Casablanca the Sublime: Real Spaces of a Virtual City

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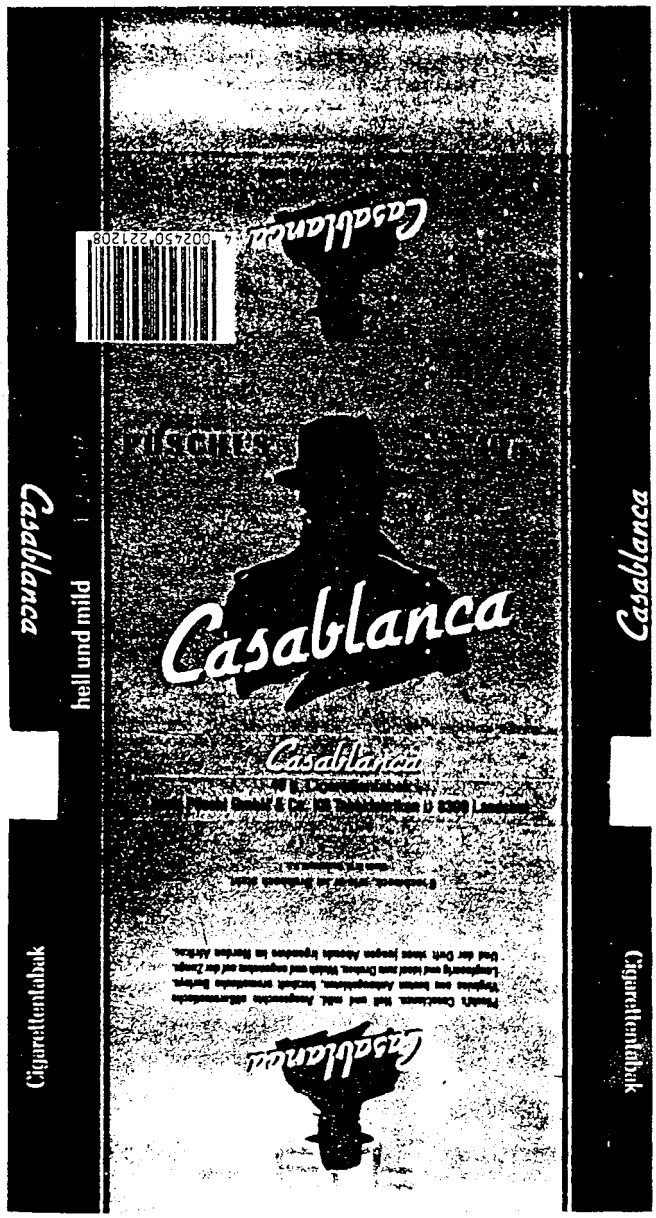
In a recent ploy to boost its tourist industry, the Kingdom of Morocco filled its tourist agencies around the world with posters of its buildings and landscapes. The photographs framed with an inscription that reads: "Morocco: A Feast For The Senses." The country projects itself outwards into the world as a pleasure paradise capable of stimulating the entire complex of the human sensorium. The feast is a touristic orgy of consumption which, triggered by our contact with the seductive representations of these carefully selected "exotic" Moroccan spaces, spins into an endless and delirious chase to experience those imaginary locations — to live the authentic Morocco as it is constructed in the posters. The tourist will never be able to fully satisfy his or her urge to experience this "real" Morocco, because it doesn't exist. Instead he or she will be left pursuing this infinitely receding image of reality, consuming anything vaguely "Moroccan" along the way, and thereupon feeling the empty mouth, left void by the unacceptable loss of the desired object.

But, why such a drive? Given that advertising undeniably works on the basis of deception, it is difficult to understand why consumers continue to have faith in it. The situation is problematized once we discover that the imaginary notion of Morocco is actually experienced by the world as a reality more real than the real; Therefore, to pursue the advertisement is actually a more genuine Moroccan experience than Morocco itself. The culprit of this phenomenon is Casablanca: a city inside Morocco yet encompassing all that is Moroccan, a city outside of itself, yet continuously folding back into its assigned location on the world map: the greatest of imaginary cities. You can find Casablanca in: Miami's South Beach, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Manhattan, Paris, or Madrid. You can smoke Casablanca, or you can eat it for lunch' — all without ever setting foot on Moroccan ground.

The city's international influence is almost entirely indebted to the imaginary Casablanca moving through the scenes of the 1942 MGM studios film which bears its name. Although the film was shot entirely at Warner's Burbank studios, and the street scenes were constructed out of revamped props from Warner's 1942 version of *The Desert Song,* its images of Casablanca have acquired a presence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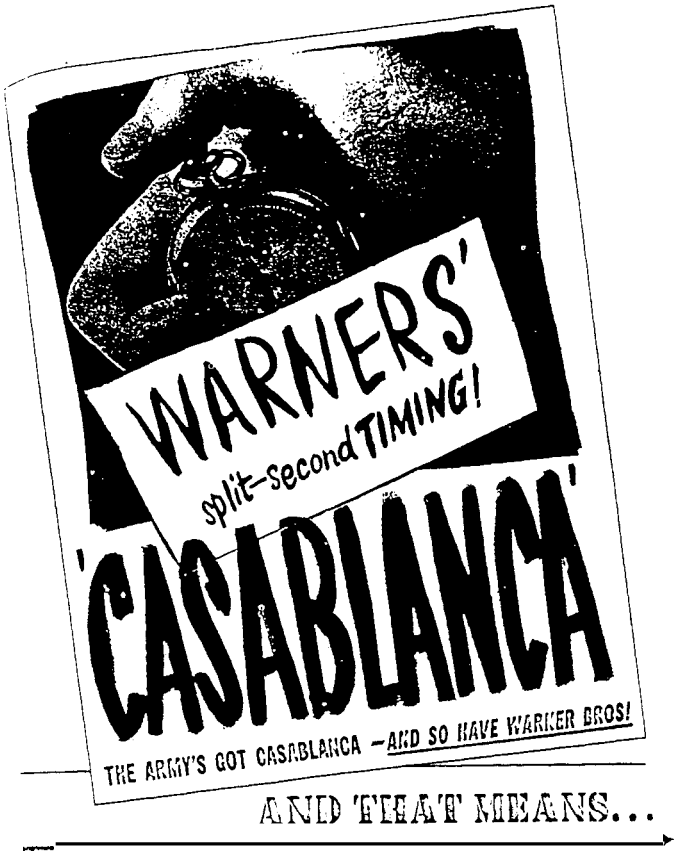

Figure 2. 1942 poster advertisement for Warner Brother's film Casablanca. The line between the imagnary and the real is blurred.

Figure 3. 1942 Newspaper feature relating the imaginary Casablanca to the real city.

which supersedes that of the actual city. The motion picture, directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman was released in New York on Thanksgiving Day 1942, just eighteen days after the Allies landed in Casablanca with the intention of taking advantage of the timely event. As a publicity campaign, Warner Brothers circulated posters and news paper columns around the country that intended to blur the line between the imaginary and the real. In a strange retroactive gesture, the movie took over the actual city with the Allied Army's use of the name "Rick's Place" as a pseudonym for Casablanca.[2] Ever since the two cities have coupled in the collective imaginary of the West.

A similar conflation between the imaginary and the real had already occurred in Casablanca when the French arrived. Casablanca was conceived by the French far prior to their encounter with the actual medina. In the mind of the French, the city had taken shape through the orientalist literature and painting of the late nineteenth century, through travel posters, prints of Andalusian palace complexes, early photographs of the monumental structures of the East, early films like Valentino's ***The Sheik,*** and in brief, through an interdisciplinary European artistic endeavor which, before the large scale impact of tourism, imagined the East and its mysteries as a homogeneous phenomenon spanning roughly between India and the Mahgreb. Before the Europeans set foot on Moroccan ground, Casablanca had already embodied a presence and spatiality in their minds; an image that was quite different from what they would find there. Lyautey, resident general of the French Protectorate, and Prost, head architect and urbanist of the colonial government, carried out a building campaign that was only superficially concerned with the real Casablanca. Rather, it followed a projective methodology through which the French conception of what the city should have been was built in a sort of retro fit construction. Under the directives of Lyautey, Prost endeavored to create an alternate Casablanca more in tune with European expectations and thus more attractive to both corporate businesses and tourism. The city was forever altered, thrown into a new reality which negated traditional structural, decorative, and spatial paradigms through a complex mechanism of simulation and replacement of traditional structures and motifs.

The political benefits that the French government reaped from its projective urban methodology becomes clear if we analyze the cultural processes set into motion by Prost with what he would call his ***architecture en surface*** (in search of an expedient way of creating the "appearance" of a city with little funds, Prost built the facades of his institutional structures first and subsequently "filled in" the building). The advent of colonialism resulted in the forced encounter of two radically different aesthetic and representational traditions.

Figure 4. The Fighting French march outside of New York's Hollywood Theater to celebrate *Casablanca's* premiere, 1942.

Embedded in each were autochthonous, culturally determined ways of relating to the objects they produced and consumed. With colonial occupation however, these modes of perception clashed, uprooting the structure of relationships between subjects and their surrounding object world. New kinds of objects and social transactions were introduced, and a cross-fertilization occurred that permeated all aspects of every day life. This condition made subjects call into question the boundaries of the ideological space they inhabited, and fomented the emergence of new contentions and attitudes towards the physical appearance of these objects, their production, and their consumption.'

The cultural clash brought about by the colonial enterprise fractured the unity of cultural identities and their correlate channels of signification, resulting in a sense of dismemberment that permeated individual consciousness. Thus, an analysis of the artistic forms that resulted from this disjunctive encounter (i.e. Prost's architecture) based on traditional modes of conceptualizing subject/object relations is obsolete. We cannot look at the results of an operation with the tools that the very operation eradicated. The humanist tradition, which, in architecture, not only valorizes the subject as the sole originating agent of form and meaning, but extends to incorporate epistemologies of the body as guiding principles of harmony and beauty, tumbled in the face of the Other. I am not suggesting that this occurred immediately, in fact, the work that Prost executed was very much in line with humanist thought: his beaux arts spatiality and traditional treatment of structural and decorative motifs are clear signs of his endeavor to encode his oeuvre with the social values and rules of the French elite. What I am suggesting, however, is that, as a result of colonial contact, bi-lateral gaps in cultural signification appeared, and that the incapacity of traditional theories about subject'object relations to account for those gaps proved their inadequacy: subjectivities were being formed through new channels. Within this context, the subject which in humanism had been regarded as the determinant of meaning, was now not only incapable of producing that meaning, but actually threatened with disjunction and paralyzed with the fear of the Other.

What is evident from the hiatus caused by colonization, is that subjectivity does not exist prior to and independent of the world that surrounds us, but that it is affected, shaped, and made available through social transactions. It is through the relationships of production, reception, and consumption that we have with the objects surrounding us that our subjectivity is formed. When the British punk rockers of The Clash sang:

> I'm all lost in the supermarket
> I can no longer shop happily
> I came in here for the special offer
> A guaranteed personality [4]

they were alluding to the disorienting fact that, under the auspices of modernity and capitalism, we have access to subjectivities, and develop identities, through exchanges in consumer culture. As Kazys Varnelis explains:

> ... there are so many choices available to us that we are made to feel free and productive by exercising choice among them. While we cannot be Peppers and members of the Pepsi generation at the same time but neither of these contradicts our eating of a Three Musketeers candy bar. We form meaning for ourselves out of the combination of these different codes. Yet these processes of filling in are not ones of production but rather of consumption, not free, but rather confined to restricted, banalized channels.[5]

Clearly, the categories of production and reception have been reversed by capitalist commodity exchange, and the position of the creative subject, that the humanists would have, has been erased. Subjectivity and identity are displaced into the realm of culture, of architecture, disseminated in the object world surrounding us.[6] We have access to subjectivities through receptive exchanges with those objects. In the case of Casablanca, these objects (the fragments of Casablanca) are disseminated across the world haphazardly. We encounter them inadvertently as we surf the "net" of reality, and our exchanges with them reference us back to a city somewhere between North Africa and our

imaginary, to a set of feelings end emotions, to the experience of a *Genius Loci* that has no finite "locus." In short, the experience of Casablanca is perhaps the only "real" experience of the virtual city —all this without the introduction of the computer. And, in that sense, Casablanca cannot be understood as a beautiful city in the traditional "touristic" sense, but sublime: it is a city in which one yearns for a presence that can never be fulfilled.

This is not to say that individuals are relegated to a purely receptive position and that objects solely occupy the category of subjective production. As we know, objects have to be made by somebody, and that person should have some manipulative agency over the object. However, with the advent of industrialization labor becomes inevitably alienated through mass production and the logic of means and returns, and the individual worker finds little, if any, identification with the object produced. Commodities are social objects that are available for consumption and identification, but that strangely cannot be traced to an individual. Thus, identification occurs with the actual object, and not with other subjects. Subjects assemble in collectives around these social objects: in relation to commodities (thus we have the "jet-set," the "net-set," and other such object oriented identities). This has perhaps always been the case in architecture. A building is not produced by a single individual; it is, as other commodities, a social object with which one finds direct identification, and around which collectives assemble. This is clear if we think of reproducible structures like those of McDonald's or Mobil. These buildings are infinitely exchangeable, we see them again and again disseminated across thousands of locations. When we enter one of those buildings, we are in fact buying it, or buying into the identity it makes available. When we go to a road-side McDonald's we are immediately inscribed into the collective which, characterized by its value consciousness and its "being on the run," constitutes the McDonald's *crowd.* What is deceiving about architecture is that it constantly tries to reify its position as art, as the work of a single mind or effort. Thus, in an attempt to move architecture away from the realm of the mass produced, to veil its position as a commodity, the designer is put forth as the sole productive subject, and we are asked to identify with him/her. The buildings produced with this intention are now being referred to as "signature buildings" — the very term assigns a power to script as an agent of value that I have taken up and discussed in relation to Casablanca elsewhere — in a speculative attempt to add value to the structure. This operation is aimed at diverting attention from architecture so that its true ability to produce collective and individual subjectivities will remain unattended and at the expense of institutions whose power over buildings goes far beyond that of the individual designer. This was the case with the Agence Prost, the institution founded in Casablanca by Henri Prost to legislate all building in Morocco. At the Agence, architects operating under the delusion that they were the single productive entities in the building process, did nothing but carry out the manipulative schemes of the French state, confusing the ability to exercise compositional virtuosity with "designing" architecture.

If we continue to trace back the city's memory we find that the French and the North Americans were not the first to appropriate and transform Casablanca to render their a-priori conceptions of the city real and physical. The entire history and growth of the city known as Casablanca, is contingent upon the various repetitive instances where the real was retro-fitted to incorporate the imaginary. As early as the beginning of the sixteenth century the Portuguese cosmographer Duarte Pacheco would note that the city was easily recognizable "by a great tower that's found in it." Henceforth, the Portuguese sailors, forgetting the city's real name was Anfa, began referring to it as "Casa Branca." The Portuguese nomenclature was followed suspiciously, and chronologically, by the Moroccan appellation Ddr-el-Beida (meaning "white house" or "Casablanca"). Historians however are not positive that the Moorish name was a literal translation of the Portuguese. After all, as the Moroccan legend goes, the patron saint of the city, Sidi 'Allâl El-Kairouâni, settled in Anfa towards the end of the seventeenth century, accompanied by his wife Ldlla El-Beid'a (the white lady). The legend claims that the peasants who would come to buy goods form them would say "let's go to the house of the white one (Ddr-el-Beida)," and that subsequently, the city that was built around that site carried her name. The existence of a Moroccan myth pertaining to the name's origin might suggest that the two appellations were born somehow simultaneously, and not out of each other. Whatever the actual circumstance, by 1851 all of the maps and nautical charts of the area had replaced the old Anfa, with Casablanca.'

Historically, the processes that have caused the iterative metamorphosis of Casablanca's identity have come from the outside of the city. Yet, Casablanca has somehow always already been a part of them — an aspect that has made the city's transformations seem to occur rather seamlessly. Surprisingly enough, the last of such shifts in the imaginary identity of Casablanca (i.e. the film's contribution) has not yet been fully incorporated into the real city. Only a squalid aspect of it has filtered into the air conditioned entrails of Casablanca's Hyatt Hotel, where the piano bar is called "Rick's Place." The film, however, has permeated the consciousness of Casablancans to the extent that it is now impossible to describe the city without referencing the motion picture. For instance, when Ossman writes about the transitional nature of Casablanca's population, she is compelled to describe it in terms of the film. For Ossman the city is a locus that collects the dreams and aspirations of its citizens, it is an "end or waypoint of narrative, not its origin. ... If we think of the experience of Casablanca ..., we see it as a nonplace, a passageway ... Just as the film Casablanca, shot in California, offers an illusion of Casablanca, so too does the city itself seem to be made of dreams and prefabricated houses; it is impossible to link it to a time before movies, imported from elsewhere."[8] The notion of passage

and temporal detainment is one of the central, reoccurring themes of the movie. When Ilsa goes to see Rick at his cafe to explain why she disappeared in Paris, she does so by telling a story — her story. The narrative begins outside of Casablanca, as all stories belonging to the city, then is suspended when it enters the city. "Has it got a wow finish?" asks Rick, "I don't know the finish yet," answers Ilsa. "Well, go on, tell it. Maybe one will come to you as you go along," shrugs Rick. Going to Casablanca means anticipating leaving Casablanca;[9] to arrive in the city is to await an uncertain unfolding. And so, let us enter Casablanca through the cinematic realm:

A long shot of a revolving globe. As it revolves. Lines of fleeing refugees are superimposed over it. Over this scene comes the voice of the narrator.

> Narrator:
> With the coming of the second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully or desperately to the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarcation point. But not everybody could get to Lisbon directly. And so a tortuous, roundabout refugee trail sprang up.

An animated map illustrates the trail as the narrator mentions the points.

> Narrator:
> Paris to Marseilles... Across the Mediterranean to Oran... Then by train or Auto or foot across the rim of Africa to Casablanca in French Morocco. Here the fortunate ones through money or influence or luck, might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon. And from Lisbon to the new world. But the others wait in Casablanca, and wait, and wait, and wait...[10]

The camera's eye (a monocular surrogate of our own vision) arrives to the city as did the Portuguese sailors in the sixteenth century: through the visual cue of a Moorish tower. Leaning over its upper edge, a muezzin calls the city to prayer with the Word of the Lord. **A** downward pan shot follows the vertical length of the minaret, sign of traditional oral communication, into the native street and we begin to hear a cacophony of indiscernible sounds. The word "minaret" comes from the Arabic "manar" or "minar" signifying lighthouse. We are thus not surprised to see thar the visual importance given to the minaret in Casablanca's first scene, is replaced by the dominance of a lighthouse for the remaining length of the feature — a tower which guides the planes out of the city towards freedom. We enter the city only to leave it, and we do so, historically, through the conflation of vision with the tower. The minaret embodies the direct opening of Casablanca to the world of communication and visual exchanges; it manifests the complex twofold movement of entering and leaving without actually performing either, it is the gate to a real cyber space.

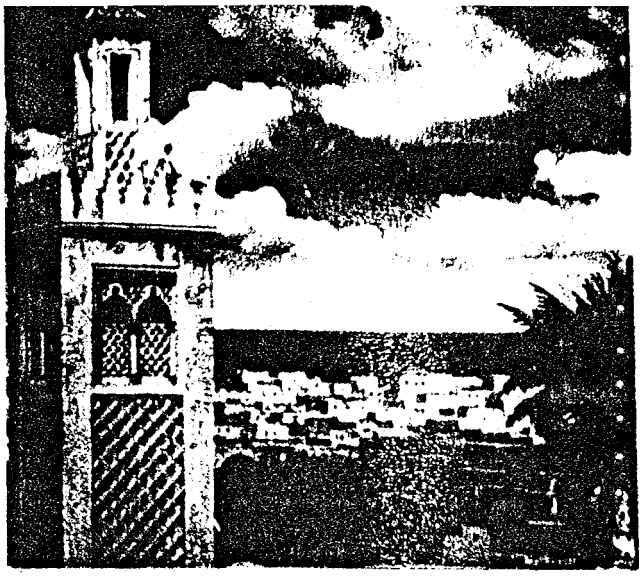

Figure 5. Opening shot to Warner Brother's *Casablanca.*

This abstract yet physical location where the eye meets architecture is, if I may suggest, the most fortunate locus from which to begin a building campaign in the expanded field of Casablanca. Casablanca can open up our profession's understanding of its role within the advancing realm of virtual space. The city (and it should by now be clear that I am not just referring to the physical space on the Western shore of Morocco) provides a historic urban paradigm in which the collective imaginary, the real, theory, and practice exist as a consolidated undivisible block where virtual space is not a mere representation of real space but an interdependent part of it. To build in Casablanca is to open architecture to an expanded set of constructive possibilities, where traditional conceptions of site, genius loci, space, structure, and the social role of the design professional may be rethought and evolve while giving architects a design foothold on the self proclaimed forward movement of the global village's cybernetic urbanity.

NOTES

1 A number of service-oriented locals that simulate Casablanca to one degree or another have mushroomed up in cities like these since the opening of the movie. The one in Philadelphia for instance, is an exact replica of the movie set used for "Rick's Cafe Americain." Further, should you want to smoke Casablanca, proceed to your local tobacco store and ask for it. It is a mild Virginia-Burley blend of rolling tobacco manufactured by Alois Poschl GmbH & Co. in Landshut, Germany. Should you want to eat it, allow me to recommend *The Casablanca Cookbook: Wining and Dining at Rick's* (New York : Abbeville Press, c1992), written by Sarah Key.

2 Koch, Howard, *Casablanca:* Script *and Legend,* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1973) p. 17.

3 What occurred in Casablanca was, in my view, an intensification of the social processes which, as a result of European industrialization and the mass production of commodities, had begun to dismantle theories that placed subjects as the sole agents producing meaning and signification, and to introduce the notion that subjectivities are made available through social transactions and the subject's relation to the object world surrounding it. These processes have been

discussed in detail by theorists like: Theodor Adorno in "Subject and Object," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982)); Althusser in "ideology and ideological State Apparatuses,"; or K. Michael Hays in "Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilbesimer," (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), to the latter of which this section is indebted.

4 The Clash (Strummer/Jones), *Lost In The Supermarket*, in "The Clash On Broadway" CD,(New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 1991), CD 2, Track 14.

5 Varnelis, Kazis, *The Spectacle of the Innocent Eye: Vision, Cynical Reason, and the Discipline of Architecture in Post War America.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Doctoral Thesis, 1994), p. 261.

6 This discussion follows the lines drawn by Marx in his historical materialism and continued by many other theorists thereafter. For example, Michel Foucault saw the subject as being displaced into history and genealogies of power: Jacques Derrida displaces subjectivity into language and textuality, Althusser into ideological practices, and Gilles Deleuze into advancing Capitalism.

7 Adam, Andre, *Histoire de Casablanca (des origines a 1914)*, (Aix-En-Provence: Imprimerie Louis-Jean, 1969) pp. 67-68.

8 Ossman, Susan, *Picturing Casablanca, Portraits of Power in a Modern City* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994) p. 27.

9 The same occurs when going to see *Casablanca* at a movie theater. One goes to see the movie in anticipation of leaving the theater.

10 Koch, Howard, *Casablanca: Script and Legend*, (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1973) p. 31.