Architecture from the Outside

Essays on Virtual and Real Space

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conducted by Kim Armitage and Paul Dash

*What led you from a critical interest in space to an interest in architecture as a discipline?*

My interest in architecture began a long time ago, as an undergraduate or even earlier. Before I started to write about philosophy, I spent some years working on architectural theory and thinking about space. Quite surprisingly and fortuitously I received a number of invitations from schools of architecture, which enabled me to think a little more concretely and specifically about space and the built environment. Later, I was invited to a couple of architecture conferences and my “career,” such as it is in architectural discourse, led on from there. My interest existed all along. I simply didn’t have an appropriate intellectual venue or a forum to think about architecture much before that.

*What kinds of problems do you see in architecture as a discipline given that it’s one of the master discourses for speaking about space? Do you think that it’s complicit in some way with all of those hierarchical constructions that you have written about?*

Inevitably, because every discipline is. That isn’t necessarily the problem with architecture. If I were an insider in the discipline of architecture, trained and working with other architects, I might be able to describe to you more clearly its critical problems. However, I am in the wonderful and unusual position of being an outsider. My dealings with the discipline have been relatively peripheral
and, for me, the beauty of those dealings as an outsider is that I’ve been able to do it on my terms. The problems of the discipline need to be assessed by those within it and those closer to its periphery than I am. Yet if I’d been trained as an architect, I wouldn’t be able to say what I’m saying, and certainly not in the way that I have articulated it. Being outside of a discipline, though interested in its internal operations, gives one a position of relative independence and autonomy. My relations with the discipline of architecture are thus much less fraught and complicated than my relations with the discipline in which I was trained, philosophy.

So you’re speaking from the outside.

I am speaking quite explicitly from the outside. To be fair to the discipline of architecture, though, it is the one discipline beyond philosophy and the humanities that is actually interested in, and in some ways committed to, what the humanities have to say. It is one of the few places that invites outside “incursion.”

So you do see architecture as outside of the humanities?

As an academic discipline, architecture is outside of the humanities—so in that sense there’s no question that it is not one of the humanities. Not institutionally at least, even if there is something of a family resemblance. Architecture students aren’t oriented to thinking, reading, and writing in quite the same way as are students within the humanities. What’s interesting about architecture is that it has always been unsure as to where to position itself and its own identity as a discipline: it is itself internally divided about whether it is a science, a technological discipline, or a mode of art or aesthetic production. This uncertainty re-
working within the discipline, would be in a much better position to answer. I know there is a lot of work going on around the question of sexual embodiment and architecture, anthologized in *The Architect and Her Practice*, published in 1996 by the MIT Press. It is a beginning for architectural explorations of sexual embodiment and should not be too readily preempted.

*The next question is actually one you yourself raised in the past. Can a Darwinian theory of evolution be applied to inanimate objects, i.e., the evolution of technology and information technology in particular?*

This issue is not unrelated to the work of Deleuze and Bergson. Bergson talks about duration being a phenomenon of life, of animation. Becoming, and openness to the future, and thus evolution, are unique properties of what is alive. And yet if one is consistent with evolutionary theory, one of the main presumptions is the emergence of life from nonlife. If Bergson is prepared to grant becoming to life, using evolutionary theory to think that becoming, then it is difficult to see how he avoids granting the avenues of becoming, and thus autonomous development, to the inorganic or the chemical. This step assumes there is the possibility of thinking all sorts of inorganic forces and processes in terms of becoming. Not only what man makes—i.e., technology and culture—but also, what makes man—i.e., nature. To think becoming, in the sphere of nature as much as in the sphere of technology, seems to me a crucial project for the future.

*Virilio once said, “We have the possibility of the colonization of the body by technology, as if we had the city in the body and not the city around the body.” Do you have any thoughts on the idea of a technological city within the body?*
I read in the newspaper a couple of days ago an extraordinary little story about a group of scientists and technicians who had devised a computer system to enable certain types of blind people to see, by way of tiny little cameras hooked up to a computer chip in the brain. They haven't succeeded in a working model yet, but they now believe that the technology is available to make it work. This is interesting because what is produced is not a body in a city but really a miniature city in the body. Miniaturized within a computer chip is already a whole set of cultural norms, values, and spaces.

*It’s interesting that vision is the first of the senses to be researched in this way.*

I think that vision is the easiest in many ways, partly due to the history of the photographic still and then the movie camera. Because of the scopic nature of culture in general, it is not surprising that the visual is the privileged domain of the computer. Bionic ears have been around for a relatively long period of time, as internalized transistors implanted into the ear. These cameras are the visual equivalent of bionic ears. So in a way it’s not the city itself but culture that is compressed into the chip in the brain, and in this sense the city is in the subject as much as surrounding it.

When we are hooked up to our computer terminals, talking to each other virtually, in different locations, the city is working through us rather than between us. Where I disagree with Virilio is that the city works through us as much as around us. The mail—the physical letter and electronic media—functions virtually. The invention of electronically generated media does not introduce us for the first time to virtuality but rather renders virtuality more graphic. We were already in a certain mode of virtu-
ality when we wrote letters or when we painted and read. The city has never been just anything but an ongoing site of virtuality.

The body can harness a whole load of technological input, but there is a limit to its capacity for technological transformation. I don't know what this limit is, but there is a boundary beyond which the body ceases to be a body. This point is the limit of the viability of technology.

*When exactly would a body cease to be a body?*

It is arbitrary, but there is a certain point at which the replacement of every organ by a prosthetic one produces something fundamentally different in type. There's a point at which you can replace toenails or a spleen or whatever, and yet the body can still be considered the same. I don't know what that point is, partly because such technology still remains largely speculative or fictional. But there is a point beyond which things start to function differently—not necessarily worse, but differently. We would then have different kinds of bodies and different kinds of body functioning, and perhaps even the possibility of different becomings.

*Would you become a different kind of person?*

You would have to be a fundamentally different kind of person. What kind of person that is, I don't know—these kinds of imaginings are the principal preoccupation of science fiction writers.

*Have you any idea as to what the implications of your writings about bodies and built space are on the recent trend of cyber-utopian writings, which seem based on the premise of liberation through a liberation from real space?*
I get as much pleasure as anyone from this technology and its potentialities, but it seems to me that what this technology offers is precisely an enhancement of the body, not its replacement. The body you have is still the one sitting there hooked up to the machine, regardless of the clothing or apparatus you put on it—the information glove is still designed for the human hand. So I understand the appeal of this technology, beyond the body, dominant in cyberspace, but it seems to me to be just unthought-out or fanciful. There can be no liberation from the body, or from space, or the real. They all have a nasty habit of recurring with great insistence, however much we try to fantasize their disappearance. The cybernetic focus on the body is precisely a mode of singling out and intensifying certain regions of the body, its stimulation to maximal degrees.

You have written that the idea of leaving behind the body is a male fantasy of autogenesis. Is it also a male fantasy of complete control?

It’s not just a male fantasy. I think that women have it too.

But on what basis do you think women can claim cyberspace as women’s space, outside of the paradigm of autogenesis or total control?

This is an interesting question. While some think of cyberspace as a world of their own, which is the fantasy of autogenesis, a sort of Frankenstein fantasy of building a body or an entire world, many women working in cyberspace—producing art or writing—have never had that fantasy. What they see instead is that computer technology provides a space, an opportunity, a promise, of the possibility of working and producing differently. It is an incredibly effective tool—something that speeds everything up,
makes it look shiny, gives it a polished look, yet it also transforms how we can work. This is quite different from (and considerably more modest than) the idea of its producing another world, or the simulation of this world. This is nothing but a fantasy of self-mastery and self-containment that is unattainable elsewhere. Many women have a primarily pragmatic relation to these technologies and refuse to be mesmerized and seduced by their phantasmatic promise. It is an immensely seductive technology, but part of this seduction is not its ability to transcend this world so much as the allure or the pleasure of its use. For example, like many people, I have a powerful attachment to my Macintosh. It’s about the beauty of the design, the ease with which it allows you to do certain things, and its capacity to transform how we think what we do. Much of the appeal that cyberspace holds for those of us outside the field of fiction is simply practical: the technology enables us to do interesting things quickly and simply. There is a pleasure in its efficiency. The more pragmatic our relation to these technologies, the more we will enjoy them.

This attachment to the machine or computer is, of course, not unlike the relation of the user to drugs—one can use drugs to build up a fantasy of a complete existence safe from the rest of the world. But drugs needn’t be seen that way. Drugs can rather be interpreted as another form of technology, as a mode of corporeal or conceptual enhancement or intensification that doesn’t aim or hope to build a world, as an alternative to the real. Technology isn’t inherently masculine or phallocentric or ethnocentric, although certainly its modes of production and circulation are closely invested in power relations. But in spite of this, it holds a certain promise: it can be used in all sorts of ways with all sorts of aims or goals in mind. It is both the condition of power and a possibility for its subversion, depending on how it is used, by whom, and with what effects.
So like drugs, technology can also be addictive?

No question about it. Technology is addictive. Whenever any mainframe goes down, people go berserk, deprived momentarily of their hit of daily e-mail. Perhaps it is not so bad as that, but there is a broad resemblance. They are both bound up in the metaphors of addiction.

Virilio has written that interactivity is to real space what radioactivity is to the atmosphere—a pollution. This again seems to complicate and undermine the claims of those who want to use cyberspace as a utopian space in which phallocentric thought can be subverted.

There are no utopian spaces anywhere except in the imagination. But this absence doesn't necessarily have to be restrictive. If we had a utopian space, we would already be there, and yet the phallocentric world would continue intervening within it, for it would be a space alongside of, rather than contesting, the space of the real. It is to our benefit that we cannot access this space because it means that we must continue to fight in the real, in the spaces we occupy now. We must fight for results we can't foresee and certainly can't guarantee.

You have used in the past Roger Caillois's construction of psychasthenia—a depersonalization by assimilation to space.¹ Do you think that in the postmodern city this is our general experience of space—especially in terms of the media bombardment of commercial spaces like shopping centers, the kind of artificial spaces that in some ways coax us into lapses of identity, or some kind of out-of-body experience?

There is a certain joy in our immersion in space. It is important to recognize that you can attain a certain (tempo-
Do you see a relation of psychasthenia to virtual space?

There is a possible relationship but not a necessary one. Psychasthenia occurs when the boundaries of personal identity are collapsed and the subject is no longer able to distinguish what is inside from what is outside, what is self and what is other. It is clearly a very disturbing and debilitating psychical disorder. Cyberspace does not in itself induce psychosis or psychasthenia: one requires a certain bodily and conceptual cohesion to even enter cyberspace with all its apparatus and equipment. Indeed, there is a certain safety in entertaining one’s fantasies and hopes in cyberspace precisely because it is virtual, not actual. This is one of the pleasures of cyberspace: you may have the possibility of at least temporarily disturbing an identity. Whether this disturbance becomes psychasthenic is perhaps another ques-
tion. I think the fantasy is that you just get another identity different from your own; waiting a while to use it, like donning a new outfit, is part of the allure of cyberspace.

*This is a similar fantasy to the idea of the mall as a space in which you can shop around for another identity.*

But you can’t. At the mall, all you can do is use its social spaces, including cyberspace, as supplementary augmentations of aspects of your identity. This is perhaps a minor augmentation, not really as radical as some proponents of virtual identity might claim. You don’t become a woman by adopting a female identity in cyberspace if you are a man in real space. Cyberspace has been seen as the site of a certain cross-dressing, or swapping of identities, that can only be phantasmatic and supplementary. But while entering cyberspace does not make the man a woman, it may make him see other possibilities for being a man.

*How would this inability to change identity at will relate back to the idea of a totally technologized body? It’s the old watch analogy—if you change the face of a watch and then change its wrist strap, do you have the same watch? Similarly, if you change your toenails and then also change x, y, and z, are you the same person? If you were able to change all of these things at will, would you also be changing your identity?*

No. It’s you that’s making the change, and it’s you that is your identity. If you think you’re changing, the you that does the changing hasn’t in fact changed at all: it remains a sovereign agent, a reigning consciousness. Your identity is changing all of the time, but it’s you who is being changed rather than you who is the agent of that change. We are effects more than causes. You can choose what clothes to wear but you can’t change the you that’s wear-
ing them. The very notion of choice is bound up with your identity.

I think this is the fantasy that is behind certain queer politics—the idea that you can choose your sexual identity. I suspect it stems from a misreading of Judith Butler’s work on performativity: that you can just perform what you want to be. The problem is that if you choose to perform a certain sexual identity, then you have not changed at all by undertaking that identity, you’re just acting out. It would be nice to be able to choose an identity, but in fact it is chosen for us. Our agency comes from how we accept that designated position, and the degree to which we refuse it, the way we live it out.

You write about the relationship between bodies and cities as being a mutual one in that each imbricates the other—how we embody virtual space and it, us. How does this mutually imbricating relationship work, given that virtual space seems to privilege sight over other corporeal experiences?

The fact that cyberspace is primarily visual is not a particular problem in itself. We were all already completely visually immersed, even before the advent of cyberspace. Cyberspace has become embodied in the screen not accidentally or contingently but because of the visualized nature of our culture and its prevailing pleasures. The technology predicated on an economy of watching has been pervasive for at least a century. In our culture television has captured our imagination through the eye. The fact that computer technology has become embodied in a screen-type technology, rather than as some other form, is an interesting historical question, but it isn’t really simply about a momentary technological privileging of the visual.

If cybertechnology is able to gain a grip on bodies and their desires, it is because the virtual or the cyber is also
Fundamental act of architecture is define space by separating one space from another and basically requisite of this act is creating differentiation of inside and outside. In beginning of time, architecture had this tendency to enhance shelter and habitation by inside and give over movement and utilization of natural environment to outside; but inside and outside doesn’t exist without each other. This essential relationship served by elements like openings and visual accesses and had been improved by the time. Architecture and sociology have been fickle friends over the past half century: in the 1960s, architects relied on sociological data for design solutions and sociologists were courted by the most prestigious design schools to lecture and teach. Twenty years later, at the height of postmodernism, it was passe to be concerned with the sociological aspects of architecture. Currently, the rising importance of sustainability in building, not to mention an economical crisis brought on in part by a real-estate bubble, have forced architects to consider themselves in a less autonomous way, perhaps bri Architecture is both the process and the product of planning, designing, and constructing buildings or other structures. Architectural works, in the material form of buildings, are often perceived as cultural symbols and as works of art. Historical civilizations are often identified with their surviving architectural achievements. Architecture can mean: A general term to describe buildings and other physical structures. The art and science of designing buildings and (some) nonbuilding structures.