

The Lost Decade?

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The first decade of the 21st century will be remembered for a series of losses, failures and catastrophes. The potentially infinite postponement of Calatrava's Chicago Spire, amongst other unbuilt icons, should be considered a cautionary tale, which serves as an allegorical frame for the discipline of Architecture and its position within the larger cultural milieu of our time. What is left for Architecture in a period of absent possibilities—symbolized by the negation of this iconographic spire? Should architecture now look toward the time in which it will celebrate the gap, the void and the absence of its own presence as its new dominant mode of operation? Can the void itself now represent a positive future?

When confronted with the possibility of the void, we are faced with a sense of anxiety for the potential death of architecture; its limitations pronounced by gaping foundation holes and abandoned construction cranes. From this gap we might look instead toward the positive aspects of the void, considering loss as a productive strategy that embraces the possibility of design over the mind-numbing pragmatism and neo-conservatism that is often born of crisis.

The Void

The void, or gap, has always been Architecture's primary terrain but somehow this has been forgotten. Imagination takes root in detritus, finding opportunity within compromised no-man's lands and forgotten landscapes. The recent increase in the prominence of the discipline of Landscape Urbanism, which reclaims the potential of abandoned territory and turns what had been previously considered wastelands into productive and active ecologies, is a case in point.¹ Buildings and landscapes turn away from the picturesque in favour of the performative, emphasizing systemic relationships over iconic symbolism.

¹ The term Landscape Urbanism is often attributed to Charles Waldheim, editor of *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, and Chair of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Charles Waldheim (ed.) *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).

² Wikipedia: (2010) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scenario> [accessed 1 May 2010].

The problem of the (lost) icon is symbolic of Architecture's crisis of representation that has defined the past century. As we turn now from the symbolic to the performative, we attempt to escape from the tyranny of the visual, through projections of possible futures. Our modern conception of the scenario as a speculative device derives from ancient Italian plays, where actors improvised from plot summaries that were literally pinned to a background scene or sketch.² This notion of the dynamic play or scenario projection, repositions architecture within the realm of the imaginary, where architecture's role is not that of simply providing shelter but that of evoking worlds.

The consideration of the void as a zero-point of mythic origin has moved past its tabula rasa beginnings in modernism to an anxious realm defined by a spectrum of crises (whether social, political, environmental or economic) ultimately producing what American architecture critic Albert Pope has described as "the zero effect."³ He considers the prospect of a "degree-zero urbanism" wherein crises are reduced to their root cause and shaped into a singular quality, "the zero effect," in order to see past a crisis mentality. Pope argues that it is possible to redefine crisis as a symptom of larger trends whose logic is revealed only when judgment is suspended:

For all that global warming and global terrorism create crises, the zero effect does not. The zero effect is not a symptom; it is a quality. The zero effect is a quality that exists in phenomena that are both good and bad, providing professional detachment where it is most urgently needed.⁴

³ Albert Pope, "Ex Nihilo Urbanism" in *New Geographies 1: AFTER ZERO* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek moves beyond Pope's call for suspension to one of acceptance. Žižek has proposed that the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic 'zero-point.' This is a combinatory effect of the convergence of ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, global imbalances including intellectual property and forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water, and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions.⁵

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London/New York: Verso, 2010), p.x.

Far from an argument for sustainability, Žižek instead considers the 'zero-point' as an opportunity to embrace our uncertain existence, arguing against Hegelian notions of progress by positioning catastrophes and broken equilibriums as a part of natural history. He reminds us that oil, our main source of energy, is the result of a past catastrophe of unimaginable dimensions.⁶ Catastrophe may, after all, be tomorrow's opportunity.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, "Censorship Today: Violence or ecology as a new opium for the masses?" in Volume 18: *After Zero* (The Netherlands: Stichting Archis, 2008), p.42.

Žižek argues compellingly for the acceptance of nature as an ongoing and transmuting phenomenon, by insisting that our conception of nature is an idealization that in fact does not exist:

'The 'nature' qua the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes, with its hubris, brutally throwing off the rails its circular motion, is man's fantasy; nature is already in itself 'second nature,' its balance is always secondary, an attempt to negotiate a 'habit' that would restore some order after catastrophic interruptions.'⁷

⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

In contemporary architectural discourse, the notion of sustainability carries an assumption that we can situate nature within measurable limits— of resources, of efficiency, of performance. Here, the design act is one of regulation— mediating the boundary between architecture and nature. While ecological limits are based in science, more often than not the notion of sustainability carries with it a moral exactitude that implies that design (and architecture as an aesthetic project) is frivolous.

Thus the term sustainability reduces architectural imagination to problem solving rooted in empirical limits, promoting a condition of stasis that automatically dismisses the potential of digression from its calculated equilibrium. With sustainability we are doomed to tread water indefinitely. If we are not sustaining, then might we not be projecting into the (ecological) void? Instead of sustaining, we might consider the 'zero-point' as an opportunity to move from the anthropological to the ecological, where we permanently and perpetually lose our place at the centre of the universe. We must first set a course to reconsider architecture as a dynamic and projective practice that reflects a more sophisticated understanding of the potential for the ecological.

Projecting into the Void: 12 Scenarios

The Lost Decade, a term borrowed from the 1990's, alludes to the Japanese asset bubble that triggered a decade of stasis in Japan. Many critics and politicians, including American economist Paul Krugman, have invoked reference to Japan's earlier crisis as a means of positioning our

current confrontation with the void. Today's world economic crisis has driven us closer to the abyss, radiating far beyond its fiscal origin. We are challenged, however, to find opportunity within the reverberation of the Lost Decade and its resulting wave of interrelated economic, social, political, and ecological crises.

A recent proposal by MUTT Collaborative, "Lost Decade: The Lost Oughts, or 12 Scenarios for Maximizing the Void," posits a return to the power of the void, a void pregnant with the potential to ignite the imagination. MUTT offers a series of productive possibilities that consider opportunities presented by "The Lost Oughts" in order to overcome the apparent failure of Architecture to prepare itself for an imminent period of scarcity. Indeed, the delay of the Chicago Spire, amongst other unbuilt icons, registers the effects of larger economic, ecological, political and ultimately ethical failures within the broader cultural sphere. Here, MUTT explores opportunities presented within such limitations, through design proposals culled from twelve possible scenarios. Each scenario deploys design strategies to cultivate opportunity from loss.

"12 Scenarios for Maximizing the Void" finds possibility in the multiple, rejecting the notion of an ultimate solution in favour of a series of scenarios that explore the latent potential of the void. Originally conceived as an entry to the Chicago Architectural Club's MINE THE GAP competition, "Lost Decade" literally explores the void left by the Chicago Spire tower, whose foundation sits idle as a negative reminder of the ghost that might have been (see Figs. 1 and 2).⁸ Twelve scenarios propose a myriad of ways the negative can become the positive once again. In an attempt to move beyond zero, each of the schemes finds potential in the social, environmental, economic and political crises of the Lost Decade (see Fig. 3).

⁸ "Lost Decade" was one of twenty projects featured in the MINE THE GAP exhibition at the John David Mooney Foundation Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, USA, May 15-21, 2010.

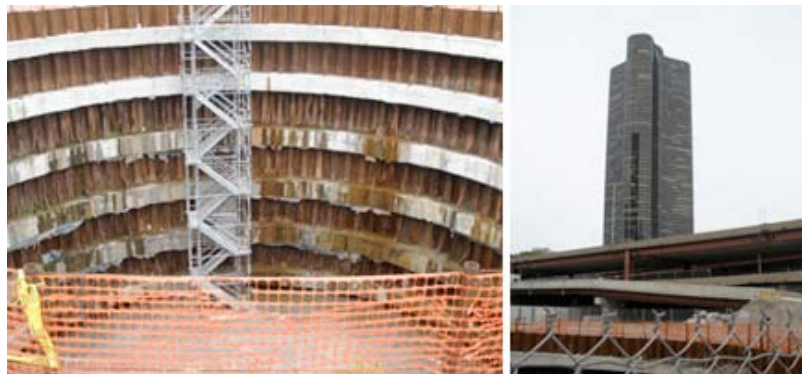


Fig. 1 (left): The abandoned foundation cavity of the Chicago Spire tower. Fig. 2 (right): The site of the unbuilt Chicago Spire tower. Photos: MUTT, 2010.

“Lost Decade” looks to confront the rapid transformations in contemporary culture that have taken place over the past decade and that have contributed to the crisis of the void, represented by the unbuilt icon. One might consider the void as a symptom of the acceleration of globalization. How might we transform the negation of what was once considered individual and unique in contemporary culture, now supplanted by the global and generic?

Looking to a sample of possible scenarios, [Scenario 1] Lost Energy: Barrels to Biofuel considers the void as a potential algae-to-biofuel production farm. One that replaces global oil dependence with a symbiotic system of urban grazing and alternative fuel cultivation, converting the site to an urban prairie and grazing field (see Fig. 4). Optimizing the crises of global food production and energy reliance, “Lost Energy” empowers the city of Chicago, re-establishing local energy systems and food sources. [Scenario 2] Lost Species: Biodiversity Regeneration addresses similar issues of globalization, contemplating the void as an urban agricultural system that grows vanishing crop species for dissemination. The homogenization of corporate agriculture is displaced through the cultivation, distribution and perpetuation of diverse biological systems. Additionally, [Scenario 3] Lost H₂O: Private to Public addresses the very serious issue of the increasing privatization of natural resources through the creation of a series of publicly accessible water follies. Public citizens confront the void by considering the global privatization of water and an individual’s rights within that system.



Fig. 3. Lost Decade: The Lost Oughts, or 12 Scenarios for Maximizing the Void. MUTT, 2010.

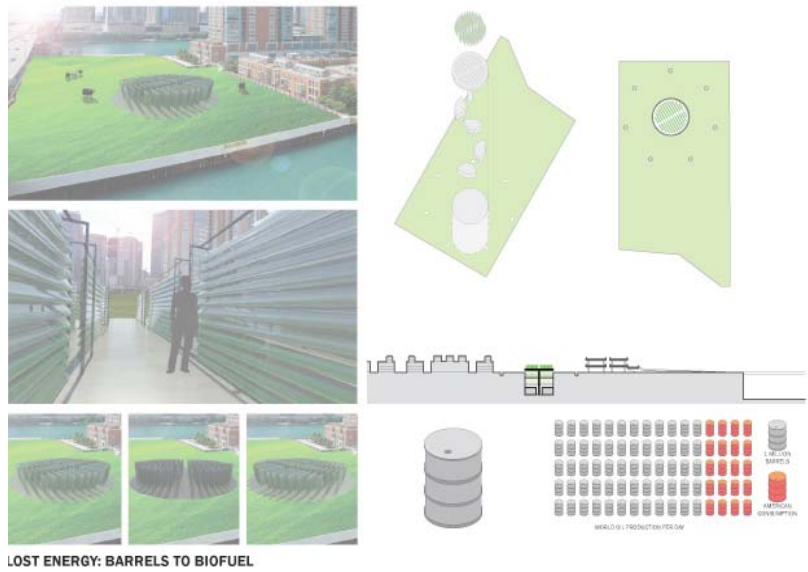


Fig. 4. [Scenario 1] Lost Energy: Barrels to Biofuel, and for Maximizing the Void.

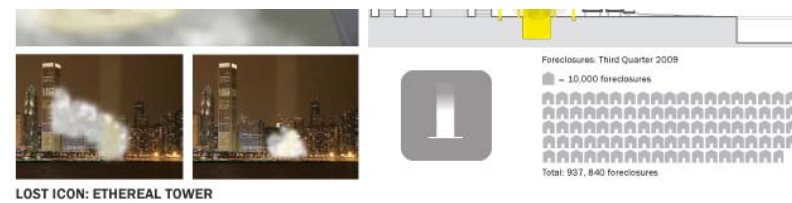
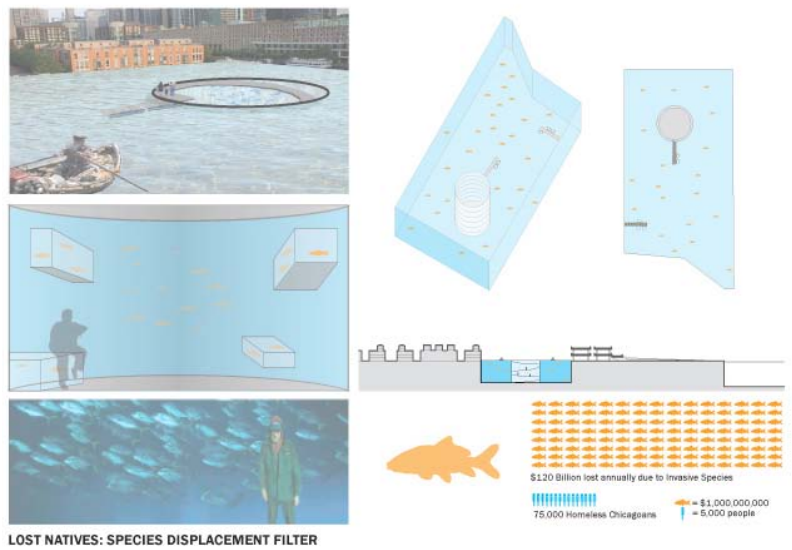


Fig. 6. [Scenario 5] Lost Icon: Ethereal Tower.

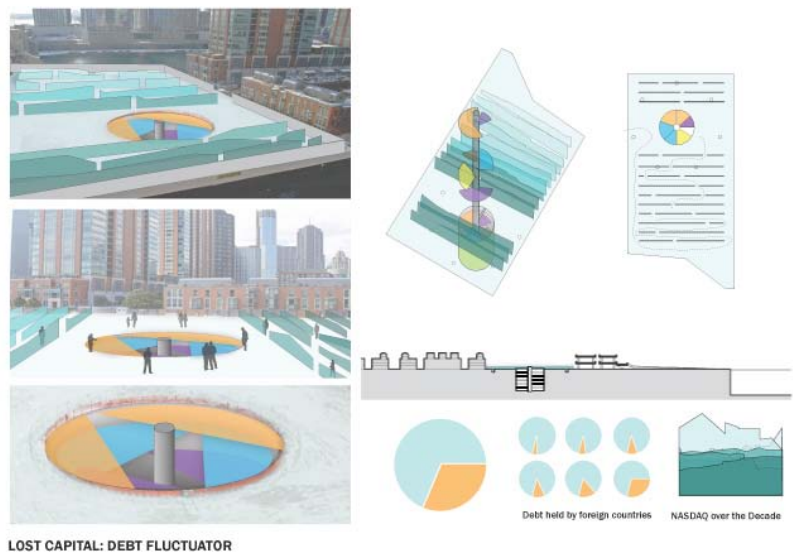


Fig 7. [Scenario 6] Lost Capital: Debt Fluctuator. MUTT, 2010.

“Lost Decade” Scenarios 9-12 address the social crises unique to our mediated decade, wherein issues of identity, experience, community and ethics are considered relative to the void. [Scenario 9] Lost Place: Virtual Monument Simulator examines the crises of identity brought about by globalization and media technologies by transforming the void into an immersive virtual environment. Within the void, a live-feed cyclorama collapses spatial distance between observer and place, traveller and icon, questioning the relevance of representation and the authenticity of experience in contemporary society (see Fig 8.).

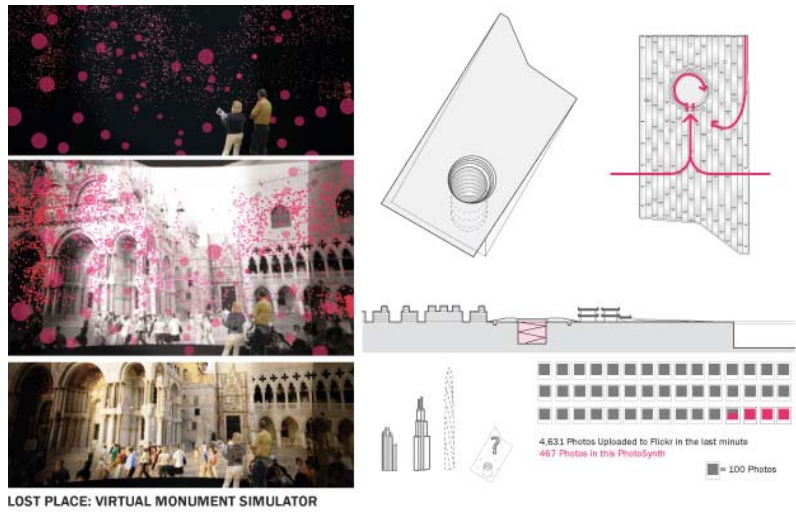


Fig 8. [Scenario 9] Lost Place: Virtual Monument Simulator, MUTT, 2010.

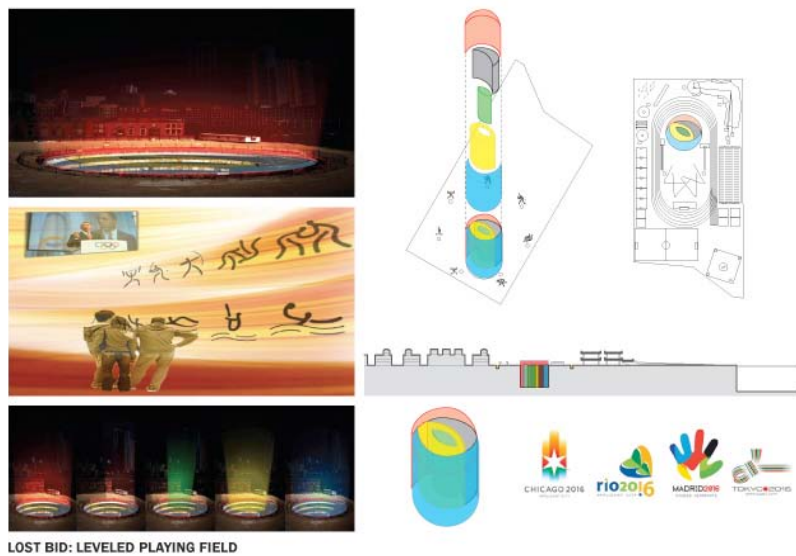
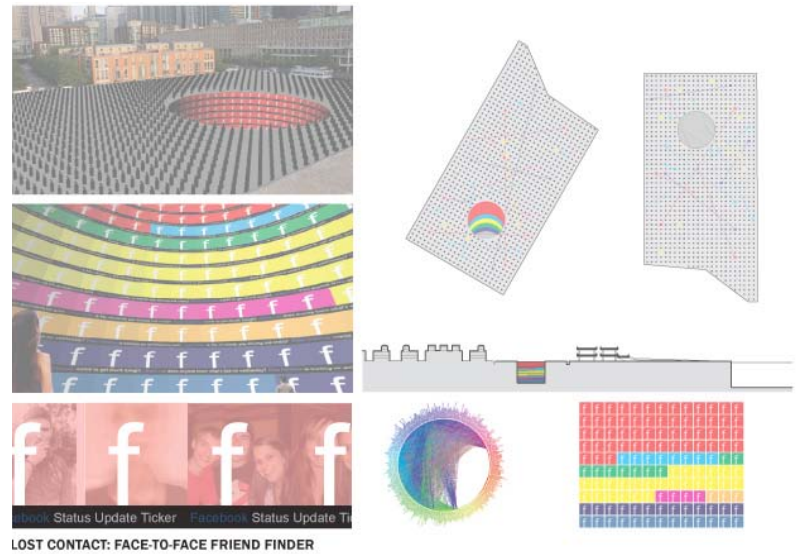


Fig 9. [Scenario 10] Lost Bid: Levelled Playing Field.

[Scenario 10] Lost Bid: Levelled Playing Field considers the gap as a museum dedicated to the loss of the 2016 Chicago Olympic bid. With the onset of globalization, the void is considered relative to the (declining) status of the US within an emergent global society (see Fig.9). Other scenarios address social crises, including [Scenario 11] Lost Contact: Face-to-Face Friend Finder, which proposes a spatialized network of physical social relationships that challenge the role of distant mediation and community in our contemporary society (see Fig. 10).



LOST CONTACT: FACE-TO-FACE FRIEND FINDER

Fig 10. [Scenario 11] Lost Contact: Face-to-Face Friend Finder. MUTT, 2010.

The scenarios explored in MUTT's proposal offer a means of escaping stasis. They are tools of play and projection that enable us to reinvent the void, and in turn, restore architecture to the realm of the imaginary. "Lost Decade" imagines scenarios that explore the potential of the void as a means to accept and embrace possible futures for architectural design.

Essentially, we must consider the void as an effect of globalization, a symbol of a paradigmatic shift from the anthropomorphic to the ecological. The void, symbolic of our new 'ground-zero,' has moved past the 'zero-effect' of suspension to one of acceptance, a 'zero-point' that fosters future potential. Whatever what may follow, we must embrace the void as an opportunity, instead of perpetuating crisis.

Whilst we could consider the ruin of the Chicago Spire tower a romantic allegory or an emotional depiction of the decline of an idealized natural world, our contemporary disenchantment with materialistic society has not given rise to the metaphysical (as imagined in the 19th-century romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner) nor to the dystopic (as vividly portrayed by novelists Philip K. Dick and J. G. Ballard and played out within the architectural fantasies of Lebbeus Woods). As our forsaken icons lead the way to abandoned cities like Detroit, threatened by an overwhelming expanse of desertion and decay, we have become increasingly anxious about our real-world ruins.⁹ None-the-less, cities like Detroit can act as models, large-scale experimental tableaux, for artists and other innovators actively seeking their positive transformation.

⁹ Detroit's decline is so extreme that a large portion of the city is planned for demolition, with relocation of its residents to a central area. See, Susan Saulny, "Razing the City to Save the City", New York Times, 20 June 2010.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

If we return to Žižek’s conception of nature as an artificial construct, we might extend his argument to include that of the beautiful. If we consider the conception of nature as something uncontrollable and undefined, aren’t we likewise obligated to modify our notion of the sublime? According to French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the sublime, a condition of pleasurable anxiety that we experience when confronting nature’s wildness, was the founding principal of the Modernist period.¹⁰ Lyotard argued that the modern art movement attempted to replace visual concepts of beauty with intellectual constructs, challenging conceptual limits as a means to reveal the ambiguity and unpredictability of the postmodern world. As we move now from an anthropocentric to an ecological world-view, we move from a place of anxious distance from nature, to a state of absorption within it – our pleasurable anxiety is now replaced by the simultaneous joy and horror that “we” are finally “it.” As Architecture attempts to invent new ways of confronting the sublime, we might consider its turn to the ecological as an extension of its search for meaning; only now through architectural performance and productive relationships in place of visual aesthetics. We might argue, like Lyotard’s conceptual artists, that beauty itself is deeply rooted in the imaginary. Our methods of conceptualization may differ, but the sublime’s ability to confront the multiplicity and instability of the world continues to confound us.

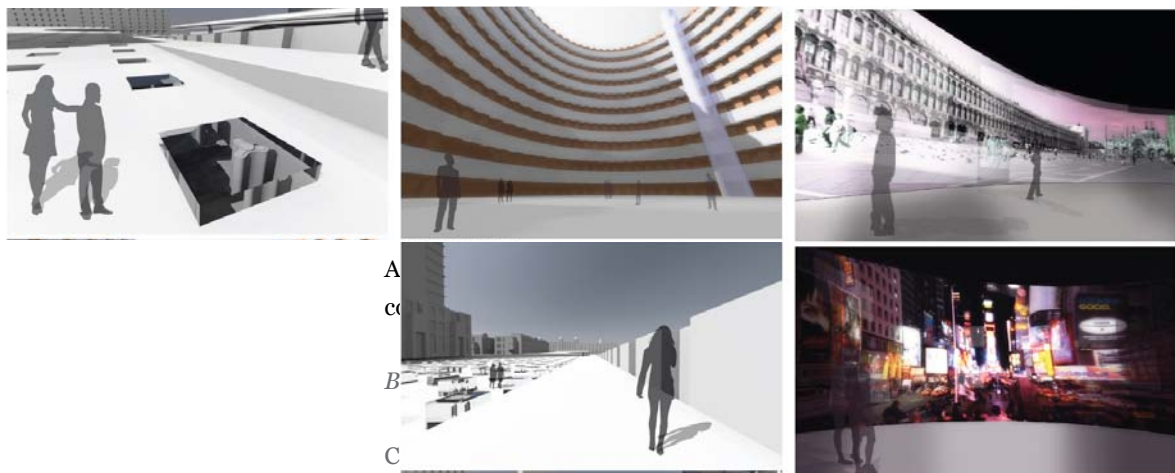


Fig.11. Descent into the Void. [Scenario 9] Lost Place: Virtual Monument Simulator. MUTT, 2010.

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<http://www.chicagoarchitecturalclub.org/competitions/competitions.aspx>, [accessed 20 May 2010].

Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

Albert Pope, "Ex Nihilo Urbanism" in *New Geographies 1: AFTER ZERO* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) p. 12.

Susan Saulny, "Razing the City to Save the City," *New York Times*, 20 June 2010.

Wikipedia: (2010) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scenario> [accessed 29 May 2010].

Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London/New York: Verso, 2010) p. x.

Slavoj Žižek, "Censorship Today: Violence or ecology as a new opium for the masses?" in *Volume 18: After Zero* (The Netherlands: Stichting Archis, 2008) p. 42.