

THE LEGIBLE CITY

preview Maastricht '88, Manhattan version, Nagoya '89

Amsterdam version, Amsterdam '90, Karlsruhe version, Karlsruhe '91

In THE LEGIBLE CITY the visitor is able to bicycle in a simulated representation of a city. This virtual city is constituted by computer generated three dimensional letters that form words and sentences along the sides of the streets. Using the ground plans of actual cities - Manhattan, Amsterdam and Karlsruhe - the existing architecture of these cities is completely replaced by a new architecture of letters and text. All texts for THE LEGIBLE CITY were written by Dirk Groeneveld.

A modified folding bicycle is used as the interface between the viewer and the image. Its steering handle and pedals are linked to the computer, and give the viewer interactive control over travel direction and speed. The physical effort of bicycling in the real world is thus gratuitously transposed into the virtual world, affirming the absurd yet euphoric conjunction of the zealous body in the virtual domain. A video projector is used to project the computer generated image onto a large screen. Another small monitor screen in front of the bicycle shows a simple ground plan of each city with a moving dot to indicate the momentary position of the bicyclist there.

In THE LEGIBLE CITY the viewer bicycles through a virtual city that is constituted by an urban architecture of letters and texts. Bicycling through these cities of words is consequently a journey of reading. Choosing the path one takes is a choice of certain texts and their spontaneous juxtapositions. The identity of these new cities thus becomes the conjunction of the meanings these words generate as one travels freely around in the virtual city space.

The MANHATTAN version of this work the texts are eight separate fictional story lines in the form of monologues by ex-Mayor Koch, Frank Lloyd Wright, Donald Trump, a tour guide, a confidence trickster, an ambassador and a taxi driver. Each story line has a specific lettering colour so that the bicyclist can choose to follow the path of a particular narration. In the AMSTERDAM and KARLSRUHE versions all the letters are scaled so that they have the same proportion and location as the actual buildings which they replace, resulting in a transformed representation of the actual architectural appearance of these cities. The texts are largely derived from archive documents that describe mundane historical events there.

A city is simultaneously a tangible arrangement of forms and an immaterial pattern of experiences. Its architecture is an architecture of the imagination, its identity is a psycho-geographic network of information, a labyrinth of narrative pathways that is secreted within its urban plan. The city that is re-constructed by media technology is a new territory of exploration - mirroring the objective world into a virtual imaginative space, it deconstructs its material structures and evokes a fluid poetics of space and person and intimate experience.