

ACADIA'S BROWSER: VENTI NON-FAT DECAF LATTE

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Summer is here, the weather is warm, and people are hanging out at sidewalk cafes. Some coffee shops, as you know, are better than others. It takes special skills to make great espresso drinks. It also takes special skills to generate great CAD drawings. 3D CAFE is here to help us enhance our CAD abilities, with its freebies, tutorials and products full of good taste (www.3dcafe.com). It is one of those "coffee shops" we should all know about.

As a testament to its success, 3D CAFE will soon receive its 10 millionth visitor since its inception in 1996. To celebrate this event, they are sponsoring a contest and the lucky winners will be awarded a top of the line NT workstation and a Prijon Hurricane Kayak. You can fill the contest entry form on-line. Let me know if you win!

If this isn't enough to tempt you, there are tons of other reasons to visit this site. It contains a huge library of free CAD props (e.g. trees, people, and so on – see figures 1 and 2) that can be used to spice up CAD drawings. Students love how these props turn their drawings into more detailed and refined end products. The site also directs you toward delightful tutorials covering subjects from Inverse Kinematics with LightWave to a basic introduction to AutoCAD. In return, we all can contribute to the freebie library by submitting our own creations.

The CAD library comprises an intriguing blend of computer generated models

(see figures 3 and 4). Some are complex and some simple, with all contributing to a well rounded site. Props and 3D models are usually available in several flavors, created within various software packages (e.g. CAD, 3D Studio, Adobe Photoshop, LightWave, Softimage) and supplied in a number of presentation formats. In the special effect section, Quick Time movies present clouds and fog moving through mountain scenes and tumultuous water flowing toward an unknown goal. In addition to standard DXF and 3DS formats, many models are available in VRML allowing you to immediately walk through them in 3D. All of this action spurs excitement; like the caffeine jolt you get from a triple espresso.

Though this variety is good, it also has its draw back. Unless your hard drive is loaded with a bazillion different modeling programs, you end out constantly importing files, transforming data, or downloading plugins in order to view images. This is somewhat ameliorated by a multitude of plugins available from 3D CAFE, some of which are quite nifty. For example, Shadelit is a 3D Studio MAX plugin serving to provide you with more control on the "lighting fall off" in a texture. Despite the plugins, some images remain difficult to access, but those that are accessible are well worth the trouble of your visit.

The 3D CAFE image gallery, for example, contains 300 distinct images by artists from all over the world (like figure 4, 5 and 7), and the site is updated daily. You may also want to check out the picture of New York City (see figure 6). It is one of 3D CAFE users favorite. It was simply captured from Autodesk's WCT which shipped with 3D Studio Release 2.0. The file was then imported into MAX and was rendered using default settings. Figure 7 presents another interesting model where the author composed a study conveying the transformation of a lobby from virtual to real space.

Though plugins, free models, tutorials, and software can be useful to all of us, the site is rather anemic in information content. I constantly find myself wanting to know more about this or that part of the site or about the CAD process behind one of the pictures displayed. It leaves me quite thirsty. Should I order another drink? 3D CAFE is promising to unleash Cafeen Magazine very soon, providing free computer graphics information on-line. Maybe that will satisfy my thirst.

In the mean time, I am left to my thoughts. When I go to a café, I see other patrons, I hear the murmur of their conversations, I feel the pulse of life. This is something you can't really get at via the internet (at least not yet). The value of the internet lies in another dimension, that which allows a designer from Shanguai (figure 5) to communicate with a colleague in California. 3D CAFE fosters this kind of exchange. It provides live chats for those wanting to share ideas on computer graphics and links to a variety of online newsgroups. In this setting, ideas can grow and ripen into full body projects.

From Sartre to Picasso to Bob Dylan, coffee shops have inspired many great creations. Just like good coffee, good CAD drawings are a pleasure to the soul. 3D CAFE provides its share of support to our creative endeavors. May we all have the chance to get inspired while visiting its pages.

Aesthetic	3.7
Creativity	3.7
Execution	4.5
Information	3.3

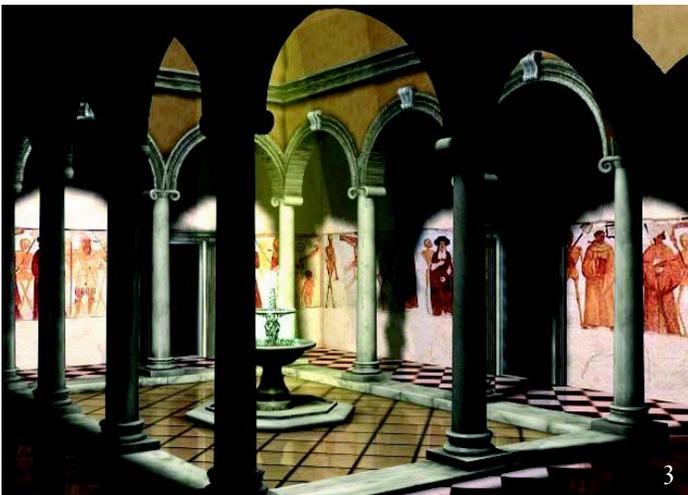
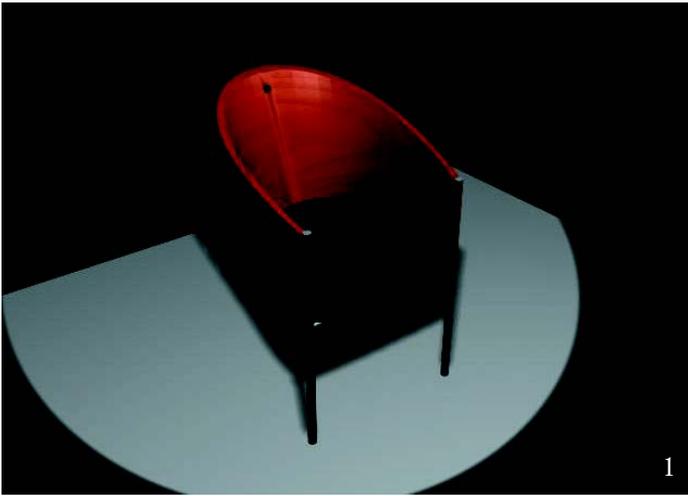


Image Credits

Figure 1: Philippe Starck designed the Costes Chair in 1982 for the Café Costes in Paris. The computer modeling of this chair was executed in 3D Studio. Modeling. Author: Unknown.

Figure 2: Italian coffee maker modeled in 3D Studio by Renzo Del Fabbro.

Figure 3: Cloister modeled in 3D Studio by Adriano Del Fabbro, Italy.

Figure 4: Court of Justice Building in, São Jose ,Santa Catarina State, Brasil. Architectural project by Aldo L. Eickboff. Computer graphics by Pablo Lassalle, Brazil.

Figure 5: Space modeled with ACAD and 3D Studio. Picture adjustment in Adobe Photosop. Modeling Author: Liu YiBing, Shanghai, China.

Figure 6: Model captured from Autodesk's WCT, rendered with 3D Studio MAX. Contains 182,915 polygons.

Figure 7: Embassy Heights, Bangalore, India. Composite view of interiors. Typical Lobby View. Author: Mabesh Murthy. <http://www.vrrt.com/mabesh/mabesh.html>