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Cinematic approaches to mapping spatial narratives

Introduction

This paper argues that film (as a multi-dimensional mapping tool incorporating aspects of space and time) can generate deeper understandings of inhabited environments than architects' traditional hand-eye approaches alone. Eschewing a hand vs computer, or traditional versus experimental processes, as an either-or situation, the paper investigates filmic methods for recording, analysing, and communicating about urban space as complementary tools for critical investigation, and creative design skills in architecture. Methods and precedents discussed draw on pedagogic research for observing and presenting complex spatial and architectural phenomena by Maureen Thomas, along with the work of three UK-Ireland based artist-documentary film-makers: Patrick Keiller, William Raban, and Willie Doherty. Project case studies illustrate how architecture students apply learned filmic techniques to selected urban settings to explore contextual, social, technological, and aesthetic qualities that can shape contemporary environments and place-based architectural decision-making.

The paper is structured in three parts: an examination of the key concepts and precedents for combining film with other architectural mediums and mapping techniques; a discussion about the use of cinematic mapping as a multi-disciplinary methodology in the project research; and an illustrated evaluation of project outcomes and findings/conclusions using extracts from filmic outputs.

The outcomes illustrate how filmic approaches were used to foster critical spatial, socio-political, and cultural urban narratives as well as temporal spatial investigations rather than to produce more commercial or abstract outcomes in their own right. The findings suggest how students can thrive on the engaging potential of film and art-based cinematic techniques to aid more traditional analytical and communication tools. They demonstrate how cinematic mapping can provide a basis to capture and communicate the implicit attributes of early stage design that are often talked about but not effectively choreographed to show early stage processes to develop design ideas ahead of the architecture.

Conceptual Framework: Cinematic mapping and Expanded Cinema

The design projects discussed herein draw on established forms of artistic and documentary-type filmmaking from sources outside of architecture in order to bring meaning, more than entertainment, to multi-media urban mapping. Mapping and filmic approaches in the projects aim to communicate more in-depth phenomenological understandings of place; revealing the substance, history, and meaning given to space by people – i.e., through the interpretation

of lived and observed human experience. Cinematic mapping (i.e., mapping communicated through filmic narratives) is a multi-disciplinary approach to envisioning architecture, incorporating filmmaking processes to communicate qualitative aspects of urban environments as well as quantitative information in ways that are accessible to both design professionals and lay-people.

The processes and precedents for filmic observation and communication that underpin the projects share aspects of psychogeographic and Situationist approaches to urban mapping that can be read in more traditional architectural media including drawings, maquettes, site-specific installations, and photography. Cinematic mapping adds a fourth dimension, time, and – importantly – allows the use of post-production techniques to communicate meaning via multiple time-frames and viewpoints simultaneously, adopting elements of "expanded cinema," an avant garde concept that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge traditional audience-screen relationships.[1]

Precedent filmmakers: Doherty, Keiller, Raban

Key precedents include films by Keiller and Raban, who began their film-making careers in architecture and painting respectively, and Doherty, a Northern Irish video-artist. The full depth of their background and body of work is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, however they can be seen as sharing observations on the built environment through the lens of history, politics, consumerism, globalisation and personal identity. They each focus a critical gaze on places in which they live as well as trying to engage with lesser-observed aspects of unfamiliar, even empty and undervalued, environments.

Keiller is principally known for a collection of films, *The Robinson Series* that use an imaginary narrative and narrotor to focus on London - on architectural, political, and social trends related to consumerism, conservativism, globalization, and individual identity in urban society. His work, illustrated in Figure 01, combines archival footage with a pseudo-documentary style, what he calls "an attempt at some sort of hyperreality."[2]

Fig. 01. Film stills from *City of the Future* and *London* by Patrick Keiler
Source: Keiller, 2007, 1992 (Cropped/combined by Author,2017).

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[1] Tate, 'Expanded Cinema – Art Term', accessed 25 April 2017,
  http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/expanded-cinema.

[2] David Anderson, 'Interview with Patrick Keiller', *The White Review*, January 2014,
  http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-patrick-keiller/.

Raban's films are known for pioneering examples of multiple-screen and multi-media techniques developed as a "reaction against the fixed single screen of traditional cinema."[3] Raban's work, illustrated in Figure 02, grew from an his art/painting background and evolved during the 1970s and 1980s toward a pseudo-political body of work that chronicled historical and contemporary events in an attempt to "create some meaning of the condition of the country."[4]

Fig. 02. Film outtakes from *Diagonal*, *Thames Barrier*, and *Thames Film* by William Raban
Source: Raban, 1973, 1977, 1987 (Cropped/combined by Author, 2017).

Doherty's work, illustrated in Figure 03, varies from landscape to urban settings and often incorporates long focused images, filmic photographs, sometimes with natural sounds, and other with voiceovers, and layers of text and image, "which creates a sense of ambiguity and plays on the viewer's prejudices and assumptions."[5]

Fig. 03. Film outtakes from *Empty*, *Remains*, and *Segura* by Willie Doherty
Source: Doherty, 2009, 2009, 2014 (Cropped/combined by Author, 2017).

Projects

Student projects employing film in studio and site-based mapping were structured over a twelve-week semester through a series of steps including pilot projects and background readings, then training workshops and film precedent studies before students were introduced to selected urban areas. Mapping work was both a collaborative and individual process, working with peers and engaging with members of the public. Pilot projects were used to gauge existing

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[3] Michael Amarger and Frédérique Devaux, *William Raban Interview*, Cinémas de Traverse (EDA Productions/Corto Pacific, 2010), https://vimeo.com/126909408.
[4] Ibid.
[5] 'Derry Artist Willie Doherty's New Work "Closure" Goes on Show at the Ulster Museum', *Derry Now*, 26 January 2017.

film-making knowledge/skills and to provide a basis to compare later work. Supplemental readings dealt with the theory and history of how architects can use film as a new technology to contextualise and aid the student investigations.

Initial trials: wandering sideways with camera phones

The projects began with a one-day exercise based in familiar surroundings of the students' city-centre urban campus; to map a particular, but unplanned journey over the course of an hour using only a phone based camera, and to edit the resulting video for the following day. Acknowledging the ubiquity of film-use already part of students' design work, guidance in this stage was limited to Perec's advice to those aspiring to map urban and architectural environments (from readings): "Note down what you see. Anything worthy of note going on. Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you? Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see."[6]

The outcomes from the first films comprised an expected collection of video walks – sped-up or slowed down – with added musical soundtracks that matched the chosen tempo with greater and lesser success. Films tended toward the frenetic jumpy character of hand-held cameras, or toward very high and low perspectives when capturing views from a single vantage point. There were typically issues with noise distortion when ambient sounds were included. Some examples from students with more prior video experience included added graphics, outtakes, split-screens and overlays to communicate more day/night activity and to distil some qualities captured in the short window of observation.

Precedents and film-watching: lessons in the art of standing still

With the benefit, and some noted student frustration, from the first exercise the next project stages included technical workshops, led by photography and digital animation tutors to help focus on more considered uses of film and film techniques. The workshops combined with film screenings of precedent examples including Keiller's *London,* Raban's *Thames River,* and Doherty's *Segura*, seen outside of the studio – in community cinemas and in art-galleries. These films provided examples where the outcomes were not random but the result of critical observations, historical understanding, and a considered use of both camera and sound. They gave students an understanding that a successful film need not be in a rush, or require a soundtrack other than what is essential to communicate some understanding of the place and people being observed. Each example included both stillness and a poetic approach to observing everyday life – allowing the camera to linger or very slowly to pan without comment, or overlaying sound captured without distortion, or adding in a measured voice over and additional sound. They require the viewer to work and engage more to discern slight movements of wind and light, and people – revealing and editing rather than pointing out everything.

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[6] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, [1974] (Penguin, 2008), 50.

The benefit of first making mistakes then learning techniques and seeing work by the artist-filmmakers seemed to make a positive impressing when students moved to the next stage – being introduced in groups to a less familiar context in a coastal village setting – a contained urban area with a documented history and clear enough morphology to allow students to concentrate on their mapping and storytelling technique.

Student experiments: taking the lessons forward

The influence of the first stages was an immediate move to experiment and try to apply different techniques without as much perceptible pre-judgement as the first films. One group of students took it upon themselves to purchase a used 8mm projector, immersing themselves in the town over a couple of days. Their example in Figure 04 draws heavily on Raban's *Diagonal,* projecting an analog square of light onto selected surfaces that is captured through the digital process.

Fig. 04. "Elmo" An MArch student experiment in expanded cinema
Source: C.Harnett, S.Ladha, L.Magee, M.McAlea (Cropped/combined by Author,2017).

The work, illustrated in Figure 04, reveals as much as it conceals at times, framing areas of the town that relate to its life and natural environment, and areas of dereliction.The analog process is captured in real-time with digital tools in a carefully staged series of locations with only ambient noise, the ticking of the projector, and the comments of local people (unseen, watching in the background): e.g., "The thing I like about this is that it's dark and that looks like its daytime, just a small window of daytime…it's that one square block, that looks like a picture."

Mapping a "narrative promenade architecturale"

In the latter project stages, focused on specific areas of the town, drawing on earlier group films as well as collective desk-based reports that included traditional areas of mapping; historical overviews, figure-grounds studies, photographic surveys, interviews, and so forth. Following reviews of the group

work, the students were introduced to further theory and practice techniques for their final mapping work; what is referred to as "spatially organised narrativity" developed and published by "story-architect" and academic Maureen Thomas.[7]

Thomas' work, as applied here, combines a sequenced film-based narrative to the seminal framework for mapping and analysing cities, established mid-twentieth century by urbanist Kevin Lynch as a personal urban experience through landmarks, pathways, nodes, districts, and edges. Thomas's narrative approach connects Lynch's spatial concept to a filmic order: exposition/equilibrium, development/disruption, climax/recognition of disruption, resolution/repair of disruption, denoument/equilibrium.[8]

Using this framework, students were tasked to hone their mapping and integrate aspects of their 2D work in a way that brought an uninitiated viewer on a journey that would link to a later design proposal in that area of the town. One student's final work (outtakes of a 6-minute film) is shown in Figure 05, below.

Fig. 05. Hybla – An MArch filmic journey, outtakes.
Source: L.Magee (Cropped/combined by Author,2017).

Poetry and narrative outcomes

The student example above, one of many selected for discussion, demonstrated a significant jump in focus from the first film experiments; a more

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[7] Maureen Thomas, 'The Moving Image of the City: Expressive Space/ Inhabitation/ Narrativity: Intensive Studio Workshop on "Continuity of Action in Space"', in *Urban Cinematics*, ed. François Penz and Andong Lu (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 281–310. Thomas previously ran a "Cinemarchitecture" workshop with MArch students at [institution redacted for paper peer-review] and one of the former participants acted as an adviser on this project.

[8] Ibid.; Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (MIT Press, 1960).

personal and matured series of observations, which in this example were developed out of the students' initial frustration with the abstract nature of establishing a narrative without traditional architectural plans and form as the driver. The filmed example of Figure 05 takes the viewer on a journey narrated with the students own poetic prose; moving from a framed seaside perspective, using overlaid maps, drawings, and models with film, to describe a historic area of landscape and buildings with suggestions of architectural intervention.

Examples of the spoken accompaniment include the following: "On the sand where the river meets the see you're looking towards Scotland. The endless tide is brought in an pulled back, tying two places together; a passage not an end…A sylvan avenue sets an axis to a house called Hybla, one of the oldest in the town…To turn from Hybla, and revel in earthen qualities….a moment to consider, straight stricken shadows from swaying sycamores. You stand in the cold but out of the wind and watch milky white swim with grey as the branches swing and dance against the glass...Bronze captures only the dying evening light, and you look up at the fleeting framed clouds. The smaller space is hushed awaiting its audience…Lowered toward shallow waters, you slip across to the fort side. You climb it and you reason with why it is called a cursed place. You hastily retreat. Hybla is a respite. The sea is a deep breath, and you go home."

Summary

A considered and time-based filmic approach to mapping can reveal unexpected phenomena in unaltered everyday environments. Once observed and noted, less readily observable socio-spatial phenomena can then be captured and shared more effectively (in real or time-lapsed frequencies and frames) using cinematic techniques as communication tools. Like orthographic drawings, model-making, and CAD skills therefore, filmic methods can become another set of intuitive creative tools to aid architects' exploration and envisioning of changing environmental meanings and experiential spatial qualities in their designs.

A recurring theme in the projects herein, derived from examples such as Raban's *Thames River* was a more deliberate choreography or framing of two-dimensional drawings. A number of students filmed their traditional drawings in a considered way to focus and frame the intended messaging with increased specificity – aided by actual movement "through the space," accompanied by sound and spoken word.

The mapping work was most successful when students communicated through real materials and references; less successful in communicating environmental perceptions when drawn. Some students focused more on the act of filmmaking rather than storytelling, which resulted in picturesque films that often failed to communicate intended concepts clearly; more structured narration and visual signposting to lead the reviewer through their thinking was needed.

As one external reviewer noted: "More accomplished pieces of work delivered conceptual ideas driven by a desire to make tectonic and material

compositions intent on delivering specific experiences rather than ideas conceived to shape and make architectural form to be viewed. The sophistication of phenomenological intent that projects delivered was supported and enhanced by the process of capturing ideas on film."

Conclusions

The project findings set out in the paper suggest filmic techniques can positively impact the experiential depth of design investigations, and that filmic outcomes can be effective envisioning tools that foster greater engagement between architectural professionals and lay-persons. They support an argument for the use of filmic techniques more widely in architecture, particularly for early-stage design investigations. Structured thematic approaches to filmic mapping, drawn from established theory and precedents, provide a basis for architects to observe, test, and communicate temporal environmental qualities as spatial narratives, to move beyond two and three-dimensional surface/object fixations from the earliest project stages.

Finally, the project experience and findings demonstrate how filmmaking can provide a platform for architects and non-architects to more effectively envision and share insights about everyday spatial experiences. Though a limited study, the project shows how the impact of digital research and design tools can extend beyond a limited academic sphere of architects, filmmakers, and students.

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