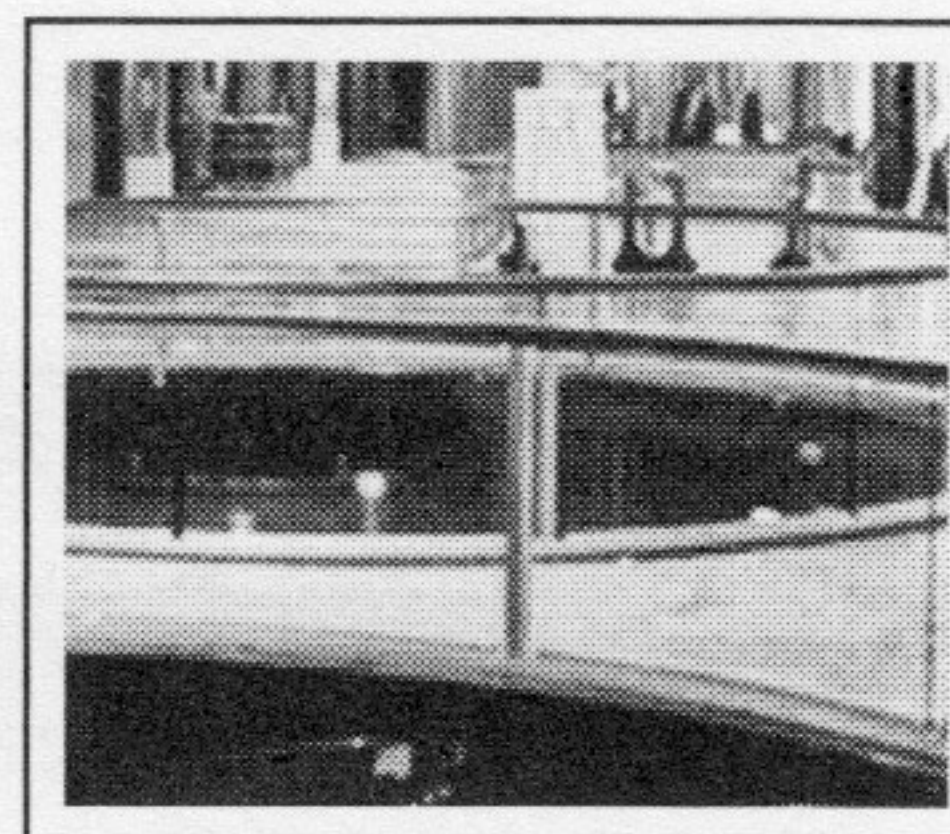# AR² View

ART AUGMENTED ON YOUR MOBILE DEVICE

Activating Space: Augmented Reality and Postmodernism

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In 1984, Frederic Jameson famously wrote of postmodern architecture in his analysis of the Bonaventure Hotel. The postmodern hotel, he argues, "aspires to be a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city; to this new total space, meanwhile, corresponds a new collective practice, a new mode in which individuals move and congregate."[1] Writing before the age of ubiquitous computing, Jameson imagined the social world of this new postmodern space as a kind of "hypercrowd," in which people operate as if in an extension of the urban environment, a double of the surrounding city. [2]Likewise, the conception for the exhibition AR²View proposes the space of the Hilton Hotel in New York City as a place of congregation, of movement and encounters. The exhibition coheres around the idea of the hotel as "a system of generic meeting spaces and temporarily social and personal places," and asks artists to respond, using Augmented Reality interfaces, to the particular site, both as an architectural and as a social construction.[3]

Augmented Reality, briefly, can be defined as a technology that deploys electronic systems within the physical world in order to affect or mediate the experience of that world. The "augmentation" of reality is performed by overlaying computationally generated information, whether graphic, sonic, or textual, onto the physical world, often using the interface of a mobile personal computing device, such as a tablet or cellphone. Users survey a scene before them using the camera view of an enabled device, which responds to geolocative triggers, such as GPS coordinates, generating a virtually modeled "object" that hovers in the foreground of the screen.

The theme of AR²View calls into question the paradigm, proposed by Jameson, of the postmodern architectural and social space configured by the Bonaventure Hotel. The projects in this exhibition prompt the question of how postmodern spaces can be renegotiated under contemporary technological conditions, specifically the imposition of virtual objects in real spaces, viewed through a screen of an enabled mobile device. The exhibition reveals the extent to which the intervention of a technology such as AR alters the way space is navigated, the way people in space interact with one another, and the way the virtual augmentations can work against disorientation and disengagement. The projects contained within the exhibition explore how AR technology amplifies or disrupts the postmodern situation described, but not endorsed, by Jameson. In what follows, Augmented Reality will be brought into dialog with the paradigm of the postmodern, and its social and political potential will be shown to contrast with the apolitical stance of the postmodern.

The Bonaventure Hotel, according to Jameson, performs as an extension of urban space. In Jameson's distinction between Modernist and Postmodernist architectural constructions, the Modernist building becomes a monument to utopia, a structure that sets apart the activities within the building from those taking place in the
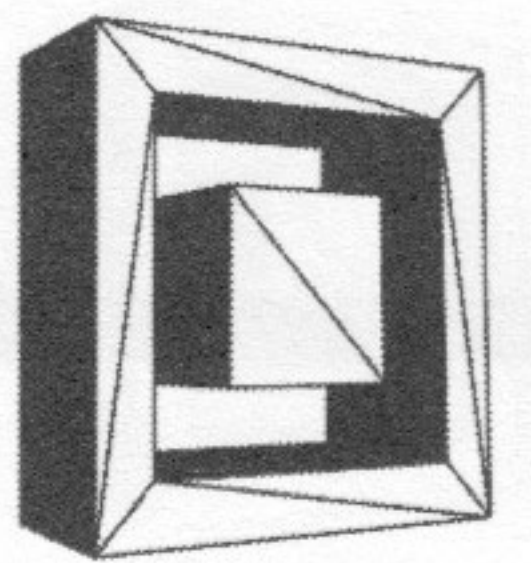
surrounding urban environment. The postmodern building, by contrast, refuses to demarcate itself from its surroundings, instead integrating itself into the rhythms and passages of the city that envelops it. For Jameson, LeCorbusier's modernist construction "radically separates the new Utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric which it thereby explicitly repudiates."[4] "The [exemplarily postmodern] Bonaventure, however, is content to 'let the fallen city fabric continue to be in its being' (to parody Heidegger)."[5] Whereas complete virtual environments set themselves apart from an existing environment, AR elements superimpose themselves on a real spatial fabric, bringing to light unthought or unspoken dimensions of that space. Augmented Reality projects, then, resist a Modernist utopia, a territory set apart from the social and political complexity of the world, instead integrating themselves within an existing environment in a way that forces the user to consider what a given space represents, how it is normatively used, and how it might be "detourned" or repurposed to pursue specific goals. AR projects do not support the disengagement of the postmodern, but they operate within an idiom of extension and amplification, as does postmodern architecture, rather than supporting the exclusion and separation of Modernist architecture or virtual reality.

Whereas the location of the annual CAA conference might provoke a sense of disorientation, the conference itself can be seen to mirror the paradigm of the polis passed down from Plato. In an age of digital communication, the conference sustains an older model of collaborative communication. Calls, proposals, organizations of panels, meetings, and exhibitions, are all conducted in electronic space, but toward an ultimate end of face-to-face meeting and dialog. The postmodern city, in contrast, is a politically disengaged space of accidental, fleeting encounters, run-ins with passers-by, shop windows, traffic; it is not a space of prolonged collaboration or dialog. The conference revives an ancient model of a political and social democratic utopia, and in this sense conflicts with the fragmented, decentralized experience of postmodern space. Modernist structures, in Jameson's account, attempt to build a coherent, rationalized spatial experience, an experience engineered and directed by, for example, the grand entrance. Modernist buildings encourage the formation of social groups through the creation of common spaces, even creating a sense of commonality in individual living spaces by reproducing architectural features uniformly between dwellings. Unlike the Modernist habitation, the Bonaventure has no clearly demarcated entryways or porticos, creating an unresolved, labyrinthine system that promotes disorientation, destabilization, and more aimless movement through the hotel's interior.

Rachel Clarke actuates this disoriented mode of perambulation and interaction in her project "Nowhere." Her vision of the hotel conference space reveals the disconnection and potential alienation of the site, showing how the architecture itself works contrary to the utopian mode of collaboration and face-to-face interaction ideally catalyzed within the social world of the conference. The postmodern space of the hotel creates friction in this ideal social model, confronting the viewer with a dazzling labyrinthine "hyper-space, where one is required to walk through seemingly endless long wide corridors, go up and down in brightly-lit glass elevators and escalators, and through tunnels and by-passes to yet more rooms and halls of connected activities and events."[6] The conference space mimics the simultaneous sense of connection and fragmentation evoked by the network, its tunnels and by-passes leading to nodes of intersection and interaction, interspersed with stretches of anonymity and

redirection.

The question remains, then, how the imposition of AR artifacts within the space of the hotel will affect the social and architectural experience of that particular location. AR technology, first of all, will necessarily provoke alterations in the spatial experience of a particular location through its supplementary function. Whereas in Virtual Reality environments, "a virtual world replaces the real world, in Augmented Reality a virtual world supplements the real world with additional information."[7] Virtual worlds, similarly to Modernist architecture as described by Jameson, repudiate real space, configuring a complete, computationally rendered environment that can supplant an existing location. Just as postmodern architecture provides an extension of urban space rather than a separate spatial and social zone, AR artifacts do not demarcate a virtual realm from a real-spatial realm. They do not insist upon transporting the user into another dimension of experience separate from the fabric of everyday life and everyday space. Instead, Augmented Reality overlays virtual objects on real ones, heightening the user's awareness of particular aspects of that space.

For example, John Craig Freeman's "Orators, Rostrums, and Propaganda Stands" "re-imagine[s] the museum plaza in the function of the public square" by making visible black and white animations of various contemporary public uprisings, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street.[8] The anonymous social space of the hotel, transformed into a space of dialog during the conference, is further shifted into a space of active rebellion and resistance by the project. Smooth glass escalators and elegant foyers, locations of brief encounters and conversation, will be disrupted by political action. Like Freeman's other projects, such as "Water Wars," which superimposes makeshift shantytowns on elegant city streets, warning of the possibility of environmental refugee camps as water is increasingly privatized by major corporations, "Orators, Rostrums, and Propaganda Stands" works against complacency, mobilizing virtual objects towards an active and critical re-evaluation of spaces that might seem reassuringly stable or monolithic. Urban space, or the interior architecture of the hotel, is transformed in AR into a site of political upheaval, accentuating the user's awareness that no space is neutral and that every space contains the possibility for confrontation and dialog.

As in the case of "Orators, Rostrums, and Propaganda Stands," Augmented Reality not only operates through defamiliarization and a heightening of socio-political awareness, but through a strategy of narrativizing otherwise "mute" spaces. Whereas the postmodernist building as described by Jameson might be said to resist narrative through strategies of indirection and fragmentation, the augmented environment explicitly orients itself to the formation of narratives. This formation of narrative might be thought to be a modernist or utopian strategy, one that shores up the instabilities of postmodernist spatial wanderings. Narrative, in other words, might be thought to imply an arc, with exposition, climax, and denouement, a neat package that rejects loose ends, inscrutability, or absurdity. Often, however, augmented environments function more as provocations toward possible narratives, rather than as presentations of definitive storylines. They allow the user to generate the narrative, through the imposition of graphical or textual elements on an existing spatial configuration. Freeman's projects create specifically political narratives, prompting users of equipped mobile devices to re-envision particular sites under