17. Scripted Spaces: Navigating the Consumer-Built City

The architect studies the blueprint of the casino. Its interior is designed to never look entirely finished. Every few months, each entrance must be reevaluated. Perhaps a corner facing a dreary street is not paying off well. It has to go, and the interior around it must be able to survive radical surgery. Let us say that involves an eighth of the overall floor space, where a "sportsbook" will be added, with banks of screens running football, basketball, baseball games for betting. New ceilings, new colors, new lighting—but only there, never throughout.

Every thirty feet or so should be reversible. If any section on the floor begins to look "tired," showing five years of age, it should be dressed up, made more "up to date."

A working casino avoids chronological memory that might be identified as history. Only the ludic memories brought in by the player tourists are taken seriously. Better to build consumer tourist memory than history. For the tourist, time stands still—no docks—only the script.

The scripted space is the dominant model for consumer-built environments, from casinos to shopping malls to theme parks, and finally to tourist plans for existing cities. Facades become shells for a modernity inside, where the flow across a scripted space is paramount. Each square foot must pay off. No space inside is allowed to be considered "finished."

The areas should seem "junked up" (a term used by the casino industry, at least in Reno). If murals and statues look unusually primitive, or a spot is left nakedly undeveloped, that might be intentional. The interior should never appear too thoroughly coordinated. In fact, it might do well if it looks a trifle unraveled at the corners. This implies personal freedom for the player, the chance to beat the odds. It also helps mask the obsessive controls needed to make every square foot pay off. Similarly, police at malls have to fit into the rhythm of shoppers. Sometimes in southern California, teenagers at malls are handed cards

warning them to behave. Or reminding them that no animals alive or dead are allowed inside the mall. Surveillance cameras study the activity at malls and casinos, not simply to check for crime, but also to monitor which classes are spending money where.

What results is a classist carnival; that is, a restricted design—genteel—and at the same time, flamboyant, Baroque, in ripe colors (even on the Sistine ceiling, or in German Baroque churches, or colonial Mexican *zócalos*). Like a Peronist rally, it mixes populism and political repression. Scripted spaces that rely on illusionistic effects bring on "happy imprisonment" and "ergonomic controls." Certainly, Disneyland qualifies as happy imprisonment, and City-Walk, and the cybernetic computer for that matter. We need to study the precise details that go into scripting these narratives of control (and presumed freedom), the allegory that the viewer navigates. This is a pilgrim's progress of sorts, where free will and predestination are balanced uneasily.

In Baroque scripted spaces, the dome "tells" a different immersive story than the basilica. The painted Baroque dome allows the viewer to wander more as a character in a story, under the watchful eye of the oculus. And yet, however glamorous the effects, the viewer is supposed to sense a hierarchy, cosmic or financial, or even egalitarian. The higher or-der is like the authority of the apparatus; it can be understood only through obedience to the pope or the duke; or to Disney, for that matter; or Microsoft.

Similarly, one should not be too Manichaean when studying how such designs come to be. "Ergonomic control" (even it seems fascist) is too incoherent and wasteful to be monolithic. For example, in Los Angeles, urban planning, with all its mistakes, often operates like a confused poker game between the transportation and tourist industries, interrupted regularly by sheer greed, and endless holidays. Hundreds of millions of dollars get frittered away, projects left half finished, or half remembered. What results is whimsical, weirdly contoured scripted spaces, "non-finished." Mount Olympus (an instant neighborhood for the elite) was a real estate fiasco in the seventies, as was Venice in 1904.

Since the late fifties, downtown Los Angeles has been bulldozed into an alien Manhattanized banking district, like an omelet scrambled nearly out of existence. Now a new plan centers around a new loft district, and the new Disney symphony hall. But originally, in the early sixties, while the central hill (Bunker Hill) was stripped, revitalization was supposed to center on Spring Street, the fading, stately twenties banking center. But that beginning was scrapped half–way through, in the mid-sixties, replaced by a more carceral,

glass curtain-wall and brick pedway model for the hundreds of acres left barren on what had once been Bunker Hill. Then the Bunker Hill strategy was scrapped three-quarter way through, replaced by a mixed-use plan in the eighties—to repopulate the rim of downtown, invent an arts district among the old warehouses, add a few "urban villages." Then this in turn was stopped in its tracks by the recession of the nineties, and has been essentially forgotten. In 1995, in an attempt to prime the pump, public works seemed the answer: a new hockey stadium; a bigger convention center; a new symphony hall; a metro rail that looks mostly ornamental, but with well-appointed, empty stations. What resulted from these misadventures was a grab bag of ponderous architectural sketches, some in stone, some in stucco, some in glass and steel.

Scripted spaces are very scattershot, sometimes just a randomized mix of greed, business competition gone sour, and simple hysteria. What results can have an ironic charm, though—cockeyed parodies of industrial objects, of consumer rituals. The Switchback rollercoaster ride in Coney Island (1884) was modeled on railcars used inside mines. From there, as a kind of Dantean silliness, tunnels were painted. Then the stakes were raised, literally—more simulated hazard (or sim-death, as I call it), because competition among amusement parks led to higher roller coasters, more "hair-raising" rides. It is a parody of capital accumulation.

Illusionism has a unique modernity: it captures transitions in mid-metamorphosis. What results, if it succeeds, should operate as both a warning and a feast. The gimmicks should seem a trifle sinister (even Disneyland rides in the fifties relied on blacklight effects common to horror films); and at the same time, in idealized, exaggerated safety: It is like shopping inside a feudal kingdom; no wonder Disney models their parks on a cartoon feudalism. The shopper learns that the space may seem re-strictive, but it is still free enough to allow for personal chaos—free will inside a predestined script.

In that sense, aspects of Disneyland resemble a seventeenth-century pilgrim's progress, Calvinist entertainment. Indeed, cities with scripted spaces are, by themselves, nothing new. Baroque cities were scripted, as were the ritual spaces in Mayan cities—or even the Vatican, or Mecca. Certainly today, any space where the audience is a central character—where the navigated story dominates—bears an uncanny resemblance to L.A., for example, or a theme park city, or even European cities during tourist season.

My anti-tours are scripted. You spend the afternoon finding what no longer exists; or traces of bad planning, of canceled plans, of old roads, orchards, movie locations. If an entrance and exit are assigned, if the walking

narrative is emphasized (even in landscape design), if illusionism is essential to the trip, then the parallels operate in much the same way, even in the places that no longer exist.

Then there are simulated copies as scripted, from John Soane's museum to the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, where the Baroque designs of Athanasius Kircher are rebuilt, and spun inside a labyrinthine scripted space, where you are invited to get lost.

Borrowings take on the same haphazard quality that the designs do. In popcorn palaces of the twenties and Mediterranean-style malls of the nineties, elements from Baroque domes were transplanted, or misplanted, in splendid garishness: plaster phantasmagoria, alongside Egyptiana, mummies guarding movie exits, and gargoyles with glowing red eyes. The Burlington Arcade in London (1829) was built again on Lake Street in Pasadena (1980), in miniaturized scale. In how many cities, from Mexico to western Europe, are nineteenth-century hotels for the ruling class now restaurants for the tourists?

Illusionistic scripted spaces leave a very quirky historical record. However, in this chapter, I must limit myself to problems that are unique to such spaces at the end of the twentieth century. And that includes problems in architectural criticism.

The Empty Frame

Photos fail to capture the journey taken in a scripted space. For example, early photography in the nineteenth century often made a street appear to be empty because the pedestrians moved too fast for the camera to freeze them. Architectural photography still borrows heavily from early Romantic landscape painting; it tends to decontextualize, for a world where context is practically everything. Since the nineties, this problem, and related issues inherited from postmodern architectural theory direct criticism beyond the postmodern, toward "the industrialization of desire."[1]

Animation

In honor of the integration of cinema into heavy industry (from war to business), I would like to concentrate on the paradigm of *animation* instead of "finished" architecture. For decades now, architects have built through animation CG programs as much as on blueprints. And in animation, whether on the com-

puter or on a shopping street, *movement is structure* to a degree that is staggering.

Immersion

When I interview specialists and audience alike, often I am told that malls feel like computer games. Why is that? Both spaces are designed around a narrative where the viewer or the shopper is the central character, in an immersive environment built for *navigation* (walk-through that implies freedom of choice, but actually is severely monitored or limited). All traditional architectural features are subsumed beneath this walk-through narrative. That includes the gimmickry itself, so often rather cheesy, but intentionally so. The pseudo-marble is supposed to look false, as upside down as a balloon in a parade, or a movie set dropped from the top of a building. The gaucherie often is intentional, again what designers in the casino business call "junking it up": banal murals next to expensive wood trim.

It is an aestheticized experience that tries to look like the imaginary brought in by its consumers. It should look homey, but always a bit artificial (safely rebuilt, not natural). It should look well appointed, like brilliant packaging, but not superior.

After postmodernism: Since 1989, in stages, postmodernism has drifted away. We see now that the impulse turned out as conservative as it did progressive. Right-wing cable news exploited deconstruction to bury the liberals, a pox on all your houses. It is a standard trick. Only the scale of it is terrorizing. Even war now relies on the industrialization of desire, through media and consumer space, much the way locomotives industrialized time and travel a century ago; but even more the way Baroque princes worked with special effects.

The Panic

As a result of a widening of the classes during this electronic industrial age, these scripted spaces have mutated oddly after 1970, toward a culture of control. This was a standard element in modernist planning, evident in late modernist plazas (sheer walls, glass curtain or otherwise). In the nineties, this surveillance was given a happier face, with miniaturized cameras rather than gangways (layered, with isolated entryways). We were already becoming a culture at home with surveillance. We already expected it, assumed that the classes must be pre-separated much more, like packets in a baking kit.

However, behind this soothing isolation was a panic about scarcity and that the economy may turn these spaces into neo-Victorian nightmares.

However, in consumer-built cities, there may be a counter dialectic at work. The trend toward tourist pedestrian marketing in big cities, from Piccadilly to Times Square to CityWalk, may produce precisely the kind of "democratic ways" that accompanied class warfare in the genteel cities of the nineteenth century (circa 1850); and made them nonexclusive for a time. The vast immigration worldwide since 1970 may surprise us, deliver something less hierarchical to scripted spaces. But they may reinforce precisely the class rigidity that is emerging.

Nevertheless, scripted spaces are always a business powder keg. They may blow in some way over the next generation, as the classism and panic, along with the pressure to build bigger crowds of all classes, runs head-on into each other. Not only are the casinos continually unfinished; the consumer-built cities may never be finished, once the social pressures boil over; and the fiscal shortages keep growing. We are witnessing the first act in a drama that has barely begun.

No matter how conscientiously the planners try to hide clocks, to stop class politics, they often fail to prevent the crisis from growing. In the postwar United States, those who bought and those who sold the suburbs assumed that shopping malls by a freeway exit would stop "history," no more encroachment of Depression-type poverty into the suburb. How did that work out? Frankly not well at all in many cases. The mix of slums and gridlock in postwar suburbs has reached epic proportions in the past decade.

There is no way to stop aging in cities. Every forty years, the city matures whether there are clocks or not. Crime in Las Vegas is sharply on the rise, despite all the glamour of the mega-casinos. The glitz and spectacle is merely the first stage in the building of any city. No wonder scripted spaces built centuries ago, like Venice, seem oddly prescient today. Prerevolutionary Paris, hidden behind the new Louvre and the new Marais, is warning us, and, at the same time, soothing us.

Labyrinths: Program Design Reception (1997)

Let us clarify what this term *labyrinth* opens up for f/x debate. It suggests that all "virtual" systems are cybernetic—about power and relinquishing control, about feedback systems.

What sites does this bring to mind? The Vatican? Casinos? Computer games? The Web? Shopping malls?

Are there movies about this subject? *Videodrome*? *The Net*? *Brazil*? *2001*? *Independence Day*? *Twelve Monkeys*? *The Game*? *Blade Runner*? Perhaps a few hundred more?

What does this narrative say to us when we are active characters? What does it say to us when we are watching a flat screen? How does this influence the way all spaces must be designed in the future?

A few philosophical issues to remember: We cannot ever rely simply on our personal relationship to a movie or scripted space. That is only a third element within the whole: program; design; reception. We must take each step on its own, and see the problem as ideological (program); epistemological (script); and ontological (reception). In other words, at the level of the program, the political use of ideology is fundamental, and must be studied that way (how political interest is manifested within the codes generated to protect those at the top, or condemn their perceived enemies). At the level of the script, there is a code of how knowledge is supposed to be set up, how the branches and winding paths reveal a knowledge. And on the level of reception, the virtual is always relative; there is always a crisis about real/unreal, a suture between the two that makes the story exciting. The more "realistic" the illusion, the more the ontological game must deal with fakery (obvious example: the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*).

At the heart of these philosophical issues is a sense of codes themselves, how they are hidden, how they are turned into real space, how they are hinted at cautiously, and whether there is ever a codified version that applies as the ideal form of reception (there isn't).

So this is a fiction that is navigated by the audience as a fact of sorts. It is unnaturally (and therefore "realistic") vivid somehow, tangible (*haptic*, an old term from the 1930s that is being revived: sensory). One begins to see how the heritage of postmodern theory is of some use here, to clarify how many ways a code can be warped or broken, and yet be serviceable.

The ontological gimmickry harkens back to the Baroque era surely, an easy place to settle (trompe l'oeil, anamorphosis). But we must remember how subtle the levels of simulation must become, how the slippage of the code of the real is, in itself, the conflict of the story (where the power "trip" takes place). Consider the issue this way: philosophically speaking, an audience goes from confusion to the realization that there is a program greater than themselves. They see the hints of it physically, but only the reflection of the greater process—to

experience a dual reality (Neoplatonism, etc.). This is rather charming, to sense the gimmick, while glamorizing the machinery that gave it to you. We are expected to worship the apparatus, while pretending to subvert the script. So the epistemology is tainted by the hidden ideology; and given momentum by the ontological journey itself. We learn a system (via movies or the Net) that seems innocent on one level, but is built into a corporate model that is very political indeed. Part of our revenge against that system is the knowledge that it is filled with gimmicks. However, many of these gimmicks are part of the script itself, and suit the program very well. So we imagine that our ontological awareness is a weapon against ideology, but in the end, we accept the epistemology as a truth (a democratizing force), even a game about the truth.

So we can use the terms *ideology*, *epistemology* and *ontology*, but only if we apply them very solidly to real events, real practices, and never privilege our reception to the point where we think we are psychic enough to ontologically know what goes on in a corporate boardroom, or how precisely a scripted space hides, manipulates. And above all—why such places look as they do. We can guess who benefits, and what is expected. But the ultimate function is what the collective and singular imaginary may actually be for the audience or the players. We cannot even presume that we know ourselves precisely all that we experience within an "interactive" or scripted space.

NOTE, 2023

This article first appeared in 1998. The term scripted spaces has since gone into rather expanded use; also by me. (See the "2023 Afterward.")