

# Architectural critique through digital scenario-building

## *Augmenting Architectural Criticism and Narrative*

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**Key words:** Digital recreation, Scenario-building, Narrative, Fake, Architectural critique

**Abstract:** As an idea *scenario-building* has parallels the use of creative faking in related disciplines, most particularly, in contemporary art. The techniques involved in scenario-building and faking offer us enhanced ways of undertaking creative thinking and critical review of architecture and architectural projects. Critical review and theoretical analysis of architecture can be undertaken via a range of methods that Attou (1978) classifies as Normative, Interpretive and Descriptive. Digital representation now offers us new ways of augmenting these critical styles in ways that have yet to be fully exploited, and possible means of exploitation are illustrated in this paper. In short the work described here shows how digital techniques can be used to enrich architectural investigation, critical reporting and debate.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of the *scenario-building* is founded on principles similar to those used in creative faking in other related disciplines, but in particular contemporary art (Jones, 1992; Capaldi, 1979). The technique described is used as a device for creative thinking which can begin, for instance, with ‘what-if?’ scenarios. In this respect the start point is similar to the kind of *digital-unbuilt* work reported by Novitski (1998, 1999) and earlier by others (e.g. Cambell, 1995). The technique of creating, in a digital environment, works of architecture that have either not been constructed, or have been destroyed, offers a potential for virtual architectural environments to be developed in such a way that they can be used for more than simple appraisal. The visualisation, modelling and animation of works of

architecture can offer another set of media that can form the basis for a more rigorous and complex critical review. As Attoe (1978) says “the printed word is too limited to provide for all perspectives and nuances pertinent to the discussion of what is seen and experienced as three dimensional”. Digital media can be the new ingredients in the critical review of, and response to, architecture.

In scenario-building the digital creation of what no longer exists, what never was, or what might be, is simply a first step. With a range of computer mediated techniques applied, the digital-unbuilt model can, for instance, form the start of a trajectory along a postulated historical path and associated circumstances. The idea of creating ‘scenes that might have been’ and using them as the basis for debate about possible plausible alternatives is referred to by Mitchell (1998) as creating a counterfactual argument. To some extent this paper is concerned with the creation of counterfactual arguments; but Mitchell notes that some historians regard counterfactual premises as meaningless. The contention presented in this paper is that such techniques can usefully augment architectural research and enrich architectural teaching.

As mentioned above digital scenario-building can be compared with, faking. The word fake is chosen deliberately to distinguish the associated ideas from those that might be associated with making a copy or facsimilie, which should be more correctly, referred to as a forgery. In forgery the perpetrator’s aim is to copy an object and make the pretence that it is the real thing. Although the words forgery and faking are sometimes interchanged, here faking is taken to be the act of producing an alternative version of an object, or a set of facts surrounding that object to provoke debate and reaction. It refers, in this paper, to the idea that has been developed in the fields of art and logic where the proposition of alternative truth is used to foster richer debates, and to challenge accepted premises.

In this paper two specific applications are described to illustrate possible applications of scenario-building, and these are categorised by their critical styles. Critical styles rarely exist in isolation; a review or analysis is usually an amalgam of different critical approaches. The first of the critical approaches illustrated relies, principally on the use of Interpretive Criticism; particularly Advocatory and Evocative approaches. The example taken is that of investigating the potential significance of a particular building, and its designers, had a different set of circumstances prevailed in the 1920s and 1930s. In the second example Evocative criticism is again used, but a strong element of Self-criticism also prevails (Attoe, 1978). In this case, the technique is applied in a contemporary educational setting, and shows how students of architecture can usefully apply the scenario-building method to

their own work. The technique has met with praise and commendation (Hyett, 2000).

If we take Attoe's (1978) division of critical methods it could be said that in Computer Aided Architectural Design, the main attention, so far, has been on Normative Criticism. This takes as its premise that "somewhere in the world outside a building or urban setting there is a model, pattern, standard or principle against which its quality or success may be assessed". Techniques that use Artificial Intelligence, Expert Systems and Design Decision Support Systems would fall into this category. The aim of this paper is to support the potential of computer based systems to aid Interpretive and Descriptive methods of architectural criticism, to augment the methods used for Normative Criticism.

## **2. BEYOND DIGITAL UNBUILT**

The application of digital modelling and consequent photomontage has become well established in architecture. This method has found application in examples such as new proposals for a site, or for the recreation of destroyed or unbuilt architectural projects. As a way of allowing us to visualise what does not exist, examine spatial qualities and engage in contextual criticism [a form of descriptive criticism according to Attoe (1978)] this has been very valuable. But we should note that it is clear that the nature of the digital representation in such cases fundamentally affects our perception of the value and quality of the architecture represented (Mitchell, 1992: Brown and Nahab 1996). This is a matter which is not dealt with in depth here, but is worthy of further consideration in the context of scenario-building.

Digital photomontage as a technique is a static one and based on two dimensional images. Over the past five years or so more computing capacity and better software has meant that we can contemplate the use of interactive three dimensional VR techniques to advance the systems for architectural design; but it is possible to use digital and associated VR techniques for more than simply visualising what once was, or might be desired. We can take the idea that what can be produced digitally can form the basis for more involved architectural critiques. The basis of the approach is that different scenarios (not just scenes) can be recreated digitally as a way of suggesting alternative versions of the truth, or alternative chains of development had the circumstances changed from those that prevailed. This then allows certain lines of argument to be supported: as such the technique can be used to augment critical theories of architecture (Brown and Simpson, 1997).



*Figure 1.* A Photomontaged Urban Scene

In short what is being proposed is constructive faking: constructive from the point of view that the creation of a faked set of events allows different lines of arguments and critique to be constructed. This is in line with the suggestion by Jones (1992) that the study of fakes should be embraced, and should be made with “a greater awareness of the contingent and culturally conditioned nature of the distinctions made and the criteria applied”.

### **3. EXAMPLE ONE: AS A POSTULATORY TOOL**

To illustrate the scenario-building technique two examples are presented in this paper. The first example, here, takes a significant architectural practice, Connell, Ward and Lucas (Thistlewood and Heeley, 2001), that was active in Britain in the 1920s and 30s. Through the application of scenario-building interesting questions can be posed and the work of the practice can be examined. In its broadest sense, we can ask, for instance, whether the practice deserves a more prominent place in the history of the Modern Movement. Some of the critical reviews of the work of Connell, Ward and Lucas have been disparaging, perhaps because the work and the context of that work were often misunderstood and misinterpreted. The abandonment of what could be the practice’s largest and most ambitious project, the Lord’s Court, may, to some extent, have exacerbated the misunderstanding. This scheme is, therefore, ideal as a vehicle for illustrating the idea of using scenario-building, as a way of supporting a postulated idea.

Connell, Ward and Lucas adopted an approach to design that was radical, compared to most of their British counterparts. This radicalism covered a spectrum of design issues from colour treatment through to technological innovation. Through the use of virtual recreation of what would have been a

key project we can create a scenario to investigate their role in developing ideas relating to the Modern Movement. Through the scenario the effect of their potentially very potent influence on British and International architecture can be contemplated.

Lord's Court, dating from around 1929, was project that was started but was stopped at ground level (or so it was thought) because of wartime restrictions. It was never actually completed.

### 3.1 The source information

In practical terms the ideas being promoted in this paper are illustrated with a particular example, based initially on creating a virtual model. This model then acts as the core tool for historical and theoretical evaluation. The source data in terms of drawings on Lords Court plus information on projects prior to Lord's Court were provided by Heeley (1995). The data was not complete and what was found was difficult to trace. A typical original drawing, an elevation, is shown in Figure 2.

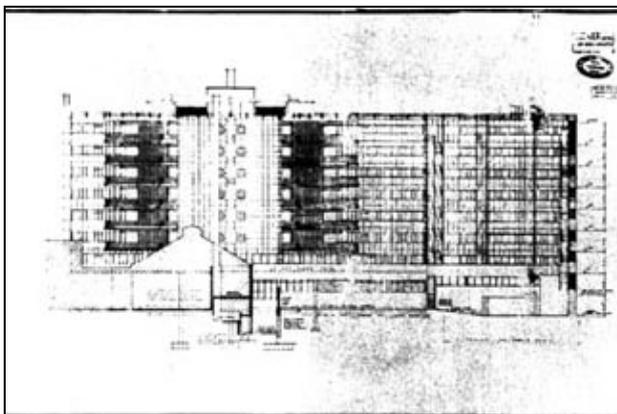


Figure 2. Original Connell Ward and Lucas drawing

The drawings and associated information were, until recently, thought to have been lost. The data that has been uncovered required careful study and cross checking to arrive at a point where the digital model could be constructed.

### 3.2 The digital representation

To create the models and visualisations the technique is very orthodox; AutoCAD and 3DStudio were used to generate the two and three-dimensional representations that can be seen in Figures 3 and 1. Some modification took place in Photoshop.



*Figure 3. The building model*

The drawings were in a poor condition and information was incomplete so some interpretation and extrapolation from other works by the same architects had to take place. For the architectural scholar this is where the interest starts to arise. It now becomes necessary to understand the context of the project in three respects. First, the prior and parallel work undertaken by Connell Ward and Lucas has to be understood so that the drawings can be read with a knowledge of the kind of technological and design innovations that the practice was keen to promote. Secondly, the contemporary architectural climate needs consideration. Thirdly the urban setting, the physical context at that time, has to be addressed.

However the initial inspection of the visualisations revealed something unexpected. When the images of what is there now is compared with the digital reconstruction the building, at street level, is almost identical. What this shows, then, is that the building was actually completed to first floor level before construction stopped, and not to foundation level as originally thought. In its own right this proved to be a very enlightening piece of digital archaeology.



Figure 4. A faked contemporary photograph

Then there are other matters. What colour should the building be? A sepia photograph can be created (faked) from the digital data to show how it might have been recorded (Figure 4) but Connell Ward and Lucas used very strident colours in their other buildings internally and externally: sugar pink with royal blue, chocolate brown and lemon yellow. Unlike contemporary buildings this one would have challenged the convention of restrained use of colour. We can postulate what reaction would such a prominent building in such a particular location adjacent to Lords Cricket ground have drawn from architectural critics? Pink buildings were simply not cricket.

### 3.3 The postulated history and parallel debate

The different digital representations can now be used to develop an imagined architectural lineage and associated critical debate. As part of the scenario being constructed a report on the new Lords Court building in an issue of the *Architects Journal* in 1929 has been faked. A page of that imagined journal report is shown in Figure 5. This gives the scenario-building critic the opportunity to review and comment on the building that might have been, but with that discussion set in a contemporary context.

The building is likely to have been very contentious from several points of view. The scenario is therefore extended by suggesting that a group of prominent architects who were interested in what they regarded as a more restrained and socially responsible type of housing for the people would have made their objections well known.



Figure 5. A fake review: Architects Journal of 1929

This line of thinking leads to a faked letter in the Architectural Review in 1930 (see Figure 6) from a group of architects opposed to what they strongly believe to be an inappropriately strident addition to London’s building stock.



Figure 6. A fake letter of objection printed in the Architectural Review 1930

By developing the argument in this way a debate set in the political, economic, cultural and architectural context of the time has to be invented. This requires some understanding of the relevant issues and context, and as such is a good and salutary exercise to run through. It creates an interesting framework through which an architectural argument can be formed (Rashidi, 1998). The line of postulation continues in this way, and it is assumed that

by the 1950s the building, like many 20s and 30s buildings, is in need of refurbishment. In the scenario proposed it is suggested that the building has been refurbished as a hotel. A report of the refurbishment now appears in a faked issue of the Architectural Record; see Figure 7.

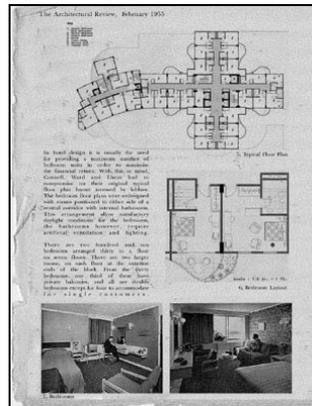


Figure 7. 1950s journal reporting on the refurbishment

The history of the building is imagined in a series of contemporary contexts in this way. In its most recently invented reworking the building becomes the base for a new cricket academy at Lords. As before the news of this event is faked (Figure8) and the report is created in the style of an issue of Building Design in 1998.



Figure 8. The building reborn as a cricket academy in 1998

From the 1920's, through to the end of the twentieth century a series of scenarios have been constructed, and, as shown here, these scenarios have been run out and made explicit through a series of faked journal articles.

The earlier stages of the process where the late 1920s through to the early 30s are covered show how the technique can be applied in a research setting. The digital archaeology showed that more of the original building had been constructed than had been first thought. But the modelling and visualisation of Lords Court made it possible to gauge the importance and potential impact that this building would have had. Its contribution to the portfolio of work that Connell, Ward and Lucas compiled would have been significant.

Extending the time line in the history of Lords Court from the 1920s through journal articles means that assumptions have to be made. It is the debatable nature of such assumptions that lead certain historians to question such lines of historical research. But the point of this technique is not simply about historical research; there are two other important reasons for its use. The first, like faking in art, is to provoke reaction. The second is to provide a framework for investigations as part of an architectural education. The simple fact is that to create a believable scenario the students has to understand the historical and architectural context in which the fake is set. For instance, in the example above the current issues and the way that they were described at the dates chosen for the faked journals had to be established. This application in an architectural education setting has been extended and an example of how this has been done is set out in the next section.

#### **4. EXAMPLE TWO: EDUCATIONAL SETTING**

It is important for architectural students to be able to stand back from their work and be self-critical. This is all part of the process of becoming a better designer. In other words, "On the one hand, the artist is the imaginer and producer. But he is also the critic" (Shahn, 1957). As an aside, one might say that, as critics, we could take issue with this quote and suggest that it should read "he or she is also the critic", but the essence of the point remains valid, that self-evaluation and reflection on one's own creative exploits is as important as the creative exploit itself.

As part of an architectural education Collins (1968) notes that it is vitally important for students to be made aware that the:

"dialogue between his teacher and himself is simply an exercise in one aspect of the process of design, which he must learn to perform in solitude once the academic training is at an end. For there is no difference between criticism and self-criticism except for the number of people involved."

What digital technologies and virtual environments allow us to do is to create a framework for a richer kind of self-criticism. The example presented next is meant to illustrate how digital scenario-building can be used to foster a more interesting environment in which the architectural student can undertake such self criticism. It is, in fact, a way of moving on from the written essay or report that are rather stale as devices for students to report on and evaluate (in some cases their own) architecture.

The application of the technique described here was undertaken with third year students of architecture. These students were required to review a major project that they had completed, but to do so through a faked journal article. Choice of the journal to be faked was left to the individual student. The article was to be in two parts; the first a general review of the project, but presented as though it had been written by either a known architectural critic, or someone famous in an appropriate area. The second part was to be a technical review of the project in which the important aspects of the technology were to be reviewed and accounted for. Again, this was to be presented in the manner that the chosen journal presented such reviews.

The example presented below shows extracts from the submission by Paul Swarbrick; it is typical of the kind of response that the student group made. In Paul's case he chose to fake a contemporary edition of the *Architectural Review*, and the scheme reviewed was his combined emergency service centre (housing Police, Fire and Ambulance services).

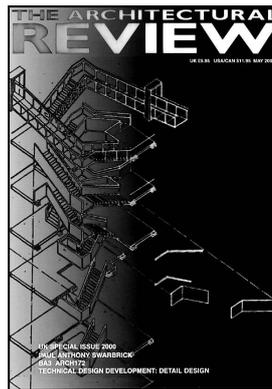


Figure 9. Faked Journal

The front cover is shown in Figure 9, and a page from the main report appears in Figure 10. The report allows the author to review the scheme through the eyes of the fake critic, Timothy Brittain-Catlin, who talks about the creation of a 'unified and dignified unit'. The report allows the student to create a carefully constructed argument as to how they have created a

‘unique and genuinely provocative scheme’ in a way that is rarely possible in the conventional architectural ‘crit’. Conventional presentations are spoken and because of this important points or lines of argument get lost. Even when presented as a written report the important issues can lose their impact. The fake review forces the writer to take a new standpoint; to imagine the response by an informed third party.

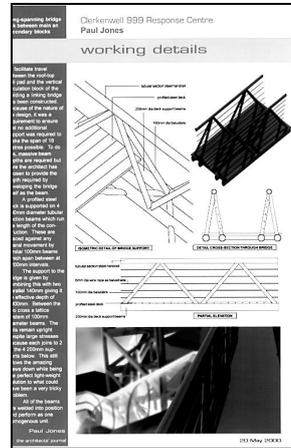


Figure 10. Typical page of the faked review

In terms of technical issues the condensed and focussed approach adopted by most journals forces the student to decide what is important, and what is critical in terms of the technology. Journals do not report on the routine, so the student has to decide what aspect(s) of the technology make their buildings special. A fake technical report, by another student, Paul Jones, is shown on Figure 10.

The results of the student exercise were very pleasing. The students felt that the faked scenario allowed them to make points and justify decisions in way that otherwise would not have been possible. In terms of the product, these were more engaging and pointed than those arising from more conventional ways of presenting a case.

## 5. CONCLUDING COMMENT

The idea of the fake as part of digital scenario building is developed in this paper. The aim was to show that, as a technique, scenario building presents an interesting and engaging way of developing an architectural critique. The emphasis of the work described here is to go beyond the interesting recreation of the visual aspects of the architecture and to

investigate the parallel influences on architectural criticism, and to take a third party view of an architectural issue. It is possible, then, for students and theoreticians to exploit virtual environments technology, using them to foster creative debate generated by deliberately and thoughtfully faked virtual histories.

It may occur to the reader that given all that has been said in this paper, a possible scenario is that the research work on Connell, Ward and Lucas never took place and the student project was never set. Maybe this paper is part of a faked scenario. Maybe.

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