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HOW TO CONSTRUCT A SPACE FOR SPACE

– An introduction to the doctoral project 'Embedded Spaces'.

In the summer of 1943 the Austrian American architect Rudolph Michael Schindler (1887–1953) was asked by Museum of Modern Art in New York to send in materials that could present his work at an upcoming exhibition[1]. In his reply Schindler wrote:

> I consider myself the first and still one of the few architects who consciously abandoned stylistic sculptural architecture in order to develop space as a medium of art.[2]

This bold response frames in one sentence a life long investigation into space, which lead Schindler to the construction of an 'inclusive' space, that at the same time was an abstract idea and a real physical presence, an architectural critique and a political manifestation, a unit system[3] and a geometric abstraction[4]. Schindler defined an entirely new approach to architecture through his 'inclusive' space – in his own terms 'Space Architecture' – and stated repeatedly that it held the most essential characteristics of modern architecture:

> Modern architecture cannot be developed by changing slogans. It is not in the hands of the engineer, the efficiency expert, the machinist or the economist. It is developing in the minds of the artists who can grasp 'space' and 'space forms' as a new medium for human expression. ... It is not merely the birth of a new style, or a new version of the old play with sculptural forms, but the subjection of a new medium to serve as a vehicle for human expression.[5]

To position Schindler's 'Space Architecture' in a historical and conceptual context, one may turn to the historian Stephen Kern's account of the change in concepts of time and space between 1880 and 1918, in which he describes an attitude towards space that was similar to that of Schindler. Kern writes:

> The traditional view that space was an inert void in which objects existed gave way to a new view of it as active and full.[6]

This new understanding of space – which Kern calls a 'positive negative space' – offers a conceptual lens that may divide Schindlers use of space into three parts: a) the passive space of the neutral void or container, which to Schindler had no place in modern architec-

ture, b) the active space that the architect acts upon as his 'raw material',[7] which 'receives' the artistic expression through manipulation, and c) the active space that in return acts upon the architect to define the design process and upon the user in general to define the perception of the final product. In this way space both becomes embedded by the artistic intension and embedded in the design process – a duality that in a lot of ways is similar to the description that the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell offers of the landscape as a medium.[8] Mitchell states:

> Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.[9]

Translating this historical and conceptual context to that of space, establishes a context for space as a medium and embedding as the activity that works in two directions at the same time.

The initial question of my doctoral project 'Embedded Spaces' at The Aarhus School of Architecture and Danish Center for Integrated Design is derived from such a context: 'How can space be used as a medium in an architectural design process?' or in other words 'How to construct a space for space?' This subject will in the course of the doctoral project be investigated through several 'catalysts', three of which should be mentioned here:

In 1991, the architect Michael Benedikt offered a first description of what the writer William Gibson had earlier coined 'cyberspace'. Benedikt laid out four 'threads' – language/myths, media technology, architecture and mathematics – which could be followed into this new spatiality. He writes:

> ... space itself is something not necessarily physical: rather ... it is a 'field of play' for all information, only one of whose manifestations is the gravitational and electromagnetic field of play that we live in, and that we call the real world.[10]

The possibility to work with multiple manifestations of space, specifies and expands Schindler's use of space, and offers through a critical use of current media – like shared immersive environments – new possibilities for the architectural design process.

At the 1999 AnyMore conference in Paris, the architect Bernard Tschumi called for such a critical position towards the way media influence architecture. He argued:

> ... architects should not be involved with the media of construction but with the construction of the media.[11]

This critical position spans a century – from regarding space as a medium, in the early years of modern architecture to the changes in the media chosen for current architectural design processes and the status of the final products.

In his book Constructions, the philosopher John Rajchman sets out to form a new bridge between architecture and philosophy, one that questions the traditional – and still reigning – view of architecture as the least 'beaux' of the beaux-arts, forever bound to what is possible in the real world. Rajchman asks:

> What if the architectonic in Kant were not an overarching system but something that has itself to be cons-

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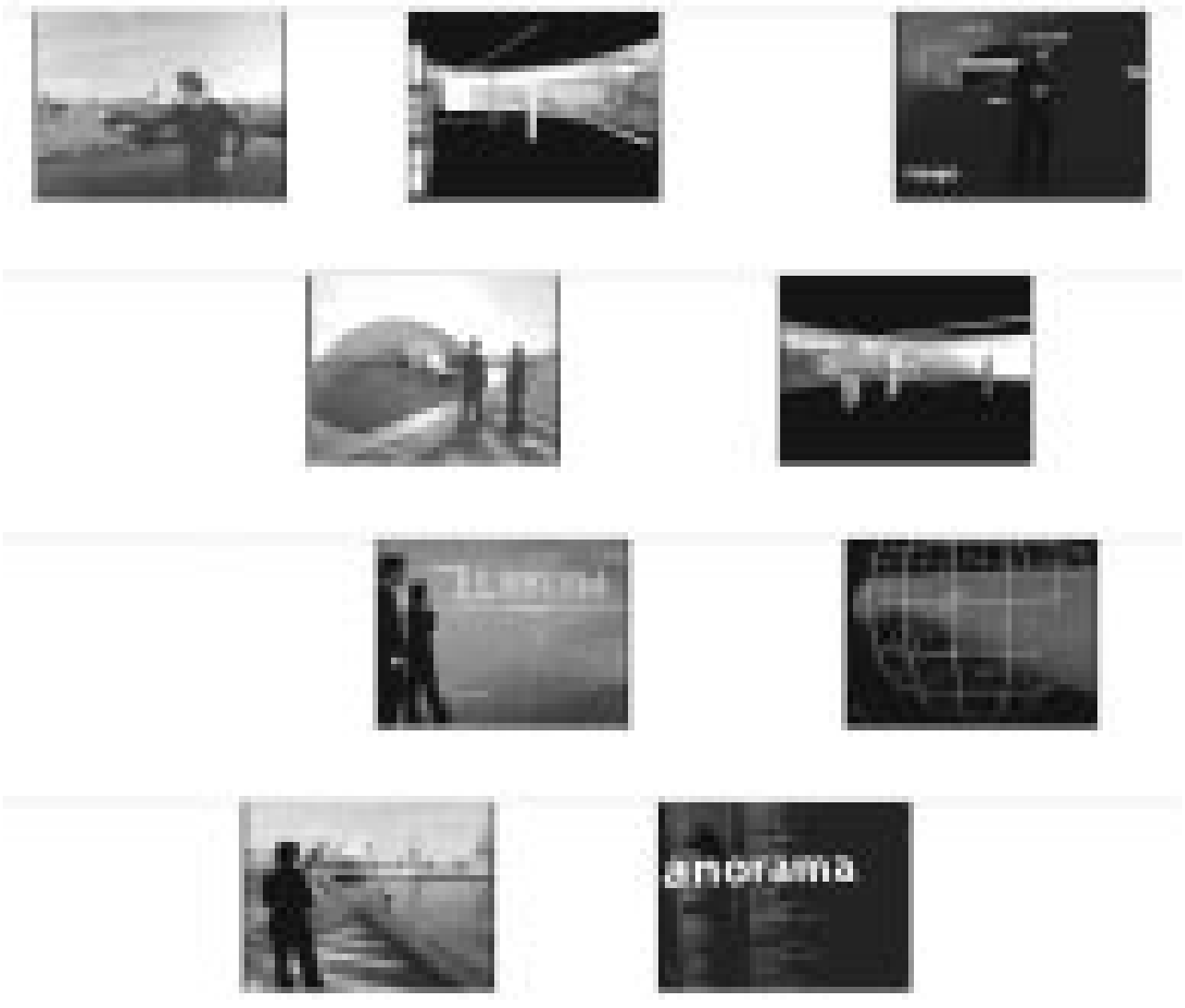

'The Virtual Architect' is one in a series of experiments that will investigate the possible use of space as an interactive collaborative design tool. The aim is twofold: to develop a conceptual framework for the use of space in a design process and to propose a scenario for such a use. 'The Virtual Architect' constructs – in this experiment as a video prototype – a shared immersive environment as a series of simultaneous spaces that offer the architect a way to specify, organize and manipulate objects by 'placing' them in different spaces. These different spaces are defined by specific properties, constraints and modes of interaction, and define in that way the basic rules for the design process.

For more information and illustrations please go to:
http://www.embeddedspaces.dk
http://www.daimi.au.dk/workspace/index.shtml or
http://cavi.alexandra.dk/

tructed anew, in each case, in relation to fresh problems – something looser, more flexible, less complete, more irregular, a free plan in which things hang together without yet being held in place?[12]

In this way Rajchman questions what an architectural construction may be. Could it at the same time be physical and abstract and material and spatial – in which way we return to the title of this article "How to Construct a Space for Space."

Notes

1. According to MOMA, the exhibition never took place.
2. RM Schindler, Letter to Elisabeth Mock, Museum of Modern Art, August 10th 1943 (Santa Barbara: Unpublished ADC/UCSB, 1943).
3. RM Schindler, "Reference frames in space," in RM Schindler, ed. Lionel March & Judith Sheine (New York: Academy Editions, 1995), 57–61; in Architect and Engineer, Vol. 165, April 1946.
4. Kathryn Smith, Schindler House, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2001), 33.
5. RM Schindler, "Space Architecture", in Schindler, David Gebhard, (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 1971), 150.
6. Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 153.
7. RM Schindler, Article "1", (Santa Barbara: Unpublished manuscript ADC/UCSB, 1912).
8. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape", in Landscape and Power, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).
9. Ibid., 5.
10. Michael Benedikt, "Introduction", in Cyberspace First Steps, ed. Michael Benedikt, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 20.
11. Bernard Tschumi, "Discussion 4", in AnyMore, ed. Cynthia Davidson, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 185.
12. John Rajchman, "Constructions", in Constructions, John Rajchman, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 1.