General

A Better World on the Horizon

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Kas Oosterhuis, Lukas Feireiss (eds.), *Game, Set and Match II: On Computer Games, Advanced Geometries, and Digital Technologies*, Rotterdam, Episode Publishers, 2006, ISBN 9059730364

The question that has preoccupied us since the turn of the millennium loomed up and raced past is: where has the future gone? The future as an idea, a positive entity. As we leafed through the exhaustive collection of essays *Game, Set and Match II*, we found the answer: in architecture. The book shares the same title as the follow-up conference organized by Hyperbody Research Group at Delft University of Technology. It presents an abundance of ideas, research results, building proposals, history lessons, essays and proclamations – a veritable upturned theoretical toolbox, derived indiscriminately from various disciplines.

That variety is reflected in the topics that the authors deal with. In his presentation and foreword, Kas Oosterhuis, the project's initiator, suggests that the publication will examine the relationship between architecture and computer games. Oosterhuis, with his contribution 'Swarm Architecture II', is the first to practically ignore that relationship. In this publication, 'game' has two meanings – firstly in the narrower sense (the role of computer games) and secondly in the wider sense of architecture as a game in search of new rules: rules of aesthetics, of technology or of geometry. And accordingly, the contributions ultimately fall into three themes: play, geometry and open source, although the distinctions are not necessarily strictly applied.

So what is the relationship between games and architecture? Up till *SimCity*, buildings in games were mainly for destroying. Inevitably, therefore, there is an article surveying *SimCity*, that highly popular planning simulator that has generated a whole games subculture around urban planning issues and their effects on social structures (even at a planetary level). Many of the authors have problems concretizing that relationship in a similar way. Katie Salen suggests in 'They Must First Be Imagined' that, with games being designed and tested more collectively these days while the game is already being played, it might produce a change in the way interactive experiences are designed outside the digital field. De Jong and Schuilenburg elaborate further on that idea, as a shift in creative practice from *genius* to *scenius*, from an individual designer to a network of creativity, with consumers and producers designing products in a communal process.

In some texts, architectural metaphors are applied to games, as in Laurie Taylor's criticism of the current 'sandbox' metaphor for the contemporary games world. That approach imagines the game as a sandbox, an environment that can be manipulated in which players have a large number of toys they can use to engineer the game world to their liking. Taylor proposes 'garden' as a more comprehensive metaphor, combining the ideas of sandbox, labyrinth and maze which, in her opinion, are too limited on their own. 'Garden' captures the scope of several levels, types and use of space more effectively. Norbert Streitz elaborates further on this in his discourse on cooperative buildings, a form of intelligent architecture that adapts to changing situations with the computer disappearing

in the building. In the 'ambient agora' he has conceived, games as such do not play a part, but something resembling a digital garden comes about, stimulating communication, data transfer and informal contact by means of 'calm technologies' which react to the varying positions of people in a particular space (which in turn correspond to specific levels of interaction).

It is a recurring theme in the book – the idea that architecture should be less rigid, should move towards openness, should allow more room for subjectivity. Ralitza Boteva draws inspiration from multiplayer games to describe a form of architecture that interprets space not as a container, but as a medium that can be shaped according to the subject's wishes. The farther you read in the book, the more the contributions ignore the games aspect and focus on practical proposals for architecture in a network society. As Raoul Bunschoten aptly comments: a digital data storm is raging through urban spaces and rapidly uprooting all kinds of aspects of urban life. That storm must be contained and its positive aspects exploited.

The most remarkable example of a proposal of that type is the AlloSphere: a three-storey spherical space built on the campus of the University of California in Santa Barbara. It is intended to promote interactive experiences, open up the fields of mathematics, nanotechnology, the worlds of extremely small and large, of exceptional speeds and unknown dimensions. Marcos Novak praises the AlloSphere in visionary terms: '[It is an] instrument for what can be called "experimental artificial cosmogony and cosmopoetics" – a place for transvergent "worldmaking", for inventing and evolving new species of "worlds" as science and art, a place where we can not only visualize or simulate what we know, but where we can entertain (in rigorous fashion) generative hypotheses of how worlds could be if we altered their basic assumption.' In this context, art gives science 'a free rein' enabling intuitive leaps to be made, a fusing of the two into a serious game.

As is often the case, the impression *Game, Set and Match II* leaves behind is that a finer, better world is on the horizon, because, even though most authors repudiate old-fashioned optimism, a hint of utopianism can always be perceived in the return of spherical shapes, attention for open communication, renewed aestheticization of everyday life, pleas for softness, plans for holistic and sensual buildings. Sometimes the latter have already been built (for example, the naturally-ventilated Kanak Cultural Center or, closer to home, the Hessing Cockpit near Utrecht, the Netherlands), but more often than not they are just out of reach, a mixture of fixed forms and extremely fluid information flows which is still hard to conceive. In other words, a welcome respite from the reign of concrete terror that has defaced the living and working environment in recent decades. One important question still has to be answered: where will we be able to see that game architecture? In the palaces of multinationals and stark Prada boutiques? Or will a counterattack be launched against the fortification of public space and, as an ever-related component, the increasingly straitened human psyche?

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