

## Introduction

### **AVATAR - Advanced Virtual and Technological Architecture Research**

Neil Spiller

The Advanced Virtual and Technological Architecture Research Laboratory was founded in September 2004 at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. By 2004 many teachers and students at the Bartlett were working with some aspects of virtuality but the full scope of the research was often contained within the hermetic unit system. AVATAR is conceived as a cross unit research group and agenda that explores all manner of digital and visceral terrain, its augmentation and symbiosis. AVATAR also has a dedicated Masters Programme for students. Over recent years AVATAR has grown into an international research collaborative centre. It attracts students from around the world and a critical mix of cultural, aesthetic and social agendas are encouraged.

AVATAR is fundamentally interested in research concerning the impact of advanced technology on architectural design, however it also contributes to discussion on issues such as aesthetics, philosophy and cybernetics.

Technologically, AVATAR concerns itself with virtuality (exploring fully immersed, mixed

and augmented environments); Time based new media (film, video and film theory), Nano and bio technology (micro landscapes and architecture, ethics, sustainability and ecology) including reflexive environments and cybernetic systems.

Philosophically and artistically, AVATAR is convinced that the new technologies prompt a re-evaluation of Surrealist spatial protocols and tactics. Also it believes that Alfred Jarry's proto-surrealist poetic pseudo science of 'Pataphysics and its idea of the 'Clinamen"- the swerve (chance) has great import on what we do. The choreography of digitally enabled chance allows us to create architecture of blossoming possibility where events are fleeting, exceptional and particular.

Narratively and aesthetically, AVATAR considers itself uniquely skilled and positioned to posit new aesthetic systems and codes of representation for architecture, interior design, multi media design and graphic design.

Generally, it is at the forefront of international architectural discourse and is constantly working to uncover the new architecture of the twenty-first century. AVATAR's practice is neither anti-intellectual nor Luddite, it looks everywhere and excludes nothing in its search for new paradigms of practice.

The most important paradigm shift sustained by the new media band technology with its consequent ubiquity is that of the liberation of the user from the stylistic and spatial dictates of aesthetic fascists like architects, politicians and planners. As this century progresses, this tyranny will become less and less legislated. The ability of users to configure spaces that are mnemonic, high and low coded, personal and transmittable is swiftly accelerating. Music appreciation, for example, has become an evolving virtual terrain, music collections can be invisible, remixed, shared, distributed around rooms as invisible but aural graffiti, play listed to infinite satisfaction. Geo tags can be left all around the world to offer insight, polemic, warning and delight. We can make the traces of our lives readable as a new social archaeology. Obviously the great paradox of our Age, the prospect of surveillance, always makes us consider the ethics of careful, wise and informationally safe digital space.

This guest-edited edition of Haecceity Papers showcases some of the original approaches to architecture that AVATAR has fostered in recent years.

Ben Sweeting explores ethics and cybernetics particularly the issues of contingent design and its nested potentials. His work is beautifully logically argued and hand drawn with dexterity seldom seen in the computer age.

Lenastina Andersson explores a mnemonic architecture of minute ghostly happening in a derelict house in Sweden. The ethereal objects tell the story of the history of the house. The drawings have a dark, foreboding yet ultimately beautiful sfumato quality to them – very Rembrandian. Sacha Leong explores a world where the everyday has assimilated even the rarefied protocols of tissue engineering and biotechnology. A simple domestic kitchen doubles up as a biotech lab. Christian Kerrigan posits a non-Luddite approach to sustainability. Having discovered that when you constrict tree growth with metal corsets, one can grow, very structurally dense timbers. He therefore shows us how to husband the growth of a ship with a kind of heavy metal bonsai technique. This is a 200-year architectural project, controlled by amber clocks and even a slipway is constructed in this fashion – a machinic ecology augmenting a natural one. Michael Wihart presents a photo essay of his work as body-space. Nic Clear presents his light box polemics and their accompanying critique of digital psychosis.

In a world where nearly all, architecturally speaking, is possible we are continually exploring the question of what is it that we need to do to continue to place architecture at the centre of human discourse as its primary agent of problem-solving.

We hope you enjoy this issue of Haecceity Papers and that you are interested in some of our ideas, concepts and innovations.

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### **Neil Spiller**

Neil Spiller is Professor of Architecture and Digital Theory at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. His early work has been described as a cockroach standing on its hind legs holding a spear. This architectural language was honed by years of experimentation, with technology, with mythology and with shifting aesthetic preoccupations. It readdressed itself in the light of the voodoo of the virtual, and when the time came, it flirted with the blue and grey goos of nanotechnology. Recently his work has tested itself against the religious iconography of the crucifix, the Adoration of the Magi and poor old St Sebastian. Now it dwells in the vicissitudes of Reflexivity. His many published books include *Digital Dreams - The Architecture of the new Alchemic Technologies* (1998), *Lost Architectures* (2001) and *Visionary Architecture* (2003).