



iTecture

*What would you see and hear if buildings wore their hearts, lungs and nervous systems on their sleeves, or at least their structural skins? Plymouth's **Cybrid** project is an eye-opening slant on the silent march of the smart buildings, round the corner, soon. **Cybrid's Chris Speed** envisages its future*

Plymouth, as with so many of Britain's regional centres, is currently undergoing a cultural makeover as part of attempts to refocus the city as a happening, future-oriented place to come to live and do business in. Inevitably, much of this is focused on the incipient new media activity that bubbles just under the surface of the city's cultural activity. And much, perhaps inevitably, derives from one of the hubs of that activity, the University of Plymouth's School of Computing.

Hidden in its warren of departmental activities is STAR, otherwise known in the curriculum brochures as the Science, Technology and Arts Research group. STAR's group of computer science and interactive media researchers has for the last two years run an interesting annual exhibition, Without Walls. This has explored the relation between only too existent physical, and the emergent digital architecture fields, attempting to nurture a dialogue between the two. In the last two years the University commissioned a series of three new buildings to re-house various expanded departments on the University's increasingly cramped Portland Square site. The square, such as it is, fronts onto a main road that joins Plymouth's concrete city centre and one of its immediate inner city suburbs beginning only yards further up the hill.

If one wanted to draw the attention of the many passers-by, these buildings would be a good opportunity. STAR, which has for a number of years been researching the prospective futuristic interfaces between buildings, their users and the passing public, saw its chance. As the building plans developed it developed Cybrid, a groundbreaking synergy between the built environment and a whole new range of uses in the building for new media, particularly sensor, tracking and an innovative take on how Building Maintenance Systems (BMS) technology might be used for artistic, indeed Information Art, ends.

The project centres upon one of these three new University of Plymouth buildings, giant steel and glass box Behemoths, characteristic of the many contemporary large-scale buildings that are too complex to

understand just by looking at them. Defined by its social function for a huge variety of different people, wired completely to allow itself to control its own environmental conditions, and providing a digital and actual space for people to work in, the building can be 'alive' and present in many different ways. However, like most digital systems, these dynamics that make the architecture so versatile and meaningful for so many different people are hidden, and the building will continue to look the same day in and day out.

Cybrid was thus born out of the desire to explore and illustrate the complexity that defines such a contemporary building. By tapping into the data networks that are hidden throughout the building, the Cybrid becomes a resource for scientists, engineers, researchers and artists to begin representing some of the hidden activity that defines the building's use. From watching the movement of people, to tracking their use of the Internet and even monitoring the environmental conditions of the building, new representations of this activity will emerge, perhaps as sound through speakers, as images through data projections or as a stream of information to a website, Cybrid is intended to visualise the many images that one building can be known as, but is traditionally understood as one.

The actual building where STAR's experiment is being hatched, is designed by the well-respected environmental architectural practice, Feilden Clegg Bradley. The three office blocks are connected by an open corridor linking three atria to form a fluid and multi-level environment that is well lit and well designed. The building is host to a number of 'cutting edge' schools and departments, most notably the Peninsula Medical School, which works from an interdisciplinary teaching philosophy embracing many other departments' activities: neuroscience, engineering and interactive media. If it is simple enough to 'see' the building from the outside and begin to find a relationship with it through a staff or student disposition, it doesn't mean that it is easy to get your head around this nature of building that serves so many different people in so many different ways.