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Editor –in-Chief's Corner
Shaping the 'Public Sphere' in Second Life:
Architectures of the 2008 U.S. Presidential
By Annabel Jane Wharton, Duke University

Abstract

The "public sphere" – that space of the civil intellectual engagement of the population with the politics of the state – has been consistently addressed as the exclusive realm of speech, whether in oral or written form, from its origins in print culture to contemporary blogs. Though Jürgen Habermas, formulator of the classic understanding of the public sphere, acknowledged the contribution of the built environment to political interchange, the material setting of the public sphere has been largely absent in its subsequent discussions. Indeed, now that those concerned with the degeneration of public sphere have turned their attention to its survival on the web, physical space has virtually disappeared from any assessment of democracy's vital signs. The description offered here of the figuration of the 2008 campaign venues of Second Life attempts to demonstrate the effect of architecturally articulated space, virtual as well as real, in the formation of the polity. I have argued that the architecture of the campaign venues of the recent U.S. presidential election is the necessary complement to the discourses that went on within them. Buildings, even digital ones, certainly modify the acts of those who use them. Muggings are more likely to occur in back allies than in the lobbies of five-star hotels; miracles seem to happen more often in churches than in prisons. If buildings inform behaviors, certainly they also contribute to the shape of politics.

Keywords: agency; architecture; public sphere; space; theory; immersive worlds; 2008 presidential campaign.

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Discursive space

A modest speculation on the agency of architecture in the virtual world is offered here. The 'architecture' considered is not, obviously, physical or material construction. Less obviously, this 'architecture' is not merely a depicted or represented place, objective and rational. It is, rather, representational: an experienced space, a space that is subjectively and partially understood only by moving through it (Lefebvre, 1991, 38-39). These digital environments have the affects of physical structures. Like real-life structures, they both embody the culture of those who construct them and model the behaviors of those who occupy them. The election venues built by Democrats and Republicans in Second Life during the 2008 presidential campaigns in the United States provide the examples for my argument.

Second Life, which went on-line as a fully-formed virtual world in June, 2003, is the product of Linden Lab, a corporation based in San Francisco. The world it offers is large. At the time of the U.S. Presidential elections in November, 2008, 18,000 servers maintained 450 square miles of virtual land with a population of over sixteen million registered residents embodied in "uniquely named" avatars with limited citizens' rights including ownership and movement (Linden Lab, 2008). Second Life is the best documented of those immersive environments that depend on their residents to build them (Spence, 2008). Second Life's relatively older demographics – the average age of participants in November, 2008, was 32 – makes it an attractive arena for social and political analysis. A recent monograph published by Princeton University Press offers an anthropological assessment of the culture of Second Life – an indication of the seriousness of the digital world's human implications (Boellstorff, 2008). The book also provides a bulky bibliography covering the history and historiography of this digital world. Most of those participating in Second Life are 'in World' for entertainment (e.g. live music performances, soft porn, shopping) or other forms of personal satisfaction (e.g. creating objects, practicing religion, exploring). A very few are 'in World' to make a real-world living (e.g. as builders, land speculators, skin-makers, police). But education and discussion groups are also prominent preoccupations of residents. Here is the locus of politics in Second Life.

The readers of *The Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* may be more familiar with Second Life than with academic discussions of the 'public sphere'. The public sphere is a discursive site in which the educated public defines, through rational-critical disquisition, communal political positions which may subsequently affect the actions of the state. This understanding of the public sphere depends on Jürgen Habermas' powerful analysis published as *Structurwandel der Öffentlicheit* in 1962 and, with even greater effect, as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 (Habermas, 1989). Therein, Habermas posits the public sphere as essential to the work of modern democracy. He describes the emergence of the public sphere in the eighteenth century and its disintegration in the twentieth. The media and the venues of the civic interaction of individuals have been spectacularized (Debord, 1983). *Loci* for the civil exchange of political ideas have become sites of profit. Newspapers have been superseded by television, coffee houses by sports arenas, and reasoned arguments by unsubstantiated opinions. (Calhoun, 1993, for a survey of criticisms of Habermas' theories). In the twenty-first century the web has become the medium of choice for communication, eliciting a new set of investigations of the Habermasian public sphere. The potential scaffolds for deliberative democracy – as well as the obstacles to civil political dialogue – now offered by the web generally and by immersive worlds in particular, have been registered by a growing number of researchers. Representative are the works of Dahlberg, Papacharissi, Bohman, Wodak and Wright, and Barlow (Barlow, 2008; Bohman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; Wodak & Wright, 2006). Considerable optimism has been expressed by these researchers about the formation of new critical communities by means of the internet, though they fully acknowledge the burdens placed on the realization of a new discursive realm in virtual space by bad actual-world political habits.

In his historical introduction to the public sphere, Habermas positioned the exchange of ideas within specific material conditions, referencing physical sites from the Greek *oikos* to the English coffee house as well as developments in technology and the economy. Subsequent discussions of the contemporary public sphere among historians, sociologists and philosophers have concentrated almost exclusively on its discursive content and technological means. The architectural and topographic settings of the public sphere have been largely ignored. By considering the architectures of political meeting places in the immersive world, this article makes a foray into the understudied material settings conducive to the serious political discourse that sustains deliberative democracy.

If Habermas' theory provides the object – namely, the public sphere – of this paper, the works of Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari contribute significantly to its theoretical frame. Lefebvre establishes space as a product of human action and an expression of the political, rather than a passive presence (Lefebvre, 1991). Importantly for the purposes of this paper, his understanding of the world's space as a human construction has been posthumously reified in digital worlds: the space of Second Life exists only as product of Linden Lab's programmers and Second Life's entrepreneurially creative participants. Deleuze and Guattari, with their generative investigation of space as the matrix of power, have also greatly contributed to the definition offered here of the spatial differences between Republican and Democratic sites (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Indeed, the nomadic, unmapped territory of evolving opposition – identified as smooth space – and the ordered and institutional territory of established state power – termed striated space – present uncomfortably close correspondences to the virtual sites under discussion.

Nomadic and fixed space: Democrats and Republicans in Second Life

The immersive world of Second Life featured a number of political structures supporting candidates in the 2008 U. S. presidential election. Seven sites were identified through the use of Second Life's "place" search engine with terms like "political," "Republican," "Democrat," "McCain," and "Obama." This search engine also recorded the number of avatars visiting the sites. Locations which were exclusively commercial – such as shops selling political paraphernalia – or those sites whose functions were undisguisedly ironic, though included by the search engine, were excluded from this assessment. Some of the structures discussed in this paper continued to exist in Second Life after the conclusion of the election campaign. Nevertheless, the past tense is used throughout this piece as a sign of the uncanny transience of the built environment in virtual space. 'Uncanny' usually suggests an unexpected disturbance in what should be familiar and secure (Vidler, 1992); in immersive worlds it references the odd expectation of the instability of the familiar and ephemerality of the secure.

Figure 1

Although the Democratic Party apparently had no established official headquarters in Second Life, Barack Obama was the principal subject of several simulated environments. The "Unofficial Obama Headquarters" (Silicon Island 70.182.26) was the largest of the sites devoted to the Obama campaign (Fig. 1).[1] The structure was located on an island between a wind farm and research offices. The size of a supermarket, this two-storied hyper-Modernist building was all virtual steel, glass, and plastic. Emphasis was on the periphery of the interior of the structure: high-tech devices in the form wall-plaques and computer consoles frame the space. These information instruments offered direct internet access to voter registration, volunteer opportunities, and the candidate's position papers. The cool, gray space was barely furnished. The few aluminum benches in the building presented no attractive social alternative to studying the data provided. Indeed nothing in the venue suggests social interaction – there was no coffee bar, no over-stuffed sofas.

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[1] The first name in this citation and those that follow identifies the 68-square acre block (sim) occupied by the site. The sim is the basic module of Second Life. The numbers plot the location of the site within the sim.

Figure 2

Another Democratic site, "Obama for President – Headquarters for Victory" (Seokcheon 108.201.49), was set off a lonely highway in an unroofed stone enclosure (Fig.2). Its gray, windowless walls had as adornment only red, white, and blue-starred swags at their apex. It presented a large, open area, minimally furnished with a few leather-covered couches and lounge chairs. The enclosure walls were lined with identical box-like portals, differentiated only by their titles: "Arts," "Civil Rights," "Defense," "Energy," "Ethics," "Urban Policy," "Health Care," "Women." A click on a portal provided the visitor with a web-link to Obama's policy comments on the indexed subject. Though the raw textures with which the Seokcheon site was defined were very different then the slick ones on Silicon Island, the spatial orders of the two sites were remarkably similar, in that they were dauntingly empty both of things and of avatars.
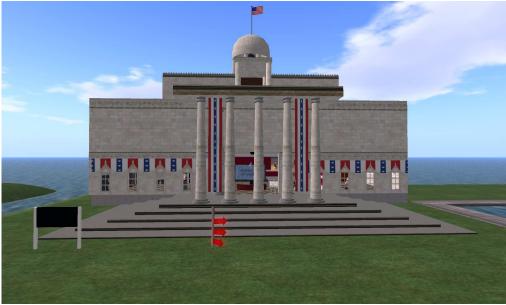
If the Silicon Island and Seokcheon sites were large-scale, functionalist and austere, two other Obama venues were more intimate. The "Obama/Biden Lounge and Unofficial HQ at Hope Beach" (Donggyeo, 25.101.22) offered a small, resort-like retreat on a tropical island. A space, the size and shape of a garage, presented familiar posters of Obama and free campaign paraphernalia for interested avatars. It featured a large, shaggy, black robotic dog named Hope. Like the Silicon Island and Seokcheon structures, Donggyreo's Obama/Biden hall was not a closed space, but an open one. The accessibility of the lounge area was complemented with two other public amenities. A small bandstand adorned with bunting was built in front of the hall. Next to the meeting room there was, in addition, an orientalizing tent. There the visitor was invited to relax on floor-pillows under an Obama banner.

"Americans for Obama" (Ryder Jungle 137.30.24) presented another intimate setting: a simple timber and glass country retreat with a large fire place at its center and log furniture. The site, complementary to its architecture, expresses preservationist interests. Like the other Democratic sites, its walls were papered with posters. Avatars were offered free Obama tee-shirts, buttons, hats and hand-held American flags. One negative poster was on display: "McCain Votes Against the Vets – CNN." It also had a message board on which visitors could post their

thoughts on both the site and on campaign itself. Though it was an enclosed space, avatars were teleported to the interior of the structure; doors only needed to be opened to leave the cabin.

The Donggyeo and Ryder Obama-for-President venues were both rendered somatically attractive with their saturated colors and elaborate textures. Their island and jungle locations, however, represent them as remote, exotic sites of holidays and adventures, as opposed to places of community construction. Whether designed as practical or as pleasurable, all of the Democratic campaign settings in Second Life appeared marginal and relatively isolated. They had few visitors, most of whom were self-identified as non-U.S, citizens.

In contrast to the detached character of Democratic venues, Republican sites in Second Life were fixed, ordered places. Of the three indexed Republican Party sites devoted to the McCain and Palin campaign in Second Life only one was intimate in its scale. This structure was not, however, isolated. "A Republican Place" (Oro 26.114.27) was a Tudor-style bungalow settled in the suburban grid of a Catholic neighborhood. It had yard signs outside and political posters in the living room. In the immediate neighborhood were the Catholic Now Café and Chapel and two large churches – the Cathedral Basilica of All Saints and the Shrine of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. In addition there was an enclosed garden with a commemoration of Roman Catholic "Glories" and a Rosary-O-Matic for avatars. A store in which various religious statues and paintings were sold and the Catholic Information Center were also located within a two block radius. Although the site was not highly populated, "A Republican Place" appeared to be very much a part of a broader, apparently stable religious community.

Figure 3

Much more monumental than 'A Republican Place' were the two other McCain/Palin campaign locations indexed in Second Life. The largest was the site of the "Republican Party of SL" (Keen 77, 173, 21) (Fig. 3). This monumental complex, about the size of two football fields, was too large to photograph as a whole. Images in Second Life "rezz" or resolve into sight only as an avatar approaches, and they disintegrate as the avatar retreats. Distant views of the built environment are impossible. The "Republican Party of SL" campus was organized around the Washington Monument, which occupied the center of a grand, cruciform reflecting pool. The

dominant building in the complex was rendered in a style that might be called Washington-DC-Revival or Wedding-Cake-Classical. It took the form of an oblong mass with a relief frieze as a cornice and arched windows draped in the Stars and Stripes, topped with a clerestory level and finally crowned with a domed belfry. The structure was introduced by a monumental staircase and porch supported by five (sic!) columns of a mock-Doric order. (No self-respecting Greek or Roman colonnaded porch would have a column frustrating the axis of its entrance.)

An avatar visiting this structure found, at ground level, a spacious, open lobby with a reception desk, a few chairs, a table offering free virtual cigars, and several Second Life political posters on the walls. The lobby was flanked by two smaller rooms – one devoted to a display of books denouncing liberal politics, including works by Ann Coulter (*Godless: The Church of Liberalism*), Sean Hannity (*Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism*), and Jonah Goldberg (*Liberal Fascism*). A left click on the cover of any of the volumes linked to Amazon for the book's acquisition. The spacious meeting room on the second floor interior was lined with traditional, faux-oil portraits of all American presidents up to George W. Bush. Portraits of Republican presidents might be identified by hovering the cursor over the image. At one end of the room there was a podium, with chairs arranged for a lecture.

Figure 4

The classicizing headquarters and the Washington Monument were apparently the only structures retained from an earlier version of the site during its recently initiated rebuilding (Hunghi, 2008). Reconstruction was on-going, which perhaps explained the setting's lack of landscaping: bushes, flowers, gardens, and trees were almost entirely absent. Other buildings in the complex were all rendered in a non-descript Corporate Postmodern style: Dryvit-like containers with rounded corners sprayed brick-red, flesh-colored faux marble and black structural details. Dryvit is the trade name that has become a generic term for a currently popular mode of construction--basically stucco blown over Styrofoam--that has many variations. Such processes are deployed to produce not only slick works like those of the Republican Party of Second Life, but also ornamental facades with the faux-classical details popular with banks and hotels. Styrofoam is much cheaper to model into pilasters, cornices and capitals than stone.

These faux-Dryvit buildings at Keen in Second Life included a café with an expansive You Tube screen for members of the "Republican Party of SL" only. There was also a large auditorium where streaming video presented by the "East Coast Conservative Podcast: News and comment from behind the Blue Curtain" could be viewed collectively on Sundays at 5:30. The screen was flanked to the right by a Second Life poster of the group and to the left a picture of Obama waving his hand, labeled "Sig (sic!) Heil, Hitler." Across the campus was the "University of Conservative Studies" which was intended "To solidify and fortify young skulls formerly full of liberal mush" (Fig. 4). Although still under construction at the time of the election, there were two high-tech classrooms on the second level. Finally, between the café and the theater there was a skeet-shooting game. Only members could play; each game costs 1L$. The game is very inexpensive: the conversion rate of Linden dollars to US dollars has been relatively stable at 250L$ = $1.00. On the margins of the site there were two separate spaces – a darkly ominous, unlabelled monument and an open-air pavilion with McCain (no Palin) information, a Nobama sign, and a parked jet fighter plane.

Figure 5

Another elaborate site in Second Life devoted to the McCain/Palin campaign was "The Straight Talk Café: John McCain and Sarah Palin for America" (Sagamore 166.152.31) (Fig. 5). The teleport station was a gazebo. The architecture surrounding the avatar's landing point was realized in the Georgian and Beaux-Arts styles, variations of the classical. On axis were monumental buildings with colonnaded pedimented porches – the incomplete Ronald Reagan Building on one side and the Georgian town hall on the other. The inside of this last structure was as formal as its exterior, space being arranged symmetrically around a grand double stairway. All the open rooms were empty of furnishings; the walls were adorned with elaborately framed paintings of American presidents and heroic occasions in American history. Another under-construction building was sign-posted as the new Republican Hall of Fame. The Straight Talk Café itself, another Georgianesque structure, was furnished as a meeting place with a bar and comfortable couches as well as informational materials on McCain and negative posters about Obama.

On a hill above the central quadrangle was another Washington Monument. At the base of the front side of the obelisk's base were bronze plaques with battle scenes from wars in which the US fought, including World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War. Following on the right side are memorials to the Persian Gulf War and the Iraqi (sic!) War flanking a memorial plaque representing Somerset County, PA (trees), New York, NY (Twin Towers), and Washington, DC (Pentagon) with additional space in which to add further plaques to future wars. The central square around the gazebo was formally divided into quadrants, each of which was artistically marked. The most impressive of these monuments was a great equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt. The second quadrant displayed a series of reliefs with portraits of the American astronauts on granite mounts framing a raised circular area with an American flag and the imprint of an astronaut boot on the surface of the moon. A model of the Wright brothers' first plane and a plaque with their portraits occupied a third quadrant. The final quadrant was adorned with a Civil War cannon. The trees and bushes of the landscaping softened the seriousness of the architecture.

The Straight Talk Café site acts like a town square from a nostalgically remembered United States of the 1950s or from Main Street in Disney World. The Sagamore sim was by far the most popular 2008 campaign venue in Second Life. It seemed to attract as many Democrats as Republicans. Debate was lively and arguments were heated, but for the most part remarkably civil. Volunteer security avatars were always present but I never witnessed an eviction.

Architectural agency

Structures in Second Life are, of course, distinct from buildings in real life. Buildings in digital environments are not restrained by weight-bearing technologies. Their roofs do not leak and their foundations do not subside. They do not decay. They can be destroyed without creating waste. Old forms may be readily exchanged for new ones. In their evanescence and insubstantiality, Second Life buildings behave more like fashionable real life clothing rather than like real life structures. Second Life buildings present no primordial presence in the landscape; they contain no nooks and crannies for the residue of memory. Indeed, the built environment of Second Life offers a rich source of criticism of phenomenological treatments of space. From Eliade and Rosen's primordial eruptions of the Divine to Heidegger and Bachelard's oneiric huts, phenomenological theories of space have no traction in the architectures of immersive worlds (Bachelard, 1992; Eliade, [1957] 1987; Heidegger, 1971; Rosen, 2004).

In other important ways, however, virtual structures act in ways similar to material ones. Digital buildings, though much, much cheaper than real-life structures, do require the possession of "land" and the purchase or production of construction materials or textures. Large compounds and big buildings infer wealth in the immersive world, just as they do in the physical one. Further, the form that a patron gives to her building is as much an expression of her interests and peculiarities as the figuration that she gives her avatar. Architectures in immersive worlds, like those in real life, reveal a great deal about their makers. They even appear to have embodied their producers' ideological perspectives. But perhaps most fundamentally, the virtual structures of Second Life, like built ones in real life, may well act as agents in their environments. In real life, shopping malls cultivate the obsessions of consumers, casinos the compulsions of gamblers, arenas the manias of sports fanatics. Places are shaped for the same purposes in Second Life: buildings manipulate the movement of their users and condition their actions and even their thinking, often without those avatars' conscious realization.

The digital environments of the Republicans and Democrats in Second Life eerily resembled their political campaigns in real life. The Democrats urged change, exploiting new media as a means of conveying their message. Correspondingly the major Democratic sites in Second Life tended to be digitally articulated either as modern or as vernacular spaces without historical reference. Venues were typically open, unhierarchical, and directionless. Architecture shaped a place, but gave it no particular meaning or resonance. Technology had a dominant presence. Communication was primarily textual – political positions had to be read by the visitor, not intuited. The sites seemed to assume that their visitors were coolly rational. The mechanically accessed messages were largely positive, devoted principally to describing the presidential candidate's positions. The buildings – both the non-descript modern spaces and the vacation sites – appeared even during the campaign period to be temporary or only temporarily political. All of the locations were didactic and programmatically a little dull. They were also all minimally inhabited. The Democratic sites in Second Life were empty, un-policed, and non-discursive. They were temporary, abstract spaces designed for the purpose of disseminating ideas and information. The only social engagement promoted was that which might occur elsewhere – in real life political activism. By the time of the final editing of this text in June, 2009, all of the Democratic sites discussed in it had disappeared. They were nomadic spaces.

In contrast to the Democrat's focus on change, the Republican campaign emphasized the maintenance of traditional values. The architecture of their campaign venues corporealized those values through familiar and reassuring forms. Republican complexes all were anchored in a broader community. The scale and form of buildings were given much greater emphasis. The style of choice in the two major Republican sites was Classical. Classicizing architectural forms were, from the nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, associated with the gravitas of the state and those institutions that represented the state's political, cultural or economic authority: legislatures, courthouses, museums, banks. Classicizing principles establish an authoritative order: bilateral symmetry contributes to a clear articulation of hierarchy; reference to the Greek and Roman past lend that symmetry the weighty sanction of revered tradition (Taylor, 1974). These spatial practices were put to use in the Republican sites.

Though textual materials were certainly available at the headquarters of the Republican Party of SL and at the Straight Talk Café, communication was image-oriented. Ideas were visually conveyed by monuments and pictures: great events and great men. The sites appealed to the patriotic through reference to the illustrious national past. Attacks on the opposition were much more prominent; polemical violence was greater. Surveillance was more extensive. The Republican locations tended towards the iconic and dogmatic. The labor involved in the planning and construction of these sites was apparent. The producer's dedication to architecture was complemented by a devotion to programming. The two major Republican sites were coded by their makers to act socially not in real life but in Second Life. In both, formal discussions and lectures were organized and advertised. In Sagamore, there were, in addition, beach parties, dances, and conversations which attracted avatars of different political persuasions. This commitment to the immediacy of avatar interaction is instantiated in the sites' settings. They were less boring then the Democratic venues. At the time of the final editing of this article in June, 2009, Straight Talk Café and the Official Republican Headquarters of SL are still active. The end of the campaign effected a marked reduction in creative contention. Nevertheless, those sites, as fixed spaces, still provide potential venues for discursive engagement.

The importance of sustaining a public sphere for engaging effectively with state policies and practices is broadly acknowledged. The 2008 US presidential campaign venues in Second Life suggest how immersive worlds might contribute to the construction of that public sphere. Immersive worlds, in their virtual place-making, present possibilities for the production of a public sphere unavailable to other web-based fora—political blogs, facebook, twitter. Immersive worlds provide architecturally articulated spaces that attract individuals and sustain their communal interaction.[2] These venues, by their spatial order and programming, also affect the discourses which they accommodate. By recognizing the force of space-shaping in the production of politics we take one step towards the transparency of a democracy.

Acknowledgements

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[2] More recently I was the only U.S. Citizen in a group of Egyptians, Turks, Saudis, and Palestinians who met to discuss President Obama's speech in Cairo. The discourse was powerful and enlightening.

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