Future Places

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Two themes flow through this issue. Leading is the elusive notion of the future, and attitudes toward it in the work of place designers. Woven into this is a forcefully emerging set of issues which has come to be associated with the future in something of a reflex. The means of message exchange and information handling are undergoing dramatic changes, which in turn transform fundamental concepts of place and time. Advanced information technologies are rapidly coming to be seen both as objects of sober explorations and as an infrastructure for the promised land. The attaining and retaining of knowledge is an archetypical human endeavor, and buildings and icons throughout the ages and across cultures attest to that. It is no wonder that the information machine is being pursued so hotly today.

Much of our built environment expresses an ambiguity of status and aspiration, of current condition and hope, or fear. This ambiguity reverberates in the persistent conflict between tradition and innovation. Designing and planning are activities which are by definition mindful of what is to come, as much as they are rooted in what has been or still is. To conceive of built settings is to establish an imaginary vector along the trajectory of time, and to condense experience and aspiration into a physical abstraction. Visionary plans and utopian concepts actually tell us more about our current state than about the future. "Desires are already memories," Marco Polo

tells Kublai Khan in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

To sort out present attitudes toward the future, signified in built and imagined urban settings, is a tricky task. The future as focus of an attentive gaze is something of a contradiction in terms since our concept of it is itself a product, a phenomenon, of a shifting here and now. Collected here are snapshots and fragments, a kind of contemporary archaeology of tomorrow's places envisioned today, and a pocket mirror of advanced technology's entry into the built environment. The message of the assembled pieces remains implied. But it is tempting to risk some general observations.

The subjects presented here stem largely from three regions of the advanced industrial world—the United States, Western Europe, and Japan—and some cultural distinctions in their future attitudes can be made. By and large, the Japanese initiatives show an optimistic readiness to embrace the future with dramatic moves. Japan is leading a growing group of countries spanning from West Germany to Australia in which "informatization" has begun to supplement or replace older urban development paradigms. Here, a veritable avalanche of initiatives seeks to endow technology-driven infrastructure and consumer market development with a social vision. In the United States the tone tends to be more skeptical, even suspicious, about such visions, certainly the ones aspiring to be of urban scale.

Practitioners here have come to collectively concur with the primacy of local, pragmatic, and incremental responses. In residential buildings, ongoing shifts in technology and society at large are reflected in three new phenomena: the innovative house presented as "intelligent" appliance in a conventional cloak, as neoconstructivist statement for the new urban professional, or as result of a demographically conscious building program. Recent Western European projects exemplify a continued belief in urbanism, the city-bound rite of inaugurating the future. Here, we find re-visions and minor revolutions amid dearly held planning conventions, the reliable sources of both disenchantment and delight.

Contemporary architectural ideology, that volatile system of beliefs about the values, goals, and means of the profession, is shattered into a myriad of little credos. The most successful of architectural careers seem driven into show business, pragmatism, or insider cultural commentary. On the surface, larger dogmas seem long gone, yet some have persisted or quietly taken over. For one, technology has survived as a main theme of utopia, and with its evolution, the "wired city" of the 1960s and the "advanced information society" of the 1980s emerge as prime paradigms, for the chorus of critics and those eagerly greeting the electronic revolution alike. This is in keeping with our society's prevailing attitude toward the future, where

technological innovation has come to be understood as synonymous with social progress.[1] The public search for the electronic El Dorado, largely called off in the United States due to lack of viewer response and sponsor patience, is fully under way in Japan. Great Britain, France, West Germany, and others have dispatched smaller expeditions as well.

Meanwhile, industry and academia are busy constructing and reconstructing new "technopolitan" areas and networks, high-technology innovation and production nodes targeting rapidly evolving markets.[2] The Silicon Valleys and Route 128s of this world have been excluded from this survey and saved for future form investigations.

With notable exceptions, architectural representation has found it difficult to find new means for expressing new concepts of information management. Intrinsically elusive and ephemeral, the complex questions of the information age are being responded to with iconic curtain walls and other, more intricate forms of reinterpretation. Substance, program, and the layered meanings of contemporary society are in certain representation-minded quarters expressed by the mechanical elegance of vintage machines. Has the microchip brought about the bankruptcy of style?

To some, the natural environment and the built environment, at once manifesto and equipment for the future, have been replaced by an afterimage of what was on the picture tube one-thirtieth of a second ago. The conventional notions of the public and the private, and of inside and outside, appear to be rendered meaningless. The physical boundaries of the "traditional" place are being perforated, dissolved, and replaced by audiovisual protocols and advanced technology's regime, as manifested in new communication and surveillance systems, a development long ago introduced by telephone and -vision.[3] The experience of metropolitan public places attests to the convergence of built and transmitted media. The computer-aided information spaces of New York's Times Square and Tokyo's Shibuya station area have transformed their built environments into message supports, image screens, and echo chambers.

Several blurs distort our notions of architectural space as a source of "sense of place," a condition decried by Virilio and other critics of media abstraction as degenerative. The blurring of the human presence is brought about by the ability to be in several places at once via telecommunications, and to adopt more life-styles than one, through surrogate sampling of transmitted programs, or via intercontinental travel. The externalization of memory is perfected by the absorption, retention, and dissemination of knowledge by the growing collective of machine data banks, at once ubiquitous and intangible. The blurring of time as structured by planetary mechanics is brought about by the 24-hour continuity of automated functions. Cinema and television have irreversibly altered the nature of spatial experience, a trend amplified in electronically supported techniques. We have learned the aesthetic of the special effect and come to read all extraordinary places in this way. Hollywood's stage settings and Epcot's Future World are ambiguous hybrids of a sense of lasting presence and fleeting effect. Modern tourism is another symptom of this conditioning, where both the picturesque and the stomach-wrenching titillate the detached. And the future itself is being rehearsed as a persiflage of the present in the largely fatalistic or violent tradition of science-fiction cinema.

Architecture, imagistic and media-conscious within its representational conventions, faces renewed questions about its profoundness. These questions pose a multiple challenge related to the use of information in the broadest sense. Buildings are at once message carriers and facilities of information exchange. They are artifacts of human intelligence and more specifically manifestations of programmed societal commitment. Information about the direction of society and our cities is available, ready to be assimilated into relevant concepts. There is a role for utopias—not for ready answers, but to generate plausible and accessible questions. This is less a challenge of information access than of intelligent design advocacy. Serious research and experiments

must be launched, aimed at learning about the character of the new media, their impact on behavior, and their opportunities for reducing isolation and supporting empowerment. Information systems have become an environmental dimension, and the issues they raise may help reconnect place and societal direction in responsible ways. Visionary concepts of cultural and political relevance are needed to synthesize data and commitment, communicate conditions, and propose integrated means of change. Our physical environment must remain both reliable source and focus of our sense of reality.

Notes

1 Leo Marx points out that there are two traditions of thought about technology and progress in the United States. One can be traced to Thomas Jefferson, who held that technological innovation must be subordinated to social ideals. The other, somewhat younger yet clearly dominant today, originates with Daniel Webster and others, who expounded the idea that technological innovation automatically spells social progress. (Leo Marx, "Does Improved Technology Mean Progress?," *Technology Review* (Cambridge: MIT, January 1987).

2 Paul Virilio, "The Overexposed City," *Zone 1/2* (New York: Urzone, 1986). Original in *L'Espace Critique*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1984).

3 Raymond W. Smilor et al., *Creating the Technopolis* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1988).

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