Building Perceptions: Media Architecture and the Hypersurface Experience

Marc Steinberg

Cinema and architecture, despite their differences, have long been thought akin. Giuliana Bruno, a theorist who works on the relations between film and the metropolis, asserts that “Film emerges out of a shifting perceptual arena and the architectural configurations of modern life. Cinema – the ‘motion’ picture – inhabits modernity’s moving urban culture.” For Bruno, the link between cinema and architecture is one between cinema and the architectural forms which constitute the “new geography of modernity”: arcades, railways, department stores and exhibition halls. These architectures of modernity are spaces of motion, sites of transit, through which people and commodities pass. Cinema (and the camera itself) gains a kinetic dimension from the locomotive architectural forms of modernity and the city-dweller’s experience of this city; both film and modern architecture are “practices that engage seeing in relation to movement.”

The kine(ma)tic structures that Bruno describes are spaces of flows: funnels for the in- and outpouring of people and goods. They are less edifices than vehicles for the facilitation of movement. And it is from the experience of the body moving through these spaces that the defining contract of cinema is born: the moving camera (which in mimicking the subject’s movement through urban space becomes the “spectatorial means of transportation”4) and the immobile spectator (who cedes the right of motion to the camera). But what happens when these structures themselves become cinematic, when screens are mounted so that the surfaces of the structures themselves become (cinematic) sites of movement? What happens, in other words, when architecture becomes media architecture? How does the mediation of structures transform their architectonics – and the urban subject’s experience of this architecture? How are the perceptions and experiences...
of the city-dweller affected when the vehicles for movement become surfaces of movement? What becomes of the static cinematic spectator when the funnels for filmic movement (modern buildings) present themselves as sites of spectacle, as the very screen-surfaces that formerly presupposed an inert audience? What kind of new perceptual environment do travellers within media-architectures find themselves in?

**Superflat Architecture: Projecting Consumption**

"Superflat" and "hypersurface," two dovetailing theorizations of media architectures, provide complementary frameworks for thinking through these questions. Both theories were developed at the end of the 1990s, and both reflect an interest in surface, commodities and architecture as a component of contemporary "hypervisual" culture. While superflat began as an art-historical genealogy (and exhibition) proposed by the Japanese artist Murakami Takashi in order to theorize the importance of movement and surface in premodern and contemporary Japanese art and visual culture, it was quickly expanded into a theory of architecture concerned, on the one hand, with surface as a site of emergence and, on the other, with environments of commodification and consumption.

In emphasizing surface and flatness, and rejecting the transcendental aspirations of modernist architecture, superflat architecture is "yet another media in contemporary information society." Indeed, this interface with media and the commodity system that flows through it is one of the defining characteristics of what Igarashi Taro calls "superflat urbanism":

Since the early 1990s, the emergence of superflat architecture has been accompanied by what could be called a superflat urbanism – a radically new conception of the built environment that reflects the absorption of public space into the flatness exemplified by manga, computer screens, and other signs of the postindustrial information era. This development is reflected in the rise of new tendencies such as information architecture, in which informational screens become integral components of a building’s structure.

The example he cites of such an informatic media structure is the qFRONT project, completed in 1999, which boasts the largest exterior projection screen in Japan (23.5m high, 19m wide). Located at the exit of Tokyo’s Shibuya station, it lies at the intersection of five major railway and subway lines, through which 500,000 people and 90,000 cars pass every day. Shibuya, one of the city's most vibrant shopping districts, caters to consumers in their teens and twenties, and is renowned not only as the site of consumption but also of the production of new trends. Shibuya is also a place of play, with karaoke bars, coffee shops, clubs, restaurants and love hotels spread liberally among the multitude of shops and department stores. All of which are marked with layers of signs and billboards that cover the buildings. Signs are arranged not only along the horizontal axis but stacked upwards on the vertical axis six or more stories high. This density of information and colour is as impossible to assimilate as to ignore. And at the Shibuya intersection, this gateway to information, consumption and pleasure, the urban subject finds the largest and most dynamic billboard of them all: qFRONT, with its massive, pixellated TV screen. Supplemented by a booming sound system, it plays product commercials, videos of new music releases and film ads, interspersed with real-time video clips of spectators and text-messages to loved ones.

qFRONT is home to the flagship store for Tsutaya, a self-styled "culture convenience club" that sells and rents CDs, DVDs, video games, manga and books; a cinema complex, Cine Front; a Starbucks café; and a digital arts education center, Digital Hollywood. Conceived of as an "information disseminating commercial building," qFRONT is a media space within and without, and is emblematic of the superflat in that it is simultaneously a space of culture, information and consumption. Yet it is less the conjugation of the flows of culture and consumers within the building that I am concerned with here than the flow of subjects without. Does the massive LED screen, called "q's eye," which forms qFRONT's outside surface, automatically install the consuming subjects into a mode of viewership commonly associated with film or TV?

The answer is most certainly "no": the subjects of the massive screen are mobile and transient. They come from a number of directions, and pass through optimal and non-optimal viewing and listening positions. Moreover, two other massive video screens also vie for a passerby's (visual and aural) attention, though they are sometimes coordinated with qFRONT's screen. It takes but a little imagining to realize that the environment created by the intersec-
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position of the screen as it becomes a surface in the urban environment. Here the screen does not try to "capture" attention (presuming an immobile subject whose wandering attention need be caught), but rather projects images (onto mobile subjects whose attention is as itinerant as their bodies). The subject’s body has become a reflective screen onto which the images (and sounds) emanating from q’s *eye* can be projected and absorbed. This assemblage is not, however, properly panoptic: the eye is not watchful, its aim is not to gain knowledge about a subject. On the contrary, its aim is to project knowledge-information onto the subject, to use bodies as “white walls” of signification, to capture them within the semiotic of consumption that de-

tion and overlap of these screens is one of aural and visual cacophony. This realization similarly leads one to the conclusion that the passerby’s gaze remains both mobile and wandering. This might explain why the qfront’s massive screen is called “q’s *eye*” rather than “q’s *screen*”; the strategists at qfront have opted to conceptualize the mobile subject’s body itself as a projection screen, and the massive qfront screen as a projective (camera) “eye.” Even though they may be using the word “eye” in a metaphorical sense (q’s *eye* is still at base a screen), the qfront strategists’ rhetorical move suggests a reconceptualization of the moving-camera/immobile-spectator relationship described above that can help in understanding the changed

qFRONT, 2003, vue de trois écrans au crépuscule—view of three screens at twilight; photo reproduite avec l’aimable permission de. Courtesy qFRONT, Co., Ltd., Tokyo.
finishes contemporary commodity culture – for it is of no small importance that the content of the images on the screen is primarily advertisement.

But how successful is the qfront's eye – and screen-based media architecture generally – in its processes of signification? Is the subject always already signified and inscribed, or does the possibility exist of escaping these signifying projections, maybe even through them? The key to answering these questions is the fact that the subject of these media architectures' screen-eyes is both mobile and bombarded by other projections, available to countless other signs and images projected onto the body. Stephen Perrella's theorization of hypersurface architecture is worth turning to at this point, for it addresses this subject's experience of the multiplying layers of images and signs that characterize the contemporary urban environment.

**Hypersurfacing Signification: Escaping Signs**

Perrella began theorizing hypersurface architecture in the late 1990s as an attempt to conjoin the trajectories of digital technologies, media culture and trends in topological architecture. Topological architecture is generally thought of as "curvy" architecture, which is based on non-euclidean geometry and the idea of continuous deformation. Topology, as Alicia Imperiale points out, "is the study of the behavior of a superficial structure (surface structure) under deformation." With advances in computer-automated design (CAD) and computer-automated manufacture (CAM) technologies, the architecture of the 1990s was characterized by the exploration of alternate kinds of buildings; a formalism that explored the possibility of creating morphic, non-standardized spaces. Key figures of this movement are Frank Gehry, whose Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is more sculptural than structural, and Greg Lynn, who drew attention for theorizing and designing buildings based around the idea of amorphous "blobs." Perrella's project consists in bringing this type of architecture into contact with what he calls "consumer praxis" – hence turning it towards spaces of consumption.

If superflat urbanism takes its cue from Shibuya's mediatic-consumption space, hypersurface architecture takes its inspiration from an analogous space in the U.S. – Times Square. Here again there is an emphasis on surfaces, mediatization, and the intersection of art and commodity culture. Hypersurface is a general cultural condition as much as it is an architectural practice; it is an experience generated by contemporary consumer architectures as much as it is a way of designing buildings. In short, it is a phenomenology of the perception of buildings that describes the urban subject's perceptual experience of mediatized buildings as an event, as Perrella describes:

"Hyper" implies human agency reconfigured by digital culture, and "surface" is the enfolding of substances into differentiated topologies. The term hypersurface is not a concept that contains meaning, but is an event; one with a material dimension. We are currently at the threshold of this new configuration as a site of emergence for new intensities of culture and intersubjectivity.

Though the built environment is already suffused by the "media complex," this suffusion itself contains liberatory possibilities – possibilities for the emergence of what I would call "differential
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Perrella emphasizes the link between flows of information on the surfaces of buildings, the spaces in which this information is absorbed, and the transformations in human agency and subjectivity that this absorption facilitates: What appears to be a spreading trajectory is the further decentralization of commercial representational systems unleashing new forms of human agency, in the guise of interactive information-play within the material surfaces of architecture. Nowhere is the possibility for such a transformative liberation so blatantly evident as in the electronic displays of New York’s Times Square and Las Vegas. The subject of these mediatized environments is not the passive white wall of signification. Above and beyond the subjective or habitual predispositions that constitute the subject’s perception as an inherently active process, the very multiplicity of the images projected onto the subject in the urban media environment creates from the outset a condition of asignification that might be called, harkening back to the experiences of early twentieth-century writers, sensory overload. Signs are layered one atop the other, all working upon the body and yet amounting to confusion – an experience of an excess of signs turned into asignifying materialities (light, colour and shapes). Information separates from the screen and becomes spatial and material. This excess, and the asignifying materiality of signs, is an experience of hypersurface, as Perrella insists in a later essay: This is the geometry of topological transformation where all the complexity of the coexistence of relations is held within the singular flatness of a vertical plane, a plane loaded with excess experience, overly abstract and abundant with information. Hypersurface is after the shared figure, the set of relations in the coexistence, the excess and the experience of this excess. Hypersurface is the breakdown of communication and signification manifest in the experience of the materiality of architectures of information. It pushes the experience of form and movement, light and colour to the point where the meanings these forms and movements are supposed to convey break down.
Perrella foregrounds this breakdown, this excess, in his own hybrid architectural diagrams/art works. *The Haptic Horizon* (1995), a series of "texture maps" made in collaboration with Dennis Pang, renders the experience of asignifying immersion meant to approximate or visualize that of the subject in a media environment such as Times Square or Shibuya, produced through the transformation of images from Disney films. There is a trajectory towards which the subject moves (a quasi-perspectival point or vortex — or several — into which the picture is drawn), blocks of light and colour, vaguely dimensional structures (architectural forms in passing), a sense of mobility (subject passing between screens and lights), and the passage of time (the blur of time-lapse perception). And like the urban hypersurfaces of Shibuya or Times Square, there is a sense of non-totalizing immersion: the experience is one of patches of light, blocks of dimensionality, trajectories and random events, simultaneously slow-motion overexposure and hyperspeed blur. As Perrella and Pang's images make clear, a hypersurface is an asignifying perception of lights, colours, movements and sounds — non-referential materialities that generate, in their own right, aesthetic experiences.

**Animatic Architectures and the Building of Perceptions**

The architectures of modernity created spaces of movement that precipitated, as Bruno has argued, the development of the mobile camera and the immobile spectator. With media architectures and their multiplying layers of signs, however, there is the generation of a space in which the subject remains mobile, and the perspectival ordering of space by the subject/camera-eye is no longer possible. In short, the experience of the contemporary city, especially that in which buildings are fitted with screens, is an experience closer to one generated by animation than (classical) cinema.
The privileging of surface, and the close relation between colour and material form, animation provides a better approximation to the experience of the urban media environment as hypersurface than cinema does. Since relations of space in cel animation are constructed through the interaction of surfaces and colours, the experience constructed through animation is most often not that of the ordered, navigable space of cinema and the modern city, but the immediate and phantasmagoric space of interacting colours and planes that problematizes signification, and its spatial correlate, orientation. Which is, of course, the experience of the dissolution of legibility that Perrella has termed hypersurface.

The as-yet nascent conjunction of these two trends towards the animatic in architecture point to the potentiality of hypersurface as not only the perception of buildings but as an architectural project, a building of perceptions or, as it ultimately must be, a building of perceptual experience that points to the very limits of perception. The Dutch architect Kas Oosterhuis, in his built projects, such as the Salt Water Pavilion (1997) in the Netherlands, and his planned projects, such as trans_ports (2001), provides a fascinating example of someone who has endeavoured to build hypersurfaces. His structures conjoin the concept of animatic buildings (“I am not talking about animation in the design process, but about animated buildings,” he has said) with media surfaces and screens. Yet unlike the media surfaces of Shibuya or Times Square, the screens are attached to amorphous (Salt Water Pavilion) and modulating (trans_ports) immersive structures in which information is related to materiality from the outset (the building’s walls are the screen-surfaces), where signs are always-already experienced in terms of light and colour, and where the subject is conceived, in Oosterhuis’s deft twist of the commercial game, not as the receptor of signs, but as the participant in an animatic hypersurface. For example, trans_ports will be “a data-driven supple structure which changes shape in real-time,” with a skin that “interacts with the users in a two-way exchange of information.”

Screen or media architecture, as I have argued, not only changes the relationship between the spectator and the screen, but generates an experience of the urban environment that emphasizes perceptual limits and the material experience of asignifying signs. The urban subject’s perception of signs
as materialities is an experience of hypersurface that is visualized in Perrella’s diagrams, and conceptualized through the medium of animation. This potential for new experience generated by the breakdown of signs in turn provides architects such as Kas Oosterhuis with a novel project: the building of structures that are themselves infused with life, and that mimic the animatic experience of the media-architecture city as the liberatory breakdown of signs.

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Qu’est-ce qui arrive quand l’architecture devient une architecture de médias? Pour répondre à cette question, l’auteur discute de projets récents qui lient le cinéma, l’architecture, l’information qui circule et la mobilité des regards dans l’environnement urbain. Que ce soit l’imposant qFRONT à Tokyo, l’architecture topologique de Stephen Perrella ou les bâtiments animés de Kas Oosterhuis, chacun de ces projets développe une architecture de la «superplanéité» ou de l’«hypersurface», laquelle accentue les limites de la perception et de l’expérience. Utilisant plusieurs strates d’images et de signes non référentiels, ces projets insufflent l’architecture d’une phénoménologie libératrice et intense.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 11.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Ibid., 16.
12. Ibid., 10.
13. Ibid., 9.

MUSCLE, a fully operational prototype of a programmable structure (a building with moving walls) based on the concept of trans-ports, will be shown at the Pompidou Centre in Paris from December 2003 to March 2004 as part of the “Non Standard Architectures” exhibit.