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The Synthetic City: Excursions into the Real-Not Real   [Media and the City]

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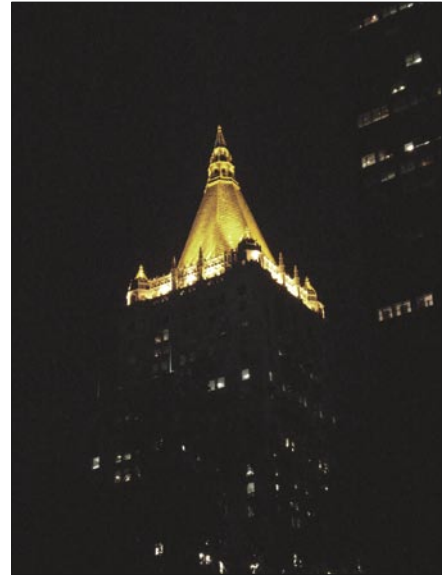**ISSN**

Author

Scherr, Richard

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The Synthetic City: Excursions into the Real-Not Real

Richard Scherr

As you walk out of the subway at Madison Square, New York City, they stand before you, familiar, yet strange. The Empire State Building, Metropolitan Life, New York Life, and just outside of the view, the Chrysler Building, all ablaze with light in the night sky. The buildings are landmarks, known to all of us, and need little emphasis to dominate our attention. But here they are, highlighted, marked, designated, separated from their normal context, the way quotation marks set off a word or phrase. Buildings—in quotation marks! The intense light has shifted their material reality into something more ephemeral. They are still the same buildings we know—but made up to be more noticed, to look more *like landmarks than their normal images would suggest—the Empire State Building made to "look" like the Empire State Building. And we do notice them, enjoy them, marvel over them—and we are conscious that they exist, that they are different ("How radiant! How beautiful!"), as if the buildings were now seen for the very first time, and glow with a sense of life that we never before knew existed. The buildings are still of this world, but they are also set apart from this world. They are real—but at the same time, somehow not real—at least in the way that we have always known them.*

Left to Right: Empire State Building, Metropolitan Life Building, New York Life Building at night.

One of the fundamental shifts in the twentieth century has been the challenge to authenticity—the replacement of the real, based in direct observation, i.e., the actual thing—with products and events that are shifted into the realm of representation, fantasy and the artificial. We are able to observe through lenses that magnify the invisible, expose the hidden, deepen the color, freeze the moving, crop the continuous, and conceal the extraneous. The possibilities of mechanical reproduction take the unique and make it ubiquitous, removing all vestiges of the object's originality, materiality and aura.[1] Art, literature, theater, film and other arts analyze and transform experience and objects through a wide variety of devices based in pictorial illusion, abstraction, fragmentation, superimposition, montage, deconstruction and other techniques which remove us further from the temporal and spatial settings of real experience. The entertainment and advertising industries exert a powerful influence on culture, which have given us new worlds, dreams and fantasies that offer compelling alternatives to the existing traditions, codes and places of our daily lives.

Nowhere has the artificial, or the synthetic, had a more powerful influence than in the development and quality of the American city. Over the last several decades, the proliferation of popular culture, mass media, and the power of global corporations to blanket the world with the same images, same products, same stores has become the great equalizing force that covers the urban landscape everywhere, although in several different guises. On the one

hand, it exists in isolation in its most pure manifestation: the Disneylands, Universal Studios, and other entertainment theme parks—even shopping malls—have programmed mass entertainment experiences to be enjoyed by everyone. More insidiously, the theme park has emerged within the central city in the form of mixed commercial/restaurant entertainment districts. Sometimes these are unabashedly exposed in completely new settings (the recent transformation of 42nd Street, New York); more typically they are encased in historic "warehouse" districts (Larimer Square, Denver; Pioneer Square, Seattle; Sundance Square, Fort Worth; Quincy Market, Boston; the Gaslight District in San Diego; the Warehouse Districts in Dallas, Cleveland, and Portland, and many more); and the same instinct has brought the "malling" of cities everywhere (including New York, the one city thought to be

impervious to suburbanization—as seen by the transformation of Soho, 57th Street, Fifth Avenue, Chelsea Piers, and the Seaport).[2] More recently, the packaging of cultural-entertainment districts, using museums, sports complexes, and convention centers (again, so much the better if connected with "history"), has emerged as the new formula for pumping life into old central districts, as observed in the redevelopment of Pittsburg, Denver, Baltimore, Hartford, Cleveland, St. Paul, Philadelphia, Seattle, and many other cities.

In many of the above cases, such as Denver's Larimer Square and the New York Seaport, there was an attempt to incorporate the authentic, original structures of the city as

Above: 42nd Street, N.Y.

Above: South Street Seaport, Schermerhorn Row, N.Y.

part of the package through the creation of "historic districts," or some similar provision designed to legislate preservation. In the most restrictive cases, virtually no change to the historic fabric is allowed, any proposed alterations are closely monitored, and buildings are restored to replicate their original state as accurately as possible. Despite good intentions, however, the result typically falls short of "true" authenticity. As soon as even the most sensitive design intervention (or even simple intent prior to actual reconstruction) takes place, a part of the city has been artificially "cropped" from its surroundings, and time has been made to stop, bypassing all references to ongoing cultural and physical changes to the rest of the city.

This framing of the normally continuous and chang-

ing into a frozen moment of time turns the authentic into a parody, oddly mute and introverted, finally ending up as a museum, a representation of itself rather than a place allowed to be deformed and contaminated by the dynamics of cultural, social and economic change. But removing the legislative frame is not the answer either. When historic settings are not so insulated within static and controlled districts and are more freely open to the demands of the marketplace, they become "recycled and revalued territories…turned into gentrified, historicized, commodified, and privatized landscapes," or once again, the entertainment theme park.[3] In either case, protected or nonprotected, the historic fabric of the city becomes separated into a displaced, artificial condition, a form of tableau configured and framed without a context—or within a context that no longer matters.

The commodification of the city based in mass media, simulacra, and the inauthentic that has been generated out of a perhaps less-than-fortuitous mix of the proliferation of popular culture, new communication technologies, and global capitalist expansion has been well documented.[4] However, indignation and incredulity quickly recede into history as the phenomenon of the unique and new more and more becomes the ubiquitous and commonplace. Clearly, none of it could have come about unless both city officials and developers became knowing collaborators in the enterprise. Historically, the collapse of center cities throughout the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s presented a dying patient in need of resuscitation by any means. And the power of the media to reshape culture over the same period generated a public that accepted—no—*demanded* change. These leaders could hardly have responded otherwise. Yet, while the revitalization of city cores with interchangeable theme stores, entertainment districts, sports stadiums, and the rest may have done wonders for the tax base, and cleaned up areas of blight and decay, it has also come at a heavy price in terms of each city's unique sense of place and range of experience—or, as expressed by the architect Louis Kahn, the city as an form of incubator, "where a young boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life."[5]

The point of all this is that there has always existed an edge (sometimes blurred, but still an edge) between the world of the real/authentic and the fictive/artificial; life, or the real world, on the one side, and fantasy, entertainment and art on the other. Even in the case of the long history of theatrical forms and entertainment, the experience, while fused within the ongoing activities of the city, was always bounded, contained by a defining wall, or an interruption in the flow of events, a critical polar division that articulated the world of fantasy/illusion from that of reality.[6] This notion of understanding experience or culture in terms of polar oppositions has been a recurring method of inquiry throughout the twentieth century (i.e., high vs. low culture, reality vs. fantasy, signifier vs. signified, public vs. private, figure vs. ground, the static vs. the changing, etc.), and has been fundamental to our comprehension of the world around us.

It is becoming clear, however, that oppositional strategies are limited to explain more ambiguous and interactive investigations in art, science, linguistics and literature; thus the emergence of deconstruction, chaos, chance and other theories that deal with the fuzzy zones of hybrid, or in-between phenomena. The computer, with the technology of documentation through digitalization, has enabled

all visual phenomena to be "leveled out" into a common, interactive field, allowing all forms and media to interact and be combined. As the shaping of popular culture and the arts continues to evolve, the edges between the real and fictive are starting to disappear, and we begin to see urban interventions, such as giant diode displays and animated building lighting that exploit the use of media, incorporate methods of scenographic sequencing, superimposition, fragmentation, replication, and other techniques that blur the edges of temporal, programmatic and spatial boundaries.

This blurring of the polar city marks the beginning of a newly merged, hybrid phenomenon, which I call the

Above: NASDAQ sign, Conde Naste Building, N.Y.

"real-not real."[7] It begins with a realization that we can no longer clearly differentiate the real/authentic and the fictive/artificial: as the city has evolved and recycled, neither condition can be found anymore in its pure pedigree form. Facets of the city that started with, or have some remaining vestiges of the authentic have unavoidably been contaminated by spatial/physical and programmatic changes, or have been recontextualized through new symbolic, or cultural associations. Thus, we find that an authentic historic building may be converted into a McDonald's, and we're not sure anymore if the building is "original," or a fabrication that recontextualizes its

contents; and if it really is the original, as in the case of the Candler Building of 1914 on 42nd Street, does the tenant, with its over-the-top lighting, ten plasma display menu boards, LCD projections of New York imagery, and ATMs, overwhelm its host, and seem to make it no better or worse than the newer fabrications down the street? Context becomes ubiquitous—authentic or fabrication is no longer in doubt, as the question no longer begs to be asked.

Of course, such imposed fantasies, media creations, invented narratives, and artificial tableaux still must accommodate circumstantial necessities of performance (be entered, heated, stand up, be circulated through). But they have otherwise become so ingrained that they are now totally absorbed in our understanding of the world;

Above: McDonald's in the Candler Building, 42nd Street, N.Y.

thus it is that they have acquired an identity of being "real" (according to their own terms). So, while McDonald's was once a disturbance in the midst of the "real" city around it, it no longer exerts such an effect today (even in its current location in the Piazza della Rotunda in Rome!). It is a part of the scene as much as anything else; and the same goes for Mickey Mouse, the IBM logo, the Old West, or any number of other invented narratives or symbols that easily slip into a mythic status. As the differences between the authentic and inauthentic become smaller and smaller, and harder to decipher, they also begin to matter less and less, to the point of indifference. What were once polar opposites finally collapse, or blur into the singularity of the real-not real, bits of cultural debris that can be used in any number of ways, and whose meaning shifts through changing association and contexts.

Through the increasing power of communication technologies, tendencies toward dissimulation throughout current cultural production, and the dominance of private control we are rapidly evolving a new kind of "synthetic" city which is taking the place of the traditional city we once knew. The notion of the synthetic here is less a description of the inauthentic or simulacra, as referred to above, than a realization that the city is a manufactured product that is controlled and artificially manipulated to an extent far beyond what was previously possible, resulting in an interactive, mixed field of information and space. Such control is exerted through global private corporations of an unprecedented scale and power, which use the city as a communication mechanism for generating capital, and further remove it from its former role as a text of broader cultural transformation. As the later stages of capitalism evolve, greater competition generates expansion and continued growth necessary for the prosperity and survival of private interests. These are now requiring ever-more-dominating techniques of control, fueled by the evolution of media technology—thus resulting in the current state of the synthetic as a dominant force in the city's evolution.

The New City

The nature of the synthetic city is the result of a continuing evolution of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century city, with its diverging patterns of social and physical instability, the development of mass advertising through major national publications, radio (later television), and giant billboards; the inventions of electricity, sound amplification, and the telephone; the evolution of Hollywood and the film industry; pop/commercial architecture; and generally, the increasing role of all forms of mechanical

reproduction. It is, however, useful to discern a number of characteristics of the current urban condition that present some significant differences from earlier city forms.

If the traditional city tended to be based on a clear delineation of polar conditions (i.e., public vs. private, manmade vs. natural, historical vs. the new, and real vs. the fictive), the synthetic city is composed of somewhat fuzzier situations, where the characteristics of urban events and places become mixed, redefined and blurred into new hybrid combinations (or contradictions)—i.e., public-private, live-work, the reconstituted past, the constructed landscape, and the real-not real.

Our greatest cities have grown and been transformed according to a trajectory based in collective needs and aspirations—i.e., the formation of community, trade, exchange of information, the advancement of learning and the arts, etc.—all of which unfolds through a larger *public*, or cultural dimension. But the synthetic city doesn't so much evolve, as it is controlled, orchestrated and manipulated mainly through *private* entities (sometimes of global dimension) whose motives tend to be focused, circumstantial, and based on self-interest and expansion within a prevailing capitalist environment.

The open, nonhierarchical grid, minimizing locational preference and site specificity recurs throughout the history of the city, allowing new development (typically single buildings) to be arbitrarily and incrementally built on available property; thus it manifested the ultimate independence between architecture and the city.[8] The synthetic city also gives little importance to location (anything can be built anywhere), but here preference is given to larger groupings of interrelated development that are often independent of the grid or other neutral infrastructures. The goal is to achieve "critical mass," as well as define a self-contained, comprehensive internal order and experience that can exist independently of its surroundings.

The formal structure of cities has always been based on institutions that are relatively permanent and stable, as well as gradual transitions and sequences between events that allowed the evolution of organic interrelationships between the parts. The synthetic city, on the other hand, is made up of programs which may quickly change (for nothing lasts very long), causing abrupt shifts and disjunction between parts that might as well be completely disassociated, or that sometimes rub up against each other in odd, unpleasant or enlightening ways. Rather than a preexisting typology of conventions, or preferred forms associated with articulated functions that have been tested over time, the synthetic city requires new combinations of
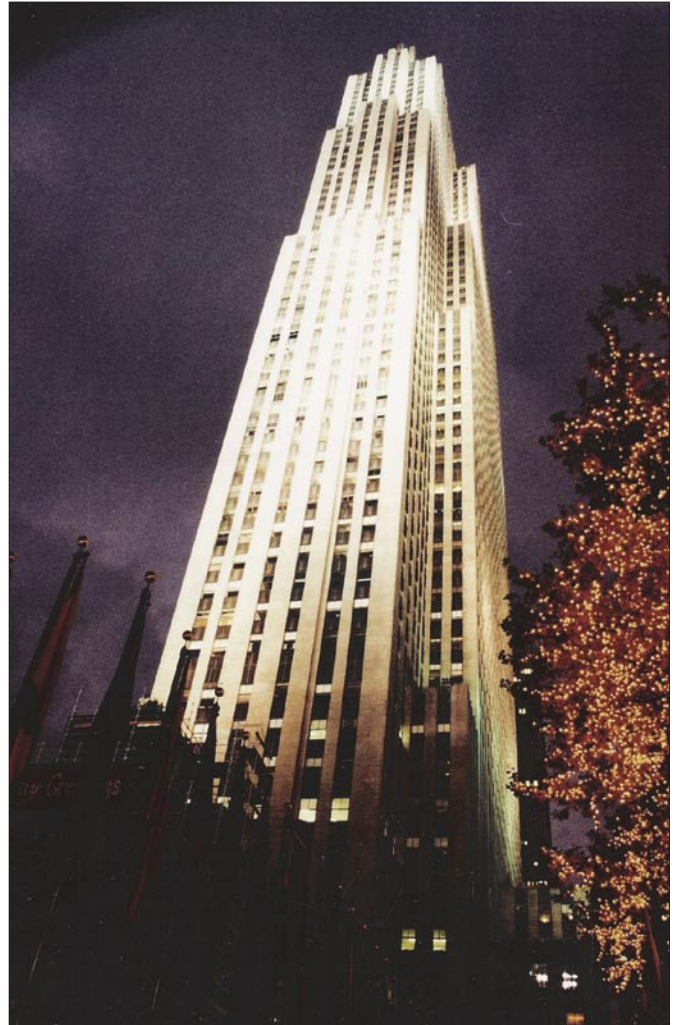
functions unrelated to existing typologies, in which building form in itself is less important than the accommodation of specified (and often complex and varied) programmatic demands that require unique formal solutions.

The essence of the synthetic city is the ability to control: any particular development, building or event can be made to happen anywhere and take on any form given the

Left Above: The Warner Bros. flagship store (low-end retail culture) occupies a monument that is built to endure on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, N.Y.
Left Below: After several years, a "quick change" takes place into the Louis Vuitton Store (high-end retail culture), and one hardly blinks.
Right: The former RCA Building transformed into timeless spectacle, Rockefeller Center, N.Y.

power and desire of private interests to make it happen. Of course, the commodification of production within the city, supported by the underlying agenda of expanding profit is not a new phenomenon.[9] What has changed is the degree of its influence. Fueled by media's ability to shape mass desire for the same products, the same entertainment, the same images, packaged in the same forms, it is today nearly impossible to discern any other reality outside this world of spectacle and popular culture. We now find that the power of the media and corporate interests to fabricate an alternate world, or reframe and recycle original contexts, has blanketed virtually every facet of reality, so that in fact there *is* no other reality that can be separated out from the fabrication.[10]

The real and the fictive have collapsed into the real-

unreal. Fragments of history, memories and artifacts based on places, and buildings remembered in their original state remain; but they have become transformed through new intents and agendas, they exist within different contexts, and they ambiguously intersect within an overlay of less authentic sources and forms, so that the differences between the two, if perceivable, make little difference. For a variety of reasons the real (authentic history, the original source) can no longer be placed in a privileged position from the artificial (simulated history, the copy): the replication can be made superior to the original; the original has been repaired or refurbished to an extent that it looks like a replication; or the passage of time has removed us so far from the source that the precise form or narrative of the original recedes into the distance. Thus, even the possible manifestation of the original automatically becomes suspect, and is assumed to be distorted from its original state.

All of this begs the question whether the copy, reinvention or simulation is any more of a distortion than our transformed perception of the original. In short, both the authentic and the replication have become blurred to an extent that they are interchangeable, and there is no longer any obligation (or ability) to differentiate between them.[11] The synthetic has become real—and the real has become synthetic.

All sources, forms, programs, agendas and styles become legitimate in this new urban scene, to be used, mixed and matched depending on the predetermined needs, desires and expectations of those in control—which, presumably, are the same as those who consume the product. The synthetic city becomes a form of machine *to produce effects*, able to be manipulated, controlled and changed at will to perform as required, whenever and wherever necessary. These effects, produced through new media, advertising, and the market-generated, constant replacement of physical settings have generated an ephemeral city of continuous change and transformation.

Glimpses of Opportunities

Given the nature of the synthetic's condition of flux and impermanence, a critical question arises as to whether any semblance of the traditional qualities of place and permanence in a city can be maintained in a context of shifting values and cultural associations. As discussed earlier, even the tools of historic preservation, when used to maintain the integrity of the original urban fabric, have little power to insulate a city from perceptual and cultural shifts that fundamentally alter the qualities and meaning of the artifact itself.

There are times, however, when media and events, when executed well, put places in the city into sharper focus, and a sense of place emerges as a shifting, dynamic perception, a new form of presence that achieves success on its own terms.

Consider, for instance, the New 42nd Street Studios building, with its changing patterns of colored light, echoing the dynamic shifts of bodies in the space within. The transforming facade captures the dynamic spirit of

Above: A "new" historic building (stone hung on hidden steel structure) constructed in Soho, a strictly legislated historic district containing the world's foremost collection of cast-iron buildings.
Below: Times Square, N.Y.

porations in America today. A display of pure reflection by day, and a blaze of light by night, it also anchors the heretofore anonymous plaza at the base of the building with power and distinction.

Such buildings and events, reveling in spectacle, media and dynamism, could become our new monuments, and help define a sense of place in a synthetic city no longer composed of stable, unchanging forms. While shifting, transitory, superficial and market-driven, their overall presence, however, establishes expectations for more of everything—brighter, larger, and ever more memorable and fantastic. Thus, one building, sign or event in Times Square or Soho may change, or disappear, but we can be assured that the overall effect will stay the same. We can hope that design awareness may lead to new environments that offer multiplicity and choice. But the danger is that it may only "appear" that way, leading to a bewildering recurrence of sensory-numbing imagery that overwhelms substance and diversity.

Yet another result could be the city of simulated difference, a synthetic environment of wildly diverse preferences and options, carefully orchestrated to facilitate the most enhanced effects. Vestiges of the real will continue to exist as precious, preserved artifacts, analogous to original historic texts placed under glass. But they become ever smaller, more minute, and almost inconsequential in the face of new media experiences that enlarge, intensify and realign our experience in a newly expanded sense of place, however impermanent and transitory.

In the end, however, we might as easily discover that the condition of the synthetic is far more closely aligned with a changing, mixed, newly emerging multicultural urban population. No longer sustained by the limited, reductive text of the historic city, it may require far more complex, rich and multivalent messages and settings to evolve and flourish.

movement itself, establishing a sense of place that stands apart yet relates to the vibrating mass media scene around it. Here, the architecture sharply resonates with something very real and majestic—the moving bodies, the changing light, suspended in space within a structural membrane—as specific an identity of place as the old succession of flashing marquees from the 1940s. We realize it, and it stops us in our tracks.

Or take the recently opened Apple store in front of the General Motors Building. A transcendent, cubic glass entry pavilion, it meets the challenge of establishing an iconic representation for one of the most influential cor-

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

2. The notion of the malling of America is thoroughly discussed in Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992). See, in particular, Christine Boyer's chapter, "Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at South Street Seaport." Also see Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994), pp. 421-458.

3. Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, pp. 448-49.

4. Other histories besides those cited above would include the development of some

Above: The New 42nd Street Studio Building, N.Y. Platt, Byard, Dovell Architects.

of the more important business and technological innovators, such as Walt Disney and Microsoft.

5. John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1979), p. 44.

6. Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, pp. 74-75.

7. One might give some recognition here to the seminal work of Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966)—in particular, his discussion of the notion of ambiguity and the phenomenon of "both-and."

8. Manfredo Tafuri, "Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology," in K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architectural Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 13.

9. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), provided the seminal articulation of this position more than thirty years ago.

10. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Semiotext, Inc., 1983), pp. 23-25.

11. This discussion is inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"—in particular, his views on the collapse of reality and illusion in film through consciousness of the filming apparatus and a continual shifting of images, which denies reflection—as opposed to the phenomenon of distancing essential to theatrical experience.

All photographs are by the author.

Above: The Apple Store on General Motors Plaza, N.Y. Bohlin, Cywinsky, Jackson Architects.