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Alternative Histories: the Creative Application of VR in Developing an Architectural Critique

Abstract

The idea of the creative fake (not forgery) in architecture parallels the ideas of creative faking in other disciplines such as art and design. The idea developed here is to use the vehicle of the virtual world as a device for creative thinking through mature 'what-if?' scenarios. This paper explores the potential for virtual architectural environments to be developed in such a way that they can be used in the critical appraisal and understanding of architecture.

Resumo

A noção de "cópia criativa" (não falsificação) em arquitetura é análoga à mesma noção em outras disciplinas de arte e design. A idéia aqui desenvolvida aqui é de usar o veículo do mundo virtual como um mecanismo para criação através de cenários especulativos do tipo "e se?". Este trabalho explora o potencial para ambientes arquitetônicos virtuais desenvolvidos de tal forma que possam ser usados na análise crítica e compreensão da arquitetura.

Introduction



figure 1: a photomontage

The technique of digital photomontage has become well established in architecture. In this technique a view of a computer model of a building, saved in digital format, is merged with a digital photograph or scanned image of the intended site of the building. This method has found application in the case of new proposals for a site, or for the recreation of destroyed or unbuilt architectural projects; and it is clear that the nature of the digital representation in such cases fundamentally affects our perception (Mitchell, 1992; Brown and Nahab 1996). But the technique is a static one and based on two dimensional images, and over the past five years or so more computing capacity and better software has meant that we can contemplate the use of interactive three dimensional VR techniques to advance the systems for architectural design (Campbell, 1995): (figure 1).

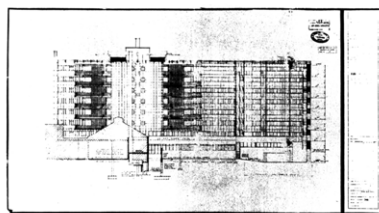


figure 2: original elevational drawing

This paper explores the idea of using digital/VR techniques for more than simply visualising what once was, or might be desired. It takes the idea that what can be produced digitally can form the basis for more involved architectural critiques. A specific illustrative example is presented to indicate the potential avenues of exploitation of the approach. The basis of the approach is that different scenarios (not simply scenes) can be recreated digitally as a way of suggesting alternative versions of the truth, or alternative chains of development had the circumstances changed from those that prevailed. This then allows certain lines of argument to be supported: it can be used to augment critical theories of architecture (Brown and Simpson, 1997).

Put simply what is being proposed is constructive faking: constructive from the point of view that the creation of a faked set of events allows different lines of arguments and critique to be constructed. Jones (1992) notes that the study of fakes should be embraced, but should be made with "a greater awareness of the contingent and culturally conditioned nature of the distinctions made and the criteria applied". The fake here does not refer to the copy, which is more correctly referred to as the forgery (Capaldi, 1979) in this context. Instead it refers to the idea that has been developed in the fields of art and logic where the idea of alternative truths are used to foster richer debates.

An example



figure 3: the 3d model

A significant architectural practice, Connell, Ward and Lucas, active in Britain in the 1930s, is the focus for this illustrative investigation (Thistlewood and Heeley, 2000). Through the use of virtual recreation of what never existed a scenario can be created in which the question can be about whether the practice deserves a more prominent place in the History of Modern Movement in England can be explored. The effect of their potentially very potent influence on British and International architecture can be contemplated.

Some of the critical reviews of the work in question have so far have been disparaging, perhaps because it was often misunderstood and misinterpreted. The abandonment of what could be the practice's largest and most ambitious project, the Lord's Court, dating from around 1929, may to some extent, have contributed to this misconception. This scheme is therefore, ideal, as a vehicle for illustrating the idea of using virtual environments

not merely to recreate what once was, but also to develop more involved arguments. It was building that was started but was stopped at ground level (or so it was thought) because of wartime restrictions. It was never actually completed.

The proposition

In practical terms the ideas being promoted in this paper are illustrated with a particular example, based initially on creating a virtual model. This model then acts as the core tool for historical and theoretical evaluation. The broad question that this illustrative study tries to address is ‘Should the practice of Connell, Ward and Lucas be given a more prominent place in the History of Modern Movement in England had their work been more properly credited?’

The source information

The source data in terms of drawings and information on projects prior to Lord’s Court were provided by Heeley (1995). The data was not complete and was difficult to trace. A typical original drawing is shown in figure 2.

The digital representation



figure 4: a fake contemporary photograph.

In terms of computed representation the technique is very orthodox; AutoCAD and 3DStudio were used to generate the two and three-dimensional representations; see figures 3 and 1.

Since the drawings were in a poor condition and information was incomplete some interpretation and extrapolation from other works by the same architects had to take place to take place. In terms of the architectural scholar this is where the interest starts to arise. First the model shows that the building was actually completed to first floor level before construction stopped, and not to foundation level as originally thought. Then there are other matters. What colour should the building be? A sepia photograph can be created from the digital data to show how it might have been recorded (figure 4) but Connell Ward and Lucas used very strident colours in their other buildings: sugar pink with royal blue, chocolate brown and lemon yellow. Unlike contemporary buildings this one would have challenged the convention of restrained use of colour. We can postulate what reaction would such a prominent building in such a particular location adjacent to Lords Cricket ground have drawn from architectural critics? Pink buildings were just not cricket.

The postulated history and parallel debate



figure 5: a postulated review in an Architects Journal of 1929

The different digital representations can now be used to develop an imagined architectural lineage and associated critical debate. In figure 5 a report on the new Lords Court building in an issue of the Architects Journal in 1929 is faked. This gives the opportunity to review and comment on the building that might have been in a contemporary context. (figure 5)

Because the building is likely to have been very contentious it is then imagined that a group of prominent architects who were interested in a more restrained and socially responsible (in their eyes) type of housing for the people would have made their objections well known. This idea leads to a faked letter in the Architectural Review in 1930; see figure 6.

In this way a debate set in the political, economic, cultural and architectural context of the time has to be invented. This requires some understanding of the relevant issues and context, and as such is a good and salutary exercise to run through. It creates an interesting framework for an architectural argument to be pursued through (Rashidi, 1998). In the line of fake histories that the imagined building is taken through it is assumed that by the 1950s the building is in need of refurbishment. The model and images derived from the model are thus updated and a review of the building which, it has been suggested, has been refurbished as a hotel, now appears in a faked issue of the Architectural Record; see figure 7.

The history of the building is imagined in a series of contemporary contexts in this way. In its most recently invented reworking the building becomes the base for a new cricket academy at Lords. As before the news of this event is faked (figure 8) and the report is created in the style of an issue of Building Design in 1998.

What conclusions can we draw?



figure 6: a fake letter of objection to the building – Architectural Review 1930.

The virtual recreation and associated work allows us to address the specific questions ‘what might have been?’ and ‘what impacts would it have had?’ Had Connell’s work been better appreciated, perhaps he might have carried on to practice and design more buildings in Britain. This would have set a higher standard for high rise development, providing more alternatives to the weaker features of Modernism. As a result, this could have changed the public perception of high rise living making it more acceptable and popular. According to Heeley (1995) it would have been a powerful influence that might have set in train a move ‘away from the economic and social manipulation represented by the high-rise developments of the 1950s and 60s that are now discredited’.

Following the virtual recreation it becomes interesting and possible to compare Lord’s Court with what was considered a major triumph for modern architecture in England, Highpoint. Had Lord’s Court been completed, it would certainly have challenged and perhaps surpassed the position and reputation of Highpoint designed by Lubetkin and Tecton. Lord’s Court might also have changed public perception of concrete as brutal and cheap material. Here, Connell has proven that this highly versatile material could also be suitable for luxury accommodations and we can detect in the Lords Court project specific moves towards postmodern thinking.

More generally, if the idea of the fake is developed it presents an interesting and engaging way of developing an architectural critique. The emphasis of the work described here is to go beyond the interesting recreation of the visual aspects of the architecture and to investigate the parallel influences on architectural criticism. It is possible, then, for students and theoreticians to exploit virtual environments technology, using them to foster creative debate generated by deliberately and thoughtfully faked virtual histories.

But there is, of course, the (intriguing?) possibility that I have simply made all of this up.

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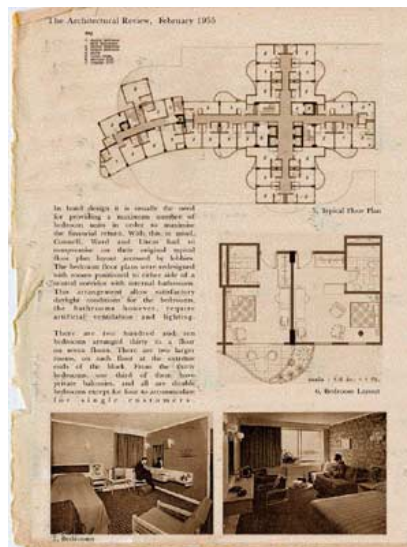


figure 7: report of the refurbishment reported in the 1950s



figure 8: the most recent reworking as a cricket academy in 1998