IMAGINARY CONSTRUCTION: FILMIC PROCESSES WITHIN THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN STUDIO

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The discussion of architecture and film has often been "framed" by references to set design and backdrop – the glamour or *frisson* lent by iconic buildings, the documentation of historical periods and styles through the *mise-en scène* – which, despite their pleasures, leave interesting structural and perceptual questions less explored. Those questions concern the influence that cinematic techniques and concepts (given the enormous cultural influence of the medium) might have on perceptions of the built environment, as well as the potential for their incorporation in architectural and urban design processes. This paper will discuss and reflect on an architectural design studio and subsequent exhibition that explored some of those questions, particularly, can we use filmmaking as a tool for stimulating and redefining the learning environment of the architectural design studio and the resulting architectural designs? The paper will provide a context by describing the structuring of the studio – the design brief, programme for the year and its pedagogical grounding – before going on to examine and analyse some films produced by students and speculate on their implications for architectural design and teaching processes .

Keywords: architectural education, cinematic design, design studio, design method(s), film

1. Introduction

The discussion of architecture and film has often been "framed" by references to set design and backdrop: the glamour or *frisson* lent by iconic buildings and the documentation of historical periods and styles through the *mise-en-scène*. (Neumann 1996, Albrecht 1987, Hanson 2005) The links between film and urban culture made in recent research have provided another rich field of discussion; for instance the exploration of the close interaction between the images of cities and their filmic representations (Clarke 1997, Bradley 1999, Krause 2003, Donald 1999). However, despite the pleasures of these and other approaches (Pallasmaa 2001, Lynn 2006), there have been interesting structural and perceptual questions less explored. Those questions concern the influence that cinematic techniques and concepts (given the enormous cultural influence of the medium) might have on the embodied process of perceiving the

built environment, as well as the potential for their incorporation in architectural and urban design processes. Here we are particularly interested in the relevance of this field for design teaching.

This area has begun to be explored more recently as digital technologies have made filmic processes more accessible. Courses taught at the Cambridge University Moving Image Studio (CUMIS, now closed) in the early 2000s aimed at making architecture students more familiar with screen language and technical skills. This contributed to exercises where students created "portraits" of buildings – seeking an expression of character beyond physical characteristics (Thomas and Penz 2003). There have also been recent attempts to: rethink architectural representation through the possibilities of digital film (Ratinam 2005, Schaedler and Brown 2007), enhance and extend student engagement with the organisational compexity of the design process through adopting film project planning methodologies (Clear 2005), and produce more "sensorialised" environments through filmic analysis and representation of place (Pizarro forthcoming). This paper will discuss and reflect on an architectural design studio that particularly exploited the potential for filmic processes to extend the discussion of place and narrative in the architectural design studio.

Film/Architecture/Narrative was a Design Unit within the Bachelor of Architecture programme at Bristol, UWE in 2006-7; the work of which was exhibited at The Architecture Centre Bristol in May 2007. The projects sprang from intensive site studies and an analysis of film elements such as montage, depth of field and open-form. Students interwove large-scale models and site footage in video and image sequences, using the process as a way of testing their designs. Ultimately, the Unit strove for an architecture not simply conceived as set-design but as a more thoughtful exploration of the possibilities of the filmic imagination for architecture.

The studio introduced a number of questions and tactics in order to test the potential for a film-focused studio to encourage a broader sense of context and sensitivity to questions of inhabitation. Filmic concepts and techniques were used in the exploration of sites and the production of designed interventions in an attempt to stimulate approaches that went beyond the common understanding of 'digital design' as excessively visual and pictorially focused (Boyer 1996).

To support these explorations the emphasis was on the use of film in the student's design process, rather than simply as a representational device for a 'finished' design. With this in mind, firstly, we were interested in exploring the adaptation of filmic concepts (e.g. montage) to underpin the design process; avoiding simply deriving an architectural aesthetic from a film's mise-en-scène. Secondly, development of the schematic designs and sketch proposals was through intense cycles of modelling and filming; developing a feedback process for the design rather than treating the film as a highly refined client presentation device. Thirdly, in keeping with the 'quick and dirty' approach, we concentrated on students using accessible, relatively inexpensive software and hardware in order to produce the work (this included using mobile phones to film and editing on freeware).

This paper will examine some of the results of the studio and reflect on the way that the projects allowed us to investigate a number of questions. How do we experience the city in a cinematic sense? Can our understanding of space and place be enhanced through film? Can zooms, montages, jump edits, storyboarding, scripting, establishing shots, pans, close-ups, framing, tracking shots, sequencing, depth of field, continuity and other aspects of film productively contaminate architectural design? Finally, can architectural students (and architects), use filmmaking as a tool for stimulating and redefining the design process?

After outlining the studio brief and structure the bulk of the paper will examine and analyse some films produced by students in the studio and speculate on their implications for architectural design processes. It should be noted that within the Film / Architecture / Narrative Design Unit, the 'Narrative' element of the studio's investigations was also critical - particularly in developing students' concerns and consideration for the experience of building occupants. However, in recognition of the conference theme, and a need to maintain focus and brevity, it will only be discussed in this paper in relation to the film/architecture interaction explored in the studio.

2. The Studio

The studio's site area was Spitalfields in East London. Historically situated outside the City Wall of London the area has been defined by a fluctuating mix of marginalised activities and migrating populations. Currently, the expanding City financial centre looms over the site to the west and the increasingly gentrified Bethnal Green rubs up against the eastern edge – stock market to street market to art market. Power relationships and hierarchies flow and shift through the site, while the atmosphere of the place continually changes. Using diverse media students navigated, explored, filmed, mapped and walked boundaries, charted sections, examined sky to sewer, east to west, placed old maps on new ground to uncover and to know this terrain.

A series of projects were completed over the year: an exploratory urban intervention, a threshold study, and a building design for a new International Film School. Each involved the use of film within the design process and its presentation. The first project, and the focus of this paper, was titled "Imaginary Construction" and involved the development of an urban intervention responding to daily rituals observed in the site area. The interventions were generated by four approaches. Firstly, an analysis was made of a number of urban narratives (stories by authors ranging from Paul Auster to Banana Yoshimoto) in order to encourage students to think through the site in terms of its stories and their spatial inscription. It was also a means to develop approaches to notating spatial narratives and diagramming the gestures of inhabitation.

Secondly, students identified a 'client' for their interaction. The focus was a person or group of people who the students identified as performing an everyday ritual in the area. Examples included tradespeople, beggars, students and kitchen-hands. The students, through video, drawing, sound recording and photography, mapped particular activities

these people conducted in the public realm, with an emphasis on diagramming and storyboarding the chosen ritual. Thirdly, there was an exploration of the more general site area and the identification of a site for the intervention. The fourth parameter of the project required students to investigate and focus on a single material for use in constructing the intervention.

The project then entailed bringing together the approaches within a design proposal that evolved through a repeated process of model making and filming. The resulting architectural interventions were required to address aspects such as spatial sequence, threshold, and material quality and sensorial perception as well as their potential appropriation and social significance. The project aimed to use that process to intensely study the way architecture is experienced by a user, culminating in the production of a large-scale model (1:1 to 1:20) and a moving image sequence exploring the presence of the intervention in its site.

Filmic concepts and techniques (here encompassing digital video and image sequences) were key parts of these processes. The emphasis on these media and their associated formal language was driven by an interest in their potential to encourage students to consider aspects of their site and design response that might ordinarily remain unexplored. It was also hoped that this process might lead to students rethinking the possibilities for communicating those formal and experiential aspects of their projects. These intentions and hopes were grounded in a number of potentials posited for a 'filmic' design process.

Perhaps the most important was the use of film to provoke the consideration of a fuller 'urban sensorium' in the project. This term has been explored by a number of authors (Buck-Morss 1991, Friedberg 2006, Goonewardena 2005) but is used here in the sense provided by Pizarro (forthcoming) in his own reflection on student explorations of a "cinematic urban design." The urban sensorium "is used to signify the plethora of sensorial stimuli people receive from the built environment to fix their position in the world psychologically, emotionally and physically." (Pizarro forthcoming) Film has the potential of capturing or describing an increased range of stimuli. Thus the environmental quality of the urban context for the student projects extended beyond visual attributes such as colour and texture to take in aspects such as sound, temperature, rhythm, odour and even more ephemeral qualities such as emotional ambience.

The filmic appreciation of the city was also integrated with the textual explorations of the studio in the promotion of a 'narrativised' approach to the social and cultural positioning of the projects. Explorations of the site area drew on recent deployments of the notion of *flâneurie* as an activity where a mobile, analytical observer might be able to capture some of the ephemeral conditions of urbanity and be alert to their socio-spatial construction (Jencks 1995, Jacks 2005, Pizarro forthcoming). This also drew on De Certeau's championing of walking as a 'weak' tactic that might open up the individual to new ways of experiencing and designing the world (De Certeau 1984). These notions were incorporated within the filmic interpretion of site and project

through assemblages and bricolages of character, setting and narrative. They were brought together through processes of montage, storyboarding and soundtracking. It was felt that film sequences emerging from the process would be more likely to address issues of duration and inhabitation related to the architectural projects.

3. The Films

In analysing and discussing the students' resultant film work a number of questions were used that relate to the studio's initial research premise. They were: how did the student relate a sense of Spitalfields cinematically? What filmic techniques can be seen to influence the design and its representation? How did the process enhance the student's understanding of the space/place of Spitalfields? What aspects of the intervention's character did the filmic representation emphasise or reinforce? The questions often overlapped and they won't rigidly structure the discussion of the students' work; however, they do provide a useful grounding to the following analysis. What follows is a detailed exploration of one student's film in order to convey a sense of the way in which the film fitted in to the overall studio process. Following that is a discussion of particular aspects of some other films to reinforce a few of the key ideas that emerged from the studio.

4. Labyrinth

Matthew Hynam's film Labyrinth is a melancholic, dream-like journey that overlays sights and sounds of the existing Spitalfields market with a proposed intervention into that space. The film's cool tones and abstracted imagery convey both the detached sensation he sought for his project (linking a character's uncertain sense of reality with the confusion of a market space) and an elegiac rendering of the market that is disappearing because of the site's continued gentrification. The existing market is represented through a series of black and white still images, an overlaid, continuous tracking shot of the roof structure and a time-stretched, muted field recording. These are interspersed and overlaid with images of an intervening, imaginary structure in cool blue tones.

Three aspects of the film emerge as useful for this discussion: the purposeful construction of a sense of immersion and motion, a structural relationship between the intervention, film and market, and the imparting of a specific atmosphere, or mood, within the film. The first of these aspects is most directly evoked through the continual tracking shot of the roof, which provides an obvious sense of motion and a temporal register for the film. It's also reinforced by the repeated dissolve from one market image to the next that adds to a sense of time passing. Each of these elements is shot from a first person point of view – further establishing the camera as the roving eye of the viewer, weaving through the market.

The structuring of the film, particularly the visual continuity, rhythm and framing also describes a relationship between the site, intervention and film. The overlaying and

interspersing of images of the intervention with those of the existing market suggests the physical insertion of the new structure. The underlying framework of the tracking ceiling shot suggests a spatial sequence to the images while the frequent alignment of forms found within images of the site with those found in the intervention enhance their visual and spatial overlap. These tactics build to create a convincing sense of an interwoven site and proposal that still allows for a useful perceptual 'gap' between the two elements – the intervention can be interpreted as an insertion that reframes the market rather than something that obliterates the existing.

The control of the visual palette and aural quality of the film also provides a strong sense of mood that relates simultaneously to Matthew's reading of the existing market as well as the proposed character of the intervention. The grainy black and white imagery, muted and distorted field recording, and the slow pace of the overlaid tracking shot combine to evoke a melancholic, documentary atmosphere. These tactics, along with a shifting set of image scales (ranging from long shot to extreme close up) offer the film as a capturing of a disappearing sense of place. At the same time the abstractions at work (for example, the slowing down and stretching of the sound recording) and the way they generate a sense of detachment help to embody the experience of the disoriented visitor within the Labyrinth intervention. Finally, all the shots used in the film are first person point-of-view, encouraging a fluctuating reading of the film as an immersion in both the environment of the existing market as well as the proposed intervention. Reinforcing this further is the absence of a totalising shot that would reveal the overall spatial structure and allow the viewer a definite emplacement – the market and intervention interaction is represented as a labyrinthine experience.

We consider Labyrinth a successful film because of the productive ways that it interweaves site and proposal, as described above, as well as the way it developed through a series of experiments in modelling and filming. This process identified the importance of the intervention's temporal quality and its 'framing' of the market for the user. This emerges in the film through the careful control of the relationships between its own structure and the architectural structures in terms of view, rhythm and continuity. The film ended up becoming a stimulating method of interpreting the space of the market as well as evoking an atmospheric experience of the intervention.

5. Canopy of Raindrops

Florence Wong's film and intervention was located in Dray Walk and focused on the impact of elements such as rain, light and wind. Dray Walk, part of the old Truman Brewery complex, is a fashionable pedestrian laneway that houses cafes, bars, clothing stores and galleries. Both the film and the intervention emerged as exploratory gestures – the architectural project and its filmic representation involved a series of experiments with forms and materials, and the possibilities for their filtering of climatic conditions within the site.

The current role of Dray Walk as a public space of promenading, voyeurism and display initially drew Florence's attention. Documenting the ways people acted (in multiple senses of the word) within the space during a day that featured sunshine, wind and

heavy rain squalls, and then into the evening prompted the subsequent experimentation with a climate-sensitive, theatrical intervention. A very definite relationship was set up between the site exploration, documentation and the intervention design. The project developed as a weather register structure as well as a device that could trigger or encourage particular behaviours in response to the climatic conditions. The design process, with the film as an integral part of it, was used to develop an intervention that filtered light, cast shadows, created sound and suggested pathways through the space – triggered by rain, wind, sunlight, night-lighting and the movement of crowds.

The film techniques were directly bound to the material exploration: the initial site studies documented various weather conditions and atmospheres and the subsequent filming documented various trials of form, material, structural system, scale, tone and volume. The final film attempted to interweave the evocation of the site and the intervention, using a number of techniques to place the project physically and temporally within the place. These included a chapter structure to communicate daily cycles and rituals, the creative use of studio effects to replicate different weather conditions and times of day, a moving camera to try and animate the static model, and combined field recording with studio sound to reinforce a carnivalesque atmosphere.

Canopy of Raindrops isn't a wholly successful film. There are problems with its sometimes crude editing and the attempts to reproduce models at varying scales with particular atmospheric effects (e.g. rain) stretched Florence's technical abilities. However, this also leads to the key strength of the film – its role as a kind of cinematic sketchbook containing a series of experimental vignettes. These short sequences, although not really forming a cohesive piece, contain ideas that are strong and that would often be impossible to explore through simply sketching or model making. As a response to some of the initial research questions we asked ourselves, the film clearly demonstrates its usefulness within the design process for thinking through some of the ephemeral qualities of an architectural proposal in a schematic way.

6. Brick Lane Ribbon

Tim Hawker's film makes a stark contrast with Canopy of Raindrops. As a short film it is much more successful in terms of visual and aural control, sense of rhythm and overall aesthetic cohesion. As an exploration or representation of an architectural intervention it is far more ephemeral and impressionistic. In that way it failed to meet some of the objectives of the studio but it has some extremely poetic elements that are worth discussing here.

The most interesting aspect of Tim's project for this discussion is the way that both the film and the intervention it represents are assembled from fragments; the process of montage is critical to the establishment of a mood and a suggestion of form. The structuring of the steady-paced, monochromatic image sequence relates closely to the suggestions of an intervention formed from a single piece of translucent material - twisted and deformed to fit the site and to provide a platform for appropriation by people in the street.

The building up of this suggestion happens through a series of similarly scaled detail shots of the model arranged in a well-paced sequence. Although it lacks a clear relationship to its context, it gives a very persuasive study of form and detail that suggests ways by which such filmic studies can help generate a material poetics. The communication of context through images reflected on the surface of the 'Ribbon' is a technique that reinforces that material focus while also starting to place the intervention. An atmospheric field recording and a minimalist, minor-key piano piece, support the image sequence. Their combination provides an editing rhythm as well as introducing a sense of narrative: suggesting the intrusion into the dark, rainy street of a late night argument and bottle-smashing. This is a particularly effective detail as it balances the optimism of the intervention as a non-programmed object for free play with an obvious potential for misuse and vandalism; the film begins to act as a critique of the architectural idea itself.

Brick Lane Ribbon is a very suggestive film that demonstrates a sure handling of sound, visual composition, editing and pacing. Unfortunately, the architectural intervention it related to suffered from a lack of progression and remained as ephemeral as the film suggests. In that way Tim's project was less than successful. However, the film was extremely useful as a means of suggesting the material and formal potential the project contained and again demonstrates the usefulness of the medium as a design impetus.

7. Urban Choreography

The final film we will discuss is Justin France's Urban Choreography. Justin's site exploration led him to film and analyse the interactions between a carpenter constructing a shop counter on a pavement and the pedestrians who had to pass by as he wielded a circular saw. Justin interpreted the episode as a piece of urban choreography – both the carpenter's actions with the saw and the various ways in which people negotiated a path past him or paused to watch.

The subsequent intervention and film focused on the social and aesthetic potential of those flowing movements. The intervention developed as a stage for performance that straddled the pavement and roadway – accommodating but also slightly deflecting the movement along each to create an eddy where people could appropriate the space for a range of activities. Within the film these concerns with flow and path were communicated through the use of the camera as subject moving through the street; most of the film used overlaid loops of the footage with that of the model to suggest the placement of the intervention. There was also an overlaying of 1:1 detail (a hand tracing the line of the timber cladding) with the urban street scenes and a similar approach to the audio (field recordings mixed with music from a hypothetical performance).

The most interesting element of Justin's process was that layering of material to give a sense of the intervention's presence. It was never seamless but in fact that 'gap' between the layers became critically important as a way of reinforcing the negotiations required to accommodate the project in the street – echoing the negotiations he originally observed, those of pedestrians past his camera and past the carpenter at work.

The film and its techniques not only communicated the interest he had in flows but also forced Justin to think through the adjustments and modifications he needed to make architecturally in order to place his project in the site.

8. Conclusion

The studio was a tentative, initial foray into what, to us, seemed a relatively unexplored area. While the intersection of film and architecture is undeniably rich and well trod with respect to analyses of their symbolic and aesthetic interaction we feel that there is an exciting, and under explored, potential for filmic techniques to enrich the design process. Particularly within the context of architectural education, filmic concepts and techniques seem to offer productive means to extend the sensorial and socio-cultural explorations of student projects.

The architectural design process results in the realisation of ideas as occupied spaces, as buildings, as towns, as cities. Our experience as users of these places is multi-sensory and filtered by our individual perceptions. The manipulation and representation of designs for these spaces is abstracted by the media of architectural drawing and the cleanliness of the computer generated image. Film has the potential of positively contaminating this abstracted representation of place. By its inclusion in the architectural design process, consideration of the experiential and ephemeral qualities of place is reinforced. Although film does not capture the real experience of a place, working with moving images brings the potential reality of the completed design in the real context under closer and earlier scrutiny within the design process. Further, the contemporary connection between architectural and urban space and the filmic imaginary makes an interaction within the design studio even more relevant (Aitken and Zonn 1994, Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001, Zonn 1990).

The studio discussed here was a first step in that process and, although it inevitably raised more questions than it answered, it opened up exciting possibilities for recasting the schematic architectural design process and modes of concept presentation. The decision to use film within the teaching and learning processes of the studio was made because it was felt that the medium could enhance processes of contextual exploration and design development, particularly in relation to understanding issues of duration and inhabitation. However, we would not suggest that it should become part of every design project and studio, nor that it will necessarily produce wonderful new architectures. Where it has an appropriate relation to the pedagogical objectives of a studio we feel that it is an extremely productive tool for changing the parameters of the educational and design process.

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