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UMI
CAPTURING THE CITY / SPATIALIZING THE CAPTURED
AN ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY OF HONG KONG

by
Lucia Cheung

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Albert Pope, Thesis Director
Gus Sessions Wortham Professor, School of Architecture

Brian Huberman, Thesis Reader
Associate Professor of Art and Art History

Lars Lerup, Thesis Reader
Dean, Albert K. & Harry K. Smith Professor, School of Architecture

Houston, Texas
April, 1999
The incredible density and the ever-moving round-the-clock public transport constitute the vibrant character of Hong Kong. In this totally consumptive city where the turnover rate is unbelievably fast, people have no time and no room to think. Compactness is no longer a function of lack of space but has become a system of its own.

Static representation is no longer sufficient to document a city like HK in which every single parameter is animatable.

Various computer animation techniques were explored to spatialize the raw footage of the city. These exercises sought to capture the ambiance rather than the physical constructs of the city. “Studios” generated in computer were stacked to form a tower in which the experiences and events of the city were encapsulated. The fixity and objectness of the tower (architecture) is effaced through visually animating the surfaces. Tower was also the metaphor of the compactness of the city.
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Various studios are built by enclosing space with simple surfaces. Some of these surfaces are texture mapped with the captured footage of the city. These studios attempt to encapsulate the urban experiences rather than to replicate the physical construct of the city.

Stacking, zoning and stacking, are two basic urban planning principles of compactness. Studios are vertically stacked to depict the compactness of the city. The stacking also forms the narrative thread of the animation.
The thesis in many ways is my baggage towards Hong Kong, the city to where I belong. Being raised in a city under the shadow that it was going to expire, the happenings in the territory had tremendous effect on my cultural inscriptions which permeated in this project.

Triggered by the handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese Government, the concern of the future of the city, and the conscious seeking of cultural identity have aroused countless debates throughout the territory. The public generally takes a rather pessimistic view on the return of HK to her motherland, considering as a marker, marking the loss of freedom, and the decline of economy. These impressions are further intensified by the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 from since, the Chinese Government has been drastically losing credibility of ensuing human right. However, when one thinks about if the Colonial Government had ever offered us the right to elect our governor, one may question whether we were just numb or political inert to our colonial past. No doubt the handover is definitely a critical marker in the history of the city, but I would rather take it positively. One cannot deny it is precisely this critical moment that initiated the awakening of her citizens. People have been playing more active roles on the policy making of the society, they ask more from the government, they are more sensitive to the economical and social issues. They have been trying to make their own voices through various media to inform the city. These “events” or “acts” are not necessarily being against the government and in a way I see them as various channels for communication, between the citizens and the government, between the bodies and the city, and also among the bodies themselves.
My thesis was grounded on the exploration of various media to represent the ephemeral and dynamic quality of a city. An attempt was made to attack the static nature and objectness of architecture. Video shooting was my first try as the data-collecting process. Sources from books, magazines and the media had added a lot of richness to my project.

My video capture had put a lot of emphasis on the density, speed and the ad-hoc quality of the city. The framing and the angle of the shooting was subjective in a way, but without sacrificing the realness of the conditions. The ambiance, rather than the physical constructs, was the main focus of the raw footage. An effort had also made to capture the most mundane, the most insignificant and the almost numb everyday phenomena of the city.

"In Hong Kong the link between speed and mass is taking on increasingly spectacular forms, with intensive flows of people generating still more voluminous programmes and masses. Here capital and movement are concentrated in point masses with the magnitude of a small city."

"Among the various situationist methods is the dérèze (literally: 'drifting'), a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. The dérèze entails playful constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll. In a dérèze one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there."
During the process of editing the raw footage, I became to notice the spatial relations and tensions among the various movie clips. Clips with certain relations were grouped and 3D computer models were built to explore the spatial dynamics of the clips. The Gestalt of the movie group reconstituted the atmosphere of the city that I could never achieved through straight editing of my footage. I named each of these units as “studio”. These studios could be self-contained or related to each other and each of them was built in a way to convey a special theme. A recontextualization of the footage was resulted through the active juxtaposing, displacing, mis-fitting of movie and audio clips. Studios were stacked to form a “tower” to depict the compactness of the city. Through the stacking, transition spaces were generated and taken as an advantage to construct the narrative thread of the documentary.

“Hong Kong’s skyscraper centre is a compact Ville Radieuse with space between the point blocks squeezed out. Zoning of a kind exists but it is a vertical one. Vertical zoning and stacking are the two basic urban planning principles of compactness. Every building is a neighbourhood in itself, shops at the bottom, a three-storey restaurant reachable only by lift above them, and on top of that flats with a school somewhere in between. All activities are deliberately pressed as closely as possible next to, into an don top of one another.”

“This serenity hides the apotheosis of the Skyscraper as instrument of the Culture of Congestion… in the Downtown Athletic Club the Skyscraper is used as a Constructivist Social Condenser, a machine to generate and intensify desirable forms of human intercourse. …In the Downtown Athletic Club each ‘plan’ is an abstract composition of activities that describes, on each of the synthetic platforms, a different performance that is only a fragment of the larger spectacle of the Metropolis.”
Through the use of computer modeling software, individual frames of the movie clips were texture mapped onto the surfaces generated in the computer environment. There existed two degrees of movement in this process, the movement of images in the clip itself, and the displacement of clip across the surface. External to the texture, there were the displacement of the surface and its form change, and also the movement of the camera (viewer) relative to the space. Timing and framing played an very important role in this animation process.

These exercises were directed to encapsulate the urban experiences of the city by juxtaposing different movie clips or stills. An attempt was also made to dematerialize architecture (the tower) with moving images to efface the fixity and objectness of architecture.

architecture can now, via film, become truly immaterial. Contours fade, forms become fluid. The relationship between human beings and architecture is no longer polar or dialectical, but immersive. You can quite literally be swallowed up in it. It concerns new role for architecture in a pervasive visual culture where the mass media have less and less need of the enclosure of the box (TV, cinema). The audio-visual media continue the find new outlets in the city. For the static nature of architecture, bound up as it is with concepts like foundations, durability, inertia and tradition, this has serious implications. Mobilization, which has long had society in its grip, is now impinging upon the material environment. When stationary objects are visually animated they lose their objectness, their fixity....
The logic of the computer softwares I used in this project had a lot of input in my conceptualization of space making. The effects appeared in my movie were mostly inspired by the animation capacity of the modeling software, Alias WaveFront. The animatability of the different parameters of shaders, forms of the objects, and environment was explored in this project. Even the way the computer model structured was determined by the animation capacity and hierarchy of the different components of the model.

The rhythm and the coherence of the documentary was acquired not only through the architecture of the tower, but also the editing, the architecture of move. With computer, digital editing encourages more exponential attempts in manipulating and mixing of the video footage, animation clips, stills and even the audio tracks. Digital editing allows special filters, altering of duration and scale, superimposing and juxtaposing, and the application of motion on individual clips and stills. Transitions filters also had a great effect on the stitching of the clips. All these cannot be possibly achieved through analogue editing. As a matter of fact, editing can totally change the ambiance of the animation clips.

"When bricks become pixels, the tectonics of architecture become informational. City planning becomes data structure design. ..... Everything changes, but architecture remains."

".....the computer, by analogy with the wooden perspective machines of the Renaissance, as 'a tool for structuring visibility'. It is a machine that, depending on the software used, can register reality in the form of video images or other data input, but that is equally capable of simulating, controlling, projecting and broadcasting reality. The computer is an instrument for visualizing things that cannot be seen with a traditional camera or the naked eye."
thesis as performance

no need for text
capturing the city
section of the city
the vestibule for the experience;

out of curiosity, out of insecurity;
the emergence of the folding;
the strangely familiar; seeing the
no subtext;

the by-pass of the overwhelmed, the

unbearable:
the twists and turns that negotiate with the urban fabric; the one-way automatic pedestrian-carmer, downward in mornings and upward at the rest of days; the hillside escalator has revitalized the decaying old urban centre; and has induced different "scenarios" along the whole length;
the city that expired

to gather, to magnify and
to reflect: a collective establishment:
to enjoy the advantage of being
free to engage or not engaging at all:
The Hong Kong Government is not responsible in any way for the people of Hong Kong and the future of PRC.
To really appreciate architecture, you may even need to commit a murder.

Architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses as much as by the enclosure of its walls. Murder in the Street differs from Murder in the Cathedral in the same way as love in the street differs from the Street of Love. Radically.
to get back on your feet.
the temporary landing;

the bridging and the awaiting;
the compromise and the seeking of
the public good;
the return to the motherland; the end
of the colonization;
the uncertainty and shadow of
the "expiration";
the friction; the bombardment; the chances of encountering;
the vehicles: the carers, the various degree of privacy;
the crossings: when the pedestrians meet the vehicles;
the mass transit: or the MTR;  
the extracted: the physical extraction, the relative
velocity that experienced with respect to its surroundings;
the inducing agent: the spacious and
fully air-conditioned concourses have induced various "underground"
pedestrian activities; the once dispersed enclaves along the MTR spines have
begun to merge to form a continuous fabric;
the neon reflection; the city's double;
the relative; the encounter of the static and the
dynamic;
the fluidity; the still image acquires a dynamic form;
the fixity; the movement of object is substituted by the
moving images;
the around-the-clock: the city that supposedly never sleeps;
the self-proclaimed, Tseng Tso-choi, the “King of Kowloon” claimed that the British took the New Territories land that belonged to his ancestors, and wanted it back; he has been defacing HK with Chinese calligraphy for more than 40 years; his “emperor characters” on walls, street posts and electricity boxes tell you the stories about his royal ancestor, and you may come across the “Fuck the Queen” slogans;
the mass media: the various channels that keep the general public informed: different bodies have different agendas towards their operations, whether fair or biased, they are definitely instrumental;

the freedom of speech: one freedom that we enjoyed under the colonial government: several radical journals and newspaper had evolved before the handover, aimed at testing the elastic limit of the "freedom" and setting out precedents for the "50-year politically unchanged" era after the handover;

the self-censorship: certain bodies have imposed a self-censorship on their operations as not to be black-listed by...
The annual June 4th procession in HK in the memory of the sacrificed in 89 Tiananmen Square (1997)

The dragon dance farewell to the People’s Liberation Army by the public on China border 1997
The demonstration in HK as the support for the students in Tiananmen Square, June 1989

The signing of Sino-British Joint Declaration, Beijing 1987

The welcome to the People's Liberation Army by the general public on the HK border 1997

The Provisional Legislative Council members in the handover ceremony 1997.
the annual spectacle: the annual

firework display on the second day of the lunar new year:

in addition to the annual:

the worth-celebrating 0:
on the skywalks: the pedestrian highways;
the observation platforms: the framing devices: can accommodate more than you expected;
avove the highways: the two systems that are always perpendicular to each other:
the new airport: on a totally reclaimed piece of land; the west shift of urban centre; the reconfiguration of the Kowloon area is anticipated as the building height limitation is substituted by the plot-ratio control.

the new infrastructure: in conjunction with the Port and Airport Development project; the network that serves the territory and the South China;

the antiseptic image: to conceal the chaotic character; in favour of the modern and consumer glamour;
means to an end:

the revelation of the tower within the tower;

through the passage of vehicle;

through the passage of pedestrian.


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