

THE IN-BETWEEN-STATE

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PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that architecture and urban design's adherence to the manipulation of physical structures as their sole means for creating holistic environments renders their practices ineffective. Contemporary life no longer exists only in a physical state. New technologies—smart phones, smart glasses, high-speed transports—have given birth to a new virtual world for people to live within. As this paper recognizes that these technologies offer the potential for new shared democratic environments, it argues that the current implementation of these technologies has fragmented contemporary life into discrete pockets of activity. As there is not yet an understanding of how the physical and virtual should relate, this paper offers a comparative analysis of the relationships between architects, inhabitants and their environments in physical and virtual worlds.

Analysis will reveal that the problematic division of experiences stems from a larger misconception of what architecture and urban design should do: namely, that environments should determine people's behavior. It argues for a new value system where environments are not measured by their determining of behavior, but rather, their ability to spawn new behaviors and social forms—environments which are equally authored by designers and inhabitants.

Lastly, this paper will demonstrate that the creation of such environments requires contemporary life to advance to the "In-Between-State"—a state where environments are experienced simultaneously physically and virtually. The In-Between-State will enable contemporary cities to be authored by all its citizens, necessitating exploration of social values, democracy, and social evolution.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

This investigation is based on a theoretical understanding of form, authorship, and behavior. A "form" is the set of rules that orders the *behavior* of a material construct, both inanimate and animate. All forms are realized through material constructs and any material construct is merely a realization of its form (see figure 1). A form may be realized through the material constructs of another—a material construct may be ordered by a primary form and an *additional* secondary form (see figure 2). "Authorship" is the varied ability to have a form materialize perfectly. It is measured by the degree of similarity between a form and its material construct(s) (see figure 3). Just as there are primary and secondary forms, there are primary and secondary authors—a realized form may be the product of multiple authors (see figure 2). Given the site of investigation (the relationship between people and their contemporary urban environments), behavior is spatialized by its division into separate "activities" (see figure 4). Each activity is a group of actions, which support a common end. All activities have a beginning and an end; they are located in time and space; they are *destinations* that are traveled to and from (see figure 5). In this regard, the activity may be considered a basic unit of realized form. Authorship at a larger scale is determined by the ability to include desirable activities and exclude undesirable activities (see figure 6). The distances separating activities and how they are traversed greatly impacts larger behavior.

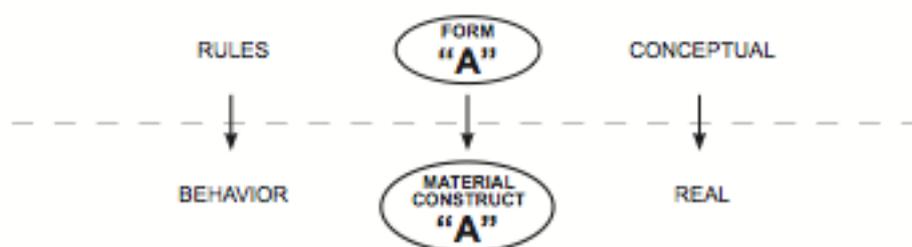


Figure 1.

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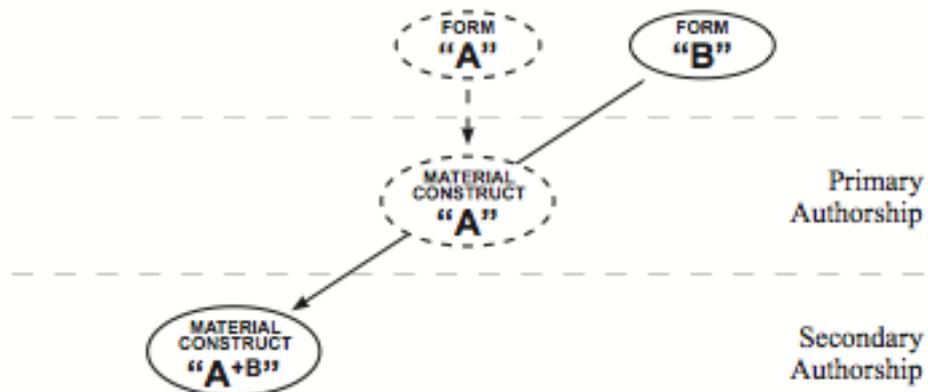


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

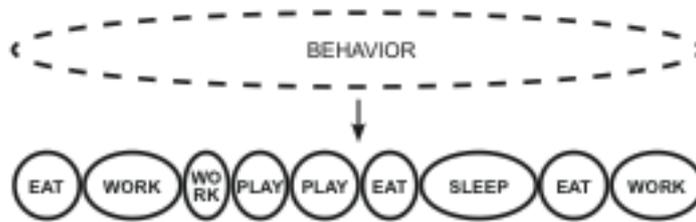


Figure 4. Behavior is divided into separate activities.

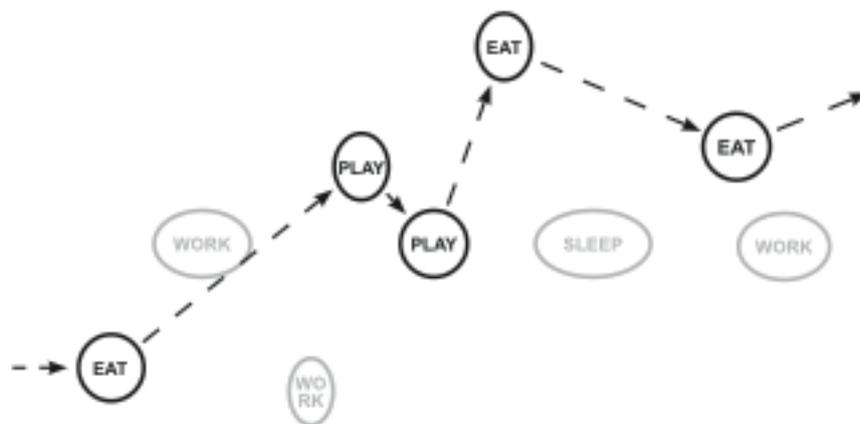


Figure 6. Large-scale authorship over behavior is the ability to include desirable activities and exclude undesirable activities.

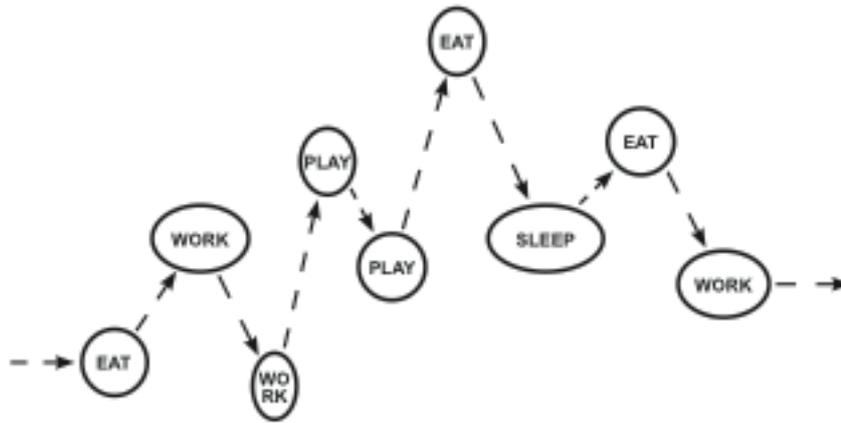


Figure 5. Activities are spatialized as destinations.

ANALYSIS OF PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

Form in the Physical World

Nature orders everything in the physical world. This applies to both inanimate and animate beings. For example, a pig—an animate being—does not decide *how* it should behave or, even, if it *should* exist. Its behavior is not for any purpose beyond survival—beyond the rules established by nature. The forms of a pig and nature are one in same. However, the form of a person is distinct from nature. Unlike a pig, a person has consciousness; that is, the capacity to *choose* to exist. Where a pig behaves *only* according to the rules of survival, a person behaves according to an *additional* set of rules that are unrelated—and often contradictory to—his or her own corporeal well-being. Nature alone does not constitute a person. For example, when a person eats, he or she does not do so purely to survive. Instead, a person eats in a manner that supports his or her form, which may dictate eating certain foods in certain a manner or even fasting for several days.

In the physical world, a person is only a secondary author of his or her physically realized form. A person’s form is materialized through the manipulation of physical constructs which are firstly ordered by—and bound to—the rules of nature (see figure 7). A person alters the behavior of his or her own body (an animate construct) and inanimate constructs—such as stone—to create things such as architecture (see figure 8). The inherent discrepancy between a person’s form and its physical realization perpetuates variation. This stimulates evolution of form at individual and multiple levels—the erratic behavior of one construct causes multiple constructs to interact in unintended ways (see figures 9 and 10).

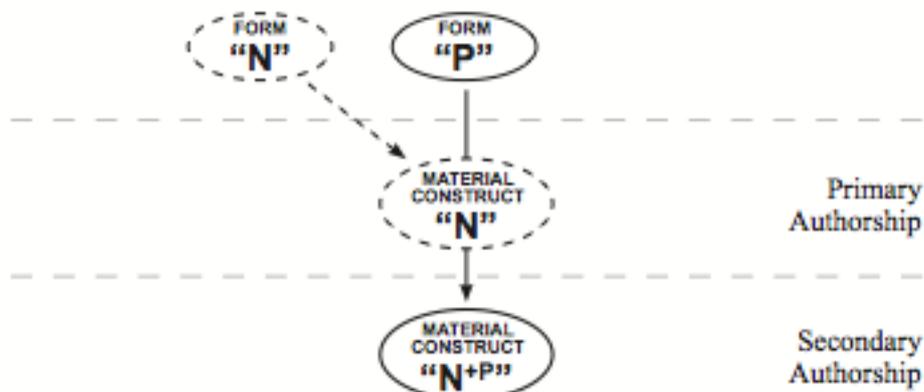


Figure 7.

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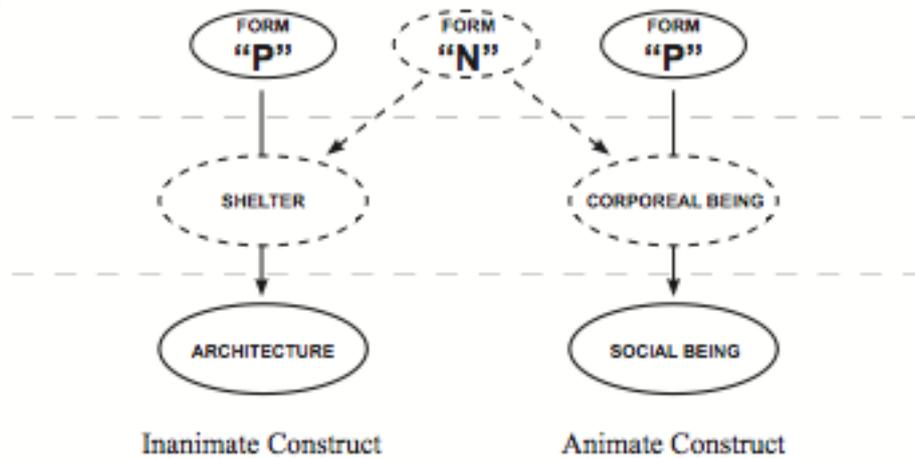


Figure 8.

Thus, in a foreign platform (such as the physical world to the form of a person), all secondary authored constructs aid in the realization of their forms through their own behavior and by supporting the behavior

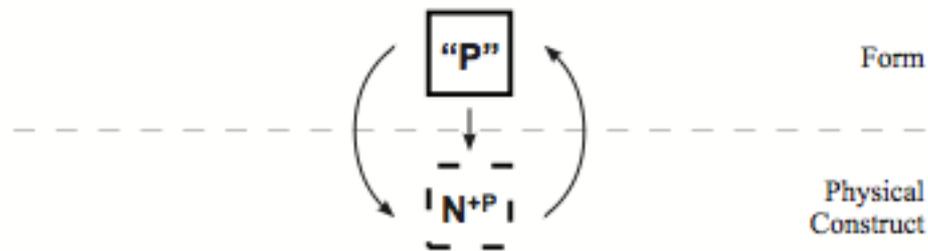


Figure 9. Discrepancy between a person's form and its physical realization causes unintended variation



Figure 10. The erratic behavior of one construct causes multiple constructs to interact in unintended ways.

of fellow constructs—this occurs either directly at a singular level or indirectly by forming a network with other constructs that form larger environments. In the physical world, a construct a person creates (e.g. a pew) aids in the realization of his or her form by retaining its physical shape, supporting that person's corporeal behavior (e.g. praying), and furthermore networking to other constructs to form a larger environment (e.g. a church).

The gap between a person and nature is perhaps the earliest and most fundamental motive for a person to create an environment which alleviates the struggles of survival and supports his or her form. The act of making one's environment is as essential to the realization and production of a one's form as is having freedom to control one's own corporeal behavior.

The Form of People

The relationships discussed thus far are further complicated by the fact that there is *not* one form that governs the behavior of all people—every person follows his or her own set of behavioral rules and beliefs. The form of one person may be very similar or very different from another's. Thus, inanimate constructs—and the environments they form—that supports the behavior and form of one person *may contradict* and *limit* the behaviors and forms of other people.

Competition Between Form and Shared Authorship in the Physical World

The primary objective of the architect is to create environments that necessitate the *coexistence* and fair interaction of many different realized forms, stimulating their evolution. Although such places in the physical world appear common (the public plaza is a chief example), environments that host a variety of behaviors can only exist within a *common* and *foreign* platform.

For a theoretical example, form “A” and form “B” cannot coexist *equally* in a shared space if either one is fully realized (see figure 11). Only by their partial realization where their constructs first follow a foreign form (form “C”) can form A and form B coexist and interact in a productive manner (see figure 12). In such a platform, authorship over all constructs can be *shared* as neither form A or form B has primary authorship. The more *equally* foreign form C is to form A and form B, the more democratic of a platform it is.

Shared authorship happens in two ways. In the first case, form A is realized through a reductive process where the construct of form B (construct C^{+B}) is stripped to its primary form (form C) and used only as primary material (see figure 13). An example in the physical world would be recycling plastic water bottles to make create plastic grocery bags. Of the two types of shared authorship, this is the less productive of the two as neither form A or B gain anything from their interaction. However, in the second scenario, construct C^{+B} is used for *both* its primary and secondary forms. Here, construct C^{+B} acts a launchpad for the evolution of all forms involved and the creation of new constructs (and new forms) not possible with either form A or form B alone (see figure 14).

This means that the inability of architects to *fully author physical* environments causes different forms associated with different people to materialize and interact within their environments (see figure 15). Though physical architecture may specify certain activities, it only succeeds in providing the *possibility* for these activities. Rather, inhabitants are free to participate in specified kinds of behavior or deviate from them. People have the physical capacity to rebel against existing social forms and institutions. Consider, for example, food fighting in a cafeteria or protesting in the Financial District of Manhattan. Authorship over physical environments is always shared to some degree.

The evolution of existing forms (and creation of new ones), requires their constructs to materialize within a democratic platform—a platform that is *equally* distinct in form. Only in such a platform can the material constructs of one form become agents in the materialization and production of others.

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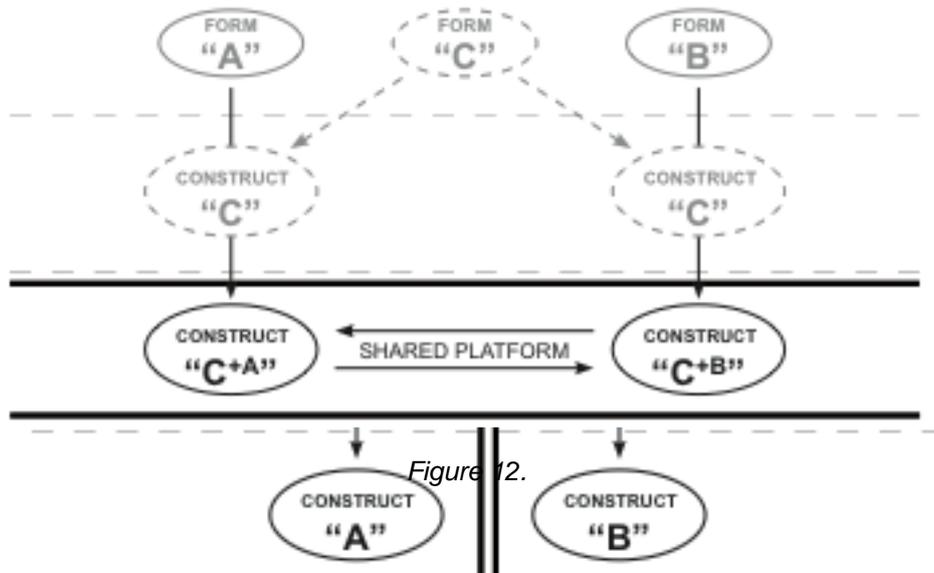


Figure 12.

Figure 11.

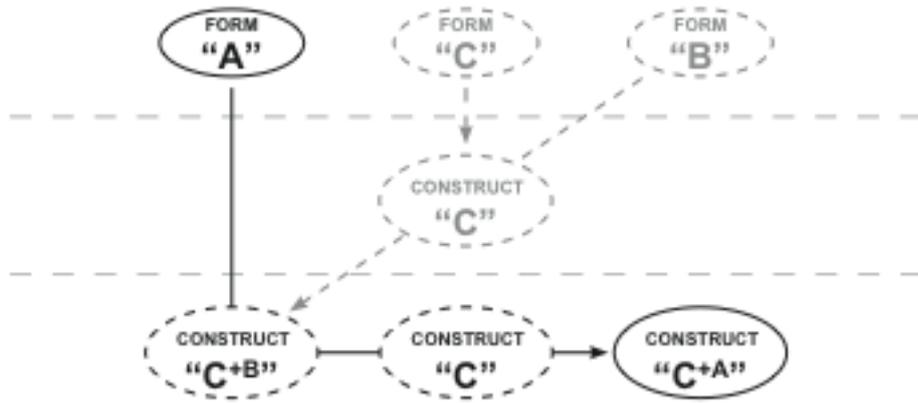


Figure 13.

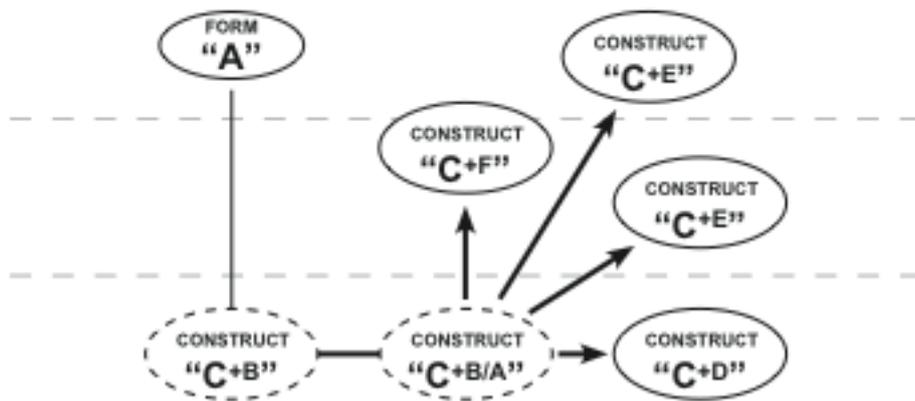


Figure 14.

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Figure 15.

Multiple Activities in the Physical World

At the scale of multiple activities across different environments, the gap between form and its physical realization again proves valuable for the interaction of different forms and the production of new ones. Large-scale authorship over a person's physical behavior raises two complications. First, the undefined nature of any one environmental activity problematizes its qualification as *desirable* or *undesirable* before it is ever realized, as individuality disrupts the *inclusion* of desirable activities and the *exclusion* of undesirable ones. Second, the rules of the physical world cause all environments to be separated by varying distances, as activities are *unequally* accessible both to one person and among multiple people (see figures 16 and 17). As such, transitional activities in the physical world—like walking from a restaurant to a movie theater—makeup a significant part of a person's larger experience. To create a more desirable end or activity, *shared transitional constructs* are spaces that are equally foreign in form and have the potential to host diverse types of people. As a result, shared transitional constructs, such as sidewalks, streets, and subways, become incubators for new forms (see figures 18 and 19).

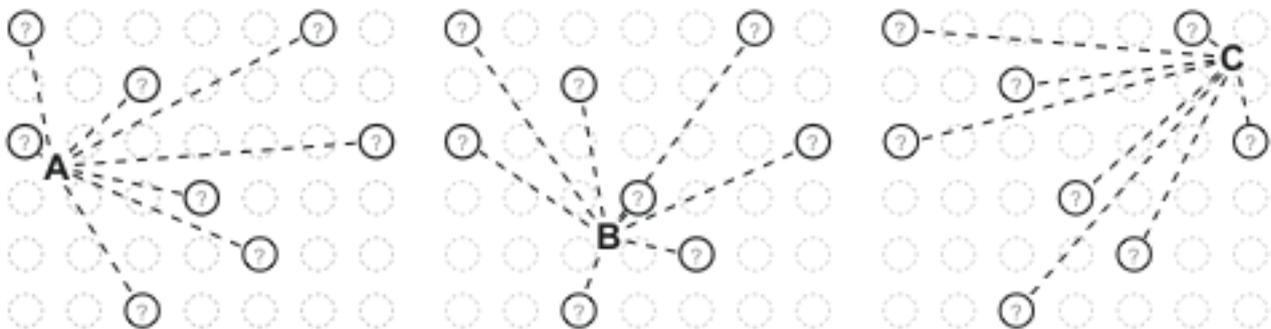


Figure 16.



Figure 17. Physical activities are unequally accessible both to one person and among multiple people.

Competition Between Form and Shared Authorship in the Virtual World

In the physical world, a person is bound by the laws of nature, but rarely by the rules of *other* people. This is not the case in most contemporary virtual environments. As the virtual world does not impose its own form, the behavior rules of any virtual environment are solely defined by the environment’s primary author (see figure 21). Consequently, inhabitants are limited to the activities outlined and are unable to add their own. Virtual environments cannot be re-authored or employed for activities *beyond* their designed capacity. The material existence of these environments adheres to their conceptual one. Furthermore, because the virtual world is empty, the environments architects create are the *only* inhabitable places. Architects outline the full spectrum of virtual behavior possible.

Yet, within most virtual environments (e.g. Google+), inhabitants *experience* a higher level of freedom and control than in the physical world (e.g. in Google+ users can manipulate their content with great ease). However, because users have only secondary authorship, total diversity may be more limited. Variation is high in quantity, but based on a few themes (see figure 21). Compared to the physical world, forms in virtual environments are realized through a more controlled and reductive process. Virtual information and behavior are highly curated by the architect and the user.

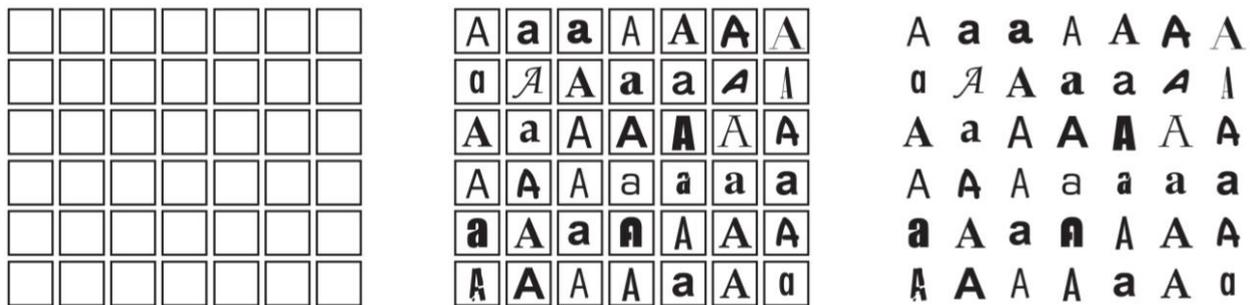


Figure 21.

Multiple Activities in the Virtual World

At the larger scale of multiple activities across different environments, the reductive nature of virtual authorship is again problematic for the interaction of different forms. People *experience* a high degree of authorship over larger virtual behavior for two reasons. First, because environments successfully specify their activities (and environments are largely unchanging), a person can easily qualify any activity as desirable or undesirable *before* it happens. The scripted nature of behavior within a single activity allows predictability (see figure 22). Second, the absence of natural virtual rules causes all virtual environments to be inherently separated by a distance of zero and, therefore, equally accessible to every person. The ability to instantaneously warp to any environment results in the exclusion of *transitional* and undesirable activities from virtual life—only desirable environments are accessed. Consequently, in the virtual world, people operate in parallel universes and nowhere do truly *unrelated* forms interact. The virtual world enables every person to be spatially adjacent, but socially estranged by their confinement to predetermined activities they deem desirable.



Figure 22. Virtual activities are qualified as desirable or undesirable before they are ever realized.



Figure 23. Desirable activities are included and transitional and undesirable activities are excluded from larger virtual behavior.

CONCLUSION

The Contemporary City

Contemporary cities are becoming increasingly homogeneous in their material makeup and use. Large developments of globally branded architectures and programs dominate many urban centers. Public open spaces are privatized to benefit those with wealth and exclude those without. For example, Union Square in Manhattan—one of the New York City's most central public spaces—is surrounded by commerce economically inaccessible to those without the financial means, such as Nordstroms, Bestbuy and Starbucks. Moreover, shared transportation systems are abandoned for the sake of individual convenience. For example, the largest public space in New York City—the street—is dedicated almost entirely to the automobile—a private transportation system used only by a fraction of the city's population.

The current value system for determining the success of contemporary environments stems from the once prevalent need to author the natural environment for survival. Everything that people author in the physical world, at its core, has been, and will continue to be, an attempt to overcome the conflict between their forms and that of nature. Consequently, it has long been the desire of architects and urban designers to fully author their environments and, by extension, the behavior of their inhabitants. Indeed, inhabitants value qualities such as efficiency, predictably and controllability. Thus, while current technologies have opened contemporary urban life to more fluid and democratic possibilities, most contemporary environments are *conceived, created and used* in static manner. Nevertheless, the greater degree to which an environment controls behavior, the more predetermined and predictable behavior becomes and the easier it is to eliminate undesirable behaviors along with the unknown and new.

Authorship over environments, both physical and virtual, currently requires specific skills and knowledge most do not have—the construction of buildings, sidewalks and streets requires vast amounts of economic wealth and manpower. At the same time, the construction of virtual spaces requires technical expertise typically learned in higher education and access to rapidly changing technologies. Although the physical world ensures a certain level of shared authorship and the virtual world enables content to be created, duplicated, and manipulated instantly, most people are unable to directly author the places they inhabit. The majority of physical and virtual environments today are authored by a select few, making them largely preventative and undemocratic. By contrast, a more engaging city needed with the most inclusionary and open spaces imaginable. These spaces must host the highest number and variety of people and demand their expression through ordering the environment itself. To achieve this goal, the city must be questioned, critiqued and authored by all of its people.

The-Inbetween-State

The solution does not lie in the virtual world or the physical, but in a platform that integrates both, what I call the In-Between-State (see figure 24). The In-Between-State will allow a place such as Times Square to be re-made instantaneously by the collective. Its fundamental meaning and purpose could be continuously questioned through a shared and interactive experience. New social behaviors, which deviate

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from existing social forms such as protests, parties and the unidentified, will be evaluated within a dynamic public and may spawn their own communities and full societies.

The In-Between-State could be realized through technology manifested not as a physical device (phones, glasses or watches), but as part of the city itself. Free and accessible technology must be embedded within the city's basic infrastructures (streets, sidewalks and parks) to provide unprejudiced access to a greater public for every person all the time. Virtual constructs will be disseminated through physical constructs and melded together. This information, which now *is* the city, would be gathered and displayed, through everyone's augmented physical behavior. The current physical environment would be left largely untouched as the city advances to a living repository—an egalitarian platform for new social activity.

In the In-Between-State, the form and experience of the city will be forever multiple and open—necessitating the exploration of social values and democracy and the invention of new social forms. The In-Between-State will be the catalyst for the perpetual redefinition of the contemporary city and its people towards the fantastic and unknown.

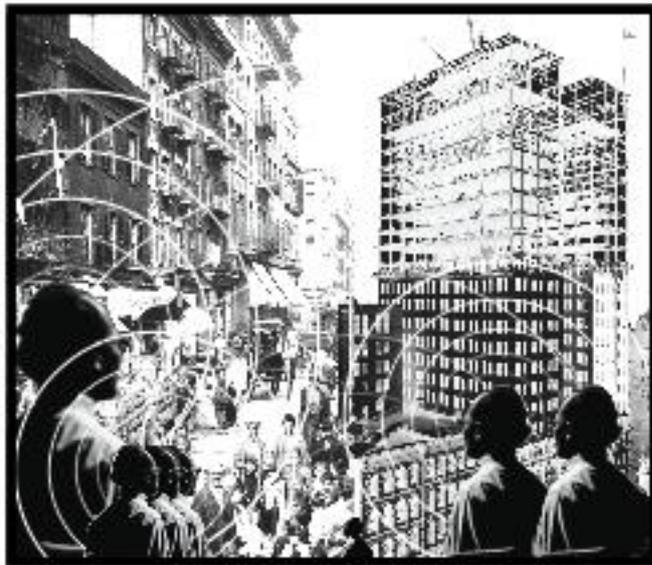


Figure 24. The-Inbetween-State

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