

Stephan Doesinger

Bastard Spaces

1st Annual Architecture and Design Competition in Second Life.

Why are so many people fascinated and at the same time alienated by the virtual world in *Second Life* (SL)? Is a deceptive alternative to physical reality, to so-called "First Life," being suggested here? What if this metaverse (1) is an eerie mirror of reality?

Could it be that Walter Benjamin's 1929 commentary has become the central metaphor of our basic cultural situation?: "When two mirrors look at each other, Satan plays his favorite game and opens the perspective to infinity."(2)

I initiated this architecture and design competition because through my artistic work (3) I have become convinced that computer games like *Second Life* no longer merely replicate the world, but that instead an insidious process of reversal is taking place. The aim of the competition is to explore new trends in architecture and design on the electronic soil of the MMOG (massive multiplayer online game) of Second Life.

In SL we encounter a space that is more than only a metaphor of reality. It is both: metaphor and reality. Apart from players' self-dramatization through avatars and buildings as alter egos, it is about communication and the skills involved in social adaptation. The connection between fiction and reality is bewildering and often brings up questions that are elementary for contemporary architecture:

Where are you actually when you make a call on your mobile phone? In which reality do you find yourself when you have your iPod in your ear, when the acoustic space is uncoupled from the physical one? In which space are you located when you are playing a computer game, moving through the Internet or using SL as a 3D telephone? It seems as though everywhere where physical and media spaces cross, new spaces come into existence. These are spaces that are sometimes present and sometimes absent, but are usually mobile, moving like vagabonds at different speeds over the continents, until they burst like a bubble – at the end of a long-distance call on the highway. Let's call them "Bastard Spaces"!

Even what we call the public space is a Bastard Space. It is largely a construct of the media because it is about a radical economy measured in purchasing power, circulation numbers and television ratings. People are transformed into consumers there; they become target groups and "eyeballs." With MySpace, YouTube and SL, people write their own parts in this multimedia show – only to subsequently reclaim their right to existence as individuals...

In the course of this process, stage settings are created in SL for an absurdist theater reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet's **Last Year in Marienbad** (4). Self-portraits in 3D, buildings full of yearning and "dream houses" are revealed when, like Jeff Bridges in **The Big Lebowski**, you fly over a landscape that is situated aesthetically somewhere between Bob Ross and **The Sims**. A flowering landscape of iconographic formations. When you first wake up and find yourself in the architecture of this virtual exile, you automatically think of David Lynch's surreal scenario in **Lost Highway**.

On the other side of Benjamin's mirror, we gaze at contemporary architecture which, as architectural theorist Anthony Vidler describes it (5), summons a feeling of the uncanny, seems restless, not capable of creating a feeling of home, an architecture that manifests the alienation of modernism. We see an architecture that, as Michel Houellebecq (6) criticizes, is occupied with setting up "the shelves of the social supermarket."

The competition will demonstrate whether the ideas in SL are capable of escaping the radical economy and aesthetic that Excel (7) has made into the most important architectural program of our times.

Special thanks to: Tuncay Acar, Markus Bokowsky, Helmuth Gsöllpointner, Stefan & Gisela Kaiser, Alberto Sejas, Corinne Valentin, Florian Wupperfeld, Johanna Walter, Roland Weiss and the members of the jury: Shumon Basar, Tor Lindstrand, Michael Schirmer, Pascal Schöning, Mathieu Wellner.

(1) "The term metaverse comes from Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, and is now widely used to describe the vision behind current work on fully immersive 3D virtual spaces. These are environments where humans interact (as avatars) with each other (socially and economically) and with software agents in a cyber space that uses the metaphor of the real world, but without its physical limitations." (**Wikipedia.org**)

(2) Walter Benjamin, **Pariser Passagen**, 1929; Benjamin, Walter: **Gesammelte Schriften**, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Vol. 5, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1989.

(3) Cf. Stephan Doesinger, **Learning from Sim City**, Revolver Verlag Frankfurt 2007: "Die Welt ist ein Computerspiel und dein Herz pocht wie Pop-Corn."

(4) Cf. captions for images from *Second Life* taken from "Last Year in Marienbad" by Alain Robbe-Grillet, quoted from: **Last Year in Marienbad**, John Calder publishers, 1977, pp. 50-51.

(5) Cf. Anthony Vidler, **UnHEIMlich - Über das Unbehagen in der modernen Architektur**, Edition Nautilus, 2002.

(6) Cf. Michel Houellebecq, *Die Welt als Supermarkt, Interventionen*, DuMont, Cologne 1999.

(7) Cf. "Excel has had a greater impact on contemporary architecture than Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Frank O. Gehry have managed together." Tor Lindstrand in "Architecture's Second Life," *Architect*, Jan 9, 2007.