

Digital postmodernism: making architecture from virtual tropes

Katie MacDonald¹

¹Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia

ABSTRACT: Three decades strong, the Digital Turn is now mature enough to be read as a precedent rather than merely a tool for futuristic forms. Aesthetic fascination throughout the Digital Revolution has cycled through parametricism, cyberpunk, minimalism, and the more recent Vaporwave, New Aesthetic, and Postdigital. The philosophy of Object-Oriented Ontology shapes aesthetic theory and our understanding of the inner lives of things. The aggregation of these influences leads to a new self-consciousness among designers about leveraging digital tropes. In lieu of the road signs and duck buildings of Postmodernism, Digital Postmodernism embraces digital aesthetics and techniques—neon gradients, aggregation, feeds, pixels/voxels, and other ‘signs’ of the digital. Efforts to translate the aesthetics of computer imagery into physical space (and thus into practice) have emerged. Models and architectural follies produced in this vein suggest a material palette for bridging from representation to reality: architects seek to create physical versions of digital models, where the reading of space as being syntactically digital is the point. The implication for practice is thus a return to the linguistic concerns of Postmodernism—in lieu of disciplinary-centricity, however, Digital Postmodernism engages the public’s deep knowledge and familiarity with the tropes of digital space. The grounding of this architectural movement in popular perception suggests the possibility of bringing together architects and public, united in their desire to bridge the parallel worlds of virtual and physical space.

KEYWORDS: Digital Postmodernism, Postmodernism, New Aesthetic, Object-Oriented Ontology, Postdigital

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between Postmodernism and emerging approaches to contemporary architecture as influenced by the Digital Revolution. It asks, and seeks to answer, how the recent succession of architectural fascinations—Postmodernism, Parametricism, and Digital Fabrication—shaped contemporary preoccupations with digital aesthetics in allied fields and popular culture. The research methodology looks at the work of young academics and practitioners, situating them within various influences including theories of philosophy, art, and popular culture. Collectively, the analysis of existing theoretical texts and recent theoretical and built projects establishes that today’s emerging voices share an interest in digital aesthetics that is both indicative of the larger cultural zeitgeist and a return to the aesthetics of popular culture.

1.0 AESTHETICS AFTER THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

Architecture of the past three decades reflects both the fast pace of technological development and the economics that accompanied it. Just as parametricism heated up, capturing the public imagination with the celebrity of Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid, the Great Recession not only halted many projects, but also scaled back what we as architects believed we can do. In art, design, and fashion, minimalism reigned, both because of its economic necessity and because sporting luxury goods during a time of economic hardship proved not a great look (Brooke 2018). A decade later, with unemployment down and earnings up, the design community is once again embracing luxury materials, but the futuristic, smooth swooping aesthetics of the Digital Revolution seem outdated. Three decades strong, the Digital is now mature enough to read as a precedent rather than merely a tool for fluid forms, thus creating a disciplinary question about what follows an aesthetic that supposes itself synonymous with the future.

Like architecture, allied creative fields have struggled with developing a new visual language. In film, popular science fiction became cyberpunk and then seemed to reach a design plateau, stalling out on a specific vision of dystopian techno-centricity (Konstantinou 2019). From the first 1982 incarnation of *Blade Runner* to the next in 2017, little has changed. The futuristic imagination has not been able to predict what extends beyond this vision.

Instead, contemporary image making has favoured a combination of nostalgia and techno-cool. Vaporwave, a term originally used to classify the sound of synthetic 80's pop rock, expanded to define a visual culture of Lisa Frank pencil boxes and electric neon ski jackets (Tanner 2016). The recent rise of athleisure and streetwear brands has revived this aesthetic, with the emblematic Supreme fashion empire celebrating a look that seems simultaneously basic and loud: white sans serif text on a red background transforms every product into a billboard.

Gradients have dominated graphic design of the last few years, seeming to be the natural meeting point of 80's sportswear and 8-bit digital aesthetics. Pantone named its Color of the Year as a gradient of two colors in 2016 and Areaware created a puzzle that immortalized a particularly prevalent pink to yellow fade. MOS Architects adopted this trend, updating its representation to include frontal axonometric drawings placed over gradient backgrounds, a form of representation of digital model space dubbed "screenshots" on their website.ⁱ This meta tagging of an image which is in fact far more composed and labored over than the casual nature of the title suggests is as much a pointed rejection of the ubiquitous representation of photorealistic architectural rendering as it is an embrace of low resolution digital aesthetics. The "screenshot" goes so far as to imply that each project is developed through and lives perpetually in this highly refined digital state. When navigating from one project to the next, it is difficult to tell which is built and which is theoretical, but that is the point: every project, client or not, garners legitimacy from its careful presentation within a staged digital world of buildings unburdened by the requirements of codes, physics, weather, and construction crews—which is to say, reality.

In art, the New Aesthetic was defined not by a manifesto, but in a Tumblr thread of satellite images and pixel art (Birdle 2011). Because it takes form as a feed, "The New Aesthetic embraces an unusual creative technique: aggregation. It rejects the demands of the manifesto in favor of the indiscriminateness of the collection" (Bogost 2012). MOS Architects exemplifies this technique, both conceptually and formally. Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample's recent book, *An Unfinished ... Encyclopedia of ... Scale Figures without ... Architecture*, (Meredith and Sample 2018) is masquerading as an encyclopedia but shares more in common with the structure of a tumblr feed or Pinterest board—it collects aesthetic objects as a set rather than assigning value to individual pieces. Their physical creations follow the same logic. Over the past decade, the duo has built up an aesthetic of aggregation: they developed a software that simulates physics by stacking blocks, *Stack*; they made physical installations that followed the same logic, *On the Verge of Collapse* and *Rainbow Vomit*; they have built a series of residential projects that aggregate like shapes (often extruded gabled house profiles), resulting in the framing of oddly shaped voids and courtyards, strange interior intersections, and a constant celebration of oblique views.

This new wave of production hatches out of a popular culture obsessed with the vernacular of digital forums: the ubiquity of drone photography and satellite view, the reality of constant surveillance via digital footprinting, and the rawness of nascent technologies such as photogrammetry (which sometimes allows the creation of accurate digital scans of real objects, but more often than not contains glitches and voids that inspire thrill through their simple inaccuracies). The clear distinction between intention and result in such a process creates the effect of "weird realism" (Harman, 2012), which, like the uncanny valley (a term coined by Masahiro Mori to convey the unsettling human reaction to a close simulacrum) becomes part of the public's everyday experience in the consumption of video games, live-action films that

are in fact animated, and high-fidelity robots. Other digital tropes include neon, gradients, pixels and voxels, 8-bit net nostalgia, and primitive, simple geometries.

2.0 MAKING THE DIGITAL PHYSICAL

As in the art community, the emerging generation of architects are self-aware of their backgrounds as digital natives, accept technology as a default part of contemporary human existence, and are interested in mining digital vernaculars for novel potential. Just as their predecessors may have studied architecture on the Grand Tour, the new generation draws equal insight from webpage hierarchies, data streams, and algorithms. It follows then that the material palette of this generation contains both stones and pixels, structures of steel and code.

Unlike the Zcorp 3D printers, bondo, and paint readily stocked in the model shops of Morphosis, Zaha Hadid, and other parametricists, the physical models and creations of the new generation represent a shift in the treatment of the digital artifact—from smoothly plastic to self-conscious, reductive, and deliberately physical. In First Office's *Possible Table*, a typical table is distorted using digital projection as to undermine its normative reading and use as a table, but is built in a typical material palette, thus bringing the digital act of distortion back into the physical world. Similarly, in the LADG's *The Kid Gets Out of the Picture*, normative construction materials are stacked in a makeshift fashion and topped with a plaster surface reminiscent of a blanket atop a child's fort. While the operation of formmaking is firmly rooted the aesthetic of digital collage, the installation itself hybridizes the found object of the off-the-shelf construction material with the digitally fabricated waffle structure of the blanket.

Postdigital architecture, as defined by T+E+A+M's Ellie Abrons and Adam Fure, has laid claim to such blurring of boundaries between real and virtual:

to think a postdigital architecture is to both flatten and peel apart the ontological difference: digital and physical collapse into overlapping realities while qualities of our tangible world, such as materiality and form, cleave. (Abrons and Fure 2017, 194)

In the design of an architectural installation, *Living Picture*, T+E+A+M demonstrates this effect. Primitive geometries (cones, prisms, logs) are populated with a graphic applique that recreates a historic tableau. The disconnect between form and image in this work suggests a privileging of the Digital. While the physical space is defined by platonic forms, the meat of the project is a digital rendering of a historical space that is then applied to physical objects of no specific formal significance.

In another blurring of the boundary between real and digital space, JE-LE's *Prom Picture* creates an architectural installation that can only be fully understood in post-production. A classic, flat green screen backdrop is cut in a topographic pattern and folded to create oblique lines of viewing. In post-processing, the green is swapped for a variety of patterns symbolic of a formal dance (florals, sequins, jewels), transforming the classic couple's photograph from the banality of prom to the limitless possibilities of digital space. The installation can thus be read as the physical incarnation of a Snapchat filter, a visual editorial captioning on top of an already lived experience.

3.0 DIGITAL POSTMODERNISM

3.1. In architecture

On a fundamental level, Postmodernist architecture was interested in elevating the banality of low culture—Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown sought to learn from the adult theme park of Las Vegas, complete with its strip malls and parking lots;ⁱⁱ Michael Graves became a household name because he sold his style of pop-cultural assemblage not only in the form of buildings, but also as household products on the shelves of big box stores; Postmodernism's cousin, the Memphis Group, deliberately set out to undermine good taste—which had previously been synonymous with modernism.

The contemporary equivalent of Las Vegas signage is surely the visuals of the internet—memes, social media, online commerce. It makes sense then that the new crop of architects sees opportunity in celebrating and elevating these found materials. If Postmodernism took on the populist palette of billboards and strip malls, then Digital Postmodernism embraces the ubiquity of internet graphics and co-opts them as the building blocks of the new physical-digital hybrid.

Venturi's argument for the value of commercial signage can be just as easily swapped out for digital signage:

I have alluded to the reasons why honky-tonk elements in our architecture and townscape are here to stay, especially in the important short-term view, and why such a fate should be acceptable. Pop Art has demonstrated that these commonplace elements are often the main sources of the occasional variety and vitality of our cities, and that it is not their banality or vulgarity as elements which make for the banality or vulgarity of the whole scene, but rather their contextual relationships of space and scale. (Venturi 1966).

It follows that a Digital Postmodernism might attempt to redefine the banality or vulgarity of digital tropes by repositioning them contextually against the backdrop of the real world.

While recent architectural movements have originated in the academy, the theoretical text and temporary installation are not enough to cement an idea's place in the profession. MVRDV's recently completed *The Imprint*, a windowless night club and theme park building in Seoul, then plays an important role in demonstrating the adoption of Digital Postmodernism into full-scale, permanent construction. The building's façade combines the inverse relief of a Rachel Whiteread sculpture with the surreal quality of a warped digital model frozen in space and time. In mitigating the building's programmatic requirement to keep out daylight, MVRDV borrowed the windows of neighboring buildings as a kind of digital line work, then "draped" the geometry onto the volume as a series of grooved articulations (MVRDV 2018). The result is a façade skewed by lines, like an AutoCAD hatch gone awry. A giant golden circle is even projected onto the volume and made physical with metal cladding that drips from elevation to ground plane and down a flight of stairs. To occupy the resulting urban space is to set foot in a world that seeks to not only overlap graphics with space, but also to announce the digital syntax of said graphics. The project description on the firm's website affirms this intention by describing the building through a series of software operations. That the building contains a theme park only furthers its dialectic with Postmodernism.

In this framework, theorists and architects that advocate for a strong placed-based architecture (e. g. Juhani Pallasmaa or Kenneth Frampton) may offer a voice of Digital-Modernism equivalent to the place that Late-Modernists had for Post-Modernism.

3.2. In allied fields

In allied fields, notions of the Digital Postmodernism have not yet been widely adopted. However, the term may apply to a contemporary literary scene defined by the emergence of diary-like realism in fiction, with authors like Karl Ove Knausgård and Rachel Cusk creating memoir work that more closely resembles a daily LiveJournal blog than a personal diary (Mariusz 2017). A modern update on the epistolary novel, it is an isolated projection of self for the isolated consumption of many others. The "digital" part of Digital Postmodernism suggests an external intervention, a filtering through a digital lens (Gibbons 2018). Digital Postmodernism is thus characterized by the depiction of a meta-self, an understanding of a self that has already been filtered through various cultural media. A thing becomes not only itself, but also an encapsulation of what the culture already assumes that self to be.

CONCLUSION

Some have posited that while the progenitors of the Digital championed form, and the second generation translated those forms into construction (digital fabrication), the next wave of architects will leverage data to shape future practice (Marble 2018). Within corporate practice, data has certainly been championed as a tool for both project management through BIM and

project evaluation through the measuring of performance and usage, but this largely reduces architecture to a profession of technicians.

On the other end of the spectrum, the New Aesthetic suggests a relationship with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a philosophy that imagines all things are of equal importance and that things, as much as beings, have inner lives:

The New Aesthetic is a visible eruption of the mutual empathy between us and a class of new objects that are native to the 21st century. It consists of visual artifacts we make to help us imagine the inner lives of our digital objects and also of the visual representations produced by our digital objects as a kind of pigeon language between their inaccessible inner lives and ours. (Borenstein 2012)

In architecture, Mark Foster Gage posits that OOO reaffirms the importance of architecture for its own sake and rich in complexity, rather than as a reductive mechanism for solving functional problems (Gage 2015, 95). Gage is not interested in defining a formal movement so much as convincing the architect that form, like everything else, has value.

For an emerging cohort of architects, neither problem-solving nor OOO is enough. This group is not defined by a manifesto or doctrine, but can begin to be aggregated under a shared operation of blurring digital and physical boundaries where the reading of space as being syntactically digital is the point.

In lieu of disciplinary-centricity, Digital Postmodernism engages the public's deep knowledge and familiarity with the tropes of digital interaction. The grounding of Digital Postmodernism in popular perception suggests the possibility of bringing together architecture and public, united in their desire to bridge the parallel worlds. Postmodernism allowed for economics and culture to blend: "Postmodernism calls attention to the reality that in the age of commodified culture, art has to be produced within the capitalist market; therefore, culture and industry always intertwine" (Tanner 2016, 32). In the same vein, Digital Postmodernism posits an inextricable link between contemporary culture and digital space.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ www.mos.nyc

ⁱⁱ In addition to publishing *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown put together the exhibition *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City* in the Renwick Gallery of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. for the Smithsonian in 1976. The exhibit included three sections: signs and symbols in the home, on the commercial strip, and on the street.