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CONSUMED

Go Figure

By ROB WALKER

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As a genre of visual communication, the architectural rendering is underscrutinized. When we see one — in a business meeting, on a real estate sign, accompanying an article about a public-works project — we understandably focus on the merits of what's depicted, not the depiction. Recently, however, I happened to spend a lot of time looking at such drawings, and found myself drawn to a recurring feature that, strictly speaking, had nothing to do with the suggested structures: the little human figures who inhabit the rendered world.

The apparent purpose of these figures is to provide sense of scale — in fact one architect friend of mine refers to these figures as “scalies.” That is no weirder than the more-official names given to these denizens of hypothetical environs, including “people textures” and “populating images.” In general, they are a happy and healthy lot: they jog past environmentally responsible retail, stride in smart business attire toward gleaming office structures, hobnob in the former back alley magically converted to green space.

But where did these uncanny little citizens come from, and what are they really up to? I figured I'd ask Geoff Manaugh, proprietor of the delightful Bldgblog.blogspot.com, devoted to such themes as “architectural speculation” and “urban conjecture.” In the past, Manaugh told me, people were often completely absent from architectural representation, so letting figures into the frame humanized and presented buildings in a social context. “The funny thing is how it has become its own subgenre,” he continued. “You can take the most random rendering and just stick in a few people — someone listening to an iPod, somebody reading a newspaper, maybe a couple holding hands, some guy playing an acoustic guitar. Suddenly it's meant to make the entire building beyond critique; it's already part of our city.”

In a sense, then, people textures became a form of rhetoric, whether they seem drawn to the buildings they're placed near or even if they seem oblivious to them in a way that suggests a new structure is a natural part of the streetscape. “You tend not to see people spraying graffiti or a homeless person sleeping in the alley,” Manaugh observed. “Or rats.” Every so often, student projects will play with the form — Manaugh recalls examples involving people textures in gas masks or having sex or urinating on the street. Obviously that's rare in more-professional contexts, where the norm is an anonymous pedestrian with no attention-hogging features.

There is a small people-texture industry. Realworld Imagery sells CDs containing, for instance, 104 “Business People,” for insertion into renderings, for about \$150 a disc. A site in Britain, Falling Pixel, offers, among others, “120 Casual People” (which sounds like a

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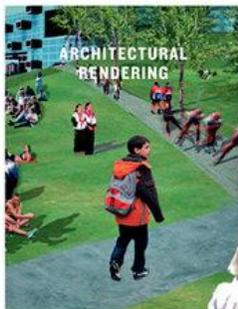
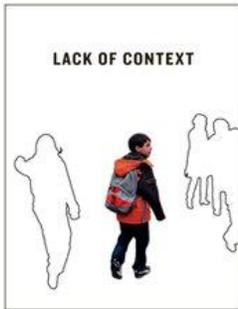
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passable indie movie) for about \$70. Marlin Studios, in Arlington, Tex., also sells textures, and its founder, Tom Marlin, explained the business to me.

He found his way into the field by way of creating video games and learning how to incorporate photo-realistic surfaces and textures borrowed from real life. Packaged digital bundles of images of trees and cars and the like turned out to be useful tools for architects who want to add pizzazz to renderings. A developer trying to get financial backing for a shopping center, Marlin explains, might tell the architect, "I need to see the parking lot full of cars, and I want hundreds of people walking around." His visualizations are two-dimensional moving computer animations, though soon Marlin plans to release three-dimensional figures who walk or gesticulate in repetitive loops. Many of the people textures he sells were created in long, single sessions in which scores of individuals in neutral day-to-day costumes (a blazer and tie; jeans and T-shirt) are photographed against a green screen and sign an all-purpose image waiver. While a certain amount of variety matters — scalies can be young or old and come from diverse ethnic backgrounds — the most important factor is making sure any individual isn't so remarkable as to distract from the scene as a whole (or dressed in outfits that will quickly look dated). The idea is to sell the same scalies over and over.

Marlin's biggest rival is most likely the architect who simply creates his own populating images, maybe grabbing pictures off the Web and altering them. Tim Woods, a professor of architecture at the Savannah College of Art and Design, advises his students on proper deployment of people textures (racial balance is important, for example). He says it has lately been the case that some will use recognizable figures. He showed me one of his firm's renderings, in which [Anderson Cooper](#) relaxed happily in front of a modified-shipping-container home. If that seems absurd, Woods reminded me that the point of a rendering is not to depict a reality; it's to persuade viewers — whether clients or investors or the public at large — to go along with an architect's vision and let him or her make it reality. They may not seem to have much on their minds, those orderly little scalies, but it turns out they have a lot to say.

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