

Ghosts of Copenhagen

Michael Birn

Ghosts of Copenhagen is a spatial strategy developed through staging. Architecture is expanded to include terms such as action, story and backdrop, thus opening itself up to a scenographic perspective. The quality of this architecture lies in being a space of humans who are not “users” or “staff-ages”, but animate it as complex characters and directly influence its form. From this perspective, architecture appears as a further character that sets boundaries for actions, comments on, contrasts or supports them. The built space and the human being are in a direct and complex interaction.

Ghosts of Copenhagen is a multimedia artifact with its own definition of functionality resulting from a multitude of parameters. Its immersive character entices the viewer to expand definitions of architecture based on their own perception. The work combines the architectural elements and objects represented by the model with the specific technical requirements of the installation (monitors, glass panels, cabling, etc.) and the spatial requirements resulting from the narrative. The hierarchy between narrative (film) and space is suspended. While perception in a movie theater usually has to decide between the narrated film space and the cinema auditorium, in *Ghosts of Copenhagen* these coincide: Exhibition space (1:1), model (1:15) and film form a single unit.

DESCRIPTION OF THE OBJECT

Ghosts of Copenhagen is an animated installation [Fig. 1]. A hyper-realistic scale model of a Copenhagen ‘Bown Bar’ is animated by hologram-like figures with the help of the ‘Pepper's Ghost effect’ [Fig. 2]. This illusion trick, developed in the 19th century, is named after the English scientist John Henry Pepper (1821-1900). It uses a flat glass set at an 45° angle and special lighting to create the impression that partially transparent objects appear and disappear. A similar method, known as the ‘Schüfftan process’, was used to create spectacular film effects, for example in *Metropolis*.¹ Hidden loudspeakers play sound collages that support the immersive, ‘magical’ character of the installation [Fig. 3-9].

CAFE INTIME

Located in Copenhagen's Frederiksberg district, the real-life *Cafe Intime* offers its guests live music every day and fascinated me from my very first visit. A local friend, who was already fully immersed in the alternative realities of this famous-infamous place, took me along. Since then, I visited *Cafe Intime* every time I was in Copenhagen to observe and understand what was really happening here. This work is therefore also my own logbook and the artistic interpretation of a place that constantly challenges my perception with its seductive allure. There is a special atmosphere in *Cafe Intime*. On the one hand, it is created by the interior, which has grown over 120 years and is characterized by dark wood paneling, heavy carpets and countless paintings, photographs and curious objects, between which hangs the smell of cigarette smoke and beer. On the other hand, of course, the guests play a key role in this atmosphere. There is an open interaction between a very heterogeneous audience. Old and young, rich and poor, artists and employees meet here to enjoy jazz, creating a place of exchange and unbiased social friction. *Ghosts of Copenhagen* is a work that stems from a real experience and has a concrete, locatable starting point. This locality expanded when the neighboring theater *Riddersalen* made its stage available to us for the filming. The balance between my artistic freedom and the sensitive handling of this real existing microcosm was of great importance for this work.

THE GHOSTS

A pianist takes a translucent beer glass from the floor and places it on the bar, where it objectifies itself as a physical (model) glass: He 'builds' his physical space, there is a story about why this glass is right here and not somewhere else. The shape of the physical space is subject to a narrative reason. The actions of the ghosts follow a non-linear narrative. Figures appear and disappear in an endless loop, reminding us of typical regulars in a bar and its staff. At the same time, there is something mythologically charged about their appearances, their costumes. Their multidimensional nature encourages speculation about their identity. It remains open to what extent the ghosts are aware of the presence of others. Do they share a common experiential space?

THE SHARED HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE AND SCENOGRAPHY

Scenography has always been part of architecture: ancient theater stages were a continuation of the city, baroque palaces staged the ideal of a state, in the work of Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841)

urban planning and stage design join hands.² It was only with what is known as façade architecture from the world of commerce that the staged in architecture was increasingly viewed critically.³

BACKDROP AND MOVIE

With the advent of digital image processing technologies, it has become common practice in architecture to create photorealistic images - renderings - of buildings before they are constructed. Such moving images in particular are very similar to fictional films. A dramaturgy and the resulting staging is the consequence and brings architecture closer to production design/scenography. A house is not staged after its completion, but the house tries to satisfy the expectations of its previous staging, its 'image'. A turn towards people can be clearly seen, at least in the sense of anticipating an immersive experience of the building project, and one can see a democratization of architecture in this, as laypeople can now also 'understand' architecture (which they understandably often find difficult on the basis of floor plans and sections). This raises questions about the understanding of architecture and what is expected of it: What happens when space is reduced from a three-dimensional experience (including the experience of real spatial sound and smells etc.) to a two-dimensional representation? What view of humanity underlies the scenarios of these digital worlds?

As a film architect, I have often been attracted to the backs of movie sets, which have a deeply appealing aesthetic of their own. Here, the backdrop does not give itself away, it has its own aesthetic that empowers the viewer. Those who look behind the scenes are not necessarily disappointed. On the contrary: they are empowered by a kind of Brechtian alienation effect and have gained a new insight. *Ghosts of Berlin* does not hide its backsides, they are part of the aesthetic experience. The actual experience is generated by the viewers themselves and is only partly the result of visual tricks. This is also something we know about film: despite the complicated production methods that remain hidden from the viewer in the cinema, the magic of a particular scene - the so-called 'fairy dust' - is part of a truthfulness that is based on tricks, but results from the feelings of the viewers themselves. The knowledge that the person shown is only an actor, that the concrete shown is made of thin slabs of wood or that the narrated time is a result of the montage does not change this. The craft is known, but the experience is not broken. It is not unusual for the back to tell us more about a work than its visible side.

ARCHITECTURE AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Artistic research makes it possible to expand existing perceptions of architecture. As an architect, I am interested in how the individual - and not 'human' - is reflected in his built environment. Since each and every individual has very complex characteristics and sometimes acts in contradictory ways, the classic architectural concept of function - based on needs such as warmth, light, air, etc. - is only applicable to a very limited extent. Through artistic research, it is possible to integrate narration as a functional factor in architecture in order to generate new spatial qualities.

In the narrative, a different relationship between people and architecture/space comes to the fore: a graffiti artist who appropriates a house wall, a craftswoman who feels compelled to lay her pipes in an unconventional way, a child who transforms a windowsill into a mountain plateau are everyday events that make direct reference to our built environment, but are difficult to use as a universally valid spatial strategy - their character is too unique and too individual. And yet we are very familiar with the results of these space-creating actions.

The individual relationship between people and space can be found impressively, for example, in Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*.⁴ In his memories of how he merged with the house of his childhood while playing hide-and-seek behind the curtain or how the table under which he sat became a temple, Benjamin describes a personal perception of the place.

Looking at architecture from a subjective perspective is classically a field of activity in scenography. This is where my personal interest and a field of research for architecture comes from: How can the value of individual experience be used as a space-creating strategy? What spatial strategies result from viewing architecture as an 'extended backdrop' and how can the term 'backdrop' be used in architecture without its negative connotations?

Personal experience - immersion - is an essential component of my artistic research. My work intends initially to arouse a childlike curiosity, a desire to surrender to the experience, to be enchanted by the magic of a trick, in order to face a reflection in the second step. This sequence from the individual to the objectifiable also corresponds to the perception of architecture in films. However, the installation - unlike a film - enables the spatial analysis of what is experienced: How are the

individual parts of this experimental set-up connected? What role does the scale play? How could the effect be repeated with different parameters?

Performers / actors: Aja Skafte, Githa Schulz, Jesper Arntzen, Jørgen Nielsen, Lars Leths, Magnus Gabrielsen, Skipper, Stine Bukholt

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Figure 1. Installation view (Photograph by author)

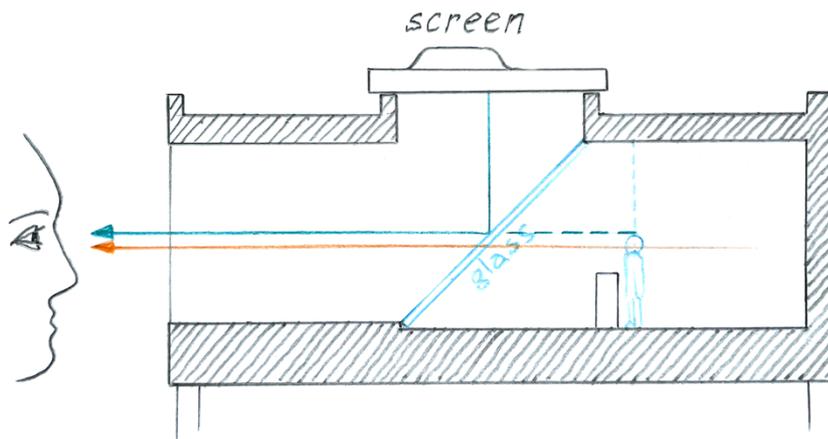


Figure 2. Principle of the "Pepper's ghost effect" (Drawing by author)



Figure 3. Detail shots: interaction between the holograms and the physical space (Photographs by author)



Figure 4. Detail shots: interaction between the holograms and the physical space (Photographs by author)

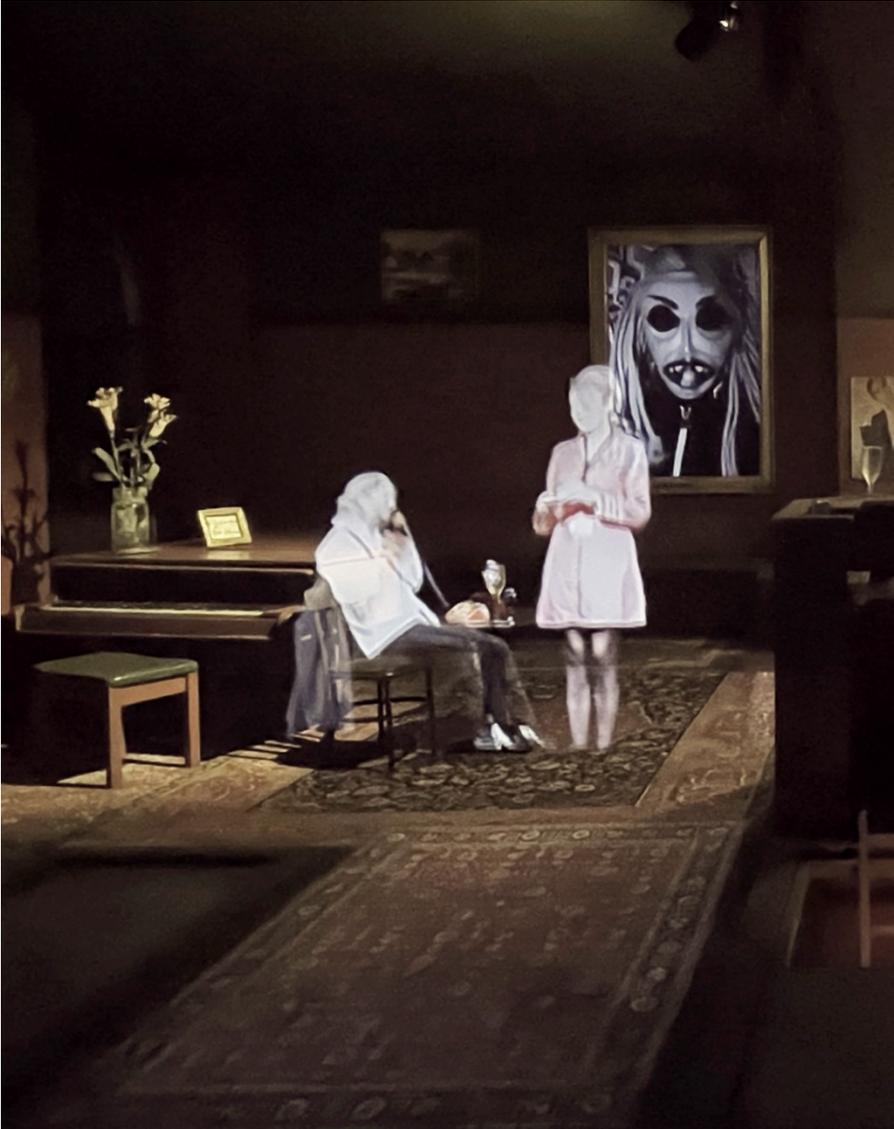


Figure 5. Detail shots: interaction between the holograms and the physical space (Photographs by author)



Figure 6. Detail shots: interaction between the holograms and the physical space (Photographs by author)



Figure 7. Detail shots: interaction between the holograms and the physical space (Photographs by author)



Figure 8. Detail shots: interaction between the holograms and the physical space (Photographs by author)



Figure 9. Detail shots: interaction between the holograms and the physical space (Photographs by author)

Bibliography

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Bio

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Notes

¹ Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, (1927, Universum-Film AG).

² Stefanie Bürkle, *Szenografie einer Großstadt: Berlin als städtebauliche Bühne*, (Parthas Berlin, 2012).

³ Gernot Böhme, *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus*, (edition suhrkamp, Suhrkamp, 2016).

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, (Suhrkamp, 2010).