

Windows without Doors: Toward an Architecture of Digital Living
Heidi Cooley
Visual Studies Program, University of California, Irvine



For a little over seven years, my husband and I have lived in Downtown Huntington Beach, our house being a pastel yellow with white trim 1922 cottage-style house—complete with white picket fence. While there are still numerous other “historical” homes in our area, in many cases dating from the years marking the construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad, many more have given way to new towering stucco structures with (predominately) glass facades, structures that span the 25’ X 117’ lots upon which they are built. Certainly one is struck by the contrast between the old and new in the Downtown and Old Town districts of Surf City, USA, a contrast made more visible in the twilight hours when the blue glow of cathode ray tubes spills out into the relatively still neighborhoods. Generally, the older homes emit a curtain- or shade-filtered blue glow from a single square window that sits to one side or the other of a front door. In contrast, the newer houses generate an unfiltered (by curtains or shades) and unobstructed (by

front door) flickering, blue rectangle, which stretches the width of the façade and the height of the first story; the rest of the structure disappears into the night.

Of interest to me is what this phenomenon reveals about televisual spectatorship in Huntington Beach, as well as what it suggests, more generally, about living in an increasingly digital society. At a time when screens of varying shapes and sizes—on televisions, computers, ATMs, cell phones—greet and organize us, frustrate us and provide us with pleasure, we might be tempted to compare the structures in Huntington Beach to screens without considering the implications of the analogy. What does it mean that these houses have façades of glass from which emanates the glow of television screens (but also computer screens)? What is significant about the fact that entry into and exit from these newly built structures seems nonexistent? And what do these architectural features suggest about the relationship between built space, televisual spectatorship and digital living? This paper begins to engage these questions.¹

Windows are what one encounters first when approaching the newer structures that crowd the residential streets of Huntington Beach, CA. Interestingly, these windows are not framed, at least not in the decorative way of the older homes in the area. (If some sort of framing exists, it is usually part of the “mold” that shapes the rest of the stucco-ed structure.) Instead, the windows are inserted into the walls of the structures, with just enough synthetic material to hold them in place. These windows are large sheets (probably tempered and in some cases color treated, perhaps for UV protection). And these spans of glass are without the imperfections of old glass; no ripples or bubbles interfere with or warble the potential view. Equally significant is the tendency to not cover or curtain these windows; and any sign of the mechanisms of window

¹ “Televisual spectatorship” indicates television watching and, at times, seeing “from afar” using screens other than television screens. “Digital living” suggests a digital mode of living, a manner of living that involves an ever-growing interaction with (and perhaps dependence on) digital technology. The fact that I use both terms in relation to each other throughout this paper is suggestive of the increasing convergence between televisions/television viewing and activities involving digital devices/appliances. I will privilege televisual spectatorship at various moments throughout the paper, since I am focusing on an architectural feature that corresponds with televisions and television usage.

coverings, i.e., cords or rods for shades or blinds, usually remains invisible.² Perhaps these characteristics suggest a more transparent and immediate, less distanced perspective; perhaps they suggest less concern regarding the distinction between and separation of inside and outside, private and public. Or, perhaps windows of such proportion correspond to a tendency for display, turning the house into a showroom. However, the matter of the front door, or apparent absence of the front door, redirects the trajectory of this interpretation and, as a result, allows us to move toward a refiguration of televisual spectatorship.

Of course, there is a door to these structures that serves as the “front” door, but it has been relocated to the side of the house. In fact, not only has it been moved to the side, it has been recessed in an alcove so that when approached from an angle (since one cannot approach from the side due to the proximity of other houses), one is hard-pressed to see the door. But the apparent absence of a door has important implications, especially if we recall what Virilio asserts about doors. For Virilio, the door is the “first window” (“Third Window” 191).³ As such, it is the architectural component responsible for making a structure a building: “no building exists without a door” (“Third Window” 191). Virilio continues: “By definition, if there is no door, then it’s not architecture, it’s not a human habitat” (“Third Window” 191). Additionally, it is the door that “structures [man’s] day” (“Third Window” 191) into day and night. Under these circumstances, when one is without a door, it would seem that one is also confronted with being without place and without time. And by extension, it would seem that assumptions about inside and outside, private and public no longer apply, at the same time that “distinctions between *here* and *there* no longer mean anything” (Virilio “Overexposed City” 383). Consequently, notions of entry and exit must be revised.

² At the time of the initial writing of this paper, this was the case. However, one is more likely to see traces of coverings now, and it is becoming increasingly common to see these windows at least partially covered. However, the coverings chosen are often sheer—and very screen-like.

³ The window proper and the television/computer screen are the “second” and “third” windows, according to Virilio.

Here I return to the description with which this paper began: that in the evenings, emanating from these windows is the flickering blue glow of television, since the television set is located next to the glass façade. Perhaps this description allows us to consider the window to be participating in generating television emission (as opposed to the television set/screen being an extension of the window, or a window all by itself). In this case, the façade of glass merges with and becomes the electrically active screen; all physical heft and substance seemingly dissipated. Beatriz Colomina and Jean Baudrillard provide support for this interpretation. In “The Split Wall,” Colomina directly equates the window and screen when she asserts, “The window in the age of mass communication provides us with one more flat image. The window is a screen” (“The Split Wall” 128), an active screen that “undermines the wall” (128), dematerializing it. Likewise, Baudrillard explains, “Today our only architecture is just that: huge screens upon which moving atoms, particles and molecules are refracted” (“Ecstasy” 20). Architectural facades, indeed buildings as wholes, dissolve into informational interchange and exchange. As Virilio describes, the “architectonic element” dissipates into “instantaneous diffusion,” the solidity and stability of architecture made membranous as a result of the “man/machine interface” (“Overexposed City” 383). It would seem that to “inhabit” such structures, structures that have evolved into screenic sites, involves something other than living “within” or “inside”; for there seems to be no interior, just the interactivity of pixelated light. Thus, one might say that entering and exiting are notions that do not apply to these structures that fail to provide the material substance and structure (including the door) required for entry and exit. Instead, one participates in constant (inter)activity. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that these newer structures, in being comprised of screenic immateriality, might be seen as providing access, i.e., to information—and not to people (public) or things beyond the window, outside; and our relationship to the glass façade at the front might be termed access-ing.

That entry and exit no longer apply must suggest something particular about the way we “see”—and live. That we might access our homes instead of entering them must inform the practices by which we engage televisual spectating. But in order to begin to define what spectatorship entails, it seems relevant to consider what access-ing means. I propose that access-ing, as the operative description of our inhabiting a home, is a function of, and in fact quite an appropriate term in the context of, contemporary post-Fordist revisions of domestic life and social existence. If we currently exist in a society which functions according to, as David Harvey proposes, “flexible accumulation,” which “rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (147) and, subsequently, emphasizes de-centralization, dematerialization, ephemerality and instantaneity, then we live equally flexible lives. Domestic space changes, then; it is home, office, marketplace and “fun zone.”⁴ Which means that flexible domiciles are in order, domiciles whose walls are porous not obstructing, thereby allowing for the permeability of (inter)activity that flexibility requires.⁵ Perhaps then, we might say that access-ing, the process of (inter)activity, is the mode of flexibility; it is what enables flexibility to happen.

⁴ The force behind this newly formed multi-purpose domestic space is life-style living, which is mobilized by consumption, specifically the consumption of services (i.e., personal and business services as well as entertainment and events), as opposed to goods. And when goods are purchased, they are so in the name of fashion, which has a very short half-life. Fashion-oriented goods are more labels than things, one might claim; therefore, they are not so different from services. Consuming immaterial experiences rather than useful, material goods, reinforces, even if tangentially, the idea that the door no longer exists—indeed, is no longer relevant. If goods require a point of entry, experience only requires the access of a good Internet connection (and, perhaps, a credit card).

⁵ Important to note is the fact that while flexibility may describe economic, social, cultural and political trends in society as a whole, it does not guarantee flexibility of socio-economic status. In fact, I would assert that such flexibility is likely to “promise” the opposite. At this point, I have not completed research with relation to this. But, in Huntington Beach, the structures that I link to this notion of flexibility could only be inhabited by people able to afford the down payment and mortgage on a \$750,000.00 “starting at” price. Raiford Guins has suggested that the prevalence of glass as an architectural component might be about being able to afford glass, its translucence.

This is not to say that the Downtown and Old Town districts do not offer (more) affordable housing, but affordable housing means a more enclosed and fixed—not so permeable—existence (i.e., in tightly arranged rows of apartments), which I would suggest corresponds to less flexible forms of employment and fewer opportunities for financial flexibility. It would be interesting to think about recent lower, less-flexible, income housing being built to determine how it might reflect or not the flexibility of contemporary circumstances.

Equally important to consider is the fact that flexibility is a function of information; in living flexible lives, we live according to information, since information, being a matter of bits, epitomizes versatility and flexibility. As has been discussed by numerous others, information is the prime commodity (and the form in which capital accrues, since “cash” now circulates as bits from bank to bank); it is the immaterial substrate that permeates our business, social and personal transactions, including transactions involving spectatorship. We, therefore, see and live with relation to the flows of data (which is ceaselessly updated). And under these circumstances, circumstances which account for the relocation of work to home and the bleeding into one another of work and leisure—as well as computer screen and television screen, we are no longer positioned “behind the window” as previously (which may account for the fact that people do not close, or even install, curtains). And we are not observing from a distance but interacting, engaging screenically. Likewise, it implies that we no longer contain an outside by framing it with the window or the television set.⁶ In which case, televisual spectatorship must become something else.

It is relevant to pause in order to consider the television set itself and the transformation it, as an object (comprised of two primary features, console and screen), has undergone with relation to the shift in televisual spectation. In photographs and advertisements from the 1950s (see Spigel), the television is a piece of furniture, the screen encased in a bulky wooden console. As furniture, the television set is an object to be used; it is serviceable, the console functioning as a surface for placing curiosities as well as a proscenium for presenting entertainment. However, the contemporary television seems less a piece of furniture. The screen, not the console (which is now made of plastic or some other synthetic material—perhaps similar to that which attaches

⁶ I am alluding to the so-called objective viewer/observer, whose seeing proceeds according to the tradition of Alberti’s window and perspectivalism. Objective seeing connotes separation and abstraction, while interactivity, as I use it here, suggests immediacy and a more material engagement (often associated with interface).

the glass facades to the stucco structures?), is the predominate feature, having spread in height and width. At the same time, the console has decreased in depth—to the point of turning the television into a wall hanging to be hung adjacent to a window-wall. Or sometimes, the console is nestled into the wall, leaving only the screen visible, likewise adjacent to a window-wall. It would seem that the trend toward affixing the television to or building it into the wall is the first phase in the blurring of screen and wall.⁷

But even as the television, in general, is becoming more screen and less set—and as the screen is becoming more indistinguishable from the wall, and the wall from it—we are not necessarily presented with a better or bigger “picture” (even as advertisements indicate otherwise), or at least this is not the point I want to make. I propose that the television-turned-screen (-indistinguishable-from-wall) is about greater involvement, involvement as increased interaction between the spectator and the screen-wall, not as spectator entering into the world beyond the screen. Lynn Spigel’s discussion of the “smart house,” which “incorporates an electronic picture of the world that is not just representational but increasingly interactive” (*Dreamhouse* 384), is helpful. She provides a specific example, Gisue Hariri and Mojgan Hariri’s Digital House Project: the “liquid crystal walls provide surfaces and devices that interact with residents” (386). The walls of the Digital House Project are literally screens; the screens are literally walls. Plus, these screenic walls speak and respond to the inhabitants. Now the screens, as well as the houses, to which I have been referring are certainly not of the technological sophistication that Spigel discusses; but I do think that they, with their glass facades (sans door), can be interpreted as directing us toward thinking about a more interactive experience with the screen. Of course, the start of such interaction might be considered the remote control device (RCD), used for channel changing, as well as the zipping and zapping

⁷ Anne Friedberg has discussed this merging of screen and wall. I take my cue from her in making this assertion.

allowed by the VCR. But, the interactivity offered by the RCD is limited. Instead, I suggest that broadcast programming, which invites spectators to engage in online polls, chat room discussions, contests, etc, serves as an example of a version of interactivity, one that is informational and available to anyone who operates a television (and computer, too).⁸

This sort of screenic spectating, which elicits increased interactivity, reconfigures the relationship between human and technological device and, subsequently, corresponds to a reconfiguration of power. Insofar as spectatorship becomes more active and attentive and relational, it simultaneously opens the spectator to the flow of power, makes him/her more available to its continuous molding power. Beatriz Colomina asserts as much in her discussion of Le Corbusier's correlating the window as screen with communications technologies, i.e., telephone, radio, cable: "Control is now in these media. Power has become 'invisible'" ("The Split Wall" 126). Perhaps Deleuze is more descriptive in "Postscript on Control Societies," when he explains control in terms of "molding continually" and "constantly changing" (179). He asserts, "Control is short-term and rapidly shifting, but at the same time continuous and unbounded" (181). In essence, control is fluid and invisible, able to permeate the various actions and multiple processes that open (to) the spectator. It does not require the imposition of direct force; rather, it rides through forces that the person already engages.

The "smart house" provides a helpful example. According to Terence Riley, the "smart house" is a "permeable structure, receiving and transmitting images, sound, text, and data" (11): architecture and (computer) screen blur, ventilation and light become digital. In this way, the

⁸ Two other more fully interactive, but not pervasive, forms of screenic interactivity are Interactive TV and the touch-sensitive screen. Interactive TV allows viewers to access information through the television while watching television. Televisions with touch-sensitive screens, screens similar to ATM screens, record (in vibrant color) the impression/trace left by the spectator's touch. In both cases, the relationship between the spectator and the screen is direct and bi-directional, the screenic apparatus responding to and even recognizing the spectator.

On another note, I want to acknowledge the fact that letter writing and phoning stations and/or shows have been ways for spectators to interact with television in the past. However, the immediacy and variety of online interactions is certainly a more fully realized mode of televisual interactivity.

“smart house” is a structure the inhabitant is invited, perhaps required, to access through surfaces, its “smart skin,” and devices that are interactive. At the same time, the “smart house” can access the inhabitant, and does so in order to meet, or respond to, the inhabitant’s needs. Such an example is Bill Gates’ house, which tracks the occupant, i.e., turning on and off lights, as s/he moves throughout the house. And yet, even though the occupant is “freed,” i.e., of having to turn on and off lights, s/he is more integrated into the operations of the house (see Shamir Zion). Thus, the “walls” of such a house do not so much confine or enclose as track and locate. Perhaps, then, inhabiting becomes a matter of continual processing rather than domestication.⁹

Again, the notion of the “smart house” is only illustrative of what is suggested by the glass façades of the newer houses in Huntington Beach, which are so distinct from the fronts of the older homes in the area. And yet, there is a move toward “smart”-ness, insofar as these newer structures are wired for security systems and timed watering systems (for their almost non-existent plots of grass that run between the sidewalk and the street). And this move toward “smart”-ness, or an increasingly digital mode of living, is important because it allows for an interpretation of televisual spectatorship in terms of interactivity (which is usually aligned with digital technology). Perhaps, then, the blue waves of light that filter through the glass façades are evidence of an engagement between spectator and screen. Perhaps, the flickering blue rectangle that I see as I pass by announces their interactivity, and as such attests to the access-ing and continual processing that digital living entails. And perhaps it is somehow appropriate that the phenomenon I describe is specific to a place coincidentally yet aptly called Surf City, USA, a place where channel surfing, surfing the net and surfing the ocean’s waves intersect.

⁹ I am referring to the disciplining processes that occur in and as a function of domestic space, as well as to the disciplinary nature of framed seeing (to which the framed screen of the television corresponds).

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