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## The Mimetic Drive Of Capital

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Venetian Road Bridge, Los Angeles, 2011.

A white Venetian style bridge at the center of the image divides the green canal water from the blue Californian sky. The canal has a footpath on either side of its banks that emphasize the perspectival force of the image. The houses that face one another across the water are partly hidden by the trees and bushes that run the length of the canal. The shadows of the tops of two Palm trees appear on the surface of the water and softly point towards a small white boat. The scene is quiet and sleepy yet our attention is directed by the perspectival construction at work within the image. The photograph was taken in Venice (Los Angeles) in 2011 and shows one of the remaining canals built in the 1880s by the wealthy tobacco mogul Abbot Kinney. I cannot claim to have 'taken' the photograph as the image was already determined by the architecture of the canal. In other words, while the image is my photograph, the composition was already decided, all I needed to do was move into position and click.

This image space is symptomatic of the condition of the spatialised image: a photographic representation constructed in built space. Norman Klein describes this mutation - of the photographic image into the fabric of the city - as 'scripted space':

*Scripted spaces are a walk through or click through environment (a mall, a church, casino, a theme park, a computer game). They are designed to emphasize the viewers journey - the space between - rather than the gimmicks on the wall. The audience walks into the story. What's more, this walk should respond to viewer's whims, even though each step along the way is pre-scripted (or should I say preordained?). It is gentle repression posing as free will.*<sup>1</sup>

Kinney's *Venice of America*, the visionary cultural experiment, involved an extravagant interpretation of the canals and piazzas of Venice. The resort was originally conceived as a site for cultural learning and knowledge exchange, a scripted environment where Americans could experience the high culture of Europe. Gondolas and Gondoliers were shipped in from Italy and Venetian style buildings were constructed across an area that stretched almost a mile along Santa Monica beach. However, Kinney's vision was not shared by the majority of visitors to the resort who were more interested in spending time on the beach than attending the lectures and cultural events organized at great expense to the resort. The Grand Canal remained a successful amusement park for holidaymakers and when ocean water filled the central lagoon in 1905 there were celebrations across the state of California.

*Venice of America* was most dramatically separated from its European model in the 1920s when the Los Angeles health authorities become uneasy about the cleanliness of the canal water (which was left 'turbid' and 'malodorous' through lack of circulation) and began paving over the main areas of the Grand Canal to make way for new roads. The few remaining canals were left to deteriorate and the clusters of Venetian style buildings became a ruinous hangout for hippies, artists and curious sightseers exploring the more edgy side of Santa Monica Beach. Today there remains a line of four small Venetian style road bridges that provide access to the expensive canal facing residential properties. Dell Avenue, as it is now known, runs parallel with Grand Canal Court and provides Hollywood film directors with a useful location for car chases and picturesque cityscapes. The effect of the camera moving over the small bridges at high speed is reminiscent of scenes with cars

speeding down the steep roads of San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> This revisiting of well-known cinematic effects is perhaps in keeping with the spatial transformation of Kinney's Venice, which from its conception was planned as a spatialized image.



The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino, 2007.

The light blue water, clean brickwork and neat window boxes immediately indicate that this interior is an elaborate reproduction of Venice. What is most striking about the indoor Venice canal is that it is lit to appear as if it were caught within a multitude of time zones. The bright artificial sky contrasts with the warm glow of the tall cast iron period lights. Smaller spotlights are embedded in the cast steps leading down to the canal and there is a soft glow of up lighters beneath the first floor balconies and planted window boxes that line the stage like canal. Shop window displays and hidden ceiling lights contribute to the persistent glow of the interior. The surface of the canal water reflects this constant array of lighting, from yellow to light blue to dark blue and in places almost white (from the false clouds above), the artificial colours are mixed together in the subtle ripples of the water. The photograph of Venetian canals, surrounding walkways, Piazzas and shops was taken in Las Vegas. When I took the photograph in 2007 I believed that I had some influence on the composition and framing of the image even though it was clear that the scene was already composed, all that was left was for me to point and shoot.

Like New York, New York, Luxor or Caesars Palace, the Venetian is both a representational image of another city and a zone of activity that remains subject to its own particular system of governance - providing light relief from the rows of gambling tables that line the floors below. The bars, restaurants and many of the shops are always open. The complex systems that illuminate this specialized image do not change with the natural cycle of the day. The time is set somewhere between day and night. Everything in the image is blazing but there remains a sleepy, intoxicated atmosphere. The twenty-four hour economy is here made possible through the enduring spectacle of the spatialised image.



Tianducheng is an Eerie, Abandoned City of Lights Clone, 08.07.2013.

The view from the central Boulevard of Tianducheng is included in an online newspaper article (travel section) from 2013 that explores some of the reasons why the city remains abandoned.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion in the image of a lonely traveller gives some indication of the origin and orientation of the article. A scaled down replica of the Eiffel Tower stands as an architectural centerpiece of the city of Tianducheng. The Parisian style town houses, fountains and Eiffel Tower are caught within a perspectival order that corresponds to a 'scopic regime' that is often associated with Renaissance painting, a Cartesianism with its faith in a 'geometrized, rationalized, essentially intellectual concept of space'.<sup>4</sup> A period fountain is fixed at the center of the image, forcing the metal tower into the role of a subordinate extra or backdrop. A figure in a dark top and light trousers pulls a bag (on wheels)

across the path breaking the symmetry of the classical composition and producing a sense of emptiness. Like the rows of identical white fronted houses in either side of the image, the Eiffel Tower is mirrored in the still fountain water. The architecture and planting is also mirrored throughout the image. Two rows of darker buildings stand behind the copy of the Eiffel Tower.



Tianducheng 天都城杭州 Ghost town in Hangzhou, 24.09.2013.<sup>5</sup>

From this raised perspective the connecting blocks of brown apartment buildings rise up behind the French townhouses that stand before them. The long leafy boulevard and fountains form a spatialised representation of Paris but there is no sign of the cafes, restaurants, shops and people that would normally be found in the busy French city. In mid Nineteenth century Paris, Baron Haussmann planned his Boulevards to facilitate troop movement and artillery fire in the event of uprisings or protests that might lead to revolution. The more recent brutality of China's response to political protests is well known and it is perhaps no coincidence that Tianducheng, when seen from above, stands as an image of power and state control.

Construction started on Tianducheng in 2007 but the majority of its apartment blocks and French Town houses remain deserted. Like other new cities constructed across China, Tianducheng's existing population is a fraction of what the city was built to house.<sup>6</sup> The spatialised image of Paris is the face of a huge process of

industrialization taking place across China. As Wade Sheppard has recently observed, 'urbanization is a financial movement: each new, city, town and district is an investment.'<sup>7</sup> The increase in the construction of new cities has led to what is known as ghost cities, huge business and residential developments which remain unpopulated - or themed suburbs such as the British, Dutch and German style towns situated around Shanghai that are mostly used by visitors in search of backdrops for wedding photos. The focus on financial planning and state investment in Tianducheng and many other newly built cities has driven the spatialised image to a new phase of production. The result of this increasing urbanization is that cities no longer have time to evolve and develop. They are instead constructed as instant worlds.



Marketing image. New Songdo, South Korea.

The marketing of New Songdo in South Korea describes how the newly built city has combined the best aspects of other cities from across the world to produce a major business center. The canals of Venice, New York Central Park, and the broad tree lined boulevards of Paris, shopping malls are modeled on the bazaars of Marrakesh and there is a newly built harbor side opera house based on the iconic Sydney Opera House. As Keller Easterling observes, 'Songdo is a double of Seoul in an expansion of the Incheon free Trade territories. It is the city in the box that developer Stanley Gale plans to reproduce elsewhere in the world.'<sup>8</sup>

This pick and mix approach to urban planning delivers a loose resemblance to iconic urban landmarks around the world which then mutate back from spatialized image to media image. Promotional films and digital renderings (such as the image shown here) focus in on the connection the city has with famous landmarks while illustrating a Frankenstein city absent of human life. The image is designed to show New Songdo as a 'smart virtual world' built for global corporations.<sup>9</sup>

Images of new cities (such as New Songdo) are produced by developers for the purpose of marketing to multinational businesses that have an interest in moving to lucrative financial centres. The highly rendered media image and promotional video are required to embody social cohesion alongside economic growth. In other words, representations of new urban spaces are produced to persuade us that the architectural structures planned for urban redevelopment are going to provide a better life. While the images of idealised replica cities are presented as a context for modern living, their main function is to secure the occupation of a dominant ideological system. This tension between social cohesion and the interests of capital is embodied within the generic media image and it is here that the development of urban space reflects a broader restructuring and ordering of political and economic systems. The move away from outward looking global economics or even sovereign nation states is marked by an increasing emphasis on sovereign city-states or economic zones. This shift reflects the collapse of older social, economic and cultural systems and, perhaps most concerning of all, provides a new infrastructure for failing governments to more easily legitimize inequality.

As we have seen, building new cities often involves doubling existing cities and that these doppelgangers provide the state with the opportunity to benefit from a more advantageous political or economic situation.<sup>10</sup> While many of these cities are not identical replicas of their metropolitan twin, the duplicate often functions as a 'free economic zone'. They are attractive to governments and global corporations because they can be easily designated as a zone and as such exempt from regional laws that regulate working conditions, minimum pay, tax and employment rights etc.<sup>11</sup> These silent doubles are built as adjacent worlds and are subject to legal systems tailored to the interests of cooperate investors. Free economic zones can also be used to keep people out, functioning as wealthy financial centers for another city situated nearby.<sup>12</sup>

In each case there is a doubling that corresponds to the logic of the photographic image. The reproduction of an existing world, the semblance to a place already

familiar and the bringing into the present of the past. This image construction can be easily read as a spatialised representation of Venice or Paris or, as we have seen, a new city modeled on a nearby or adjacent metropolis. The logic of the photographic image is extended through a staged resemblance that also remains governed by laws particular to it and perhaps most importantly, laws that open up financial opportunities for the market. In other words, the dual operation of the spatialised image, as it works to reproduce and extend the logic of the photographic image, goes on to produce a spatial manifestation of the market. The economic aspirations of multinational corporations are here, in these sites of speculation and investment capital, represented through the aesthetic, structural and material likeness to other cities.

Today we are experiencing a turn to the spatialised image and, as Frederic Jameson argued in relation to Postmodernism,<sup>13</sup> it is increasingly evident that these new forms stand as a representation of a groundless and disjointed social landscape. The ubiquity of the canals of Venice or the Boulevards of Paris, city plans that replicate traffic systems and monuments from other cities and spatial representations that emerge from the influence of entertainment space (Disney) on city planning, in each image space we are confronted by a social and political condition symptomatic of the material environments in which we live, an urban landscape that speaks of a future increasingly dominated by market forces. Rather than a mere picturesque staging of the world, the spatialised image signals a complex mutation of visual representation into new capitalist modes of production. It is this very staging that incorporates a particular economic and cultural ecology: from the ruins of city utopias to the construction of inward looking city-states, the collapse of the nation state is marked by a turn to the independent and largely unequal replica city in which the spatialised image takes center stage. Put differently, the atomized and metonymic condition of the modern city is enacted through the spatialised image: a photographic representation constructed in built space that establishes the sovereignty of city-state over the sovereignty of nation. Caught within the uneven and disorientating economic conditions of new city-states, we are faced with an increasing need to look more closely at the scripted environments that constitute our embodied experience. It is the very persistence of this interrogation that forces a better understanding of the spatialised image and it is here, in the image space of image life, that the mimetic drive of capital stands as an impetus for rethinking the function of the city in the production of subjectivity, community and culture.

<sup>1</sup> Norman Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*, London, The New Press, 2004, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Films such as *Bullitt* (1968) where Steve McQueen speeds over the hills in his Ford Mustang GD fastback specially fitted with Dodge Chargers.

<sup>3</sup> The newspaper is called HUFF POST: Travel and the article titled: Paris In China: Tianducheng Is An Eerie, Abandoned City Of Lights Clone: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/07/paris-china-tianducheng\\_n\\_3714385.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/07/paris-china-tianducheng_n_3714385.html)

<sup>4</sup> Martin Jay, *Scopic Regimes of Modernity*, in 'Visual and Visuality', Hal Foster (Ed), Washington: Dia Arts Foundation, 1988, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> This image was taken from a flickr site and is titled 'Tianducheng 天都城杭州 Ghost town in Hangzhou' <https://www.flickr.com/photos/peteriveson/9914768914/in/photostream/>

<sup>6</sup> The development is estimated to accommodate 10,000 residents but it remains largely uninhabited.

<sup>7</sup> Wade Sheppard, *Ghost Cities of China*, London: Zed Books, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Keller Easterling, *Extra State Craft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, London: Verso, 2014, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.theurbandeveloper.com/songdo-paves-the-way-for-the-smart-cities-of-the-future/>

<sup>10</sup> Such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen or Seoul and New Songdo.

<sup>11</sup> These zones allow governments to easily grant legal exemptions to large cooperation wanted to invest. Easterling, *Extra State Craft*, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Municipalities in China lead the way in this form of doubling, Shanghai has Pudong, Kunming has Chenggong and Beijing has a new financial district, Easterling, *Extra State Craft* p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991.