Introduction to 'Fluid Architectures' held at the opening on May 29, 2009
by Susanne Jaschko

We are living in a decade in which ubiquitous computer networks, information delivery in real time and new display technologies shape the face of our urban spaces. Through them a space is emerging whose salient manifestations merge the virtual and the physical. Digital urbanism stemming from decentralisation, globalisation and mobility shapes the networked society we live in and a "space of flows" which generates new dimensions for imagination and action no longer concurrent with old geographies and topographies.

As curator I have dealt with this topic in various exhibitions such as the urban interface series in Berlin and Oslo in 2007, the Open House exhibition in 2006 and the Urban Screens programme in 2007. This exhibition is another attempt to look at the cultural implications of new technologies affecting urban space and architecture from a different angle.
The exhibition Fluid Architecture gathers spaces of flow and immateriality created by artists in response to these contemporary notions of space. These fictional spaces made of light, sound, dynamic image, and other media extend the idea of physical architecture to the construction of dynamic and seemingly infinite spaces enabling a strong sensory experience. They rethink the classic standards of spatial construction and topography and introduce the concept of performative and experiential architecture.

A major challenge faced by architects, designers, and the consumer electronics industry in the 21st century is the balancing of the relationship between the stimulation of the senses through dynamic media presentations and spatial situations on one hand and the feeling of security and well being that arises from the constancy of the living environment on the other.

In the traditional domestic architecture of the 20th century, home meant a constant, steady environment into which media like radio and television gradually found their way, though without really influencing the fundamental architectural conception. Changes in the living space remained limited to refurnishing and redecoration. Sensory and mental stimulation with art and other intensive processes of reception occurred primarily outside the home in the public sphere. Through their potential implementation in and addition to architectural elements as well as their ability to generate atmospheres, digital media make it feasible to achieve a continuous dynamisation of living space. The discipline of architecture in the 21st century is challenged not only to integrate these "technologies of stimulation and imagination" in a sensible way but also to redetermine the relationship between the spatial experience of built form, which has been in the fore up to now, and the experience of media.

Perceptual changes in the surroundings are important chronological and spatial reference points in psychological processes like remembering. People typically link situations they experience with the sensory stimuli of that particular environment.

In the exhibition, Austrian artist Annja Krautgasser refers to this aspect of memorising by asking individual subjects to describe in detail places, which are important to them for personal reasons. The fascinating result of this proposition is a precise picture of the central function of rooms as time magnets, to which memories covering the entire human sensorium are attached. For instance, somebody talks about the smell of smoke from birch and cedar wood in a Canadian cabin, the changing temperatures, the impression of different colours and materials on the spot, as well as the incidents that occurred there. This shows how human memory uses places as containers for sensations over long periods of time.

I very much like that fact that Dashed II occupies the central hallway of the gallery space upstairs, thus linking most of the works of the exhibition and proposing the stimuli of senses which the other works achieve through new media as a tool for navigating and remembering the complex environment we are living in.

Marnix de Nijs' work Remapping Firenze relates also to the idea of memory of space through sensation and atmosphere. It is a virtual and 3 dimensional map of Florence's historic, urban architecture which is to be experienced by walking or running. The visuals are made of millions of dots, thus giving some ghost-like and almost immaterial impression of the monumental buildings. This 3 dimensional world of dots made me think of the ultrasonic navigation which some animal like bats use. They send out 'klicks' -- ultrasounds -- that are reflected by physical objects. To me all the dots generating the immaterial world of Florence look like imaginary reflection points of such an ultrasonic navigation....

The sound that can be experienced at times and in certain spots equally reminds of an echo of specific moments and occurrences and are the only references to human presence in this virtual world.
In its experience this work relates to the 3-dimensional worlds of computer games as much as to the Situationist concept of roaming the city without an destination but aiming at the experience of situations itself. To me the work is first and foremost an atmospheric portrait of Florence - similar to the portraits of spaces in Annja's piece, but here with a complete different set of media. At the same time, the pixelated architecture of Remapping Firenze evokes the impression of architecture under deconstruction and in the process of dissolution; a dissolution into the flow of pixels foreshadowing a world of architectural form as media display.

Architects are increasingly paying attention to the design of dynamic processes in architecture by developing buildings that make use of new technologies as time-based and dynamic systems, both inside and on the outside of buildings. We certainly can speak of an 'eventisation' of architecture and urban space. By the means of new technologies turning architecture into a media spectacle -- think of massive public screens and media facades in the first place, architectural space has become highly experiential and performative, enabling strong perceptual experiences for the good and the bad.

What we can observe with these media in public space is that they have a massive visual impact on their surroundings and that they execute a performative and event-like gesture which becomes by its continuous repetition a kind of permanent spectacle.

Certainly these architectural performances bring up critical questions about the environment with regard to the energy consumption on the one hand and what we call light pollution.

Temporary and artistic interventions and reinterpretations of architecture such as the 2 examples we have here by Mader Stublic Wiermann offer us new perspectives on architecture and 'refresh' the perception of our environment .They add visual layers to the existing. They tread architecture almost as sculpture and reinterpret its formal qualities, thus evoking the ideas of fluidity, dematerialisation and change - maybe in the line of work which was brought to us by artists like Laszo Moholy-Nagy and his revolving light sculptures, or by Nicolas Schöffer's kinetic architecture - to name only two of various historic references of this kind of work.

Almost all works in this exhibition support the theory of energetically formed space, brought to us by architecture critic Reyner Banham. The theory of energetically formed spaces, with campfires being one of the first examples of such suggest that light, warmth, and sound are capable of forming energetic spaces - and that modern media can channel, bundle, and intensify these energy flows. Those energy flows form a space that, in contrast to structural space, is dynamic and heterogeneous.

If we look at Pablo Valbuena's work, we can see some design principles which it shares with Mader Stublic Wiermann's, Jan Robert Leegte's of Walter Langelaar's such as adding a virtual layer of light to the existing architecture, playing with perception, irritating and provoking an altered and less coherent understanding of space.

In these qualities these works commonly relate to and evoke impressions of 'relational space'. In Scott McQuire's words, relational space is 'a space which has been stripped of inherent qualities, such as stable dimensions and appearances (and of course stable social

meanings), but is increasingly experienced as shifting, variable and contingent. Relational space can only be defined by the temporary position occupied by each subject in relation to numerous others, which suggests that relational space is not easily unified since every subject belongs to multiple matrices or networks that overlap and interpenetrate.'

In his analysis McQuire particulary looks at contemporary urban spaces in which the physical component of space becomes less and less important and the connectedness to a decentralised network gains importance. This is a complex and debatable subject of its own and cannot be touched upon in depth in this introduction unfortunately - but it might serve as a backdrop for many works in the realm of Fluid Architectures.

Interestingly the three works of Leegte, Valbuena and Langelaar are site-specific in that their point of departure lays the properties of specific spaces in this building. In that sense they all emphasise the dominating features of the spaces they integrate with. They all convey a strong temporal and spatial experience of the individual physical spaces they correspond with. By doing so they enhance the viewers' sensation of presence, the here and now, of their momentary position and perspective. In the case of Valbuena's work, The Extension series, the physical space is extended into a virtual dimension by the means of seemingly simple lines and geometric shapes. Space is mirrored, doubled, multiplicated, it moves and changes its direction. Unobtrusive characteristics of the room, corners, window sills and plinths are staged and become protagonists in a theatre of light unfolding before our eyes.

Jan Robert Leegte chose two opposing blind windows in the stairwell for his intervention thus creating a silent visual dialogue between the two architectural elements. 2 squares of light hit the two windows and direct our eyes to them. It's puzzling because there doesn't seem to happen a lot. And I don't want to give away what little events happen there - it is for you to find out.

Walter Langelaar's involves the viewer in a more direct way, he even integrates him/her in the constructed space, thus not only challenging our perception of time and space but also recalling the idea of simultaneous presence in various spaces and bodily connectedness to virtual space.

The relationship of the human body to physical space is shifted by the virtual world, and with it, the notion of permanence, memory, and our relationship to physical objects in general. Artist Mark Napier states: 'The age of objects has ended. Rock, steel and cement are the losers.'

This 'virtual world' made of code and data challenges the notion of physical monument as a means to permanence. We enter an age in which experiences can be transmitted over wires, objects can be transmitted as information, "printed", and recycled, much as water flows through the weather cycle. Permanence is no longer associated with physical objects, but

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with the persistence of ideas in the collective consciousness of the networked media. Eventually permanence becomes organic and process: a function of a systems ability to regenerate itself.

The Cyclops Series of artworks by Napier asks simply 'What does a virtual monument look like?' Through monuments humans preserve their ideas, extend themselves through time, extend their presence over generations. Monuments create the illusion of permanence. Recent growth of computer and network technologies extend the human nervous system and alter our experience of physical space, distance, and memory. Information can be transmitted globally, instantly. Databases store media experiences, and networks distribute and replicate this information with minimal effort. Yet there is blindness in the rush to exploit the new technology: we bring the comfortable assumptions of the physical into the virtual without noticing that they don't apply.
Consequently, Napier's answer to his question 'What does a virtual monument look like?' is a parody of solidity: a bendable building, a monument that bounces, a skyscraper that flies. The object straddles the line between a thing and an event: an organic form that is itself a record of a fleeting moment of destruction and creation.

Deconstruction of space is also the subject of Stanza's work Urban Generation whose source is numerous surveillance cameras in London delivering live images. These are mirrored and woven into a digital tapestry of simultaneous space which diminishes the relevance of the single image, the single moment and the single space, but promotes the idea of constant flow that washes away the importance of the single event. Permanence is here process too.

If we accept that today the physical relationships between things are losing relevance in relation to the invisible connections of objects amongst each other, if we accept that there is a second layer data or digital in the city which adds to the physical, and that process is the today's major paradigm, this paves the way for completely new designs and constructions of space.
One early example of this rethinking innovating architecture is The Invisible Shapes of Things Past which was first conceived in 1996. The project proposed an architectural form based on the spatial movement of a video recording. The work introduced a method of finding an architectural or sculptural form not based on manual modelling but on a generative process. The technique and idea behind the project is the separation of frames of a video and their assembly in a spatio-temporal order – or in other words, the digital sequence of frames is turned into a 3 dimensional object. This object or confined space could then theoretically be reintroduced into physical space. The concept was widely recognized and exhibited since it inspires to reveal technology-based sources for design processes even though it was meant

to be a purely experimental research.

Architecture has seen a lot of change since the computer is employed to generate shapes.
You might have seen the invitation/flyer for this show which on the front shows a lot of
examples of so called blob architecture, mostly organic like forms, which are stress analysts'
nightmares, and surely inspired by Kiesler's infinite house.
Our graphic designers' method is to collect images from the internet on the basis of the
exhibition title. When I saw the first draft of the obverse, I was struck – of course this is what
you get when you google fluid architecture or similar terms. And I decided to keep it like this –
not only because I find this design strategy in general doubtable since it always produces
misleading results and other issues like copyright – but it also illustrates how different the
works in the exhibition are to these architectural concepts which evolved so heavily 5-10
years ago. This exhibition does not present computer-aided architectural form in the first
place, but introduces conceptions of space concerning processes of deconstruction,
augmentation, extension and performance.

This exhibition is curatorially relatively dense and narrow in that you can observe similarities,
shared artistic strategies and basic questions among these 9 works. This happened partly on
purpose and partly this is the surprising result of the creative process since three of the works
have been developed for this show and were designed for the gallery space. I find these
coherences and relations between the pieces very interesting – because only through them
you see the differences and are challenged to pay more attention to what happens, what the
individual work implies and says. I at least hope that through the tightness of this exhibition
your attention will not lie on the technology but can be drawn to the subtlety and conceptual
complexity of the works.

If you followed my introduction so far, you may have noticed that I have not spoken about one
work yet: Michael Najjar's The Invisible City. This is because I wanted to leave it to Michael to
talk about his work and the thematic context he is dealing with in the netropolis series in detail
now.