Jim Carrey Goes to Seaside

L. RUDOLPH BARTON
Portland State University

> Now and forever the architect is going to replace the set designer. The movies will be the faithful translator of the architect's boldest dreams.
>
> – Luis Bunel, 1927

> I translated images of architecture, not architecture itself, into set designs.
>
> – Anton Furst, Oscar-winning production designer for *Batman* (1989)

In early 1998 Paramount Pictures will release a film entitled *The Truman Show,* directed by Peter Weir and starring Jim Carrey, about a young man who grows up in an idealized small town. In time, the young man comes to find out that he is the unwitting focus of a perpetually televised performance; furthermore, the town is in actuality a collection of film sets, and town residents are largely transient actors. The location selected for filming was Seaside, Florida. This curious symmetry between film plot and place illustrates a fundamental dilemma in the construction and execution of design codes; that is, central to nearly every code lies a critical dependence upon the authority and power of scenographic architectural form.

Both revered and reviled, Seaside has achieved near mythological stature in contemporary urbanism. Upon scrutiny however, Seaside is a triumph of Baudrillard's *simulacra* for, like this film, it reveals itself to be an image of an image of community. To this end, this paper examines the relationship between scenographic intentions and constructed realities by analyzing symmetrical relationships between film-making and code-making. In Seaside, there is evidence that its aesthetic sanctions, which oscillate between nostalgia and innovation, have empowered the pleasing myth and illusion of community over the creation of authentic place. This paper further argues that codes which similarly focus upon the resurrection of archaic architectural forms are preprogrammed not to create, but, in the manner of films, only simulate urbanity. Architectural codes and films simulate place; both can manipulate and trivialize the past. To philosophical theorists like Jean Baudrillard, architecture like cinema unfortunately "plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths."[1]

The Seaside Times

Hooray For Hollywood!

INSIDE

Escape To Create Celebrates Fifth Year

Fig. 1. For *The Truman* Show, Ruskin Place was transformed into a Neo-Classical corporate center; the building in the center is a stageset.

FILM-SPACE AND THE SIMULATION OF PLACE

For *The Truman Show,* location filming in Seaside lasted nearly six months. Prior to filming, Paramount injected over one million dollars into the community to further develop the imagery of Seaside, renamed Seahaven for the film. In the center of town, crushed oyster shell streets were paved over, a transit station and stylized street furniture were added and commercial buildings by Stephen Holl and Machado-Silvetti were temporarily reclothed. Importantly, several missing spatial-defining components of the Seaside plan were constructed to visually complete the street walls around the central park and townhouse-lined Ruskin Place. One Neo-Classically styled stagefront was built to disguise the oldest building in Seaside – an early 20th-century wooden restaurant moved to the town square. One-story while filming was underway, the stagesets will be computer-enhanced to four-stories by the time the film is released. While several

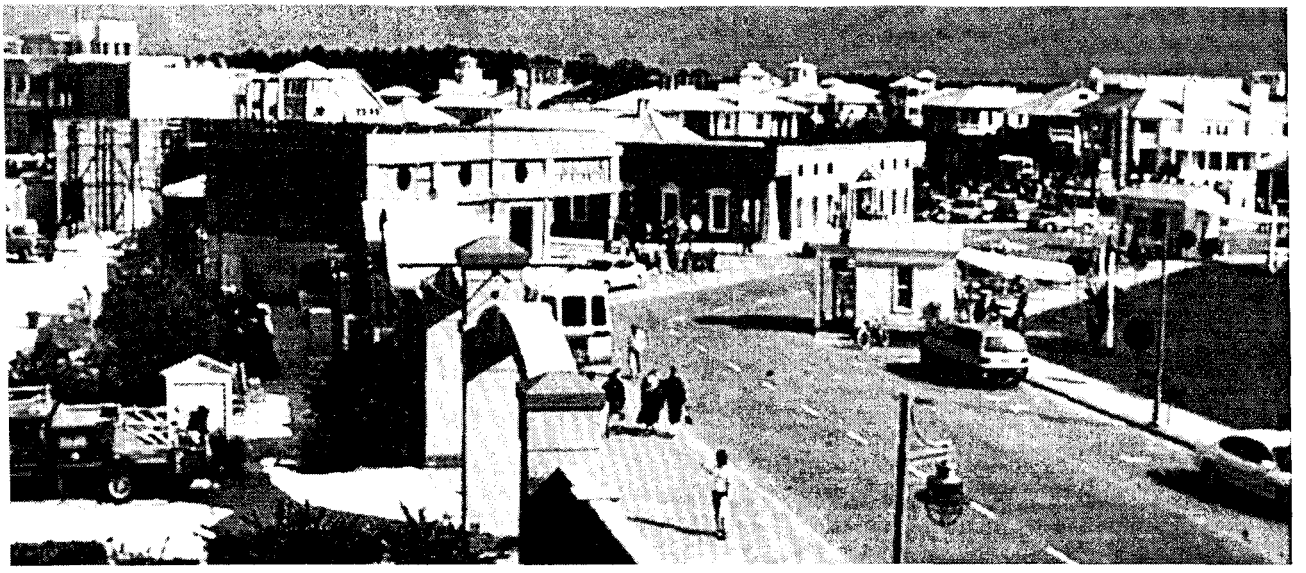

Fig. 2. *Several missing spatial-defining components of Seaside were constructed to visually complete the street walls and public places; one-story while filming was underway, the stagesets will be computer-enhanced to multiple stories by the time the film is released.*

commercial stagefronts were constructed for film needs, practically none of the residential structures needed to be constructed. Visitors walking through Seaside could often be overheard questioning the "reality" of numerous buildings; most conclusions were inaccurate!

When location filming was concluded, there was community debate about retaining a number of these temporary stagefronts for their contribution to the plan, and some were retained until late 1997 when several stage fronts enclosing Seaside's central town square were removed. Highly important buildings have been reduced to masks and public spaces have been emptied of meaning that can only be achieved through diversity and the genuine. Since so many of its residents are transients. Seaside buildings have become, in effect, collective stagefronts for the idealized and temporary play of community.

THE URBANISTIC CODING OF SEASIDE

The Seaside Master Plan and Urban Code, developed between 1978 and 1983 by the Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk partnership, today is 90% physically complete except for a number of commercial and institutional structures. Nearly 350 residential structures, from Savannah-styled mansions to carriage-style outbuildings, have been built. Yet at 80 acres, it must always be remembered that Seaside is hardly larger than a neighborhood; and although Seaside possesses qualities of both resort and town, it is neither. Even though it has a summertime transient population which can reach more than 1,000 residents, presently fewer than 50 people reside year-round.

As envisioned by land owner and developer Robert Davis, the plan was to create an idyllic, inexpensive beach-front vacation community, not unlike the nearby hamlets of Grayton and Seagrove Beach where Davis' family had summered since the 1940's. At the heart of Davis' vision was the opportunity to develop in this new community a renewed sense of civic intimacy. Davis and Duany/Plater-Zyberk jointly inventoried Southern vernacular architecture and concluded that, although the South contained a rich heritage of house designs, such structures must be understood within the context of the small town. According to Plater-Zyberk, "It is not with isolated buildings but with regulating plans, building types, street standards, codes and policies that we seek to achieve the urban characteristics which insure the balance of common good and individual expression."? Thus the Seaside Code' came to regulate both urban and architectural issues in an attempt to develop this renewal of community. Developer and designers concluded that this intimacy would become manifest through a Beaux Arts-inspired architectural system of functional building typologies; this typology would be ordered within the morphology of the small, pre-World War II Southern town. Within this context, however, there exists in the Seaside Code an important dialectic in its approach to urbanism – public buildings are not coded, only private ones. In that context, the Code works exceedingly well in its definition of urban and communal space. Communal components, such as idiosyncratic beach front pavilions, gazebos, fences and street landscaping work with commercial buildings to provide rich visual and physically shared experiences.

The Architectural Code has been less successful. While some exceptional buildings have been made, the majority of private residences have been thematically constructed into what architectural historian Karal Marling has termed an architecture of reassurance. Due to popular and consumerist subscription to the Seaside image, most houses have affected a Victorian and/or Neo-Classical appearance, much of which is dependent upon cinemagraphic techniques relating to surface, screen and appearance. Although the Architectural

Fig. 3. Aerial view of Seaside (1995); photo by T. Allen

Code is somewhat elastic, all residences incorporate white picket fences in the front and back, exteriors of wooden clapboard, galvanized metal roofs, porches, large overhangs and vertical windows with operable shutters; pre-1940's materials have basically been coded from use. The maintenance of this image is insured by a centralized booking agency which handles rentals for over 250 cottages.

Administration of the Code, enforced by the Seaside Development Corporation, a series of Town Architects and an Architecture Review Committee, has focused primarily on the postmodern tendencies to treat individual buildings as a/historical and a/geographical backdrops. This postmodern tendency exemplifies what pioneering Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov called *creative geography*, a film technique of montaging cuts of different places at different times. In Seaside, as a result of urbanistic and architectural coding, one can see buildings from the Florida Panhandle, Charleston, New Orleans and Savannah within a short ten-minute walk.

THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE CODES AND FILM

Upon release, The *Truman Show* could play an important role in the criticism and dissemination of architectural ideas through the mass-medium of film, and possibly join a fascinating number of films which contribute to the debate on the intertwined processes of architectural and cinematic practices.[4] This correspondence is not surprising since both architecture and film design are fundamentally about the manipulation of imagery, space, and light for the body to move through constructed space. Anthony Vidler's characterization that films are a laboratory for the exploration of the built world illustrates that many construction implications of cinematic language (frame, montage, etc.) have a dialectical relationship to the tectonics of making buildings.[5]

Despite recent attention to the film/architecture analogies,

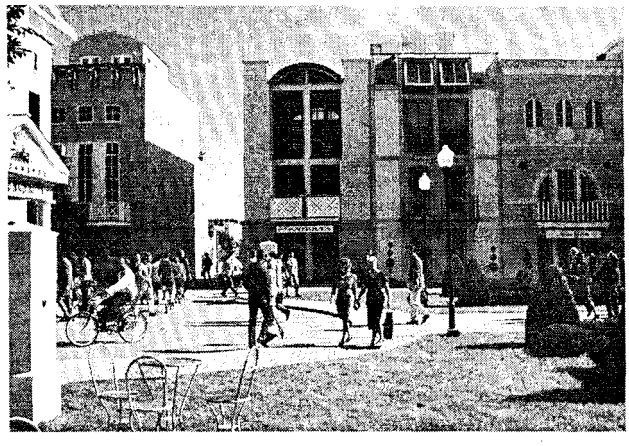

Fig. 4. For the film, the stylistic montage of Ruskin Place integrates actual buildings and stagesets; the building on the left is a stageset.

the potential relationships between film and architecture have been passionately discussed since pioneering works were created in both disciplines during the 1920's.[6] To filmmakers like Eisenstein and Pudovkin, the whole art of film lay in exploiting its capacity to transform and liberate the cinema from being merely *copy images*, and thus make a break with the narrative and representational capacities of traditional theater and the novel.

The work of Lev Kuleshov has recently drawn the attention of architectural theorists. Kuleshov, the first film aesthetic theorist and educator to thousands of Russian cinematicians, is renown for his work in montage and for his creation of "artificial landscapes." In one of his most famous experiments, Kuleshov combined shots of the American White House with shots of the steps of a well-known building in Moscow, thus creating a building that existed only on the screen. Furthermore, Kuleshov claimed that the source of the associative power of montage was in the viewer's, not the director's, consciousness; the viewer's perception of the

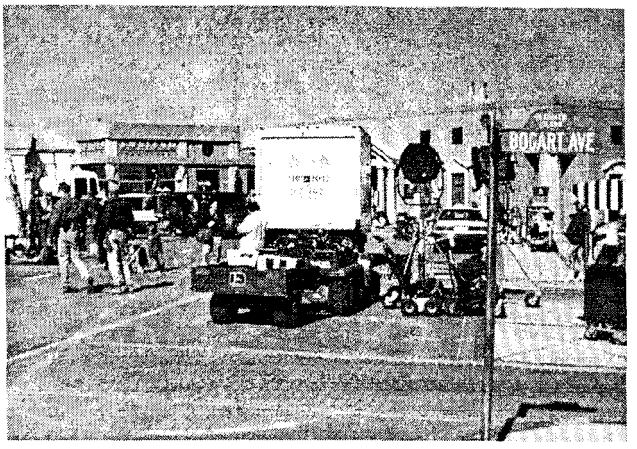

Fig. 5. Constructed space outside the controlled view does not exist in the making of films, and most architectural codes.

edited material. which did not necessarily bear any relationship to objective reality.' His observations are remarkably similar to contemporary architectural debates on the semiotics of constructed form and space.

Examining the analogies between film and architecture does reveal that, while there are similarities in the perceived spatial effects of constructed space in both, architecture and film are inherently different and need to be critically practiced as such. Cinema is a temporal art, unlike a piece of architecture everything is not present all at once. Also, as a temporal art, film is a linear, controlled process wherein the director exerts total domination of the experience of the viewer – lighting, dialogue, music and resolution. In contrast, architecture is not as privileged; it must be experienced within an ever shifting. fragmentary, intransient material range of context.

Another critical and paramount differencelies in cinema's reliance on the controlled view. In film, this is always the point of view of the lens; the viewer sees the action not from his own position, but from the position where he is placed by the filmmaker. Constructed space outside this field of vision does not exist; thus, the reliance on stagecraft. In architecture, the presence and specificity of what exists in front of and behind the surface in view needs to exceed the expectations of the camera. Further alienation between cinema and film lies overtly in the exponential growth of computer technology as it overtakes the idea of the physical presence and experience. With less and less constraints on structure or space, special effects threaten to reduce even the physical stagefront to an illusion. Whatever the technological revolution will produce in the cinema, it should not mean a comparative degeneration of communities into the equivalent of one continuous architectural pan shot.

CODES, MYTHMAKING AND THE SIMULATION OF PLACE

For the code-maker, the critical issue is an analysis and understanding of the differences between the perceived and the physical. This critical commentary has drawn the attention of contemporary urban observers ranging from Ada Louise Huxtable, Jean Baudrillard and Michael Sorkin. All three are fascinated with the power of films to reduce authentic experience and place to those experiences connected with the programmed theme park.[8] To Baudrillard, themed environments are "a play of illusions and phantasms" and to Huxtable, "it is the commodity used to fill the vacuum of imagination and ideas." To Sorkin,

> "this new realm is a city of simulations, television city, the city as theme park. This is nowhere more visible than in its architecture, in buildings that rely for their authority on images drawn from history, from a spuriously appropriate past that substitutes for a more exigent and examined present....today, the profession of urban design is almost wholly preoccupied with reproduction, with the creation of urbane disguises."

This popular preference for the simulated experience is not surprising; it is safe, replicable and amusing. And Seaside is hardly the first example of this attribute. Mythmaking and the packaging of architecture a setpiece for playacting, as disengagement, is a long-standing phenomenon which has remained a strong presence throughout the ages. Examples abound from Hadrian's Villa to the temporary stagesets of the Parisian places to the casinos of Las Vegas to the community of Celebration. Questions certainly must be asked about the validity of this attitude however when it becomes ubiquitous, rather than the exception.

CONCLUSIONS

Debating Seaside is inescapable since all roads in contemporary urbanism appear to pass through that community. Unfortunately, the universal image we have of Seaside – given to us through the mass media of the popular and architectural press, and now a major film – is nothing short of a romantic, cinemagraphic montage. And, without doubt, both the vision and the architecture of Seaside have quite literally been changed by the imagery of films. The reshaping of architectural space into perceived or replicated experiences like those of Seaside seems to on the increase. The construction of communities like Celebration and themed environments like Citywalk provides a comforting, psychological response. A short drive to the east of Seaside, the new traditional town[10] of the Florida panhandle, Rosemary Beach, is taking form. The same design team concluded charrettes in January, 1996, and homes are being built. Seaside's imagery and implementation strategy is being recreated; only this time, an image of an image of an image of a community is being created.

What then is the Seaside predicament? Is it the vision? or the Code, or the Code's implementation? It probably is a combination of the latter two. Over the past fifteen years the Seaside Code has been tested. Compelling in its sense of urbanity, the architectural code and covenants are over prescriptive in their formal vision. While that aspect of the code

is somewhat flexible and can result in original works, consumerist interests of the non-resident have often minimized original investigations of Florida Panhandle context. What is highly troubling is that, although there is an emphasis on durability of materials, the code addresses more directly a self-conscious fascination with the aggregate symbolism of exterior appearance. Similarly problematic is Seaside's highly self-conscious and compressed sense of history. Within one generation, a community has been created; this in itself is not unusual for communities have been created in less time. However, what certainly is missing is the hallmark of time and an allowance for meaningful differences. There can be no patina of age in a community where the color of picket fences are limited to a brief number of manufacturer's stock colors and must be repainted every few years. Code makers should be a great deal more cautious in recognizing the inherent dangers in over controlling our physical environments.

When the differences between architecture and films are erased, urbanists and architects should become more fluent in the practice of translation and transformation not only of the appearance of community, but its actual workings. Clearly, something is lost from that true sense of civic intimacy when the quirky, the unplanned, the unexpected, the ugly, the surreal are lost. It would appear that, as communities, we are becoming less interested in our own actual history, preferring instead a simpler, homogenized, sanitized, made-for TV version. If we fail to acknowledge what are perhaps the strongest, most American features – diversity, heterogeneity, and tolerance, then we preclude any authentic development of the city, an authenticity we so admire in historic city form.

NOTES

1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Sheila F. Glaser, trans. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 47.

2 The Seaside Master Plan, Urban Code and Architectural Code is well documented in David Mahoney's *Seaside* (1991), Steven Brooke's *Seaside* (1996) and Duany/Plater-Zyberk's own *Towns and Town-Making Principles* (1991). The format has been copyrighted by the designers.

3 Classic films including architectural space as a major characteristic includ L'Inhumaine *(Marcel L'Herbier, France, 1924*). Metropolis *(Fritz Lang, Germany, 1926)*, Playtime *(Jacques Tati, France, 1967)*, Blade Runner *(Ridley Scott, USA, 1982),* Batman *(Tim Burton, USA, 1989)*.

4 Anthony Vidler, "The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary" in *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner* (Munich: Prestel, 1996).

6 That modernism had a parallel evolution in both disciplines has been well documented. The similarity between the making of films and architecture drew the attention of several architects instrumental in the rise of modernism – Robert Mallet-Stevens was the set designer for *L'Inhumaine* (1924), Adolph Loos wrote film criticism (1924) along with his critical writings on architecture, Sergei Eisenstein and Fritz Lang had architectural training before turning to film-making, Le Corbusier wrote the script for *L'Architecture D'Aujourdhui* (1931), and film had a regular place in the total-theater projects of the Bauhaus groups in the 1920's.

7 Ronald Levaco, *Kuleshov on Film. Writings by Lev Kuleshov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

8 In addition to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, see Albrecht, Donald, *Design Dreams. Modern Architecture in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1986) and Huxtable, Ada Louise *Unreal America. Architecture and Illusion* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

9 Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

10 Promotional literature for Rosemary Beach.