

A More Monumental, Non-Naturalistic Environment

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For the past five years, I have been interested in writing about and visualizing a conception of environment within architecture that is more historical than statistical, more representational than affective, more thing than flow, and more resolutely monumental than pervasive. I would contrast this monumental and historical idea of environment to the ways in which the concept of environment is generally positioned within contemporary architectural practice. Today, architects often utilize the concept of “environment” to invoke a pre-representational realm of flows and forces – natural, scientific, social, political, even mystical. Such a concept of environment appears most clearly in the vectored graphics architects use to visualize an environment – those little arrows that typically represent the movement of air, heat, or water. In some cases, the environmental vector becomes a metaphor for less naturalistic forces – via charts and statistics or other external realms through which architecture responds or emerges. Such an environment-idea appears as a sack of quivering data. It contains a pronounced present-ness via the language of physical forces and information, whether we examine the air over a 19th century city, the path of ice in the arctic, or the exchange of capital in the beginning of the 21st century. Many architects imagine all of these things – swirling around architecture, impacting architecture and the physiology of its subjects in a totalizing and immediate manner.

Architects interested in nature and data are not the only ones chained to the movements of environmental flow. Various computationally situated and neo-expressionist architectural approaches also site their work within the environmental vector, but with a more intense mystification of the source. Extending through writings on animate form, fields, and neo-baroque affectual aesthetics, the form, subjects, and representational techniques of these theoretical approaches also become imprinted with vectored pathways. This work sublimes these latter aspects of architecture into a vitalistic milieu but with a more super-natural and animist aura, versus the architectural environmentalist’s or geographer’s more natural and social orientation. Architecture appears as so deeply immersed within its setting – or the impressions

that it puts upon a viewing subject – that the distinction between object and context collapses. Ironically, the most ardent naturalistic environmentalists and computational aesthetes share a very close vision of the context within which their work emerges – a thick space of force and pre-representational influences on the subject.

To think past the vectored environment in architecture is to think past the scientific, technological, and naturalistic sublimation that dominates our understanding and experience of environments. It requires us to understand both an environment within which architecture is set, and one that is within architecture as something other than trajectories, flux, and molecules. For me, this would imply a partially Kantian concept of environment – rooted in understanding environment with an aesthetic emphasis. In his discussion of the perception of the ocean, Kant wrote that we have a more aesthetic sense of it when we forget its scientifically defined contents and uses (the structure of its currents, its role as a biological realm, or a site of commerce) and begin understanding it as both a form and as a series of a-scientific impressions. In this specific case, the ocean takes on a monumental character as we become aware of it as something other than a pathway, a context for life, or as a system of wave frequencies. In the context of architecture and environment, I am interested in aesthetics as a type of a-scientific form of experiential understanding that can begin to lend environment a monumental, potentially more object-like character.

To achieve a monumental sense of environment via conceptions of Kantian aesthetic distance would be intensely paradoxical. To continue with the ocean example, it would require us to understand the ocean as a thing – in a Kantian sense – but it would also at the same time require us to understand its possibility as an environment – the setting for life and the living. Thus, this desire to monumentalize and objectify environment contains several powerful and interesting tensions: monumentality typically requires visibility, form, and a separation between subject and object such that the object emerges as a distinct figure. Yet, from a scientific viewpoint, environment can never be



Pittsburgh Reconstruction

fully removed from the subject. The idea of environment from Comte to Darwin to Canguilhem is completely reliant on the immersion of the subject. We can gaze at other objectified environments that we are not obviously attached to, for example, when we look at fish in a fish tank, to cite one of many examples. But we still observe environment as the context for life – the fish tank is simply a type of theater of environment that reflects and reaffirms our own experience of milieu as something we exist within. Within the fishtank, the water inside the tank becomes analogous to the air we breathe. Environment is pervasive, and within a liberal philosophical context all things emerge from their environment. The living and its environments stick to each other. A more radically socialist perspective considers the environment to be endlessly created by its subjects and pluralistic – versus homogenous and given. This gives us a much more satisfying idea of environments that are in endless production and that we may produce. But whether a more liberal or radical concept of environment, environment and subject appear to share an inseparable union.

I think one way to resolve this paradox would be to both eliminate the intense naturalism and scientism within architectural invocations of environment, and to also unhinge the idea of environment from the present-tense of its subjects. That is, environment appears partially disconnected

from any instrumental use for both our life and the present life of other beings – like a fish tank without its fish – but that holds the potential to function as a setting for life. It's not that this monumental concept of environment is dead; rather, it does not aestheticize or invoke an environment as the absolute context for contemporary life. There is a disconnect between what we understand as an environment and the lives of the subjects who gaze upon it or are within it. A monumental environment might invoke, reconstruct or represent environments that have vanished from the context of the city or that await a life that is yet to be lived. It is an environment that may point the way to some life we lived (past-tense) or are not yet living.

I'll offer some examples of the latter possibilities of monumental environments from my own experimental historical projects, but these are meant as examples rather than absolutes. What the monumental environment can be or become extends beyond the particular historical and reconstruction-ist bent of these two examples. Nevertheless, these two projects point to some possibilities for the monumentalized environment.



Reconstruction of the Mound of Vendôme

Pittsburgh Reconstruction: Imagine the smoke that once hovered over an industrial city reconstructed as a figure and in isolation over the present context of the city. Against the sealed towers of the contemporary city, the smoke can no longer be read as quite the same devastating milieu it once was. It may serve to visualize an environment that is no more and enable us to understand our own carbon-saturated environment as something that may, one day, pass into history as well.

Reconstruction of the Mound of Vendôme: Imagine an environment that invokes a more revolutionary environmental and socio-natural scenario: in the center of the Place Vendôme wrapped around the base of Napoleon's column is a glass box dotted with holes, such as one may find in a natural history museum or zoo and that typically holds plants or animals. Inside is a monumental mound of lifeless dirt. The mound is a reconstruction of the one built there by members of the 1871 Paris Commune. The Communards created this mound of dirt as a type of cushion for when they toppled Napoleon's column – a hated symbol of war and imperialism – to the ground. The contemporary glass box and its dirt mound stands there under the rebuilt column as both an object of the past and a possible future in which that column

will be moved or will no longer exist – an environment with a type of revolutionary history and potential.

Of course, there are many other possibilities for a monumental historical environment to be visualized and examined within architecture. These two examples and the above outline begin to suggest how environments might become unhinged from visualizations of naturalism, animism, and present-ism. I believe the absence of these things within a setting that we still understand as an environment lends environments a type of grandeur or magnitude of aesthetic meaning that I label "monumental." These projects and the above, brief essay also suggest the paradoxes of producing environments outside of scientism, super-naturalism, and present-ism. Whatever the paradoxes, our contemporary socio-natural and environmental anxieties, as well as our progressive political aestheticizations of environment, deserve a monumental response as much as the pervasive realist one, and much more than one of escapist mystification. ✍️