

FLICKER: Speculations on Space and Cinema

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Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave. Here they have been since childhood, chained ... so they cannot move and can only see what is in front of them. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top. ... Now behind this parapet imagine persons carrying along various artificial objects, including figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which project above the parapet. ... In every way, then, [the] prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects.

—Plato, from “The Allegory of the Cave,” in Francis MacDonald Cornford, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 227-229.

What the spectacle has taken from reality must now be retaken from the spectacle. ... The world is already filmed. It is now a matter of transforming it.

—Guy Debord, narrator (unattributed translation), in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord, director, (France: Simar Films, 1973).

INTRODUCTION

Overview

FLICKER: Speculations on Space and Cinema was a design studio offered as an advanced undergraduate course at Roger Williams University in the fall of 2010 in which students used cinematic formal conventions as the primary analytic and generative toolkit. During the first half of the semester, students focused on a series of one- and

two-week projects exploring several specific cinematic themes. The second half of the semester comprised an urban-scaled investigation designed to splice together these cinematic themes into a more fully-formed architectural project. A program of films and readings, presented in seminar format, accompanied the various projects. Film screenings were tailored to the assignment themes, and included (among others) Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta* (1921), Buster Keaton’s *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), Sergei Eisenstein’s *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin* (both 1925), Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966), Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987), and Alex Proyas’ *Dark City* (1998). The studio’s goal was for students to become conversant in the language of cinema as it can be applied to architectural design. As an investigative and thematic studio, the overall intention was to produce critical analyses of these intersections between disciplines and add to the growing conversation on the subject.

The Flicker

Cinema’s ability to juxtapose, zoom, jump-cut, alter time, or seamlessly render impossible physical conditions creates meaning within its own medium. The *FLICKER* studio’s basic premise is that architecture has the possibility to reframe or enrich our physical surroundings using these cinematic conventions.

To flicker is to move, to appear momentarily. A flicker requires both light and time, and occurs when a light source is interrupted briefly—but long enough

for our eye to register—by a mass or force. Flicker, of course, is also the origin of a nickname for the movies. A flick is so called because of early cinema's perceptible intervals between individual images, as the gate of the projector closed and reopened to change frames. This is what exposed the artifice of the technology, but also what draws one's eye.

This thematic studio posits that the design of space can enable a flicker, allowing a cinematic experience to result from architecture. Here, the word flicker is used as a conceptual hinge, describing the source of a perceived reality that creates a distorted, incomplete, and possibly deceptive yet alluring representation of an actual condition. In his *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato describes an artificial, illusion-based perceptual reality for the prisoners in the cave that foreshadows (pun intended)—with uncanny accuracy—our cinema-saturated, televised, hyperlinked, and webcast society in which our primary interactions with the physical world are mediated. In this mediated world, architecture tends to be a durable, slow, physical reminder of our place in space and time, both as an active participant in our daily lives and as a historical, cultural artifact. The establishing questions of the studio were: What can we observe, learn, and take away from our flickering culture that has value when we design spaces? And, can we use this cinematic flicker to cast its light towards, and draw newfound attention to, our physical environment? The goals of a cinematic architecture, following this argument, are to illuminate, animate, help narrate, open to question, or cause us to rethink our assumed spatial and visual position in the city.

Cinematic Architecture: A Methodology

While cinema rose rapidly and was arguably the dominant art form of the 20th century, it did not emerge fully formed as a unique discipline. Cinema arose out of the traditions of backroom sideshow attractions, and from theater, photography, and parlor optical entertainment devices. Although cinema has either creatively replenished or eclipsed many of its antecedents, the relationship between cinema and architecture since 1895 has not been symbiotic. Cinema has called upon architecture to further its own growth as a medium more than architecture can claim to have benefited from cinema's formal developments.

At the same time, cinema's innovations certainly cannot be discounted. Techniques developed within the medium (and largely within the experimental tradition) can and should be considered where relevant to architectural design. Ideas borrowed from montage theory, non-narrative and non-representational filmmaking, and—the essential cinematic condition—the moving frame, are capable of informing architecture. Thus, as the operating methodology of the FLICKER studio, framing architectural design as "cinematic" involved looking through the cinema lens, but often back to other formal architectural traditions that cinema, in turn, has shared or drawn upon.

CINEMA AS A SYNTHETIC ART

Early cinema drew upon formal traditions of painterly composition, dramatic staging (*mise en scène*), literary narrative tradition, and photographic technology and craft, to arrive at a unique combination of elements that together became cinematic. The concurrent Modern project in the early Twentieth Century demanded that cinema claim its autonomy from the other arts, let alone establish itself as an art form. The director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein was the major proponent during this time for describing and advancing the unique characteristics of film in terms of its montage abilities. Avant-garde experiments—particularly in the 1920s—pushed and/or bristled against film's narrative, pictorial, and representational appropriations in favor of seeking originality within the medium. The vast output of a popular entertainment (in commercial narrative filmmaking), however, has hewn traditionally to film's borrowed components.

To describe an architectural design as "cinematic" requires parsing the structural elements of both cinema production and the design project. The disciplines are united by common formal elements, but what combination of these qualities can render a work of architecture cinematic? Breaking the design process into constituent formal components seems the best way that analogous comparisons may be made between the separate disciplines. The FLICKER studio, perhaps obviously, addresses these questions from a design-problem standpoint rather than a critical standpoint. Certainly experiencing architecture can be critiqued in cinematic terms, and architecture, cities, and landscapes as an agent in film can be (and has been) analyzed, but this studio aims to propose strategies towards

creating a cinematic architecture. The following subheadings represent an outline of operative elements common to film and architecture. The studio investigated and tested these themes in an effort to arrive at a cinematic design approach.

Seamlessness and Illusion

Seamlessness, or a propensity towards photographic, mimetic illusionism has been a mainstay for commercial (Hollywood-led) cinema production. Seamlessness applies to a series of shots cut so as to maintain continuity of action, and can also be the application of visual effects to enhance or alter a scene. This tool of the cinema is useful for looking at the possibilities of visual illusionism in architectural design, particularly through representation.



Figure 1: Timothy Digan, *An Architectural Phantasmagoria* (student project for FLICKER, Fall 2010) A panorama of a mundane student residence takes on an elegiac quality when photographed over the course of a passing day.



Figure 2: David Rodrigues, *An Architectural Phantasmagoria* (student project for FLICKER, Fall 2010) A photograph of an abandoned rail depot takes on life and memory.

The basis of the FLICKER studio's first short project, "An Architectural Phantasmagoria," was this prem-

ise. The assignment asked students to test how our perception of the everyday (seamless) spaces we inhabit can be pictorially altered by a cinematographic effect. It is precisely at the moment of dislocation—of a realization that all is not what it seems—when cinema can perhaps first permeate architecture. Students were asked to represent a space using photography or film as the primary medium in order to convey a sense of dislocation or impossible spatial illusion. This study of seamless illusionism also suggests possibilities for architectural montage, of juxtapositions of disparate elements.

Montage and the Cut

Painting has remained incapable of fixing the total representation of a phenomenon in its full visual multidimensionality. (There have been numberless attempts to do this.) Only the film camera has solved the problem of doing this on a flat surface, but its undoubted ancestor in this capability is – architecture. ... The Acropolis of Athens has [a] right to be called the perfect example of one of the most ancient films. ... I would only ask you to look at it with the eye of a filmmaker: it is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one that our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis.

—Sergei Eisenstein. "Montage in Architecture," Michael Glenny, trans., *Assemblage 10* (December 1989): 117.

One of an architect's most basic and powerful tools is the ability to arrange building elements in a way that presents a specific view or pathway through a space or aperture. It is a common design task to define a view or frame a path of movement. However, the development in architecture of a successful montage sequence—a deliberate juxtaposition of a sequence of both views and space—is less frequently achieved, or even attempted. Eisenstein, writing about the Acropolis in his essay "Montage and Architecture," cites the Athenian landmark as a protocinematic sequence of carefully composed "shots." Eisenstein, following Auguste Choisy's description, muses about the effect of time relative to the shots in the Acropolis montage, although he doesn't specifically answer a fundamental question: what is the architectural equivalent of the cut between shots?

Interestingly, Eisenstein claims that the fundamental distinction between cinematic and architectur-

al experiences is that viewing a film involves the movement of the eye (from a stationary body, as the eye scans the screen), while architecture requires movement primarily of the body (as it traverses space). If we recognize that the precondition of understanding architectural space is movement of the body, then for a specifically cinematic reading of space we need to prioritize the visual, and investigate how the eye informs the body's experiences of those spaces.

This concept of architectural montage was tested out in the second project of the semester, entitled "The Frame and the Camera." Students were first assigned a short problem in which they designed a "montage camera." The assignment reclaimed the word *camera* for architectural use: students designed a single occupiable space located on the Roger Williams campus, which contained two meaningfully juxtaposed views. The sequence of approach to the camera, the spatial relationship between the views, and the specific framing of the views formed the base criteria for evaluating the

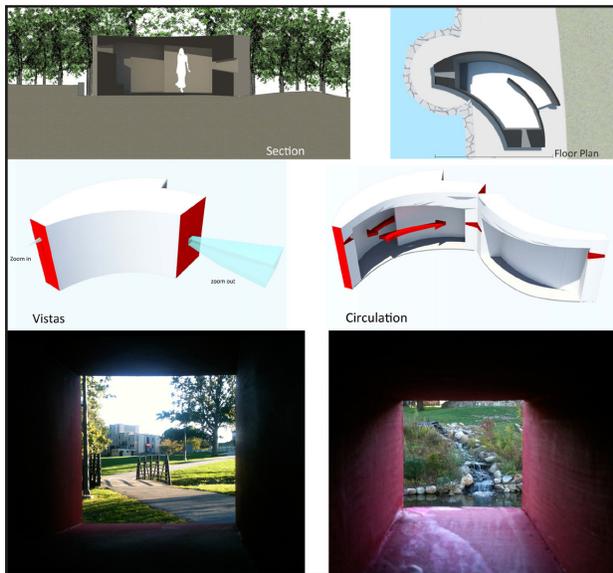


Figure 3: Matthew Demers, Bryan Palagi, and Victor Penedo, *The Frame and the Camera* (student project for FLICKER, Fall 2010). Victor Penedo's original design (top and center) was reinterpreted and built on site. The views (above), entitled "Zoom In" and "Zoom Out" were chosen to juxtapose different channels for circulation and movement: in one case, for water; in the other, for pedestrians.

project. Rich in dramatic topography and landscape while somewhat poor in inspirational buildings, the Roger Williams campus provided strong possibilities for designing and siting these projects.

After the short design exercise, students teamed in small groups to select and construct three full-scale installations adapted from the montage camera designs. All apertures frame views, and all spaces are experienced through time, so the specific goal of this exercise was to reframe inhabiting a (small) space as a cinematic experience *à la* Eisenstein: to make the movement of the body (through space) correlate with and support the movement of the eye (as in cinema). A successful room should allow the visitor to draw meaning from the newly framed view montage.

The Moving Frame and Narrative Tradition

The use of the word frame has common resonance both in film and architecture. A frame implies a cropping, or exclusion: in architecture, a building frame or window frame defines the space within its boundaries as distinct from the surrounding (universal) space. In film, the frame refers to the (lens and screen) aperture boundaries that define the filmmaker's intended composition. It also refers to the still shot—one of 24 every second—that, when placed on celluloid and in sequence, makes up cinema's illusion of fluid motion. While moving frames are a precondition of cinema, the question of sequential frames in architecture poses several design possibilities. There is the classic *enfilade*, where discrete spaces are articulated through repetitive openings. Perhaps the clearest example of conceiving architectural design as a series of arranged frames is in the work of Eisenstein's friend Le Corbusier, who designed and described movement through his buildings as a *promenade architecturale*. Less narrative and more akin to montage, Le Corbusier conceived his formal, spatial sequences as internal unfoldings or revelations. There is also the Picturesque landscape tradition, where visual moments are "captured" along a path. Gardens planned in this tradition such as Henry Hoare's Stourhead Gardens (1741-), in Wiltshire, UK, or Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's Prospect Park (1865-), in Brooklyn, NY, USA, used a series of specifically arranged viewpoints to form spatial narrative programs.

Common to film, theater, and literature, a narrative is possible—even inevitable—in architecture, though rarely absolutely prescribed, as it is in film.

The structuring of narrative is sufficiently different between film and architecture, however, that this parallel doesn't tend to hold up to extended analysis. Experimental literature (such as Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch*) or contemporary video games perhaps offer better nonlinear correlations with architecture's indeterminate narrative structure: the form (structure) of the work enables but doesn't prescribe a story line. When experiencing the built environment, it is a subject's unique interaction with her or his environment that allows a human narrative to emerge.

Visions of the City

Screen interpretations of cities and constructions of virtual cities have been one of the richest critical topics when discussing architecture's role in cinema. To look outwards through cinema, towards the city itself, one can look synthetically (and ahistorically) for examples that combine elements from the previously outlined themes. Arturo Soria y Mata's Ciudad Lineal, or Le Corbusier's plan for Algiers were both designed with motion in mind: the city-dweller is no longer a *flâneur*, a local stroller, but a fast-moving, efficient, largely passive receiver of visual imagery. John Nash's studio backlot designs for Regent Street, in London, are also capable of being read as protocinematic: there is one path, one narrative, that links Regent's Park to St. James Park, conceived purely as a visual spectacle to the extent that, for the most part, only facades were designed, and stucco was passed off as stone.

In preparation for the final design project in the FLICKER studio, students watched several "City Symphony" films and studied a series of typological and thematic architecture and landscape precedents. The site, in the Mitte District of Berlin, provided students an opportunity to engage urban infrastructure, contained significant adjacent cultural and architectural landmarks, and boasted a rich and complex history. The program was relatively straightforward, and included six movie theaters and a virtual/augmented reality gaming center. Coupled to the actual site and program investigations was the cinematic design agenda. Each student crafted his or her own specific cinematic approach. This ranged from foregrounding a narrative sequence to exploring digital technologies that allow fragments of projected images to appear as parts of a living façade. What emerged broadly as themes were questions of ephemerality vs. permanence, the balance of the visual and the spatial, and the

seemingly ironic condition of a public, urban gathering spot comprising large, dark spaces where spectators stare passively, in silence, at a screen.

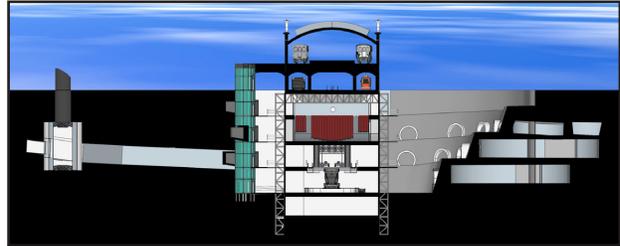


Figure 4: David Rodrigues, *City Of Cinema* (student project for FLICKER, Fall 2010). The project provides a new model for urban moviegoing and embraces the site's existing infrastructure and history.

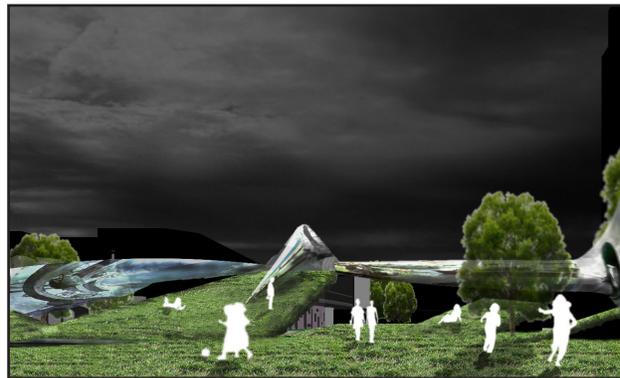


Figure 5: Nicholas Rossi, *City of Cinema* (student project for FLICKER, Fall 2010). An "unwatchable movie" activates the ground surface.

DESIGNING CINEMATIC ARCHITECTURE

I believe cinema is dead, [and] I'll actually give you a date for that death. I would say that it's the 31st of September 1983, which is the day that is now generally recognized that the zapper—or the remote control—was introduced into the living rooms of the world. Bang! Almost at one fell swoop ... interactivity begin to enter the agenda. Because you're sitting in the dark, and because you're looking in one direction, and because you're sitting still, how can you be interactive with that [cinema] screen? Already in a sense, the general characteristics of passive cinematic enjoyment, fascination, intrigue, have already curiously been broken. ... Essentially the two big ideas that now govern our understanding of cultural pursuits, at whatever level, are probably the two phenomena of interactivity and multimedia, and cinema can't deal with either of those propositions.

—Peter Greenaway, "Cinema of the Future," lecture at Lovebytes 2005 conference, Sheffield, UK (16 April 2005). Transcribed by author from video available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZQTrp261E>.

A persistent question raised throughout the FLICKER studio was: is this formal interdisciplinary work relevant to architecture if cinema (as Peter Greenaway has it) is dying?

Since artistic advances in both disciplines are to a large degree socially, culturally, and economically driven, technological advances should not threaten either. A social shift in the way we view films is perhaps under way, but isn't about to invalidate the art form. Technology can act as an enabler for latent cultural attitudes or production, but the shift to digital filming, postproduction, distribution and projection, has not changed our intellectual and visceral reasons for viewing film. Similarly, software and digital manufacturing developments in the architecture field have facilitated our ability to realize new forms, but haven't changed our need to be both sheltered and inspired by our buildings.

FLICKER attempted a critical analysis of common formal parallels between disciplines that should remain relevant to both. The ahistorical approach to identifying these themes and applying them to the cinematic architectural design agenda can thus be viewed as being entirely native to architecture, abetted by film. If films can create visions of our world that engage, captivate, or challenge us, then surely architecture can flicker, too.