

Thematic Sessions

100_2: THE EARLY CONSOLIDATION OF A DIGITAL DESIGN PARADIGM
1988–1997: Ambitions and Apprehensions of a “Digital Revolution”

In Narcissus’ Gaze: Ethical Choices in a Time of Revolution

The Master said, He who sets to work on a different strand destroys the whole fabric.
—Confucius, *Analects* II. 16¹

Thinking back to perspectives formed within the threshold of “Digital Revolution”, apprehension about looming ethical questions were not at the forefront of this writer’s experience. In 1992, being an avid tool user in the fine arts and construction fields, digital technology seemed to offer only exciting new potential. Practically however, personal exposure to digital technology prior to this time included little more than that obtained within a brief stint as an army paratrooper, cultivating an orientation at times more from the “technologically enhanced nightmares” side of this topic.² The character of this perspective on digital technology, while containing elements of global scope, was also that of being a new student in architecture, informed by myriad preconceptions about design practice and education, many of which would soon undergo irrevocable transformation.

Nearly two decades later, now from the perspective of a professional architect and that of a developing design educator, one primary aspect of design thought, initiated in the crucible of design school, in the midst of “revolution”, continues to reveal new insights. In few other areas do the effects of this unfolding aspect seem more critical than within the subject of digital design, explored in this essay as an ethical orientation of distinct consequence.

Much in the way that an observable perturbation of one transiting planet can help astronomers to detect the presence of others unseen, observation of this subtle and unfolding aspect of digital design seems best revealed obliquely, via intersecting discussion of ethics and aesthetics in architecture. Since this indirect mode of investigation is narrowly focused, the risk of sending readers on an irritating sidetrack seems minimal in the worst case; a brief indulgence is requested.

Re-orientation

The orientation of this essay begins with the notion that digital design, as an architectural pursuit, from the beginning of the “Revolution”, has been subject to critical discourse on the essential nature of architecture in general. To go a step further, one might also say that when digital technology was developing as an often uncomfortable new pairing with traditional modes of design, it was bound ultimately to align with the trajectory of all other technological innovations adopted in the same pursuit. From this orientation, a critical line of questioning on the subject of digital design might begin with: What is architecture? Then: What is the scope of architecture, and is it limited to any particular level or mode of technology? If the scope resides within the boundary of human experience, then from this orientation, *all* modes of architectural expression will

eventually transform as human experience transforms. The constant in this equation is the realization that architecture always remains a function of, and in service to the human experience of space and belonging. Any digital design revolution therefore, is a reflection of transformation in human experience and not an uncomfortable imposition on some sacred state of the art. Such a notion may seem simplistic, but is a necessary orientation for further discussion.

This orientation then theoretically precludes the notion that any of the ambitions and apprehensions experienced in conjunction with such a revolution would cause *digital-design* to take a divergent course from *architecture*; yet, from a certain perspective it seems to have done just that. And herein lays the realization and re-orientation for this author: The direction of digital technology in architecture is bound ultimately to come under review of the same basic ethical and aesthetic investigations as all other aspects of the architectural field. There may have been a time for a wild-west approach to figuring out the fit between new digital technology and architecture; however, now seems the time to own our evolving identity as expansive technological beings. The field of architecture transforms, not into something unrecognizable, but rather into a product of exchange between what was and what is becoming. We may be entering the threshold of a distinct digital-architectural non-duality.

“Hot ashes for trees?”³

The implications for such an orientation directly affect architectural education, research and practice today. The question of how architecture relates to the human experience of place and belonging has never seemed so timely from the post/intra-revolution perspective of this author. The proposition to look back into a time of revolution, now accepting as true a non-dualistic identity between architecture and digital technology, allows for the inclusion of the most important issues from that time in an investigation of how architecture and digital technology fit today. And so, any apprehension then, from this author’s perspective, resides not in rightly-oriented, human-centric or even unbridled ambition, but in a particular and insidious trajectory of ethical misdirection which serves as a vexing bane to progressive development in architecture today.⁴

To discuss this ethical trajectory, let it first be clear that this is not an effort to define that which is *un*-ethical, but rather to illustrate a mistake; a less than equitable trade of expansive evolutionary development for temporally self-referential stagnation. The mistake is not in itself unethical, but rather often what seems to be the product of an unsatiated penchant for technological self stimulation. In other words, it is a mistake of allowing technology to become the reason for its own existence; the solution searching for a problem. This is a mistake of architects, the designers of nothing less than the cosmic threshold of humanity, allowing digital technology, our evolving identity, to be separated from architecture as a parallel, even divergent pursuit.

Taking liberty with a literary illustration of the problem, the subtlety of this mistake may be reflected in the terrible dilemma of Narcissus: Was it true beauty, the essential living reflection of an ever evolving cosmos, which Narcissus saw in the pool? Or was it a perpetual, infinitely stable form of self-referential symmetry that locked Narcissus in his own gaze, resulting ultimately in death? This re-positing of a

mythologically derived moral question is to suggest the outcome may have been a choice of orientation, and that perhaps a *Nemesis* of contemporary design is the lure of a design ethic which is inherently self referential. Regarding digital design tools, this suggestion becomes obvious in an absurd way when one looks at the products of a purely technical course in digital modeling; perhaps one which might be available through a school of manufacturing technology. Looking for design ethic, beyond attention to detail, in such a course *is* the absurdity; it is a technical, how-to, tool using course. When this absence of design ethic is allowed in architectural pursuit, a subtle and potentially terminal problem develops. This problem and its origin, in a revolutionary time of choice between dualistic divergence and evolving identity, is the primary subject of this essay.

An uncanny cosmic reflection

Speculation on this view of Narcissus' dilemma serves as a useful introduction to another critical architectural issue of the time period: the uncanny. A particular aspect of this subject may help reveal the transforming nature of our practice, our identity as digitally *aware* beings, and what may be lost in an unfortunate trade if we are not careful.

As it happened, the time of "Digital Revolution" was also the time in which Anthony Vidler compiled and released his highly influential writings on the "Architectural uncanny".⁵ Referencing the memory of attending design school at the University of Florida in this time, the emergence of this book in conjunction with already focused discourse on ethics and aesthetics, served to cultivate an expanded receptivity to new ideas about design process. The core of this *ethics* problem in digital technology can be described indirectly as the same category of problem we engage regarding *aesthetics* in the earliest moments of design education; revealed ultimately as an ethical choice.

For this educator, one important use of Vidler's works on the uncanny in the development of design curriculum has been in addressing the orientation of new students to the perception and awareness of others. On this level, the line of thinking is engaged to counter a general predilection for self referential imagery of architecture. This also introduces a line of inquiry which prioritizes human experience, the psychological phenomenon of constructing awareness, as the primary context in all investigations of spatial interaction. In this curriculum, both early and advanced design studios investigate exchange and transformation between systems; material, spatial, scalar, organizational, cultural, social, temporal and more, across superimposed and intertwining boundaries, seeking out trajectories of interaction. These trajectories unfold through analytical operations which are distinct and entirely familiar on one level, and on another, tend to reveal inherently *not* the forms and images we may have expected. Within this analytical mode, we may begin to speculate on the origin of familiarity and belonging.

One direction of our studies has dealt with the nature of that aspect of beauty which possesses as part of its inherent identity its own opposite in some measure. The term "beauty" in this sense, is not the common notion of strictly personal liking of an image, but rather that aspect of a thing or situation which evokes a clear sense of the familiar, human belonging, in the sense of the uncanny. Such a condition, we have found, will tend to possess a trajectory of scale and organizational interaction which is not inherently stable; that is to say the familiar and un-familiar aspects tend to be unequal. Further, we explore the possibility that this condition may contain some quality of

recognizable, familiar, early-life trajectories recorded as the psychological residue of a first experience of self/other threshold common in various forms to all human beings. A particular and direct reading of Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay on the uncanny,⁶ referenced many times by Vidler, suggests a very subtle but critical parallel to the replacement problem of Narcissus.⁷ The value taken here from Freud's writing is not necessarily found in his comparative descriptions of meaning for the uncanny, but rather the subtle tracing of a particular relationship. Freud clearly develops a distinction between a miss-categorized or mistakenly exchanged alternate variation of the term *heimlich* (homely or familiar), and a condition where the term is rightly understood to have the inherent and simultaneous quality of its opposite within the same moment.⁸

The parallel of interest between this line of thought and our new digital threshold is twofold: First, a more obvious comparison may be made between the desired process of identity exchange as described by Freud, and the observation of the insidious nature of unfortunate exchange which is made when misguided ethics allow the pursuit of technology for its own sake. Second, and more speculatively, this subtle condition of both the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* within a single moment, seems to have the potential to trace back unconscious longing in human beings to our earliest experiences. This longing, we speculate, may be one for re-connection to a trajectory matching that of our first true psychological construction of *place* (Place) in the world. Following this second line of thought, the Place may not be, as Gaston Bachelard suggests, found within the first experience of home;⁹ but rather within the first conscious threshold moment of transition from one state to another. We may speculate further that this moment could be one which happens between first awareness in the womb, possibly a self referential experience where no distinction is made between mother and self, and the next level of awareness, Bachelard's "first world".¹⁰ So, the trajectory of this transition *is* the condition we may begin to propose as the first Place, and not necessarily one side or the other of this first habitable threshold.

In characterizing the nature of our present condition, post "digital revolution", this author's perspective aligns our current experience with that of a first threshold moment, the first Place, between what we were and what we would become. We now may choose our orientation to be that of being in the threshold of a new, simultaneously *heimlich* and *unheimlich* technological identity; the only survivable choice of orientation for Narcissus.

Speculations of this nature are very much for the purpose of initiating investigation and certainly not definitive. Within such speculation however, we might say that a designer today is fundamentally different than the same designer of twenty years past, if only for the awareness of expanded capability that digital technology has generated. This unfolding potential seems to require more vigilant watch over our ethics in the process of engaging and directing pursuits in digital design. Design schools, all of which are arguably *digital* (because all students and instructors now exist within a new consciousness of technological awareness), must both engage digital design, and make it an inherent identity of design. We are coming to the point where we no more need to label a curriculum "digital" than we now might absurdly label a curriculum "human". We are, and are becoming, our own transformed, doubled identity, now inhabiting a new threshold of revolution; true cosmic beauty, fearlessly reflected in our work.

¹ Confucius, *Analects* II. 16. quoted in C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1947) 7. In *The Abolition of Man*, beginning with a subtle, ethically derived, semantic misdirection observed in an elementary English text, Lewis addresses an insidious and parallel misdirection of far greater scope. Here, an otherwise productive social ethic is observed to be replaced for a very similar looking though inherently destructive ethic, threatening catastrophic consequences for humanity. Confucius' cautionary instruction is taken to reference the potential for subtle but dissonant shifts in the trajectory of a system to multiply to a terminal rather than productive resolution.

² Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, "100th Annual Meeting, Thematic Sessions, 100_2: The Early Consolidation of a Digital Design Paradigm | 1988–1997: Ambitions and Apprehensions of a 'Digital Revolution'", ¶ 2, https://www.acsa-arch.org/conferences/100_callforpapers.aspx (accessed September 1, 2005). Introduction to the topic includes the phrase: "digitally enhanced nightmares", in reference to public images and video of digital technology in use during the 1990 Gulf War.

³ Pink Floyd, *Wish You Were Here*, from LP release "Wish You Were Here", Harvest / EMI, released September, 1975. Lyrics from this song reference detachment and social withdrawal associated with symptoms of schizophrenia which afflicted a band member, for whom the lyrics were written. The parallel between this and a theme of this essay is the identification of an unwanted perceptual substitution so grotesque it can only be accepted through some afflictive psychological inversion of its inherent qualities.

⁴ Drowning in Culture, "The Queen Is Dead, Review: SCI-Arc Thesis", posted September 14, 2009 by Admin. <http://drowninginculture.com/archives/45> (accessed September 1, 2005). After attending the annual 2009 SCI-Arc thesis presentations, SCI-Arc graduate and site founder/administrator John Southern posted a scathing critique of this private institution, well known for its forward looking design ethic, calling for director Eric Owen Moss to step down. The suggestion seems to be that a once productive ethical orientation has been replaced with an inadequate substitute. Excerpt: "*None of the projects I saw seemed to have any grasp of reality beyond a vapid obsession with ornament and form. It was as if every student had become an expert at Maya or Rhino and had used the software merely as a form of intellectual tweaking, rather than as a methodological catalyst used to drive the conceptual and social goals of the project...*" A noteworthy, although not universally welcome, development is the recent announcement that Eric Owen Moss will receive the 2011 Jencks Award for "contributions to the theory and practice of architecture". <http://www.architecture.com/WhatsOn/Talks/Events/2011/Autumn/JencksAward2011EricOwenMoss.aspx> (accessed September 1, 2005).

⁵ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992)

⁶ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, Hogarth Press, 1955), 17:217-52. Quotations and page references taken from Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*: Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Albert Dickson. Vol. 14 of the Penguin Freud Library. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 335-376.

⁷ Although Freud's writing on the uncanny is referenced here, his psychoanalytical work on Narcissism is not directly related to this reference of Narcissus. Narcissus, as a literary and mythological figure, is referenced here as an analogical vehicle of the authors own construction, pointing to the subtleties of a more concrete idea about the ethics of exchange. In this analogy, Narcissus has been tricked into accepting a false interpretation of his vision, when another orientation might have made all the difference.

⁸ Freud, "The Uncanny", p. 343-44

⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*: Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, Beacon Press, 1994) p.7 "...the house...is body and soul. It is the human beings first world."

¹⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p.7