World Capital

Felicity Hammond

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Barebyte

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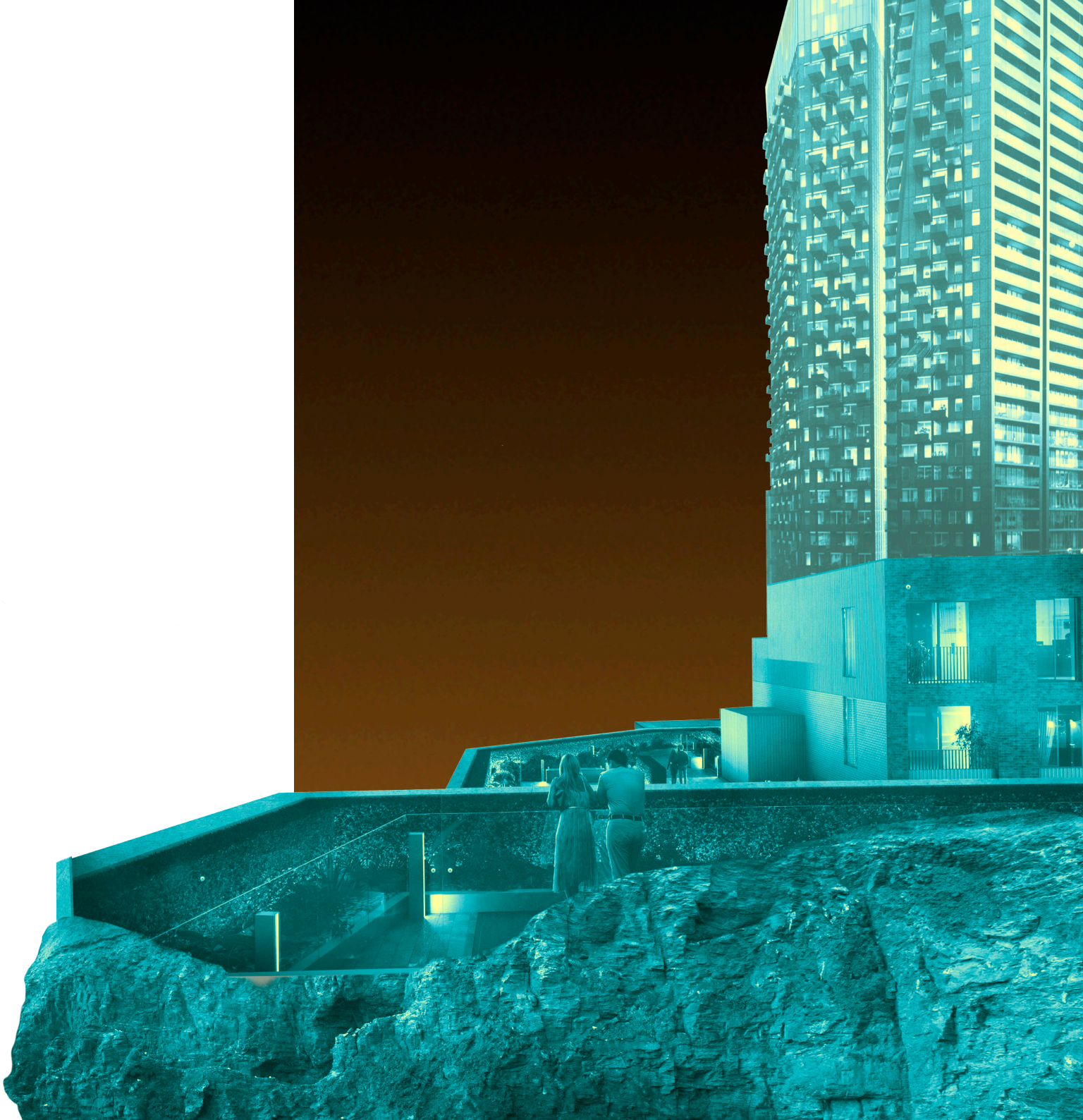
arebyte Gallery: Java House, 7 Botanic Square, London City Island, E14 0LG

Conversations about the homogenisation of the built environment have taken many forms. From Walter Benjamin's writings about the effect of capitalism on nineteenth century Paris, to Ian Nairn's scathing review of the growing ubiquity of town planning, the crisis surrounding urban identity has been and will continue to be widely contested. In *World Capital* – a new installation by Felicity Hammond - the conversation turns towards the way that digital technologies have influenced the global image of the city. Offering a commentary on the role that the computer generated architectural proposition plays in the increasing uniformity of the urban realm, the work outlines the ways in which the proliferation of the virtual world has contributed to urban indifference.

Combining images used to market contemporary housing alongside relics of the industrial past, the work collides local history with the global image that supersedes it. Re-imagining the Great Thames flood of 1928 which destroyed much of the site of the exhibition (now known as London City Island) *World Capital* recalls the area's industrial and troublesome past, propelling its history into the near future.

Images used to construct the set-like structure of this installation have been mined from online architectural image banks and photographs made both in the local area and in sites of urban regeneration across the globe. The fusion of these images creates *World Capital*; a global city with a reassuring familiarity.



In the 1955 edition of the Architectural Review, Ian Nairn predicted that by the end of the century, 'Southampton will look like the beginning of Carlisle; the parts in between will look like the end of Carlisle or the beginning of Southampton.'[1] He warned of the universal aesthetics of street furniture and new architecture, speculating that the whole land surface will soon become subject to widespread suburbanisation through the 'annihilation of the site, the steamrollering of all individuality of place to one uniform and mediocre pattern.'[2] Written over sixty years ago and focusing much of its attention on the hybridisation of the rural landscape with the urban, Nairn's concern may seem trite. However as large-scale building developments and regeneration projects surface across towns and cities, urban homogeny continues to materialise before us. It should be questioned where this proliferation of architectural uniformity comes from, particularly at a point where the regularity of architectural design isn't just mapped across the UK as Narin's article illustrates, but can now be traced between major cities across the globe. Nairn blames the erasure of locational individuality on the evolution of a power-equipped society, made possible through industrial and technological growth. It is therefore pertinent to question how the technological advancements that are embedded in the production of today's architectural representation might contribute to the global spread of urban homogony, and to what extent the local is really 'erased.' Nairn speculates that the city will continue to spread, as it no longer requires the urban centre;

> ***the old centres of gravity have been deprived of their pull at both ends and in the middle; no longer geographically tied, industries which once muscled in on the urban set-up are getting out of the mess they did so much to make, and making a new mess outside.***[3]

This explanation starts to identify why we encounter the same restaurants, hotels, so-called 'luxury' apartments, 'box-park' retail units and gated communities across multiple towns and cities globally. Even small, suburban towns have developments which market themselves as 'urban living,' using the same rhetoric and imagery as a housing development might have in the centre of New York. As travel becomes increasingly accessible, and we become more familiar with the rest of the world through our global networks, the built environment begins to take on a uniform design. Turning towards the imposition of growing networks and technologies, Marc Augé too speaks of the crisis of urban and suburban homogeny in his writing on *Non-Places*, proposing that our 'growing familiarity with the world-city and the city-world… make contrasts between town and country or urban and non-urban increasingly meaningless'.[4]

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[1] Ian Nairn, *Outrage:* The Architectural Review VOL 117, No 702, (1955) 365
[2] Ibid.,
[3] Ibid.,
[4] Marc Auge, 2nd ed. *Non-Places* (London and New York, Verso 1995) xv

Although it may be suggested that computer generated architectural propositions contribute to the growing homogeny of the built environment, the proliferation of global travel, the internet and television - which Augé proposes has a responsibility towards the rise of the global image over the local - must not be ignored. However, given the important role that CGIs play in the production of new architecture, it has become essential to interrogate the part that they play in the global design of towns and cities. Rose, Degen and Melhuish's important paper, *'The Real Modernity that is Here: Understanding the Role of Digital Visualisations in the Production of a New Urban Imaginary at Msheireb Downtown, Doha'* provides a case study which traces the complex procedures leading up to a large-scale urban development project in Qatar. Their paper argues that the 'mutability' of the computer generated architectural proposition, i.e. the way that they can be circulated across global networks of stakeholders in the project, including amongst visualisers and architects, and edited through a series of transnational conversations, plays a key role in the production of what Rose, Degen and Melhuish term as a 'post-colonial urban aesthetic.' This aesthetic they argue, is one which moves away from purely Western-influenced design, creating an 'inter-referenced urban vision, pulling together a palimpsest of cultural and architectural references.'[5] New architecture – in particular the Msheireb development which their research uses as its case study – reaches a post-colonial aesthetic as a result of the various processes that the computer generated image (by its very nature) allows for: repeated revisions and re-edits made possible through the international sharing of the image between designers based both in the UK and in Doha, and across a client team made up of American, British, Australian, Egyptian and Lebanese designers, directors and managers. This process, as Rose, Degen and Melhuish discover, is described as the 'doughnut model of design production, in which the traditional authority of the architect at the centre of the ring is being displaced by the digitally-enabled participation of other producers and receivers.'[6] A hybrid design is created, bringing together influences from across the globe, in many cases from designers and visualisers who have never physically been to the site where the development will be built.

CGIs were central to the project's design and development across the network of actors, creating a virtual urban imaginary in which to explore a Qatari-inspired, yet hybrid, character mission in counterpoint to past patterns of development, which we describe as a post-colonial urban aesthetic.[7]

[5] Gillian Rose, Monica Degen, Clare Melhuish, *The Real Modernity that is Here: Understanding the Role of Digital Visualisations in the Production of a New Urban Imaginary at Msheireb Downtown, Doha,* City and Society Vol. 28 Issue 2, (2016) 227
[6] Ibid., 236
[7] Ibid., 234

It could therefore be suggested that the post-colonial urban aesthetic - created through the modifiable nature of the CGI - plays an important role in the production of a growing, global urban homogeny. Through a transnational, digitalised design process – a process that takes place through the screen rather than through embodied experience, a distancing occurs. However, it should be acknowledged that architectural design became 'international' long before the introduction of computer aided design,[8] and so we cannot speculate that the transnational nature of the architectural design process is the only contributing factor in contemporary architecture's global identity. Rather, we might try to understand what is unique to digital tools that weren't present in traditional forms of architectural design; at what point does this distancing occur? In architectural design programmes such as AutoCAD, Rhino 3D or SketchUp, there are material 'packages' which can be used to decorate a surface. For example, once the exterior walls of a building have been digitally built, they can be clad in a downloadable surface; one which mimics brick, polycarbonate, or concrete. These methods are commonplace in architectural design, creating a language that can be recognised all over the world. In their study, Rose, Degen and Melhuish discover that architects and visualisers are creating an image of a future development which is both 'place-specific and transcendent' which must 'speak to a local and international audience.'[9] It might be argued that the 'international' in cases such as this is less the amalgamation of different cultures, but more the globally recognised ubiquity of the surfaces made available through computer aided design software; one which has a reassuring familiarity. As a result of this, the 'local' doesn't speak to the experience of people living in the vicinity of the site, but rather to an *ideal*, globalised local; one which is inter-laced with cosmopolitan ideals, including only that which fits with the global view of the city. The local isn't erased through this image, but is rather re-defined. The CGI therefore plays an important role in the production of the identity of the city, 'affirm[ing] the status of the elite while excluding other forms of cultural identity and hybridity which do not fit the desired re-imaging of the city'.[10]

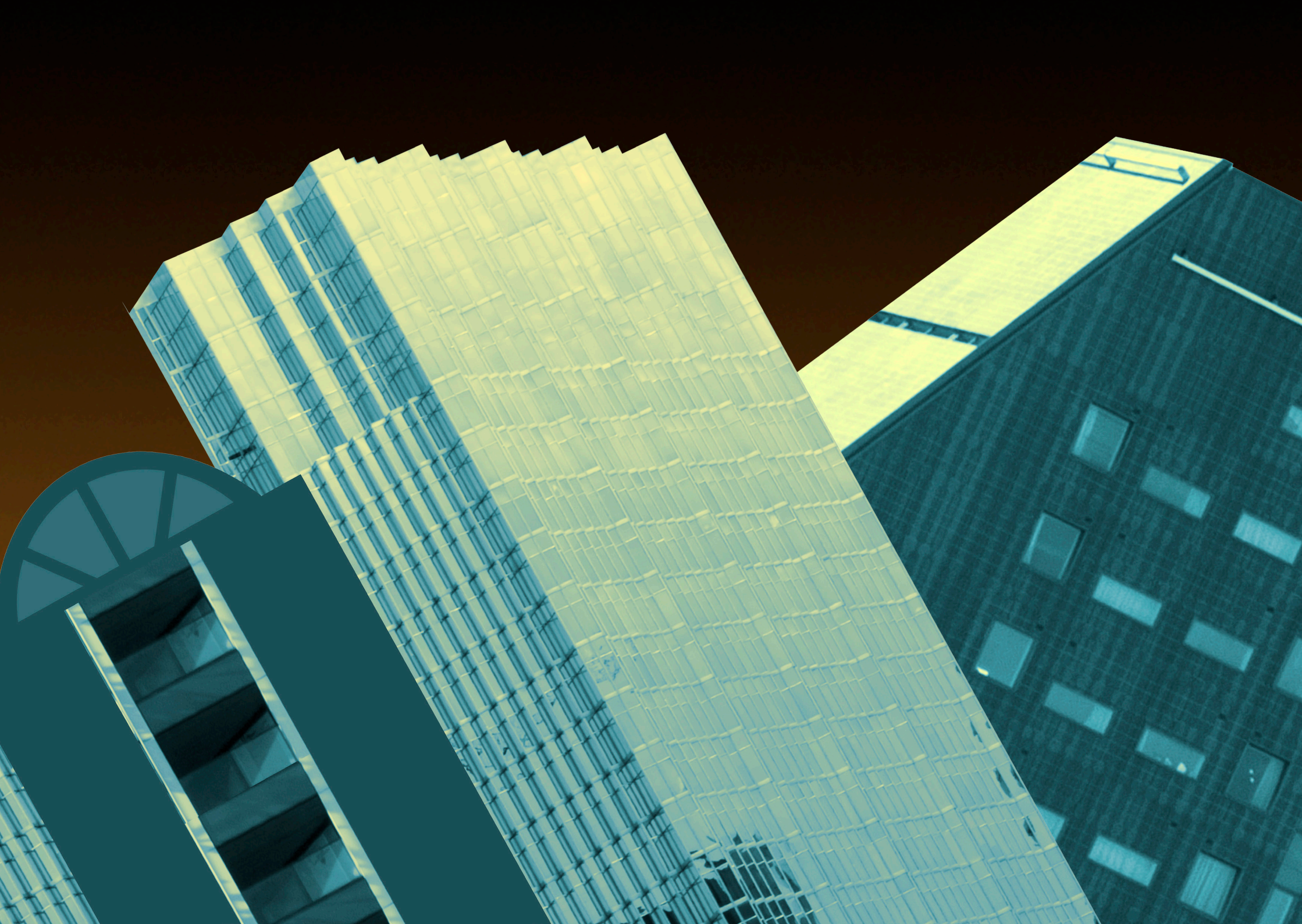
> ***digital architectural visualisations…have the capacity to delineate a "third space" where a hybrid mix of cultural inter-references can be combined and explored in a virtual and immersive digital imaginary, before being materialised in built form.[11]***

The very fact that these decisions are being made within digital space, long before the foundations for the site have even been produced, demonstrates the major role that the CGI plays in the re-imagination of the built environment. Such importance is placed on the digital imagination of future space as a result of their function as a marketing tool; as one architect working on the Msheireb development pointed out to Rose, Degen and Melhuish, "[the CGI] distracts us from the things we really have in our control…The tools aren't…about spatial investigation…they're about producing a sexy image."[12] Through their digital tool set, visualisers erase any 'undesirable' narratives associated with the site of the development, choosing to include motifs that allude to cosmopolitanism, furthering the appeal of the image to investors. These prophetic images are viewed online and in brochures when targeted towards those who might be able to finance the project, however they also have a direct relationship with the site through their placement on site hoardings and billboards that mark the area to be developed. The image is fused to the site; not only through its display, but through its ability to make the site that it imagines materialise.

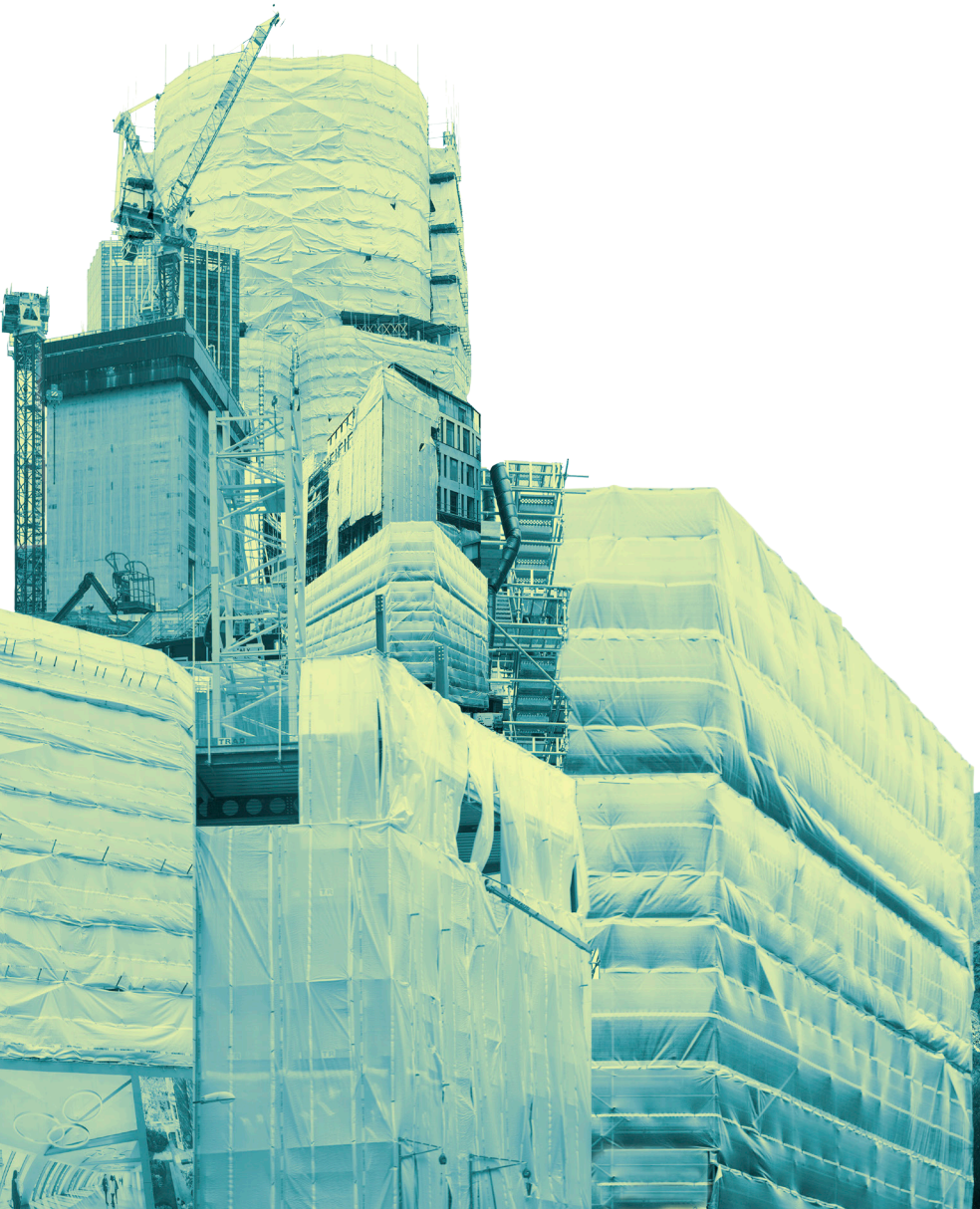
The complex indexical relationship that CGIs have with the sites they imagine is explored in Adam Brown's, *The Spinning Index: architectural images and the reversal of causality*. Brown speculates that the indexical relationship between image and object might be reversed when considering the digital representation of architecture that is yet to be built. Quoting Rosalind Krauss - 'If indexes are the trace of a cause, and the cause is the thing to which they refer,' he theorises that speculative architectural images *reverse* the direction of the causal sequence.[13] When computer generated architectural propositions are created, their referent is yet to exist. The function of such images is to convince investors to finance the build, and it is thus the image that causes the object to come into existence. However, it could be argued that this causal reverse in relation to architecture has always been true. Before working with digital tools, architectural drawings and models would have been used (and to some extent still are) to both market and plan for new architecture.

[8] 'The International Style' was an important style of architecture born out of the 1920s, acknowledged by MoMA in their 1932 exhibition, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition.*
[9] Gillian Rose, Monica Degen Clare Melhuish, *The Real Modernity that is Here: Understanding the Role of Digital Visualisations in the Production of a New Urban Imaginary at Msheireb Downtown, Doha,* City and Society Vol. 28 Issue 2, (2016) 240
[10] Ibid.,239
[11] Ibid.,231

[12] Ibid., 240
[13] Adam Brown, *The Spinning Index: architectural images and the reversal of causality*, in The Verge of the Image; Critical Introduction to New Photography, ed. Daniel Rubinstein, Andy Fisher, Johnny Golding, (Birmingham, ARTicle Press, 2013) 239



The difference however is that if, as Rose Degen and Melhuish discovered, the visualiser does not pay attention to actual spatial concerns, but rather concentrates on the perceived desires of the investor and the potential for creating a hybrid, cosmopolitan environment, the physical site will materialise the consequences; the global image made available through the international use of the same softwares and packages will manifest in physical space. The site becomes the index; the trace of the image that precedes it, and the image becomes the apparatus; the machine that produces contemporary architecture.



This reversal in causality alludes to the notion that the actual built environment is fragmentary, and as such we might liken the material of the city to the photographic image; that which is incomplete; an utterance produced from the *image* (the architectural proposition.) If the CGI is produced in dislocation from the site, i.e by visualisers whose concern is based within the speculative digital representation, and it is this image which causes the site to come into being, then the built environment itself will materialise as fragmentary representations of the image; each of them devoid of meaning as a result of their de-contextualisation from the actual site. This might begin to explain the crisis in contemporary architecture that Marc Auge proposes indicates a planetary society which is yet to materialise:[14]

> ***'[Contemporary architecture] suggests the brilliant fragments of a splintered utopia in which we would like to believe, a society of transparency. It sketches something that is the order of utopia and at the same time the order of allusion by drawing in broad strokes a time that has not yet arrived, that perhaps never will arrive, but that remains in the realm of the possible. In this sense, large scale contemporary urban architecture reproduces in reverse the relation with time expressed by the spectacle of ruins.'***[15]

It could be proposed that the fragments of the built environment embody the speculative qualities of the computer generated architectural proposition. The ubiquitous digital imagery that visualisers use in their depictions of future space across the globe translates into physical form, bringing with them their non-locational properties. The same objects and architectural features will materialise in developments across Doha and London, masquerading as cosmopolitan but existing as a result of the limitations and global use of the digital programmes that brought them into the physical world. The 'third space' created through the potential of the digital realm that Rose, Degen and Melhuish speak of manifests in physical space as objects that appear to still be in the process of becoming. The proposed new buildings that create entirely new neighborhoods in towns and cities don't yet have a history, and so the ruin that is entrenched within the architectural proposition is imbedded in its future. The image is stuck in an eternal present, its endless immateriality surrendering to the city.

[14] Marc Auge, 2nd ed. *Non-Places* (London and New York, Verso 1995) xvii
[15] Ibid.,

Felicity Hammond

Felicity Hammond (b 1988) is an artist and educator based in London. She is currently undertaking TECHNE funded research in the Contemporary Art Research Centre at Kingston University on digital representations of the built environment and their relationship with site.

Recent exhibitions include *Arcades*, Contact Gallery, Toronto (2018) *Rendered Cities*, Apex Art, New York (2018) *Work In Process*, The Photographers' Gallery, London (2018) and *Post Fail*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland (2017). Awards include Elephant x Griffin Art Prize (shortlisted, 2018) Foam Talent (2016) British Journal of Photography IPA award (winner 2016) Catlin Art Prize (2015) and Saatchi New Sensations (2014). Her recent publication, *Property* has been published by SPBH Editions (2019). She is currently artist in residence at the University of Bath.

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arebyte Gallery

Following in the long tradition of artists experimentation with new technologies, arebyte Gallery has led a pioneering art programme in its London gallery since 2013, to much acclaim.

From web-based work to multimedia installations including Virtual/Augmented Reality, Artificial Intelligence, Computer Generated Images and 3D printing, the gallery commissions multiple voices in digital culture from emerging, as well as more established artists, across the UK and internationally.

At the forefront of today's digital art scene, arebyte has been listed as one of the seven best new galleries in London by Time Out (2018) and curated the UK's first Yami-Ichi at Tate Modern (2016).

Its art programme has been praised in major press including BBC, Sky News, Fox News, The Guardian and VICE.

www.arebyte.com

2019 Programme:

home

arebyte Gallery's 2019 programme takes the idea of home as its point of departure. Continuing on from last year's theme Islands, the programme this year extends towards the peripheries and returns to the centre, becoming more personal and abstract in the process.

The programme reflects upon ideas of redevelopment of urban spaces and otherworldly sites of discovery, the disconnection of marginalised bodies, new ecologies for future ways of living and looking beyond locality as a means of integrating change, as well as resisting the homogeneous nature of corporate systems and challenging ideas surrounding labour, leisure and existence.

Home is relational, emotive, nostalgic and warm, but equally can be impossible, scary and unstable. The artists in the programme disrupt and confront the limits of what these situations mean in our present, our future and our digital homes.

Thinking about recent western-global political and social upheavals, the artists embrace and subvert technology as their means of interrogation, and posit new ideas to imagine our collective, prospective futures. Within the exhibitions, spaces of home are unpacked as spaces of transition - of gender, religion, futures and reality - but also spaces of resistance and power.

With an increased use of sharing economies, and the rising number of people working from home, our relationship towards the objects we spend time with have changed and as a consequence so too have the communities and lifestyles we operate within. The home itself becomes a consumer entry point for a vast new economic territory of invisible infrastructure of big data, with the monopolising of private activities to benefit corporate advancement as the overbearing approach. The rules governing the space of everyday life now exist through this colonising of privacy.

Through this questioning of corporate systems, political ideologies, industry and freedom, the programme ruminates on fact and fiction, on histories and futures, and on belonging and alienation. The home becomes a metaphor for thinking about the future of our societal advancement, economic drives and consumer-led lifestyles. Home is a way to speculate on fictions for prospective ways of alternative living and thus acts a framework for enabling and empowering communities both in real life and online.

2019
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