Catacombs: refuge on the border of the virtual and the real

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Abstract

The poster aims to present the project Inverse City and its development process, from the initial concept to its final execution. The site-specific installation fuses analogue and digital forms of immersion to provide the viewer with an embodied, spatial experience of finding refuge.

In our times of political and ecological unrest, the idea of a catacomb gains new connotations and appeal. The project aims to offer the viewer a symbolic, secular catacomb that they can fill with their personal hopes and beliefs to shield them from what is oppressing or endangering them. "Underground" virtual worlds are often perceived as dangerous places, but this work aims to portray the joy of creating a community and resisting.

Catacombs are underground spaces most commonly built by oppressed communities, which is why its construction is often done in secret and develops organically. A typical example of catacombs is those created by early Christians under the rule of the Ancient Roman empire. They could only bury their dead outside the city walls, for which they would dig labyrinths of corridors and chambers underground with the walls of the catacombs consisting simply of earth.

My artworks present architectural spaces made of human bodies to reflect and unearth the socio-political structures of architecture in general or regarding specific institutions and communities. In this case, I aim to reflect on the enormous communal effort that went into the construction of ancient catacombs. Another interpretation of the human figures is that they represent all those who found a place of eternal peace here, such as those half a million people who were buried in the catacombs of Saint Callixtus.

The experiment which led to this project was the attempt to find a method that combines a digitally constructed environment with a physically immersive installation. Firstly, the two scenes were modelled in Blender, from which images were rendered with equiangular cameras so that one image could incorporate multiple traditional views. The first image was made with an extended view on the horizontal axis, while the other was made with a broadened vertical axis. These high-resolution images were then printed onto large PVC sheets so that the spaces they depicted were life-size. These were exhibited in an arched cellar art space, for which the prints' sizes were measured to fit the forms of the location perfectly. The second, vertically extended print was installed along the arch of the place, thus folding vertically along the ceiling to create an illusion of an extended virtual space.

The overall atmosphere of the exhibition with its underground cellar location, soft lights and beckoning prints aims to create a modern-day catacomb to provide a symbolic shelter for all in need of a refuge.