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Two themes flow through this issue. Leading is the elusive notion of the future, and attitudes toward it in the work of place designers. Woven into this is a forcefully emerging set of issues which has come to be associated with the future in something of a reflex. The means of message exchange and information handling are undergoing dramatic changes, which in turn transform fundamental concepts of place and time. Advanced information technologies are rapidly coming to be seen both as objects of sober explorations and as an infrastructure for the promised land. The attaining and retaining of knowledge is an archetypal human endeavor, and buildings and icons throughout the ages and across cultures attest to that. It is no wonder that the information machine is being pursued so hotly today.

Much of our built environment expresses an ambiguity of status and aspiration, of current condition and hope, or fear. This ambiguity reverberates in the persistent conflict between tradition and innovation. Designing and planning are activities which are by definition mindful of what is to come, as much as they are rooted in what has been or still is. To conceive of built settings is to establish an imaginary vector along the trajectory of time, and to condense experience and aspiration into a physical abstraction. Visionary plans and utopian concepts actually tell us more about our current state than about the future. "Desires are already memories," Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan in Calvino’s Invisible Cities.

To sort our present attitudes toward the future, signified in built and imagined urban settings, is a tricky task. The future as focus of an attentive gaze is something of a contradiction in terms since our concept of it is itself a product, a phenomenon, of a shifting here and now. Collected here are snapshots and fragments, a kind of contemporary archaeology of tomorrow’s places envisioned today, and a pocket mirror of advanced technology’s entry into the built environment. The message of the assembled pieces remains implied. But it is tempting to risk some general observations.

The subjects presented here stem largely from three regions of the advanced industrial world—the United States, Western Europe, and Japan—and some cultural distinctions in their future attitudes can be made. By and large, the Japanese initiatives show an optimistic readiness to embrace the future with dramatic moves. Japan is leading a growing group of countries spanning from West Germany to Australia in which "informatization" has begun to supplement or replace older urban development paradigms. Here, a veritable avalanche of initiatives seeks to endow technology-driven infrastructure and consumer market development with a social vision. In the United States the tone tends to be more skeptical, even suspicious, about such visions, certainly the ones aspiring to be of urban scale.

Practitioners here have come to collectively concur with the primacy of local, pragmatic, and incremental responses. In residential buildings, ongoing shifts in technology and society at large are reflected in three new phenomena: the innovative house presented as "intelligent" appliance in a conventional closedly, as neoconstructivist statement for the new urban professional, or as result of a demographically conscious building program. Recent Western European projects exemplify a continued belief in urbanism, the city-bound rite of inaugurating the future. Here, we find re-visions and minor revolutions amid dearly held planning conventions, the reliable sources of both disenchantment and delight.

Contemporary architectural ideology, that volatile system of beliefs about the values, goals, and means of the profession, is shattered into a myriad of little creeds. The most successful of architectural careers seem driven into show business, pragmatism, or insider cultural commentary. On the surface, larger dogmas seem long gone, yet some have persisted or quietly taken over. For one, technology has survived as a main theme of utopia, and with it evolution, the "wired city" of the 1960s and the "advanced information society" of the 1980s emerge as prime paradigms, for the chorus of critics and those eagerly greeting the electronic revolution alike. This is in keeping with our society’s prevailing attitude toward the future, where
technological innovation has come
to be understood as synonymous with social progress. The public
search for the electronic El Dorado,
largely called off in the United
States due to lack of viewer
response and sponsor patience, is
fully under way in Japan, Great
Britain, France, West Germany, and
others have dispatched smaller
expeditions as well.

Meanwhile, industry and academia are
busy constructing and recon-
structing new “technopolitan” areas
and networks, high-technology
innovation and production modes
targeting rapidly evolving markets. The
Silicon Valleys and Route 128s
of this world have been excluded
from this survey and saved for
future form investigations.

With notable exceptions, architec-
tural representation has found it
difficult to find new means for
expressing new concepts of informa-
tion management. Intrinsically
evasive and ephemeral, the complex
questions of the information age are
being responded to with iconic
curtain walls and other, more
intricate forms of reinterpretation.

Substance, program, and the layered
meanings of contemporary society are
in certain representation-
minded quarters expressed by the
magnificent elegance of vintage
machines. Has the microchip
brought about the bankruptcy of
style?

To some, the natural environment and
the built environment, at once
manifesto and equipment for the
future, have been replaced by an
afterimage of what was on the
picture tube one-thirtieth of a
second ago. The conventional
notions of the public and the
private, and of inside and outside,
appear to be rendered meaningless.
The physical boundaries of the
“traditional” place are being
perforated, dissolved, and replaced
by audiovisual protocols and
advanced technology’s regime, as
manifested in new communication
and surveillance systems, a
development long ago introduced
by telephone and -vision. The
experience of metropolitan public
plazas attests to the convergence of
built and transmitted media.

The computer-aided information
spaces of New York’s Times Square
and Tokyo’s Shibuya station area
have transformed their built
environments into message supports,
image screens, and echo chambers.

Several blurs distort our notions of
architectural space as a source of
“sense of place,” a condition
decreed by Vitruvius and other critics
of media abstraction as degenera-
tive. The blurring of the human
presence is brought about by the
ability to be in several places at
once via telecommunications,
and to adopt more life-styles than
one, through surrogate sampling
of transmitted programs, or
via intercontinental travel. The
externalization of memory is
perfected by the absorption,
retention, and dissemination of
knowledge by the growing
collective of machine data banks,
at once ubiquitous and intangible.
The blurring of time as structured
by planetary mechanics is brought
about by the 24-hour continuity
of automated functions. Cinema
and television have irreversibly
altered the nature of spatial
experience, a trend amplified in
electronically supported techniques.
We have learned the aesthetic of
the special effect and come to read all
extraordinary places in this way.

Hollywood’s stage settings and
Epcot’s Future World are ambiguous
hybrids of a sense of lasting
presence and fleeting effect. Modern
tourism is another symptom of this
conditioning, where both the
picturesque and the stomach-
wrenching tillate the detached.
And the future itself is being
reassembled as a persiflage of the
present in the largely fatalistic or
violent tradition of science-fiction
cinema.

Architecture, imagistic and media-
conscious within its representa-
tional conventions, faces renewed
questions about its profoundness.
These questions pose a multiple
challenge related to the use of
information in the broadest sense.
Buildings are at once message
carriers and faculties of information
exchange. They are artifacts of
human intelligence and more
specifically manifestations of
programmed societal commitment.
Information about the direction of
society and our cities is available,
ready to be assimilated into relevant
concepts. There is a role for
utopias—not for ready answers,
but to generate plausible and
accessible questions. This is less a
challenge of information access
than of intelligent design advocacy.
Serious research and experiments
must be launched, aimed at learning about the character of the new media, their impact on behavior, and their opportunities for reducing isolation and supporting empowerment. Information systems have become an environmental dimension, and the issues they raise may help reestablish place and societal direction in responsible ways. Visionary concepts of cultural and political relevance are needed to synthesize data and commitment, communicate conditions, and propose integrated means of change. Our physical environment must remain both reliable source and locus of our sense of reality.

Notes
1 Leo Marx points out that there are two traditions of thought about technology and progress in the United States. One can be traced to Thomas Jefferson, who held that technological innovation must be subordinated to social ideals. The other, somewhat younger yet clearly dominant today, originates with Daniel Webster and others, who expressed the idea that technological innovation automatically spells social progress. (Leo Marx, "Does Improved Technology Mean Progress?", Technology Review (Cambridge: MIT, January 1987).
3 Raymond W. Smilor et al., Creating the Technopolis (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1988).