

Report:

Corporeal



Corporeal / ArtEZ

Master Interior Architecture

ArtEZ University of the Arts

Designing for a digital world

by Peter van Assche

Peter van Assche M.Arch. M.Sc.

Peter van Assche (1966) is an architect. He began his career as a scientific researcher at the European aeronautics and space research centre DLR near Munich, graduated cum laude in information theory at the Eindhoven University of Technology, and began a Ph.D. at the Institute for Experimental Mathematics in Essen (Germany). It was here that he realised that his creativity would be put to better use in designing buildings. In 2001 he graduated from the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture and Urban Design. Since 2002 he has been heading the agency SLA, whose stated mission is the qualitative improvement of our living environments. Some of his most well-known designs are the National Glass Museum (Leerdam) and the Noorderparkbar (Amsterdam-North). Recently realised designs include the Europagebouw (located in the Marineterrein) and the Environmental Learning Centre (Natuur- en Milieu Educatiecentrum), both in Amsterdam.

The SLA agency has won several awards including the first prize of the open competition 'De belegerde stad' ('The city under siege') in 's-Hertogenbosch (2005) and the 'best new building' of 2010 (the National Glass Museum) published by the national newspaper De Volkskrant (2011). The SLA agency has also been nominated for several awards, including the Dutch Design Award, the AM/NAi, ARC12 and ARC16 awards, and the DOEN Materiaalprijs award (2012 and 2016).

Besides his work as an architect, Van Assche also publishes regularly in national and international periodicals.



There was a time when an education programme leading to a career as a designer was a straightforward proposition. You learned a trade. In the first year you took drawing lessons: drawing vases and fruit bowls in the first semester, people and buildings in the second semester. By the end of the first year you had learned to communicate as a designer: with a drawing. After learning how to draw, in the second year you learned what to draw: you studied design theory, and how to distinguish a good design from a bad one. You learned all about the proper use of proportions, ornamentation and materials. In the third year you started making your own designs, which were critically dissected with the scalpel of design theory. In the final year you were put to the test: now it was your turn to show what you had learned.

This is how I used to imagine the Beaux-Arts tradition: legitimacy through clarity. This is of course a naive oversimplification; already in the late 19th century there was a passionate debate about the role and position of designers in society. Still it remains a comforting thought: art education as a path from uncertainty to certainty, from confusion to clarity. Umberto Barbieri once asked me, during a lecture he was giving on the history of architecture: 'What is it an architect does exactly?' Of course I knew the answer: 'An architect sublimates the social condition in a building, either disruptively (going against the flow) or hermeneutically (going with the flow).' To which Barbieri replied 'Nope. An architect makes a drawing.'

Though his answer certainly helps tone down any unrealistic expectations about the profession (and also made me start taking my own drawings more seriously), it also shows the same kind of oversimplification I previously described in relation to the Beaux-Arts tradition: we tend to assume a fixed set of values which in turn will provide the foundation for all good designs. But what happens when the designer is living in an age in which these values are constantly changing? This is precisely why art and design education should focus not only on teaching students how to design (in this case, spatial environments); but also on teaching them how to perceive, understand and interpret the world in which they live. According to Corporeal's programme: 'Important recent developments, such as the increasing emphasis on the local dimension, organisational shifts and transformations, and the use of new technologies in our daily life, all require new responses.'¹ Obviously, this is easier said than done. A smart strategy is required here. I will return to this topic later on in this text.

This year's graduation works can be seen as a showcase of how our digital world requires a clear positioning on the part of the designer. This is not surprising, since we spend an average of almost 7 hours a day looking at display screens. The questions that arise may on first sight seem obvious: 'If everything can be found online, what is there left for me to design?' Or: 'What does the idea of locality still mean in this day and age?' Or: 'If my iPad is adaptive, then why isn't my house?' Yet, all of these questions in fact refer to an underlying deeper question, an uncomfortable question, and one which is not easy to answer: What exactly is this 'reality' that is represented by the internet? And how should I, as a designer, approach this reality?

The question is uncomfortable because we are used to thinking of digital reality as an imaginary representation of our actual physical world. However, and regardless of the (often considerable) impact of this digital reality upon our lives, it is and remains a virtual world. As soon as we turn off the switch, we find ourselves back in real life, in the real world. Still, this insight alone does not really address the underlying issues – and this is indeed where things start to get uncomfortable. Facebook is not just an idealised transposition of our confusing reality; nor is it a substitution for the real world, or a 'describing engine' of real life

In his 1981 essay 'The Precession of Simulacra', the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard² anticipated and described quite clearly the relationship between the internet and the physical world – years before the internet as we now know it even existed. Despite the somewhat esoteric title, the essay itself is quite accessible and addresses the relationships between reality, symbols and society. But it could just as well be about our digital world. The essay begins with a fable by the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges, in which the cartographers of a fictitious Empire draw a map that is so detailed that it ends up corresponding exactly with (and thus being exactly as large as) the territory it represents. Eventually however, the Empire loses

interest in the fine art of map-making and the map gradually falls apart, until there are no more than a few tattered scraps left in the desert. Baudrillard sees here the “[...] metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction, bearing witness to an imperial pride and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, rather as an aging double ends up being confused with the real thing [...]”.

In 2016, the Empire’s cartographers are working in Silicon Valley; Facebook and Google are the rulers of the new Empire of Representation, endlessly and automatically generating a painstakingly detailed map that is like a simulation of our reality, only better. A map that makes us omnipresent (we can see everywhere), omnipotent (we can control our map-life) and omnitemporal (we can endlessly relive past experiences). The ultimate consequence, at least for the time being, of this cartography was envisioned by Dave Eggers in his novel ‘The Circle’³, in which a fictitious (though by now perhaps already less fictitious) internet company of the same name endeavours to bring us total transparency. Using applications such as SeeChange, PastPerfect and SoulSearch, everything in the world is made public and shareable. You can find out everything about everyone, and everyone can find out everything about you. In the novel, being online takes place more or less automatically: there is a camera on every street corner, a webcam in every room and a bodycam on every person, and everything can always be seen in real time. The twist, however, is that this openness is not an enforced regime, but a voluntary action based on a truly noble idea: being totally open and transparent about your life will, supposedly, make you a better person. The ultimate goal, the rounding of the Circle, is the ‘Completion’: a state in which total knowledge about everyone is totally shared with everyone, so that the distinction between yourself and the other becomes irrelevant. In other words, the map of the physical world corresponds exactly with the physical world itself.

Though Dave Eggers’ novel has been called Orwellian, Baudrillard’s essay is in fact much more terrifying. Baudrillard turns Borges’ fable inside out: in his version, it is the last remains of reality that are rotting away on the surface of the map. According to Baudrillard, “[...] it is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory [...]”. In other words it is reality, rather than the map, that has all but vanished, leaving only a few weathered scraps scattered across the desert. However, even this description of the relationship between the map (or: the internet) and the reality it describes, does not really do justice to the mechanism of what he calls ‘the simulacrum’: ‘Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory [...]. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.’ What does he mean by this?

The role and function of the digital landscape in our society can be understood, according to a free interpretation of Baudrillard’s simulacrum, in four different ways. The first way would be to say that the internet is a reflection of our actual reality. In this version, the cartographers of Google and Facebook are doing a good job: The digital landscape is a reliable representation. Perhaps its only flaw is that it is not yet as detailed as it could be. Facebook merely refers to our real lives, which unlike the internet are full of meaning and depth. Or, to make a useful analogy with religion: we know that the icon of the saint is not the actual saint, but a mere representation (as accurate as possible) of the narrative about this saint.

A second way of interpreting the role of the cartographers would be to say that the maps they make in fact serve to mask and pervert our fundamental reality. According to this vision, besides being a mere representation, the internet is also a poor representation. Gazing too long at this map of the digital landscape is ‘dangerous’, since it presents an idealised and fundamentally wrong version of reality. Facebook is Fakebook. There is a moral value judgement in this vision: to go back to the religious analogy, an iconoclastic destruction of images is necessary here in order to unmask the cartographers and show us their real faces.

The fictitious reality of ‘The Circle’ takes place somewhere in the battle zone between these two visions. However Baudrillard goes not one, but two steps further. What if the role and function of the digital map is neither good nor bad, but in fact a distraction? What if the internet in fact serves to mask the absence of any fundamental reality? This ‘reality’, which we consider to be deep and

meaningful, gradually fades away in this vision. Facebook’s premise is that the online event (the ‘symbol’ or the ‘sign’) is essentially a representation of an actual experience (‘reality’); but what if this is not actually the case? What happens when the icon takes the place of the saint? In this third vision, reality is substituted by its own signs and symbols. Thousands of years of religion have taught us that this can go on for quite some time without reality getting too much in the way: we have no problem in projecting all of the saint’s qualities upon the icon.

The fourth way of interpreting the digital landscape is the brain-teaser. Here, the map is not related in any way to any reality whatsoever: it is a simulacrum in and of itself. The map is ‘hyper-real’, disconnected from the imaginary as well as from reality. Neither the map nor reality are true or untrue; there is nothing to be substituted or represented. We like to think of Facebook as representing the best bits from our lives: a polished version of a reality that is often complicated and confusing. However, according to Baudrillard there is another dimension to consider here: that this polished version exists only to hide the fact that ‘actual’ reality is also a Facebook. Facebook is presented as ‘virtual’ in order to make us believe that the rest is real, while in fact our reality has long ago ceased to be real. Our ‘real’ life also belongs to the domain of the hyperreal and the simulation. There is no such thing as ‘actual reality’; nor do we need such a thing to give meaning to our lives. In the film ‘The Matrix’, it is no coincidence that the hacker Neo hides his computer disks in this book by Baudrillard, or that the book’s pages are all blank and have been a hollowed out. (Baudrillard, by the way, was no fan of the movie.)

So what does all of this mean for us as spatial designers? A lot, according to Baudrillard, and it is no surprise that he has been such an important source of inspiration to a whole generation of postmodern (deconstructivist) designers. The 2016 graduation works also show a clear positioning of designers with respect to the digital landscape. The strategy for arriving at such a position, provided to the students by the design education programme, consists of three steps: first, students are asked to conduct theoretical research on a subject of their choice, and to independently position themselves with regard to this subject. Students then explore, in research through design, the consequences of the position formulated in the theoretical component. It is here that the designer’s personal added value comes to the foreground: free and intuitive thinking within a self-formulated assignment leads to spatial design concepts that are more unexpected and more innovative than anything that could be arrived at through purely theoretical research. Critical reflection upon the student’s own research takes place by building large, real-life scale models (often filling an entire room) based on the sketches from the research through design – an approach which is particularly interesting in the context of the digital landscape. The scale models help the student to test the spatial design concepts, and to further improve these concepts through new insights. This leads to an iterative process in which theory, research through design and real-life implementation all come together in a coherent final result.

The shared fascination for our digital living environment takes on an entirely different shape in each of this year’s graduation works. With his project ‘De toekomstige interieurarchitect’ (The Interior Architect of the Future), Sam Eerdman sounds a critical note on how casually the internet seems to be taking over his role as a designer. He takes the digital landscape very seriously, creating an online design method while also providing it with an intelligent twist. Though on first sight Sam may seem to be calling for an iconoclastic rebellion against the internet, in reality he is turning his (self-initiated) disadvantage into a strength, much the way a Judo master would. It is precisely this accessible, anonymous online working method that provides him with the freedom to create unique and distinctive designs. For Sam, design begins in a virtual reality, which he then transforms into a concrete design: in other words, reality as a representation of the map.

Arco Hollander begins his research of a miniature pop music venue ‘APoD’ by observing how discomfort can be used as a powerful design method. His thesis is that the experience of a pop concert can be enhanced by intelligently directing these feelings of discomfort. In the implementation this leads Arco to create an adaptive space, which can change shape according to the mood of the moment. His space behaves like a soundscape and can be manipulated like a playlist. The project demonstrates

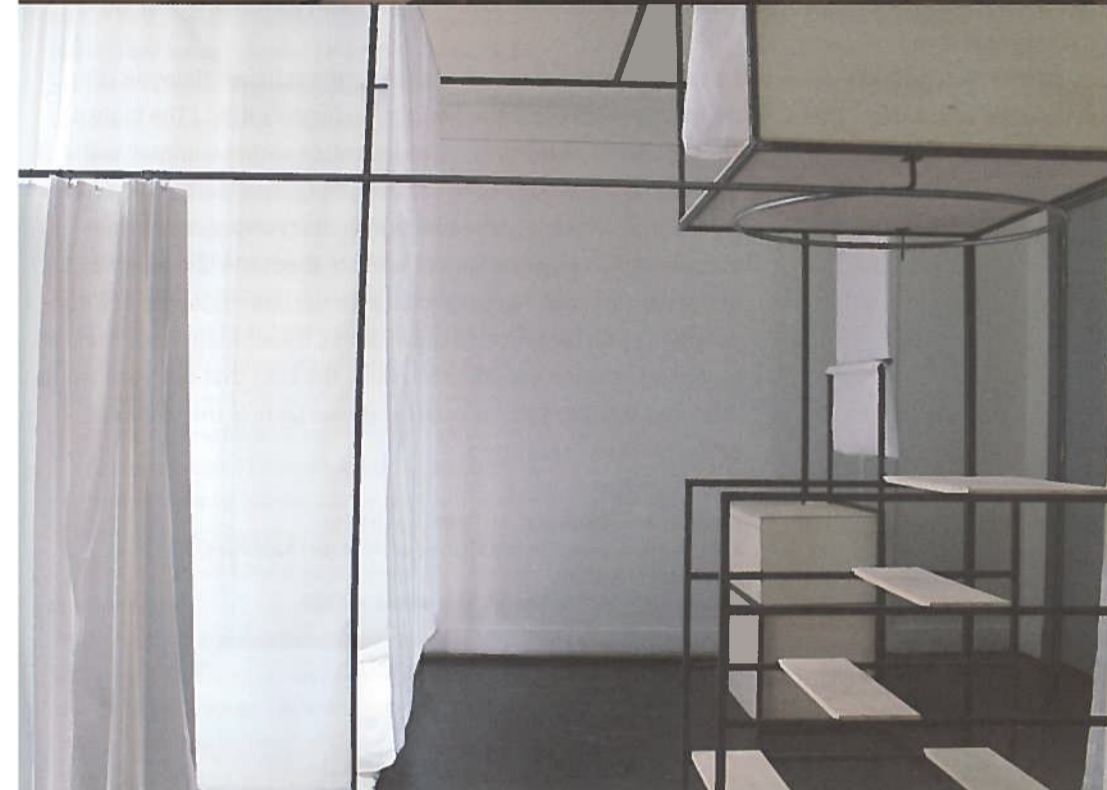
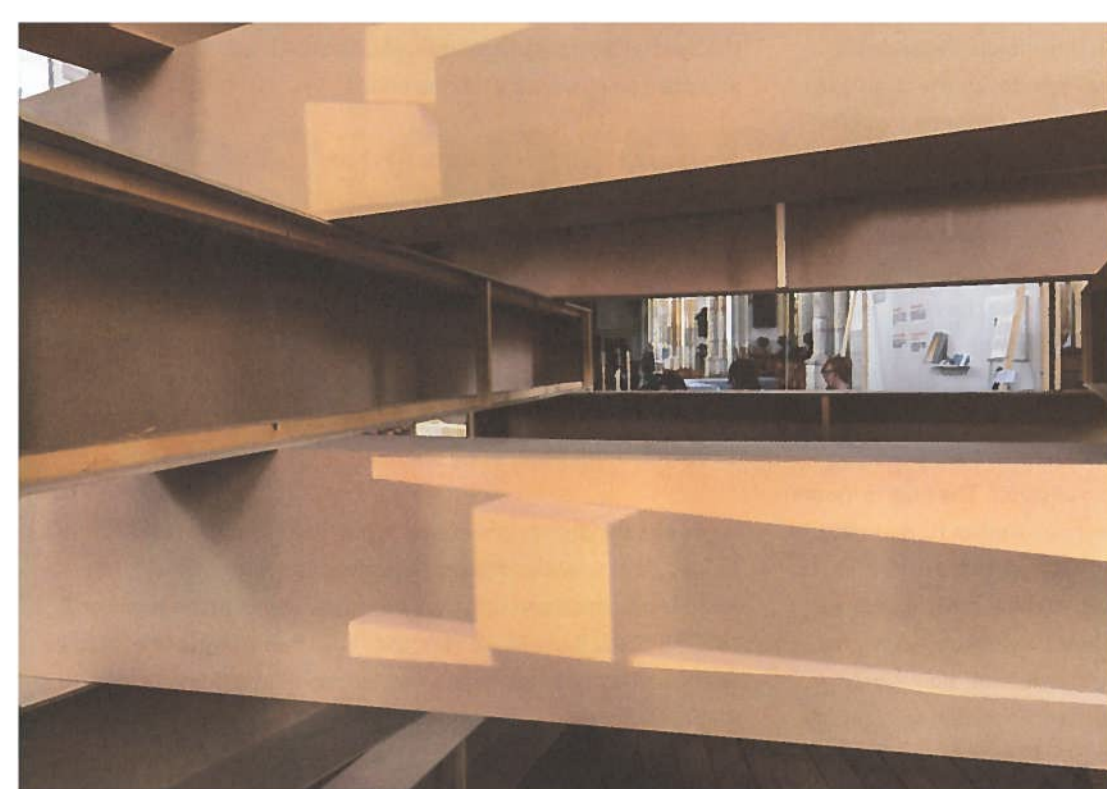
the spatial design consequences of an environment that can be adjusted as easily as a mixing board.

The project ‘Vrijheid in Ruimte’ (Freedom in Space) by José Koers is an attempt to express in a spatial design the freedom of wireless living. In her project, pieces of furniture are no longer monofunctional, but can adapt to the flow of the user. If my digital environment adapts to my behaviour, then why doesn’t my house? For José, this leads to a new and exciting language of interior architecture: a table no longer looks like a table, and any way is much more than a table. It is a table, a chair and a stair ladder all in one, depending on the flow of the moment.

Sam uses the digital landscape in order to reconquer his position as an independent designer; Arco and José find in the digital world freedoms they wish they could also have in the real world. In her project ‘Lokaliteit’ (Locality), Suzanne Overbeek focuses on the value of unique local experiences. She argues for a world in which, rather than everyone simply grabbing everything from the internet, designers painstakingly observe the unique characteristics of a specific location and express these in a design.

Aaltsje Venema perhaps goes the furthest in her dialogue with the digital landscape. Her project ‘De Digitale Kijk’ (The Digital View) presents a detailed representation within our ‘real’ world of the fragmented vision of the digital landscape. Aaltsje observes both worlds without judgment, and visually expresses in her installation a sincere sense of wonder about the characteristics of the digital world. Her project is also the best example of a non-judgmental observation of the internet. Baudrillard wrote that the purpose of the virtual world is to hide the fact that our ‘real’ world is no less virtual. Aaltsje Venema shows us how this concept actually looks in practice.

1. Report from Corporeal, ArtEZ #2, March 2016
2. Baudrillard, Jean, ‘In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities’, Semiotext (e), 1983
3. Eggers, Dave, ‘The Circle’, McSweeney’s, 2013



Corporeal – the study of the constantly changing relationship between humans and space – is the basis from which we work with students.

In the word 'corporeal' (the name of the Master of Interior Architecture), 'corpo' stands for the body and 'real' stands for the reality around us. Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher, came to the realisation that one's own body (le corps propre) is not just a thing, but rather a permanent prerequisite for experiences to be able to understand our world. The body is thus the site for social realism and spatial truth.

Visionary

Corporeal sees its students as significant innovators in the professional field, initiators who help develop the field from within studios or as independent contractors or through research programmes. They take on an investigative role: they keep asking questions and are able to remain free in their thought processes. They learn and develop themselves through continual reflection, but are also able to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to others.

Critical

Corporeal believes that designers and interior architects should be able to identify societal trends and address them in projects in the field of interior architecture. They examine behaviour and interrelations in the space where people live and develop strategies to influence them. Interior architects do not only design living spaces, but they also see and understand what is happening in the world around them. And they highlight the impact of new phenomena. Significant recent developments, such as the importance of everything local, changes and trends in organisations and the use of new technologies in our daily life all demand new answers.

Programme

In a two-year programme, ArtEZ trains Master students to become interior architects who are equipped for complex projects and partnerships. The educational programme is based on three domains: Bodily, Social, Reflective.

www.corporeal.artez.nl

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Images of the Finals 2016

From top to bottom:

Arco Hollander

José Koers

Sam Eerdman

Suzanne Overbeek

Cover:

Finals 2016, Aaltsje Venema

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