



Construction scaffolding for the Warner Bros. flagship store renovation at 5th Avenue and 57th Street, Manhattan, 1997

The Synthetic City: Preface

It is difficult to pinpoint the beginnings of the break in the evolution of the open-ended, spontaneously built American city, the urban realm as a product of small, incremental real estate decisions, a continually evolving, uncontrolled form within the gridiron whose lack of coordination between the parts generated the ultimate statement of American individualism and free enterprise. And it is equally hard to define exactly when the “synthetic” city— the city as a product of large-scale real estate ventures by corporate giants, special districts which coordinate and direct development within prescribed guidelines, controlled effects shaped by popular culture and new technologies, and the framing and commodification of virtually all commercial and cultural production—ultimately took its place. While not a single turning point, there are a series of threshold events that mark the way:

Perhaps it goes back as far as the production of the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893, the so-called great “White City,” where an idealized vision of the European city could be instantly transplanted into the frontier, serving to inspire City Beautiful transformations in cities throughout America for the next four decades. The same spirit informs much of Manhattan’s 5th Avenue along Central Park, when in 1923 the street was given 150’ zoning limits that virtually overnight transformed itself from a series of individual private mansions to a series of apartment towers of almost identical height which maximized the value of Central Park’s edge, orchestrating one of the most magnificent urban boundaries ever achieved.¹ It could also describe the advent of Urban Renewal in the 1940’s and 50’s, when cities solved problems of decay through wholesale destruction, condemning and scraping away the old to be replaced by entirely new physical orders, resulting in almost instant redevelopment. Such total change was unprecedented (except for times of war), in which all the parts could be completely remade, arranged and controlled by a single entity, and imposed without compromise or constraints.

The notorious blowing up of Pruitt Igoe in 1977 shows that we could continue to maintain control and reverse the building process in a single instant, totally fracturing time and place, if need be. During the same

period, the rapid exodus of industries and the middle class from cities throughout the U.S. in the 1950's and 60's left vast open wounds of obsolete or vacant property, ready and waiting for redevelopment. This erosion extended to the city's historic artifacts, highlighted by the tearing down of New York's Penn Station in 1964 and the threat of losing Grand Central Station in 1975. These two events helped to initiate the preservation movement and the generation of historic districts in cities throughout the U.S., which polarized the city into pockets of controlled, unchanging tableau within dynamic fields of uncoordinated, anything-goes commercial development, surrounded by remaining parcels of underdeveloped and vacant property



Quincy Market, Boston

The ultimate threshold of the city's transformation into the synthetic is marked by the explosion of communication technologies and global economics in the 1980's and 90's, which facilitated the growth of corporations to reach national, and even international markets, and the further use media and mass marketing techniques to fuel demand and expansion. Thus came the resuscitation of the city (the ultimate marketplace) by the private sector (with municipal government extending their blessing along the sidelines), which initiates a series of renewal projects (Boston's Quincy Markets, New York's South Street Seaport, Battery Park City, Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Denver's LoDo, and so many others) that recycles the existing city into synthetic enclaves that encompass larger areas, and begin to merge with their surroundings. And waiting in the wings is Walt Disney and other entertainment conglomerates, who develop a universal demand for their products, helping to sponsor a proliferating

popular culture which significantly influences the program and image of the contemporary scene in accordance with their own private agenda.



42nd Street, Times Square

Perhaps the one manifestation of the shift into the synthetic city which summarizes many of the forces and events described above was the demise of 42nd Street, New York, which evolves from a center of film and theatrical entertainment in the 1920's to a seedy, but intense and diverse mix of film, restaurants, pornography, and shopping activities from the 1950's-70's, finally collapsing into a empty wasteland, and then, in a kind of urban somersault, is reinvented into a spectacle of a different kind. Through the intervention of municipal initiatives in the mid-1980's, with the intention of setting in motion a complete transformation of the sites around One Times Square, critical parcels were condemned, tenants moved, and the rest of the street atrophied. When the recession hit in the early 1990's, it remained that way for close to a decade.

In a period of only months, the institution of one of the mythic streets in American came to a complete end; the evolution of the city simply stopped, and in its place stood an eerie, artificial void in the heart of the city. Then all of a sudden, the economy came back—but there were no existing activities, program (or even useable real estate) to take advantage of it! Enter in the Walt Disney Corporation to lead the way in renovating the New Amsterdam, probably best of the old theaters, and the race was on. Other large developers moved in, proposing new hotels, film complexes, theme restaurants, “entertainment walks,” a Madame Toussaud museum, and the street was quickly filled up with the developer's collected vision of what the

tourist wants or expects in the way of popular entertainment (forgetting for the moment that it happens to be in New York City).

Rather than a gradual transformation over years, a giant “quick change” has been enacted (in the best burlesque tradition!)—the whole street has reemerged from behind the curtain in only an “instant” in terms of the history of the city. It is completely new, contains the latest entertainment technology and experiences, but could be almost anywhere. The old city simply vanished, and what will take its place, as in so many cases of urban recycling, a newly framed, an artificial construct strangely distant, and performing on very different terms from the original.

We have developed a new kind of “synthetic” city whose forms and structure differs significantly from the historic city. The term synthetic is partially a description of the artificial and the false re-presentation of built and natural forms, i.e., the familiar manifestations of the “theme park,”² the influence of mass media and popular culture, the city as theater³, global commodification, the phenomenon of suburbanization, etc. which has been extensively documented previously, and will only will be only given limited attention here. More useful (and holding richer potential) is this book’s interest in the synthetic as a description of *control*, the recognition and formation of prescribed relationships and desired effects through development mechanisms and formal techniques, the possibility of the city at various scales to be an instrument of cultural transformation through a series of specifically designed acts.

While it may be argued that this degree of intervention might not always be so desirable (or in the free, capitalist city, even possible), and goes against the nature of the American speculative enterprise that resulted in the rich, open-ended diversity and variety within the neutral gridiron— I would suggest that this form of “just let me do what I want in my site, who cares about what’s around it” autonomy is long gone (did it ever exist?), and like it or not, the city is actually a product of not-so-innocent public and private initiatives generated out of a variety of broader cultural, market and political forces. These forces, based largely in mass marketing, global economies, new communication technologies, and mass entertainment media have had the greatest influence in reshaping the urban landscape since the shift of industrial

production, expanding suburbanization and urban renewal initiatives of the 1950's and 60's. The result is today's ubiquitous city of commodity with its common characteristics and desires: the same entertainment and cultural districts, stores, large-box retail, historic districts, sports stadiums, theme restaurants, advertisements, convention centers, and office support structure to run it all; a product of a corporate and municipal powers' narrow agenda, defining a more and more limited range of aspirations.

Does it all have to end that way? I would suggest that the notion of the synthetic can be far more inclusive, and also redefine the city as a physical text expressing a more comprehensive range of cultural and political ideals based on deeper aspirations and content than the saturation marketing of the latest film or clothing line. The term synthetic also implies that also through the possibilities of control, the city can evolve on *our* terms based upon a more complex and inclusive agenda, and help generate as diverse a scene as the complexities of our diverse population, desires, economies, forms of entertainment, artistic expression and patterns of living.

This book will attempt a broad description of the nature and manifestations of the synthetic, and present possibilities for the physical design and transformation of the city. The premise is that the current manifestations of the synthetic, i.e., conformity through simulation, mass marketing and commodification is only a limited description of the current urban scene, and through strategies of design (interventions that sometimes reconfirm, and at other times, subvert), the synthetic actually holds the potential for a new level of formal complexity, narrative content, and a realignment between the culture of democracy and the form of the city.

While the subject matter of the synthetic is based in a critical examination of many aspects of contemporary culture, interest is focused on the physical design implications that can guide the city's transformation. The actual manifestation of the synthetic in terms of the nature of transforming theory into built form is achieved through architecture, and the formation of urban space. Both architecture and the city are assumed to be inextricably related as a singular investigation in which one continually informs the other; both particularize space, give it meaning, are conditioned by the needs and

desires of the inhabitant, and at the same help define the social spaces and patterns that evolve culture. Architecture performs not only as the building block of the city, but is understood as an accumulator and transmitter of contextual information, entering into a continual physical, temporal, and symbolic dialogue with its surroundings. The intent is to understand the city as an interactive armature which requires strategies that generate relationships at all scales, in which architecture is denied its privileged autonomy as object within its site, and is rather understood as the critical component of a larger dialogue that asserts formal implications and meanings both internally and externally to its context and city beyond. As such, the book should be particularly useful to architectural and urban design students and faculty as a theoretical tool to be applied into a studio context, with the intent of expanding the range of theoretical concerns and possibilities for architectural and urban design exploration.

A number of the insights in the book come through an understanding of parallel developments in the evolution of modern art, which is not typical in architectural and urban criticism, except in rare occasions.⁴ If the critical issue is the ability to manipulate effects, surely there is no other source as critical as other explorations in painting, sculpture and film, in which artificial control is absolutely necessary for the work to manifest itself, apart from other external causes or demands. Of particular interest are the investigations in Minimal, Conceptual and Performance art during the 1960's-70's which constitutes a huge resource of aesthetic theory that has evolved fundamental perceptual and formal paradigms over the last four decades, and has influenced our understanding, if not the actual development of architecture and the city during the same period. Artists such as Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Sherrie Levine and others are discussed, who provide a critical framework for discussing recent projects, and initiating proposals for new kinds of urban programs and structures.

The concept of the synthetic has also been shaped by fundamental, critical sources that provide certain underpinnings for the material, including the essential work on the nature of the simulation by Baudrillard and Eco⁵ positions set forth by the Situationists as outlined by Dubord⁶ and others, and Walter Benjamin's seminal classic essay on

“The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”⁷ The other source material is based in the use of New York City as a laboratory for critical investigation, both based on a close observation of the city over a lifetime, the fact that New York is in many ways both a microcosm and intensification of many of the forces that shape the nature of the synthetic, and more clearly illustrates conditions that affect, and can be applied to other cities throughout the country, and increasingly, throughout the world.

The material is covered in a series of chapters which delve into a range of issues illustrating the problem of the synthetic:

“The Synthetic City: Excursions into the Real-Not Real” defines the terms of the synthetic, and poses the phenomenon of the real-not real, that which is neither the authentic fragments of actual historic settings (which being “framed” within city have been disconnected from their temporal and spatial context), nor the inauthentic replications of recent “theme park” manifestations, but rather, ambiguous, hybrid forms and programs, a fusion of both the original and the reconstructed, that now begin to constitute new urban development.

“Orchestrating the Synthetic: Ordering Principles and Techniques” describes strategies for reconstituting the city through different possibilities of control discovered through earlier theoretical investigations, focused mainly in the writings of Robert Smithson. Strategies explored include: the interchanging/mixing of sites in terms of morphological and spatial combinations; subtractive processes and the formation of voids in the city that can be filled with new programs and formal possibilities; and, additive techniques that can layer new forms and activity in existing contexts to achieve a “dialectical” city.

“The Cinematic City” explores the nature of film and its tendency to disrupt the real through discontinuities of time and space, as well as dispersing perception through the multi-directional gaze of the camera. A different form of city is explored based on a similar fracturing of hierarchy and consistency, in which the sequencing of events no longer responds to the norms of cohesion, thematic relationship, or cultural integration, let alone stylistic/aesthetic consistency. The synthetic is discovered through the nature of additive structures in the city, such as billboards and scaffolding, as well as urban voids, made up by gaps,

obstructions, places of rupture, and alternate forms of programming, materiality and language.

“Lines of Resistance in the Post-Industrial City” confronts prevalent characteristics of the synthetic city in terms of commodification and conformist values, and calls for an “open” city that is unpredictable, unstable, and changing, manifesting qualities of difference, unique identities, and the authenticity of experience. Counter-strategies of subversion, or the intentional contamination of existing conditions will be explored based on: “Transcultural Traffic,” or the influx of new cultures; “The Conflicted Site,” with built-in disturbances and peculiarities that resists normal development; “Critical Implants” of new structures that redefine the site; “Palimpsest Constructions” that recognizes indexical references offering clues for future transformation; “Urban Scaffolding,” or the articulation of changing, layered frameworks that undermine/destabilize existing styles and building types; and “Hybrids/Counter-Narratives,” the formation of new programmatic organizations based on divergent, mixed combinations of activity.

“The Private City” suggests that urbanism, as a public experience, has been challenged, if not surpassed by a pervasive sense of the “private,” which re-frames the context of the synthetic, and offers another paradigm of vastly different social and physical characteristics. The synthetic city expresses many manifestations of this emerging private culture, and as reflected in many of its sources found throughout the arts during the 1950’s, also contains the stimulus for a more complex, inclusive urban experience and patterns of development.

“The Marginal Site: Interventions Within the Voided Context” searches for an alternative context for instigating synthetic investigations which are located in marginal, post-industrial sites surrounding the urban core that are found in cities throughout the world. These sites, now largely devoid of significant activity or building fabric, are freed from contextual responsibilities, functional/aesthetic constraints, and the restrictions of site boundaries and permanent edifices, yet unlike the modernist *tabula rasa*, are filled with historical/conceptual information and material presence. Design strategies are presented based on the formation of the modern ruin,

mapping systems, subtractive processes, programmatic hybrids, and the articulation of new narratives, both actual, and fictive.

“The City as Index” offers another approach towards conveying meaning as an avenue of resistance to the synthetic city’s deepening confusion of messages through media contamination and proliferation of symbolic signs. The notion of index, or signs which refer to a directed, physical causal relationships to perceived circumstances and human activity, is introduced as a basis for investigating the city which can overcome critical problems of representation, and suggests the continuing need to resolve the city in objective terms based in the authenticity of experience and earlier events as a determinant of its transformation and development.

“Action Space” discusses the changing nature of urban space as represented by recently built parks and plazas in Barcelona, Paris, and New York, projects which define a corrective rupture with the precepts of 19th century space. There are two sources for this new type of urban space which have received little critical attention; one can be traced to the realization of the synthetic “spectacle,” or programmed event as a generator of modern space; the other is derived from the influences of investigations which were part of the Minimal and Performance art movements of the 1960’s and 70’s. Both are examples of the power of the synthetic in terms of theatrical experience to shape behavior and perception, and as the same time allow the individual to be empowered to explore a broader range of activities and possibilities for personal action.

“Chance Encounters: Public Connections in the City of Private Parts” suggests that within the modern city’s inherent qualities of functional/physical dissociation, and random, non-deterministic patterns of development lies another possibility for synthetic control and order through the chance perceptual encounters between related forms and events. While not planned, such associations, once discovered, become part of a cognitive map of defined relationships and connections which can constitute another form of ordering structure layered over the ubiquitous neutrality of streets and blocks that define the urban grid.

Taken together, the series of essays that comprise this book reinforce a heightening criticism of the contemporary city, which

through the ever more powerful and smothering forces of technology, global economics and entertainment industries, continually re-frames and decontextualizes place and experience, generating a deepening chasm between the city's form and its ability to establish a comprehensive text of its diverse culture and aspirations. But it is also suggested that because of these same technologies and global forces, offering the capability of virtually instant redefinition and transformation, there has never been a greater potential to overcome the obsolete and restrictive conventions of current development and assert a greater magnitude of control through a new series of urban design initiatives and devices. It is only a question of a more inclusive range of participants and desires beyond the small group of corporate powers with their extremely limited agenda, being able to assert *their* equally powerful alternative messages, using perhaps, some of the techniques and strategies as presented in this book. At that point, the city will truly become an unlimited field of contending ideologies, as expressed through an open-ended yet highly controlled battle of form and messages. It won't be as clean, or as focused as Disney's 42nd Street; it won't be all fun and entertaining; the frames of demarcation won't be at all as clear, and it is bound to be more than a little messy and confused; but it will also be as complex and rich as life itself (which has always been the promise of the city), and we will want to experience it.

This book could not have been written without long exposure to a series of mentors and colleagues who have offered insight, criticism and support, including John Shaw, Charles Pearman, John Reys, Fred Koetter and Colin Rowe from my years at Cornell; also, my good friends and colleagues Liviu Dimitriu, Lee Jablin, and especially Aydin Erimez, with whom I have enjoyed a continued dialogue on the evolution of New York. Recognition must be given to Rosalind Krauss, who first exposed me to the nature of the index in art, which I transferred to the field of architecture and the city. Also to Christine Boyer (while Chair of Planning at Pratt Institute) who shared her thoughts with me on the New York Seaport, Battery Park City, and other manifestations of contemporary urban tableau, and Bill Menking, also a faculty at Pratt, who has discussed his views on the development of 42nd Street . As all of the essays were written while a faculty and

Chair of the Graduate Architecture and Urban Design programs at Pratt Institute, I have gained continued inspiration from faculty colleagues and students. Recognition is certainly due to the administration of Pratt Institute, which generously provided a Sabbatical and other time off to complete this book. Finally I would like to give thanks to my wife Showkat, who gave constant support and reinforcement, of which without, this book, and my continuing career, would not have been possible.

Notes:

1. Robert Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930*, (New York: Rizzoli Publications, 1987), pp. 384-388.

2. See Michael Sorkin, Ed., *Variations On A Theme Park*, (New York: Hill and Wang Publishers, 1992).

3. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory* (Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1994) presents a definitive history of the city as theater, inclusive of mass/popular entertainments, and more recent manifestations of preservation districts as historic tableau.

4. One of the few critics to interrelate developments in art (particularly Cubism), architecture and the city is Colin Rowe. See Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1977) and Koetter and Rowe, *Collage City* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1978).

5. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext, 1983), Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1986)..

6. Jean Dubord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

7. Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).