Déjà vu
Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad

by Penelope Haralambidou
## Project Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designer:</th>
<th>Penelope Haralambidou</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output type:</td>
<td>Artefact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition:</td>
<td>Speculative Models: Air Grid and The Blossoming of Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue:</td>
<td>London Gallery West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curator:</td>
<td>Michael Mazière, London Gallery West and Ambika P3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dates:</td>
<td>22 April – 17 May 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>UCL £6,680, London Gallery West £2,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget:</td>
<td>Exhibition budget total £15,110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-exhibitor:</td>
<td>Victoria Watson, University of Westminster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Statement about the Research Content and Process

Description

The artefact, Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad, is a critical reading of Alain Resnais’s 1961 film Last Year at Marienbad based on Alain Robbe-Grillet’s screenplay. This large architectural model interprets the physical and psychological spaces in the film, and incorporates a digital animation projected onto the model. The artefact was presented at Speculative Models, a two-person exhibition at London Gallery West, in 2009.

Questions

1. How do critical forms of design-led practice (drawing, model-making and digital film) blur the boundaries between architectural design and theory?

2. How can an architectural model present a critical reading of Resnais’s film?

3. How do representational techniques which combine a physical artefact with a digital projection generate and capture architectural ideas and design?

4. What are the technical considerations of working with projected light and narrative as architectural drawing?
Methods

The work derives from interdisciplinary enquiry involving architectural design, model-making and digital film techniques, architectural history and theory, film theory and critical theory:

1. Iterative and written analysis of the spatial arrangement of the film itself and from related literature.

2. Investigation into the connections between space, memory (or amnesia), imagination and desire in architecture and psychology.

3. Architectural historical research of Baroque and Rococo architecture in Munich, used as setting for the film.


Dissemination

The artefact has been reviewed in the *Journal of Architecture*. It has been the subject matter of a gallery talk; three invited seminars/workshops; and one international lecture. It is discussed in an essay for the *KTHA*, the journal of the KTH, Stockholm.
Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad

2

Alain Resnais, Last year at Marienbad (1961) Astor pictures

3 (overleaf)

View of the screens from the back,
showing the light of the projection seeping through the paper.
Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad (2009) is an artefact which performs an analysis of Alain Resnais’s enigmatic film Last Year at Marienbad (1961), based on a screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet. [fig. 1] The film takes place in a labyrinthine baroque hotel, where X, the male protagonist, meets A, the female protagonist, and confronts her with descriptions of their romantic involvement a year ago, of which she has no recollection. A third protagonist M may or may not be A’s husband. A riddle of seduction, the narrative of the film flips between present and past, memory and imagination, and has been described as a love story, abstract thriller or philosophical puzzle. Although it received mixed reviews, the film was winner of the Golden Lion award at the 1961 Venice Film Festival. [fig. 2]

Déjà vu is an abstract paper model of the Baroque hotel, and a digital reworking of selected scenes specifically designed to be projected on the model, thus ‘redrawing’ the film in light. [fig. 4 & 5]

The three-dimensional arrangement of the hotel ‘rooms’, made from drawn, cut and folded paper, breaks the flatness of the single screen and the linearity of the film. Its simplicity reflects the elliptical storyline of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s screenplay in contrast to the ornate setting. Placed on a table, the model dressed with the luminous imagery of the film, allows the viewer to circulate around and behind it and occupy this expansion of the picture plane at an intimate level.

The project investigates the film’s spatial arrangement; how the narrative links architecture to memory, imagination and desire; the significance of the contrast between the ornate setting and the minimalist narrative; and the portrayal of the architecture as one of the protagonists. [fig. 3]

Resnais’s film is notoriously enigmatic, addressing the audience as a riddle. Drawn by the unresolved riddle of the film’s mise en scène, the project aims to unravel the visual organisation of clues and proposes an allegorical architecture: a paper ‘model’ displaying scenes within metaphorical ‘rooms’ of the Baroque hotel. It ‘remodels’ the film as a series of rooms, numbered below in order of appearance:

Room 1: right screen: surrounds a game of nim, a central repeated motif in the film; performed here with matches on a circular table accentuating the geometrical composition. [fig. 7]

Room 2: left screen: contains a theatre stage within the film, where actors perform the same narrative, locking the plot in mise en abyme. The scene is presented repeatedly as a loop, the theatre curtain constantly closing and opening. [fig. 8]
Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad
Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad
Room 3: central folded screen: the scanning views of the ornamental ceilings and receding corridors of the hotel. The camera, an eye scanning the elaborate Baroque architecture, is often in motion in contrast to the protagonists who seem trapped. [fig. 9]

Rooms 4, 5, 6: close-ups of the faces of the three protagonists, A, X and M, appear projected on three separate wooden blocks resembling pawns. [fig. 10]

Room 7: horizontal projection on the front of the table, the equivalent of the garden of the hotel, showing the famous scene with the painted elongated shadows. [fig. 11]

Room 8: long screen on a plinth at the back presents the two facing sides of the ‘blossoming’ bedroom, where an important but enigmatic incident takes place, which might hold the key to the mystery. [fig. 12]

**Aims and Objectives**

The artefact aimed to address the role of the model as a representational tool in architectural design, practice and education. My co-exhibitor and I developed this exhibition in order to reflect on the communicative possibilities of architectural model-making through practice-led design and the construction of new artefacts. We explored new techniques of model-making and asked if models can operate as dialectical and critical artefacts revealing the architecture of spatial concepts in other disciplines. [fig. 13]

Déjà vu uses architectural design as a critical research method, particularly between drawing and theoretical research, showing the potential of architectural design as critical theory (Haralambidou 2011).

It reveals the architectural significance of themes deriving from Resnais’s film: architecture, memory and oblivion; the clash between its Baroque setting (Amalienburg Hunting Lodge, Munich) and Modernist narrative (‘nouveau roman’, Robbe-Grillet); game theory in literature and design; *mise en abyme* in architecture, literature and film; erotic desire and architecture. [fig. 6]

Déjà vu exposes the architectural structure of the screenplay by becoming a topographical rather than chronological incarnation of the plot. The work is a model and a drawing of light on paper where the play of light and shadow of the film seeps through and marks the screens like ephemeral ink. It is also a short looped sequence that inscribes the imagery into the viewer’s mind through repetition. [fig. 14]
Installation view with projection

Installation view without projection
6c

6d

Alain Resnais, Last Year at Marienbad (1961). Film stills
Game of nim on circular table
Theatre scene
Scanning of ceilings and panning of corridors
The three protagonists, X, A and M
The garden
The ‘blossoming’ of the bedroom
Installation view,
London Gallery West,
2009
Installation view
from the back
Photograph Andy Keate, 2009

Installation view
Photograph Andy Keate, 2009
Questions

1. How do critical forms of design-led practice (drawing, model-making and digital film) blur the boundaries between architectural design and theory?

2. How can an architectural model present a critical reading of Resnais's film?

3. How do representational techniques which combine a physical artefact with a digital projection generate and capture architectural ideas and design?

4. What are the technical considerations of working with projected light and narrative as architectural drawing? [fig.15]

Context

Practice-led research

The work employs architectural drawing as an analytical and creative tool in architectural design research. Architectural drawing has been employed by architects and architectural historians as an analytical tool in architectural history and theory (e.g. Evans 1997; Difford 2007) or as an analytical tool to investigate work from other disciplines (e.g. in art history and theory, Steadman 2001; and in film theory, Pallasmaa 1999).

Déjà vu employs an expanded notion of drawing to analyse Resnais's film, but differs from these examples, because it uses drawing creatively, proposing an innovative artefact that can be appreciated in its own right within the environment of an art gallery. This artefact has correspondences with other contemporary architects who have used design both analytically and creatively, e.g. Diller + Scofidio (1988), analysing the work of Marcel Duchamp, art theory and theatre stage design; and Koolhaas (1978), exploring the history and theory of urban design.
16 & 17
Sketches from *Déjà vu*
sketchbook, 2009
Digital projection techniques

1. The project develops a technique for projecting footage onto specifically designed three-dimensional artefacts. This approach has been used by artists (e.g. Laurie Anderson; Krysztof Wodiczko; Tony Oursler, Pipilotti Rist and Olafur Eliasson) as well as architects (e.g. Diller + Scofidio 1988; Haque 2012).

2. The project also engages work on digital responsive projection techniques on physical models (e.g. the ETH Zurich’s Future Cities Laboratory project, ‘Projections of Reality’, Constructing for Uncertainty, Smart Geometry, 2013).

3. The project also relates to other artefacts that rework existing films (e.g. artist Douglas Gordon’s Feature Film, 1999, and 24 Hour Psycho, 1993, based on Hitchcock’s films). Déjà vu extends this approach into architectural design, and attempts to convey psychological nuances of occupation, and ideas about the role of memory and imagination in architecture, arranged spatially on an architectural model.

Methods

The work is an interdisciplinary enquiry into architectural design, model-making and digital film techniques, architectural history and theory, film theory and critical theory:

1. Iterative and written analysis of the spatial arrangement of the film itself and from related critical film literature (e.g. Dittmar 1980; Kivland 2007; Leutrat 2000; Morrissette 1975). [fig. 16–19]
   a. Screenplay: Resnais’s film is a faithful adaptation of Robbe-Grillet’s exceptionally precise screenplay. As one of the main advocates of the nouveau roman, Robbe-Grillet writes in a style that is methodical and geometric, focusing on often compulsive and repetitive descriptions of objects and spaces, rather than the characters that occupy them. A close reading of the screenplay, a literary ‘blueprint’, led to the choice of the scenes composing Déjà vu. [fig. 20]

   Repetitions combined with the fractured timeline and enigmatic plot in the film produce an effect equivalent to a collage or a cubist painting. The screenplay’s lack of chronological indications led the script supervisor Sylvette Baudrot to draw an elaborate graph that organises the film sequences on an X and Y axis in relation to change of set but also time. [fig. 21]
Sketches from Déjà vu sketchbook, 2009

METHODS

18

a model of the hotel in the present/past/future

a film reading and writing the narrative

the real and the remembered.
Different spaces in the film:

- Bedroom
- Hallway

Long corridor spread together by different spaces.

Anahid's living room, find plans and setings.
Sketches from Déjà vu sketchbook, 2009
20
Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Last year at Marienbad* (1962) cover

21
Diagram of the film by script supervisor Sylvette Baudrot (1961)

Selected images and pages from *Last Year at Marienbad* used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.
The diagrammatic delineation of time is made in the arrangement of the folded paper screens and focal range. In cinema, the surface of the projection screen coincides with the sharpest focus. Here the projector is positioned at an angle and the projection is designed to span the whole surface of the table. Placed in different locations within the focal range, the paper screens interrupt the projection pyramid in and out of focus. The selected scenes of ‘the present’ are in the middle of the table where the projection is in sharp focus (the embellished ceilings and views of lavish corridors). The past, ‘last year’ (the mysterious bedroom scene, ‘time in general’, the garden scene), appears out of focus at the back and front of the table. Belonging to memory or imagination, these scenes are blurred compared to the sharpness of the present.

2. Investigation into the connections between space, memory (or amnesia), imagination and desire in architecture and psychology.

   a. The décor of the bedroom, where key scenes of the film take place, starts as a stark interior bathed in a blinding white light, but gradually ‘blossoms’ into a suffocating, complex, flowery pattern. This blossoming represents erotic desire, but also the opening up and unfolding of either a repressed memory, or a newly constructed event in the imagination (see Haralambidou 2011). By digitally reworking the image of the bedroom and creating a short animation, the blossoming of the architecture (as a representation of desire in Last Year at Marienbad) is accentuated.

   b. Ideas about how the model and film can be ‘drawing in light’ and ‘redrawn’ in different ways were also explored in drawing workshops. [fig. 23 & 24]

3. Architectural historical research of Munich’s Baroque and Rococo architecture, especially François de Cuvilliés’s Amalienburg hunting lodge. [fig. 22]

In the film, the Baroque hotel setting is not a single building, but a sinuous montage of different locations in Munich including scenes at the Schloss Nymphenburg palace and the Amalienburg hunting lodge, mixed with studio-constructed sets. Exposing the fragmentary architectural structure of the film, the model breaks the linearity of the plot and recounts events concurrently. [fig. 25–27]

22 Amalienburg hunting lodge, Nymphenburg Palace Munich, 1734-1739
Image in the public domain via Creative Commons
Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad
Participants 'redrew' *Déjà vu* by using the same projection aimed at an angle on a table, but finding new ways to engage with the depth of light. The reflection, through mirrors, and refraction, through water-filled bottles and glasses, produced unexpected illusions and spectres, captured and framed by imaginatively constructed paper screens. The intricacy of the resulting 'architecture', built out of paper and light, was similar to the film's Baroque/Rococo setting.
Three different moments of the film
Photograph: London Gallery West, 2009
28 & 29
Design iterations
30 (previous page)
Design iterations

31 & 32
Design iterations
4. Design of a new interpretative artefact, incorporating a digital film projection onto a 3D model. [fig. 28–32]

The development of the design involved a series of iterations. The work began with digital manipulation of the original film, selecting, cutting and changing the size of specific scenes. A single new composite digital film was then made containing all the selected scenes in one frame in Final Cut Pro X. The exact position and perspectival distortion of the scenes were designed in parallel with the design of the physical model that occupied the projection pyramid. The contrast between the precise delineation of fragments of film in a digital medium and the precise manipulation of paper by hand within the space created by the projection was important. Two small plinths supporting the wooden triangular pawns receiving the projection of the faces of the three protagonists and the scenes in the bedroom at the far back were also constructed. [fig. 33–35]

The project analyses and adapts the existing film, by creating new interpretations and re-stagings of the original. It assimilates and subverts the themes, methods and language of communication of the film: e.g. restaging the narrative through a projection similar to cinematic experience, where images of light are captured on screen and presented in a darkened room. [fig. 36]

Here, however, the singular large and imposing screen that divides the space between the audience and the imaginary world depicted has split into several small screens spread on the table surface and displayed at an intimate scale.
Déjà vu: Restaging Resnai's Last Year at Marienbad
Dissemination

The work was exhibited in London Gallery West and reviewed in the Journal of Architecture (2009). It was published as an essay in the magazine KTHA (2011) and was the subject matter of the following events:

**Gallery talk**


**Invited workshops**


**International invited lecture**

Bibliography

Usman Haque (2012). ‘DIY City 0.01a’, developed with Special Moves, London. http://www.haque.co.uk/diycity.php
Dejà vu: Restaging Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad

Alain Resnais, *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Film still
Related publications by the researcher

pp. 50–57

Related writings by others

pp. 59–63
Bartlett Design Research Folios

Bloom
by Alisa Andrasek
and José Sanchez

House of Flags
by AY Architects

Montpellier Community Nursery
by AY Architects

Design for London
by Peter Bishop

2EmmaToc / Writtle Calling
by Matthew Butcher
and Melissa Appleton

River Douglas Bridge
by DKFS Architects

Open Cinema
by Colin Fournier
and Marysia Lewandowska

The Active House
by Stephen Gage

Déjà vu
by Penelope Haralambidou

Urban Collage
by Christine Hawley

Hakka Cultural Park
by Christine Hawley,
Abigail Ashton, Andrew
Porter and Moyang Yang

House Refurbishment in Carmina
by Izaskun Chinchilla
Architects

Refurbishment of Garcimuñoz Castle
by Izaskun Chinchilla
Architects

Gorchakov’s Wish
by Kreider + O’Leary

Video Shakkei
by Kreider + O’Leary

Megaframe
by Dirk Krolikowski
(Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners)

Seasons Through the Looking Glass
by CJ Lim

Agropolis
by mam

Alga(e)zebo
by mam

Chong Qiong Nan Lu Towers
by mam

ProtoRobotic FOAMing
by mam, Grymsdyke Farm
and REX|LAB

Banyoles Old Town Refurbishment
by Miàs Architects

Torre Baró Apartment Building
by Miàs Architects

Alzheimer’s Respite Centre
by Niall McLaughlin
Architects

Bishop Edward King Chapel
by Niall McLaughlin
Architects

Block N15 Façade, Olympic Village
by Niall McLaughlin
Architects

Regeneration of Birzeit Historic Centre
by Palestine Regeneration Team

PerFORM
by Protoarchitecture Lab

55/02
by sixteen*(makers)

Envirographic and Techno Natures
by Smout Allen

Hydrological Infrastructures
by Smout Allen

Lunar Wood
by Smout Allen

Universal Tea Machine
by Smout Allen

British Exploratory Land Archive
by Smout Allen and Geoff Manaugh

101 Spinning Wardrobe
by Storp Weber Architects

Blind Spot House
by Storp Weber Architects

Green Belt Movement Teaching and Learning Pavilion
by Patrick Weber

Modulating Light and Views
by Patrick Weber