Architecture and the city

Chapter 8 of Thinking about Architecture by Colin Davies

Cities endure for hundreds, even thousands of years. Rome was founded, according to tradition, in 753 BC and not only does it still exist but it is still alive, functioning as well, or as badly, as it ever did. Ancient Romans, if brought back to life in the 21st century, would probably be appalled and terrified by the modern city. But once they had got over the shock they would begin to recognise parts of it, not just the preserved ruins of the Forum or the Palatine Hill, but the ordinary streets, their directions and connections, their relationship to the seven hills and to the old roads leading out of the city. Cities have a special relationship to time and to human memory. In a sense, a city is a man-made object, but its complexity and the depth of its history make it more like something natural – its streets, squares and landmarks like rivers, forests and hills. We can dam the rivers, raze the forests and level the hills but not without a sense of loss because we are destroying our own past, both private and collective, a past that restricts but also nourishes our lives. Cities are 'monumental' not in the sense of grand or imposing, like a temple or a town hall, but in the sense that they embody memories and associations. The word monumental comes from the Latin 'monere' which means to remind or warn. Cities remind us of our own personal history and of the history of the society we live in. They remind us who we are.

Few of the buildings that line the Edgware Road in London are more than about 150 years old but the street itself is much older; the Romans called it Watling Street. So the Roman street survives not as a material, but as a virtual presence – a line, a direction, a human habit. It is surprising how many of these ancient virtual presences survive in European cities, even when they have no obvious modern function. We think of the Piazza Navona in Rome as a Baroque space, dominated as it is by Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers and by Borromini's

Church of St Agnese. But why is the piazza so long and narrow? Because there has been a long, narrow open space here since ancient times, when it was called the Stadium of Domitian and used to stage chariot races and other bloodthirsty public spectacles. There are similar survivals in almost every old Italian city. Walk in the narrow streets of Florence just west of the Piazza Santa Croce, and you will come across a curious curving street called the Via di Bentaccordi which traces the outline of a vanished Roman amphitheatre. In nearby Lucca, the form of the old amphitheatre is even better preserved, and here its presence is acknowledged in the name of the Piazza Amfitheatro, now the main public open space of the city. The standardised plan of a Roman Castrum or military camp, with its Cardo and Decumanus forming a crossroads in the centre, is still clearly discernible in the current street maps of cities all over Europe and the Middle East.

In cities, individual buildings are frequently demolished and replaced but the streets and public open spaces tend to stay put. We could think of the city as a kind of matrix of virtual structures, renewing themselves on different time scales. First comes the street plan, ancient and relatively permanent, altered only in exceptional circumstances, like the carving of boulevards through the narrow streets of nineteenth century Paris by Baron Haussmann; then come the buildings, some long-lasting and monumental, some, like the London office blocks of the 1960s, overtaken by institutional and technological change and demolished after only thirty years or so; then come the interiors of the buildings, especially commercial buildings like offices and shops, which might be refitted every five or ten years; and so on down the time scale – the furniture in the houses, the goods in the shops, the news placards on the pavement that change every day.

Cities change in different ways in different cultures. In European cities, the pattern of land ownership is usually rather fluid. Small plots on which houses

originally stood are often amalgamated to accommodate larger developments – office blocks, hotels, shopping centres, royal palaces. But in Japan, customs and laws governing inheritance tend to preserve the old site boundaries which means that the only way buildings can grow is upwards. To European eyes, this gives the typical Tokyo street a curiously squashed up appearance, its tall, thin buildings crowding together, the newer, taller ones dwarfing their older immediate neighbours. The history of the street is written in the profile of its buildings, as in a graph or histogram.

The physical forms of cities are endlessly varied to accommodate natural features like hills and rivers, as well as social and cultural forces that are more difficult to define. But they are also to some extent standardised. A city is usually a network of standard spatial elements: streets, squares, parks, yards, private gardens. In old European cities, these spaces tend to be very clearly defined, like the narrow streets in the centre of Rome or Naples, which are sliced like ravines through the living rock of the buildings that tower over them. These streets are unambiguously public. In a sense, because they are continuous, they constitute a single public space. There are no grey areas, no front gardens or grass verges such as you might find out in the suburbs. The streets belong to everybody and when they open out at a cross roads or in front of a church the resulting piazza is like a public room, the facades of the surrounding buildings its decorated walls, the fountains, trees and benches its furniture. Occasionally as we wander through the city we might glimpse, through an archway, a little yard which is obviously not a public space. It belongs to the people that live or work in the buildings that enclose it and we probably shouldn't enter it unless we have some business with those people.

This spatial and social clarity is characteristic of traditional cities. As tourists and sight-seers we love the winding streets which are the result of a gradual adaptation over centuries to the comings and goings of daily life and the scale of

the human figure. But perhaps it is their clarity rather than their picturesqueness that is most important. We tend to contrast them with the grid-iron plans of modern cities like New York or Chicago, but in fact grid-iron plans are nothing new. The medieval Bastides towns of southern France, like Aigues Mortes in the Camargue; the Roman military settlements which lie just under the surface of cities like Florence or London; the Mediterranean Greek colonies of the fifth century BC; the camps that housed the workmen that built the pyramids of Egypt: all had grid iron plans. Manhattan may have not have many narrow winding streets, but it does have that clear-cut quality, that unambiguous relationship between street and building, between public and private space, and to that extent, despite its skyscrapers, it is a traditional city.

Urban theorists of the last half century have been very interested in the clarity of traditional urban forms. One their favourite illustrations is the extraordinarily detailed and accurate map of Rome created in the eighteenth century by the architect Giambattista Nolli. Nolli's map represents buildings, or rather urban blocks, as dark masses against the white background of the streets and piazzas – a 'figure/ground' technique that has since been adopted as an analytical tool. Interestingly, the detailed interiors of churches, complete with columns, niches, and side chapels, are shown in white, because, as public spaces, they are regarded as notionally external. Satellite photographs of Rome confirm the accuracy of the map which, since the centre of the city has changed very little over the last three hundred years, still serves well as a navigational aid for the tourist.

Nolli's map is important to urban theorists because it has become a critical 'counter example' to the practice of modernist architects and urban planners who largely rejected traditional urban form in the early twentieth century. Modernists saw the city not as history written in stone but simply as a design project. The modernist city was different from the traditional city in at least three important

ways: it was a collection of separate buildings standing in open space rather than a solid mass from which open space was carved; it sorted its human uses or functions – home, work, leisure and so on – into separate zones rather than allowing them to mix together; and it was designed all at once as a perfect final product rather than the beginning of an open-ended process. The best example is not a real city but a visionary project, Le Corbusier's Ville Contemporaine, a city for three million people, designed in 1922. It is, in a sense, a fiction, an unattainable Utopian ideal, but it is nevertheless worked out in some detail and it had an enormous influence on subsequent real urban developments. A central business district, consisting of 24 sixty-storey skyscrapers, is surrounded by luxury apartment blocks for a professional and administrative elite. Further out are the estates for the workers, and on the edge of town, the industrial zone.

It is easy to see how the sunny openness of the Ville Contemporaine – a city built in a park – would shine as a vision of the future at a time when the narrow, winding streets that tourists now find so picturesque were squalid slums. But there were deeper, architectural reasons why a Modernist architect would want to blow apart the dense, congealed mass of the traditional city. The new doctrine of functionalism demanded openness. If spaces were to be related optimally to one another, if healthy sunlight and fresh air were to be welcomed into buildings, if the load-bearing walls and pitched roofs of the old construction technology were to be flung off and replaced by the reinforced concrete frame and the free plan, then the new functional buildings would need room to breathe. The ideal modernist building was freestanding pavilion, like the one-off Purist houses that Le Corbusier, in 1922, was just beginning to design for his wealthy clients. It was unrealistic to design such houses for ordinary people, but row houses and apartment blocks could benefit from the same radical rethink provided they were not imprisoned in the slowly changing matrix of the traditional city. The old city must, if necessary, be destroyed to make way for the new. In 1925 Le Corbusier exhibited another visionary urban project called the Plan Voisin, not a complete

new city this time but a new urban quarter in the middle of Paris. To accommodate it, the old district known as the Marais – the part that tourists now love the best – would have been razed to ground.

Forty years later, when Le Corbusier's vision had been partly realised in high rise estates all over the world, architects and urban theorists began to regret the passing of the traditional city and to appreciate its virtues. The city built in a park had turned out, in reality, to be a city built in a formless, meaningless open space. Was it public, or communal, or private? How could one tell? The tight correspondence between urban and social forms in the traditional city had been destroyed and the result was dissipation and neglect. Architects began to crave once again the clarity and containment of the street and the piazza. It seemed so much more human, not just in its scale and proportion but in the way it was used, the way that it brought together the activities of daily life rather than separating them into different zones. The Ville Contemporaine was like a diagram that illustrated, and reinforced, the fragmentation of modern life. A revival of traditional urban form might re-unite the fragments and heal the damaged wholeness.

In an influential book called Collage City, published in 1979, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter contrasted the modernist 'city of prophecy' with the traditional 'city of memory'. In the city of prophecy the flow of time is frozen in a utopian vision, impossible to achieve in practice. The Ville Contemporaine is a pure invention, a uniform, abstract solution to a problem formulated in purely functional terms. Tradition plays no part in it except as an obstacle to be overcome. It is cut off from the past like a person with no memory. And, being perfect, it is unalterable and therefore also cut off from the future. No work of change or improvement can take place without spoiling it. Like some disturbing vision of heaven, it has nothing left to do but sing its own praises for ever. All Utopias share this fundamental flaw: when we have built Utopia and thrown a big party to

celebrate our achievement, we still have to get up the next morning and live our lives. But what life is there left to live? In the traditional city, the city of memory, there is no final, perfect state, only a continuum that remembers the past but is open to the future. The buildings may be demolished and rebuilt, but the streets remain.

Paradoxically, the revived appreciation of the traditional city in the 1960s and 70s also took the form of visionary projects, such as Leon Krier's proposal for the redevelopment of the La Villette quarter of Northern Paris, published in 1976. With its grid iron plan and flat roofed buildings, at first it looks every bit as mechanistic as the Ville Contemporaine, but it also has that clear-cut quality, that emphasis on defined and contained space, that we saw in the Nolli map of Rome. And we can imagine how it might change. The buildings themselves are represented almost diagrammatically, as if they are merely place holders for future, more detailed designs. In the real world, the effect of this revival of interest in the traditional city was necessarily more fragmentary, but we can see it clearly in the recent history of sensitive city-centre sites like Paternoster Square next to St Paul's Cathedral in London. The old medieval quarter was destroyed by bombing in 1940 and replaced in the early 1960s by a typical modernist scheme, much admired at the time, with office buildings, including a sixteen storey tower, arranged freely on a pedestrian deck over an underground car park. By the 1980s, the buildings were out of date and unloved and a long argument ensued about the best way to replace them. This finally resulted in a thoroughly traditional plan, with pedestrian streets and squares clearly defined by big office buildings in vaguely classical styles with shops on the ground floor. The overall effect is rather bland and hardly to be compared with old Italian precedents, but the substitution of modernism by a version of traditional urban space is clear enough.

Time, then, is the key to the understanding of traditional and modernist urban form. But there is another factor, related to time, that is perhaps even more important: speed. When everything in the city moved at the pace of human or animal locomotion, the streets were shaped and scaled in proportion to this pace. The coming of the motor car has changed all that. It isn't just a question of traffic – there were traffic jams in ancient Rome – it is a question of the speed of the traffic, or rather its potential speed. It is said that the traffic in central London moves no faster now than it did a hundred years ago, but the fact that motor vehicles have the potential to travel must faster has opened up the possibility of a different kind of urban form.

The tight-packed traditional centres of European cities are resistant the transforming effect of potential speed precisely because of their enduring, monumental nature. But on the outskirts it's different, and in a twentieth century megalopolis like Los Angeles, which covers an area of 500 square miles, the motor car has almost completely erased any remnants of traditional urban form. The poor people still travel around Lost Angeles at ground level on public buses that move relatively slowly. There is still some possibility of living and working in a neighbourhood, and even of walking a couple of blocks to a mini-mall. But above these shabby, formless streets is a faster city of elevated freeways on which richer people move at speed between the parking lots of the mainly commercial premises that substitute for traditional public space, and nobody ever walks anywhere. In this Los Angeles, traditional urban form is irrelevant because proximity has been replaced by speed. The continuous spatial experience of walking in the city, with all its potential for chance encounters, has been superseded by a sequence of spatial episodes – the home, the office, the shop, the restaurant - separated by short doses of that peculiar combination of cosiness and danger that is car travel. The city has been exploded, or rather it has been built in a pre-exploded condition. In this setting, architecture has no monumental function and no responsibility to its neighbours. What does it matter

if the shopping mall and the cinema complex and the fast food outlet are all built in different styles? They are never experienced together anyway. They are isolated pockets of architectural invention with no context – temporal or spatial – to give them meaning.

Continuity and scale are key concepts. It seems almost absurd to compare a city like Los Angeles with a city like Venice (Venice, Italy, that is). They might almost be on different planets. But the contrast is instructive. There are no wheeled motor vehicles in Venice. Its isolated position in the lagoon and the canals that are its main streets allow only slow moving 'vehicles' like gondolas, vaporettos and barges. All very picturesque. But the important thing is the effect that this slowness has had on the form of the city, preserving intact its pre-industrial character (if only for consumption by the tourist industry, but that's another matter). Each neighbourhood, with its canals, its streets, its church, and its piazza (not just a public gathering place but also a rainwater collector discharging into the ornate well at its centre that is the symbolic focus of the everyday life) is scaled appropriately for the community it accommodates. The controlling factor is the normal speed of travel, which is walking pace. How long it takes to walk from the edge of the neighbourhood to the centre is the measure that creates that neighbourhood. Speed regulates the scale and proximity of essential facilities like churches, piazzas and wells and thereby creates urban form – the heights of buildings, the widths of streets, the density of occupation, and so on. Why do tourist love Venice so much? Because the enforced absence of wheeled motor vehicles has preserved its slowness, which in turn has preserved its fundamentally human quality. The individual buildings of Venice are stylistically rather diverse – Byzantine, Gothic, Renaissance classical – but together they create a coherent form that is itself a kind of communal or collective architecture, assembled gradually over the centuries. It is what the Italian architect and urban theorist Also Rossi called, in the title of his most important book, 'The Architecture of the City'. Any addition to this architecture

must win its place by agreeing not to spoil it. This is the opposite of Lost Angeles. In Venice no-one would dare to ignore the spatial and temporal context of the city. In recent years, almost no-one has dared to build in Venice at all.

If Venice has a fundamentally human quality, does this mean that motorised cities like Los Angeles are fundamentally inhuman? Not necessarily. They too have their apologists and appreciators. The architectural historian Rayner Banham, for example, was a connoisseur of the LA freeways and of the dispersed urban environment they produced. He called it 'Autopia'. Driving on the freeways, he said, was 'a special way of being alive'. In their 1972 book 'Learning from Las Vegas' Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour reveal their secret love of the motorised American city, and in particular of one of its most important components, the roadside commercial strip. Gas stations, fast food outlets, motels and supermarkets don't usually count as proper architecture. Respectable critics and commentators either ignore them or defame them as a form of pollution. Peter Blake wrote a book about the roadsides of America called 'God's Own Junkyard'. But for Venturi et al a gas station is just as interesting as a Venetian palace and a lot more relevant to everyday American experience. They construct a theory of roadside architecture just as Aldo Rossi constructed a theory of the traditional European city, using similar concepts and language. Casinos are compared with cathedrals, parking lots with the gardens of Versailles, and the sprawl of the strip is contrasted with the containment of the Roman piazza. The Nolli map of Rome is mentioned.

But perhaps Venturi's most important insight is that the key determinants of this twentieth century urban form are speed and communication. Put very simply, this is a landscape of objects in space, strung out along a road, and the distance between those objects is fixed by the speed of the passing vehicles. Each object, or building, must attract the attention of the driver and persuade him or her to pull in. The crucial part of the architecture is therefore the sign that lets you

know what goods or services are on offer in the building, from a hamburger to an instant wedding. The design of the functional part of the building is less important. It can be simple and cheap, even if it's a wedding chapel. The building becomes, in Venturi's terminology, a 'decorated shed'. And this is not seen as a bad thing. There is a long architectural tradition of decorated sheds. A medieval cathedral is, conceptually at least, a kind of decorated shed. Its west front is like a big, composite sign conveying, through representations of biblical figures, saints, devils and monsters, a complex message about the spiritual merchandise in which the building deals. This kind of far-fetched comparison is typical of Venturi's provocative style, but it has a grain of truth and its critical force is greatest when turned on what he perceives as the sullen dumbness of orthodox modernist architecture. The decorated shed is celebrated as a practical, vernacular, characteristically American form that has its origins in the simple wooden buildings of the old frontier towns, the saloons and sheriffs' offices with their flat facades, taller than the buildings they front, defining a rudimentary street. It is a form peculiarly well suited to the strung out, motorised city, but with one modification: the façade has to be detached from its building and turned through ninety degrees to face the oncoming traffic. It becomes a 'totem', conveying its message partly symbolically but mainly straightforwardly in written language – the brand, the prices, the special offers, the valet parking. The building itself is now just a plain shed. Inside, it may be fitted out as a utilitarian retail outlet or as a luxurious restaurant, but no-one notices the outside. By the time it comes into view, the driver's attention has already been distracted by the next big totem along the road.

Technology changes cities, as the example of the motor car demonstrates. Digital technology might yet have an even more profound effect on urban form. In the modern world, distance has almost been abolished and proximity is no longer an important factor in many human transactions. We shouldn't exaggerate the power of digital communication technologies. The change they

bring is mainly one of degree rather than of kind – an email is only a faster letter. And there is nothing new about virtual worlds; a novel is a virtual world. Nevertheless we seem to be experiencing a collapsing of space and a dissolving of matter, including even, in a strange way, the matter of our own bodies. In the dealings of everyday life, the physical presence of the people we know, the people we work with, even the people we love, is not essential most of the time. We can always email them, call them on the mobile or follow them on Twitter to find out what they are up to. We can meet them in a video conference or in an imaginary place, like the popular virtual world known as Second Life. We can meet strangers there too, though we won't necessarily see them as who they really are. They might have chosen to be someone else when they concocted the avatar that represents them. The very identity of individual human beings is becoming uncertain. But then when was it ever certain?

Cities deal in physicality and proximity. They are like machines for facilitating physical meetings. Or perhaps they are markets in which the price of proximity is fixed. Until very recently, people who worked had to be near one another, in the factory or the office, the shop or the school. Space had to be found for various activities, it had to be located near other spaces that accommodated related activities, and there had to be physical links between them. A shop on its own in the middle of a field would do no business but in a street with other shops it becomes a place worth visiting. This economy of proximity was defined by physical boundaries and shared passageways – buildings and streets, figure and ground. Now all that is becoming irrelevant. We no longer have to stroll down to the town square to buy provisions in the market and hear the news and gossip; we can order what we need online and switch on the television for continuous bulletins. So what role is left for the town square? We don't need it any more. And soon we won't need the business district or the shopping centre either. Mechanised industry and the motor car began the destruction of the city; digital communication is finishing the job.

The French philosopher Paul Virilio describes how, in the nineteenth century industrial city, time began to take precedence over space as the organising principle of urban life. Work, defined as a period of time – the three shifts per day of the factory or the nine-to-five of the office – became life's city centre, while leisure time and vacations became its suburbs. Conversely, the functional patchwork of the modern city, with its business district, industrial zones and residential suburbs, was the spatial reflection of a temporal reality. Space and time collided violently twice a day in the rush hour. But now, in the digital age, time no longer rules. Simultaneity is the new principle. Even the natural differentiation of day and night has been cancelled by instant global communication. On the computer screen, as Virilio puts it, 'everything is always already present'. Robots man the factories and office work is shifting back into the home as broadband connectivity spreads. It no longer matters much when or where the human work is done.

What are the architectural consequences of this spatial and temporal convulsion? If space is the essence of architecture then the fundamentally non-spatial digital technologies must be seen as a threat to traditional architectural forms. Take the question of remote surveillance and its effect on that ancient and almost universal urban form, the street. The street has a number of obvious functions – a passageway for through traffic, a corridor linking adjacent properties, a gallery for the display of goods in shop windows – but it also has the less obvious function of preventing crime. As everybody knows, crime usually takes place in dark alleyways and other sparsely populated urban spaces that nobody supervises. In the busy street you are safe because any crime is bound to be witnessed and muggers are therefore deterred. Even at night, when the shoppers and revellers have gone home, the street will be relatively safe provided there are windows facing it from which residents just might be keeping watch. This is old-style surveillance, which relies for its effectiveness on the

physical shaping of space – that is to say architecture. But now the word surveillance means CCTV cameras sprinkled liberally over the whole city and connected to banks of screens monitored by persons of uncertain status in secret locations. Note the spatial displacement that has occurred. The visible, physical presence of a policeman in a particular place has been supplanted by the hidden, virtual presence of a security person in a dozen places at once. Whatever we think of the civil liberties aspect of this, it must eventually have a corrosive effect on urban space in general and on traditional streets in particular. Why do you need a street if you have CCTV? In theory, buildings and building entrances could be arranged randomly – scattered over a 'campus' perhaps – provided there is good lighting and blanket camera coverage. In theory, the certain knowledge of the presence of the cameras will deter the criminals and reassure everyone else that they are safe. But will it feel safe? Does feeling safe depend on mere knowledge or is it more a question of spatial instinct? Does it rely on the physical presence and vulnerability of the body? These are important questions for architects.

Surveillance is just one example of the way that a digital technology tends to undermine the organised physicality of the city. The relationship between form and function in urban architecture is far from straightforward but when we add in the digital effect the situation becomes even more fluid. Functional building types don't just become unstable, they dissolve completely into that radically un-spatial realm that we used to call 'cyberspace'. The internet is a kind of city, a city in which physicality and proximity are irrelevant. The complete repertoire of public building types – those monumental anchor points of the traditional city – is represented in the convenient, searchable, space-less simultaneity of the internet: libraries, museums, town halls, banks, stock exchanges, schools, universities, shopping centres. (Concert halls, theatres, cinemas and sports arenas were forced long ago to share the uniqueness of the experience they offer with radio and television and their related recording technologies.) How

long can the city hold out against this virtual competitive onslaught? Will urban architecture - the systematic organisation of physical space and proximity - eventually disappear both as an art and as a shared experience?

Well, probably not, for one simple reason. People, for the foreseeable future at least, are embodied beings. We live in our bodies and there is nowhere else we can live. Bodies are physical and they need real, extended space in which to be. They also have to be protected from the sometimes hostile environmental conditions that prevail on this planet – the weather, in other words. That's why we used to live in caves and now build artificial caves. Artificial sheltering structures, because they are human products, immediately and inevitably become cultural as well as practical, and architecture is born. Most architects love digital technologies and are quick to adopt them in their day to day practice. Some become besotted with them and begin to imagine that they represent a new kind of architecture dealing with a new kind of space. If there is such a thing as 'cyberspace', the argument goes, then it must need organising, and who better to do this than people that are trained in the organisation of space? The 'paper architecture' of the past - all those visionary projects like the Ville Contemporaine – has become the digital architecture of the present. But this, surely, is a misunderstanding. The 'space' that we seem to see in the computer is an illusion, like the space in a Renaissance perspective painting. It beguiles the mind but it is useless to the body. Architecture, we might argue, is not the ally, but the enemy of virtual space. Architecture represents that embodiment and situatedness – that 'being there' – that is the foundation of all human experience, including the experience of the virtual. A simple example might clarify this. It is ironic that while the real, physical city is being displaced and distorted by digital technology, the virtual worlds of the internet are full of images of physical architecture. In Second Life, people are busy choosing identities for themselves, meeting people, running businesses, buying and selling things, learning languages, and attending art galleries and concerts, just like in

the real world. You can of course do all of these things elsewhere on the internet but Second Life is more appealing because it is, or seems to be, unified and continuous. You don't have to switch between web-sites to get from the language school to the art gallery, you can, in theory at least, 'travel' from one to the other through something that is almost like space. Actually, you can 'teleport' yourself from place to place, which is more of less the same thing as typing in another web address, but the illusion is maintained that you are still in the same 'world'. How is the illusion maintained? By furnishing the virtual world with representations of at least some of the physical features of the real world. So there is land and sea and sky, they are where you would expect to find them – the sky is up, the land is down – and they are appropriately coloured and textured. You can almost believe that plants would grow in the ground and that rain might fall from the sky. Your avatar stands on the ground and is subject to a force that is rather similar to gravity. There is light to see by and it presumably comes from some kind of sun or moon, for there is day and night, and they alternate on the same 24 hour cycle as the real day and night. This isn't just a picture or a film because we ourselves seem to be able to move around in it. You could say that it is just a video game, but the fact that there are no rules or goals or levels, and the fact that anyone can join in, seems to change its status, persuading us to accept it as an actual, if not a real, world. For some people it is real enough to inhabit for long periods of time, real enough to make a living in, real enough to get married in and build a home.

What might this home look like? How will it be designed? What factors should the Second World architect take into account? Will they be the same as those for a house in the real world: local climate, availability of suitable building materials, water supply and drainage, energy efficiency, subsoil conditions? No. The architect can safely ignore all of these factors because this is only going to be a pretend home, like a home in fairy story. The walls will not need to be insulated because there is no warm air to contain or cold air to exclude; in fact the walls

don’t need to be there at all, unless to preserve the privacy of the avatars that ‘live’ in the house. No need for a roof either, since it never rains and the heat of the sun can’t actually be felt. Structure? Again, no need, for there is no gravity. It turns out that the force that keeps things on the virtual ground can be switched off. Everybody in Second World can hover or fly at will. The truth is that it just isn’t necessary to build buildings in Second Life, so why do so many people do it? And why do those buildings look like real buildings, with walls and roofs and floors and chimneys and porches? For the same reason that this virtual world has a ground and a sky: because this is an environment designed for humans and humans can’t live, even virtually, in abstract space. They must feel the resistance of the real world, the resistance that defines life. In a world where the primary conditions for the existence of things seem to have been abolished, those conditions must be recreated in some form of representation. So, paradoxically, while the cities of the real world are being threatened by the space-dissolving forces of digital technology, the cities of the internet are desperately clinging to physical, spatial, enduring, human architecture.