Multimedia and Websites

A Virtual Walking Tour: The Alhambra
http://saudiaramcoworld.com/interface/200604/alhambra

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Architectural subjects are well served by web-based technologies. Flash animations and Quick Time Virtual Reality (QTVR) provide the tools to document and explore complex built environments in ways unthinkable just a few years ago. QTVR, an interactive panoramic photographic system pioneered by Apple Computers, has matured rapidly since its appearance roughly a decade ago. In its original iteration, QTVR was restricted essentially to a single register or plane permitting viewers to pan horizontally around a space with vertical panning limited to about 15 degrees up or down, thereby eliminating roof structures entirely, not to mention inlaid marble and mosaic floors. With the advent a few years ago of 360-degree spherical QTVR panoramas, this limitation was overcome, thus allowing viewers to twist and turn around a virtual architectural space in much the same way as a visitor does when walking through a physical space. Advanced editing programs and better compression algorithms have also played a role in rendering ever larger and sharper QTVR panoramas so that now the image fills the screen to create a truly immersive experience for the viewer.

Despite its obvious importance for the teaching of architectural history, developing QTVR panoramas remains challenging, and novices will quickly be disappointed by their results if they have not followed painstaking protocols and procedures. Practice may not make perfect, but it helps. Perhaps the two most challenging issues are the effects of light (natural and artificial) and crowds of tourists milling about. Bright sunlight streaming through windows or high-wattage spotlights can wreak havoc with a QTVR photograph, all but washing out large portions of an image. In heavily tourist spots such as the Acropolis or Saint Peter’s, visitors walk with deliberate slowness and evident curiosity past your odd-looking tripod set-up and wonder why you are taking pictures of the sky and the ground—because spherical QTVR requires a consistent set of overlapping images to completely fill the virtual sphere, and even minor inaccuracies will spoil the final product.

That is just the technical end of it. More challenging are issues surrounding copyright permissions that hinder access to major monuments. The use of a tripod almost always requires the consent of the relevant authorities, and it is usually difficult enough to determine who wields authority for a particular historic site, let alone explain what you wish to do with a relatively unfamiliar technology. Moreover, permission to display the images on the web without password restriction is difficult to obtain, although unrestricted access is usually required for foundation funding.

Regardless of these issues, QTVR is on the cusp of becoming a standard component of digital visual resource collections. Essentially, a single QTVR panorama is analogous to a single still image in the sense that you can access it from a digital image database system and insert it into PowerPoint or display it in a generic viewer for classroom presentation. Of course, one QTVR panorama incorporates more than thirty still images, replacing the sequence of individual images usually required to teach even one section of a building, such as the nave of a church or the courtyard of a palace. From this perspective, QTVR carries with it challenging issues of archiving, cataloging, access, and distribution now being encountered as educational institutions move forward with the build up of digital resources.

Limiting this discussion to issues of access and display, we can identify two principal options for making QTVR a practical academic resource: (1) cataloging QTVR panoramas in a database or collecting them in a website equipped with a straightforward list, or (2) interactive websites linking suites of panoramas to ground plans and elevation diagrams, augmented by instructive texts and additional media such as video clips or sound files, designed as an immersive virtual tour of a specific structure or site.

The second option is exemplified by the subject of this review, a new website devoted to the Alhambra incorporating a collection of panoramas developed by Barry and Michael Gross, who have been photographing QTVR since their undergraduate days at Williams College. A Virtual Walking Tour: The Alhambra was featured in the online July/August 2006 edition of Saudi Aramco World magazine and grew out of an idea of the managing editor Richard E. Doughty, an alumnus of Williams College who read about the Gross brothers in an alumni magazine.
Saudi Aramco World is published by Aramco Services Company, a subsidiary of the oil company Saudi Aramco, and is dedicated to encouraging a richer understanding of Arab and Muslim cultures. A Virtual Walking Tour: The Alhambra is an important example of this effort.

The tour begins with an orientation, not unlike what one might expect at the start of an on-site guided tour, offered as a series of screens presenting still images and a map accompanied by brief introductory text. A voice-over narration can be turned off but is valuable in teaching the pronunciation of the more unusual architectural and Islamic terms that describe the monument. The illustrations are well chosen to encourage careful examination of a complex in which seemingly simple decorative elements discretely carry important cultural meaning. At the conclusion of the orientation, the virtual tour begins following the conventional division of the complex into three principal sections: the fortress area of the Alcazaba, the Nasrid Palaces, and the garden district of the Generalife.

The Alhambra tour is organized using an animated bird’s-eye-perspective model of the entire complex so that the layout of the extended hilltop site is always kept in view. Once in a room, the screen design keeps the plan on the left, and a list of all the panoramas for that area is provided below as a handy index. The selected panorama fills most of the right half of the screen with a menu to allow zooming and reveal hot spots. Descriptive text below each panorama provides commentary, again available with voice-over narration. It would be helpful if, like the voice-overs, the sometimes lengthy text below the panorama could be hidden. This is particularly an academic concern since most faculty prefer to keep presentation screens uncluttered.

By far the richest section covers the Nasrid Palaces, with eighteen panoramas devoted to this labyrinth of rooms that was partially destroyed when Charles V calculatedly planted his Italianate palace on the site. It is here that the pragmatic screen layout reveals the thoughtfulness of the designers by keeping the visitor oriented in the series of rooms, passageways, and courtyards that comprise the palace area. Hot spots are used to good effect and link panoramas in a chain to evoke the spatial flow of the Alhambra, where passing from brightly lit courtyards to semi-shaded arcades to darkened interiors is a significant aspect of its experiential character. In the Court of the Lions, we are thus able to glide seamlessly from beneath the shadow of the covered arcade to the fountain in the center of the sun-drenched courtyard, augmented by ambient (and optional) sounds of running water. To anyone who has visited the Alhambra, the website will invoke memories of the tranquility of this geometrically precise courtyard where channels of water provide the physical and visual linkages between spaces.

The hot spots in the panoramas also give access to still images rendered with Zoomify software, a technology that facilitates the delivery of high-resolution images on the Web. Zoomify accomplishes this task by dividing digital images into hundreds, or even thousands, of tiles based on the size of the source file. For example, one can click on a section of wall in the Court of the Lions to open a pop-up detail into which one can then zoom to a level that approximates viewing from a distance of a few inches. An explanation of the rich surface treatment that integrates Arabic calligraphy with vegetal motifs would be helpful. Several poems by Ibn Zamrak inscribed on these walls, as well as along the edge of the basin in the Fountain of the Lions, are translated in the site texts, but web design would allow for a more seamless integration of text and image. For example, translations might appear on a translucent screen over the images, allowing the viewer to “read” the inscriptions in situ like a contemporary member of the Nasrid court. Such a solution would underscore the importance of literary associations within the social, political, and religious ambience of the Muslim court.

A number of video clips are also
sprinkled throughout the site. I counted sixteen clips, all accessible from the text screens below the QTVR panoramas—perhaps the least happy design solution. The clips add detailed views of magnificent architectural elements, such as the upper portions of the Hall of the Abencerrajes, but in general, they feel more like an earnest workaround to give greater visual access to the breathtaking decorative elements. This particular clip clocks in at 19.5 megabytes and requires a few seconds to download on an Ethernet connection. The site might benefit from adding an option to view higher resolution QTVR in the size range of 20 megabytes, which would also take a few seconds to download on a high-speed connection but would offer a higher level of zooming and eliminate the need for still images.

A few minor quibbles and a suggestion: an index or list is a useful way of organizing QTVR for quick access and would be helpful in this site. In addition, a PDF of the entire text would be appreciated by those who prefer to read by turning pages rather than flipping through screens where narrative flow is difficult to maintain.

Like so many historic sites, the Alhambra has been polished for an ever-burgeoning tourism industry, and the website reflects this glamorizing approach. The entire structure suffered much during the post-Muslim period, and in the following centuries, large parts of the complex fell into varying states of disrepair. We remain uncertain about the precise function of each room, most of which were modified after the Christian conquest, as well as the pictorial and textual iconography throughout the palace. The website does not capture this history, and if a second edition is produced, it would be worthwhile to describe restoration and conservation efforts and include historic photos such as those available from the websites of the George Eastman House (www.geh.org) or the Conway Collection at the Courtauld Institute (www.artandarchitecture.org.uk). For example, early photos of the Court of the Lions show the fountain with an upper basin now removed, enough information to raise issues of historic preservation for undergraduates.

This complaint conceals a more serious issue, namely the absence of a trained architectural historian acting as an advisor or, better still, coauthor of the website. Richard Doughty approached several scholars who declined to work on the site, which is understandable. Composing a text for such a website is closer to writing a documentary film script than a conventional article, and a website is generally not a forum for original research. This situation also reflects the still-limited penetration of advanced digital media in the art history classroom. While A Virtual Walking Tour: The Alhambra is absorbing for a solitary viewer driving the mouse, the complexity of the site might overwhelm even the most experienced of lecturers confident in their knowledge of the real place but apprehensive of getting lost in the digital replica.

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Sir John Soane: An English Architect, An American Legacy

Like Sir John Soane's house in London, the recently released DVD Sir John Soane: An English Architect, An American Legacy is a curious and divided thing, as its title and multiple narrators confirm. The Checkerboard Film Foundation was established in 1979 with the goal of documenting contributions to the arts in America. Its first two films on architecture treat Gwathmey Siegel and Philip Johnson, and Sir John Soane may seem an odd choice for the third. Not only is he a quintessentially English architect, but he died in 1837. Yet, Soane is less the odd man out than he might at first appear. Gwathmey and Johnson spearheaded the rejection of modernist dogma that led to the postmodern movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. Together with Michael Graves, Robert A. M. Stern, Harry Cobb, Richard Meier, Denise Scott Brown, and Robert Venturi—all of whom, with the surprising exception of Gwathmey, appear in this film—they claimed Soane as a key inspiration for the American postmodernist legacy alluded to in its subtitle. Charles Jencks, present at the inception of the postmodern movement, narrates the film and points the viewer towards the richness of Soane’s house at Lincoln Inn’s Fields, an early nineteenth-century building that was profoundly influential in the 1970s and 1980s.

Postmodernism espoused a return to history, which many interviewees in the film insist had been repressed by modernist pedagogy. Stern, dean of Yale’s School of Architecture, holds Walter Gropius responsible for the removal of history from the curriculum: modernism was to operate as a site for new invention, “an entirely new beginning.” To prove the point Graves recounts how, as a young student at Harvard, the dean stopped him from studying a neoclassical theater design: “You won’t need that