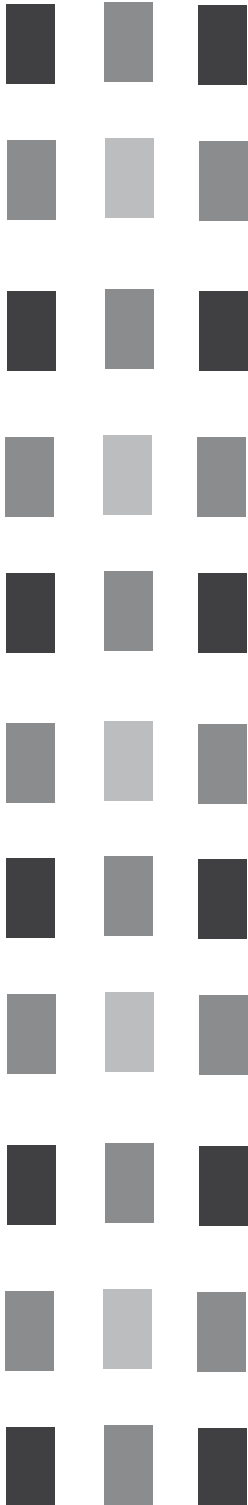


# Architecture as Interface: Mediating the In-Between

*Lisa Tilder*



In an increasingly digital age emerging technologies are challenging architectural conceptions. Traditional notions of boundary, place and building must be repositioned within the realm of the medial. The mass proliferation of digital technologies – from photographic reproduction to internet-based models of production, distribution and consumption – has set forth renewed consideration of strategies for architectural production.

The influx of new media has affected architectural production in multifarious ways, offering a set of transformative conditions up for architectural exploration. Recent developments in architecture utilize material properties and the electronic image as means to dissolve fixed architectural boundaries and to take up residency in the in-between. Some look to temporal effects to create an architecture of disappearance, some produce strategies of formlessness to attempt to escape Architecture's material body. Others establish hybrid conditions that draw upon consumerist strategies – whether branded buildings, commercial products or advertising campaigns. Relationships between on-line and bricks-and-mortar architectural realities further attempt to redefine Architecture's role as signifier in an expanded field.

The translation of computer graphics paradigms into architectural form continues to become increasingly complex. While the simulacra of Disney and Vegas imports were once the norm, more elaborate hybrids have evolved. Like the application of filters to Photoshop, a series of translations produce highly modified and extreme effects. As our world moves from pixel to point, blur to description and back again, overlaps of analog and digital produce paradoxes of any-thing and no-thing. No longer either-or or multiple-choice, the culture of the copy is all-of-the-above. This blurred space of suspension between referent and original, material, virtual is an in-between condition tantamount to a super-modern sublime.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Virtual Place of Displacement: Disney Media**

"All fakes are clearly not equal; there are good fakes and bad fakes. The standard is no longer real versus phony, but the relative merits of the imitation. What makes the good ones better is their improvement on reality..."<sup>2</sup>

Of World's Fairs and Expositions, virtual places of displacement -Disney is a company made of and by media, born of its reciprocal relationship to the television industry. Disneyland the place began with Disneyland the television show, conceived to produce the funds to build the theme park – while simultaneously developing an unprecedented marketing audience. Each week, the television show featured bits on one of several exotic locales,

which the theme park simultaneously incorporated into its construction.<sup>3</sup> It wasn't a coincidence that Disneyland's fabrication was orchestrated by set designers and animators: Disneyland was built as an elaborate façade – postcards to be experienced by all.

Disneyland, the theme park has since been kingdom cloned, however it has also returned full circle to its source: television. The same medium which helped to establish Disney-as-place reconstructs an updated virtual-Disney, with Brand Experience supplanting earlier models of tourism. In the 1980's the Disney Channel was established, the first 24/7 infomercial for the Mouse – and the saturation of the Disney brand accelerated. Disney, with the acquisition of a myriad of other brands (ABC News, ESPN International, E! to name a few)<sup>4</sup>, became more fluid, as a means to appeal to a variety of audiences and currencies. Next came the "Disneyfication" of Times Square, the Disney Cruise Line – each extending the brand further into a floating image-world. Walt Disney himself is purportedly suspended in a kind of flux; he is rumored to be waiting on ice, cryogenically frozen – for the next round of Disney cloning ...<sup>5</sup>

### **The Corbis Picture Experience™**

"Like music, consumers will have a choice in what content they want to see at any given time and place. Consumers can tune in to art, history, or nature and target high-resolution screens on the refrigerator, in the living room, or anywhere else for viewing..."<sup>6</sup> (Bill Gates)

In 1989, Bill Gates founded Interactive Home Systems, now named Corbis, to buy the rights to digital images. Corbis owns one of the world's largest collections of digitized images, including the renowned Bettmann Archive, a collection of 17 million images that includes those of Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, and Marilyn Monroe. The name Corbis is taken from the Latin for "woven basket" – an electronic basket of 'original' copies.<sup>7</sup> The Corbis Collection is made up of "the world's most significant photography and fine art"<sup>8</sup>, with more than 65 million images from various realms of human endeavor – history, the arts, entertainment, nature, and science, from more than 3,000 sources, 2.1 million online. Corbis grew by buying the rights to digital reproduction of all works in the UK National Gallery, the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, and others. In 1999, Corbis introduced "The Corbis Picture Experience," which unveiled a suite of personalized image products for consumers, ranging from screensavers to high-quality photographic prints – all at affordable prices.<sup>9</sup>

When Corbis first acquired the Bettmann Archive, it began to digitalize the collection at a rate

of 40,000 images a month. However, it was quickly determined that it would take twenty-four years to scan the totality of material in the Archive – so Gates moved quickly to preservation tactics – to tide off the collection's eventual decay (and loss of worth). The 'original' annals were moved from their longstanding headquarters in New York City to a retrofitted underground nuclear storage facility in rural Pennsylvania. While the physical relocation of the material archive to a former nuclear storage facility is somewhat ironic – it is also incredibly appropriate – for the internet was first developed as a means of redundant communication in the event of nuclear attack. The history of Otto Bettmann's archive is also nomadic and equally stealth: Once Curator of rare books at the State Library in Berlin, he smuggled what became the beginnings of the Bettmann archive out of Nazi Germany in two steamer trunks. The 'original' archives began of displacement; now easily accessible at the click of a mouse.<sup>10</sup>

In 1966, Bettmann edited a picture book entitled *The Bettmann Portable Archive*, which presented an abbreviated, surreal selection of his holdings, self described as "... a graphic history of almost everything ... presented by way of 3,669 illustrations culled from the files of the Bettmann Archive ... topically arranged and cross-referenced to serve as an idea stimulator and image finder."<sup>11</sup> Bettmann's index bore the shape of a lexicon of alphabetized associations – like multiple chance meetings between sewing machine and umbrella.<sup>12</sup> Category A for example, assembled images to present a coincidental montage of Absurdities, Advertising, Agriculture, Air Cooling, Angels, Art, Artists, Astronomy, Auctions and Automobiles.

Appropriately enough, the Corbis Collections offer a similar montage of image associations: Monika Lewinsky and Bill Clinton, Young Girl Eating Red Gelatin, Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne, and Man using Cell Phone by Pyramids of Giza reside in a slot-machine-like assemblage of search-engine strategy. Images purchased for personal or professional use may be simultaneously reconstituted in corporate brochures, desk top screen savers and Easter post cards sent home to mother's computer. Catalogues with diverse names and strategies like Saba, Sygma, Christie's and of course, Bettmann,<sup>13</sup> market temporary rights to politics, celebrity, history and high art; Catalogues such as Crop, Blue, and Senses promise deliverance of mood, texture, color and light alongside stock images and objects from every-day-life for sale.<sup>14</sup> Personalization strategies abound: Corbis Screensavers customize the desktop with a selection ranging from Fabulous Footwear to Cocktail Culture to Leonardo da Vinci.

Corbis argues that the preservation – and increased virtual access – of "original" images serves

both the corporation and the general public.<sup>15</sup> However, the archive's relocation to slumber in cold storage vaults in an undisclosed location – owned by Iron Mountain National Underground Storage – has been the cause of concern for some. The incorporation of history as private property raises significant issues in relation to authorship, the work of art and mass production. In addition to artistic and property rights, questions of interpretation are also an issue. While the public was initially assured that access to the archives would remain open – Corbis archivists will de-thaw and scan a non-digitized work from the archive upon request- scholars bemoan the loss of access to 'the real thing' that may provide kinds of valuable information not presented by digital scan (or by the eye of the corporation).<sup>16</sup> While the archives did remain physically accessible for a short time – September 11<sup>th</sup> and the events that followed have made public access no longer possible.

Otto Bettmann himself wrote in his introduction to the *Portable Archive*, "It has been said that music not performed ceases to exist. The paradox applies to pictures as well. Art not seen loses it meaning ... In a picture reference library such as *The Bettmann Archive*, millions of pictorial items are filed away. What a pity everyone can't see all of them! What a pity they can't all come alive again between the covers of a book or a whole shelf of books ... This book then is a ticket to the Archive, an invitation to come in and see. It is, of course, a partial view ... Yet to see partially may still be better than not to see at all ..."<sup>17</sup>

The Corbis-Bettmann museum of culture no longer extends an invitation to "come in and see", as it can't be experienced by a public in any traditional architectural sense – cryogenically frozen some 70 miles NE of Pittsburgh, 200 feet underground, approached by tunnel – but its facsimile is available to all, everywhere. The Corbis Picture Experience<sup>TM</sup>, now accessible "on the refrigerator, in the living room, or anywhere else for viewing" redefines relationships between public and private experience, place and placeless, ritual and commodity. The space between replication saturation and sub-zero detachment – real and virtual – offers new avenues of exploration for architectural inquiry.

### **The FOREVER Network: Mediated Constructions**

"At Hollywood FOREVER, we believe everyone has a life story that deserves to be shared and preserved for future generations".<sup>18</sup>

FOREVER Enterprises is a family of companies that operates cemeteries, funeral homes and production studios across the country. FOREVER recently purchased Hollywood Cemetery, an historical landmark that was an integral part of the

growth of early Hollywood – its first cemetery. Paramount Studios was built on the back half of the original Hollywood Cemetery site, where the picture studio still operates today. The two sites have over time built an unusual reciprocal relationship: The newly named "Hollywood Forever Cemetery" is the "Resting Place of Hollywood's Immortals", final home to the stars. Film celebrities including Jayne Mansfield and Rudolph Valentino among others are memorialized here.<sup>19</sup>

While the cemetery is an historic landmark with much of its chapels and buildings restored, it has added a number of other services that make the place a fascinating study. Perhaps the most interesting has been the addition of production studios and biography services. "Specially trained biographers" help patrons to gather photos and film clips, audio recordings and documents to construct personal memories – biographies crafted in FOREVER's own production studios. These mediated personal histories are presented at chapel kiosks located throughout the cemetery and in an on-line database accessible via the FOREVER network (stored permanently in "unique biography theaters"). Even the historic funeral chapel has been refurbished to accommodate graveside access to personal memories – now equipped with a Plasma-vision widescreen to allow display of "Forever Biography tributes" and to offer live web casts during services that allow the inclusion of family and friends anywhere in the world.<sup>20</sup>

FOREVER maintains over 10,000 multimedia Life-Stories, which include photographs, oral histories, home video, family trees, genealogies, – even DNA records. The web site, Forever Network, provides access to the entire permanent collection of Life-Stories.<sup>21</sup> The ability of every-person to take up residence alongside Hollywood's greatest, both physically and digitally, weaves scripted histories past and present. The memory base evolves; friends and family can chat or leave permanent messages. Construct your fiction ahead of schedule: Many add to their LifeStories continually, adding several chapters each year. Not only can one secure a resting place alongside historic celebrities, Hollywood Forever offers the average person the opportunity to become immortal, and direct the movie as well. A souvenir purchase from the gift shop allows for further image embedding: association, integration and distribution.

The historical relationship between Hollywood Forever Cemetery and Paramount Pictures offers up a unique exchange that resides in-between, forging relationships between the architectural studio set, its presentation to a public through film, the construction of celebrity, the 'historical' preservation of Hollywood Forever Cemetery and its new digital counterpart – a personal LifeStory™ database produced by Forever Enterprises, distri-

buted across the Forever Network. Hollywood Forever serves as an architectural interface between worlds: past and present, memorial and production house.

### Simulacra Server Chapel®

Simulacra Server Chapel® became a means to investigate emerging relationships between Architecture, Media, and Consumerism through the design of a chapel for the worship of image culture. The project Simulacra Server Chapel® proposes a chapel franchise to partake in the reverence of image production and consumption. The project consists of a series of chapels, "original" copies dispersed to internet server nodes that allow "believers" to collectively participate in the culture of the copy. Each chapel contains a processional series of architectural interfaces that alternate between Christian and Consumer ritual.

Simulacra Server Chapel® is presented through a hybrid of architectural, product, graphic and web design, forming the Sim-Net™ brand in its cultural critique. Relationships between architectural authenticity and place(lessness), mass-production, consumerism and religion underlie this proposal for popular culture.

### Global Copy

As emerging technologies begin to redefine traditional notions of place, space and time, how might Architecture itself transform? Sim-Serv Chapel® plays upon the extreme urban artifacts of our day, the theme environment. From New Urbanism to Tokyo Disney Sea to Vegas wedding chapels, we worship the copy – casino as modern cathedral: Place donations in the slot, thank you please. Issues of proximity and physical location are blurred, the copy often surpassing the qualities of the original and specific. Like the phenomenon of cell phone area maps, on-line gaming worlds and virtual product stores, boundaries become transcribed within a net of ether. The Internet's decentralized structure is appropriately linked to the culture of the copy – consumer culture, where images are mass-produced and distributed ad infinitum. The Sim-Net® campaign occupies server sites around the globe, multiplying as its subscriber network grows; chapel as nodal device in a world of fluctuating boundary.

### Chapel = Interface

Six Stations of Salvation® make up the Chapel: Vend™, Confess™, Reflect™, Browse™, Pray™, Connect™ (fig. 3–8).

Each station offers a series of architectural interfaces that navigate between church and brand,



1 |



2 |



3 |



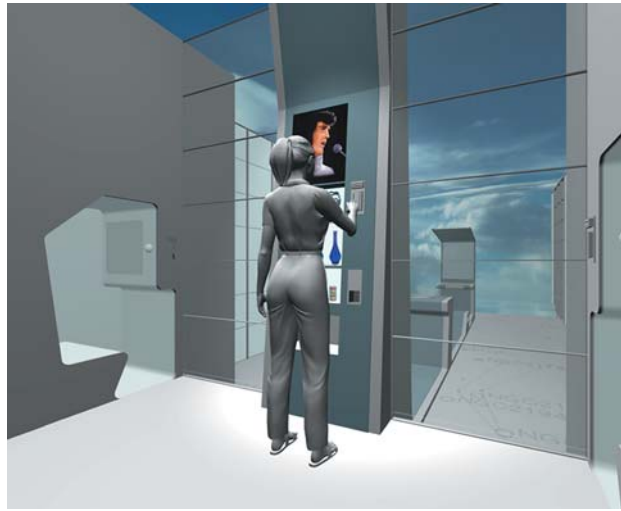
4 |



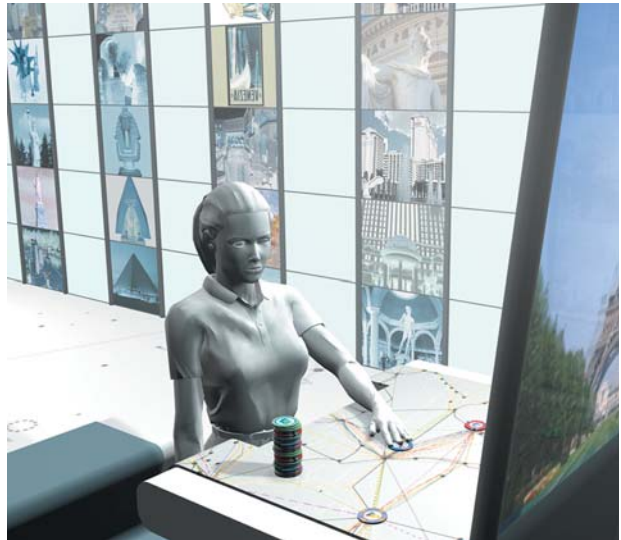
5 |



6 |



7 |



8 |

1, 7 | Vending Station® featured items: Simulacra Server Chapel® brand Holy Water™, Kinetic Rosaries™, Holy Wafer Chips™. Your tax deductible donation (purchase) open the Chapel gates

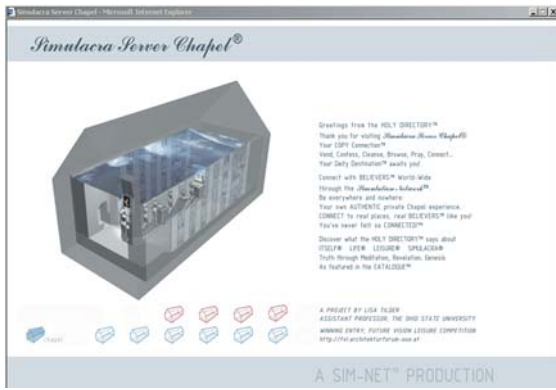
2 | Confess your sins. Our Waiting Room™ provides support in time of need. Featured Remote Counsel-of-the-Month: Dr. Phil. Cleo. Walt Disney (animated), Jeff Bezos

3 | Cleansing Station® sets the stage for reflection. BEst activated with Simulacra Server Chapel® brand Holy Water™

4 | Browse a free copy of the Holy Directory Catalogue™ for featured Chapel products. Bible Bench™ browsing displays chapel products via LCD window-walls. Coming soon: Help in time of Need: Testimonials from the Connected™

5 | Experience our new improved Pray Station™. Your prayer establishes connection to the Future Vision Network. Clapsed hands activate sleeping LCD window-walls of the Chapel. Join our Network™ Prayer Service

6, 8 | Holy Wafer™ chips allow easy navigation of the Future Vision Network™. Connect to Believers and Locations world wide. The Chapels LCD window-walls make Connecting a religious experience! Become a Believer Today! Connect now.



9 | Simulacra Server Chapel, home



10 | Simulacra Server Chapel, connection kit

artifact and image; procession through the series of Salvation Stations<sup>TM</sup> plays upon Catholic ritual and Pop-Culture consumption. The visitor engages an ironic juxtaposition of money donation and product dispensing, talk-show confessional and purification, pew-based catalogue shopping and prayer, culminating at a digital networking altar. The Salvation Stations also activate the Chapel environment, where LCD Window-Walls display dispersed product replicas available for purchase. At each station, the "believer" activates an interface in various ways: a vending machine purchase opens the Chapel gates; browsing the Holy Directory<sup>TM</sup> product catalogue activates Chapel wall imagery; the placement of Holy Wafers<sup>TM</sup> establishes connection to the "Simulation Network".

### Product Line: Stand by your Brand<sup>TM</sup>

The Chapel campaign is completed by its marketing strategy, which establishes the Chapel brand and network. Simulacra Server Chapel<sup>®</sup> welcomes members with the Copy Connection Kit<sup>TM</sup>, which holds a sampling of chapel products: The Holy Directory Catalogue<sup>TM</sup>, Prayer Cards, Server Scroll<sup>TM</sup> and Holy Water<sup>TM</sup> (web site) (fig. 9, 10). The Holy Catalogue<sup>TM</sup> serves as a manual to the project, offering instructions for conceptualization navigation. Chapel features, services and products are organized by Meditation, Genesis and Revelation. The Sim-Serv Product Line also features Holy Water<sup>TM</sup>, Kinetic Connection<sup>TM</sup> Rosaries, Wafer Chips<sup>TM</sup> and more, all available for purchase.

When you are feeling lost- Browse the Catalogue! Act now to receive a Sim-Serv<sup>®</sup> Connection Kit when you subscribe today! The integration of brand through product, graphic and web design, architectural interface and space constructs a critical stance toward future leisure (consumerism = religion) through its own devices.

Architecture's traditional role as signifier is enhanced by new media, increasing its ability to connect and contribute to the language of culture. Media's ability to transform architectural production by making meaning of the in-between offers enhanced possibilities for expression, representation and interpretation. Architecture as interface renews the capacity to engage one's culture, allowing Architecture to rejoin the mythical.<sup>22</sup>

### Image Dispersal

Simulacra Server Chapel<sup>®</sup> was a winning entry to the Future Vision Leisure International Competition for Ideas 2002 sponsored by Architekturforum Oberösterreich,<sup>23</sup> and was awarded the 2002 FEI-DAD Design Merit Award.<sup>24</sup> This project has been exhibited at the OK. Center for Contemporary Art in Linz, Austria and in the exhibition, "Critical Mass: Architecture.Art.Design" at the Museum of New Art, Detroit.

### Author:

Lisa Tilder, Assistant Professor  
Ohio State University, Columbus

### Notes:

- 1 The term 'supermodern' references to: Iblings, Hans: *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization*, Rotterdam, 1998.
- 2 Huxtable, Ada Louise: *The Real Fake and the Fake Fake*, in: *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion*, New York, 1997, p. 75.
- 3 Dunlop, Beth: *Building a Dream: The Art of Disney Architecture*, New York, 1996.
- 4 <http://www.disney.go.com>
- 5 This cryogenic speculation is noted in: Baudrillard, Jean: *Simulations*, trans. by Foss, Patton and

- Beitchman, New York, 1983, p. 24.
- 6 Corbis Press Release: *Bill Gates, Founder of Corbis and Chairman & CEO of Microsoft, Addresses "Imaging and the Internet" in ImageScape '99*, November 16, 1999.
- 7 Rapaport, Richard: *In His Image*, in: *WIRED*, Issue 4.11, November, 1996.
- 8 Corbis.com: *The Corbis Story*, <http://www.corbis.com>.
- 9 Op. cit., note 6.
- 10 Boxer, Sarah: *A Century's Photo History Destined for Life in a Mine*, in: *The New York Times*, April 16, 2001.
- 11 Bettmann, Otto: *The Bettmann Portable Archive*, New York, 1966.
- 12 Comte de Lautréamont: *Les Chants de Maldoror*.
- 13 Corbis is currently celebrating the 100th Birthday of Otto Bettman, October 15, 2003, with a year-long publicity fest that includes a one-million dollar image donation program and photo contest.
- 14 <http://www.corbis.com>
- 15 Consultants hired to design the Corbis facility at Iron Mountain visited food industry giants such as Sara Lee to research extreme cold storage options. Bill Hannigan, Editorial Director/Digital Archivist of the Bettman Archive lamented, "We treat cakes better than we treat important photographs." See Jana, Reena: *Famous Photos Frozen Forever*, in: *WIRED*, July 24, 2001.
- 16 Nadel, Dan: *Burying the Pas*" in: *Metropolis Magazine*, November 2002.
- 17 Op. cit., note 11.
- 18 <http://www.hollywoodforever.com>
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Neil Leach argues that Benjamin's concept of aura may be reinvested in the iconic image within popular culture. See Leach, Neil: *Millennium Culture*, London, 1999.
- 23 <http://vl.architekturforum-ooe.at>.
- 24 <http://www.feidad.org>; Liu, Yu Tung: *Defining Digital Architecture: 2002 FEIDAD Award*, Basel, 2003.