

• STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL •

# San Marco Square

## Venice

Michael Awad makes urban panoramas using a special camera that registers only moving objects.



• MEMORANDUM •

# Time-based architecture

*Ole Bouman*

Often, all too often, architecture denies time. It challenges eternity and aspires to permanence. It poses for the photographer as a frozen tableau, unsullied by mortality. It pretends moreover to be a long-term investment, immune to wear, misappropriation or declining cultural relevance. The discourse on architecture, finally, is almost entirely about that one, breathless moment when time seems to stand still: the delivery. Neither the arduous genesis of the concept, nor the refinement of the sketch, nor the battle for quality of execution, nor even unforeseen uses, those mutations of real life, provoke as much reflection as that one pure moment when the world seems perfect. The question I wish to raise in this article is what happens when we approach architecture from the opposite direction – not from a longing for perfection, but from the viewpoint of the ravages of time.

## *A culture of many times*

Time, it is said, is nature's way of making sure not everything happens at once. Nowadays, however, it can no longer be relied on to do so effectively. The British physicist Julian Barbour, in seeking a 'theory of everything' to unite quantum mechanics and relativity, argues that the universe is just 'one big bunch of nows'. Several articles in the September 2002 special edition of *Scientific American* postulate that the relativity of time is a human construct. In the transition from a humanist world view (in which the unfolding of the inner self prevails) to one in which the central issue is the processing of information, time

becomes increasingly defined as a social contract rather than an actual fact. Some speak, in a fine oxymoron, of The End of Time.

Still, we need neither theoretical physics nor philosophy to realize the extent to which time has become ever more compressed into an everlasting here and now. We live in a culture of perpetual nowness where what matters is the updating, rather than the creation, of information. Our days are spent checking for news: the doormat, the newspaper, the mailbox, the answering machine, voice mail, SMS alerts, teletext, stock prices, the diary, electronic newsletters, ICQ messages... it is an incessant bombardment. There is always something new to check. What typifies all these forms of communication, however up to date, is their asynchronicity. Nobody is hanging on at the other end of the line or sitting opposite you waiting to receive your answer. To respond, you in turn leave a message. This disconnection of communication from real contact is a crucial factor in the progressive subjectivization of time. Every message is stamped with its time of arrival. Your personal universe turns into a realm of time management, system maintenance and the meeting of deadlines.

There may however be an even more significant factor behind the triumph of the here and now. That factor is the simultaneity of different life styles. For adherents of the 'flex' way of life, everything is simultaneous. Whereas production and reproduction once inhabited quite separate realms, now work, relaxation

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and private life are everywhere at once. You take your work home with you, you structure your own day at the office and fire off an e-mail to a friend, to the real estate agent or to the tax consultant whenever you feel like it. Everyone has his or her personal To Do list. How else can you survive in a world where you have to think of everything at the same time, while you are continually bombarded with distractions?

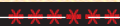
And, just as individual life has become a concatenation of what were once strictly distinct levels of experience, society too has become a patchwork of different time experiences. Even in suburbia, renowned from the start for its monoculture, we see an emerging mosaic of black and white schools, full and empty parking spaces, fading children's playgrounds, moribund churches and flourishing mosques. It is the result of a clouding of the collective sense of time in the multicultural society. Conflicts flare over the organization of time. Pungent cooking smells in the early morning. Five times a day to the house of prayer during Ramadan. Anger over Santa no longer paying his customary visit to the 'black school'. Sentimental thoughts of combining the Islamic fast-breaking with Christmas. Everyone is more wide awake than ever, but nobody knows what time it is for someone else. What we learn from the situation is either that time is the fundamental order that binds everything together, or that it isn't. An unquestioned acceptance of the clock, the diary and the calendar is making way for a system of temporary and arbitrary agreements which are made on purely pragmatic grounds and which only remain valid as long as it suits people. This is the culture that fosters the dissatisfaction that has erupted so virulently in recent times. This too is the heart of the matter of integration. Far more than a shared language, it is a shared time that enables people to live in harmony and to respect one another. Some biologists hold that an empathy with another individual's use of time is what makes the real difference between the human and the animal. And although the perception of time scarcely rates a mention in the current fierce debates on integration, it is an area that can only be understood in terms of a wide diversity of social attitudes.

What reaction patterns can we detect in the current discourse on society? It is no longer a discussion about Left or Right, Socialist or Conservative. Although it is certainly possible to treat time as a divisive issue, choosing a position is not so much a matter of striking a balance between social justice and individual freedom. More and more, people are adopting positions in a (usually unconscious) reac-

tion to today's fragmented temporal order. As such, these are not ethical or material reaction patterns, but temporal ones. On the one hand, there is the progressive approach in which the right to self-determination with regard to time is central and the tendency towards further atomization of time is not really disputed. According to this way of thinking, it is up to those who think differently to become just as liberal, enlightened and individualistic. On the other hand, there is a powerful conservative tendency which expresses itself primarily in terms of the preservation of values and standards. But its real aim is to counter the further fragmentation of time with a desperate appeal to the needs of society. This mentality betrays a latent jealousy towards those groups who still display the social cohesion inherent in a strongly shared sense of time. After all, the only family that could still be termed the 'cornerstone of society' is the average immigrant family. The conservative tendency would dearly like to see greater 'family reunification' among native-born Netherlanders.

Besides these two conceptual assessments of what is going on in society, there is also the limit of tolerance that can be reached. How much loss of time can we still put up with – on public transport, in traffic jams, on the telephone, listening to muzak and repeated 'Please hold the line' messages? How much incomprehension can one tolerate about the breakdown of old customs such as shopping hours and public holidays, or the breakdown of the arbitrary borders of human existence by in-vitro fertilization and euthanasia?

All things considered, the whole cultural discourse is about the question of how far we can go in personalizing time towards a regime of total arbitrariness. Is there anything that still binds us together? Absolutely, and not infrequently such things are experienced as a foregone conclusion, as a tyranny of clichés: the obligatory networking via Christmas and New Year's cards, the commercial enterprises of Mother's Day, Father's Day and Valentine's Day, the annual mega-events of the Oscar awards and the Eurovision Song Festival. The elections. The Tour de France. And, of course, the constantly updated 'Breaking News'. Criticism is frequently heard of the gratuitous significance of a news channel that does not serve truth but is driven by viewer statistics. But the hidden significance of this journalistic circus might just be the daily synchronization of society. The passive news consumer can observe daily how his fellow citizens remain equally passive in the face of the same news reports. It is a rarely analysed yet vital function of the



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press. The volatility of the media is the ultimate indicator of a nation's durability.

This brings us to the concept of synchronicity, the extent to which each person's clock can keep the same time as another's. It is not long since all humanity shared such a moment. I refer to the Millennium, of course, and in particular to the Bug scare. The First of January 2000 was first supposed to be a universal party, followed by a universal catastrophe. It turned out, however, to be a moment like any other, a gigantic flop, the ultimate rude awakening, leaving ruins in its wake such as the Millennium Dome in London. The New Economy slammed into a brick wall. Now, in the anonymous year 2003, there is nothing on the calendar (apart from the threat of war, of course) to bring us together. We shall have to do it ourselves. For a society, the daily ration of news, celebrities and commercial violence can never be enough. Time is not held together by vague sentiments but by concrete actions. Interventions at a wider level than the individual are needed to promote the rediscovery of shared time. I could describe it as a 'Delta Plan' to halt the further disintegration of time, if that didn't sound so parochially Dutch. So let's call it a Grand Projet, a project to heal time.

*Synchro system*

The battle for time leaves us orphaned. If it is true that every form of society is ultimately founded on a shared time, then the question arises whether continued submission to a divisive time might not eventually lead to the impossibility of society, at any rate, as something that rises above the immediate pragmatics of controlling and coordinating, and gains a life-motivating, identity-imparting significance. This brings us to the ethical significance of shared time. Technically speaking it is quite conceivable that an entirely atomized and rationalized time might produce a perfectly functional society. It is not unimaginable that a continued commercialization of time into a system of asynchronous transactions might lead to a peaceful, or perhaps sedated, world. Such a system might run smoothly enough if its control mechanisms were perfected. But the question is of course whether that is desirable. Whether it is nice. And whether there aren't other alternatives.

The tenet of this pamphlet is that it would be better not to carry out this sinister social experiment but to investigate how to repair the synchronicity that forms the foundation of social cohesion. That's what matters: the synchronization of the experience of time to a level where you can recognize yourself in another;

in his or her world view, life rhythm and ideals. For what starts as tolerance towards someone else's lifestyle may end in indifference towards that other person's time. The emancipation of time from the chains of faith and ideology has had a liberating effect on the individual's right to self-determination, but has produced a society in which people have become their own time units, shut up in their time capsules and communicating with one another only in protocols. Indeed, extremely precise clocks are needed for those protocols. But sharing a clock is not the same as sharing a sense of time. A clock only helps you share clock time, not the duration, the experience, the sensation of existence. The clock only facilitates communication, not participation in another's life. People will soon be asking what time something happened rather than how it felt. Nobody will know what the time is for someone else. Perhaps this is the true reason for the increased concern for the need for integration. The problem isn't language. It is not the sharing of values and standards. It is primarily the failure to share time. Thus poor integration is not a problem of the other and the others, but a problem of ourselves. Nobody is able to say clearly what people are supposed to be integrating into, because we no longer know. It wouldn't be the first time that a conversation ostensibly about the faults of the other has in fact been a conversation about ourselves. The accusation levelled most fiercely at present concerns the avoidance behaviour of some people. Yet avoidance is precisely the consequence of disintegrating time, and thus applies to us all.

It must be admitted, however, that the situation sketched above is far from being a fate to which humanity is meekly letting itself be led. Besides all the protests against globalization and excessive submission to market forces, which contain an implicit critique of the prevailing time perspective, there are countless forms of resistance where time is an explicit issue. It is the resistance of self-imposed slowness. In art, film and architecture, we can point to countless examples of works that consciously aim to decelerate movement and the viewer's experience. Deceleration is meant to lead to contemplation, reflection, tactility and value. In the political arena, too, voices are regularly heard in favour of countermanding the devastating pace of life and opting for deceleration. It is a concept that is invariably linked to the 'quality of life', with the implication that haste impairs that quality. Even some businesses have now discovered slowness; not as a critique of capitalism, but as a commodity with good prospects of success in certain market seg-



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ments. Fashion, body care, interior design, Slow Food: many different areas are profiting from the sense of unease by offering SlowTM. Even slowness can become a brand.

But slowness is not the same as shared time. Slowness can just as easily become a consumer product, a question of style and status; something you use to express your individuality, and hence a function of atomization. Slowness can also, in true Dutch style, be turned into a highly intensive project. Slowness is a way of flaunting your privileges. It has nothing to do with community formation. That can only be fostered by the reinstatement of *chronomunitas*, a community of time which is stronger than *chronocracy*, the dominance of time. In a community of time, time is not necessarily slower but it gains more significance due to the shared experience. This makes it fuller and more intense; it gains a historical and future perspective. A community of time does not fret about the waste of time because it continually generates time.

The question now is whether this vision of a community of time could lead to a real turning point in the current process of temporal fragmentation. Can time become public again? Will it be necessary to appoint a protector of public time, in the same way as for the public domain? Should that protector be the State, from whom we have the highest expectations in the case of public space? Must it also take responsibility for saving public time? At what levels could such a community of time be created? At the psychological level, where time is experienced? At policy level, where time is organized? Or at design level, where the creation of time also acquires shape? Below are some considerations with respect to the last of these three directions.

*Designing shared time*

You can try to change the way people think about time and thus cultivate a new mentality based on the necessity of shared time. You can also try to organize society at various levels in such a way that the time factor becomes a theme of politics and administration and due weight is given to the importance of social synchronicity. But is it also possible to give the time factor visual form? Can the abstraction on which the whole of the above argument has been based be a source of inspiration for those shaping the look of the world, for the representations of values that we encounter daily? Can time be made visible in our environment, and can it be used in the design of clothing, interiors, buildings, cities and landscapes? And is such design capable of bringing people closer

together? Can the conceptual counterpart of time – the order of space, material and form – make time?

Sure it can. In the case of our second skin, fashion, that is immediately clear. Few cultural expressions make such a potent contribution to a group identity as clothing. In the right gear, you're part of the scene. Appearances are not only an expression of individual personality but are also a coded signal for various kinds of desired contact. There is still much that could be achieved in this area by means of colour, shape, difference, logos and all that. It would be a start. The most elementary form of synchronicity is a date.

And what about the third skin? Architecture is not without experience in this domain. I need only mention a few properties that architecture has always possessed to clarify this. If one interprets time as heritage, there are countless examples of the immortalization of values in stone and ornament. Memories were evoked, as it were, by form. The future, too, has a rich tradition of built imagery. The architects who designed as a way of proclaiming the future literally fabricated time. It must be said, however, that architecture has almost entirely lost this function, knowing neither which memories are worth petrifying nor which future is worth the effort of proclaiming. All that remains is the engineering of consent by way of neoclassicism, of community spirit by traditionalists, of the calming perspective by the Disney Corporation; or, at the other end of the spectrum, a vague fascination with the new, strange and far-off – the megastructures, the blobs and the deconstructivism. Architecture has largely abandoned its functions of commemoration and midwifery, and thus reflects the poverty of the historical consciousness. How can you build for tomorrow if you live purely in the here and now? The same applies to art in public spaces, which lost its *memento mori* function half a century ago. History and the future used to make time into a collective good, but the present day privatizes time.

Here's another angle. If time is seen as a coefficient of efficiency, then architecture is a brilliant metaphor for this. There can be few fields where the struggle for time, the hunt for speed and the respect for haste have been so strikingly expressed. A professional field currently on the rise in the Netherlands sports the name 'mobility aesthetics'. This discipline aims to give standing and visual form to a culture of motion, and offers a sequel to the non-aesthetic of mobility that prevails at high-visibility motorway locations, where two principles apply: the speed of access to and from the transport network, and the size of the logo on the

Undated Sunday Time Planner

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cornice. The mobility aesthetic does not make time, but aspires to a more pleasant way of spending it.

Then there is the architecture that works on the basis that everything is fluid and will forever remain so. It is the architecture of the flex office and the drive-through restaurant. Its repertoire includes sliding walls, snap-on modules, system ceilings, tidal traffic flow schemes, multifunctional buildings and programmatic intensification. In fact, it is an architecture that has no intention of representing anything, but aims only to serve the evanescence of every idea, every programme and every life.

Digging a level deeper than the outward form, we may discern time as an organizational principle of our existence. Actually, the built environment is always a reflection of that. Indeed, it bolsters that organization. Just as time gradually spread by way of mechanical clocks and watches, so sources of heat and water have spread. Where people once huddled around an open fire or the village pump, and shared their joys and woes at the first signs of spring or of winter drawing on, now everyone can bask in a private mental universe at his or her own radiator or washbasin. The impact of technological advances on the individualization and hence the desynchronization of time cannot be overestimated. Scarcity makes time into a collective good, while abundance privatizes time. In that respect, architecture has less and less capacity to create collective time. But enormous quantities of private time are being produced.

One thing is clear, time has long been present in architecture and it will remain so as long as architecture is accommodating, aspires to cultural significance or is ambitious. Indeed, there is still much to be achieved in this area with a greater awareness of the temporal dimension. But the real question is this: is it possible to conceive of an environment that not only calms, accelerates, accommodates or privatizes time, but which also makes 'public time' by explicitly taking the necessity of doing so as its point of departure? Is it possible to conceive of an architecture that does not separate by setting boundaries, but which unites people by telling stories relevant to these times? An architecture that synchronizes? An architecture that is not finished when the design has been translated into material form and handed over, but just begins at that point? This would be a Time-Based Architecture, an architecture in which process and duration is just as important as form. This architecture would adopt the process of becoming as part of its meaning. It would be programmable and reprogrammable, and would employ reusable technology to that end: moni-

tor screens, polymers, projection techniques, sensory systems or electromagnetic fields. But much more is possible than this widespread introduction of new media. It would admittedly permit a mobile and interactive image, but that in itself says nothing about the content of the image. At that level, too, use could be made of the time factor.

The main thing is not to see time as 'clock time' (producing an architecture of effectiveness) but as experienced time. The latter implies the necessity of telling stories – architecture as a form of cinematography. To increase the opportunities for telling stories and thereby for the creation of synchronizing collective experiences, we shall have to abandon the whole idea that accommodating functions is the chief aim of the design, and instead consider the significance of time for our world. For example, it could turn out that waiting time, hitherto always viewed as time wasted, suddenly becomes a necessary phase, a core element of creativity – of an immobility aesthetic. At last, a source of synchronization! Railway platforms, bottlenecks in the traffic network, lifts, 'transferia', car parks, red lights and intersections: a vast region lies unexploited as long as it is seen as a mere transition. If, however, one could regard mobility as an alternative form of staying in place, and at the same time see that staying put as the last remaining collective experience at the scale of the masses, room opens up for the telling of new stories. They no longer have to be stories that are true for all time. Nor do they have to be stories that can only tell of power. It must be possible to democratize the form of time and leave it to the possibilities of Time Sharing. This would not be architecture as the art of making place, but architecture as the art of spatial creativity in public time. It would be an environment in which the colourful diversity of the world is not merely an abstract principle but a daily reality. It will make possible a world in which the unity of place does not necessarily have to be the unity of time or action. The culture of multiple times needs depth. Design and art could help to create collective experiences that are just as meaningful as gothic portals or classical domes used to be. The world must learn to be eloquent again. Only then will the culture of change no longer appear as a permanent state of transition but as a destination. That would create time, indeed. Who would have thought that the discipline that once liberated space is now capable of giving people their time back?

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