



Cinematics in Architectural Practice and Culture

FRANÇOIS PENZ

Over the course of the last two decades Professor François Penz has been researching at the intersection of Architecture, Cinema, and Digitality, developing novel modes of investigation, in the belief that the moving image can provide us with new perceptual equipment to grasp the complexity of architectural and urban phenomena. Here he reflects on the legacy of the Cambridge University Moving Image Studio (CUMIS), which he co-founded in 1998, alongside more recent projects.

45

Recognising, very early on, the potential creative role of digital media, from 1987 I experimented for a decade with regular computer-drawing life classes, as a means of introducing the computer as a natural part of architectural student life, alongside pencils, pens, colours, rulers, set square, compasses and sketchbooks. This turned out to be an innovative and popular approach. It led to a number of research workshops, involving the Applied Psychology Unit in Cambridge, in a bid to assess the impact of computers on design creativity. The topic was debated in an international symposium, 'Computers in Architecture: Tools for Design' (1990), the basis for a book of the same name published in 1992. From then on, I extended my research interest to the moving image and cinema, organising in 1991 my first undergraduate workshop on 'Architecture in Motion' in the Department of Architecture. In 1992 I also organised the first UK architecture-film competition, in conjunction with the *Festival du Film d'Architecture* (FIFARC), in Bordeaux.



These pioneering activities attracted the attention of the National Film and Television School (NFTS), and in 1993 I started a long-term collaboration with Maureen Thomas (then Head of Screen Studies at the NFTS), which led us to organise the very first 'Cinema and Architecture' conference in 1995 (also published as a book in 1997). In 1998 Maureen and I co-founded the Cambridge University Moving Image Studio (CUMIS), focusing on the new techniques, methodologies and potentialities of digital media in design-related disciplines.

THE CINEMATIC MAPPING OF CAMBRIDGE PROJECT

CUMIS, which was part of the Department of Architecture, ceased to exist in 2005 due to a major restructuring of the department, and was subsequently incorporated into the Digital Studio (DIGIS) for Research in Design, Visualisation and Communication. In its time CUMIS produced around 900 short digital movies documenting the various aspects of the life of the University. This archive was dormant, however, and would soon have been inaccessible (as the digital tapes were gradually becoming more brittle and increasingly difficult to digitise). Fortunately in 2011, thanks to a grant from the Isaac Newton Trust, I had the opportunity to revisit the work of CUMIS during the course of the Cinematic Mapping of Cambridge (CMoC) project. Dr Andong Lu, a former CUMIS alumni (2001), was the Research Assistant on the project and his intimate knowledge of the archive proved invaluable.

47

Our research project aimed to digitise a subset of the archive and make accessible this unique and forgotten resource through a process of 'cinematic mapping'; geo-referencing the movies on a map of Cambridge, at the place where they were filmed. This 'movie-centric' map of Cambridge forms a novel way of exploring the city. 241 movies are now accessible to all through our interactive website: <http://expressivespace.org/CMC/index.html>.

Since CUMIS was a University wide resource, its collection fell broadly within departmental (i.e. Department of Architecture) and non-departmental movies. The departmental archive collection consists of short movies of museums and colleges, several departmental buildings, libraries and gardens, as well as movie-essays produced by MPhil and PhD students, as CUMIS supported our MPhil in Architecture and the Moving Image (1999-2005) and PhD programme from 2000 onwards.

THE MPhil IN ARCHITECTURE AND THE MOVING IMAGE (1999-2005)

The MPhil programme positively embraced the studio model of practice-based research, which has been fundamental to the department's philosophy since its inception and the appointment, in 1956, of Leslie Martin and his trademark assessable 'Testimonies of Studies', in the form of models and other results of practice-based design-work. As well as acting as a locus for the development of innovative research methodologies, CUMIS and the Digital Studio constituted a 21st century incarnation of the traditional architect's studio, which included digital media as a vital part of its creative apparatus. The MPhil was set up to ensure that the rapid advance in digital technologies should not exceed our ability to use digital media creatively and persuasively, and to fully understand their potential and effects.

48

Until recently, architecture created its visions in two dimensions, and then projected the two-dimensional rendering into three-dimensional reality. Cinema captured three-dimensional reality and transformed it through the medium of film to a projection of moving images on the two-dimensional screen. Now, both architecture and moving-image arts use the medium of the computer to create simulated worlds directly in three-dimensional cyberspace, and to narrate experience and information as well as entertainment in media-rich environments. Moving images form an inherently time-based medium: with the addition of time to the space/image equation, narrative becomes a central issue. More and more, a clear understanding of moving image narrative language needs to inform the practice and aesthetics of generating navigable space in the computer. And, as the computer becomes the common medium of moving-image art and narrative as well as architectural modelling and virtual world-shaping, audiovisual media needs to develop a full understanding of the expressive visual and spatial potentials of digitality.

The MPhil in Architecture and the Moving Image brought together theoretical and practical study from both fields, focusing on the narrative organisation of space,



Memento Mori

and the spatial organisation of narrative. The theme of 'Architecture and the City' ran through all elements of the programme, and the focus for all work in the MPhil was the narrative organisation of space and the expressive use of digital media in the context of digital design, visualisation and communication.

THE NARRATIVE EXPRESSIVE SPACE CONCEPT

50 One of the largest building types covered in the collection is the museum. If we browse through many of the movies we may notice that, through the process of filming and editing, the museums acquire a new dimension in being reconfigured for the screen. In the moving-image essay, *Memento Mori* (<http://expressivespace.org/CMC/DIGIS-ES-46.html>), the transformative capabilities of the moving image are laid bare. In this movie, a visitor attempts to follow the whole life cycle, from birth to death, through seven paintings, thus creating a 'cradle to grave' journey. At the same time as the physical space of the museum is being reconfigured through the editing process, the visitor also reconfigures the actual map of the museum by re-cutting it according to her journey. It exemplifies that the moving-image medium challenges the museum building as the sole organisational device of artefacts and demonstrates how knowledge representation can be liberated from material space.

Filming museums was a way of reconfiguring the space and affording novel and immaterial freedom. Every movie would reveal new configurations and new spatial characteristics; it is like looking at a familiar space but with new eyes corresponding to a new narrative device. Other valuable elements emerged from considering the same space over time, for example the Firzwilliam Museum which was filmed consistently over ten years. We realised that by filming it over and over again one could see the space changing: the new wing extension emerged and the old café and bookshop arrangement disappeared. The movies acquired an other dimension, that of having recorded some minor and some major transformations. They become a valuable spatial

memory – or a site of memory. I call the application of this process over time for a given space ‘cinematic building archaeology’. And there are other such examples in the CUMIS collection, e.g. the numerous movies of Darwin College or the Zoology Museum. But if we extend this notion to the city, it becomes a form of cinematic urban archaeology.

THE CUMIS LEGACY, DIGIS AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The CUMIS collection reveals the city’s topography and its fabric but also reflects something of its social and cultural context at that point in time, across the new millennium. The archive constitutes a cross-sectional moving image study with a strong emphasis on spatial and architectural representation that brings out the qualities of even the most banal of setting. Applied over a longer time frame, the transformations are even more evident. Out of the Cinematic Mapping of Cambridge project emerged a much larger research project, ‘The Cinematic Geographies of Battersea’, sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in partnership with *The Survey of London* (English Heritage) and the University of Liverpool.

51

The project started in June 2012 and aims to harness the unique mechanisms by which cinema and the moving image contribute to our understanding of cities. It investigates the convergence of two different yet complementary ways of understanding the built environment: on the one hand, the historical approach developed by *The Survey of London*, and on the other the cinematic interpretation of cities. Battersea, a landscape currently undergoing considerable changes, is the latest parish being written up by *The Survey of London* under the direction of our former colleague, Andrew Saint. Complementing this enormous effort to record and probe the architectural history of Battersea, we are investigating the ‘soft side’ of Battersea through the process of ‘cinematic urban archaeology’, making visible the emergence of the modern city and its subsequent transformations since the year 1895 – the birth of cinema. Such retrospectively longitudinal cinematic studies are now possible due to the increasing



availability of archive material – fiction films, documentaries, newsreels, but also amateur films. Our initial investigations have revealed that Battersea is particularly ‘moving-image rich’ with well over 500 films found so far.

We rely on the concept of ‘cinematic urban archaeology’ to dig deep into the Battersea past. Accumulated layers of films (fiction, documentaries, TV and amateur movies) corresponding to particular locations have left us images, which are the encounter between two narrative forms, the language of space and the screen language. In the process the camera ‘culls’ the landscape and the ‘data’ collected is a formidable source of archive material – still very much underused and under researched. When watching *Alfie* (1966), for example, if we stop paying attention to Michael Caine and look past him, we can notice at one point the recently built towers of Sparkford House, Battersea Church Road (designed by Colin Lucas in 1964), on the Somerset Estate. In this way we can start to appreciate fictional films for their documentary revelations.

53

In the second phase of our project we are aiming to make visible and accessible our new resource for Battersea on the ubiquitous ‘smart phone’, at the place where the films were shot, using the city as interface. We are also looking into the possibility of making the CUMIS archive movies available on smart phones in Cambridge at the place where they were shot. With just under a third of the 900 tapes currently digitised, the CMoC website will continue to grow in the future. It will no doubt prove for DIGIS and other media archaeologists a fertile research ground, as there is a great need for further ‘excavation’ of the material and renewed ‘observation of the observed’.

The CUMIS archive and the expressive space movies briefly evoked here crucially underpin a distinctive interdisciplinary approach to architecture – synthesising body, space and narrative in a new way of architectural thinking: a form of Cinematic Aided Design. In the future DIGIS will carry on reflecting on combining cinematics with architectural culture and practice in order to catalyse a conceptual paradigm shift in architectural design process, commensurate with advances in digital technologies.