

# FROM FACADE TO INTERFACE

## REPRESENTING INSTITUTIONAL POWER IN CYBERSPACE

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Architecture has always been a medium for the expression of power and, in recent years, architectural power has been augmented, altered, and displaced by attempts by powerful institutions to represent themselves, and to establish a parallel presence, in cyberspace. This exploratory paper examines the way that a variety of powerful institutions have chosen to cope with the challenge of electronic representation during the early years of the Worldwide Web.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on mostly-American examples of the “virtual tours” and “homepage” imagery used by government agencies, banks, churches, and museums, the paper examines the extent to which principles of architecture and urban design continue to influence the way these institutions assert their importance to virtual visitors.

### Urban Legibility Before Cyberspace

Across the globe, the architectural manifestations of church and state have long dominated the skylines of settlements; at the same time, these powerful institutions have also claimed the most privileged precincts in a town's plan. More recently, the most privileged heights and central spaces have frequently been claimed by market-driven edifices such as corporate skyscrapers, places that an earlier generation once termed “cathedrals of commerce.” Whether in service of God or Mammon, all such structures have asserted the power of the institutions they represent. As political scientist Murray Edelman has argued:

*It is the monumentality of great public buildings and some corporate office buildings that most conspicuously distinguishes them from the rest of the environment. The scale of the structures reminds the mass of political spectators that they enter the precincts of power as clients or as supplicants, susceptible to arbitrary rebuffs and favors, and that they are subject to remote authorities they only dimly know or remotely understand.<sup>2</sup>*

### On-Line But Off-Axis: De-urbanized Institutions

By contrast, the on-line representations of such places can offer only the most illusive semblance of monumentality, yet promise to deliver a seemingly endless

array of information to anyone wishing to visit a website. As William Mitchell puts it, the increased reliance on cyberspace “eliminates a traditional dimension of civic legibility. In the standard sort of spatial city, *where* you are frequently tells *who* you are. (And who you are will often determine where you are allowed to be.) Geography is destiny ... but the network's despatialization of interaction destroys the geocode's key.”<sup>3</sup>

To its celebrants, one is left with a parallel world where a wide range of avenues for discrimination have been eliminated. Shielded by the anonymity of the Internet, distinguishing factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, sex, disability, age, group affiliation, physical appearance, and demeanor all fail to constitute a barrier to equal access. The result is a world where all sites (and, by extension, all sights) are rendered equally available. In such an environment, the same click of a mouse button yields the homepage for McDonald's and the one for the CIA. Whether the search is for fries or spies, the global reach is rendered functionally equivalent. Such apparent egalitarianism, while often appealing to the average web-surfer, is hardly reassuring to the powerful institutions seeking to retain authority as well as accessibility.

### *Accessible Authority: An Oxymoron?*

In the built world of cities, the public architecture of self-professed democratic regimes has long played a dual, and perhaps contradictory, representational role. On the one hand, a democracy seeks to demonstrate the openness of its institutions; on the other hand, like all other types of regime, a democracy must also house its institutions in a way that commands respect and sustains the legitimacy of those chosen to hold positions of power. Power and authority have been demonstrated by a variety of architectural and urban design techniques, ranging from the borrowed metaphors of sacred temples, so central to neo-classicism, to such devices as plinths, elaborate processional approach sequences and axes, exaggerated entrance stairways, oversized doors, expensive and ponderous materials, inhumanly-scaled columns, expansive plazas, as well as a variety of liquid and solid barriers such as moats and walls. Collectively, these devices reaffirm the exalted status of the institution by asserting its spatial superiority. At the same time, these powerful institutions — government buildings, corporations, churches and the like — need somehow to

appear inviting and accessible, yielding themselves to peaceful entry by the suitably-respectful persons who are their constituents, clients, and congregates.

### *The Limits of Power-mongering in Cyberspace*

In this push-pull dynamic, cyberspace presents few opportunities to enhance the ability of institutions to demonstrate the values of dominance, achieved in the built world by full-time awareness of a spatially-prominent edifice. Instead, over the Worldwide Web, sites must be accessed sequentially, and any consistently-viewed or persistently-present images are structured at the behest of the user, or by the software and hardware developers, rather than by other kinds of powerful institutions. Moreover, once-accessed, the cyber-visitor is immediately invited in, almost always in a manner that requires far less effort than visiting a real institution. The website offers the visitor the illusion of centrality and self-importance, but it is a domain where everything is rendered equally central (and equally peripheral).

Similarly, the virtual world offers the possibility of individual attention, convenience, and seemingly unprecedented privilege, yet does so in a way that is carefully constrained. The virtual tour of the White House, for instance, goes to more rooms than the real tour, and directly links the visit to welcoming comments from the President and First Lady (a privilege otherwise accorded only to a few hundred top campaign donors), yet it does not let visitors look out the windows or sense the exalted position of the building in L'Enfant's plan for Washington. Efficiency of movement, control over information, and ease of access are attained at the cost of urban context.

What is lost is the necessity to experience the power of the approach. The virtual version of the institution is presented as far more transparently accessible than the real one, whereas the experience of pedestrianism approach to a venerated and elevated precinct, the anticipation-generation of long queues and clearance procedures, and the freighted act of crossing a literal threshold of power, often through a security gauntlet as well, is a crucial part of the way the meaning of a powerful institution is structured and sustained. By contrast, the cyberspace version of institutional power offers up an urbanism without approach, yielding immediately to an interiorized architecture. A layered world of barbed wire and wrought iron is lifted to reveal a discrete set of uninterrupted intimate scenes, glimpsed through clear glass. What is left is architecture without the city.

### **The De-urbanized World of Virtual Tours**

This cityless transparency and interiority hold many advantages for those who lead these institutions, and especially for those who are hired to manage the institution's public image. From a public relations perspective, the marketing of a virtual institution provides an opportunity to maximize the appearance of approachability while still delimiting access in all important ways. Coping with thousands of daily 'hits' to a web-site does not pose anything like the challenges of crowd-control that a mass advance on the actual site would cause, yet offers a seemingly unlimited opportunity

to deliver an idealized interpretive message, entirely free of hecklers, defacers, or terrorists. The virtual tours of powerful institutions offer expanded means for the public to react and comment, but these responses are fragmented, privatized, and interiorized. Electronically transmitted to a hidden center for subsequent and selective response, the opportunity for registering approval and dissent is individualized in a way that renders it publicly-invisible and publicly-inaudible. The virtual institutions, while seeming to champion participation, do not attempt to build-in the analogous spatial devices necessary to make collective response seen and heard. Virtual tours tend to visit depopulated rooms reached instantly, and do not depict the plazas, boulevards, rallygrounds that so often provide the larger urban settings for powerful institutions, the places where political and cultural authority is challenged or demonstrated.

Even when augmented by video clips and three-dimensional graphics, the virtual version of powerful institutions almost always strips them of the urbanism that constructs and reveals their meanings, both in social and in aesthetic terms.

A virtual tour of the Louvre, for instance, may well reveal an unobstructed (if over-pixillated) view of the Mona Lisa and may even contain museum maps and glass-pyramids, but does nothing to show the museum's spatial presence as the termination of an ever-lengthening axis of French power, once linking palace and parade route, now linking high culture and high capitalism. Likewise, St. Peter's is shown with its plaza, but without articulating its presence as the terminus of the Via del Conciliazione, the Mussolini-era boulevard built to link the Vatican to other prominent parts of Rome — an urban rapprochement of church and state that paralleled and commemorated the Lateran Treaty of 1929. In a similarly constricted way, the White House virtual tour begins with the White House itself and does not look across the street to take notice of the placard-wielding protesters in Lafayette Park or pause to consider the controversial closing of the road outside its entrance, which has recently rendered 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue an address without a street. Even in the case of such elaborate virtual tours — representations that explicitly celebrate the value of an edifice and its contents — architecture is de-urbanized, becoming instead a single site, a destination without a route.<sup>4</sup> In substituting an interface for a facade, the richness of experience inherent in approaching a powerful institution is diminished and thereby controlled, replaced by a voluminous network of easily and eagerly available information that masks as much as it reveals.

### **There's No Place Like Homepage**

Not all powerful institutions are as explicitly interested in attracting virtual visitors as the White House or Le Louvre. Nonetheless, while stopping short of providing virtual tours of their buildings, many powerful institutions have established a presence on the web and, in so doing, have exhibited a range of strategies for linking their virtual self-representations to their real-world architectural trappings. In addition to the vast array of profit-seeking organizations using the Net to market goods and services, there are many thousands of

public and nonprofit institutions with websites created to dispense information and enhance the public image of their activities. Across the globe, government agencies of every level, major and minor religious denominations, and cultural organizations of every stripe have established a myriad of ubiquitous branch offices on the web. While it is impossible to do justice to all aspects of this phenomenon, what follows is an attempt to set out some of the ways that three types of powerful institution — federal government departments in the United States located in and around Washington, DC, banks, and art museums — have carried forth aspects of the built environment in their cyberspace self-representations.

#### *The Cyber-Presence of U.S. Government Agencies*

The first thing to note about the webpage presence of these agencies is the extremely low reliance on images of their Washington-based headquarters. For the most part, there seems little interest among webpage designers (and their sponsors) in orienting cyber-visitors to the physical appearance or location of the actual agency, even though these places tend to be quite large and quite prominently sited. The Department of the Interior site, for example, opens with three images: a pleasant picture of mountain lakes, a well-protected wolf, and a Native American in traditional dress. The triptych is a composite image of the department's mission— "to protect and provide access to our Nation's natural and cultural heritage and honor our trust responsibilities to tribes." Hidden from view is not only any indication of the Department's urban base in Washington, but also any indication of the lingering disputes over Indian policy, and over mining and timber rights, that have rendered the agency so perennially controversial.

Similarly, the Department of Energy's site is full of high energy graphics, but devoid of any mention of nuclear power and bereft of any image of its own source of power in Washington, and the Department of Transportation's site shows a mural depicting U.S. transportation history and progress, from horses to space travel, but does not provide any picture of its departmental headquarters. The Department of Education supplies an image of a "tree of knowledge" rather than a view of its headquarters or a school, the Department of State shows only a display of flags and eagles, and a Euro-centered view of globe, with buttons poised over Europe and Middle East promising further access to "hot topics." In keeping with the casual tone that pervades the whole user-friendly portrayal of government bureaucracy, the designers of this site casually inquire whether cyber-constituents "Need help? Have a foreign policy opinion?" and suggest avenues for follow-up. Most other US federal departments were, as of early 1997 at least, even less graphically sophisticated, seemingly content to symbolize themselves through their logos rather than their edifices, a design decision that has yielded little more than electronic letterhead with a benign and homey text.

One case where the casual tone vanishes but the anti-architectural trend remains comes as no surprise: the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The last thing anyone would want to do is highlight the McLean, Virginia, location of CIA headquarters. Here is the institution that

thrives on the implicit ubiquity of its cyberpresence. The Central Intelligence Agency is not about centrality, but about the hidden omnipresence of surveillance. The first sight greeting Internet visitors to the CIA is a warning that the Government (with a capital-G) "may monitor and audit the usage of this system," an acknowledgment that is actually more forthright than the incessant and insouciant telemarketing that pervades the rest of the Web. Yet this is the CIA, where the concept of *worldwide web* seems somehow still human, a global network of spies seeking entrapment in the name of national security. "Click here to continue," the screen invites. To a frequent computer user, the phrase is by now so familiar as to preempt the need for further thought. Yet now the trivial finger motion of the click has been transmuted into an act of bravery. Never has a mouse been rendered more mouse-like. It invites a pause not unlike the architectural and urbanistic use of gates, moats, and daunting flights of steps that have long characterized the architecture and urban design of Important Places. Surveillance seems not only a threat but a promise. Instead of stairs there are stares; instead of a facade there is a faceless interface.

In surveying the various US federal departments, the only one where website designers have made explicit use of the agency's architectural presence is the Department of Defense. Here, the famous Pentagon building does play a central visual role, but does so in a highly-abstracted manner, a five-sided figure sprouting a computer cord and spinning in cyberspace. Like the other departments, the agency is detached — in this case quite literally — from any sense of its urban presence in Washington.

In part, the reluctance of most other agencies to feature their buildings may very well stem from their general lack of architectural distinction, although other factors may also be present. For one, these places are powerful institutions that are not in any way dependent on actual visitors for their financial well-being. These representations are indeed intended to be full substitutes for an actual visit to the agency, in a way that a homepage for an art museum can never convincingly become. These institutions exude their power, not from this single central workplace, but from within the congressional committees that secure their annual appropriations and from the decentralized branch offices that link their work to local constituents. It is also possible that the reason the urban contexts of the Mall and the capital are deemphasized also reflects the broader anti-Washington sentiment of much of American politics in the 1990s.

#### *The Architecture of Cyber-Corporatism*

The underlying attitude toward place-based and building-based iconography seems affect more than just the federal bureaucracy, however. As major U.S. corporations have increasingly forsaken central city locations for campuses in the once-greener pastures of exurbia, much of corporate iconography seems to have shifted from reliance on high-rise signature buildings to more conventional marketing based on place-less logos, where identities like the neo-Saarinen Nike and blocky-classical IBM are constructed out of only the most indirect of architectural references. Among major American firms, it may well be that only TransAmerica regularly

markets its headquarters (a San Francisco concrete pyramid) as its desired corporate image, and even this seems more the case of a building designed with a logo in mind. Elsewhere in the United States, many of the major skyscraper headquarters named after the corporations that sponsored them no longer even house that corporation. Ultimately, the relative absence of architectural representations may suggest an outright unwillingness to identify with some single center of power, given a global economy and the seemingly global reach of American “national interests.”

### *Banking on Cyberspace*

Perhaps the most prominent architectural shift occasioned by digital media has occurred over the last fifteen years in the world of banking. In larger cities, most bank customers may never even visit the central offices of their bank, and nearly all transactions may take place across the interface of an ATM machine in a location entirely lacking the spatial reinforcement of a traditional banking edifice. Yet banks still need to find ways to assert their traditional authority.

The website of the United States Federal Reserve Board of Governors in Washington uses its neoclassical, quintessential bank-like, headquarters in all subsequent links from this homepage, a reminder that in this system ultimate control is invested in the center. Nearly all of the Fed’s 12 regional branches also make strong use of architectural language, sometimes through direct imagery of their headquarters, but sometimes through use of neo-classical cartoon icons that bear little or no relation to the design of the building itself, but seem reassuringly bank-like. The problem arises most clearly in the case of Fed branches housed in modernist headquarters, such as those in Boston, Dallas, and Philadelphia. In the Dallas website, for example, the first page superimposes the phrase “Enter Here” on the image of a contemporary building lacking the neo-classical exaggerated articulation of entrance.

Following this, it abandons the modernist language completely, and subsequently relies on a fragment of a classical capital as its icon. This sort of practice goes well beyond the Federal Reserve System, too; the websites of private banks also often try to evoke traditional portico-and-pediment images of themselves, even if this imagery bears little relation to any actual street presence. In the case of bank websites, the central goal often seems to be symbolization of a renewed sense of civic legibility, perhaps as a counterpoint to the loss of this quality in the built world.

### *Cyber-Museums: Architecture as Icon*

Museum buildings have often been designed with greater distinction and distinctiveness than most government and corporate offices, in part because these buildings house institutions that depend on easy facilitation of actual visits by a diverse public and in part because they make consistent and substantial use of their architectural presence when marketing themselves on the Web. In contrast to many other Washington agencies, the Smithsonian Institution site wholeheartedly embraces its picturesque castle and stresses the centrality of its

presence on the Mall. New York’s Guggenheim Museum site not only emphasizes Wright’s landmark building but has its visitors use abstracted architectural fragments from it as buttons to gain entry deeper into the presentation. Similarly, the imagery of Chicago’s Art Institute site takes off from the two prominent lions flanking its entry stair, appropriating their respectful associations while finding a neat visual metaphor to assert the dual importance of its School and its Museum. Madrid’s Museo del Prado site similarly incorporates classical facade fragments, whereas the site for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco adopts an annotated neo-Roman archway as the entrance for cyber-visitors.

The formality of the arch-image is more than counterbalanced by friendly promises (“We’re committed to making our entire collection available online” and status-flattening invitations (“It’s your turn to be the curator”). For these places, architecture lends both dignity and playfulness, although — for the largest museum sites — the multiple layered and centrifugal links can also easily lead to intimidation (not unlike the experience of an actual protracted visit).

## **Conclusions and Questions**

From this cursory survey, it seems possible to draw several tentative conclusions, all of which would need to be systematically tested against a larger repertoire of examples, and monitored over time. First, many institutions that rely on a single, architecturally prominent, major headquarters (such as a museum or a regional federal reserve bank or some religious denominations) rather than a dispersed array of small branches, find it desirable to make explicit use of architectural references in their websites, often treating their building (or some fragment thereof) as an icon that both facilitates and accompanies exploration of the site. For institutions where no single identifiable edifice serves as a common reference point and symbol of power, however, other techniques must be devised. These include appropriation of abstracted icons of commonly understood pre-modern architectural references (such as a column capital or neo-classical facade) used to convey an image of established authority even when there is no architecturally equivalent edifice housing the institution. Other common techniques eschew direct architectural reference entirely, preferring to work through the media of text and typeface.

In many ways, the phenomenon of the institutional website is little more than the continuation of public relations by other means. Like other forms of image marketing, the websites seek to find ways to demonstrate the power of the institution in the most affirmative and enticing manner possible, and to suggest that some of this power can be willfully shared with every cooperative visitor. Ultimately, for the leadership of some institutions, the virtue of a virtual headquarters seems to be that it allows power to reside at a safe distance from actual public contact while, at the same time, it conveys a sense of unprecedented ease of access to information. In these analogous edifices, all doors that are shown appear to be open and readily enterable, yet unlike real buildings, the designers of cyberspace structures are not compelled to reveal all doors.

Among the many unanswered questions about the power-shift now underway, a few stand out as especially pressing: What new media techniques will emerge for conveying power to compensate for the diminished aesthetic reinforcement of the built environment? Will the profusion of virtual environments work to empower groups that could never afford (or be allowed to occupy) prime physical space? How does access to cyberspace relate to access to physical space as a mechanism for demonstrating and consolidating political influence? Will the ever-augmenting sophistication of software itself become a primary currency of power, bedazzling the cyber-visitor with hypermedia flights of fancy, while implicitly belittling all those who lack the sophistication of equipment necessary to access these electronic representations in their full technological glory? Whatever the growth of software as a design medium, architecture will still retain much of its primacy as a tool of power for influential institutions; even as facades give way to interfaces, sometimes the facade will strike back.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Many of the ideas introduced in this paper were developed in collaboration with graduate students in a seminar on "Urban Design Politics," taught at MIT during the fall of 1996. Their assistance is gratefully acknowledged.
- <sup>2</sup> Murray Edelman, "Space and the Social Order," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 32, no. 2, November 1978, p. 3. These kinds of issues have been explored in depth, as exemplified by a globally-diverse set of government capitol complexes, in Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) and Vale, "Capitol Complexes: Urban Design and National Security," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Fall, 1993), pp. 273-283.
- <sup>3</sup> William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits* (MIT Press, 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> In this regard, it would be well worth examining a set of virtual tours, not of buildings, but of entire cities. How are cities represented in such a medium? Are they shown as a series of discrete 'sights,' or is there an attempt to show how disparate locations are linked together or how they are highlighted and emboldened by their urbanistic position? Here, as elsewhere, rapidly-expanding opportunities to combine media offer opportunities for highly sophisticated representations of complex urban environments as well as for detailed analysis of buildings. Another promising methodological avenue for future research would involve in-depth interviews with designers of web-pages and virtual tours, and corresponding interviews with their clients, to judge how collaborative and how self-conscious the decisions about institutional representation tend to be. Like relationships between designer and client in the built world, this aspect seems crucial, although it is beyond the scope of the present paper.