unthinking
photography

Into the Universe of Rendered Architectural Images

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On the 3rd of January this year, the City of London Corporation released a series of images depicting how the skyline of the Square Mile (London's primary financial district) will look in 2026. The images show the existing buildings of the 'City Cluster' joined by an additional thirteen photo-realistically rendered towers, all but one taller than 100 storeys. Many of these new towers, destined to house financial services and insurance companies, have already been given their obligatory nicknames ranging from the sinister, to the obscene, to the ridiculous. According to this plan, the recently completed Scalpel (52 Lime Street) will eventually be joined by The Diamond (100 Leadenhall Street) and The Can of Ham (70 St Mary Axe). The forecast presented by these images is clear: the future will look much the same as the present; there will simply be more of it.

The confidence of these images is of course incongruent with the lived experience of most London inhabitants contending with the UK's current state of economic and political uncertainty. Determining what might occur and what challenges we may face in the coming year, let alone in 2026, seems beyond the predictive scope of most of us living closer to street level. Yet this is the strange visual rhetoric of the architectural render and its role within a complicated ecology of 'speculative urbanism'.

While the capacity to intervene in the production of urban space or formulate an effective vision of what's to come has appeared increasingly cut off to the general population, long-term development projects and real-estate schemes continue to dictate city transformation well into the future. And we are increasingly inundated with the architectural visualisations that accompany these plans. Displayed on construction hoardings or posted online, realistic or more stylised, architectural renders populated by cheerful and affluent 'render ghosts' seldom present an image of the city fully recognisable to its current citizens. As **Snøhetta** Research Director Julia Dorothea Schlegel suggests, the universe of architectural renders is unfailingly one of "great weather and pretty people".

The production and circulation of increasingly sophisticated renderings of architectural projects can be viewed as the final step in a temporal loop of urban speculation – financial opportunities are identified through market calculations, sections of the city are earmarked for investment and demographic change, then photo-realistic images of these developments are produced that signal the apparent inevitability of this process before it has even begun.

Lawrence Lek and Kode9, 'Nøtel' [film still], 2015-ongoing
multimedia installation, HD video, open world video game, and VR experience dimensions variable

Architectural renders expose the fact that there are essentially two kinds of images in the world – 'representational images' that try to capture or depict reality as it is or was, and 'projective images' that attempt to bring an as yet non-existent reality into being. In our current digital age, fuelled by visualisation, animation and simulation technologies, the presence and power of projective images is rising. But architectural renders also reveal that access to the production of these two different kinds of images in relation to the urban environment is very unevenly distributed. The now necessary role of architectural visualisations within the urban design process has produced a parallel industry of its own with top-level studios commanding prices as high as £10,000 for images and animations produced by highly skilled operators of 3D rendering software like **V-Ray**, **Blender** or **Octane**.

The philosopher who perhaps best helps us think about the nature of these two different kinds of image is Vilém Flusser. Much like Marshall McLuhan, whose writing only came to be fully appreciated retrospectively in the age of the internet, Flusser's thought anticipates the current ubiquity of digital visualizations, models and simulations – what he described as "technical images".

Flusser has often been thought of as a philosopher of photography, but he can be more accurately viewed as a thinker of computational images, with photography representing for him only the first example of this new age of image production. In books such as **Into the Universe of Technical Images** (published in German in 1985), Flusser distinguishes our current era of technical images made by technological apparatuses from an earlier era of traditional images; human-created two-dimensional images that attempted to give the world meaning by representing, depicting and mapping reality. The traditional image, from cave paintings to religious icons, belonged to a universe of magical or mythical meaning, governed by forces outside of human control. Flusser places between these two eras of image production an age of history in which the linear written word would overtake the power of the traditional image in the formation of meaning – a period of superstition being swept away by an era of texts, calculation, narratives and explanations.

Lawrence Lek, 'Play Station VR', 2017
VR for Oculus Rift Headset, duration: 3 min
© Lawrence Lek, courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London.

The prominence of the image has returned in our current era of technical images, Flusser argues, because our texts have ceased to perform their sense making role. The proliferation and growing complexity of these texts – scientific, political, artistic, conceptual – has made them impossible to grasp. Technical images were invented, he claims, to synthesise and remediate our texts, to make them comprehensible again and capable of being absorbed. Flusser explains,

> "Texts have recently shown themselves to be inaccessible . . . They have become unclear. They collapse into particles that must be gathered up. This is the level of calculation and computation, the level of technical images"

Although these lines were written in the 1980s, Flusser's argument rings particularly true in our contemporary age of information overload and the accompanying data visualisations designed to restore coherence to the noise. But Flusser also cautions us that technical images are fundamentally different from the traditional images that preceded them. While traditional images depict or represent the outside world, technical images envision or inform it. Technical images, in other words, are not mirrors but projectors. And what they project outwards, in very circular fashion are our very own models, concepts and texts – what Flusser calls "programs". Technical images, we might say, are not images or representations of the world, they are visions of the world remade to correspond to our own texts, concepts or programs.

Architectural renders are, in many ways, quintessential examples of the technical images Flusser had in mind. As a thought experiment we could develop a whole list of texts and programs embedded within and projected out from architectural visualisations: the software programs used to produce them (with their particular affordances and biases); the architectural CAD (Computer Assisted Design) drawings from which they are derived; the planning documents and maps that divide the city up into intelligible fragments; the economic models that establish the feasibility of a particular development project; the inherent assumptions and ideas of what constitutes a functioning urban environment, etc.

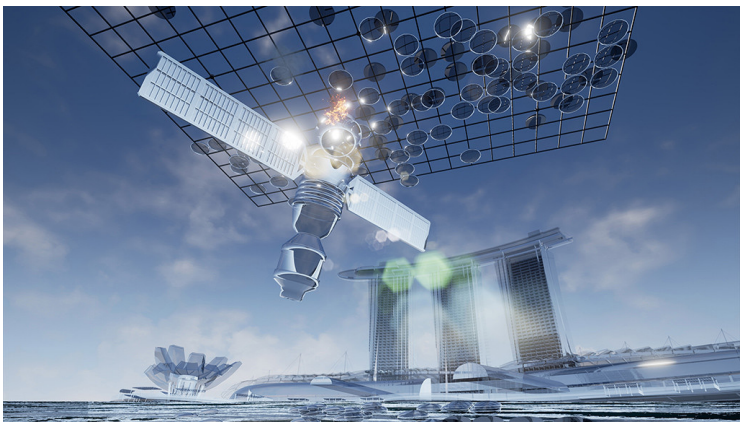
With current advances in rendering and visualisation technology, the connection of these technical images to the data and programs inherent within them is becoming even more direct and synchronised. Building Information Modelling (BIM) systems, for example, generate 3D models embedded with large amounts of structured design and construction data. In the BIM systems promoted by companies like **AutoDesk**, architectural renders are not simply surface images, they are compositions of "intelligent objects" that carry detailed information about themselves, from the properties of materials, to expected energy performance, to maintenance schedules. Image and data are inextricably linked in these models.

Other developments in rendering software, by companies like **Lumion**, are making the translation of CAD drawings to photo-realistic still and animated visualisations virtually automated and instantaneous through the use of image libraries of objects, scenery and materials. Architectural renders, in other words, are increasingly becoming crucial tools within real-time design practices – we could call them "operative" or "operational" images, to use a term employed by both the filmmaker Harun Farocki and the philosopher Sybille Krämer. As operational images, renders need perhaps to be interpreted and questioned less in terms of what they represent, and more in terms of what they are capable of doing, what sorts of effects they bring about, and what kinds of futures they project.

Lawrence Lek, '2065' [film still], 2018
HD video. Stereo sound, duration: 5 min
© Lawrence Lek, courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Flusser's concern with technical images is that at the same time as their importance undeniably grows, we tend to misrecognise their status as mediations of the world. In Flusser's terms, we see them "not as images but as windows", so that when we look at our technical images we imagine that we are looking at the world itself. The problem we face then is that the intricacies and complexities of life and our environment that don't fit easily into our increasingly numerical models and programs are at risk of falling entirely from vision (and our processes of envisioning).

In a circle of self-fulfilling simplification, we project forward via these same technical images a version of reality that envisions and forms the world according to the selective logic of our existing models. We see this process playing out of course within the sphere of urban design in which so many of the elements and experiences that make city life meaningful seem to evade our practices of modelling and visualisation. As the architects Jesse Reiser and Nanako Umemoto note in their **Atlas of Novel Tectonics**, the true horror is not that our digital renders do not adequately represent the actual world, it's that our built environment is increasingly beginning to resemble the generic glossiness presented within them.



Lawrence Lek, 'Geomancer' [film still], 2017
HD video, stereo sound, duration: 48 min 15 sec
© Lawrence Lek, courtesy of the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Commissioned for the Jerwood / Film & Video Umbrella Award.

Flusser believed that it was imperative for artists and thinkers to ensure that a degree of creative improbability was injected into the probable and predictive future envisioned by technical images. Fortunately, a substantial number of contemporary artists and designers are turning the software and image production techniques of rendering towards far more creative ends than large-scale real-estate development. Figures like architect-turned-artist Lawrence Lek shift the architectural render from the domain of property speculation to that of speculative fiction, and like the best examples of that genre, Lek's urban scenarios present a mixture of the provocatively improbable and the frighteningly likely. Neither celebration nor straight-forward critique, Lek's works play in that zone of ambivalence that produces thought. Part of the appeal of the pieces is the way that Lek combines architectural visualisation with material not often synthesised within these models: Chinese cosmologies, philosophies of language, histories of cinema.

In connected works such as 2065 (2018), Geomancer (2017), and Play Station™ (2017), Lek uses architectural animation as a tool for future world building, envisioning the possible relationship between human and machine in the cities to come. His fictional Farsight Corporation, a company claiming to be committed to "aligning advanced artificial intelligence with human interests", features prominently in all three works. Lek's projects take the form of video animations, VR experiences and open-world games, but they all employ the recognisable aesthetics of architectural renders, including the familiar format of the 'drone view' fly through. In the animation Geomancer, for example, the rendered urban cityscape we move through is that of "Sym-Singapore", described as a simulated recreation of the city-state. Through a fragmented narrative, we learn that this the eve of Singapore's centennial celebrations in 2065, a time of advanced AI, automated work and ecological crisis, when humans have abandoned the actual city in favour of urban simulations and virtual games. In the future of Geomancer, it's the AIs, not the humans, that rebel against their predetermined roles and strive to become creative artists. While Flusser feared we were becoming too focused on our technical images, losing sight of the actual world around us with all its complexities, Lek makes use of architectural renders to create a future parable, one in which our obsession with technical images goes even further – where we enter into these images, abandoning the world entirely.

Lawrence Lek, 'Geomancer' [film still], 2017
HD video, stereo sound, duration: 48 min 15 sec
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