

IML575 | WORLD BUILDING | Spring 2019

Building a World through the microcosm of the Street Corner:

Prototyping the future of Los Angeles' Skid Row and its Population through World Building.

“World building exists at the intersection of design, technology, and storytelling. In its ability to enable and conjure deeply considered holistic worlds, it represents the foundational narrative and design practice for transmedia, spherical storytelling, and the post-cinematic. World building takes a lateral anthropological stance, borrowing specifically from ethnographic practice to contextualize speculative designs in real world research. World builders as designers then use this ethnographic groundwork as a place from which to begin imagining future possibilities. This process allows designers to intelligently project plausible scenarios and outcomes through the creation of diegetic prototypes and models backed by rigorous research, envisioning desirable futures and the steps we may take to realize them - or the parallel universes we may be grateful to prevent ...” *World Building and the Future of Media: A Case Study - Makoko 2036*, Laura Cechanowicz, Brian Cantrell, Alex McDowell

Instructors

Professor : **Dr. Alex McDowell, RDI**

Visiting professor : **Dr. Sergei Gepshtein**

Visiting designer : **Alexandra I. Thomopoulos**

Class Meetings

USC Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts, 3131 S Figueroa St #110, Los Angeles, CA 90007

RZC120

Tuesday 9am-11:50am in RZC 120 (WbML lab, Zemeckis)

Thursday 9am-11:50am in RZC 120 (WbML lab, Zemeckis)

Class Structure

The class will meet twice a week over a period of 12 to 13 weeks. Because research and diversity of exploration is crucial to the development of a world, we will invite several guests from across several disciplines to speak, and hopefully remain associated, with the class.

During the first week, the students will be invited to help to compile the list of domain expert invitees. Particularly towards the start of the semester and depending on guest availability we will divide the two 3-hour sessions each week between guest visits and collaborative development of the world.

Syllabus

World building is a narrative design process that conjures and investigates an interconnected system called a 'world'. This emergent framework launches the dynamic intersection of narrative architecture and the flow of storytelling. It creates new opportunities for controlling the vectors of our own narrative, shaping a future reality that helps us change our understanding of the present and develop deeply considered futures. This method helps open up and reimagine standard patterns of thinking about the known in order to absorb the unknown. World building is a substantial foundation for expressing multiple narratives across media-agnostic platforms.

For this class - in the setting of the World Building Media Lab - the world to be built and extended from previous semesters will be grounded in the city of Los Angeles. It will focus multiple lenses on Skid Row, a population historically disadvantaged by the social, political, and economic conditions of the city, and extend its narratives into the future. Within this district, the class will build a microcosm - a Street Corner - that reflects the structure, systems, behavior and rules that govern this world, projected into the near future altered by informed speculation and disruptive events.

A systemic gathering of knowledge within real world constraints will support the power of fictional storytelling, developing this future using elements of narrative design and systems theory. We will explore the possibilities of trans-disciplinary and disruptive collaboration in relation to the complex problem of developing core and platform-agnostic systems of narratives within the framework of a networked and immersive world.

The semester will include a variety of lectures including visiting domain experts, collaborative discussion and hands-on experimentation. We will test the strengths and weaknesses of existing and evolving media practices, including a number of post-cinematic methodologies.

All members of the class will develop the world in collaboration with one another and with visiting experts. Each student will build unique and personally meaningful outcomes that emerge from and live within the developed world.

"The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them..." **Albert Einstein**

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete..." **R Buckminster Fuller**

The Class

The class will be loosely* divided into three integrated sections (100%).

[*note: it is central to the process of world building that discovery propels adaptation, and that evolving ideas will develop unexpected design and narrative solutions.]

1: DISCOVERING THE WORLD (30%)

Weeks 1 – 4: introduction, research and development

Alongside guest visits we will conduct initial topical and visual research, hold seminar-style discussions with the aim of defining the rules of our world, and explore the emergent properties and ecologies. To help facilitate this process, we will also conduct generative games and exercises, including The Situation Lab's "The Thing From the Future," which will help accustom students to systemic thinking. During this period, all students will participate in developing a single holistic world from which each project will organically develop.

The first phase engages in the systemic capture of knowledge to be distributed across multiple ecologies at multiple scales.

We ingest knowledge through deep research and access to domain expertise. From these sources we develop a series of high level ***what if why not provocations*** to challenge and develop the world.

Suggested deliverables:

- **visual and text-based research**, including interviews with visiting domain experts and others
- **multiple and varied reference sources** an overview of an initial [web-based] archive of research content categorized and connected to its sources
- **a custom 'mandala'** visualizing multiple aspects of this specific world
- **an overview of the rules** and properties of the world

2: PROTOTYPING & EMERGENT NARRATIVES (30%)

Weeks 5 - 8: full collaboration framing the rules of the world, evolving into individual narratives and their structural relationship to the shared world

Production begins on design prototypes and emergent narratives that will serve both as iterative tools and entry points into the world we build. Throughout the process, we will continue the seminar format as a means of tightening the world rules and curating deliverables. By week 5, we will have begun the process of intensive curation and determination of what in our world is “canon” and what is “myth” and begin compiling the work into a “design bible.”

As the world develops, we ideate and prototype emerging stories using design visualization, developing new approaches to existing media.

Because this world will be set in Los Angeles, we will plan student- and expert-curated field trips and workshops during this phase.

Multiple characters are developed within each project to intersect and flow through the spatial structure of the world.

By week 7, logic structures are tested as characters engage and interact and narrative develops. Students start to develop individual or group projects tied to the core world.

The structure of the world and its inhabitants is framed by the complex design problems defined by the students. At its core the world continues to frame the flow of stories that emanate from it. At this stage narrative and design can develop platform-agnostically across media, as determined by the individual skills and interests of the students.

Suggested deliverables:

- **a design bible** for the world, and subset 'chapters' for each evolving narrative project.
- **intersecting narrative architecture** exploring and defining - through fiction based in research - a future metaverse of the city, viewed through the microcosm of the Street Corner.
- **analogue or digital prototypes** which will test emerging lenses within the Street Corner, based on the research and provocations that emerge from Section 1.

3: DEVELOPING THE NARRATIVE OUTCOME (40%)

Weeks 9-13 : populating the world and its narrative architecture with character and lens; final presentations

The third phase defines the outcome of the collective world and demonstrates the ways in which the emergent future world, its process, its evolving narratives, and its distribution can create the potential for change in the present.

As the world continues to develop as a narrative container, multiple characters must intersect and flow through the infrastructure, interrogating the world through their narrative and defining their arc relative to its structure and rules.

In sub-groups or as individuals, students will spend the remainder of the semester seeding their characters in relation to the strata of the world that they inhabit. Each student will be expected to create a lens or lenses that will deliver insight and provocation while clearly defining the narrative architecture of the Street Corner.

Finally, the intention of the class is to create a multi-media outcome that can be distributed through appropriate media to provoke radical change, discussion, and further development of the world.

Suggested deliverables:

- The class will determine an appropriate format for presentation to a wider audience and present a final designed 'container' as a framework for the various projects contained within the world of Skid Row 2035. It will be exhibited during the presentation session of the class, and tested for further distribution.
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Grades and Evaluation

A - Excellent. The student was present and engaged, participated fully and insightfully in all class discussions, listened to colleagues, conducted meaningful research in and out of class sessions, and produced prompt and well-executed deliverables. The student was respectful and provided constructive criticism.

B - Good. The student was mostly present and engaged, participated in class discussion, conducted sufficient research and produced deliverables on time. The student was respectful and participated in reflection and critique.

C - Average. The student was mostly present, but occasionally absent. The student provided a bare minimum of research and was sometimes late with deliverables. Participation in class discussion and reflection was inconsistent.

D - Unsatisfactory. The student was often absent, conducted little research, and produced few or late deliverables. The student displayed no interest or engagement in discussion and reflection. **F - Failed.** The student was absent most of the time and/or hardly participated in discussion or production of deliverables.

Breakdown of Effort for Grade

CONCEPTUAL CORE

- The project's controlling idea must be apparent and be productively aligned with one of more multimedia genres.
- The project's efficacy must be unencumbered by technical problems (typically involves a back-up plan).
- The project must approach the subject matter in a creative or innovative manner.

RESEARCH COMPONENT

- The project must display evidence of substantive research and thoughtful engagement with its subject matter.
- The project must use a variety of credible sources, which are cited appropriately.
- The project must effectively engage with the primary issue(s) of the subject area into which it is intervening.

FORM & CONTENT

- The project's structural or formal elements must serve the conceptual core.
- The project's design decisions must be deliberate, controlled and defensible.
- The project must achieve significant goals that could not be realized on paper.

Recommended Reading/ Viewing

- *Stalker*, Andrei Tarkovsky - one of the great films, that's all.

- **Minority Report, Steven Spielberg** - a (linear) film narrative that flipped the model of script-based production by building a (non-linear) world of future reality that preceded and stimulated the script, and launched world building as a narrative design practice
- **Highrise, Katerina Cizek, National Film Board of Canada** - an interactive website accessing architectural time-space, allowing the viewer access to parallel narratives in multiple media
<http://highrise.nfb.ca/>
- **Adam, Veselin Efremov and team, Unity** - using the process and tools of interactive media to produce a revolutionary piece of linear animation made in realtime that points to a future where the silos of media practices can be folded together
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXI0I3yqBrA>
 - ... and the 'making of' - <https://unity3d.com/pages/adam>
- **Here, Richard McGuire** - HERE by Richard McGuire is the story of a corner of a room and the events that have occurred in that space over the course of hundreds of thousands of years. A wonderful way to visually contextualize a multi-layered narrative over time and demonstrate the multi-dimensional power of the graphic novel <https://screendiver.com/directory/here-by-richard-mcguire/>
 - and the process of constructing Here: https://fivedials.com/files/fivedials_no35.pdf
- see also the 5 dimensional **Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons**
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watchmen>
- **/r/place, April 1 2017, Reddit Place timelapse** - multiple storytellers in conflict and coordination
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfF7gtPA5HY>
- **Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth, Buckminster Fuller** - a narrative and metaphorical framework for extrapolating forward to a necessary future.
- **Thinking in Systems: A Primer, Donella Meadows**
- **Ethnographies of the Possible, from Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice, Joachim Halse*.***
- **The City & The City, China Miéville** - a novel and beautiful narrative of parallel worlds that occupy the same geo-located time and space.
- **Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino** - multiple metaphorical narratives about a single city, 'described through 55 fictitious cities many of which can be read as parables or meditations on culture, language, time, memory, death, or the general nature of human experience'; a complex system for the structure of multi-lensed and folded storytelling.
- **World Building and the Future of Media: A Case Study - Makoko 2036**, Laura Cechanowicz, Brian Cantrell, Alex McDowell, IEEE Xplore - the descriptions and outcomes of a 2-semester world building class in 2016.
 - **Makoko 2036 Abstract:** This essay is a case study that illustrates the use of world building as a "technology of the imagination" - entering a tradition of many other technologies of the imagination as elaborated by Sneath et al. and Halse - that envisions the future of media and technology [3, p. 182]. **Published in:** [IEEE Technology and Society Magazine](#) (Volume: 35 , [Issue: 4](#) , Dec. 2016)
<https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/search/searchresult.jsp?newsearch=true&queryText=makoko>

Instructor & TA biographies

Lead instructor: **Alex McDowell RDI** is professor of practice at USC School of Cinema where he directs the World Building Media Lab and World Building Institute and teaches world building as a post-cinematic narrative design practice. Present lab research

includes the *World in a Single Cell*, a development of new visual semantics within VR for a pancreatic beta cell defined as a city, and the *Street Corner* as a metaphor of complex human interactions and a microcosm of dynamic and intersecting systems. Through his 30-year career as a film production designer and across the academic and narrative design landscape he and his teams have developed over 75 worlds, fictional and real, past, present and future, with outcomes across all media including those not yet defined. amcdowell@cinema.usc.edu

Visiting professor: **Dr. Sergei Gepshtein** is a scientist working in the areas of perceptual psychology and sensory neuroscience. He is a member of the Center for Neurobiology of Vision at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, where he studies boundaries of perception in the natural world and in visual media. He directs the Collaboratory for Adaptive Sensory Technologies, which he founded at the Salk Institute with the goal to translate results of basic sensory research toward a wide range of applications: from immersive visual technologies and adaptive sighting devices to architecture, urban design, and forensic science. Dr. Gepshtein has recently joined USC School of Cinematic Arts as the director of the Center for Spatial Perception & Concrete Experience (SPaCE) at <http://wbispace.usc.edu>, which is a part of the USC World Building Institute and is housed in the division of Media Arts + Practice. sergei@salk.edu

Guest designer: **Alexandra I. Thomopoulos**, Master of Architecture, May 2018, University of Southern California. athomopo@usc.edu

[Syllabus by Alex McDowell & Brian Cantrell May 2018, Alex McDowell & Sergei Gepshtein December 2018]