CHRONOPOLIS: INHABITING TIME

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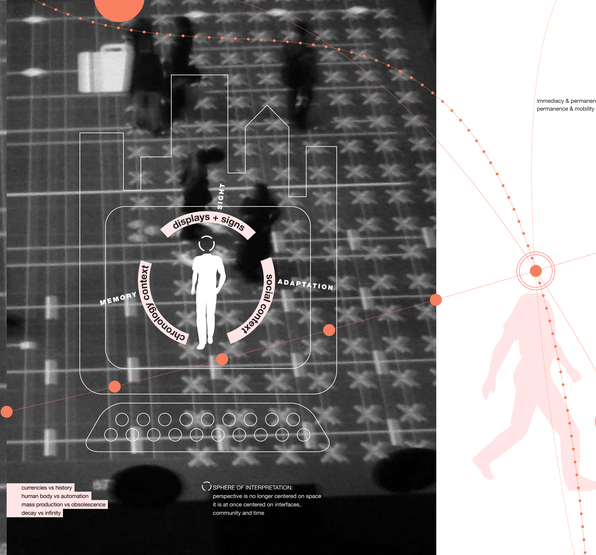

immediacy & permanence
permanence & mobility

"The advent of the computer in our laboratories and studios has certainly made the shape and form of time amenable to human manipulation and intuition in a way that has not been the case within rational disciplines since the dawn of the modern era." Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time*

What role will digital media and computation play in defining what a future architecture might be, how it will look, sound and feel and perhaps most importantly, be experienced? This is not an inappropriate question considering architecture's incessant quest for other disciplines (from film theory to dance and cooking) to "scaffold it," as Roger Connah writes in his ironically titled book *How Architecture Got Its Hump*. Yet, media's interference with architecture began long before the current historical moment. Already in post-World War II, pre PC times, Constant's utopian vision of New Babylon imagined an architecture of endlessly shifting environments, renewed and varied by "technical implements." Xenakis and Le Corbusier's Philips Pavilion for the 1958 Brussel's World's Fair radically predicted the coming fusion of electronics, sound, image and built space materialized into a veritable urban gesamtkunstwerk.

Perhaps more recently though, in the excess of the late 1980's and 1990's architecture was thought to be completely reborn as digital computation enabled the warping and distending of a reviled Cartesian space, at least on the screen. At one extreme, architecture was reduced to an incessant readout of numbers, coordinates, lines and points, as ground plans and elevations nested inside the GUI windows of 3-D modeling software were transformed into data. In its avant-garde other, it became a festering, bio-mimetic organ-tech mutation, seeping from the mind and re-emerging on the screen as a world of fantastic representations in the process of eternal becoming; the *n*-dimensional zones of Marcos Novak's trans-architectures, for example. Through the exemplary "information architectures" of such projects as MVRDV's *Datatown* (a city composed entirely of data that has "no topologies or prescribed ideologies") and Asymptote's *Virtual NYSE* (perhaps prophetic in its visualization and capturing of market ephemerality), bricks and mortar were rendered into binary representation. Architecture finally finished its long journey from the built to the symbolic.

Immersed within these architectural universes of data and representation, however, can we not help but feel a strange sense of simultaneous deja-vu and loss? While there is the sneaking suspicion of "having been here before" as info-driven architecture tramples over the well-trodden ground of scientific data visualization, there is also the haunting sense that we have been left lodged in a space of disembodiment–a hermetic, clean room of a realm devoid of human experience. Is it possible that these architectures of information remain largely stuck in a realm that, as Connah suggests co-opts the surface of the screen but forgets the scene? "Understanding the differences between scene and screen could produce differing, improbable, even performative, architectures."

Shifting from architectures of information to performative architectures could imply spaces, actions and events enacted in and embodied by time itself. Space itself becomes malleable to our perception, behaving and responding in the grey zone between the real time landscape of the machine and the open, rich physical world. Time is no longer used as a technique, a tool for generating visual representations that are ultimately frozen into sculptural forms inserted into our predominantly Euclidean landscape. Even within the earliest analog performative architectures (for example, Chinese cities that functioned as large-scale sundials where the interaction between sunlight and shadows and the built environment provided the clocking of day and night), time functioned as material form. Architecture once again is invaded by media, becoming a *time-based* art.

Andrei Tarkovsky once wrote that the Japanese master time as the stuff of art. Could we entertain the radical notion that what the computer really provides architecture is not the stuff of information but the stuff of time? Could the so-called users or participants in architecture inhabit not simply a space of visualized numerics and extruded blobs but time itself? "What is it about time's relentless fluidity, Sanford Kwinter writes, in *Architectures of Time*, "its irreducible materiality, that the modern mind finds so impossible-or repellent-to think?"

Designing for time is the catch phrase that scaffolds both the concept and subsequent realization of *Chronopolis*. Armed with a host of disciplinary interferences (graphic and interactive media design, branding, computer music, performance, the design of responsive, computer-augmented environments), we aimed to create a temporal architecture; a space where time performs and responds according to human presence inhabiting its periphery and center.

Chronopolis' architecture, at first, appears to lie in the realm of the display. The screen, blown out of proportion and re-projected onto the surface of the physical world at 30 x 30' is seen from a distance as urban signage in motion, a calendar, and, intentionally but perhaps somewhat mysteriously, a clock. Yet, as its name invokes, *Chronopolis* is a city constructed of time where flows of commerce, pedestrians, commodities and decay/transformation itself are rendered into icons and organized over 4 standardized time grids of 60 seconds, 60 minutes, 24 hours and 365 days. The time units of seconds, minutes, hours and days repeatedly travel over *Chronopolis*' surface, these animated icons moved by the flow of real time leaving a trail of dots behind in their wake.

Stepping into *Chronopolis*, however, the experience shifts. The display, the stable point of reference gives way as we suddenly inhabit a strange visual, spatial and sonic architecture of grids and pictograms perpetually in motion. With the image traveling below our feet and time's incessant motion sounding and enveloping us above and around from a battery of parabolic loudspeakers, the screen and scene begin to merge. Time's inevitable passage becomes felt for *Chronopolis*' inhabitants: palpable and dense.

From the outside, *Chronopolis*' digitized display suggests its interface-the mechanism which hides the thorny complexity of the computational machinery lying below its surface while acting as an affordance for the revelation of that hidden depth. The interface normally dictates the form and frame of interaction-the screen's surface revealing what Paul Virilio called its "interactive depth." *Chronopolis*' real time clock of urban signs in motion suggests a semantic mechanism for navigating the city-a city that from the periphery appears to be reduced to the flattened space of the desktop. Yet from inside the environment, it is the steady build-up of human presence that ultimately opens up the space of revelation. Walking, touching, jumping on and interacting with *Chronopolis*' fleeting, projected surface does not trigger or reveal Virilio's interactive depths. Rather, it only through the visitors' inhabiting and populating of *Chronopolis*' does the system respond to the presence of bodies and perform its own temporal transformation towards acceleration. As the population rises, time is smeared and our experience of it as a discrete series of instants gradually succumbs to an accelerated continuum without beginning or end. Space itself becomes the interface to time.

"Only when you break away from the spell of time as a sequence of instants one can measure by the clock," wrote the late Chilean neurobiologist Francisco Varela, "and you come back to your own depth of experience can you realize that what you live in right now is almost like a cloud, like a whole, like a span, like a flash, which is far from a dot. The now is like an enormous matrix from which you can grow the quality of who you are." *Chronopolis*' fragile attempt to materialize time might be one small direction for performative architecture's mediated future dance between the thickets of computation and the physical world. For after all, is it not the case that to feel time's passing in the sinew and cavities of the body is to transport the inhabitants of such an architecture back into the world of the living, moving us from a cloud of data to a cloud of experience?