



The Empire State Building, New York

The Synthetic City: Excursions Into the Real-Not Real

As you walk out of the subway at Union Square, it stands before you, familiar, yet strange. The Empire State Building, Metropolitan Life (and just outside of the view, the Chrysler Building) all ablaze with light in the night sky. The buildings are all landmarks, known to all of us, and need little emphasis to dominate our attention. But here they are, highlighted, marked, designated, separated from their normal context, the way quotation marks set off a word or phrase. Buildings—in quotation marks! The intense light has shifted their material reality into something more ephemeral. They are still the same buildings we know—but made up to be more noticed, to look more like the landmark than its normal image would suggest—a better (but actual) version of the Empire State Building made to “look like” the Empire State Building! And we do notice them, enjoy them, marvel over them—and we are conscious that they exist, that they are different, and we are conscious that we are staring at them (“how radiant!, how beautiful they are!”) as if the buildings are now seen for the very first time, and glow with a sense of life that we never before knew existed. The buildings are still of this world, but also set apart from this world. They are real—but at the same time, somehow not real—at least in the way that we have always known them.

One of the fundamental shifts in the 20th century has been the challenge to authenticity—the replacement of the real, based in direct observation i.e., the actual thing—with products and events that are shifted into the realm of representation, fantasy, and the artificial. We are able to observe through lenses that magnify the invisible, expose the hidden, deepen the color, freeze the moving, crop the continuous, and conceal the extraneous. The possibilities of mechanical reproduction take the unique and make it ubiquitous, removing all vestiges of the object’s originality, materiality, and aura.¹ Art, literature, theater, film and other arts analyze and transform experience and objects through a wide variety of devices based in pictorial illusion, abstraction, fragmentation, superimposition, montage, deconstruction, and other techniques which remove us further from the temporal and spatial settings of real experience. The entertainment and advertising industries exert a powerful influence on culture, which have given us

new worlds, dreams, and fantasies that offer compelling alternatives to the existing traditions, codes, and places of our daily lives.

Nowhere has the artificial, or the synthetic had a more powerful influence than in the development and quality of the American city. During the last decade of the century, the proliferation of popular culture, mass media, and the power of global corporations to blanket the world with the same images, same products, same stores has become the great equalizing force that covers the urban landscape everywhere, although in several different guises. On the one hand, it exists in isolation in its pure, open manifestation—the Disneylands, Universal Studios and other entertainment theme parks, and even the shopping mall have programmed mass entertainment experiences to be enjoyed by everyone. More insidiously, the theme park has emerged within the central city to serve as mixed commercial/restaurant entertainment districts, sometimes unabashedly exposed in completely new settings (as in the recent transformation of 42nd Street, New York). More typically, entertainment centers are encased in historic “warehouse” districts (Larimer Square, Denver; Pioneer Square, Seattle; Sundance Square, Fort Worth; Quincy Market, Boston; the Gaslight District in San Diego; the Warehouse Districts in Dallas, Cleveland, Portland, and many others). And finally, we have seen the “mall” of cities everywhere (including New York, the one city thought to be impervious to suburbanization, as seen by the transformation of Soho, 57th Street, 6th Avenue, Chelsea Piers and the Seaport).² More recently, the packaging of cultural—entertainment districts, including museums, sports complexes, and convention centers (again so much the better if connected with “history”) has emerged as the new formula for pumping life into the central city, as observed by the redevelopment of Pittsburg, Denver, Baltimore, Hartford, Cleveland, St. Paul, Philadelphia, Seattle and many other cities.

In many of the above cases there was an attempt to incorporate the authentic, original structures of the city as part of the package through the creation of “historic districts” or some similar form of special district designation designed to legislate preservation. In the most restrictive cases, virtually no change to the historic fabric is allowed, any proposed alterations are closely monitored, and buildings are often restored to replicate their original state as accurately as possible.

Despite good intentions, however, the result typically falls short from the desired goal of “true” authenticity. As soon as even the most sensitive design intervention (or even simple intent prior to actual reconstruction) takes place, a part of the city has been artificially “cropped” from its surroundings and time has been made to stop, bypassing all references to ongoing cultural and physical changes as the rest of the surrounding city evolves. This framing of the normally continuous and changing into a frozen moment of time turns the authentic into an kind of parody, oddly mute and introverted, finally ending up being a museum, or representation of itself rather than a place allowed to be deformed and contaminated by the dynamics of cultural, social and economic change. The paradox is that when historic settings are not so insulated within static and controlled districts and are more freely open to the demands of the marketplace, they become “recycled and revalued territories... turned into gentrified, historicized, commodified, and privatized landscapes,” or once again, the entertainment theme park.³ In either case, protected or non-protected, the historic fabric of the city becomes separated into a displaced, artificial condition, a form of tableau configured and framed without a context—or, within a context that no longer matters.

The commodification of the city based in mass media, simulacra and the inauthentic that has been generated out of a perhaps less than fortuitous mix of the proliferation of popular culture, new communication technologies and global capitalist expansion has been well-documented⁴, although indignation and incredulity quickly recedes into history as the phenomenon of the unique and new more and more becomes the ubiquitous and commonplace. And clearly, none of it could have come about unless both city officials and developers became knowing collaborators in the enterprise—the collapse of center cities throughout the U.S. in the 1970’s and 80’s was a dying patient needing resuscitation by any means available, and surely, the power of the media to re-shape culture over the same period generated a public that accepted—no—*demand*ed it. The revitalization of the city’s core, with the proliferation of the interchangeable theme stores, entertainment districts, stadia and the rest may have indeed done wonders for the tax base, and cleaned up areas of blight and decay, but has also come at a heavy price, in terms of the loss of much in the way

of identity, the unique and range of experience, or, as expressed by the architect Louis Kahn, the city being the place “where a young boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life.”⁵

The point of all this is that there has always existed an edge (sometimes blurred, but still an edge) between the world of the real/authentic and the fictive/artificial; life, or the real world on the one side, and fantasy, entertainment and art on the other. Even in the case of the long history of theatrical forms and entertainment, the experience, while fused within the ongoing activity within the city was always bounded, or contained by a defining wall, or, an interruption in the flow of events⁶, a critical polar division that articulates the world of fantasy/illusion from that of reality. This notion of understanding experience or culture in terms of polar oppositions has been a recurring method of inquiry throughout the 20th century, i.e., the high vs. low culture, reality vs. fantasy, signifier vs. signified, public vs. private, figure vs. ground, the static vs. the changing etc., and as been fundamental to our comprehension of the world around us.

It is becoming clear, however, at the end of the 20th century, that oppositional strategies are limited to explain more ambiguous investigations in art, science, linguistics and literature; thus the emergence of deconstruction, chaos, chance and other theories that deal with the fuzzy zones of hybrid, or inbetween phenomena. The computer, with the technology of documentation through digitization has enabled all visual phenomena to be “leveled out” into a common, interactive field, allowing all forms and media to interact and be combined. As the shaping of popular culture and the arts continues to evolve, the edges between the real and fictive are starting to disappear, and we begin to see projects that exploit the use of media, incorporate methods of scenographic sequencing, superimposition, fragmentation, replication, and other techniques that blur the edges of temporal, programmatic and spatial boundaries.

This blurring of the polar city, based neither in a recovery of the real, or purely aligned to the world of fantasy, mark the beginning of a newly merged, hybrid phenomenon, which I will call the “real-not real.”⁷ This is a realization that we can no longer clearly differentiate the real/authentic and the fictive/ artificial—as the city has evolved and

recycled, neither condition can be found anymore in its pure pedigree form. Facets of the city that started with, or have some remaining vestiges of the authentic have unavoidably been contaminated by spatial/physical and programmatic changes, or have been re-contextualized through new symbolic, or cultural associations. Thus, we find that authentic historic buildings have been converted into a McDonalds, and we're not sure anymore if the building is "original," or a fabrication in keeping with its contents; or, the point that an arch is no longer structural, but has become the McDonald's symbol. Conversely, imposed fantasies, media creations, invented narratives, and artificial tableau have to accommodate circumstantial necessities of performance (accommodate life, be entered, heated, stand up, be circulated through) or have become so ingrained for so long that they have become totally absorbed into our understanding of the world, and thus, now acquire an identity of being "real" (according to their own terms). So while McDonald's was once a disturbance in the midst of the "real" city around it, it surely no longer exerts such a disturbance (even in its current location in the Piazza della Rotunda in Rome!), and is a part of the scene as much as anything else; the same goes for Mickey Mouse, the IBM logo, the Old West, or any number of other invented narratives or symbols that easily slip into a mythic status. As the differences between the real and not-real, or the authentic and inauthentic become smaller and smaller, and harder to decipher, they also begin to matter less and less, and possible even become besides the point. What were once polar opposites finally collapse, or blur into the singularity of the real-not real, cultural debris that can be used in any number of ways, and whose meaning shifts through changing association and contexts.

Through the increasing power of communication technologies, tendencies towards dissimulation throughout current cultural production and the dominance of private control, we are rapidly evolving a new kind of "synthetic" city which is taking the place of the traditional city as we knew it. The notion of the synthetic here is less a description of the inauthentic or simulacra, as referred to above, but more a realization that the city is a manufactured product that is controlled and artificially manipulated far beyond that which was previously possible, resulting in a interactive and mixed field of information and space. Such control is exerted through global private

corporations of an unprecedented scale and power which use the city as a form of communication device or mechanism for generating capital, and further remove it from its former ability to serve as a text of cultural transformation. As the later stages of capitalism evolve, greater competition generates expansion and continued growth necessary for the private sector's prosperity and survival, now requiring ever greater techniques of control and domination, thus causing an increased prevalence of the synthetic as a dominant force in the city's evolution. As the synthetic expands, what was "natural" space becomes smaller, more contracted, and a less perceivable experience—and once lost, can never return.⁸ Along a similar vein, Rem Koolhaas has referred to the continuing disappearance of history— or, the perceived reduction of a past whose influence becomes smaller, overwhelmed by the sweeping transformations of the present, as newer, and better ideas, products, make history recede future from consciousness.⁹

Rather than lamenting such a condition, the magnitude of societal/technological changes insure that such a reconstitution of urbanism will continue whether we like it or not, which suggests that we attempt to understand its characteristics, and possibly its implications, if one has any hope to impact the future city. It is further suggested that the nature of the synthetic, rather than being a prescription for demise, can actually offer new and richer possibilities for evolving the city, many of which are based in the characteristics of other disciplines, such as art and film, that use means of artificial control to radically restructure spatial and temporal organization. The result could be the possibility of a city with far greater breadth and diversity, one that promotes multiple, inconsistent, composite arrangements over the singular, consistent articulation of programs and spaces, and one which might significantly relate to the circumstances of today's rapidly changing, and highly fragmented culture. What is needed to achieve such a resolution between culture and form is the discovery of new strategies of transformation and synthesis, resulting in the combination and interaction of urban forms and programs that are potentially richer, more complex, and diverse than currently possible.

The New City

The nature of the synthetic city differs significantly from earlier forms of urbanism, which can be described by the following comparisons:

If the traditional city is based on a clear delineation of polar conditions i.e., public vs. private, the manmade vs. natural, dwelling vs. the workplace, the historical vs. the new, and, the real vs. the fictive—the synthetic city is composed of somewhat fuzzier situations where the characteristics of urban events and places becomes mixed, redefined, and blurred into new hybrid combinations (or contradictions), i.e., the public-private, live-work, the reconstituted past, the constructed landscape, and, the real-not real.

If the traditional city grows and transforms by the conventional trajectory of evolution based in collective needs and aspirations, i.e., the formation of community, trade, exchange of information, advancement learning and the arts, etc. all of which unfolds through a larger *public*, or cultural dimension—the synthetic city doesn't so much evolve but rather is controlled, orchestrated, and manipulated mainly through *private* entities (sometimes of global dimension) whose motives tend to be focused, circumstantial, and based on self-interest and expansion within a prevailing capitalist environment.

If the traditional (typically American) city is based on the open, comprehensive, non-hierarchical grid, minimizing locational preference and site specificity, as new development (typically single buildings) is arbitrarily and incrementally built on available property, and thus manifests the ultimate independence between architecture and the city¹⁰—the synthetic city also gives little importance to location (anything can be built anywhere), although preference is given toward forming larger groupings of interrelated development to produce articulated enclaves of activities within bounded limits. The goal is to achieve “critical mass” as well as define a self-contained, comprehensive internal order and experience that can exist independently from its surroundings, suggesting that architecture (as a generator of larger urban fragments) and the city become inextricably intertwined.

If the traditional city is based on a pre-existing typology of conventions, or preferred forms associated with articulated functions

that have been tested over time—the synthetic city requires new combinations of functions unrelated to existing typologies, in which building form in itself is less important than the accommodation of specified (and often complex and varied) programmatic demands that require unique solutions.

If the traditional city is based on institutions which are relatively permanent and stable, and well as gradual transitions, and sequences between events that develop larger urban orders and organic interrelationships between the parts—the synthetic city is made up of programs which may quickly change (for nothing lasts very long), resulting in abrupt shifts and disjunction between parts that might as well be completely disassociated, or sometimes rub up against each other in sometimes odd, unpleasant, interesting, or enlightening ways.

The essence of the synthetic city is the ability to control—any particular development, building or event can be made to happen anywhere, and take on any form, given the power and desire of private interests to simply make it happen. The commodification of all production within the city, supported by the underlying agenda of expanding profit, fueled by media's ability to shape mass desire for the same products, the same entertainment, the same images, packaged in the same forms is not a new phenomenon.¹¹ But what has changed is the degree of its influence—that while once one could discern that there was another reality outside of the world of spectacle and popular culture, we now find that the power of the media and corporate interests to fabricate an alternate world, or reframe and recycle the original context has blanketed virtually every facet of reality, so that in fact there *is* no other reality that can be separated out from the fabrication.¹²

The real and the fictive have collapsed into the real-unreal—there are fragments of history, memories and artifacts based on places, buildings remembered in their original state, but they have become transformed through new intent/agenda, exist within a different context, and ambiguously intersect within an overlay of less authentic sources and forms—and, the differences between the two, if perceivable, make little difference. The real (authentic history, the original source) can no longer be polarized, or placed in a privileged position from the artificial (simulated history, the copy); the replication can often be made

superior to the original, the original is often repaired or refurbished to an extent to look like the replication, or, the passage of time has removed us so far from the source that the precise form or narrative of the original recedes into the distance, so that even the possible manifestation of the original automatically becomes suspect, and is assumed to be distorted from its original state.

All of which begs the question, whether the copy, reinvention, or simulation is any more of a distortion of reality than that of our transformed perception of the original itself. In short, both the authentic and the replication have become blurred to an extent that they become interchangeable, with no longer any obligation (or ability) to differentiate one from the other.¹³ The synthetic has become real—and the real has become synthetic.

All sources, forms, programs, agenda and styles become legitimate in this new urban scene, to be used, mixed and matched depending on the predetermined needs, desires and expectations of those in control, which presumably, are in concert with those who consume the product. The synthetic city becomes a form of machine *to produce effects*, able to be manipulated, controlled and changed at will to perform as required, whenever, and where ever necessary. The question now simply becomes the quality, potency and choice of relationships, which through new forms of urban development, will generate particular kinds of content through forced association (not unlike Benjamin's discussion of the possibilities of film), and provide new opportunities for programmatic and formal relationships that might redefine and enrich the city far beyond what was previously possible.

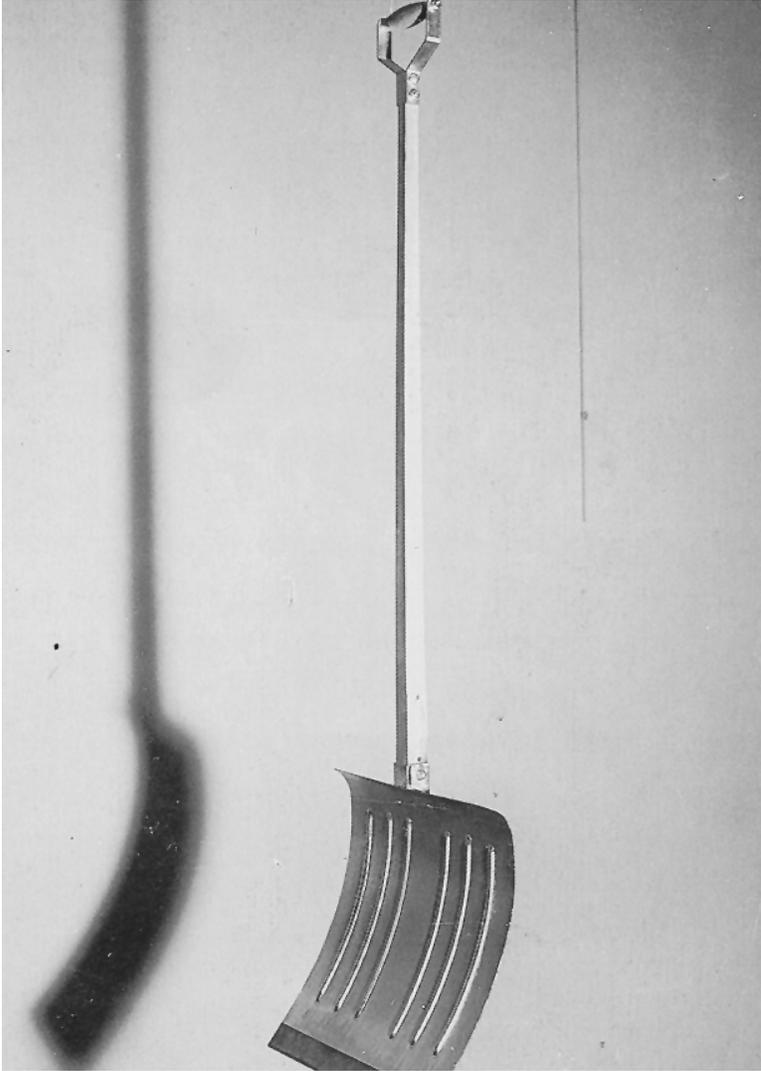
The Real—Not Real: Precedents in Art

The fuzzy blurring of the real and the fictive in architecture and the city must be understood within the larger problem of representation, one of the central problems in art investigated throughout the 20th century, although here restricted to narrowly focus on the nature of transformation vs. appropriation relative to the problem of the real not-real. Even here the territory is rather vast, as such critical movements as Dada, Surrealism and Assemblage from, say, 1915 through the 1950's all deal with problems and processes that are affected by problems of

perception relative to context (gallery vs. the external world); there are, however, several artists who over the last ten -fifteen years have dealt specifically with the problem of appropriation and shed significant light on the real-not real paradox, and deserve our primary attention.

Typically in art processes, actual objects are manipulated (cut, colored, covered, changed in material, folded, reduced, enlarged, etc.) so that the identity of the original object no longer maintains the same form. Or, the object is juxtaposed or recombined with other objects as in assemblage and collage processes, whereby the form and meaning of the object is changed through the influence of its context. In the case of photography, transformation occurs through the problem of mechanical replication, in which the likeness to the image is maintained, but through the camera's ability to temporally and physically remove the likeness from the source of origin, the viewer is shifted into being a passive observer of a unalterable past; photographs become "incitements towards reverie...they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality" and subvert participation in the present.¹⁴ Transformation thus occurs either by: changes performed within the form of the object itself; changes in the object's autonomy through interference caused by other objects; or replacing the object's representation from the natural to the mechanical, respectively.

None of these operations hold, however, when confronted with Duchamp's famous invention of the "Readymades" in 1914, which took familiar items, such as a bottle rack, urinal, or snow shovel, and redefined the object as art merely through its being re-named, and placing it into the gallery, or studio context. In this case, the object has been changed through the artist's intent—yet the object also continues to exist in its original state, thus presenting the viewer with an ambiguous, but clearly defined dual and concurrent states of being. It *is* the snow shovel—and it is *not* the snow shovel—at the same time.



The Readymades opened up radical possibilities for reconsidering the role of existing artifacts in the making of art that has been with us throughout the 20th century, and was an especially important catalyst to the formation of pop art and artists of the 1950's and 60's (Warhol, Johns, Rauchenburg, Dine, Oldenburg, and others) who have worked in the narrow margins between art (the synthetic) and life (the real). Most of the work of this period is still based on the transformation of the object through techniques discussed above, and as opposed to the Readymades, there is no difficulty discerning the changed status of the art object vs. the authenticity of everyday life evolving within its context. In the 1990's however, there are a series of investigations by a variety of artists that blur the characteristics of the actual object based in authenticity vs. some adjustment of the object into the realm of

fabrication, resulting in a condition which rests ambiguously between the two states (which again, owes much to Duchamp). Some of this work further illuminates certain manifestations of the real—not real condition presented above, and should be examined further prior to an investigation of recent developments in architecture and urban development.

There are two types of work currently being undertaken along these lines (although both are dealing with problems of perception of the object): on the one hand, artists are replicating known objects and materials through other forms and materials that resemble the original; on the other are artists who are using photography and digitizing techniques that simulate reality rather than working within earlier limitations of representation. An example of the first case is an artist such as Richard Pettibone, who is known for reproducing, very accurately, the known work of other artists, including Constantin Brancusi and Marcel Duchamp. The objects are authentic, in the sense that they are “originals”—we know the author of the work, taking the form of the material, the crafted fact of the object ascribed to and made by Pettibone—at the same time, they are inauthentic, by virtue of their being copies of similar works by another artist, with sometimes minor variations in scale. They are not reproductions of the object, but a re-making of the object, perhaps as “good” as the original. And if Brancusi never executed the particular object at hand—he “could” have—and if Duchamp could re-make his works over again, why not others? The work is both authentic and real—and inauthentic and not real, at the same time

The work of Sherrie Levine and Robert Gober share similar qualities. Levine has painted canvasses that look like other materials, plywood, for instance, that looks authentic, although we know it is another material painted to look like plywood. Gober has re-made a wide variety of objects, such as cribs, sinks, bathtubs, drains, etc. in different materials that look very much like the original object, but differ in subtle ways. In both cases, rather than an exact replication of the object, or a transformation of the object into something else, the object has been re-made, carrying over part of its original identity in terms of its likeness to something we already know, but also asserting a new identity, having its own authenticity as being *itself*. The question

then to be asked might be, “what in fact constitutes a true identity vs. the representation of something other than the thing



itself?” These works suggest that the same image can generate more than one identity—and that while the “true” identity and the “false” identity share a common image, they also begin to be interchangeable—the one is not any more true than the other, or has any more value than the other—they are simply different (and concurrently, the same).¹⁵

Equally interesting are artists working in photography and computer digitizing techniques, who also question our expectations concerning the assumption of “truth” in the re-presentation of the object. Keith Cottingham digitizes existing historical photographs of real scenes, and then subtly manipulates the true images through the replication or replacement of figures, parts of figures, or changing background fields—certainly not to achieve aesthetic, compositional, or even conceptual interest (in many cases, it doesn’t appear as if *anything* was changed)—but to create an entirely synthetic representation, a fabrication which doesn’t look like a fabrication. Everything in the photograph is actually *false*—it does not, or could not ever exist. This fundamentally challenges our assumptions about photography as a replication of reality. Instead, it becomes as much an invented, artificial image as any other constructed object, but because it is still a photograph, the work sets forth another truth on its own terms as authentic as the original source. And as the original source, or history, is either lost, or recedes into the distance, one cannot, with confidence,

designate the synthetic condition as being false—it cannot be verified except through the artist’s original confirmation.

In a similar vein are photographers who set up and record artificial constructs made to seem real, thus challenging the veracity of the photograph as an index of reality, as well as allow the artificial to be blurred into being perceived as real, i.e., photography’s special ability to turn living beings into things, and things into living beings.¹⁶ Cindy Sherman (one of the innovators of the genre) uses herself as a model of an actress from a film clip, or some historical figure, through the use of make-up and props; the artist has been disguised as someone else, but her common identity in each scene is made to show through, asserting an ambiguity as to whether the photograph is of another person, the artist lurking behind the partial facade, or both. Laurie Simmons takes pictures of small models, puppets, and other toys with proper lighting, framing, etc. to make them seem absolutely alive, or equal participants in the everyday world to their full-size, or human equivalents. The question becomes, “if the model is artificial, and the photography is a replication of a real object captured in real time, does the model remain as a fabrication, or has it become somehow ‘authenticated’ through its photographic documentation?” Sandy Skogund, and other artists invent elaborately surreal, fabricated tableau, which are then photographed. Some of these look very close to actual events, using human models as props, and others are based in wildly fantastic, surreal scenes using made-made models of living forms. Once again, given its historical role as a replication of the world, our assumption is that the photograph presents a “true” event, when of course, the scenes are actually fabrications, and never actually took place. But the photograph completely and accurately documents the fabrication at the time and place it was constructed—it is the *reality* of the fabrication, which is presented as truthfully as possible. Gerhard Richter takes us even further on this fuzzy path, in which he makes paintings that *appear* to be photographs that distort, or blur the real scene, so that what seems to be a photograph *appears* to take on the characteristics of painting (and in fact, is a painting! This layering of camouflage conditions raises the synthetic stakes even further, although the “truth” of the work is equally present, given that the images are of actual, experienced scenes,

and the fact that the painting is an actual, undisguised depiction, rather than representation of reality.

The fact that there are now a large number of artists who are investigating similar perceptual themes is partly the result of larger technological developments in computer communications and media imagery, which has only become prevalent over the last decade, and is reshaping the landscape of art exploration, and other communications media. This work is tightly bounded with other cultural transformations, and is highly influenced by developments in related arts, such as film, television and theater literature, so that the blurring and cross-over of various of media becomes integral to the subject matter as well as the experience. These experiments also serve as a precursor to similar phenomena that are similarly influencing recent developments in architecture and the evolution of the city.

The Synthetic Hybrid

The manifestations of the synthetic city are more varied and complex than simply the emergence of the world of simulation, the virtual, the various manifestations of Disneyland and the theme park (by now a well-trodden territory with evidence of which abounds¹⁷), but rather a more complex hybrid of the real and the virtual which maintains connections to authentic places and forms, but within a reconfigured structure. The condition of the synthetic, or artificial hybrid can be found in the following configurations:

- a. existing buildings or spaces that are adjusted by overlaying new layers of interference (additions, lighting, scaffolding, media information etc.)
- b. re-contextualizing existing places or buildings or even newly constructed setting by framing them within new cognitive meanings, or narrative structures (virtually all urban recycling and renovation projects)
- c. orchestrating within new development mixed hybrids of the authentic and artificial forms
- d. adding new programs and forms on to existing structures while still retaining vestiges of their original program and form.

In all cases, there has occurred a kind of “self-consciousness” of the new status of the building or district—as stated earlier, it has been placed within quotation marks—no longer the original artifact that resides within its earlier historical/cultural text, a self-conscious restatement, or re-presentation of itself, now acquiring a new value as commodity, and a vehicle to support its larger conceptual and scenographic role in remaking the city. The shift into the synthetic hybrid is achieved through the following devices:

1. Media Overlay



The first condition is most commonly found through the recent overlay of advertising information on to existing buildings, where through new technology, giant, digitized reproductions can turn buildings (buses, and virtually any inanimate or moving surface seen by

the public) into giant billboards of products. Facades have been dematerialized into pictorial information, and the building's original architecture that placed it firmly within a temporal dimension has been covered over with a kind of armature, or scaffolding that allows "quick-change" of information whenever the message gets old, and needs to be freshened up. Lighting parts of buildings (the Empire State, mentioned above) or even whole buildings (the G.E. Building, Rockefeller Center) obviously highlights and emphasizes the presence of the original structure, but in a surreal way, whereby the building is removed from its real context, and becomes separated out, made self-important as an icon of itself, a landmark that is in a sense, landmarked once again! In other words, through overt reemphasis, the lighting has dislocated the object from *itself*, from its original reality, and turned it into a kind of fetish object, a representation of itself, rather than the actual thing. These layers of light and advertising have little, or nothing to do with the real activity and programming of space that goes on behind them, where presumably, life, work, learning, recreation goes on as before, irrespective of the masked exterior. The historical separation of interior and exterior is taken to new heights of discontinuity, in which architecture as a spatial vessel for human activity is completely isolated from its external, two-dimensional pictorial message, which in turn is removed from its physical role within the larger urban context.¹⁸

2. Narrative Framing

The second condition has resulted from the re-casting, or institutionalizing of traditional neighborhoods into districts (typically of an authentic, historical character) with newly designated roles, that take them out of the normal, evolutionary continuum into controlled settings with particular agenda, characteristics, histories, content, and expectations. Thus the designated historic district is no longer simply a area of older structures with stylistic integrity and original fabric, but an area which carries the additional role of reminding us that there is in fact a rarefied, precious piece history left vs. the decimation and arbitrary reconstruction of the fabric around it, that we value it, and no matter what, it will never physically change. Of course, the more the place acquires recognition and desirability, the more it becomes

codified, frozen into a form of theatrical tableau, and separated from its authentic past. Not only is the original culture and social structure



that sustained it's form and identity is no longer intact, but its newly acquired legislative status insures its continuing stagnation, irrespective of the transformation of culture, technology, and values that goes on around it. This removal, or separation of the place becomes finalized when we give the historic district a name, an identifiable theme that will attract, and becomes a place that people will want to live in, to visit, and be entertained.

The old industrial "warehouse districts" of so many cities (Denver, Dallas, Cleveland, San Francisco, Portland, etc.) previously derelict, now serve as entertainment/restaurant centers that repeat pretty much the same formula, where one may visit for one's "shot" of traditional urbanism (the effects of which lasts a month to a year before dissipating and need replenishing) and then go back to one's home in the suburbs. There are more tragic examples of vibrant districts that once had a unique identity, such as Soho, New York, which for a period of time (approx. 1968-1980) artists and galleries infiltrated into what was an undiscovered manufacturing district, resulting in one of the most important centers for creating and showing art in the world. While shifting from its original manufacturing use, the area continued to be authentic within its continuing cultural/economic evolution as a reuse of the found artifact of 19th century warehouse structures (not

unlike the transformation of the Diocletian Palace of Spalato through its appropriation of the earlier remains into an urban precinct.) The “Cast Iron District” was recognized, given Landmark status, renamed (branded) as “Soho,” the zoning was changed, stores and restaurants moved in to take advantage of the area’s new popularity and status, rents went up, artists and galleries moved out, and the district has evolved into a retail mall of mainly national stores that differs little from what might be found anywhere (except situated in the carcass of the most outstanding collection of 19th century cast iron facades anywhere in the world).

“Little Italy” (similar to Boyer’s discussion of the South Street Seaport) is another example of an identifiable district which has lost its original population and identity as a unique urban neighborhood, yet whose remaining wisps of aura have been re-marketed as the same infamous ethnic place (fading memories of the gangland slaying, social clubs, and cultural traditions), with but with improved entertainment value that can appeal to everyone. The district has thus turned into an ambiguous theme park, both real and not real—it retains some of the earlier imagery and commercial activity, and does remain in the original location, with most of its original fabric intact—but now missing its original, authentic soul. The moral of the story is that with recognition of value and mass appeal comes commodification; and once the process is set in motion and the capitalist wheels spin faster, it can never be reversed back to some earlier state (as if the new reincarnated identity that covers over the original could be *covered over again* by the appearance of the original!). The result is a hybrid of the real, original fabric (that isn’t allowed to age, or change) and the legitimate memory of the past, all consciously reprogrammed in a theatrical setting that can serve up any number of new narratives (even recreating some old ones), in an improved, more perfect version.

3. Mix and Match

The third condition describes new buildings and districts which fabricate a mix of authentic artifacts, or authentically reproduced settings with new construction, with little to distinguish one from the other, resulting in another version of the real-not real. New-old,

original-copy, unrestored-restored—it doesn't really matter. It's all just putting together the right experience with whatever seems to do the job, and has the right "look" in the end. Consider the "new" Ford Theater on 42nd Street, New York, reconstructed in 1996 as a seamless combination of the Lyric (1903) and Apollo (1920) theaters to develop one enlarged combination of the two. Some actual historic fragments remain, and are sometimes restored in place (the Lyric facade), sometimes re-positioned (the Apollo proscenium), and sometimes re-created in a new location (the Apollo dome). In most cases, details are invented that resemble the original, and placed within a circulation foyer and main auditorium that are completely new. It all blends in into a new hybrid of the synthetic and re-contextualized original, and nobody's the wiser. At the larger urban scale of 42nd Street, the original Minsky theater was moved 150' down the block (it just didn't work well where it was), which now serves as an entry to a new 16-theater movieplex and Madame Tousseaud entertainment complex. The theater is intact, and remains as one of the few authentic, original buildings left on 42nd Street—but in a new location, submerged and synthesized within the ersatz development all around it.

The confusion of the authentic versus the simulation and challenge to the assumed superiority of the authentic can occur in a completely fabricated setting, for given enough care and money, the right materials and the latest technology, one can simulate the original to such a degree, right down to the patina, that the simulation is in fact as good and equal to (and even improves upon?) the original—and one possibly might not easily tell the difference between the two. So if one of the "theme" settings in Las Vegas, the Hotel Bellagio uses perfectly crafted materials and details from its Italian sources, and from



Hotel Bellagio, Las Vegas

particular vantage points, one could not say whether one was on Lake Como or the Las Vegas Strip, is the place/experience *completely* inauthentic? And if to add to the confusion of the real-not real, if one enters a museum space within the hotel which houses actual Picassos, Braques, Renoirs and the like, is the experience of the art somehow compromised, or less effective than seeing the works within, say, the Metropolitan Museum? We're not talking Disneyland anymore, or the obvious cheap rip-offs of your everyday theme park, but highly refined environments that give you something close to the "real" thing, or closer to the "hyper-real," leaving out the dimples, scratches, messiness and other imperfections that get in the way of reality. It's all there—the best stuff is all brought together in one place—the perfect picturesque vista is only a short walk away—and you can see it all in less than a day.

Seaside, Florida proves that the real-not real can be finely orchestrated, mainly through zoning controls that refer to a past vernacular that actually existed, is well-understood, and through explicit coding, can be fairly well reproduced by less than major talents.¹⁹ The life in the town that goes on is of course real although as a retirement community, somewhat constricted, and nicely sealed away from the realities of work, poverty, multi-ethnic culture, and other complexities of the world. The fairly consistent historicism that pervades the architectural forms and the public organization is inspired

by earlier American village planning models, which appeals to one's nostalgia for the past, allowing participation in a fictional existence rooted in earlier times. Given the comprehensive and convincing physical presentation, it is possible to be believed and enjoyed without much effort, and certainly no less believable (and real) than similar suburban settings, which try to come close, but don't get it just right. And as with any fiction, we can conveniently suspend belief when need be so as to allow the desired amenities of the modern world (the car, garbage disposals, the latest communication technologies) to combine with history, in order to make life comfortable. In other words, we take in the presentation on *our* terms, to make it work for *us*, much as the spectator of a modern wrestling event, who can suspend belief as required, in order to enjoy what is *seen*, rather than have the spectacle contaminated by what one knows, or thinks.

Even when the illusion is threatened, such as the recent use of the town as a stage-set in making the movie "The Truman Show," which necessitated making a number of stage-set buildings to make the setting even more perfect, the potential disturbance was taken in stride. The community actually liked the additions, which after all, blended in so well that you really couldn't tell the movie set from the real set, so it was decided that they be kept in place after the movie was completed. And the community was right—it was not a question of the fake vs. the original, the fictive vs. the real—without any imperative to perceive any difference, or more critically, the suspicion as to whether the difference has any sustained, or inherent value—distinctions begin to fade into a fuzzy, unified state. It's both fake and real, at the same time, and one is as enjoyable, and as accepted as the other.

4. The Programmatic Overlay



The Beauty Bar, New York

There has recently been developed a series of so-called “theme clubs” in New York’s East Village, one of the most notorious called “BeautyBar,” owned and conceived by Deb Parker.²⁰ The BeautyBar takes what was an actual, functioning beauty salon, and turns it into a bar/club, *while leaving the original salon intact*. Included are hair dryers, sinks, price lists, and miscellaneous paraphernalia of the original beauty salon, mixed with bottles of liquor, glasses, and the other paraphernalia required for a functioning bar.

This presents a somewhat different phenomenon of the “theme” entertainment operation, often restaurants, that take on the imagery and sounds of popular cultural phenomena, such as the “Hard Rock Cafes,” “Motown Cafes,” “Harley-Davidson Cafes” and the “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” restaurants and the like that have proliferated throughout cities across the U.S. In these types of settings, a given theme is overlaid onto an arbitrary, empty site, or neutral container that becomes totally transformed into the selected synthetic experience. It is the nature of the ability of the chosen theme to constitute displacements in both time and place that establishes the restaurant’s degree of success as “entertainment.”

The Beautybar shares some relationship to this notion of theme entertainment, but is actually a very different phenomenon. One uses the original space, which remains in place, in a way that was not originally intended, and of course, the two functions, beauty salon, and bar, have no relationship to one another, much in keeping with surreal

operations caused by collision of unlike events (as in Breton's dictum, "the fortuitous encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table."²¹) In the act of superimposing a function *over* a given function, the club onto a beauty salon, the newly superimposed activity (the bar) is familiar and real, as is the original, found condition (the beauty salon)— they are both intact, relatively unaltered, and remain able to be independently read. Yet it remains unclear as to which identity, that of the original function or the newly imposed function dominates, or whether the old rules for their operation are unaltered, or transformed by the forced marriage between the two.

It is more likely that the hybrid condition has generated a new identity, different than either the beauty salon or bar in isolation, in which their mutual cross referencing, and consequent contamination produces an exaggerated, or hyper awareness of both difference and similarity. Clearly, the two functions were never meant to be together, and when combined, result in a kind of defamiliarization, or destabilization of expectations, producing another kind of experience than earlier associations with either bars or beauty salons. In fact, it is the quality and degree of this distancing of the known encounter into the realm of fantasy which constitutes the nature of the bar's ability to "entertain."

There are a number of ambiguities that result from the combination of functions that enrich the situation even further. If one has drinks while having one's hair done (which is often the case), one presumes that it is still a salon with an added amenity. At what point does the identity, or content of the original artifact actually "shift," or cross over into the new hybrid condition? One would assume that the beauty salon has to function like a bar, and at some level, actually resemble a bar for the identity to change; or, perhaps even the re-titling, or intention of reprogramming the beauty salon at a certain hour (not unlike Duchamp's operation performed on the Readymades), is enough to complete the transformation. We know that if the salon remains intact, one can simply remove the "club" function, and it will automatically revert back to its original program, although the old identity may be affected by the residue, or "aura" of its earlier use, and thus be impossible to completely retrieve. At the same time, there is an implication is that the beauty salon and the bar can also function

concurrently, i.e., still function as a salon during the day, and a bar in the evening. The entertainment gets better, however, if we push the overlap further, as one decides to have one's hair done or nails polished in the evening while everyone else continues to drink (as does happen), in which a part of the earlier identity of the beauty salon becomes reinstated. And if the choice of the overlay of the two functions completely arbitrary, what is the criteria that determines the appropriateness, or the degree of success in making these sorts of transformations—in other words, are there limits? One would assume that certain combinations make no sense, while some make for more interesting combinations. One could also argue that the greater the degree of misfit, or non-congruence between the juxtaposed programs, the more interesting, or at least, the more entertaining the result. Traditional criteria of quality are turned upside down—in this case, it is the degree and nature of the interference caused by the hybrid—along with the resulting discomfort, visual dissonance, and de-familiarization that become key ingredients for inventing new synthetic experiences.

An interesting analogy to this kind of stimulation, one imagines (if not too extreme) is not unlike the activity of “cross-dressing,” i.e., one sex putting on the clothes of the other sex. While a male body in male clothes is a normal, ingrained experience producing a singular identity between the body and its cladding--a male body in female clothes is rather abnormal, a misfit between the covered and the covering, and defines an entirely new experience of one's body. While the body is of course still intact, and hasn't changed, the new clothing, challenges one's former identity, causing a kind of “hyper” awareness of both one's, male body, as the original condition, and the characteristics of female clothing, the imposed condition. When combined, there has been produced a new type of body form, a male and a female combined into one, or male-female, made up of forms partly concealed and partly revealed, sharing some of the characteristics of the original



Parade, New York, 1998

body and clothes, but producing both a projected image and internal awareness of a different, newly discovered identity.

This is to once again make the point that the combination of unlike programs in the city results in more than the familiar virtues of complexity, multi-use, cross-association, and all the other qualities of the multi-functional city, but is rather a description of radically different forms of urban experience, as well as a potentially new synthesis of built forms marked by varying degrees of ambiguity, and the continuing vacillation between sometimes being (or expressing) one thing, sometimes another, and typically, a little bit of both. Relative to the context of the city, the Beautybar suggests two other critical implications:

1. The notion of the urban site can take on another kind of condition—rather than the *tabula rasa* of the modernist, empty shell, in which one replaces one familiar identity with another, one can conceive of a kind of “filled” site with peculiar characteristics and identity which transforms the terms of adding to a given site. Functional transformation becomes a

layering of familiar functions which in combination result in unfamiliar, synthetic hybrids, a process leading to higher and higher degrees of entropic disorder, complexity, or, the state of the real-not real.

2. It would also seem that the problem of form, style, or the intention of producing an “appropriate” expression of function, culture, the age, etc. becomes subverted, in the sense that the choice of the narrative, or the previous function automatically “produces” the design. If the narrative of the new synthesis has a strong enough identifiable imagery, or semantic power, there is little to be invented, or contrived except for the small choices remaining as to what to maintain and, and what to discard. The key, then, becomes the positioning and layering of programmatic content, the orchestration of synthetic programs to shape the evolution of the city rather than the invention of new forms or typologies.

The other option, perhaps, is to allow the synthetic city to evolve as the random accumulation of events, sometimes in isolation, sometimes combined, where position on the gridded capitalist game board makes little difference, which over time, removes us away from the historic city, and further into various forms of production like those just mentioned, or other modes of recycling, simulation and recontextualization. But given the synthetic’s ability, or even necessity for imposing direction, or “maximizing the desired effect” at all scales, it would be unfortunate to dwell only on this small, standalone fabrication of the Beautybar that might easily be lost over the din, when the opportunity is for something so much more, closer to a majestic sweeping narrative, with the whole range of effects at our disposal.

Notes:

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

2. The notion of the mall of America is thoroughly discussed in Michael Sorkin, Ed., *Variations On A Theme Park*, (New York: Hill

and Wang Publishers, 1992), in particular, Christine Boyer's "Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at South Street Seaport," and also, Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory* (Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1994), pp. 421-458.

3. Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory, Op. Cit.*, pp. 448-9.

4. Other histories besides those cited above would include the development of some of the more important business and technological innovators, such as Walt Disney and Microsoft. See:

5. John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1979), p. 44.

6. Boyer, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 74-5.

7. One might give some recognition here to the seminal work of Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), in particular his discussions on the notion of ambiguity, and the phenomenon of "both-and."

8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), p. 30.

9. Rem Koolhaas, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press), 1995, p.1263.

10. Manfredo Tafuri, "Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology," from K. Michael Hays, (ed) *Architectural Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1998), p. 13.

11. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995)

providing the seminal articulation of this position more than thirty years ago.

12. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Semiotext, Inc., 1983), pp. 23-25.

13 This discussion is certainly inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt (ed) *Illuminations Walter Benjamin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), in particular, the collapse of reality and illusion in film through one's consciousness of the filming apparatus, and the inability to be distanced by the continual shift of images that denies reflection (versus the continual distancing present in theater, in spite of the use of real actors during a live performance.)

14. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), pp.14-16.

15. Benjamin would answer this relative to the original object's projection of aura, paradoxically generating a perceived distance, vs. the mechanical replication of the object which destroys all notion of distance. See: Benjamin, *op. city.*, p. 222-23.

16. Sontag, *Op. Cit.*, p. 88.

17. Refer again to sources cited under footnote 2, including those by Boyer, Sorkin, and Baudrillard.

18. The architectural precedents and theory for the notion of the independence of a building's exterior from interior (as opposed to modernism's bias towards interdependence) is comprehensively articulated by Robert Venturi (see footnote 7 above.)

19. David Mohney and Keller Easterling, *Seaside: Making a Town in America* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991).

20. "Deb Parker Beautybar" *New York Times*, Sept.7 1998, Metro page 1.

21. Lucy Lippard (ed.), *Surrealists On Art*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 2.