Multimedia

The ever-expanding and overlapping worlds of electronic communication change not only the context but the very fabric of the built environment. They redefine space—and in so doing redefine the limits of architectural scholarship. Indeed, electronic media are crucial dimensions of the historical record of the built environment. As the JSAH goes online and becomes multimedia, it seems appropriate to analyze some of architecture’s new modes of interaction. This selection of reviews zooms in on the new forms of cartography and archives that have become increasingly relevant to architectural scholarship and have their own history and key architectural origins in projects such as Buckminster Fuller’s World Game and Charles and Ray Eames’s Powers of Ten. I am grateful to Laura Kurgan for her help in putting together this set.

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Twitter.com and Twitpic.com
http://twitter.com
http://twitpic.com/1ek1i

On-Site/Off-Line: Producing Global Space
Recently, global imaginary has been gripped by two very different urban events, both spectacular and incendiary, unfolding amidst the news of the financial and credit crisis. These two events, the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008 and the fire that consumed the new TVCC (Television Cultural Center) building in Beijing, adjacent to the CCTV (Central China Television) building, in February 2009, have opened a new space of discussion on and off the web that has potentially profound implications for the way that urban space and political practice are imaged and imagined.

The web discussion of these events could be connected to the digital representation of the Tamil homeland by the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam, a now historical example of the production of political space on cyberspace. Both the Mumbai attacks and the TVCC fire can be treated as broadcast events in the most expansive sense of the term. The role of the social networking site Twitter.com in making the events public in real time was a feature common to both. Twitter describes itself as a free social messaging utility for staying connected in real time and is most accurately described as a micro-blogging tool, allowing people to connect both on and off the web, moving seamlessly between these modes. Users send tweets, or short text messages of up to 140 characters, via mobile phones or the World Wide Web. Users who are at a given location can communicate with a multitude of other users by sending a tweet anywhere in the world. Tweets can therefore reach people who may not be particularly interested in a specific event but simply happen to be connected, directly or indirectly, with people who are on-site or who are picking up tweets from others. Twitter’s method for disseminating information is particularly suited to events that are mysterious in their origin and in their implications, and it therefore has a tenuous relation to the ethical standards of journalism as well as political space.

A CNN article, “Tweeting the Terror: How Social Media Reacted to Mumbai,” quotes a Twitter user named naomieve: “Mumbai is not a city under attack as much as it is a social media experiment in action.” The implication of this observation is interesting insofar as it simultaneously delocalizes Mumbai as a place while locating mediated social action spatially. In so doing, the qualities of lived space are diminished through a network of Twitter connections, albeit in the real-time universe of tweet threads. In this logic, Mumbai’s spatiality became more “real,” or realized on the web, as the volume of tweets related to it rose dramatically.

In a very different sense, this quality of realization can also be seen in relation to the TVCC fire. On this dramatic event, the blog Archinect (cited above) carried a piece by Orhan Ayyuce that begins “It is true the situation went into the scale of architecture 9/11 with the incredible carrying capacity of the countless blogs. . . . Whatever the reason for the inferno at the building, one thing is clear that it will be remembered as the day [that the] iconic building died, by many.” Yet the opposite, in fact, might be true. The singular nature of the TVCC/CCTV project, and the rhetorical space its design occupies in relation to the Chinese, state situates its mission as one of reformatting broadcast technology as well as broadcasting Beijing itself. Ironically, it is through the twittering about the fire that the building project realized its broadcast potential, an outcome desired by its architect. As a building project housing a media organization, the TVCC/CCTV complex exists in an uneasy relationship with the political project of the Chinese state, even though it is encouraged by that state. Moreover, it is a medium through which a national and international debate about design and identity has been incited. Thus formed, by, and for the media, this complex exemplifies the power of media to transcend other means of producing symbolic space, including state power.

The dissemination of images of the fire via Twitpic.com (the image uploading feature of Twitter) was dramatic in its own
Twittering about city-specific events is part of a global debate about urban artifacts. Yet iconic structures have the capacity to spark problems of Beijing’s relationship to this. Evident from the comparison to 9/11, the nation of design and national identity. As is Beijing urbanism, particularly the question of design and national identity. The network of shared messages forms a dense spatial fabric, while the real-time feature defers the question of an event archive. This sublimation of time by space has implications for contemporary urbanism and historiography. For example, as an archive that leaves traces that are not necessarily chronological in their organization, Twitter makes visible the vast network of global forces that include and reach beyond Mumbai. A collection of these tweets detaches lived place from local form, circulating Mumbai as a global phenomenon whose boundaries are amorphous.

Similarly, the on-site production of tweets about the TVCC fire replaced the iconic urbanism of the building complex with contemplations about the texture of Beijing urbanism, particularly the question of design and national identity. As is evident from the comparison to 9/11, the problem of Beijing’s relationship to this iconic structure had the capacity to spark a global debate about urban artifacts. Yet twittering about city-specific events in Beijing or Mumbai ironically localizes the cities by reducing their specificity to urban texture or urban medium, as it also seemed to do in the case of Mumbai.

This peculiar on-site/off-line production of space through representational technologies such as Twitter might produce global space by making visible the interconnections assumed by the social, cultural, and economic processes of globalization and by transcending the symbolic power of space through its real-time dispersal into tweets about events. This form of spatial production has an interesting resonance with the strategies through which space is produced by various embattled nationalisms. Long-term and proposed nation-state projects such as the Tamil nation in Sri Lanka or the Palestinian state exemplify the difficult relationship between space as an abstract quality of social production/projection on the one hand and as lived places on the other.

Over time and through a series of false breakthroughs, those unfinished political projects have acquired a deferred quality that is reflected in the media that is deployed by groups seeking their realization. Alongside the “heavy media” of bombs and violence, “soft media,” such as the active cultivation of symbolic capital in the form of landscapes that suggest suffering and cyber-representations of the hoped-for nation-state, enable the global circulation of precarious projects that are in an unstable relationship with global geo-politics.

For instance, the website of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which, until recently ran a fascist and military quasi-state apparatus in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka addresses its political claim to a Tamil nation and territory with barely any territorial references. An iconic map on the LTTE site refers simultaneously to the existing nation as well as mapping the hoped-for Tamil Eelam nation. The site operates as an argument for the nation, producing the space of the nation as a site of belief but not necessarily a place to be inhabited. This abstract spatialization, which simultaneously delocalizes, was enabled by even early World Wide Web technology, but it has been enhanced exponentially by tools like Twitter. The social significance of this form of on-site but off-line production of space lies in the ways it detaches ethical judgment from political projects. While the nation promotes attachment in an ethical sense, in the possibility of its realization as territorial unit the nation on the web also enables detachment in the specific and oftentimes problematic political projects necessary to its realization.

Twittering about the Mumbai attacks raises similar ethico-political dilemmas by its destabilizing production of space. Blogger Alexander Wolfe suggests, “Mumbai is likely to be viewed in hindsight as the first instance of the paradigmatic shift in crisis coverage: namely, journalists will no longer be the first to bring us information. Rather, they will be a conduit of images and video shot by a mix of amateurs and professionals on scene.” The anxiety regarding the ethical implications of this form of news-gathering is echoed by a blogger quoted in the CNN article “I started to see an ugly side to Twitter, far from being a crowdsourced version of the news it was actually an incoherent, rumor-fueled mob operating in a mad echo chamber of tweets, re-tweets and re-re-tweets.” But if this
ethica l anxiety centers fundamentally on the political possibilities that are available in the context of media proliferation and its production of abstract, global space, we might have to reserve judgment on the effects of this production until we fully understand the flipside of twitting. Numerous blogs also report the use of social networking tools like Twitter and Facebook to organize protests around events such as the Mumbai attacks. While these gatherings of communications like Twitter itself, are fundamentally event-centered, they have had interesting political implications, resulting in concrete actions towards reforming a system of political institutions. On the other hand, as the recent protests in Moldova reveal, such actions cannot remain anonymous and crowd-driven, ironically because tools like Twitter are specific in their capacity to localize subjects even as they abstract and delocalize space.

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Notes
The following websites relate to this essay:
http://architect.eu/news/article.php?id=85467_0_24_0_C
http://rudenoon.com/alerts/archives/1405
http://twitter.com/MumbaiAttacks
http://www.mahalo.com/mumbai_terrorist_attack_twitter
2. This argument is made by Pradeep Jeganathan in "eclam.com," Public Culture 10, no. 3 (1998), 515–29. Recent readings of the site suggest that not much has changed over the past decade, although the site does not seem to have been updated in over two years.

Google Earth 5.0
http://earth.google.com/

“Google Earth lets you fly anywhere on Earth to view satellite imagery, maps, terrain, 3D buildings, from galaxies in outer space to the canyons of the ocean. You can explore rich geographical content, save your toured places, and share with others.” So suggests the front page of Google Earth. Many years ago Paul Virilio borrowed a phrase from Nam June Paik for the chapter in War and Cinema called “Cinema Isn’t I See, It’s I Fly.” This motto and its transformations have notable implications for image-technologies in the digital era. The front page of the Google Earth website is a starting point for exploring the trajectory from seeing and flying to saving and sharing.

“... that the globe was long ago digitized seems obvious today: every spot on earth can be located, calculated, and represented in multiple descriptive systems. This digitization was prefigured by the ancient Greek system of lines of latitude and longitude, which translated the surface of the Earth into an abstract grid capable of becoming universal. Mathematical descriptions of locations fixed them with stable numbers, irrespective of politics, place names, borders, or changing environments.

The ability to visualize the land and sea in smaller and larger swaths has always been of interest to architects and urbanists. From Le Corbusier’s descriptions of his first views of cities from airplanes in Avion accuse ... ! (1935) to the Eames’ exploration of the zoom in Powers of Ten (1977), the experience of a map in motion, and in particular the seamless transition across scales in that map, has had a special place in the architectural imagination. While earlier architects depended on collaborations with aviators and scientists in order to produce the images which fascinated them, in the past decade the ability to zoom into anywhere on Earth at a variety of scales has become widely available.

In addition, data of endless variety can now be coordinated with the digital grid in all sorts of ways. Cartography might now be just as well called data visualization or analysis. Something more extreme has happened, though. Nowadays there is direct access to a digital globe—any one of us with a computer and a connection to the internet can hardly imagine what it would be like not to be able to type in an address and zoom into it immediately—and that representation is available for all sorts of interaction, not simply looking.

This globe is presented in a patchwork of high and low resolution images, on CD-ROMs and DVDs, in online encyclopedias and atlases, in scanned collections of ancient maps and sophisticated gazetteers, in public websites and exclusive (and expensive) and protected locations. From the everyday driving requirements addressed by Mapquest (http://www.mapquest.com/) to the exotic imagery from outer space supplied by GeoEye (http://www.geoeye.com/CorpSite/) and Digital Globe (http://www.digitalglobe.com/), “the globe is on our computers,” as Gayatri Spivak noted some years ago.1

The most noteworthy adventure in digital cartography is the Google Earth database and its associated software. Google Earth was unveiled to the public in mid-2005, and today it claims to have archived nearly a third of the earth’s surface in high-resolution (one pixel per meter) images. Whatever its faults and limitations, this constitutes an extraordinary democratization of an image database previously accessible only to a few governments and experts.

The idea seems to have emerged rather directly from the cinematic-architectural imagination with which I began. Avi Bar-Ze’ev, one of the founders of Keyhole (the company that became Google Earth), suggests on his blog that at its inception Google Earth was a sort of amalgam of the virtual earth Neal Stephenson imagined in his novel Snow Crash (1992) and the zoom in Powers of Ten. “Powers of Ten is/was amazing in that it helps one understand the scale of the universe and how sizes relate across the spectrum. But Google Earth is more than just a size comparison tool. . . . Unlike most maps, in GE, you can turn off national boundaries and see the world as it really is.”2

“As it really is,” of course, is a con-

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