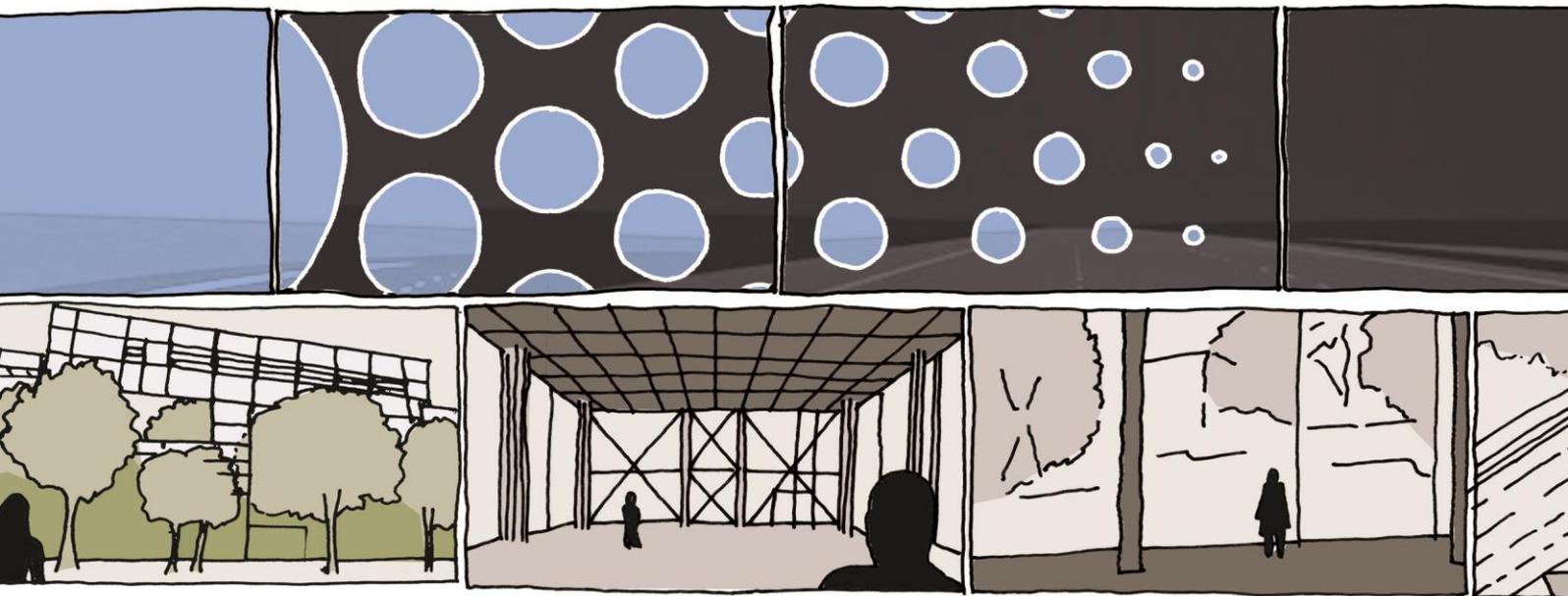Digital-Cultural Ecology and the Medium-Sized City

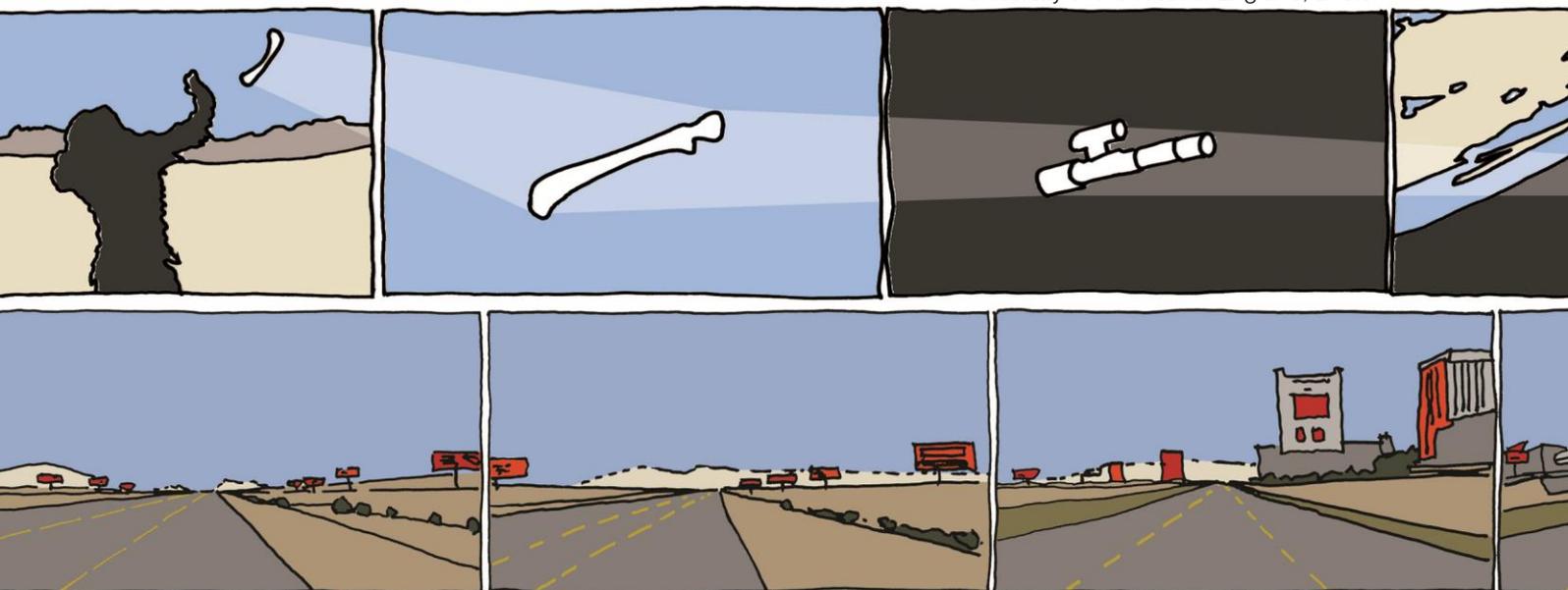conference paper 01-03 April 2016

Filmic Space:

Parallels between transitions in film and architecture

Composite transition image, fig 1
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Introduction

This paper examines the potential of bringing together filmic language and architectural language to describe the experience of moving through the complex fabric of the modern city. In particular the paper focuses on how the city might be read through the use of 'filmic transitions' such as cuts and dissolves and how this has the potential to open up a new hybrid syntax which designers can use to intervene within the city. Stephen Doesinger writes in his 1998 essay 'Sim City' that as we wander through the metropolis we mentally consume and edit space in a filmic manner due to our exposure to and understanding of the medium. *'We are all the time making mental movies, and in a sense this is how we consume the city: layered, superimposed fragments loosely associated with faces and conversations, which we can the recall and re-consume later,* when remembering[1].'

The exploration of filmic syntax within architectural research and practice has predominantly concentrated upon using filmic language to describe the experience of space. For example recent thinking by academic Richard Koeck considers the formation of space as a kinetic construct that can be read in a filmic manner[2]. Beyond solely a description of space, there is significant potential for filmic syntax to be considered as a lens through which we could create and edit space itself. Graham Cairns have opened up the possibility of using filmic syntax within the creative stages of the architectural design process[3]. Jonathan Mosley and Lee Stickells' examination of how filmic concepts and spatial ingredients, including montage and narrative, can be combined to design space move these approaches towards practice, through experiments in the educational design studio 4[4]. Architect and theorist Bernard Tschumi's thinking on the relation of space and event provides the structuring principle of bringing narrative to bear on the architectural design process[5] but there is little explicit reference in practice to filmic narrative and filmic structures influencing spatial design. An exception to this is architect Jean Nouvel, who has been inspired by cinematic techniques and directly references them within his design process. His practice considers the experiential and temporal dimensions of architecture, evaluating spatial arrangements in terms of framing, duration, and sequencing[6]. Of particular interest is the way that he draws comparisons between his process of considering space and the film maker who manipulates sequences of space[7].

The potential for using filmic syntax, as way of underpinning the design of spatial experience, is that it may profoundly influence the mode of understanding of architectural and urban design, from a process based on the consideration of the traditional orthographic plan, section, elevation and static three dimensional view, to one based on the construction of a temporal, inter-connected experiential journey through occupied built space. In order to move towards the realisation of this potential this paper begins the process of building and exploring a coherent language, a hybrid syntax blending filmic and spatial concerns, that may be used to positively contaminate the design process. The authors focus on the mechanism of the filmic transition as a junction between two chronological scenes or shots and the corresponding architectural or urban experience of two sequential spaces, where the parallels can be sufficiently demonstrated to become generators for future design and intervention.
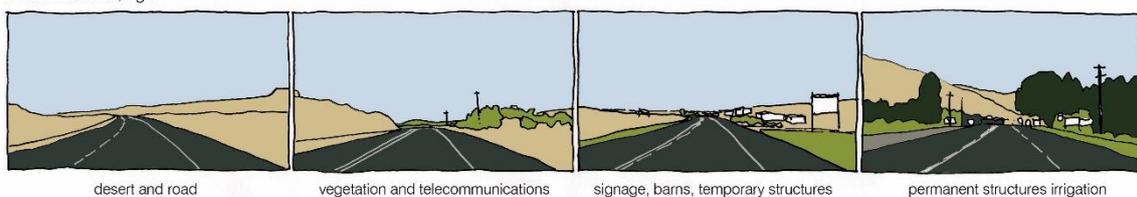
Spatial Dissolve

Dissolve, fig 2

scene 1   dissolve in progress   scene 2
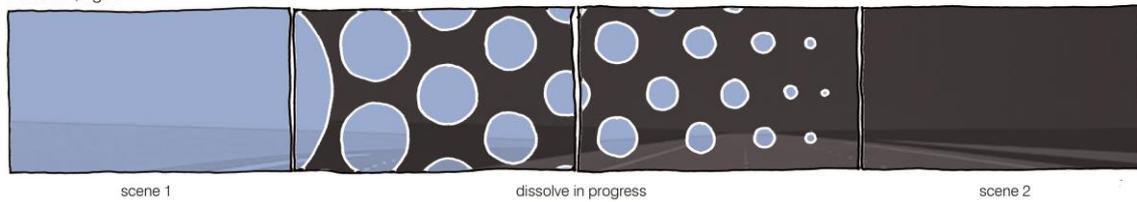
The filmic transition of the dissolve blends one scene with another and is most typically used to convey a passage of time. Within architecture and urbanism a spatial dissolve can be experienced in the movement between environments where one environment dissolves gradually into another through the careful blending of one set of spatial conditions with another. At an urban scale a spatial dissolve typically occurs on the approach to cities set within mainly uninhabited landscape. The traveller experiences a slow shift from a natural to a built terrain. One such spatial dissolve is discerned from a car windscreen whilst approaching the city of Moab, Utah along U.S. Highway 191 that runs through the valley that the city occupies. From the southern tip of the valley, the view from the windscreen is filled with sandstone cliffs either side of the highway, a predominantly natural environment. The dissolve begins with the appearance of elements of a settlement - telegraph poles, electrical pylons, signage for utilities. This is followed by barns, mobile homes, condos, single houses with irrigated gardens and heavily irrigated vegetation becoming visible on the horizon; then city edge construction; and then irrigated roadside vegetation, shops, traffic, signalled traffic junctions; and finally, with the dissolve into the second environment, that of the city, nearing completion, the appearance of continuous street frontages of buildings and the local populous.

Moab Dissolve, fig 3

desert and road   vegetation and telecommunications   signage, barns, temporary structures   permanent structures irrigation

The Moab valley presents a spatial dissolve that is interpreted as such by the authors based on the experience of the existing situation. It was not intended to be perceived as such by the creators of the city. Developing an understanding of how filmic intent may be more or less purposefully engendered and embodied by the experience of space, the following examples examine firstly an architectural proposal without any filmic intent that the authors speculate will result in a spatial dissolve, and secondly an architectural environment in which the designer explicitly references film as influencing the design of his architectural environments.

Zaha Hadid Architect's proposed Kartal Masterplan (2006) in Istanbul extensively uses computer modelling and parametric algorithms to generate an urban form that dissolves a proposed development with the existing city fabric of Kartal to the west and Pendik to the east. The modelling allows for the

algorithmic scripts to gradually 'morph' [8] urban typologies from the existing low rise suburban developments to a new high rise urban form and then back down again, in what the architects term a 'soft grid' [9] approach. The spatial dissolve as a term is not used by the designers, however the authors interpret this blending of urban and architectural form as setting up of the conditions for such a transition. Most of the project's visual imagery concentrates on the form from a bird's-eye view, however it is possible to imagine experiential reality of journeying at street level from Kartal to Pendik and perceiving a sequence of successive dissolves as the soft grid rises and falls within the viewer's field of view.

The work of Jean Nouvel captures the aesthetic of the spatial dissolve through the layering of glass and steel mesh to reflect and break down transitions between spaces. This dissolving of spatial boundaries and the consideration of the experiential (rather than formal) dimension of the relevant design is a purposeful move, being part of Nouvel's belief that the architect and film maker have similar outlooks, both going to great lengths to compose and frame space as an unfolding experience[7]. In particular his Fondation Cartier (1994) and more recently One New Change (2010) exemplify this effect, both using ingenious façade arrangements to dissolve the surrounding context. Spatial dissolves in these projects are enhanced by the careful surface treatment of glazed planes including the use of silk-screen fritting and coatings to alter the surfaces' transparency and reflective qualities, perceived as the building user transits through the building. Jean Nouvel talks about this sequential experience of approaching architecture, viewing a building first from afar and then close up and how the construction of this sequence has similarities with the temporal dimensions of cinema[10].

Architectural Dissolve, fig 4 (Fondation Cartier, Paris)

façade dissolving with surrounds   gallery walls dissolving   stair dissolve
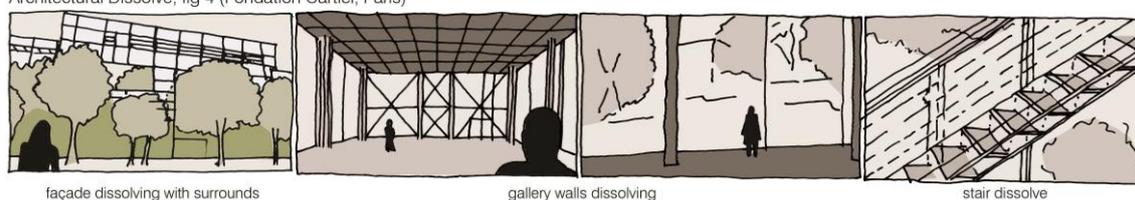
Approaching Fondation Cartier along the Boulevard Raspail the glazed façade appears to simultaneously reflect and absorb the trees and streetscape around it introducing a gradual spatial dissolve between interior and exterior. Graham Cairns writes how the effect of the façade involves *'… the juxtaposition of diffuse exterior reflections with equally diffuse views of the interior' '…resulting in a visually complex collage that collects so many images that none are discernible in isolation[3].'* Closer to the building the spatial dissolve deepens, created by the multiple layers of glass, geometric structure and the transparency of the double height gallery space through which the trees in the garden beyond are visible.

The experience of the spatial dissolve at One New Change is different from that within the Fondation Cartier. Rather than using flat glass facades Jean Nouvel has adopted a more complex glass geometry of polyhedron form that appears inspired by stealth plane technology. The result is a façade that creates a series of spatial dissolves between the reflected views of the surrounds. These dissolves are created

by the application of fritting to the edges of each facet within the facade. The fritting softens the edges of the reflected views and presents the eye with a blended sequence of juxtaposing views created by the geometry of the angular building. As one enters from New Change one experiences the cranked facade turning inward, creating a glass canyon which draws in and dissolves views of the city with the frit. The spatial dissolve continues beyond the point the fritting disappears and the eye is presented with a space of internal reflections of shop fronts and people, bouncing off all surfaces and the top floors appearing to dissolve into the sky.
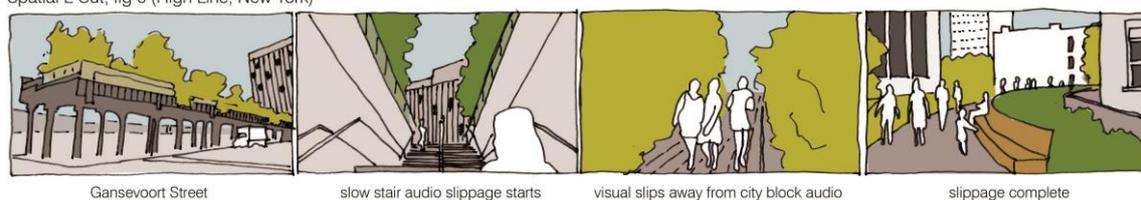
Spatial L Cut

L Cut, fig 5

scene 1　　　　　　　sound cut in from scene 2　　　　　　　scene 2
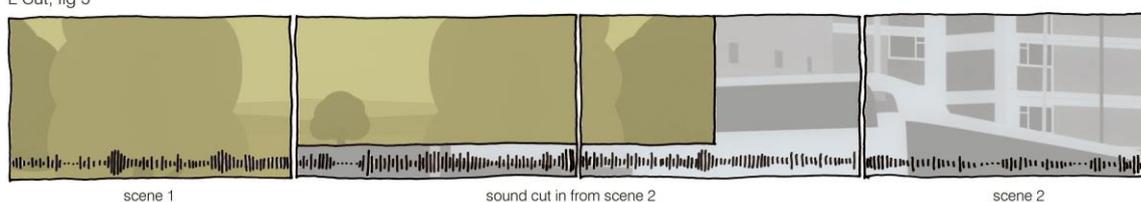
As in film, in which the L cut is an overlap around an edit of either the audio or imagery from one scene onto another, the spatial L cut is experienced as the slippage of acoustic or visual stimuli/cues within one's movement between two distinct architectural or urban spaces. The name L Cut refers to film's construction as two parallel sets of information, audio and visual, running on the celluloid strip one alongside the other, with the L literally referring to an edited junction between sections of film that looks like a set of interconnecting L's. As an example, this transition may allow the closing imagery of a scene to be accompanied by the sound of the next scene. An equivalent of this example within architectural space is where, a spatial L cut is experienced on entering a stadium through a confined passageway with the increasing sound of the crowd anticipating the more abrupt visual transition of one's emergence into the arena. In film, L Cuts are often used to communicate events happening off camera and allow a viewer an awareness of the next shot or scene thus aiding the flow of the film. Similarly in physical environments the experience of spatial L cuts allows the city wanderer or building user a visual or acoustic awareness of spaces before they are entered, thus aiding the flow of spatial experience.


Spatial L Cut, fig 6 (High Line, New York)

Gansevoort Street　　　　slow stair audio slippage starts　　　　visual slips away from city block audio　　　　slippage complete

An example of a spatial L Cut where slippage occurs between the visual and the audio is within the High Line designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R). This 1.5 mile long repurposing of an abandoned elevated railroad, stretching between the Meatpacking District and the Hudson Rail Yards in New York,

introduces a very different visual space of softly moving vegetation and sinuous design elements, and acoustic space of relative quietness away from the traffic, as it repeatedly punctures the block structure and winds above the grid of busy streets. The experience of the transition between the High Line and the street and duration of this slippage are dependent on where you join the High Line with the design intention being to vary *'…the transition from the frantic pace of the city streets to the slow otherworldly landscape. [11]'* For instance entering the High Line at the Gansevoort Street entrance via the 'slow stair' the eye and ear experiences a spatial slippage between the Manhattan Grid and the woodland thicket not dissimilar to Jean-Luc Godard's slow motion L Cut technique pioneered in his 1980 film 'Slow Motion'[12]. Ascending the stair the visual environment immediately changes as the space is focussed on the overhanging vegetation above whilst the acoustic environment is still that of the street. Over the course of the ascent the vegetation envelopes the city wanderer whilst the noise of the street fades only when moving off the stair onto the High Line level. Other entry and exit points vary the rapidity of the transition and create different degrees of slippage between the sound and view of the block and the sound and view of the Highline's differing spatial conditions.


Architectural L Cut, fig 7 (Slow House, North Haven, New York)

windscreen   approach   slow stair   controllable visual slippage
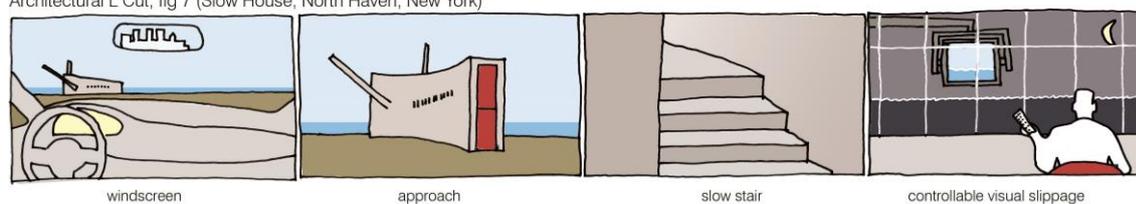
Slippage in visual continuity can also be seen in other projects by DS+R including 'Slow House' an exactingly presented design for a vacation house in North Haven, Long Island New York, 1991. The house design contains a spatial L cut that brings into a space the visual awareness of the space from another time, being equivalent to a filmic transition between scenes at different stages of a narrative (for example, the flashback). Driving away from the city towards the coastal house the experience begins with the view through the windscreen. The initial view of the house is glimpsed as a thin tapering sweeping wall with the entrance set within its thickness. As you approach a narrow door pivots horizontally sweeping upwards to reveal an expanding curved passageway. The passageway contains a 'slow stair' to the upper level living spaces terminating at a picture window. The window looks out over the sea with a wall-mounted screen blocking a segment of the view and playing a recording of the same view from a previous time. The user of the building design can, in theory, arrive at the house at night, enter and then focus on the silent moving image of the view from the day. The user can control the time delay, increase the speed of play-back, zoom in and out, pan across the image and even freeze it. It is this ability to manipulate the image independently of current sounds within the house that helps realise the designers intention of creating a*'…slippage from a physical entry to an optical departure. [13]'* The spatial L cut in this instance creates a split between views of the past and the sound of the present.
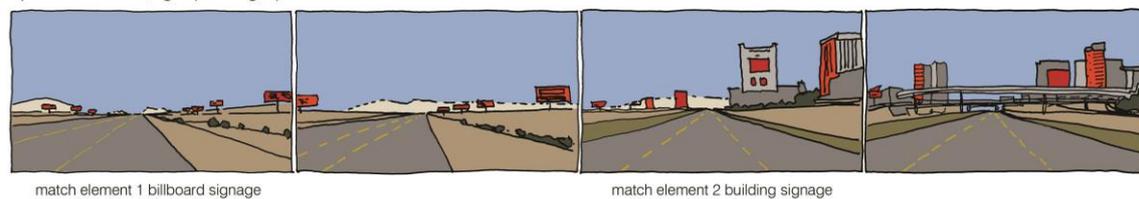
Spatial Match Cut,

Match Cut, fig 8 (2001: A Space Odyssey)

scene 1   scene 2
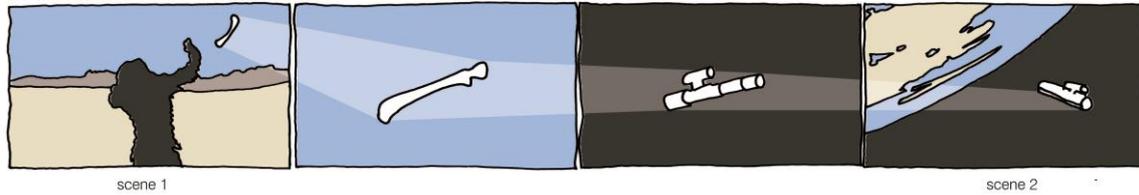
David and Kristin Thompson's book 'Film Art' state that a match cut *'...emphasises the spatio-temporal continuity between two scenes linking them both graphically and metaphorically* [14]'. A now classic example of a match cut is Kubrick's opening scene transition in '2001 A Space Odyssey'. In both film and space match cuts utilise graphical similarities between shots and space to transition smoothly as well as having the potential to create a linkage of meaning or metaphor.

Spatial Match Cut, fig 9 (Las Vegas)

match element 1 billboard signage   match element 2 building signage

A spatial parallel to the match cut can be found on the desert Interstates approaching Las Vegas which are lined with billboards. The rhythm and spacing of the billboards lining the Interstates both advertise the Vegas experience and anticipate travelling through the centre of Vegas, in effect becoming structural and physical metaphors of what is to come. The desert billboards stand in for the building facades of downtown. Moving towards Las Vegas, the experience of journeying through the match cut is heightened further by the matching of the frequency of the billboards and the rhythm of the facades positioned within city's urban grid.

Studied by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in their seminal book 'Learning from Las Vegas' the casino typology, coined as 'decorated sheds', strengthens the metaphoric connection of image as billboard to image as façade within the spatial match cut. They discuss the typology as presenting the symbol before the form and *'...an architecture of communication over space* [15]'. Within the introduction of 'Learning from Las Vegas' Venturi and Brown express their unfulfilled desire to make a film as part of the investigation of Las Vegas due to the unique ability of film to capture and represent the city in motion, something that they stated traditional plans, sections and elevations were incapable of doing [15].

Conclusion

The examples of spatial transitions examined within this paper have shown how it is possible to read existing space using filmic syntax. When read using filmic syntax the spaces examined fall into the following three categories: 1. Found coincidental transitions e.g. the Moab spatial dissolve; 2. The by-product of other design moves e.g. Zaha Hadid Architects' Kartal Masterplan 'Soft Grid'; 3. An intentional design decision to create space with filmic qualities i.e. Jean Nouvel's Fondation Cartier. However none of these categories examined have seen a designer expressly use filmic syntax as a design tool.

The potential for using filmic language as a lens through which designers can understand and create space has yet to be exploited. Beyond the Dissolve, L Cut and Match Cut there is a wealth of other filmic transitions such as Jump Cuts, Pre Cuts and Fades, which may have their parallel spatial transitions. This hybrid syntax, which sits between filmic and architectural language offers the opportunity to re-calibrate the designer's eye to that of the city wanderer, to create and craft spatial journeys within and through the built environment.

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[9] Zaha Hadid Architects use the term 'Soft Grid' to refer to *'…a flexible and adaptive grid which articulates connections and differences of form, density and use within the same spatial structure.'*
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[11] (Incerti, G. Ricchi, D. Simpson, D. Diller+Scorfidio (+Renfro) "The Ciliary Function: Works and Projects 1979-2007." Skiira Editore S.p.A. Milano, 2007. 198-203

[12] Jean Luc Godard's 1980 film *Slow Motion* uses a number of L Cuts to both transition between scenes and aid the slow motion effect used throughout the film. The effect sees the frame rate slow to the point that the persistence of vision is lost whilst the audio is maintained. This effect causes both a slippage and layering of narrative where the viewer becomes partially aware of the second space before it arrives.

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Venturi, R. Brown Scott, D. Izenour,S. "Learning from Las Vegas." Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1972.

Figures

Figure 1, Composite transition image, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 2, Dissolve, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 3, Moab Dissolve, Utah, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 4, Architectural Dissolve, Fondation Cartier, Paris, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 5, L Cut, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 6, Spatial L Cut, High Line, New York, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 7, Architectural L Cut, Slow House, North Haven, New York, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 8, Match Cut, 2001 A Space Odyssey, created by Matthew Hynam (Author)

Figure 9, Spatial Match Cut, Las Vegas, created by Matthew Hynam & Julia Kashdan Brown (Author)