Virtual environments are seen nowadays as extensions of our physical activities in the city. Are people, however, aware what the digitally mediated cities they live in are? The starting point of my paper is a question of how computer-generated images (CGIs) influence human perception of real space. I am interested in the conflict between a vision and reality, which occurs when an architectural project materialises in a public space and is subsequently rejected by the inhabitants. To explain this conflict, I will use the notion of digital utopias and compare CGIs with the great tradition of “paper” architecture. I will analyse two case studies from a medium-sized Polish city—Poznań. The first case is a redevelopment of the Main Railway Station; the second is a re-design of a local square in Poznań. The analysis focuses on the ambiguity of CGIs used to advertise new investments. The Station in the phase of digital visualisation was appreciated by the Poznań inhabitants but when the project was finally realised, strong criticism of its users followed. The second one provoked public protests already in the phase of visualisation. In conclusion, I state that the concept of agonistic public spaces should be expanded and its virtual dimension should be taken into consideration as well. When dealing with hyper-realistic CGIs, we experience a certain utopia. Confronted with their material execution, we often experience dystopian disillusion which stirs us into action.

Keywords: city utopia; re-design; computer-generated images; public space
The two examples of public spaces in Poznań I will discuss in my paper might be a perfect illustration of the old saying that hindsight is always better than foresight. The buildings and spaces I am going to talk about were accepted quite enthusiastically by audiences when their digital visualisations were presented for the first time. During the phase of planning and construction, they were awaited with great anticipation. However, when the construction phase was eventually completed, they proved to be a huge disappointment to the users. All the shortcomings, overlooked in the visualisation, surfaced. Was it because the structures were badly designed? Mis-calculated? Or were the expectations of the future users of buildings fed with smooth surfaces of realistic-looking images?

Elisabeth Grosz noted that introducing digital technologies into everyday life transformed our perception of urban environments. She wrote:

Perhaps the most striking transformation effected by these technologies is the change in our perceptions of materiality, space, and information, which is bound directly or indirectly to affect how we understand architecture, habitation, and the built environment.\(^1\)

The consequences of the change described above are visible in the high hopes, which contemporary inhabitants of cities pin on urban planners and developers. The city should be not only comfortable, user friendly and well governed, but also connected to the internet. We want to be and act in both, physical and virtual space at the same time. As William J. Mitchell noted: “Our actions in physical space are closely and unobtrusively coupled with our actions in cyberspace.”\(^2\) Mitchell’s concept directs our attention towards a dichotomy which features in augmented reality: it contains both physical and virtual experiences. This dichotomy, the opposition of vision and reality, or virtual and physical entities in mediated public space will be a useful conceptual aid in the analysis of the processes which occur in the city.

We are not only actors of augmented reality, but “true inhabitants of electronically mediated environments” as well.\(^3\) What does it mean to live in mediually expanded reality? One of many features of digitally mediated life is proliferation of views which mix images of materiality with hyperreal simulations. As Baudrillard famously observed, those simulations are more attractive, more seductive and more convincing that reality itself. What happens if we are offered a digitally re-worked and improved vision of the city we live in? We will do anything to realise it. Our urban imagination is shaped to a great extent by digital images—photographic reproductions of edifices designed by “starchitects” or fantastic visions of cities visualised by creators of video games.

**THE METHOD**

In the paper I would like to look at the friction between visualisations and material outcomes of completion of architectural and urban plans and, therefore, I refer to images and comments published on popular community websites dedicated to contemporary Polish architecture (bryla.pl) and local news (poznan.naszemiasto.pl, mmpoznan.pl). I draw on opinions of various people affected by the projects—local inhabitants, tourists and also experts experienced in analysing contemporary architecture. Similarly, the images I describe in the text come from publicly accessible sources. I limited the visual material to the visualisations and photographs published in the media, and decided not to use my own visual documentation. I realise that having lived and observed changes in Poznań for the last 20 years, I will not be able to avoid voicing personal opinions in the text. This personal perspective becomes particularly evident when I analyse the visual material. As I write knowing the outcome of the projects, I cannot avoid confronting the visualisations and their physical equivalents. This self-knowledge implies that an absolutely objective analysis of visual material is impossible and that it always conveys unconscious connotations.\(^4\)

This article is consequently positioned in the field of interdisciplinary cultural research which builds links between theory and empirical reflection on people’s everyday experiences, as well as emphasising participatory observation and discourse analysis. The remarks on integrative approach, made by Paula Saukko, perfectly support my choice of approach. As she writes:

The distinctive feature of cultural studies is the way in which it combines a hermeneutic focus on lived realities, a (post)structuralist critical analysis of discourses that mediate our experiences and realities, and a contextualist/realist investigation of historical, social, and political structures of power.\(^5\)
In my paper, I utilise all the features of the integrative approach listed above. I take into consideration everyday realities of city life, the critical perspective on media discourse and the context of local social and political structures of power. The goal of this article is to examine the gap between computer-generated images and their physical manifestations. The text is divided into three sections. The first one follows the historical paths of utopias and considers the relationship between computer technologies and paper architecture; the second compares two architectural projects from Poznań, and analyses people’s reactions to the materialised visions of the architects. In the conclusive third part, I consider a vision of a city as an agonistic space, where finding a consensus between the clashing powers, local communities, city councils, investors and developers, seems to be impossible. The article, however, will inevitably, to some extent be a personal narration about the city I live in, filtered through all my fears and expectations. In my opinion, this autobiographical autoreflexive filter might be an advantage, especially in an analysis of a city space, a space which is always perceived by its inhabitants.

DIGITAL IMAGING AS A TOOL OF CREATING A NEW URBAN UTOPIA

The narrator of a poignant film Vacancy by Matthias Müller touched the very core of utopian projects describing Brasilia, the symbol of a modernistic urban utopia, as “the city not for now but for the future”. At this point, I would like to consider briefly the principles of urban utopias and e-topias in order to establish the philosophical basis of digital architectural design. Let us start with Elisabeth Grosz who writes: “Utopias are the spaces of phantasmatically attainable political and personal ideals, the projection of idealized futures; embodiment, though, is that which has never had its place within utopias.”

When utopia is embodied, it loses its utopian potential. Why can it not find its materialisation? The explanation lies in the philosophical source of the term. In Greek ou-topos means “no-place”, and eu-topos a “good place”. Both terms sound the same (they are homophones) but they are philosophically ambivalent. In her analysis of the origin of the term, Grosz recalls Thomas More’s ambiguous interpretation. Although utopia evokes the notion of a “happy” and “good place” that people dream about, it is a no-place as well, and therefore it cannot be materialised. She emphasises that it “cannot be regarded as topological at all,” because it exist only potentially and belongs to the future.

From antiquity urban utopias were mostly narrated in philosophical dissertations or drawn. Only some were embodied, usually as examples in discussions about society and politics. While urban utopias in their very sense cannot be materialised, the projects of ideal cities use utopian inspirations and incorporate them into the bodies of real cities. The Renaissance urban plans reflect this tradition. Ideal cities use philosophical concept of a “good life” to create a perfect society, ruled by laws that are seen as appropriate for the chosen model of humanity. There are some noteworthy illustrations of ideal cities in Poland. One of them is Zamość, a Renaissance city on a regular geometrical grid, built by Jan Zamoyski and designed by an Italian architect, Bernardo Morando.

Both models of utopian and of ideal city met in modernity. Philosophers dreamt of materialising a vision of a perfect, ordered society in a physical space. Architects, therefore, had to become social engineers. The foundation of the modern fusion between an architect and an engineer was underpinned by a belief that a city is a working organism, a living machine which can be controlled by political powers. Thus, firstly, the city has to be examined, then, secondly, it has to be transformed through the means of urban construction. The ambition of transforming societies through cities was, however, never limited to a specific location but aimed to engulf the whole world. As Ewa Rewers noted:

Urban utopias which were constructed by modern societies did not conceal their claims to universality and under its cover proposed a new, more ideal world, where a city was “just” a laboratory, even if the experiment was on a scale of Brasilia.

Today, as Rewers persuades, the modern laboratory has been replaced with a “workshop,” where seemingly conflicting approaches are tested by a wide variety of bricoleurs: urban planners, philosophers, technocrats, inventors and artists. In the urban workshop, technologies meet ecologies and programmers cooperate with architects. It is the world, which William J. Mitchell called e-topia.
e-Topia is neither an ou-topos (because it has its place, both in physical and virtual space) nor an ideal city. It exists, because we live in a technologically mediated milieu. It incorporates some features of eu-topos, not in the sense of a good life derived from Greek philosophy with its values as aretē (virtues) and phronesis (practical and ethical wisdom), but because e-topia is convenient and flexible. Its residents have everything within their reach, on the screens of personal computers and mobile phones, even though they are not very focused on cognition. e-Topia is not ideal either. It embraces too many conflicting points of view to create a harmonious structure. Our new electronic cities are a mixture of virtual and physical features which facilitate our existence. As e-topia’s everyday life cannot go on without a technologically mediated infrastructure, its construction requires competences that go beyond artistic visions and philosophical ideas, and demands cooperation between humanities and science.

Rivka and Robert Oxman observe that computer technologies change the relation between architects and engineers. “This cultural evolution is pre-eminently expressed in the expanded collaborative relationships that have developed in the past decade between architects and structural engineers, relationships which have been responsible for the production, worldwide, of a series of iconic buildings.”

It undermines the position of an architect, who from the age of Enlightenment was a central figure in a city, and, instead of architectural visionaries, elevates engineers. If we looked back at the history of architecture, we would observe that the change happened gradually. As early as the 18th century, Étienne-Louis Boullée, a great architectural visionary, posed a question: “Is architecture merely a fantastic art belonging to the realm of pure invention or are its basic principles derived from Nature?” and argued that the genius of an architect guides us towards Truth and Harmony through the means of rational geometry. His vision of architecture was, undoubtedly, utopian and existed in the sphere of pure imagination. Could we regard the architectural drawings by architects like Boullée or Claude Nicolas Ledoux as futuristic? They illustrated (similarly to Boullée’s Cenotaph for Isak Newton) the base concepts of aesthetics and philosophy and were never intended to be built. They were virtual in the sense of their potentiality. We should note that unlike digital architectural projects, drawings are always theoretical and never illusionistic, as their aim is to examine the structure of Reason. With time the position of an architect has changed, but its worth remembering that the tradition of theoretical architecture has found its continuation in the works of Bernardo Tschumi, Daniel Liebeskind and Peter Eisenman.

The modernist movement emphasised the role of an engineer who worked not for universal Reason, but for a New Society. In the opinion of the one of Bauhaus’s founders, Walter Gropius, “the products of intellectual, social and technical determinants of our times” will replace “caprices of a small number of architects.” As a result, modern urban projects integrate engineering practice, ideological vision of society and metaphorical expression. Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse finds the metaphor of community in a “modulor”—a model of a perfect human body, and Lucio Costa’s and Oscar Niemeyer’s Brasilia in a figure of a cross/a bird/a plane that might be recognised in an urban structure. Brasilia was supposed to be not only a triumph of modern engineering but a readable symbol of a new nation as well. The architect cannot rely just on his vision, talents and intuition any longer. He has to be educated in the technical aspects of construction (the skill which evokes the Renaissance practice of art based on technical abilities), and, equally important, in team work. Gropius continues: “An architect of the future—if he will decide to return to the top—will have to come closer to processes of building production again.”

The echoes of the move towards integrity of architectural, urban and technological practices can still be heard today. The change, inspired by new materials and structures, transforms the principles of imagination, which finds new inspiration in virtual space and enables experiments with 3D modelling. Computer modelling, programming and simulating create virtual copies of reality. As Oxmans observed: “No longer a posteriori, the design engineer is now up-front at the earliest generative stage, bringing to the fore the design content of materialisation and fabrication technologies.”

Thus, on the one hand, architectural design, which corresponds with technologies and engineering infrastructure, should be practical and
realistic, but on the other hand, it is an illusion of harmonious human interactions. A new *e-u-topia* is created—coexistence of people, nature and machines. What do these new utopists dream about? Mitchell describes e-city as lively, friendly, wealthy and happy.

The electronically enabled shift of activities back to the home, and in formation of twenty-four-hour, pedestrian scale neighborhoods that are rich in possibilities for local secondary social relationships, potentially produce the conditions for vigorous local community life, for the formation of social and cultural capital in ways that have seemed lost.14

Modernists’ image of an ordered, disembodied and abstract city (a “machine for living”) was replaced by an image of a city emerging from R. Florida’s concept of cultural capital, where cultural differences contribute to the prosperity of the city and enrich identity of the inhabitants. As I present further on, these visions are often created using the means of computer-generated images.

According to Gillian Rose’s research into architectural practices in the re-design of living areas, contemporary architects treat digital imaging as “canvases for expression,” or “self-confident visual statements.” Those individual expressions are the basis for the further design process which involves negotiations with investors, experts and local communities. The effects are constantly input onto the virtual representation of the space. Images are disputed and argued. In the end, visions which consist of many pieces of interests of clashing groups are implemented into physical reality. Gradually changing CGIs reflect the negotiations and remain, throughout, the basis for the process of place-making.

To explain the features of CGIs, I will refer to the project of Gillian Rose, Monica Degen and Clare Melhuish called *Visualising atmospheres: digital placemaking in the 21st century*, which analysed the rebuilding of a ruined district of Msheireb in Doha. The authors described the venture using such adjectives as anthological, mutable, embodied, interfacial and spreadable. Let us consider in a few words the context in which the words were used. The first word, *anthological*, refers to the ability to amalgamate many varied fragments into the most appropriate form for the space which is being designed. The anthology is, thus, constructed using different materials and disciplines, and involves a constant collaborative effort of architects, urban planners and visualisers. The second word, *mutable*, directs us to a potential for change. The design is unstable, because it is permanently negotiated and modified both by designers and developers. The third adjective refers to the power of place-making by simulating the local context. CGIs are *embodied* because they utilise recognisable local materialities and use realistic images of people. The aim of the embodiment is to enable the spectator to “feel” the place, or to rephrase; CGIs use the “language of affect” to immerse the viewer in the image. The forth adjective, *interfacial*, describes qualities which are a consequence of mutability of digital images. CGIs are interfacial, because they move from a digital to printed form, travel between servers situated in varied geographical locations and, what is crucial, are part of the communication process between individuals involved in the process of design. We could say that CGIs do not have their final visual form as they might be modified indefinitely. And finally, they are *spreadable* due to their potential for proliferation within diverse media and in a variety of spaces—from physical public space (i.e. as advertising billboards), 3D models on websites or reproductions in printed folders. Rose, Degen and Melhuish notice that “spreadability also has its frictions, as the media through which images are presented have different visual affordances.”15

CGIs seem to be a convenient tool for placemaking which facilitates preprogramming of interactions between human, infrastructural and natural agents. We should remember, however, that the basic principle of CGIs, which present future rebuilding (or “revitalisation”) projects, is to sell them. Therefore, images of commercial and private spaces are rhetoric (I will discuss this notion in the last part of the article) and persuasive tools for winning new clients. This is why the researchers called the project in Msheireb the “reinvention” of the place and emphasised its power of manipulation achieved by balancing on the line between reality and illusion.

Realism and atmosphere therefore constantly compete against each other within the frame of images as they are manipulated to produce evocations of a ‘dream world’ that meets the client’s brief and sells the idea of the project to those who will mobilise resources for its translation into reality.16
To conclude: until CGIs stay in the cyberspace (without any representation in the physical space) and follow the tradition of paper architecture, they might be criticised or appraised. The problem begins when they are materialised. What thus is the status of CGIs? Most often they are neither utopias nor plans of ideal cities, but objects of commodification: they are used to advertise and sell a product, a certain vision of a city. We shall see what happens when those commodified images are presented to the public in the next part of the paper.

THE CHRONICLE OF TWO CONSTRUCTION SITES IN POZNAŃ

As I mentioned at the very beginning, both cases I will describe are located in the city I live in, Poznań. It is a middle-sized city in the Western part of Poland with a population of about six hundred thousands inhabitants. The city is known for the motor industry, the International Fair, a few good universities (Adam Mickiewicz University, Medical University, University of Economics, University of Arts) which ensure a steady flow of new inhabitants, the International Festival of Street Theatres and, last but not least, a decent football team.

On the wave of enthusiasm for the UEFA European Championships, which were held in Poland and Ukraine in 2012, a great number of major new investments were announced. Poznań, which was chosen as one of the four cities where football matches took place, followed suit. A series of large-scale renovations was planned, among them, reconstruction of a communication junction in the very heart of the city, new airport, redevelopment of the football stadium, new tram connections and small construction projects in the historic centre (some of these projects are still under construction). Construction of a new Central Railway Station replacing the old one was the icing on the cake.

The investor, the Hungarian Trigranit corporation chosen to undertake the venture, was experienced in the implementation of many commercial projects in Central Europe and Poland itself. The construction, financed both from the public and private funds, had started in 2011 but was officially inaugurated in an atmosphere of great excitement a month before the first football match. Designers decided not to renovate the old building, which would have been a complicated and long-drawn process, but to build the new edifice next to the old one. The Main Railway Station was combined with a bus station and a huge shopping mall.

Soon after the announcement of construction, the first visualisations were presented in newspapers and on the internet. They showed an open space, dominated by a white and blue edifice of glass and concrete. The images offered a perspective which ended with a renovated body of the old station, also clad in glass. From the visualised point of view the project seemed to be “on human scale”: human figures were quite prominent, the railway station building complemented the shopping centre situated at the back. The colours of the image: light-coloured ground and blue sky create a pleasant first impression, where the modern (the new edifice) and the historic (the old building) harmonise. The image is a perfect example of one of the aims of CGIs I mentioned earlier—visualisation of an atmosphere. However, it is also a tool of commodification. It is worth remembering that this particular perspective and specific colours are the tricks of the trade of advertising companies, utilised in visualisations in order to present the most appealing vision of a new development (Figure 1).

The progress of the construction was eagerly followed by journalists, passengers and passers by. Twenty-four-hour monitoring was installed and everybody could watch the development of the investment on the internet. On 20th February 2012, the website poznan.naszemiasto.pl (poznan.ourcity.pl) reported: “Poznañ’s railway station

Figure 1. Visualisation of the Main Railway Station in Poznañ, designed by Pentagram Architects (open access: abcnieruchomosci.pl).
changes every day. Five thousand square metres of concrete floor have been laid recently. The lift shafts were installed last weekend. Soon the interior walls will be built and, as soon as it is warmer, the steel construction will be clad in glass.”17 After looking at the photo documentation presenting the accumulation of steel and concrete elements, people posted favourable comments: “Impressive construction, bravo!”18

The development was completed in two stages. The first stage, consisting of the building of the railway station, was ready just before EURO 2012 and the grand opening ceremony was conducted by the Polish president. The second phase was completed 1 year later and followed by an official opening of the shopping mall and the bus station.

The first impressions were favourable. Users compared it to an airport terminal, or an exclusive commercial centre.19 Soon opinions changed radically and the project started attracting strong criticism. The building appeared to be impractical and badly located. It was too small for the footfall. The passengers preferred the old, partly ruined building to the new elegant space. The distance from the main hall to the platforms proved to be too great for people carrying heavy luggage, but the straw that broke the camel’s back was the size of the shopping mall. The railway station seemed to be an annex to the commercial centre. The people of Poznań started to feel fed up with the number of commercial centres in the city. Comments posted on the internet are full of complaints and manifest general disappointment with the building (Figure 2).

It is not difficult to find differences between the final effect and the visualisation when we compare the images of the two. First of all, the project has lost its white and blue elegance which was replaced with a colourful facade. The space in front of the railway station is full of cars. Also the proportions of the new building and the shopping mall are not the same as they seemed to be in the visualisation. The space around the building is surrounded by advertising billboards.

In my opinion, the case of the railway station is a very good illustration of Rem Koolhaas’s idea of junkspace. The term describes projects (Koolhaas does not call them architecture, since in his view “architecture disappeared in the 20th century”)20) which flood our urban environment with shopping malls, airports and theme parks. The architect noted: “Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout. Modernization had a rational program: to share the blessing of science, universally.”21

The forms are, thus, easily multiplied, often constructed from prefabricated elements, simply increased. To develop Koolhaas’s observation, we could say that computer programming and its products belong to the same commercial sphere of imagination as junkspace. As such both CGIs and junkspace have to be flexible, adaptable to varied historic traditions and cheap in execution. Moreover, the types of constructions referred to as junkspace by architects (i.e. shopping malls or airports) are rarely publicly discussed, as they are usually largely privately financed (as in the case of Poznań’s Railway Station) Of course, the great architects who dictate the trends and styles (like Zaha Hadid or Koolhaas himself) may still dream up grand designs but junkspace seduces those who are not so talented with its luminosity, openness and ornaments.

Koolhaas perceives junkspace as an expression of a contemporary desire to transform everything. “Restore, rearrange, reassemble, revamp, renovate, revise, recover, redesign, return—the Parthenon Marbles—redo, respect, rent: verbs that start reproduce Junkspace . . .”22 It does not mean that cities do not need renovations but, rather, that those renovations, when confronted with reality, prove to be tragically impractical. Why were they, therefore, chosen? I will try to answer this question further on in the article.

Figure 2. The Main Railway Station in Poznań, photo: BernardJ47, 2013 (open access: www.panoramio.com/photo/100005148).
The second example I intend to present is not as spectacular as the previous one. I would like to tell the story of a revitalisation of Asnyk Square, a space in the centre of Jezyce district which is known for its 19th century tenement houses. The story begins in 2010 when Zarząd Dróg Miejskich (Municipal Roads Authority) launched a programme of revaluation (the term used in ZDM’s announcement) of the square by planting over 400 trees and bushes around the run-down playgrounds and benches. In 2014, the local community council decided to proceed with a brand new renovation. The project proposed a complete rebuilding of the space which came as a great surprise to the local people. A local newspaper, Glos Wielkopolski, announced: “Art Nouveau Asnyk Square will have a new surface (granite blocks), there will be new benches and plants. As the community council explained, after the rebuilding, the square will serve not only “drunks” but all the inhabitants of Jeżyce.” As soon as the first visualisations were presented to the community, people began protesting against the project. Why did the images not seduce people this time? (Figure 3).

The image is seemingly less realistic than usual CGIs which are used in advertising projects and does not look like a photograph. The forms are situated in an abstract space. There are no buildings which could create an urban atmosphere of the visualisation. It is interesting that in this case the project was criticised already in the design phase. People complained mainly about the lack of playgrounds and pitches, as well as, the waste of money which had been spent on the previous reclamation of the area. In the article titled “Asnyk Square—only for the dead”, the author reported the voices of the local community:

The visualisations look embarrassing—a lady from Jezyce complained—There are no surrounding buildings, objects are not attractive… glass surfaces instead of sandpits… concrete couches covered with artificial moss. They will be comfortable enough after few beers. Asnyk Square is the only playground for children in Jezyce. There are always a lot of families with children there. Now it will be a paradise for beer-lovers.23

The discussion was initiated because of such CGIs’ features as spreadability and interfaciality. The images were widely presented in the neighbourhood, the local media and on the internet. People commented on all the ideas and submitted their opinions to the community officials. However, the project was not mutable enough and eventually the changes interposed in the project were not what people had hoped they would be. After few meetings, when the works on the Square had already started, people who had protested against the rebuilding project founded an active FB group called “The Asnyk Square Initiative” and displayed their opinions on posters attached to the fence of the construction site (Figure 4).

“Asnyk Square for people”, “No to a lounge of the dead”. Finally, some small modifications were implemented into the design and the new Asnyk Square was finished. Looking at the Asnyk Square case in hindsight, we can identify all the mistakes that were made both during the planning and the construction stages (Figure 5).

The misleading factor in this case was the issue of revitalisation. As we know, the term does not refer to architectural changes, but usually describes social issues. “To revitalise” stands for...
to animate” the community by means of urban planning. This time, the community’s voice and officials’ vision did not match. The officials’ priority was to have an ordered, clean space whereas people hoped to have a space for community activities.

The problem does not lie with the physical manifestation of the design, which had been altered to incorporate people’s demands, but with the fact that the project was, from the very beginning to its final incarnation, unsuccessful. In a well-known concept of Henri Lefebvre, the space is produced in the series of layered interactions. The city is created by superposition of spatial practices, representation of spaces and representational spaces. The first two, on which I would like to focus here, refer to people’s everyday activities and to a “conceptualised space” created by “urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers.” We can observe a definite friction between those two. The new Asnyk Square is a good representation of space but does not allow people to act in the space in the way they would like to.

PERSUASIVE IMAGES AND AGONISTIC CITIES

The stories I have told in the preceding part of the paper, revealed a number of inconsistencies which emerge when we talk about cities. First of all, we observe a process that Koolhaas called the shrinking of public life, where open public spaces are replaced by commercial areas. Secondly, as a result of the shrinking of public life, a tendency emerges to “clean” and “order” the space. It is an effect of an ambition to make the space more and more spectacular. In those processes, computer-generated images are just, to use a colloquial phrase, “handy” and subordinated to powers that provide projects with funding.

In conclusion I would like to point out a few general issues:

1. The form of CGIs differs from photorealistic representations to the digital schemas and, therefore, their persuasive power varies.
2. The photo-realism of digital representation makes discussions at the stage of designing difficult. CGIs act as rhetoric messages and as such appeal to people hoping for a better future. When buildings are materialised, it becomes evident that the vision of the developers does not correspond with the expectations of the community.
3. CGIs which are more schematic initiate public discussion in the phase of designing.
4. e-City is not a space of social and political consensus but an area of agon, permanent fight for space and cultural meaning.

Let us now consider these presuppositions in more detail.

While talking about rhetoric and persuasion beyond CGIs I refer to the concepts of Roland Barthes and William J.T. Mitchell. The notion of the first quality, rhetoric, draws on the Barthesian “third message” which is based on cultural connotations. We connote photorealistic metonymic images and, as a result, we believe in their message. Moreover, because of the photo-realism of CGIs, we are not able to consider those images as models and symbols. Therefore, to use Barthes’s words, we are immersed in “the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence.” Illusionist pictures, which are naturalised in human minds because of their photography-like appearance, appeal to people’s dreams of a better future and better life.

The second quality indicates that CGIs may persuade the city inhabitants to enthusiastically accept the presented vision. Just like images described by W.J.T. Mitchell, they are “transparently and immediately linked to what they represent.” A message communicated by their means seems to be like an “animated, living thing,” or rather, in this case, a living space. Future residents
settle in the space, although it only exists as a digital image. The glamorous appearance of CGIs conceals the commercial intentions of their producers. They are designed above all to sell a product and seldom become a part of public negotiations.

Respondents who commented on the visualisations of the Poznań railway station often stated: “I like that, and I hope that the investment will be developed as planned.” They clearly expected that the finished project would be exactly the same as the vision presented in CGIs. Unlike the CGIs of the railway station, the visualisation of Asnyk Square was more like a drawing than a photograph, thus it was not so seductive and it opened a public debate. We can notice that the digital simulations of the railway station not only fulfilled people’s dreams about utopia of a new, better Poznań, but led people to believe that they would be able to live in it. Let us come back to Elisabeth Grosz. She noted:

Can architecture construct a better future? How can it do so without access to another notion of time than that of projection and planned development (a time in which the future is fundamentally the same as the past, or increases in some formulaic version of the past)?

The failures of Poznań’s rebuilding projects which looked so promising at the stage of visualisation lead me to a question about the ownership of the city and the identity of the beneficiaries of projects undertaken in it. Whose is the city and for whom it is re-designed?

For whom should Asnyk Square be? For urban planners who want to see a trendy city square, or for people who live in the neighbourhood and prefer friendly chaos to a clean and paved urban area? The saying “the road to hell is paved with good intentions” seems to illustrate this story quite well. Instead of a good “revitalisation” project, people live with an unwanted concrete yard.

For whom should the railway station be? For travellers, who need easy access to platforms and ticket offices or for the customers of the shopping centre? “Since when is the part of a shopping mall where ticket offices are located called a railway station?”—asked an angry passenger. Is it possible to find a consensus between the clashing visions? This unfortunate situation is an effect of shrinking of the public space which was described earlier in the text. The powers of politics and commerce compete to gain influence over the city space and use urban projects as weapons in the struggle. This conflict is not a modern phenomenon, but the balance of the power clash has changed. As Don Mitchell observed:

As a secular space, the public space of the modern city has always been a hybrid of politics and commerce. Ideally, the anarchy of the market meets the anarchy of politics in public space to create an interactive a democratic public. In the twentieth century, however, markets have been increasingly severed from politics.

Nowadays, CGIs are used mainly by commercial power. They are commodified to sell a product to as many buyers as possible. As soon as the product is sold, investors lose interest in the space as a good place and the eu-topos ends. The gap between CGIs and real life cannot be bridged.

A similar observation can be found in the concepts of Chantal Mouffe criticising the Habermasian idea of public space consensus. She claims that interests of various groups meet and clash in cities, and all of them try to persuade the inhabitants to support their visions. Mouffe called her model of society an “agonistic model of public space” and confronted it with both the consensual and the antagonistic visions of a city. As she noted: “For the agonistic model, at the contrary, the public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation.”

Where is a place for CGIs within the agonistic public sphere? It is not difficult to realise that cyberspace creates additional spacial layers in cities. CGIs, therefore, are the next dimension of multiple, discursive surfaces, which should be taken into consideration in urban debates. They reflect the visions of planners and the expectations of people. The virtually produced images try to win people’s approval. They also have a power to activate their aspirations for eu-topia, a better life.

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