

”Building Stories”, *Critical Cities*, (London: Myrdle Court Press, 2009).

### ***Building Stories***

The construction of places through representation is highly institutionalized nowadays. Cities are launched and landscapes formed with the help of regional cultural policies and mediated narratives. Municipalities and commercial operators wish to produce competitive and attractive local identities in relation to the economy of images.

The degree of institutionalization was exemplified when the city of Barcelona some years ago contacted Woody Allen with an offer to part finance his forthcoming film. Allen accepted, the production was located to Barcelona and Barcelona city, in turn, paid 10% of the production costs (about 1,3 million USD)<sup>1</sup>. The film *Vicky Christina Barcelona* is, in Allen’s own words, "a love letter to Barcelona"<sup>2</sup>. Picturesque alleyways, charming restaurants, spontaneous romance, neurotic Spanish women and of course Gaudí.

How can this relation between locality and representation be understood? Where do media production, planning policies and the spatial professions intersect? Where in this mediated landscape are our architectural desires and needs formulated?

The British geographer Doreen Massey has addressed these issues in a broad sense by pointing out how our geographical imaginations shape and maintain spatial relations. In her book *For space*<sup>3</sup> Massey shows how the narratives of globalisation legitimize certain political strategies and policies. Questioning an essentialised, static and a-political understanding of place, Massey argues for the importance to consider each place in relation to a larger system. She recognizes places as constituted through interrelations with a diversity of coexisting trajectories and points to how each place is linked to places beyond. Always under construction, never final enclosures. Massey emphasizes the importance of making spatial imaginations and conceptualisations explicit. To better understand our construction and practice of space she claims that certain hegemonic imaginations should be challenged and the assumptions they lead to problematized.

*“To challenge the class politics of London the city itself has to be reimagined as a clash of trajectories”<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1648406,00.html> (Download date 2009-02-27)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/story/2007/07/03/allen-woody-movie.html> (Download date 2009-02-27)

<sup>3</sup> Massey, Doreen, *For Space* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: Sage,2005)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

As the local authorities in Barcelona were well aware of, the film industry is a powerful producer of the spatial imaginary, although all too often unable, or unwilling, to *re-imagine* spatial narratives outside of hegemonic norms. Is it for the sake of narrative consistency, or to promote mass-market identification, that box office success means portraying places as homogenous and stereotypical? Whatever the reasons, my proposal is that these exclusions from representation will not be contained within the space of the imaginary but intersect with, and impose themselves on, the built environment.

What does it imply for the gentrified area of Notting Hill that the Caribbean and Portuguese communities who have deeply influenced that neighbourhood were left out of its cinematic representation? In the film the neighbourhood is white and the well known Notting Hill Carnival, once instigated as a reaction to racist tendencies, is not mentioned.

In the case of the catholic conservative “Pope’s city”, Cracow, there are even clearer traces of the “cinematic effects” on city life. Or how else can we understand that after decades of taboo, and a practising Jewish population estimated at about 150 people, there has been such a surge in “Jewish” cafés following on the box office success of *Schindler’s list*?

As an architect, these are crucial questions. Whose imagination are we materializing? And what are the social, cultural and gendered constructs inherent in these foundational narratives? Are we building stages for already performed stories?

Architectural theoretician Beatriz Colomina discusses some of these issues when looking at the relationship between modern architecture and photography. In her book *In Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*<sup>5</sup>, Colomina explores mass media as the site of architectural production. She points out that many of the major works that shaped the modernist canon were immaterial pieces. Mies van der Rohe’s Glass Skyscraper and Brick Country House were for example never built, while his main modernistic icon, the Barcelona Pavillion, was a temporary building that between 1929 and 1986 only existed in print.

*“The major currency in contemporary architecture is the image, the photograph not the building.”*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137.

Colomina's thoughts have their historical equivalence in Charles Rice's<sup>7</sup> research on the emergence of the bourgeois interiors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its image-based condition. Through Rice we can conclude that image-driven narratives influencing the built environment, hardly is something new.

In the video *Imagine a House* (2007) I explore cinematic storytelling as an architectural tool. Taking the 19<sup>th</sup> century mass mediated cult of domesticity and the separation of spheres (public-private, male-female, etc) as a starting point<sup>8</sup>, *Imagine a House* looks into the making of the modern home during the early days of British industrialisation. A story of Victorian domesticity is played out in the empty house on 195 Mare street, East London, where “fallen women” are trained in the art of homemaking and working class men are taught political consciousness.

The episodes housed in this building reflect questions of belonging and assimilation central to an area like the East End, since long the entrance for immigrants to London. As a refuge it offered women “a way back” to domestic life and female respectability, as a working men's club it encouraged transgression of the house and the male claiming of a political space beyond, while the future Vietnamese art centre (in the making) celebrates place-based identities of distant locations. In working with this video it became clear how many of the assumptions that inform residential building to this day have their ideological and culturally gendered roots in the Victorian concepts of privacy and respectability.

The Hackney Council Planning Department has done a survey where they state that the windows and the four stairs up to the entrance of 195 Mare street should be saved as cultural historic elements. I propose a total make-over: *Imagine a house* as a construction and an addition, where the stories told by each repetition transform the abandoned house. If we rid ourselves of the distinction between building and storytelling, *Imagine a House* presents an act of rebuilding. If the viewer can be moved, architecture is altered.

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<sup>7</sup> Rice, Charles. “Rethinking histories of the interior”, in *The Journal of Architecture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) Volume 9, Number 3, p. 275 – 287.

<sup>8</sup> James Curran, *Media and Power*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) p. 9.