

Attention: slippery floors! : An architects' thoughts on real and virtual grounds

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Attention: Slippery Floors!

An architects' thoughts on real and virtual grounds

Post-structuralist discussion has laid open some of the hidden architectural implications that had appeared “just“ metaphorically in philosophy, literature and other discourses. Thereupon everyday statements that “are given ‘foundations’ that ‘ground’ the ‘construction’ of a theory” are no longer seen in the same light, but the metaphorical use of architecture has become conscious. Architecture wants to reaffirm its duty of keeping identity in place -or should I say ‘of keeping identity in its space’- which comes to say that it is meant to entertain a repetitive affiliation with the “ground”. Namely the ground hosts future constructions, acts as a support or a fixation point to whatever construction it might allow to be attached to or based upon. This kinship with ‘the’ground has attributed to architecture the characteristics of stability, safety, continuity and the like; not only was architecture to provide actual solidity, but it also had to signify stableness. A long-woven tradition of Western thinking presents these qualities -expressed through the metaphor of architecture- as the ‘real’, as that which is no more suspended in the air or floating, but which is founded and resting on stable premises. Accordingly architecture has been understood as a prominent representative of what we call ‘real’; things become real -i.e. architectural- as soon as they have stopped to be ‘merely’ utopian or visionary. And full of admiration of our own wit we scrutinize utopian designs and we self-sufficiently like to wait for somebody to prove to us that they can be translated into reality. Only then can they be architectural!?! Too often have we heard the phrase “but let’s wait until we see the actual building”. This threshold has a value judgement attached to it, which carefully tries to outline categories of what is real and what is not real (yet). And surely this establishment in ourselves -our built-in police of reality- doesn’t hesitate to render ridiculous every effort of those attempts which do not fit into the category of this value hierarchies.

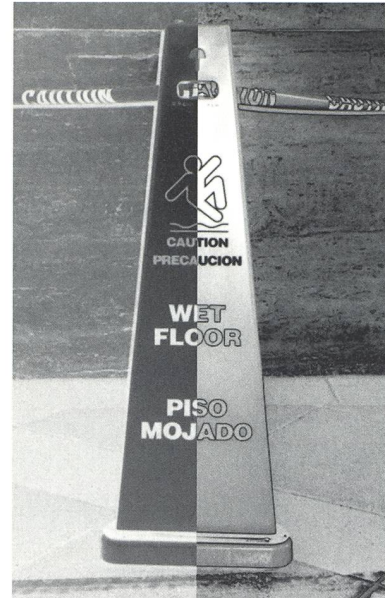
In the context of architecture, everything that could not be recognized as ‘real’ in that sense, got placed under the all-englobing concept of the ‘virtual’. Virtuality has been used and misused in every thinkable fashion and mediatized through and through. Whereas as a consequence the term has been washed out of meaning, it nevertheless holds a flexibility and an adaptability that it can thank its survival for as a word.

Deconstructivist influence on architecture has questioned a Hegelian negation of difference¹ by a repeated affirmation of that difference. This change entails the impossibility of defining the virtual in opposition to another category, as for instance the real, the material, the present.

In an essay on metaphorical uses and misuses of existential categories in the virtual², Frances Dyson rightly points out that cyberspace, which claims to

1 For instance the affirmation of the self and the negation of the other, or the affirmation of the affirmation of the negation...

2 Dyson, Frances. *‘Space’, ‘Being’, and Other Fictions in the Domain of the Virtual*. pp. 26-45. In: *The Virtual Dimension*. Beckmann. Edit. Princeton Archit. Press. 1998



have close affiliations with the virtual, has become a new locus of mystifications that degenerate ontological claims to a rhetoric which cannot stand up to its promises. She refers to Heidegger's premonition about a nonchalant handling of existential concepts: "(...) *being is thought of in terms of 'beings', and as a result of this reduction beings are experienced as objects*".³

The *body-as-text* concept becomes a slogan that excuses a quiproquo game of matter equals information; this might be a backdoor to escape a controversy, but it remains abstract. It is properly called ideology, a "*confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism*".⁴ Sure, Derrida provides an argument proposing such a metaphor *as metaphysics*,⁵ as the nascent moment of an idea, which has already become phenomenon⁶ when we understand it. But this intra-discursive strategy cannot be removed from its discursive field for a stubborn application that deliberately forgets the difference of ontological modes -to continue in Heideggerian terms- of corporeal presence and of text. Namely the result is a cheap 'virtuality' that is reduced to some freaky and childish fascination of technological experiments and artifice. Since we have catalogued textuality anyway in our classical categories, and we can deal with it on a practical level without major existential incongruities, it is convenient to take also bodies as texts and to forget any interrogation about translation. I don't mean to say that the textual metaphor lacks relevance for the rethinking of corporeality; in those terms, Derrida argues that metaphors are not innocent and even guide and fix results. But it cannot act as an excuse for ignoring that body-as-a-text is not a self-evident fact, but a theory. And a theory is part of a discussion that cannot be left aside; this would question the status of theory as a whole. Theory is a kind of *tecnè* that binds for moments in time a corporeal object, form or event to ideas. This link establishes a mutual control of objects and ideas; it is dangerous nevertheless to take the one for the other, to take the idea for the object. This establishes an ideology, which is grounded on a belief that will not survive the advent of a new theory. And if it did survive, it would be intellectual fundamentalism.

Architecture has been suffering a lot from the text-obsession, fashioning fancy talks well received by media, but not displacing a discourse that had started long before text had become relevant.

Both William Mitchell's books *City of Bits* and *E-topia* are filled with such irrelevant science-fiction applause. They don't elucidate any idea about the meaning of this contemporary renaissance of the 'virtual' for our existence besides telling us that we will be called "netizens" and that we will have some brain implants and bodynet interfaces. This is a Jules Verne revival with a lack of charm, since it presents itself without a smile on the face. This loses its

3 op. cit. Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), see also *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962)

4 Definition of ideology taken from the introduction to Paul de Man; *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. by Andzej Warminski. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, 1996. p.8 (or in *The Resistance to Theory*. p.11)

5 Derrida, Jacques. *L'Écriture et la Différence*. Editions du Seuil 1967. „L'écriture est l'issue comme descente hors de soi en soi du sens: (...) métaphore comme métaphysique où l'être doit se cacher si l'on veut que l'autre apparaisse.“

6 Idem p.45.

pertinence as soon as virtuality gets discussed in a different context than nets, information, electronics. At that moment namely, one will not care about the specifics of a then old-fashioned *mechanics* of a 'virtual space' in the 21st century, but one will try to understand its *technology*, i.e. the relation of discourse to a corporeal apparatus that we have engineered.

But the appearance of "cyberspatial thinking" has pushed man to reconsider questions he has become oblivious of; the discussion on the virtual has regained a more *conscious* disguise with the appearance of artificial interfaces that had to be designed from scratch. In fact the need to transpose bodies from materiality into immateriality asked for a sharpening of the relations and principles that entities should be involved in.

Perspective -which is a theory, not a fact- brought about major changes of consciousness that influenced political, scientific and religious constellations. I would argue that this situation was a virtual moment for its *virtù* -its potency- to engender movement, change, energy. This change was not a chronological or historical, but primordially an interpretive one. It was a moment of envisioned future within which the elements of the present could be reassembled in. This is such a moment where intellectual fundamentalism enters into crisis.

In Dyson's terms, Cyberspace is a realm of the *technosublime*, where users are not in the present, but entering 'the future'. This future is only metaphorically temporal, but resonates more as a promise (*virtù*) of an alternative thinking. We are here reminded of Nietzsche's moment of existential suspension above an abyss. The future appears as a motivation for provoking grounds to move, for inducing the reconsideration of value systems. This phase of man's transformation can be highly creative and affirmative.

The philosopher Pierre Lévy explicates the interdependency of the two stages of formulating questions -virtualization-, and of resolving those problems -actualization-. He insists on the permanent complementarity of these transformations, and extends this bipolarity to four transformations: virtual, actual, possible and real. These four transformations hold different modes of existence, different temporalities and different causalities⁷; excluding or omitting one leads to alienation, to dead mechanisms, to sterilization or desincarnation. Actualization and virtualization are mutually responsive and *together* they constitute the creative moment. It is exactly this complementary condition of any such number of modes of being, of different temporalities and causalities which constitute the shifting grounds, the suspendedness over an abyss and the dislocation of discourses. Lévy shows that there is no discussion of the virtual -no virtuality- without the co-presence of these other transformations.

7 Lévy, Pierre. *Qu'est-ce Que le Virtuel?* Editions la Decouverte. Paris 1995. Lévy compares these four transformations to the four causalities of Aristotle: material (realization), formal (potentialization), efficient (actualization) and final (virtualization).

8 Modes of being as discussed by Pierre Lévy.

*“The existence of the virtual, the occurrence of the actual,
the insistence of the possible and the subsistence of the
real cannot be disconnected.”*

Therefore a discourse about the virtual can only be evanescent, unsteady and precariously grounded (on *Slippery Grounds*). But the same is pertinent for any discourse that treats with modes of being: The *existence* of the virtual, the *occurrence* of the actual, the *insistence* of the possible and the *subsistence* of the real⁹ cannot be disconnected. Fundamentalism, ideology or machoism are in fact such theories that hold on to stable grounds; They attempt to exclude the creative pair virtualization-actualization and to exploit the material and formal potentials. Sensationalism at the other extreme emphasizes the virtual equating it with the improbable. Lévy says: “*Il ne s’agit nullement d’un monde faux ou imaginaire. Au contraire, la virtualisation est la dynamique même du monde commun, elle est ce par quoi nous partageons une réalité. (...) le virtuel est précisément le mode d’existence d’où surgissent aussi bien la vérité que le mensonge. Il n’y a pas de vrai et de faux chez les fourmis, les poissons ou les loups (...) Ce vide séminal est l’essence même du virtuel.*”⁹ Lévy explains that the virtual has an existence outside of the domain of values; it is prepropositional. It becomes very apparent why poststructuralism has brought about the revival of the fascination of the virtual. And only on account of poststructuralism can we conceptualize the interdependence of the modes of being, and have we abandoned what we call a misconception of isolating them.

I doubt that we can, need or should be able then to say: “*The virtual is...*”, as it is exactly its elusive nature that acts as an impulse to infiltrate energy into the *perpetuum mobile* of creativity that magically continues its movement.

As mentioned above in Lévy’s description of the modes of being, the virtual *exists*; following a Heideggerian obsession, we remind that *existare* in latin comes from *sistere* (to be placed) and *ex* (at the exterior). It becomes clear that talking or writing about the virtual breaks this ex-istence and actualizes it, makes it happen (‘*cela a lieu*’, it takes place, it starts to act or to occur). The actualization begins to direct and fix results. This is how the virtual has always been occurring in architecture; it thus takes part in the production of effects, traces. Again, these effects can in no way be used to trace back the way to the locus of the virtual, since the interweaving of the four causalities and four temporalities above function in a non-sequential way. This is the very blur that occurs in the displacements of the signifier-signified complex. Any ‘trace’ thus can be a visualization of blurred associations of Lévy’s four transformations, but never a freezing of a ‘virtual condition’. Freezing exploits a potential to construct a status quo; it renders present by capitalizing on this potential. But the virtual was supposed to provoke an atmosphere of inquiry, not of acquiring.

⁹ Idem op. cit. p. 144. „*The virtual is not about a false or imaginary world. On the contrary, virtualization is the very dynamis of the common world, it is through it that we share a reality. (...) the virtual is precisely the mode of existence out of which rise as well truth and lie. There is no right or wrong with bucks, fish or wolves. (...) This semantic void is the very essence of the virtual.*“ (my translation)

We can no longer trust a step-by-step progression on the grounds that the different modes of being offer in a repeatedly precarious constellation, but that sometimes our imprints get smudged, washed out or glide independent of our control; we step on slippery ground.

What to do?

...

The virtual in Lévy's account as that which provokes interrogation, shows evident kinship with both Nietzsche -accepting to pass through ashes- and deconstruction, which in Derrida's words "*is a manner of interrogating the question itself; the question and questions; and even the authority of questioning.*"¹⁰ Paramount in each case is the attempt to forget value constructs and to incite questions that have less consolidated biases.

The affinity of a procedure with an approach of questioning -for instance questioning the virtual- confirms that it engenders interrogation rather than being *issued* from interrogation. Interrogation is not at the origin of a deductive sequence of 'products', it does not precede a process stimulated by interrogation, but shares ontological grounds with it. Every practice related to questioning is inevitably linked to the virtual if it honestly and genuinely interrogates, i.e. when it also questions the way of questioning.

This by the way is the motivator of architecture, i.e. that which pushes architecture to not give in to fixed definitions. Architecture remains as elusive as the virtual itself ... and as 'impure' in its manifestations. Architecture "à l'état pur" will stay out of touch; metaphysics acts as the warrant for this, since it has been providing the existential grounds (Gründe) for this condition.

Architecture's affiliation with the figure of construction, i.e. of the ground, seems to be at the origin of the confusion about the virtual. The problem appears in direct relation to the discussion on the metaphysics of presence that Heidegger has introduced. Something that is present reduces us to its contemplation; it surely risks to loose hold of any virtual ground.

In a discussion with Jean Nouvel about the contemporary architectural conditions, Jean Baudrillard explains the necessity of a construction despite the risk of facing the nothing: "*Notre monde serait invivable sans cette puissance de détournement infuse (...) Quand on crée quelque chose, il faut bien le vouloir dans un certain sens en se disant que, (...) du côté de ceux à qui on destine l'objet, il y aura un détournement fatal...*"¹¹. Baudrillard insists that it is still necessary to rescue the possibility of a form, of the idea *as* form, knowing that this same form is always already lost in the perspective beyond its intentionality. He calls this its radicality. This is again because we cannot *intend* a form

10 Derrida. *The Derridean View: An Inter-view with Jacques Derrida*. Interview with Edward Marx. Trans. Mary Ann Caws. BM104, vol.2, no.1, Sept 1988, 4-5,8. In: Wigley, Mark. *Derrida's Haunt*, ftnote 12 p.262.

11 Baudrillard, Nouvel. *Les objets Singuliers*. Architecture et Philosophie. p.25

to be virtual; this would be an aesthetization of the virtual. It is what it does to its context which reveals its radicality.

Intention transforms the virtual into spectacle, it wants to expose what *we* can do with the virtual.

What do we mean by a virtual architecture?

Nothing is more tiring than the eternally unchanged and banal arguments that a virtual architecture has to be literally flexible or eternally temporary. Later on the program of the building, the economic situation... all enter the architectural statement -in a virtual and virgin state- as corruption. This is like speaking without using sounds. A 'virtual' architecture has to be situated outside of this discussion.

Another category of 'virtual architectures' have become boring, i.e. those visualizing all kinds of more or less rigorous processes of transformations that freeze an arbitrary state, which is called architecture. This too is a technique that tries to take the attention away from a final object and make us believe that the object after all is 'just' one step of an eternal evolution. This works only as long as one doesn't talk about ontology, which I think is not possible in a discussion about the virtual.

A third attempt is to insist on the dematerialized nature of a 'virtual architecture'. Cyberarchitectures, Architextures, Talkitectures and the like favor forms of non-corporeality of architecture; they certainly avoid issues that come up specifically about physicality, they nevertheless don't escape the same kind of critique about 'construction'.

An architecture that expresses a affiliation with the virtual might be one which has accepted at any moment of its being to pass onto slippery grounds, by which I mean grounds on which its ontological premises get confused and intermingle in non-predictable ways. This is an architecture which accepts to pass phases of non-intentionality, of ambiguity and contradictoriness and lets itself become a set of effects that it could not consider as a given of its own nature. It is an architecture which becomes constantly alienated from whatever it considers itself to be at a certain moment in time.