

# H A S A N Y O N E S E E N A L I C E ?

"Wow. After I jumped it occurred to me: life is perfect. Life is the best, full of magic, beauty, opportunity, and TELEVISION..."<sup>1</sup>

Everyone has one. Television started out as a reflection of reality, a mirror of society. With technology came the ability to change that reality, and with that ability we were able to change our reflection. TV no longer reflects reality, instead, it creates one for us. The computer screen has taken that new reality a bit further.

## TWO SIDES OF A SCREEN

Our relation with the screen has become very intense and personal. We share with it things we wouldn't share with anyone. It keeps us company while we work, while we communicate, while we shop. We can do almost anything. So Microsoft<sup>®</sup> asked us, "where do you want to go today?"



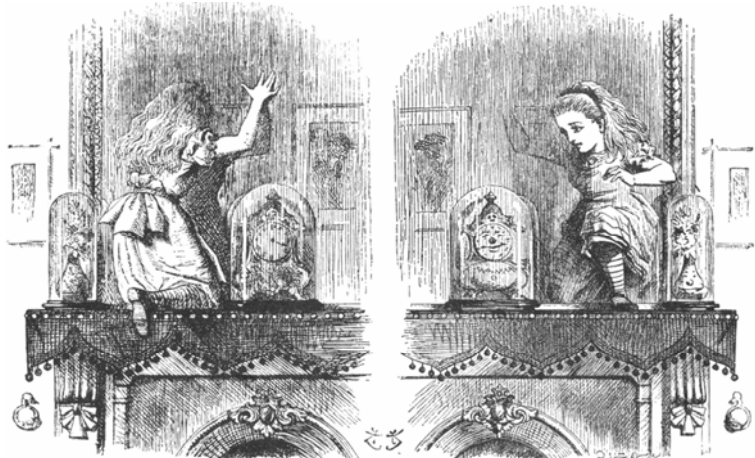
Technology is all over. It spreads quicker than any disease and it is changing our lives in ways that we have difficulty in keeping up. We have welcomed it into our streets, our homes, our studios, our pockets. It replaced the fireplace, paper, pencils, letters, books, ..., romance. It became a source of instant information, of instant culture, of instant money, of instant pleasure and instant love.

[PICTURE 01]

The screen is like a mirror, when turned off. When on, it opens up a passage and we can answer Microsoft 's<sup>®</sup> question. I go through and on the other side I am still myself, "I see myself there where I am not, (...) [in a] virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent"<sup>2</sup>. We meet our image in a space that extends beyond the surface that limits it. Reality isn't enough. This new self has been called "online identity"<sup>3</sup>. *Where are we when we meet people online?*

[PICTURE 02]

I'd like you to remember a story of a little girl named Alice. She saw the mirror as a window and thought about how life was on the other side. She went "through the looking glass"<sup>4</sup> and found a different world, a *fantasy world*. She talked with chess figures, with flowers. She became a queen.



[PICTURE 03]

Something is definitely different. I see windows covered with antennas valuing the glass of the screen over the window view. I see the screen/mirror as a frontier. Not between reality and the virtual, but between two realities. A surface where we are able to control the reflection. Like Narcissus, we have fallen in love with our reflection. Technology has given us the chance to decide on which side of the frontier we want to live. We are spending more and more time in digital environments. We have become our own heterotopy, living inside the mirror in a kind of "consensual hallucination"<sup>5</sup>. Reality has become a dream.

So, has anyone seen Alice?

We live connected to the other side of the screen. We are inhabited by technology as much as we inhabit it. We have a self that lives digitally, as data, through technology. We are no longer complete without it. It flows in our blood, through our hearts (pace maker), enters us through the eyes (head mounted display) or fingers (data glove). It's under our skin (microchips), sometimes is our skin (data suite).



It also inhabits architecture. It's, on the ceilings, under the floor, in the walls, sometimes is the walls. Architecture is beginning to inhabit it as well.

## LOOKING THROUGH THE GLASS



[PICTURE 04]

Some interesting art works question the relationship between humans and technology, and how it is infecting us. They aim to understand how we are changing, what we have become or can become. We are now a hybrid of skin and wires, eyes and screens, cells and bytes, blood and data. We have arrived at a point where we need technology to communicate, to understand, to have fun, pleasure, to feel close to someone, to make money or use it. We have changed as people. We have taken a new step in the evolution latter.

We are now able to communicate in real time with others, to be always at reach, to work anywhere, to be present everywhere while being nowhere. Technology has changed how we communicate, how we relate to each other. It changed how we work, how we do business, how we consume, but did it change how we teach?

Communication is now mainly based on the eyes and the ability to read images. We buy things through images, we sell images and the relation to those images. Architects use powerful images to sell their projects and ideas. We do it based on experience and instinct, not on knowledge. Communicating with images is not part of the architect formation but in a world of images it's easy to learn.

Our bedroom has become a doorway to any virtual space of our choice and analogue architecture is rapidly losing inhabitants to digital environments. Game spaces, Second Life world, chat rooms, etc, have millions of inhabitants at any time, more than many cities. These second spaces are rarely designed by architects. As Heidegger told us "the real plight in dwelling lies in this, that mor-

tals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.”<sup>6</sup> Still mortals, we are learning to dwell in the digital. We dwell in these digital worlds and can even teleport ourselves around it. Who is designing these digital spaces? Some are designed by common people but most are designed by programmers and designers. It seems to me that architects would be more qualified to do so, if only they were prepared to do so.

Many architects, teachers and schools are still in denial that technology is rooting itself on every aspect of our lives, including our practice. This denial is denying students the information they will need to succeed in their practice in the near future.



[PICTURE 05]

If we use technology as an augmentation of our communication capabilities, of our memory, of our work production, of our geographical orientation, of our sexual fantasies, of our love, so too we use it as an augmentation of our reality, of our space. I would argue that we are learning to inhabit the digital space, and many of us are doing it frequently. Meanwhile, the architecture’s denial defines this space as false, not real, not architecture.

It’s clear that “if man understands that technology is at his reach he realises it, like it’s damn near instinctive.”<sup>7</sup> We should acknowledge that the computer is not a machine to use as a pencil or ruler, but a machine to think with. As the notebook and pencil were (and may still be) our partners in thinking and designing, our hardware and software should also be viewed as partners. There is a kind of technological instinct that will be necessary to survive in the future and students should be oriented to develop it.

Francis Ford Coppola has said: “technology is always an element of creativity, it is never its source.”<sup>8</sup> So, if we have taught how to use the brush and paint, we should also teach how to use the mouse, how to think with the computer, how to use software to our advantage.

Architecture is still taught as it was many years ago. But in reality it is done differently than it was. We now have computers in our office. Every year, new software updates are released, more powerful computers are available. Soon, “the rate of change will be so high that for humans to be qualified in a single discipline (...) will be as outdated as quill and parchment. Knowledge will be changing so fast for that. We will need to reskill ourselves constantly every decade just to keep a job”<sup>9</sup> This certainly applies to architects and students, it should also apply to schools and teachers. It seems Darwin is still right that "In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment."<sup>10</sup> So, those that will survive, will be the ones who best adapt. Are schools teaching students to adapt? Are schools adapting? How about teachers?

The technological instinct should be oriented and taught. Schools should help students understand and explore the digital instead of denying it. We should embrace technology and understand that it is a means, not an end in itself. It seems we are still in denial and waiting for the day when electricity is no more.



[PICTURE 06]

If one agrees with Heidegger that “we don’t dwell because we build, but we build and have built because we dwell, this is, because we are dwellers”<sup>11</sup> it makes sense that digital space is also possible to build. Building is a means to dwell<sup>12</sup>. “Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build”<sup>13</sup>. We dwell in digital space, so we can build inside it. So digital architecture is architecture because it creates a site to dwell in, even if it is as data.

The views that architecture is a “question of building and that forms generated on screen are only utopic fantasies that don’t confront with the requisites tectonic of the real world”<sup>14</sup> are obsolete. Real world? Who defines what is real? Who defines what is architecture?

The arts were not always as they are now. Photography wasn't always an art, it had to struggle and find its place in the art world. It is respected now. These changes modify not only the way we represent things, but also the way we look at them. Digital architecture is also on the same battle. Digital architects are struggling for the respect of their peers as did the impressionist painters and other artists. Yes, I consider it as much art as any other.

There are new ways of designing, new methods of building, new ways of moulding materials, new ways of sharing information, new ways of inhabiting, but from what I know, very few schools have the knowledge to teach all the new advances.

Philip Bromberg argues that "our ways of describing "good parenting" must shift from an emphasis on confirming the child as a "core self" and on to helping a child develop the capacity to negotiate fluid transitions between "self stages""<sup>15</sup>. Schools should be aware of the differences in how people live now, and adapt their way of communicating to contemporary reality. We, as Alice, need to search for a way to negotiate between our lives on each other side of the screen.

Alice stepped into a metaphysical world. For us, technology is a way of realizing the metaphysical of achieving and identity away from physical restraints.

So "when speed reaches a certain point, time and space collapse and distance seems to disappear. The very conditions of spacio-temporal experience are radically transformed. At this point, does architecture finally become immaterial?"<sup>16</sup> Can architecture be metaphysical?

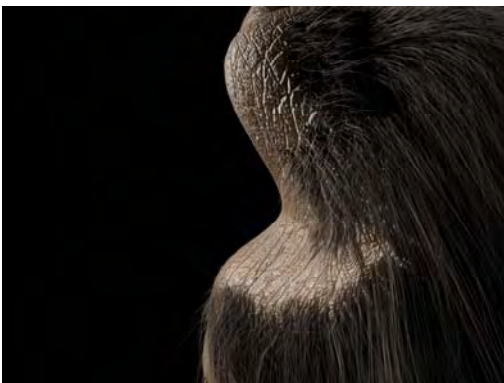
I believe there can be a metaphysical architecture on the other side of the screen. A met@rchitecture, with its own rules or lack of them. A place where we, as data can dwell in data with other data.

## ON THE OTHER SIDE



[PICTURE 07]

With this in mind I started to investigate and experiment on the other side of the screen. If I can dwell digitally and relate to other digital selves, I can build a place for us to interact, a place where I can mix people and information and build a hybrid space.



[PICTURE 08]

Using the available data as material I can use anyone that inhabits the space to build it, and if I use a person to create a space, I can relate to space as I do to a person. So, how could I build an architectural space that I could relate as I do to some person?



[PICTURE 09]

I started to try and find the human essence. What makes us relate to each other as people? I discarded the soul because I couldn't prove its existence. I also avoided the eyes because all animals have eyes. The human skin remained.



[PICTURE 10]

I began to search for data to build the human skin. I needed it to behave as skin: to wrinkle, to reflect light and to be translucent in the thin areas. I needed it to connect with the inhabitant in a strong way, to lead people to come closer or to repel them according to the strength of the design.



[PICTURE 11]

The first skin I was able to “build” was unprotected. Bare skin. Something was missing. Hair started to grow out of it. At the same space, a space was created. The result was a space that was supposed to be a website where you could dwell around it.



[PICTURE 12]

These investigations have been useful for me in the exploration on the digital environment as inhabitable and in questioning what we can build on the other side of the screen. It was also interesting to search for a human relation to something that is not human, not even matter. Unfortunately most of the 3d digital spaces available online are a mere reflection of the physical world. We go to SecondLife and we have islands, water, sun, trees. Cyberspace should not be a mere duplication of physical space. This “imitation” of the physical world may be a result of the lack of questioning of the possibilities of the digital realm. Do we really need to imitate a tree to feel it? It’s time to be free. If we are now beginning to build somewhere that is nowhere, it shouldn’t just imitate anywhere that is somewhere. Let’s be free. Let’s get rid of the every little rule that has controlled the design of space and build our *fantasy world*, with no palm trees please!



[PICTURE 13]

“One day the day will come, when the day will not come.”<sup>17</sup> Until then, “architects of all dimensions, there is an immense amount of work to be done!”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>1</sup> - *Million dollar hotel*. Director; WENDERS, Wim. [dist.] Icon Entertainment International, 2000

<sup>2</sup> - FOUCAULT, Michel - *Of other spaces*. in MIRZOEFF, Nicholas, ed. lit. - *Visual Culture Reader*. 2<sup>a</sup> ed. Nova York: Routledge, an imprint of Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, 2002. pp. 231-232

<sup>3</sup> - IXCHEL, Anya - Online Identity: some thoughts. found at [http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=40](http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=40) (consulted : May 2nd, 2007)

<sup>4</sup> - CARROLL, Lewis. - *Through the Looking Glass*. Londres: Penguin books Ltd, 1994. ISBN: 0440620877

<sup>5</sup> - GIBSON, William - *Neuromancer*. Londres: Voyager. 1995

<sup>6</sup> - HEIDEGGER, Martin - *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Perennial Classics). CIDADE : HarperCollins Publishers, 2001. p. 159

<sup>7</sup> - *Ghost in the shell*. Director; Mamoru Oshii; Script; Kazunori Itô e Shirow Masamune; Producer; Production I.G. [dist.] Manga Entertainment. 1995

<sup>8</sup> - COPPOLA, Francis Ford. in - *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*. Director; SCORCESE, Martin, 1995

<sup>9</sup> - GLEICK, James - *Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything*. Nova York : Vintage Books USA, 2000. p.82

<sup>10</sup> - DARWIN, Charles - *The Origin of Species*. Londres: Gramercy Books, 1998. ISBN-10: 0517123207

<sup>11</sup> - HEIDEGGER, Martin - *Building Dwelling thinking*. in, HEIDEGGER, Martin - *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Perennial Classics). Nova York : HarperCollins Publishers, 2001. p.146

<sup>12</sup> - Idem p.144

<sup>13</sup> - Idem p.157

<sup>14</sup> - LEACH, Neil, ed. lit. - *Designing for a Digital World*. Londres: Wiley-Academy. 2002. p.9

<sup>15</sup> - TURKLE, Sherry. *E-futures and e-personae* in. - LEACH, Neil, ed. lit. - *Designing for a Digital World*. Londres: Wiley-Academy. 2002 - p.33

<sup>16</sup> - TAYLOR, Mark C. *Eletrotecture*. in - *Any*, No.3, Nov/Dec, p.9

<sup>17</sup> - VIRILIO, Paul - *Open Sky*. London: Verso Books, 1997

<sup>18</sup> - BOUMAN, Ole - *RealSpace in QuickTimes*. found at- [http://www.nai.nl/www\\_rfq/essay\\_chap4.html](http://www.nai.nl/www_rfq/essay_chap4.html) (consulted : January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007)