candid photography – the subjects turned away from the viewer, the apparent bluntness of the symmetry - signifies the real in the realist image – in contrast to the formality of Salon painting. Some of these architectural renderings taking on similar levels of artlessness as significant of the real, however other images copy recognisable poses and styles and imply that the purchaser can 'live the dream'.

In the latter category of image, composition speaks a language which the viewer / purchaser understands – the visual language of advertising. In fact, it is a language which predates contemporary advertising – a visual codification of property ownership. In the conference presentation of this paper, I juxtaposed the above image with Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (c 1750) – the gaze of the landowner upon the viewer of the image, the pose of male and female, but significantly the relationship of foreground (owner) and background (owned) is striking.

The image and the recruitment of allies.

As Latour may wish to put it, the type of architectural rendering under consideration here is directly produced to generate consensus and recruit allies.

In *Drawing Things Together* (Latour, 2008), Latour restores focus to the media in which scientific observations are recorded: means of inscription, charts, data, projective geometry, and industrial drawing. The ability to record multiple registers and fields of activity on paper or other portable media confers power or control on those with the ability to interpret them. Latour considers two functions: recording and projection, the imagining of a future. Though beginning, as in Boyle's laboratory, with recording media as a means of transcribing the outcome

of causal processes - evidence which is temporally anterior - he moves on to means of visualisation – engineering drawing, projective geometry and economic forecasting: on the flat surface of the page, all these spheres of operation come together:

Industrial drawing not only creates a paper world that can be manipulated as if in three dimensions. It also creates a common place for many other inscriptions to come together; margins of tolerance can be inscribed on the drawing, the drawing can be used for economic calculation, or for defining the tasks to be made, or for organizing the repairs and the sales. (Latour, 2008)

Tor Lindstrand, quoted by Stephen Doesinger, remarks that '(the spreadsheet software package) Excel has had a greater impact on contemporary architecture than Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Frank O. Gehry have managed together'. (Lindstrand, 2007) In the same article, he is quoted as having stated that 'The representation of objects as we see them and their measured description, two tasks that are conventionally distinguished in architectural drawing, will be shown to have been unwittingly, and in many respects mutually determined and transformed' (ibid.) The functions of recording, representing and projecting, which once had specific technologies to themselves (perspective drawing, writing, engineering drawing), in the new technology of the rendering are becoming part of the same operation. Flusser predicted this state of affairs as regards photography: 'all apparatuses (not just computers) are calculating machines …

the camera included, even if their inventors were not able to account for this. In all apparatuses (including the camera), thinking in numbers overrides linear, historical thinking.' (Flusser, 1983)

In '*Architecture's Second Life'*, Linstrand's interlocutor in the chat room scenario which makes up the discussion, comments that 'when you look at most of the architecture (in Second Life), it really is remarkable how conservative and boring it is.' Lindstrand's reply illustrates one of the outcomes of the blurring between architecture and the entertainment / culture, 'I saw an episode of MTV Cribs and understood that if people have all the freedom and money and can do whatever they like, this is what they do … I guess it shows that the major influence in thinking about architecture today is more through other media than through architecture itself. Rather than spatial experiences, it is much more about images, television, movies, games'. (Lindstrand, 2007)

So for Lindstrand, the small, residential project as much as the megaproject identified by Hays is becoming subsumed by entertainment media. There are fewer degrees of separation now between the generation of desire in film or popular media, and the construction of the built environment.

Form and perception.

Form as read from images of past buildings serves as a program for their preservation or future existence. What the viewer perceives as form in the photographic depiction of architecture is what remains following the removal of transient details – such as traces of habitation, such as habitation itself. The building persists as a *gestalt*, a form, an identifiable entity, as long as this program is legible. From this equation, the persistence of built form depends on communication, representation and legibility.

In the promotional material for the Highbury Stadium development, much is made of the fact that the original building was recognised as an Art Deco landmark. In the new development, only the facades of the original structure remain. From the construction images available on the website, it is possible to view the facades as screens, theatrical flats, supported by scaffolding in order to preserve their integrity while the whole stadium is rebuilt behind them from the ground up. Furthermore, from certain renderings it is clear that the interior of the stadium will continue to resemble a football stadium, complete with cantilevered roofing.

fig 4: Rendering of East Stand façade, Highbury Stadium development.

In juxtaposing images of Highbury with those of wholly new off-plan developments, such as those visible on real-estate websites, there are clear differences between the generation of a building out of thin air, and the conversion of an existing form from one use to another. In one, the rendering is the projection of a wholly imagined form, in the other, the persistence of a previous form is part of the design. In renderings of Highbury it is hard to tell which is past and which is future, in images which are in a very real sense temporal collages. Latour argues that the portability of representations – charts, drawings, reports – and their flatness – is the source of the extraordinary power they give to their users/makers/readers. In this image, the façade of Highbury stadium becomes a sort of *page*. It manifests this same flatness, and it ceases to matter whether the structure behind the façade is consistent. To ally Robert Venturi's notion of the 'decorated shed' (Venturi *et al*, 1972) with Latour's ideas opens up the potential of the shed front as a page, and for it to enter into the realms of discourse appropriate to the page. This implies that it has a function to recruit allies, to generate anticipated actions which will guarantee its persistence, to set out a future program, and to contribute to its success. The causal sequence relating to the trace is reversed: forms which are visible or legible will persist. The architectural image – whether rendering or record – contains a program – form - which can be seen as a trace of future structure. This is nothing new – it is only that new technologies are revealing things about the past – and established ways in which actions were encoded, performed and read –

which were always there, only concealed in tacit knowledges, unacknowledged practices, and cultural / social contracts.

Hence, though the technology is new, the concept behind the technology is as old as the development of legible form in building. In the case of photography, digital technologies reinforce, rather than undermine, the importance of the Real and the contract underwritten by the trace. This can only be so because without such a contract between image-maker and audience, the CGI rendering would cease to function as a rhetorical machine. I have argued that the crucial importance of the photographic Real, and its appearance, is as a device to win arguments, recruit allies and to keep things moving forward for those who agree that that particular direction is forward. It is clear from the examples given that when the issue of the trace and of causality arises between participants in a discussion, there is an implicit agreement on which kind of time is in question, and in which direction it flows. It is therefore not inconsistent to speak of a *trace* of the future, as this future already exists as program in the network as a whole.

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