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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: The House as a Place to Share

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In a recent special issue of the popular architecture magazine *Abitare* devoted to Milan, two expensive shops in the city's center were listed-without a hint of irony-as indicators of the city's livability. For many reasons, Milan is truly one of most avant-garde cities in Europe, yet to paint Milanese livability so generically perfectly exemplifies the loss of identity of a place as it labors to duly consider the identities that compose it. More and more, Milan resembles one of those condominiums imagined by science fiction writer J.G. Ballard. Milan simply provides an example of a new readymade idea, the same that depicts the metropolis as a cause for alienation and fragmentation; evidently, the places where meaningful aggregation and communication are still possible are elsewhere. More than a social space, the city has become a net of cells that do not meet, without a center and without margins. According to some, the need for virtual places emerges from this lack, not because of a demand for simulation, but due to the need for communication. The virtual develops as a reaction to a world that has run out of physical realities to develop.

The space that invites activity contains the present. In a society still skeptical of contemporaneity (and of art, its illegitimate daughter), a virtual space has been created, although it is fundamentally extraterritorial. Inside this space are areas for which, in order to gain access, conformity is paramount. Yet, it is also in those interstitial areas that meaning barter to ransom content from conformism and banality. These places comprise a diffused metropolis, a gigantic, extraterritorial area that is no longer possible to circumscribe within the limits of urban space. The boundary between the observer who interprets, classifies and orders and the contemplative spectator definitely weakens here. I argue, however, for the growing desire to investigate contemporaneity as a space of endless invention: I hope that technology will help bring imagination beyond the mere mimesis of a reality that is more and more difficult to represent.

Perhaps this is only one of the symptoms of the change of the landscape of communication from material to virtual territory. The passage from "landscape" to "mediascape" involves a change in our perceptive rather than our communicative modalities, and it is the media landscape-the decentralized



place *par excellence*-that appears to us all the more as a site of communication.

From the very beginning, new communication technologies have catalyzed spontaneous aggregations: bulletin board systems (BBS), community groups and concepts like Multi-User Domains (MUD) have established community dialogues based on common themes and ideas. In these cases, the space is constituted by the people who frequent it. The position of these areas of discourse inside a virtual space has opened new roads for the complex architecture of communication represented today by the Internet. Place, in general, is the true space for the transmission of content, and this is happening in the new media landscape; but is it not absurd that this place is revealed through the windows of those small boxes called computers? The Internet thrives on these incongruities as an implausible mixture of public and private. Think of the use of the term "home page" to cover the sites of individuals and big firms alike. The home page vindicates the personalization of the message, the singularity of private space made available to innumerable unknown Internet users.

Whereas in our cities every culture of difference is waning, the Internet forces us to consider diversity. In this new space, the two symbolic places between which content expands are the home page and the World Wide Web (or, in other words, one's own house and the whole world). It has become necessary to open the right perceptive coordinates in order to cross what seems like the true contemporary metropolis, a place that pushes the subject to reassess every stabilized or normative boundary. In this place where one can no longer distinguish between inside and outside, fragmentation is the model best adjusted to face reality, forcing us to reexamine traditional ways of observing, living and criticizing the connection between space and communication. Values and styles, plans and visions encounter one another in untraditional forms. Here, one can negotiate identity through the manifold territories in which differences cohabit. Above all, in this situation of virtuality-which closely resembles the virtuality of art-everything remains to be built.

To inhabit, it seems, is attained only through building. This ultimate, to construct, has that, that is to inhabit, as its end. But not all constructions are of residences.

-Martin Heidegger

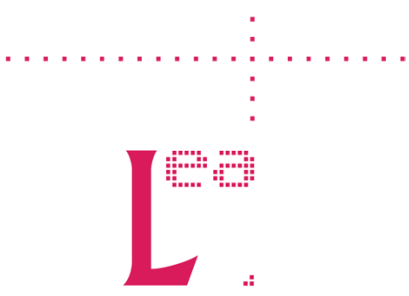
We exist simultaneously in different places-physical and virtual, mental and emotional- but there is one place that is usually ignored, perhaps precisely because it is right in front of our eyes-and that place is the house, a place with limits that are defined according to both our innate attitudes towards centrality and our natural inclinations towards privacy. In many works by contemporary artists that refer to the image, the house and its accessories comprise a central reference point in our relationship to space and memory.

By the end of the 1980s the deconstructionist impulse found its blind alley. The direct confrontation with media culture began to coexist with subjective and identity issues, allowing artists-both from Europe and the U.S.-to elaborate poetics that investigated artistic personal need. The prestigious success of Cuban artist Felix Gonzales-Torres (and later the Mexican Gabriel Orozco) confirms both the artistic scene's broadening toward artistic



dimensions that were formerly considered "minor" and a new (at least for the U.S.) interest toward art that renders private public in a consistent manner. The house becomes a metaphor for the space that we inhabit, a container from which flow images of passion and obsession, of empty, alienating, overflowing or extremely brilliant rooms. In these rooms, as in rooms figured in memory, artists create an intimate architecture of experience and reflection. I speak about rooms not to point out the easy icon of a closed, circumscribed place, but as a metaphoric place inside of which no physical barriers exist, only experiences of relationships between oneself and the world. A simple object in these rooms might remind us of an image from infancy, or at times refer to the typical (which no longer typifies): an empty referent testifying only to the loss of identity. The house certainly represents a cell in traditional architectural terms, but in many works it symbolizes a unity of place that springs out of the meeting between the traditional discipline of architecture and the visionary one of communication, the latter based above all on our desire to contribute and share.

The idea of "house" and the concept of "habitation" seem somewhat inadequate in an epoch in which many are turning toward cyberspace. We must acknowledge that home is where we keep the "personal" computer and that the computer itself reveals to us an image not very distant from what the Romans imagined as the series of rooms in which we distribute our memory. Answering machines and electronic mail terminals testify to our presence even if we are physically absent: we are available even when we are not there. The house seems, therefore, to replace our memory: we are everywhere, it is the place of eternal return. The relative simplicity of hypertext markup language (HTML) and the image formats in common use on the Internet have by now made the use of the term "home page" common. One departs from the home page to travel along new roads and returns to it in order to close the connection or go to another "home page." Our houses have become ambivalent: on the one hand, they confirm the idea of shelter; on the other, the invasion of home technology has made them mere switchboards that can carry us anywhere mentally. If multimedia machines carry us in continuous movement toward a virtual physicality, it is also true that people have not been invited here to encounter a new world of fantastic objects, but to discover the expansion of their own communicative abilities within these objects and, perhaps, to rediscover some places to share.



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