

Architectural Fictions: Renderings, Rats, and the Virtualization of Urban Space

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Abstract: I first encountered the images in my neighborhood in North Brooklyn, on billboards posted next to construction sites or in the windows of pop-up realty storefronts. This imagery is ubiquitous in “up-and-coming” urban neighborhoods. Empty lots are digitally metamorphosed into gleaming glass condos and retail arcades. These virtual constructs are often populated by uncanny figures, pixelated people engaged in a range of activities (talking on cell phones, carting small children or armloads of shopping bags). The pictured environments are eerily sterile, presenting a stark model of the future “developed” city, and of its inhabitants. I’ve found myself haunted by these visualizations, in particular by their deployment of these tiny “cut out people.” What follows is my attempt to think through the embodied implications of this disembodied aesthetic, one that has connections to digital cinema and video game technology, but that extends this imagery into often under-theorized realms.

Keywords: architecture, rats, Brooklyn, urban development, rendering



Figure 1. 184 Kent website (JHM Development, SLCE Architects, LLC, <http://rentonkent.com>, accessed February 11, 2011).

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Architectural representations draw on digital media to map new structures at the same time that they imagine the new social contexts into which they will be built. While much can be said about the way digital rendering practices have transformed our relationships to physical buildings, my focus in this study will be on the wider impact of this imagery on the neighborhoods in which the depicted projects take shape. The political significance of

such imagery is heightened in situations where large swaths of a community are slated for redevelopment.



Figures 2–3. Domino Sugar Factory Development Proposal (SHoP Architects and James Corner Field Operations, March 2013).

Thus the question of rendering examined here will encompass the process by which structures and environments are visualized using digital imaging technology, and, from a broader theoretical perspective, the ways in which virtual projections are rendered concrete, born out in the corpus of the city. I will map these relations via an illustrated, episodic case study based in one Brooklyn neighborhood: my own, Williamsburg-Greenpoint and the North Brooklyn waterfront development project.

In 2004 the City of New York approved a massive rezoning project along the East River waterfront in the Greenpoint and Williamsburg neighborhoods in North Brooklyn. The plan extends from the Newtown Creek in Greenpoint (the site of a massive oil silo leak and a designated superfund site) along West Street and Kent Avenue for approximately two miles toward the base of the Williamsburg Bridge.

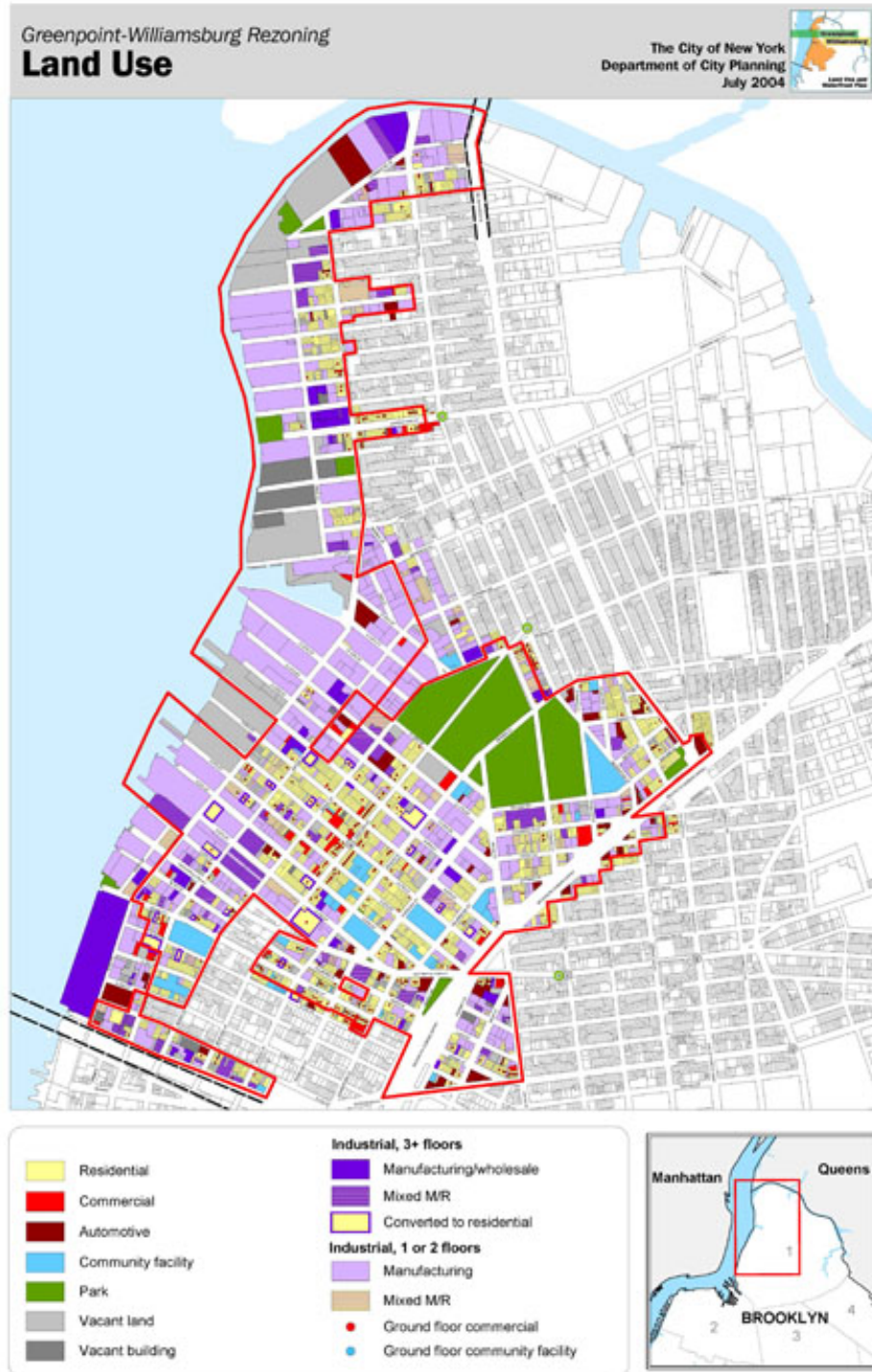


Figure 4. Existing Land Use Map, Greenpoint-Williamsburg Rezoning (New York City Department of City Planning 2004).

While both of these neighborhoods have witnessed accelerated gentrification within the past decade, the waterfront region had retained ties to its industrial roots. Descriptions of the waterfront in Brooklyn tend toward the language of ruins, even in areas that maintain active industrial and maritime activities, a trend that has been amplified in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. Prior to this project, the banks of the East River in North Brooklyn were depicted as abandoned, blighted, an industrial wasteland with some of the most spectacular views of Manhattan in the borough. The waterfront was touted as an untapped virtuality, property with nearly incalculable commercial value. And while there were large tracts of land abandoned by their former industrial owners, the waterfront was, and is, far more vibrant and active than this rhetoric would imply. A large number of manufacturing businesses remain active in the area, particularly in east Greenpoint, including a cluster of marble cutters, ironworks, and construction-related industries, several large sound stages, and the Newtown Creek Pollution Control Plant.¹ The lingering architectural ruins on other lots have provided a venue for a number of other, less fully sanctioned communities: squatters, artists, and gleaners searching for abandoned scrap metals frequent some of the larger complexes. Dilapidated structures provide havens for drug users, and an informally organized skate park was built and operated in another.

For rather obvious reasons, many of these practices are not particularly popular with city planners, nor are the aesthetics of ruins of great interest to most residential developers. And conflicts with the established surrounding communities have been substantial. Heated debates have arisen over the scale of the proposed rezoning project, the pressures these developments would place upon already overtaxed transportation, sewer, and emergency systems, the percentage of units reserved for low- and working-class residents, and the speed with which promised green spaces are being developed. These unresolved conflicts have manifested themselves, visually, in the marketing materials for new residential developments along the waterfront, which often toe a fine line between promoting a hermetic, hyper-sanitized and futuristic living environment, and celebrating Williamsburg's gritty past and artist-hipster cachet. The website for the residential property 184 Kent, for example, highlights the building's "industrial heritage" as the Cass Gilbert designed Austin, Nichols, and Company building. The splash page for the site opens with an animated hand spray-painting the building's logo, and includes a gallery of images illustrating "Billy-Burg's" status as both "a lifestyle and a vibe." The history page describes the transformation of the property in the early 1990s: "184 Kent morphed into an adopted home for artistic types who pioneered the area, and was the epicenter of the still-evolving Williamsburg's bohemian party scene."² The site neglects to mention that one of the most notorious parties in the building occurred in 2006, on the last night of residency for tenants before they were evicted to make way for the renovations. A photograph from the party posted on Flickr by urban_data shows scores of "artistic types" spilling out onto the street. "It got out of control and was shut down by the NYPD," the

photographer reminisced, “I used to live on the 2nd floor.”³ In short, however ephemeral they might be, digital renderings perform a critical role in remythologizing and repackaging the contradictions of the newly configured waterfront.



Figure 5. Jared Swafford, 475 Kent Avenue, Brooklyn, Dec. 15, 2007 (reprinted courtesy of the photographer, www.swingfromtherafters.com).



Figure 6. Edge, Williamsburg (<http://www.williamsburgedge.com/neighborhood>, accessed April 10, 2013).



Figure 7. 184 Kent website (JHM Development, SLCE Architects, LLC, <http://rentonkent.com>, accessed April 10, 2013).



Figure 8. Urban_data, 184 Kent Avenue, Brooklyn, April 14, 2006 (http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/130358969/, accessed April 6, 2013).

The Rats Surface

But idealized projections cannot always easily cohabit with the viscera of the grounded world. As one moves inland from the East River waterfront, the architectural language of new development becomes far more pedestrian. The endless rows of vinyl-sided two- and three-family frame houses that predominate in Greenpoint are interspersed with an endless parade of utilitarian four-to-six story condominiums. The “Belvedere” franchise of low-rise condos, as just one of the more prevalent examples, has over sixty properties in the neighborhood (at least according to the Roman numerals that adorn each new addition to the series).

In 2010, one block away from my apartment in one of the older frame houses, several buildings were demolished and a foundation was dug for a new condo unit. Our block was suddenly overrun with rats, who fled from the construction site and built a system of underground burrows in an empty lot next to the Belvedere 1. They soon ventured into the surrounding yards, digging tunnels under fences, chewing holes through gates, discovering cracks in foundations, reproducing, and rerouting their networks within their changed environment. Intermixed with the plentiful Norway rat population, we began to see white rats darting along the back wall; I photographed one that got cornered in the back of our garden, and another white rat was found dead on a neighbor’s back steps. Conversations on the block soon turned to paranoid speculation about escaped (or worse yet, released) lab rats, and the potential for *Rats of NIMH*-style super-breeds.



Figure 9. Belvederes I, X, XII, XVI and XVIII, XX, XXVIII, XXXVIII, XL, XLIV, Greenpoint, Brooklyn (photographs by the author, 2011).



**“I’ve had it with these
M*%\$# - F*%\$#ing
RATS
on my
M*%\$# - F*%\$#ing
block!!!**

**GREENPOINT residents— enough is enough. Time to
TAKE A STAND AGAINST THE RATS!**

Rats on your block? WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Call 311** to place a request for an inspection. If your landlord refuses to deal with a rat situation on your property, file a complaint. Keep calling to follow up. Encourage your neighbors to file complaints.
- **Contact our community board** to complain about the problem: 718- 389-0009, www.cb1brooklyn.org
- Attend our next community board meeting: Sept. 15th, 211 Ainslie Street, 6:30pm
- **CLEAN UP YOUR PROPERTY.** Keep garbage in sealed containers. Cut down high weeds and keep bushes pruned. Remove debris or other materials that might shelter nests. Pick up after your pets, and don’t leave pet food outside. Pick up rotting fruits or vegetables from your garden or trees.
- **Look** for droppings or other signs of rat activity on your property. Please be aware that rats can build burrows **UNDERGROUND** and run in the alleys between yards.
- Bearing in mind the safety of children and pets, **set out traps or bait** to get rid of rats around your building or yard. Look for covered bait stations that won’t harm curious cats or dogs. We have had success with an electric “Rat Zapper” that is poison and snap free (www.ratzapper.com, available on Amazon).
- **Talk to your neighbors** or to local businesses that need to clean up their property. If they refuse to rectify the situation, file a report with 311.

Figure 10. Poster created and distributed by the author in 2010.

My own practices of habitation were entirely upended—our much-coveted garden was suddenly revealed as porous, under siege by a decentralized, semi-visible set of bodies I could not fully capture or control. My corporeal activities were now linked to those of my new neighbors; I had to search for points of entry to block their movements, I tiptoed into the yard each morning with a rush of dread and adrenaline to check my electronic “rat

zapper,” and I grew desensitized to the sad and brutal chore of disposing of rat carcasses. Over the course of three months, I killed thirty-six rats in my garden, and spoke to three neighbors who executed similar numbers of animals, each, in their yards.⁴ I learned how rat burrows contain entrances and exits, I learned to spot the greasy trail of their foraging paths along brick walls, I could even pick up their scent as I scoured for burrows under my hydrangea bushes. I became a neighborhood rat vigilante, newly attuned to the politics of my local community board, to the shoddy construction of the basement garbage rooms in the Belvedere floor plans, and to the highly sensitive, utterly idiosyncratic social politics of our block. And the rats carried on, content to work around us.

Architectural Renderings and Unreal Estate

Architectural renderings have traditionally served the purpose of providing a two-dimensional representation of a planned project, depicting a building, for example, as it would appear when viewed from a particular position. They translate the coded and specialized representational tools used by planners into an accessible, immediate, and idealized projection of a conceptual structure within its environment. Architectural historian Robin Evans has written about the peculiar relationship architects have with their drawings, which serve as “intervening mediums” between the designers and “the object of their thought,” the end product of their work (Evans 1997:156). The experience of the architect, then, unlike that of the traditional painter or sculptor, is one of a “displacement of effort and an indirectness of access” (Evans 1997:156). Yet the architect’s drawing contains a kind of virtual power that inverts the classical relationship between reality and representation; “drawing in architecture is not done after nature,” he writes, “but prior to construction; it is not so much produced by reflection on the reality outside the drawing as productive of a reality that will end up outside the drawing” (Evans 1997:165). This “unacknowledged generative power,” he argues, results in a situation where “drawing’s hegemony over the architectural object has never really been challenged” (Evans 1997:156). The architectural rendering imposes itself upon the structure it imagines into being.

For Evans, the architectural drawing can tap into a more innovative modality when it strives less to represent a predetermined future, and functions more like a diagram, or map, or machine, one that the designer sets into motion, but that she or he cannot fully control. Patterns might be set forth in such drawings, but they are difficult to predict, and the resulting constructions may not demonstrate direct visual fidelity to the image of the rendering. This, Evans writes, is “architectural drawing in a new mode, more abstract in appearance, more penetrating in effect, capable of a more unsettling, less predictable interaction with the conventional inventory of forms of which monumental buildings are

future with the certainty of viability—a project that seems grounded and capable of being fully realized.



Figure 13. Amenities map featuring “virtual golf.” Edge, Williamsburg (<http://www.williamsburgedge.com/>, accessed April 10, 2013).

There is another aspect of virtuality to consider here. The vast majority of contemporary real estate transactions take place in the ether, to the point that the buildings themselves can feel like afterthoughts. Developers round up investors, who seek quick returns via off-plan sales to buyers, recruited through virtual walkthroughs, who purchase mortgages from banks who bundle and sell their loans to speculative investors. Purchasers can then flip their condos before ever setting foot inside. And when buildings sell out, developers sell the maintenance of the properties to outside management companies. So much of what is being sold in the high-stakes shell game of residential real estate is the idea of desirability, an idea that is becoming more essentially virtual, and more rooted in its exchange value, than ever before.

Virtual Cohabitation and Self-Rendering

Aesthetically and technologically, this peculiar and somewhat stunted relationship between the virtual and the actual is built into the creation of architectural imagery. As Sophie Houdart has noted, the creation of a digital architectural drawing involves a two-stage process: there is, first, an act of homogenization or de-essentialization, whereby the base, structural elements of an entity are distilled into a linear model or frame, using a drafting application such as AutoCAD. What architects call “rendering” involves the application of textures and colors to that frame, combining graphics, photographic

elements, and stock imagery to make the overall environment read as “real.” Photographs taken at actual sites are layered behind building mockups, and flora and fauna are added, often from stock databases or clipped from the internet. Textures are mapped, scale is adjusted, and color is matched such that disparate layers can “cohabitate” (Houdart 2008:55).

There is thus stripping away and a building back up of these elements we associate with material reality (Houdart 2008:53). And in the process of rendering, those “real” elements that supplement the framework are reduced to a kind of generic absolute.

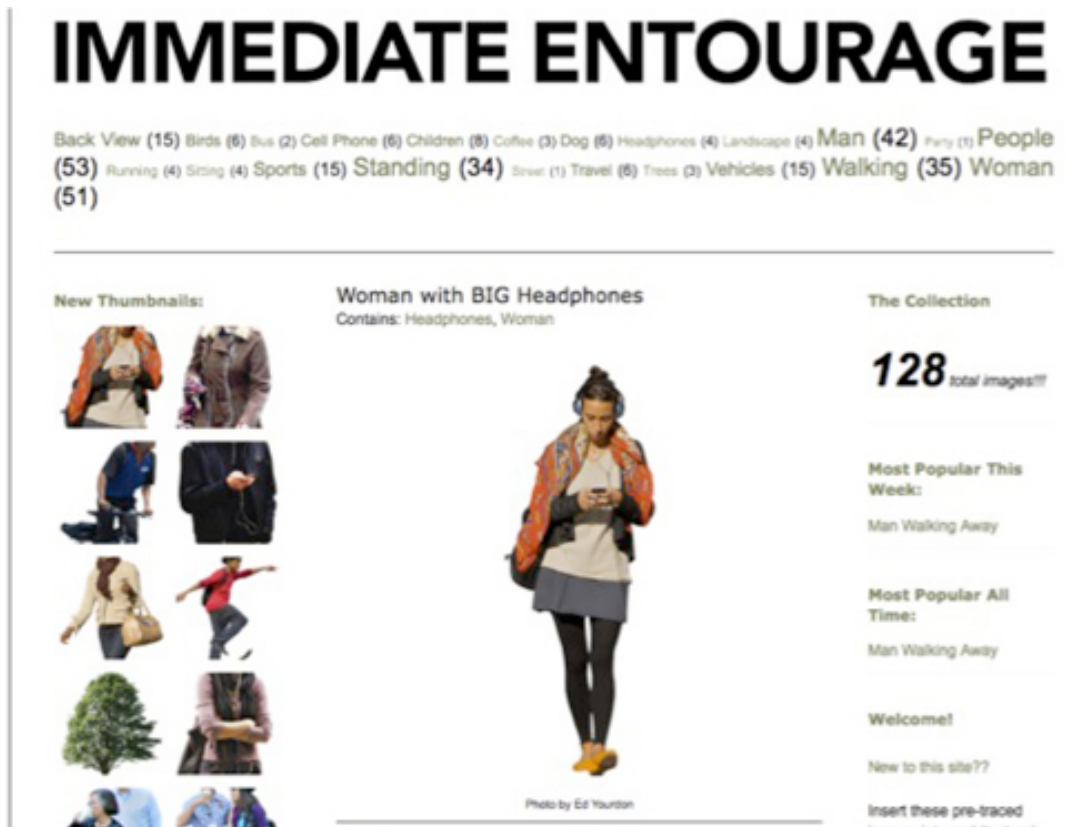


Figure 14. Immediate Entourage (<http://www.immediateentourage.com/>, accessed February 11, 2011).

And here is where we can begin to unpack those strange digital people that I find so disconcerting. Available in stock-catalogues, free-download sites, or by creating your own cut-outs from pre-existing photographs, digital people can be combined with other cut-out objects and elements to add scale, texture, and “personality” to a site. “Need people with a cosmopolitan flair?,” the Urban Moods People listing from RealWorld Imagery bekons, “This collection of 104 people is ideal. Featuring gritty urban youth to sophisticated nightlife trend setters. People in international dress and people suggesting alternative lifestyles also on this fresh and original CD.”⁵

Clicking through these sites, one is struck by a strange process of ontological equalization. As Houdart notes, “according to the logic of these image creations, every single element, a tree, sky, a person, and so on, must be considered equally. In these nascent cosmologies, in the form of catalogues and lists of things, everything is treated alike and as basically of the same nature” (2008:55). For all the care and labor involved in rendering these environments as “real,” everything about the process of rendering maintains a fierce, oppressive non-descriptness. Nearly every element feels like a placeholder, an iconic stand-in for the larger category of “tree,” “fence,” “person suggestive of an alternative lifestyle.”



Figure 15. Real World Imagery (<http://realworldimagery.com>, accessed February 11, 2011).

One of the most curious aspects of the rendering phenomenon, for me, has been the disembodied way in which I experience my own physicality as I walk along the streets most affected by new construction. The hyperunrealness of the renderings extends into

the actual environments that they imagined. I have the distinct sense of a colonization, not only of the physical neighborhood, but of my vision.

There is a certain confluence of style between architectural imagery and digital video games—technologically, and in terms of their modes of address. To borrow from Alexander Galloway’s work on first person shooter games, we might say that the architectural rendering makes use of a kind of “gamic vision.” Gamic vision, in this sense, is defined by subjective movement through a “fully rendered, actionable space” (Galloway 2011:1079). Nowhere is this confluence more apparent than in the online real estate flybys, where prospective buyers click through various layouts, views, and videos, reconfiguring perspective, but always with the screen as a portal for their first-person vantage point. Yet architectural renderings participate in another of Galloway’s key components of gamic vision: they “elevate the status of artificiality as an aesthetic” (2011:1081). The point here is less about the literal depiction of digital graphics or gaming icons than it is about staging environments in a game-like way. As we increasingly move along real or virtual pathways that echo the trajectories of role playing games, the line between the real and the virtual becomes harder to distinguish.

My own experience of first person gaming has always been governed by a sense of disconnect—this might be because I never upgraded my old PS2 console, or that I’m a horrible player. Beyond this though, is the nagging realization that I’m perceiving the game world through a POV that wasn’t meant for me. The veneer of interactivity in many games cannot mask the fact that there is an “absent one” (to invoke Jean-Pierre Oudart’s classic take on the cinematic apparatus), the designers, constructing, and constricting, the parameters of that experience (Oudart 1977-8). The space carved out for the perceiving subject feels at once too open, able to be occupied by anyone, and misdirected, marred by depictions of race and gender that ring false. In an odd way, I experience a similar disconnect when walking along the rezoned streets.⁶ Who are these bike lanes and parks really for? The gleaming glass and clean paving stones are shimmering, hyperreal, and slightly disingenuous. That several of the building projects were abandoned, only partially finished after the economic collapse, only furthers the sensation of a reality that has been poorly rendered.

But there is an aspect of digital architectural renderings that resonates on a more intimate, personal register. Real estate marketing imagery, as I’ve suggested, operates via interpellation. The vague, undetermined or generic nature of the renderings is designed to create an open placeholder in the form of a point of view: this could be you, this could be your home. Indeed, we render our homes in much the same way that architectural designers render promotional drawings, particularly when inhabiting the sorts of clean and angular spaces typical of new construction. We go online to select from catalogs of stock

textures, colors, and furnishings from IKEA, or West Elm, or Pottery Barn, or Crate and Barrel, each couch or cushion becoming the equivalent of upholstered clip art. These are layered with the analog ephemera of our personal lives (photographs and other individualized residue), and with the vistas out our windows that are of course very real, and very geographically contingent. Our clothes, our styling, our leisure activities, are similarly and inevitably colonized by the imagery that surrounds us, and constrained by the range of products available to us as consumers. We aspire to make our own homes look like hotel lobbies or catalog sets. Self-rendering becomes a process of targeted consumption, performative emulation, a set of data plugged into a Facebook template or a Pinterest board.

The image is a screenshot of the Pottery Barn Design Studio website. At the top, the logo "POTTERY BARN DESIGN STUDIO" is displayed in a serif font. To the right, there are links for "Shop" and "Reference Library". Below the logo, there are navigation tabs for "DECORATE", "ENTERTAIN", and "DESIGN SERVICES". The main content area is titled "LIVING ROOMS" and "CREATE A MEMORY WALL". On the left side, there is a vertical menu with categories: "Get Inspired" (Find Your Style, Room Ideas, Create a Gallery Display, Choose a Rug Pattern, Create a Memory Wall, Coffee Table Basics), "Make a Plan" (Room Planner, Media Furniture Finder, Sofa Finder, Build Your Logan Media System, Build Your Printer's Media System), and "How To" (Accessorize with Unique Items, Decorate with the Seasons, Arrange Accessories, Decorate a Small Living Room, Choose Furniture, Organize Your Entryway). The central focus is a video player titled "Creating a Memory Wall | Pottery Barn by Pottery Barn". The video shows a wall decorated with several framed photographs and mementos. Below the video player, there is a caption: "Every home should have an area devoted to displaying family photos and mementos. In this video, Pottery Barn shows you how to create your own stylish memory wall."

Figure 16. Potterybarn.com (accessed February 11, 2011)." title="Figure 16. Potterybarn.com (accessed February 11, 2011).



Figure 17. Laurie Simmons, *The Instant Decorator (Blue Room with Ocean View/Cocktail Party)* (2004) (<http://www.lauriesimmons.net>, accessed April 10, 2013).

Parasitic Occupations

Meanwhile, from the ground-zero of my yard, the influx of rats was further eroding my sense of being. As my thoughts became increasingly populated by murine fantasies, my physical behavior turned furtive (my gaze darting toward unkempt garbage piles on the street, sniffing out potential havens), and my neighbors began to avoid eye contact, hoping to dodge my ceaseless questions about new sightings and kills.

If you can bear with me through the indulgence of my becoming-rat, I'd like to argue that it was an experience deeply connected to the hyper-mediated, virtual architectural speculations of my material environment. My encounters with these animals felt as if they were lifted straight out of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). "Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences," they write, "which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one's bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline?" (1987:240). What Deleuze and Guattari describe is not an encounter of imitation, or of pity, or of identification. It is an affective collision brought about by proximity, an "unnatural participation" between two heterogeneous worlds, a

meeting in which the rat becomes “a feverish thought in the man, at the same time that the man becomes a rat gnashing its teeth in its death throes” (1987:258).

During this time period I’d begun reading works on speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, along with related critiques of human exceptionalism, such as Donna Haraway’s moving work on companion species (Haraway 2008). I was haunted by Kathy High’s *Embracing Animals* (2004-2006) in which she cohabitated with and nurtured lab rats who had been genetically modified with human autoimmune disorders similar to her own. And yet here I was standing in my backyard holding a dead rat in my rubber-gloved hand—I had transformed myself into an instrument of animal death, an instrument enabled by urban development, synthesized rodenticides, and the hubris of my own claim to this parcel of dirt. What I experienced in my proximity to the abominable suffering I brought to the rats was shame, the shame of being human (Lawlor 2008:174).

It was at this moment that I recalled a post I had encountered on a local community blog:

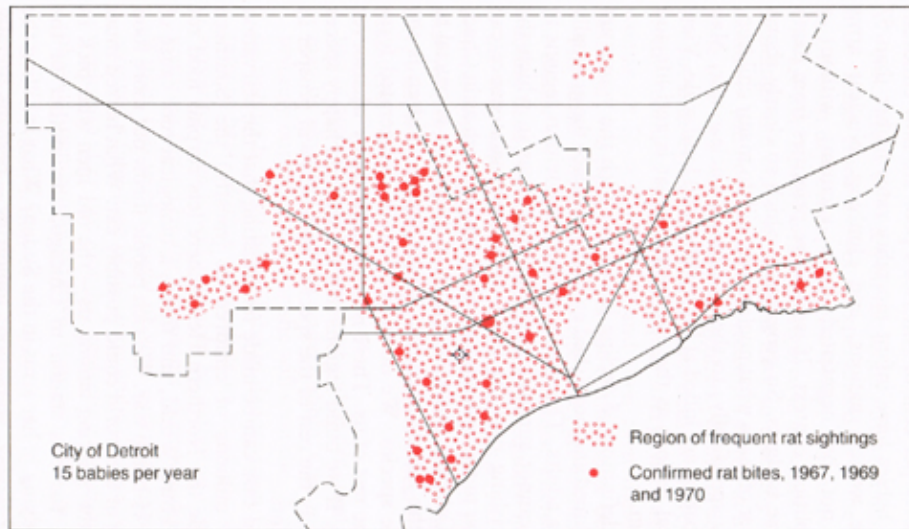
I’m part of a team producing a new documentary series on the city’s by-now colossal rat population – outnumbering humans in NY 12-to-1 by some estimates. We’re going to be following a team of exterminators as they set about ridding a range of homes and businesses throughout the 5 boroughs of rat infestations...

*We’re keen to hear from anyone who is suffering from this menace.*⁷

Thus began my sojourn with reality television, as a featured “sufferer” on Animal Planet’s *Rat Busters NYC*. As a media professor, I ought to have known better than to offer up my image, my home, my child, and even my dog for a media spectacle. Yet desperation outweighed reason, as did the hope that the Rat Busters might be able to do what I couldn’t: to treat the neglected empty lot that appeared to be the source of the infestation. In my own defense, this infestation was somewhat spectacular in size, and beyond the capabilities of any individual human. I was also hoping the producers might ferret out some scientific experts to shed light the mysterious white rats. The experience was less exploitative than I had imagined, but ultimately anticlimactic. Each shoot was conducted by a single associate producer, who directed and shot all the footage using a handheld digital video camera with an onboard microphone. The only other people present were the two stars of the show, exterminators from a Queens-based firm who demonstrated a genuinely impressive knowledge of rat behavior and physiology.

Both the producers and exterminators were sympathetic and kind throughout the process, and I was able to get treatment for several lots on the block that were grossly neglected. But for the most part, the show was an act of fabulation. The team staged a number of interventionist measures that they could not perform in reality. Though they made a show of burying a short section of mesh wire beneath a chain link fence in our garden, we all acknowledged that it is literally impossible to seal any yard from rats that can burrow or climb over electrical lines (which they can). The producers changed my designation from “renter” to “homeowner,” and edited my partner out of the episode so that I might appear more vulnerable as a single mother. In one of the more sensational sequences, they pulled an enormous rat corpse from a hole, where it had been trapped. The surviving rats had eaten away his genitals (a practice related to their social hierarchies, according to the exterminators), missing genitals that the producers curiously obscured further with a pixelated blur.⁸ The irony of the censored/absent rat genitalia coincided with my own outburst of horror in encountering the alterity of rat social logic (this evidence of an act of ingestion that resists anthropomorphism), conveniently packaged and broadcast-ready.⁹ The actual and the virtual felt hopelessly unhinged, opening into uncharted circuits of shame. And while the infestation was partially abated, it was hardly eradicated.

Rats have of course been subject to sensationalized attention in media coverage of city life, serving as the ultimate, instant signifier of urban blight. Rat statistics can be mapped, revealing geographies of poverty and civic neglect. Rat bodies and rat bites become tools for housing activists, drawing certain media attention, although as Jackson (2006) warns, these tactics can backfire when low-income residents of color become conflated in the mainstream press with the vermin themselves. Yet who amongst us won't stop to peep at footage of a rodent scampering around in a Dunkin Donuts display case? The horror can at times mask a begrudging admiration. There is a long history of reading rats and humans as mirror species, each benefitting from, adapting to, and exploiting the other's networks, habits, and bodies, each caught up in the larger engines of capital (see Burt 2005).



Map 3.16 Region of rat-bitten babies

If a middle-class suburbanite sees a rat in a slum ghetto he may feel disgust, but a slum mother feels horror. The rats – predacious carnivores – are looking for any food to eat, be it garbage or her infant’s toes, fingers and nose. In New York City there are an estimated 4 million rats, almost one to every person. But in slum ghettos like Harlem there are 20 rats per baby, hunting, hunting.

Source: Detroit Department of Health, 1967, 1969 and 1970.

Figure 18. “Region of Rat-Bitten Babies, Detroit.” William Bunge, *The Nuclear War Atlas* (Basil Blackwell, 1988) (<http://indiemaps.com/blog/2010/03/wild-bill-bunge/>, accessed April 12, 2013).



Unidentified woman displays dead rat from Harlem apartment while Mrs. Annabelle Alexander comforts bitten son, John.

Like Harlem, Rent Strikes May Hit Cleveland, Chi

Rent strikes, after success in New York’s Harlem, may spread to other cities, including Chicago and Cleveland. Leaders in both cities said plans are being drawn to force landlords to repair buildings and meet other responsibilities. They were encouraged by a New York court decision forcing Harlem landlords to put part of their tenants’ rent in escrow to pay for repairs. The decision followed a successful mass strike participated in by dwellers of 167 buildings. The campaign was dramatized when a Harlem tot, John Alexander, 5, was bitten by a rat.

Figure 19. *Jet Magazine* (January 23, 1964): 54.

But I'm more interested in tracking the feverish thoughts that those rats might inspire. To bring this back to questions of real estate and the media: what was happening in my backyard was clearly a futile attempt on my part to reinstate my own virtual borders, imposing upon the rat colony the boundaries of my yard, asserting my human exceptionalism in a full-scale rat holocaust. I was in full violation of Haraway's commandment: "thou shalt not make killable" (Haraway 2008:80). Except that the rats (as a collective) were not deterred in the slightest (rendering my killing gratuitous and, arguably, morally irresponsible). And I in fact didn't feel particularly exceptional. Indeed, as an un-landed renter in a neighborhood with skyrocketing real estate values, part of the shock of recognition here was my own tangential superfluosity to the seismic changes happening from above and below simultaneously. My presence here was far more tenuous than that colony of rats. Unlike the individualized and technologized relationships with animals described by Donna Haraway or Kathy High, my proximity to the pack-modality of the rat was not about creating a bond with a single animal, but it was a brush that changed me profoundly. If a feverish thought was planted, it was that action without a pack is futile; ownership is illusory; sentimentalism is for suckers; and survival within this environment requires a willingness to change, and to occupy spaces as they exist now, beneath the grid.

The thought planted in me is that unsanctioned parasites offer a model for living within, and against, dominant structures. If I were a speculative investor in this market, I'd put my money in bedbugs and rats. Their ability to adapt and thrive within this changing urban environment vastly outpaces that of their human counterparts, those refuse-generating bodies they depend on for survival. Parasites are machine-like, they operate via virtual, swarm-like codes, but they begin not from a place of abstraction (as does the software program), but from absolute contingency. And once they penetrate a system, they can wreak havoc.

A parasitic occupation breaks the stranglehold between designed function and actual use. The plan no longer represents reality with any fidelity. The accumulated habits of the past no longer determine the paths of the future. A parasite opens a system to the outside, or perhaps, as Serres suggests, reveal that the system itself is nothing but a state of transformation, and hardly a system at all (Serres 2007:72). And this is not always, or even often, a good thing. But when facing entrenched, and highly sophisticated networks that determine and delimit our practices of habitation, we may need to contemplate adaptive and strategic means of repurposing the limited spaces that are available to us.

Rendering Like a Rat

Leonard Lawlor (2008) argues that the process of becoming-animal for Deleuze and Guattari is meant to engender transformation in the form of creative acts, ideally those

that call forth a people to be. To become-rat, as such, requires not acting like a rat, but WRITING like a rat. Writing across public space takes all kinds of forms. The Occupy movement is of course the most inspiring manifestation of rat-thought in recent memory (which I mean as a compliment), making the tax-write-off after-thought of a generic private-public park a nest for political organizing. More subtle acts of cooptation have taken root in the very aesthetics of the virtual rendering itself.

The history of radical or activist architectural fiction is a long one. The 1960s and 1970s in particular witnessed an outpouring of conceptual architectural proposals by groups such as Archigram in the UK and Superstudio and Archizoom in Italy that were literally impossible to build. These were radical attempts to rethink the work that architecture does, to rethink the role of the rendering. Politically and philosophically motivated, artists in these collectives made heavy use of collage, pop cultural imagery, and film, and circulated their proposals through magazines and other publications, as well as absurdist submissions to architectural competitions. The proposal here serves not as a blueprint for a structure, but as an act of criticism, a means of generating thought and political change. Archigram, borrowing from an anecdote from Cedric Price, made their objectives explicit: “when you are looking for a solution to what you have been told is an architectural problem– remember, the solution may not be a building” (Archigram 1999:3).



Figure 20. Superstudio, Life-Supersurface (1972).

Superstudio’s 1969 project, *The Continuous Monument: An Architectural Model for Total Urbanization*, for example, imposed an eternal black and white grid over all aspects of lived space, a visualization of matrices of order and control, as well as the futility and

absurdity of modern architectural projects. Superstudio member Adolfo Natalini issued this declaration in 1971:

If architecture is merely the codifying of bourgeois model of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture; if architecture and town planning is merely the formalization of present unjust social divisions, then we must reject town planning and its cities...until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then, design must disappear. We can live without architecture.... [Fezer 2003-4]

Archizoom's *No-Stop City*, also from 1969, creates an artificial, boundless environment governed by a series of repeating codes, grids, and forms. Objects, furnishings, even clothing become continuous with the larger environment—identity is consumption. As Kazys Vernelis describes the project, “No longer viable as a place, the city would become a condition, existing not as a physical entity but as programming” (Vernelis 2003).

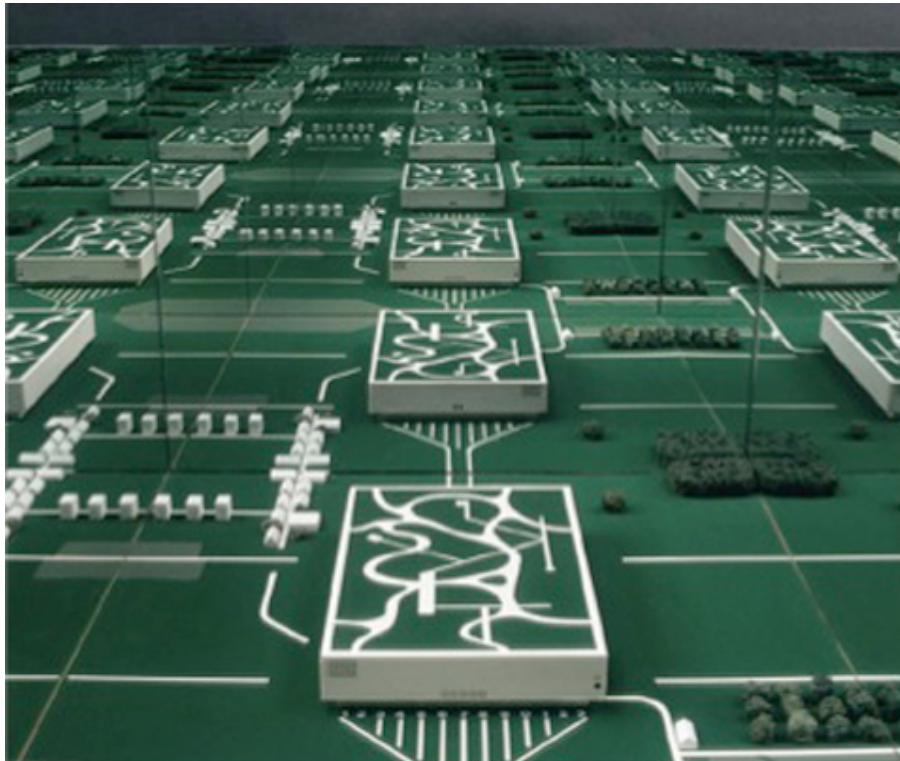


Figure 21. Archizoom, No-Stop City (1970).

In a strange kind of reversal, it seems to me that the self-conscious, sly, dystopian imagery of the radical 1960s groups have influenced the aesthetics of the contemporary digital imaginary, yet are often re-invoked, minus the politics and with no visible self-

awareness, in the utopian sales pitches of contemporary developers. Yet there is still room for artistic noise within the program.



Figure 22: People for the Architecture: “An index of imagined realities from a growing list of architectural offices minus everything except the people.” From a rendering by Morphosis Architects (<http://www.peopleforthearchitecture.com>, accessed April 12, 2013).

One of my favorite, more recent interventions into architectural fiction is the Hypothetical Development Organization, which imagines “implausible futures for unpopular places.” Their first project took place in New Orleans, where they had artists create renderings in high-real-estate-style of imaginary developments based on real, abandoned locations throughout the city. These renderings were printed on giant placards and installed on site. “The Museum of the Self” proposal, rendered by Dave Pinter, imagined a shrine to the Facebook-era:

This building is located downtown, near various museums and galleries. Hypothetically, it could be the home of a museum dedicated to the most important figure of our time: the self. The entire façade, both windows and exterior walls, would be mirrors.... [If] such monuments (honoring heroes of the Civil Rights movement, or of the Civil War) form a kind of public inventory of what matters to a community, then surely it is time to memorialize abstract strangers approving the Self. You will "like" this museum! [Hypothetical Development Organization 2010-2011]

The images the Hypothetical Development Organization dream are absurd, but they point to the absurdity inherent in all architectural fiction. Moreover, they challenge us to actively participate in re-imagining what the future of our cities could, or should, look like.



Figures 23–24. Hypothetical Development Organization, “The Museum of the Self,” New Orleans, LA. Rendering by Dave Pinter, installation photograph by Morris Brum (2010).

How can we engage in rat-like acts of writing or rendering within our real, physical environments? What architectural fictions might shock us into awareness of the virtual

grids we have drawn ourselves into? Can the space of a condo or a boardwalk corporate casino be rendered similarly unpredictable? Does the hacking of promotional imagery create any actualized impact on the street? Or will the aesthetics of radical fabulation inevitably find themselves co-opted by capitalist marketers? I'm not sure what a strategic occupation of a luxury apartment building or a waterfront development project might entail, if such an act is even possible. But I feel certain that our ability to think about, and live meaningfully within, the structures and spaces we inhabit will require opening ourselves up to a whole world of feverish thoughts, expanding our critical examinations of digital aesthetics far beyond the space of the screen.¹⁰

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Endnotes

1. According to the New York City Department of City Planning, employment in the manufacturing sector declined by 72 percent in Williamsburg, and 60 percent in Greenpoint between 1991 and 2002, but remained stable in Bushwick Inlet and in areas of Eastern Greenpoint (New York City Department of City Planning 2004). ↩

2. 184 Kent, <http://rentonkent.com/#/history>, accessed April 6, 2013. ↩

3. Urban_data, 184 Kent Avenue, Brooklyn, April 14, 2006, http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/130358969/, accessed April 6, 2013. ↩

4. Over the course of two summers, one neighbor killed fifty-seven rats, with similar per-season "hauls" reported at two other residences. A detailed log of our encounters and community efforts is archived on a community blog [I am the poster identified as "B"]: "Live From Community Board 1: Much Ado About Rats!," NewYorkShitty.com, October 15, 2011, <http://www.newyorkshitty.com/greenpoint-goodness/66740>, accessed April 3, 2013. ↩

5. Real World Imagery, <http://realworldimagery.com/products.html#P>, accessed April 10, 2013. For additional commentary on this phenomenon, see Walker 2011. ↩
6. An informal survey of neighborhood residents has generated a similar set of descriptors, from “virtual reality” to “video game-like” to “large-scale diorama.” Walking on Kent Avenue in particular reminds me of navigating the streets in Grand Theft Auto Vice City (Rock Star North, 2002). ↩
7. “Last Gasp: Got Rats?,” Newyorkshitty.com, March 22, 2010, <http://www.newyorkshitty.com/greenpoint-goodness/35109>, accessed April 3, 2013. ↩
8. The link between cannibalism, sexuality and rats has an extended history in human culture, although the prominent place these qualities hold in our understanding of rats seems more rooted in human anxieties than in rat biology (see Burt 2005). It is probable that the act of cannibalism we witnessed bore some relation to the distress caused to the colony by their relocation, and by the mass trappings and poisonings we had conducted that week. ↩
9. An excerpt from the program can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFoeBHbBRH8&list=PL2FF71B99420E1487&index=1> (Season 1, episode 5, Optomen Productions, 2011). ↩
10. By way of a coda, I am happy to note that a détente has been negotiated in my backyard thanks to the birth of a litter of feral kittens, the aid of a local trap-neuter-release volunteer, and a collective of neighbors who care for our managed colony. ↩

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