Shelley Smith

BEYOND BIG

– an examination of supermodern spaces

In the 1990's, focus in the field of architecture shifted from that of limited and defined works of architecture and planning to areas of vast and undefined urban space. Attempts at definition have resulted in labels such as urban sprawl, terrain vague, SLOAPs[1], and although these names point to the ubiquitous and arbitrary character of these areas, actual comprehension of them as perceived spatial constructs continues to be challenged.

> As proposed many times, from Garden Cities of Tomorrow, to The New City, to Learning from Las Vegas, to S, M, L, XL, it is not built form which characterizes the contemporary city, but the immense spaces over which built form has little or no control. These spaces, which overwhelm the architectural gesture, ultimately dominate the contemporary urban environment.[2]

With the disappearance of the city as an entity based upon the self re-enforcing elements of centre and periphery, the classifications of what was inside and what was outside also disappeared. Physical city borders dissolved and city elements seeped out of the interstices.

This seepage of urban elements is characterised by larger elements in a low-density field. The spaces between objects are larger thereby reducing the force of the vertical plane and emphasising the horizontal. The relationship found between the horizontal and the vertical planes in traditional cities – that which is defined by traditional spatial concepts – does not exist in these areas. This results in what the American architectural theorist, Albert Pope, refers to as 'Primacy of Space' rather than the traditional 'Primacy of Form'.[3]

This change in scale was also noted in other fields. The French anthropologist, Marc Augé, observed changes in the western societies he studied – changes so decisive that he felt they heralded the start of something new – something not seen before. He coined the term 'supermodernity' to describe this condition.

Augé characterised supermodernity by three types of excess; excess of time, excess of space, and excess of individualisation. One of the themes of supermodernity is that these excesses result in the creation of – 'non-places' – a phenomenon caused by the perceived meaninglessness of the built environment.[4]
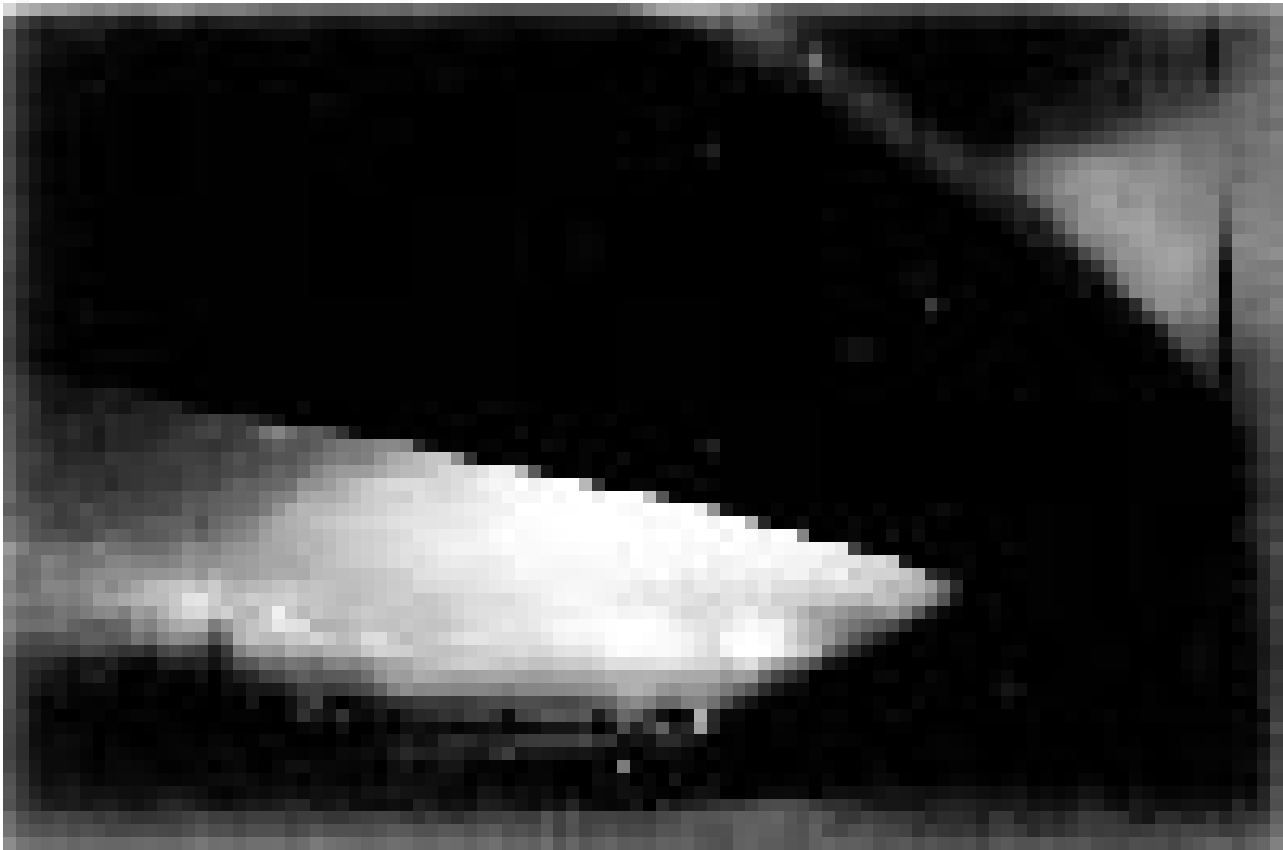
In anthropological terms, place is defined as a space taken over by human beings and within which they recognize themselves, a space where something is said about the relationships human beings have with their history, their environment and each other.

Non-places are typically spaces passed through – transitory spaces. These are spaces in which more and more time is spent, but with which we have no particular attachment in a traditional anthropological sense.

> Experience of the remote has taught us to de-centre our way of looking, and we should make use of this lesson. The world of supermodernity does not exactly match the one in which we live, for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at. We have to relearn to think about space.[5]

There has been a confusion of terms as regards the current situation in the field of architecture – a situation where postmodernist ideals of contextualism, symbolism and architecture as the 'bearer of meaning' are no longer applicable, and a situation where it appears that the modernist ideals of neutrality, repetition and transparency have surfaced again. The terms of 'neo-modernism', 'new modernism', 'a return to modernism',' supermodernism', have all been bandied about as possible descriptive titles for the present architectural state of affairs.[6]

This 'reappearance' of modernism however, has taken place in the 1990's, and as a product of this time thereby subject to a different set of parameters – not least of all as regards scale and speed – than modernism's original form at the beginning of the 1900's. Changes in the physical growth patterns of city structures and in the life patterns of contemporary city dwellers, have altered not only the physical form of the city, but also the idea of the city. The borders giving clo-

sed and static forms to both the physical environment and to personal relations have been dissolved. We are social and urban in different ways today. Francois Ascher, a French urbanist, likens this difference to the weaves of fabric. At the turn of the past century, urban social fabric was comprised of few but thick threads. Work and familial relations were constant and stable within the span of a lifetime and didn't vary much in either geographical location or content. Contemporary urban social relations are made up of many but thinner threads. The number and variety of personal relations has increased and although often of shorter duration, they take place over a larger geographical area and are not limited by physical boundaries. The one weave is no less solid than the other.[7] Cultural theory identifies themes of mobility and globalisation as operative in the changes in urban social patterns. They, and the concept of non-place, are also manifest in the spaces of contemporary urbanism. The term supermodernism has been adopted as the name of the spatial category forming the framework of this project. Supermodern spaces are exemplified by motorways, airports and mega structures and these are the analysis objects of this project. The challenge presented in understanding these spaces occurs at many levels; socially, spatially and aesthetically.

It is the premise of this project that these supermodern spaces represent an entirely new category of space, which requires new models for understanding.

The concept of space is in itself complex, elusive, and difficult to describe. This is in part due to the fact that space is both a physical and a philosophical construct. It's use as a concept in architectural theory only dates back to the mid 1800's. Prior to that space was solely a metaphysical concept.

> Much of the ambiguity of the term 'space' in modern architectural use comes from a willingness to confuse it with a general philosophical category of 'space'. To put it slightly differently, as well as being a physical property of dimension and extent, 'space' is also a property of the mind, part of the apparatus through which we perceive the world.[8]

This overlap of the philosophical and the architectural

– or the perceptual and the dimensional – is what is nowadays widely referred to as the concept of space.

Traditionally, architectural space was defined by its' borders. That is, architects created space by enclosing it – by demarcating its boundaries. Implicit then, in a traditional understanding of architectural space is the notion of setting borders that define what is in and what is out – and implicit also is the notion of space as static.

The concept of space itself is not subject to permanence – it is irrevocably linked with time and thereby subject to flow, progress, change and process. The definition of space at any given point in time is formed by the demands made upon it by that time.

The supermodern spaces of contemporary urbanism are the result of dissolving borders and horizontal expansion – their identifying characteristics are the enormity of their size and their flux. It is precisely these factors that make them so difficult to grasp – physically and conceptually.

The elements found in this enormously large urban field are the analysis objects of this project – motorways, airports and megastructures. What arises between the senses, and the spaces moved through, constitutes spatial perception and aesthetic experience.

The aesthetic theory of the sublime provides a tool for describing these spaces and their potential effect. The references here are primarily to Immanuel Kant's aesthetics of the sublime from The Critique of Judgement (1790). The sublime is subjective – referring to a feeling evoked by an object but not itself a property of that object – and as such, it becomes a useful concept as regards the potential perception of supermodern spaces. It is primarily the mathematical sublime which is referrred to – magnitudo – having to do with sheer size as opposed to the uncontrollable forces of nature of the dynamic sublime. The mathematical sublime is described as measureless, infinite, limitless, formless, boundless. It is these characteristics that overwhelm our senses making comprehension impossible. Magnitudo – sheer size – bigness – and particularly the notions of boundlessness and formlessness have an obvious connection with supermodern spaces. The idea of formlessness or boundlessness in terms of traditional

architectural space is unthinkable. Bounding space gave it form, but the horizontally exaggerated and temporally accelerated spaces of supermodernism exceed the bounds of our perception both spatially and conceptually. These spaces challenge comprehension and, although they cannot be described as limitless or infinite, they are boundless in the sense that the boundaries, which were part of a traditional spatial concept, are dissolved.

It is the intent of this PhD project to better understand the supermodern spaces of contemporary urbanism via an interdisciplinary approach employing cultural, architectural and aesthetic discourses. An integral part of this project is the use of film as an analytical tool. Film is a media that has the potential to examine these 'new' spaces in a new way. Traditionally, architectural space has been registered and communicated via drawings scale models and still photography. Given the focus in this project on analysing the experiential character of supermodern spaces, it is the contention that the multi-functionality and expansiveness of these spaces will be better registered and communicated through 'moving pictures'. Since mobility, and thereby temporality, are characteristics of supermodern spaces, film is seen as an obvious choice for analysis.

Shelley Smith, AAA
shelley.smith@a-aarhus.dk

Notes

1. Spaces Left Over After Planning
2. Albert Pope, Ladders, Rice University School of Architecture, 1996, pg. 3–5
3. Ibid.
4. Marc Augé, non-places – introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity, Verso, 1995,
5. Ibid., pg. 35–6.
6. For a discussion of modernism, postmodernism and supermodernism, see: Hans Ibelings, Supermodernism – Architecture in the Age of Globalization, Nai Publishers, 1998.
7. Francois Ascher, Modernities, discontinuities and urbanities: what issues for European towns?, in the European 5 Charter, Paris, 1997, pg. 28.
8. Adrian Forty: Words and Buildings – A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture, Thames & Hudson, 2000, pg. 256.