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BUILDING THE BETWEEN

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Advances in information technology have allowed us to move data so fast and at such reduced cost that the notion of a physical site for consulting information has almost disappeared. The dematerialization of the mediums of information could mean the disappearance of not only books, but libraries, or even cultural centers such as universities or cities.

Confronted with the challenge of users who wanted us to build a new **library for the Graduate Institute of International Studies** (*Institut Universitaire des Hautes Études Internationales*) on the *Place des Nations* in Geneva, we had to address the questions of virtuality, materialization and centrality. A few points emerged for the design of this new construction. First, the library is no longer a "container", but rather a "connector". Secondly the non-anthropomorphic, non-material world only has meaning in its capacity to relate to the physical world and the physical body we inhabit. Therefore the notion of "between-ness" emerged as our main area of research: an interface between the physical and the conceptual worlds, or the physical constitution of a conceptual environment.

The library to be built on the *Place des Nations* has a unique context, physical as well as virtual, comprising the history of the site, zoning regulations, economic projections, etc. This web of information had to be integrated into the building and the design of a new surrounding environment.

Context

The *Palais des Nations* of the United Nations in Geneva is known architecturally for the entries to its international competition of 1932 rather than for its present buildings. The controversy surrounding the competition focused on the plan submitted by Le Corbusier, who for the first time presented a “Modernist” project to an international audience. The slick facade, the forest of piles and the artificial grounds were strongly criticized at the time as being more appropriate for a factory than a “palace”. The competition of 1932 had the virtue of raising the question of image, of representation in architecture. What should a palace look like for a world organization whose duties extend to all continents?

If the question of representation was answered by Le Corbusier in 1932 with an aesthetic related to the mechanical paradigm—arguing that architecture needs to reflect its zeitgeist—a similar question certainly needs to be addressed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If we agree that architecture constitutes our environment, we must ask the question of what our environment is today. It obviously contains a physical dimension, but with the progress of computing tools and telecommunication devices an entirely new dimension has emerged.

Our perception of the world is slowly moving away from our direct experience of situations and being replaced by mediated information. Our education and perception are dislocated from actual physical places, and teletransportation allows us to be in contact with any location without being there physically. A virtual world is emerging—one that is moving away from the anthropomorphic dimension of the body—with data processors feeding us assimilated time and space sequences.

If the mechanical paradigm of the 1930s was easy to incorporate into a process of materialization, the dematerialization of space, the dislocation of time and the infinite scales of virtual reality have brought architecture and the architect to a degree where neither has easy answers. In a society of communication, where a logo can replace a facade, and an electronic advertisement is more effective than expensive materials, what is the role of the architect? In this context, Peter Eisenman has argued that architecture should not be concerned only with aesthetic, economical or functional criteria, but rather with understanding a new condition of being in the digital age.

Traditional technology gave us the means to shelter ourselves from the rain, cold, and heat, but architecture must now shelter us from conceptual reality, virtual reality and the multi-dimensional environment. New technology always presents us with friendly and positive images. It is a technology of computation and management of data, processing as fast as one million bits per second. Ultimately, it is important that we are able to decode such mediated information and to relate it to our “real” world.

Henri Bergson almost a century ago offered an explanation in *Matter and Memory*. Describing how the brain perceives a moving image, Bergson indicated that we have the capacity to memorize the previous visual stimuli and to reconstitute them in a continuous sequence, almost as in a fluid of still images. Further he proposed that a possible pattern of recognition built through past experience allows us to decode what we see. In one sense, virtual reality is located somewhere between our sensors (the eyes) and our decoder (the brain). But in order to decode, we must connect with the information source and understand its meaning.

An educated eye sees and recognizes a simulacrum of reality. An uneducated eye does not recognize in the color dots of a picture, for example, the frozen moment of a three dimensional world. A baby or a cat does not understand at first a reflected image in a mirror, just as people other than architects usually have difficulty reading an axonometric or section drawing. What percentage of viewers understand that the flow of photons and electrons projected by a cathode ray tube onto the flat surface of a television screen is a representation in two dimension of a three dimensional space? To acquire the possibility to decode information, we need both individual memory, which comes from personal experience, and collective memory. As libraries have traditionally been the depositories of this collective memory, the project for the library of the Graduate Institute of International Studies (GIIS) attempts to be an active memory, a connector between the conceptual and the physical worlds.

The library we have designed can be understood as a tool, allowing one to have a personal perceptive experience in a building fluctuating between a conceptual and a physical environment. A design based on the idea of “memory consolidation” dictates the inherent logic of the building, so our library can be considered an active memory, not only connecting the conceptual and the

material—neurons and paper—but also standing between landscape and built form, between parkland and the *Place des Nations*.

The material of the library, its collection of books and maps, has lost its stability in the dimension of paper. The library, our symbol of the memory of our civilization, is beginning to dematerialize this structure of information, with documents migrating from one source of information to another. The model of the library as a container of all possible books has evolved into a model of a connector of information. Accessible from the entrance ramp, the main floor of our library acts as one of these connectors, whereas the area which provides access to knowledge and the exchange of information is suspended above a public passageway and visually connected to the reading rooms below.

The library cannot be seen only as an object belonging to the physical world but must also be seen as a thinking process belonging to a mental construction. Its conceptual presence is obvious, not only because it can exist in the form of a publication or of an exhibition away from its physical site, but because of the impossibility to understand it purely in its physical dimension. In a country that appreciates stability and precision, the library can never be considered as a precisely definable object, since its boundaries fluctuate between different referential spheres; it exists between figure and ground, evolving as it does out of the ground.

There is obviously a physical materialization of our library, but it is a conceptual logic that has defined its design, from the slope of its walls, the angles of its elements, to the rigor of its geometry. Based on a tightly woven net representing a synaptic process of memory consolidation, the conceptual presence of the library is evident in the design of the built form, down to its smallest detail. The architecture does not respond to the technological rules of construction, nor to the anthropomorphic dimensions of the user. It is an architecture where the immaterial component of the concept is manifest in the constitution of the form.

The interstitial, manifested in various conditions, has long preoccupied Peter Eisenman. First it was cubes and grids intersecting each other in an attempt to develop an internal language of architecture, then marks and imprints inscribed in the physicality of the built form in an attempt to reveal a conceptual presence. Then followed the expression in a physical form of the other dimensions of our environment, such as historical or conceptual traces.

Immaterial presence seems to have reached an essential concretization in the library project. The project stands at an intersection between the conceptual and the physical. It exists at an interstitial space that constantly fluctuates between the different coexistent forms of reference, revealing and questioning the interaction between these two worlds. To go back to Bergson's proposition, we have to provide places to educate our perception. The library of the GIIS is such a place. To understand such a structure, one must first construct it as a mental image, then experience the physical space to verify one's mental picture, thus moving away from any preconceived notion of architecture and a library.

The library acts as a connector between the virtual and the physical worlds—it is like stepping inside a television to see behind the screen—allowing one to explore his or her own perceptive objectivity. The specific position in time and space of each individual can thus better be understood and one's own thinking process can be encouraged. It is essential to personally explore one's references, to explore the differences between a fundamentally conceptual structure and its effect on one's eyes and body moving within it.

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