

A Web Serverless Architecture for Buildings Modeling

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Abstract—The motivations of relentless migration of software products toward services accessible via Web must be sought in the undeniable benefits in terms of accessibility, usability, maintainability and spreadability granted by the Web medium itself. It is the case of office suites, beforehand thought as resilient desktop applications, nowadays made available as Web applications, often equipped with real-time collaboration features and with no need for the user to explicitly install or upgrade them anymore. Although it could not be easy to envisage a Web-based graphic application due to its inherent complexity, after the recent and significant enrichment of the HTML5 APIs, a few first attempts appeared online in the form of vectorial drawing collaborative editors or VR oriented interior design environments. This paper introduces an effective Web architecture for buildings modeling that leverages the serverless pattern to dominate the developing complexity. The resulting front-end application, powered by Web Components and based on unidirectional data flow pattern, is extremely customizable and extendible by means the definition of plugins to augment the UI or the application functionalities. As regards the modeling approach, it offers (a) to model the building drawing the 2D plans and to navigate the building in a 3D first person point of view; (b) to collaborate in real-time, allowing to work simultaneously on different layers of the project; (c) to define and use new building elements, that are furnitures or architectural components (such as stairs, roofs, etc.), augmenting a ready to use catalog. This work suggests a path for the next-coming BIM online services, matching the professionals collaboration requirements typical of the BIM approach with the platform which supports them the most: the Web.

1. Introduction

Nowadays we are seeing a relentless migration of software products toward services accessible via the Web medium. This is mainly due to the undeniable benefits in terms of accessibility, usability, maintainability and spreadability granted by the Web medium itself. Nevertheless these benefits don't come without a cost: performance and development complexity become major concerns in the Web environment.

In particular, due to the several introduced abstraction layers it is not always feasible to "port" a desktop application into the Web realm, an aspect to be taken into account even for the relevant hardware differences among all the devices equipped with a Web Browser. It can be even more arduous to tackle the inherent distributed software architecture (a client/server one at least) induced by the Web platform.

Nevertheless increasingly rich and complex Web applications began to appear, supported by the enriched HTML5 APIs, which thanks to the WebGL [1] (which enables direct access to GPU), Canvas [2] (2D raster APIs) and SVG [3] (vectorial drawing APIs), has paved the way for the entrance of Web Graphic Applications.

In this work we report about our endeavor toward the definition of a Web based buildings modeling tool which overcomes the aforementioned performance and development difficulties relying on a unidirectional data flow design pattern and on a serverless architecture [4], respectively.

A serverless architecture, on the contrary of what the name may suggest, actually employs many different specific servers, whose operation and maintenance don't burden on the project developer(s). These several servers can be seen as third party services (typically cloud-based) or functions executed into ephemeral containers (may only last for one invocation) to manage the internal state and server-side logic. Realtime interaction among users jointly working on the same modeling project, is for example achieved via a third party APIs for remote users collaboration.

The tool user interface, entirely based on web components pattern, has been kept as simple as possible: the user is required to interact mainly with two-dimensional symbolic placeholders representing parts of the building, thus avoiding complex 3D interactions. The modeling complexity is thus moved from the modeler to the developer which fills out an extendible *catalog* of customizable *building elements*. The modeler has only to select the required element, place and parametrize it according to the requirements. It is obvious that a large number of building elements has to be provided to ensure the fulfillment of the most modeling requirements.

The remainder of this document is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of related work. Section 3 reports about the application user experience. Section 4 presents adopted architectural solutions. Finally, Section 5

contains some conclusive remarks.

2. Related work

In this section we highlight some remarkable experiences aligned with the aim of our project. There are plenty of Desktop applications worth to be mentioned and analyzed, but in the following we deliberately focus on Web based works.

Shapspark¹ offers a web viewer of remarkable quality that allow the user to move inside a synthetic 3D indoor environment. Modeling phase is served in the form of plugins for different Desktop proprietary solutions.

Playcanvas² is a complete and powerful web based game creation platform which offers an integrated physical engine and a whole set of functionalities to support modeling. Although powerful and relatively simple to use, it doesn't focus on buildings modeling.

Floorplan³ has been developed by Autodesk specifically for the architectural field, and for indoor renewal projects in particular. It is a 2D modeling tool which offer also a 3D walk-through mode.

Spini et al. [5] introduced a Web modeling and baking service for indoor environments. The modeling tools exposes a 3D interaction the user may not be accustomed to, an hitch we tried to outflank by avoiding 3D modeling interaction and let the user only face a "metaphoric" 2D interface.

As regards support for users collaboration it worths to be mentioned the *Operational Transformation* (OT) approach [6]: a group of nodes exchanges messages without a central control point. Two main properties hold in this setup: (i) changes are relative to other user's changes (it works on "diffs") and (ii) no matter in which order concurrent changes are applied, the final document is the same. In our serverless architecture however, external (third parties) central synchronization point are allowed, making complexity introduced by protocols like OT less effective.

3. Application Experience

The application experience focus on supporting the user in a building modeling task. The exploited modeling approach requires the user to face as much as possible a bidimensional interface which allows her to define the floorplan and to place complex architectural elements (here called *building elements*) on it. Such *building elements* can be found in a pre-filled catalog, and when required can be further configured and customized through a side panel. This modeling approach move part of the complexity toward the developer of the customizable building elements, leaving to the final user the task to place and to configure the employed elements. A rich catalog of elements is thus crucial to answer to the users' modeling requirements.

Once the floorplan has been defined according to the *place-and-configure* approach, the system can automatically generate a 3D model which can be explored externally or in first person view, as shown in Figure ???. Each *building element* in fact comprises either a *2D generating function* than a *3D generating function*, used to obtain models respectively used in the 2D floorplan definition and in 3D generated model.

The tool also has support for layers the user can exploit to organize her project, for example to group together semantically homogenous elements.

3.1. Building Elements

Along with the aforementioned 2D and 3D generating functions, an elements is fully specified by its univocal name and its properties, used by the user for customization. Each building element inherits from its *prototype* (one and only one). In the prototype are mapped both the inherent characteristics and user interactions needed to add the element to the project and/or configure it.

The catalog comprises then four different types of elements:

Lines. An element which belongs to this category is drawn selecting a start point and an end point. To move it one can drags one of the end point or can drags the entire line. An example: a *wall*.

Openings. An opening is an element that is linked to an element of the *line* type, making an hole on it. The user create a new opening by dragging on a chosen line. Examples are *doors* and *windows*.

Areas. An area is an element which is normally generated by insertion of the boundary vertices. For example a room basement is an area. In this case it is automatically generated from the lines representing walls, thanks to an algorithm which looks for closed cycles. The algorithm is composed by the following phases: (i) search of biconnected component by mean of Hopcroft-Tarjan algorithm (see [7]); (ii) removal of edges that are not part of a biconnected component; (iii) search of all cycles through an algorithm that do a double check of each edges sorted by angle; (iv) search of maximal cycles correspondent to perimeter edges by an application of Gauss's area formula; (v) removal of maximal cycles.

Object. An element that is freely inserted into space with a drag and drop interaction is an object. Examples are tables and chairs.

MA COME SI FA A PARLARE DI LINES SE POI LE AREE SONO DEFINITE DAI WALLS?? DANILÒ SE TROVI UNA SPIEGAZIONE LOGICA TENIAMO LINES ALTRIMENTI SIAMO OBBLIGATI A CAMBIARE IN WALLS.— COSÌ VA MEGLIO?? QUESTA ERA LA

1. <https://www.shapspark.com/>

2. <https://playcanvas.com/>

3. <http://www.homestylar.com/floorplan/>

PRIMA VERSIONE DELLE AREE MA NON È PIÙ STATA IMPLEMENTATA

3.2. User Interface

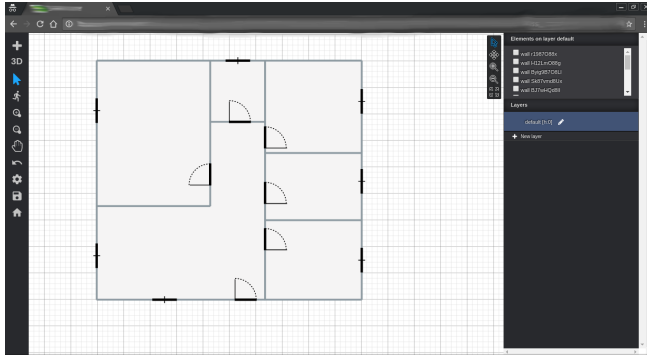


Figure 1. The user interface

Figure 1 show the application user interface. It consists of the following components (from *left to right*):

Toolbar: it contains the button buttons mapping all operations the user can do in that context

Content area: it displays the main content requested by the user. In figure 1 the content area display the 2D drawing area.

Sidebar: it contains all elements in the current layer, the layer list and the properties for the selected building element

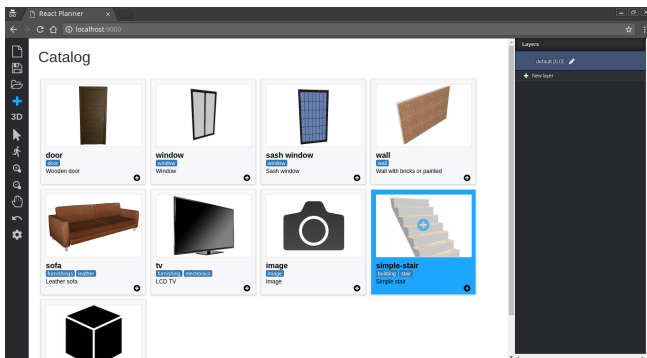


Figure 2. The building elements catalog

Figure 2 shows the building element catalog. When the user select one of the boxes, the application shows the 2D area and starts the interaction for the chosen building element.

Figures 3 and 4 shows some examples of 3D visualizations.

4. Serverless Architecture

According to [4], the deployed serverless architecture make extensive use of third parties services, or "as-a-Service-like" components, that replace ad-hoc software and



Figure 3. 3D visualizations of a school

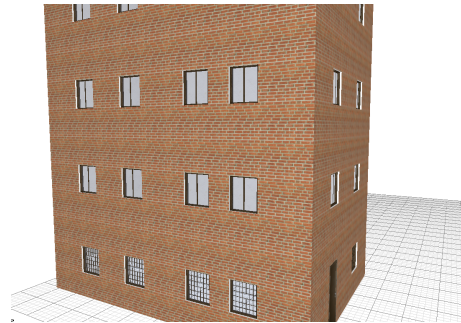


Figure 4. 3D visualization of a building

hardware and fulfill the same tasks. In particular we have been able to delegate the following aspects to external and specialized services: application distribution, user management, model generation (heavy computation), user collaboration and state storage.

Distribution. To serve the application resources (JavaScript files, images, etc.) we rely on a Akamai CDN⁴ (Content Delivery Network) and avoid any kind of webserver. This implies high availability and performance, but also represents a centralized method to upgrade client application without any user explicit action: once files have been updated on the CDN, at the subsequent reload of the web application, any user is provided with the updated version of the application.

User Management. User management activities, which requires a backend running code to accomplish user subscription and authentication, are delegated to Auth0⁵, a Backend-as-a-Service specialized on accounting.

Model Generation. The generation of 3D models may require a while. In that case, especially on low-performing hardware, the computation can't be performed on the client-side, but rather on a powerful server which generate the

4. <http://AKAMAI-WEBSITE>

5. <http://LINK-TO-AUTH0>

model on demand, taking as input the parametrization made by the user through the web interface. On this purpose we chose to move this computation on AWS Lambda⁶, a Function-as-a-Service on which runs the Python code responsible to generate 3D models, that automatically scale on the basis of the number of model generation tasks.

Users Collaboration. As regard the users collaboration, it requires some sort of synchronization among them. To use a single point of synchronization results in a much simpler architecture, so instead of relay on complex peer-to-peer architecture, which however would be a good choice aligned with the serverless paradigm we are pursuing, we opted for a synchronization mechanism based on Firebase⁷, a Backend-as-a-Service working as a coordination manager. It broadcasts each change made by a user to all the others. Conflicts are avoided exploiting layers: each user lock the layer she is working on.

State Storage. state storage = λ DB = λ Orchestrate.io⁸ (DA VERIFICARE)

In particolare, la serializzazione/deserializzazione dello stato completo dell'applicazione supportata da uno stato centralizzato.

L'architettura software del frontend reactive = λ gli passo lo stato ottenuto dal server, aggiorna tutta l'interfaccia.

The collaboration part is based on a DBaaS, with the common state stored in an external DB provided by Firebase.

The application is distributed as frontend web application and so it's mostly executed into customer's browser. The application state is inside the customer's browser and it is represented as a tree structured object. This state can be serialized and saved on a BaaS system or downloaded as JSON file. The customer can restore the application state in any time using a preceding downloaded serialized version of the state. The system will adjust the user interface and the scene by means of the Virtual DOM and the diff and patch algorithm. Il server quindi si rivela necessario solo nei rari casi in cui l'utente opta per un salvataggio online.

L'intero stato dell'applicazione completamente serializzabile come documento permette di eseguire la modellazione 2D all'interno del frontend e di contattare il server solamente per il salvataggio del dato. La serializzazione dello stato come JSON abilita l'utilizzo di molteplici sistemi per il salvataggio dei dati, in quanto non viene richiesto un backend personalizzato, ma pu essere utilizzato un qualsiasi DBaaS a patto che supporti il salvataggio di JSON. Il progetto stato realizzato connettendo i dati tramite Firebase.

If on one hand this means that the operation of the system heavily relays su qualcosa che non immediatamente sotto il controllo dell'amministratore di sistema, dall'altra lo sviluppo e la manutenzione estremamente alleggerito

4.1. Centralized Application State

Per abilitare il supporto alla serializzazione del dato necessario lavorare attraverso un unico stato centralizzato nel quale vengono memorizzate tutte le informazioni. Ci stato possibile utilizzando il pattern **unidirectional data flow pattern**. Questa scelta ha anche portato dei benefici nell'architettura complessiva del sistema che pu essere suddivisa in 3 macroblocchi: (i) la parte logica, (ii) la visualizzazione 2D (iii) la visualizzazione 3d. Un precedente esperimento di sviluppo di un progetto simile⁹ che non utilizzava questo approccio ha evidenziato un accoppiamento tra il motore logico e la UI. Lo sviluppo di una nuova funzionalit richiedeva anche lo sviluppo di procedure che attraverso listener aggiornavano l'interfaccia adeguandola al cambiamento.

The application exploits the **unidirectional data flow pattern** to gain great benefits in terms of maintainability of the software objects, due to the lightness of the resulting architecture. As requested by the pattern, the software has to be based on a **centralized state**, which represents the application logic. Consequently, every feature has as its unique goal the obtainment of a new state coherent with the requested change, following various mechanisms based on **actions** (each one containing the data for the new state) and **reducers** (software objects that can write the new state) provided by the **Redux.js**¹⁰ library. Usually, the unidirectional data flow pattern is associated with the **Immutability pattern**, which contributes to maintainability, avoiding side effects for state changes and providing smaller tests for application logic changes. We also benefits of undo/redo operations to an oldest/newer state by means of a replace of the current state with the previous/next one. As a consequence, the state can be seen as an **immutable tree structure** whose changes require: (i) The build of a new state s' equal to the previous state s ; (ii) Execution of changes on the new state s' ; (iii) Reference replacement from s to s' . Despite its simplicity, this pattern can nevertheless lead to memory waste, so we used the **Immutable.js**¹¹ library (made by facebook), which exploits structural sharing via hash maps tries and vector tries minimizing the need to copy or cache data. In our application, the state contains all the parts that there are on a plan, giving life to a finite state machine of all possible evolutions of the application state, where each node correspond to a **mode** (and consequently to a possible application state), and each edge correspond to an action from that point (which in our case is typically a javascript event such as `click` or `mousemove`). A part of the state machine is shown in figure 5. How we can see there are three nodes corresponding to three modes: (i) Node `idle`: waiting mode of the application. No action has been taken yet. (ii) Node `waiting_drawing_wall`: user has selected wall design tool, but he hasn't started the draw

6. <http://LINK-to-LAMBDA>

7. LINK-TO-FIREBASE

8. <https://orchestrate.io>

9. <https://github.com/cvdlab/walle>

10. <http://redux.js.org/>

11. <https://facebook.github.io/immutable-js/>

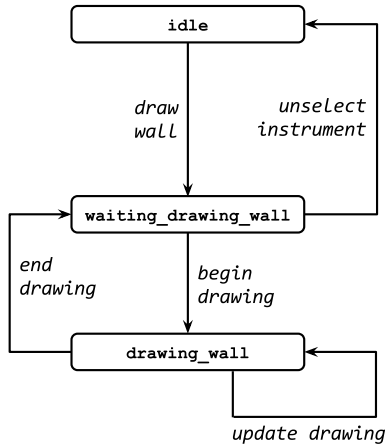


Figure 5. Subgraph of the state machine that show a wall creation.

phase yet. (iii) Node `drawing_wall`: user has placed the starting point of the wall.

4.2. Component Based UI

The entire application has been developed using separated modules, following the **SOLID programming** principles, as it could be expanded. For the web part, we have used the **web components pattern**, with the implementation of **React.js**¹² written by Facebook. The main idea is to define the frontend application as a collection of components, each one rendered in a different way according with values assigned to the state. In Figure 6 we can see the user interface of the application with the most interesting components: the toolbar (where every button is another component), the sidebar and the 2D viewer:

we have an example of based on our application.

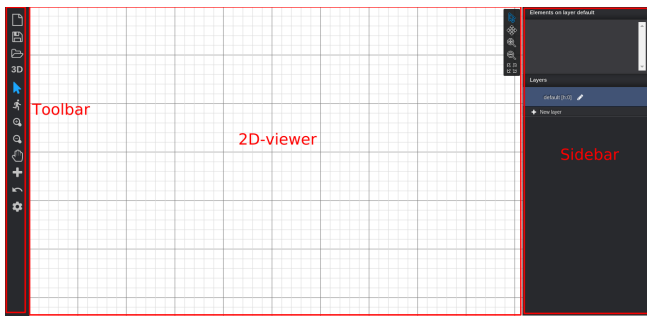


Figure 6. User interface of the application

In particular, the most interesting components developed by us are the **viewers**, for example the 2D-viewer and the 3D-viewer. This component-based structure, allows us to define whatever state definition (for example in a tabular form) simply adding a new component.

12. <https://github.com/facebook/react>

The viewers structure is outlined in figure 7, where we can observe the great blocks. The first one is the *catalog* and as we have already seen in section ?? it contains all the building elements with their properties. We also see the application *core*, which manages the state and contains all drawing functionalities, and can instantiate several different viewers giving them the state for the representation. It communicates with the catalog taking the building models properties. At least we have the *viewers*, that are chosen observing the current state mode (see section ??). At the moment we implemented the 2D and 3D viewers (see figure 8)

2D Viewer. This viewer creates a 2D view of the building model. Given the state, it exploits the **Virtual DOM** (see [8]) implemented by React.js, to update only changed parts avoiding continuously global updates. All elements are rendered using SVG DOM tag. To perform pan and zoom operations, typically necessary in this kind of tool, we used ReactSVGPanZoom¹³ a React component that adds pan and zoom features to SVG and helps to display big SVG images in a small space. It use affine matrix Math and event browser detection to adjust the image size to the required scale.

3D Viewer. It exploits the WebGL-based modeling library **Three.js**¹⁴ to build a 3D view of our building. To avoid global refreshes every time we update a part of the state, it has been implemented a *diff* and *patch* system standardized in [9]. So it has been implemented a data structure that maps the Three.js objects with the building elements inside the state. Every time the user launches a Redux.js action, the application compute the difference between the old state and the new one a redraw only the changed objects. In particular we can have the following *operations*: (i) **add**, (ii) **replace** and (iii) **remove**. For every operation it is determined a behavior based on the changed building element, changing also related building elements.

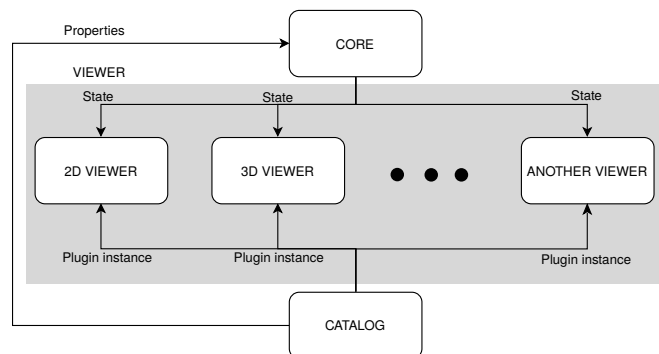


Figure 7. The architectural schema for the viewers

13. <https://github.com/chrvadala/react-svg-pan-zoom>

14. <https://threejs.org/>

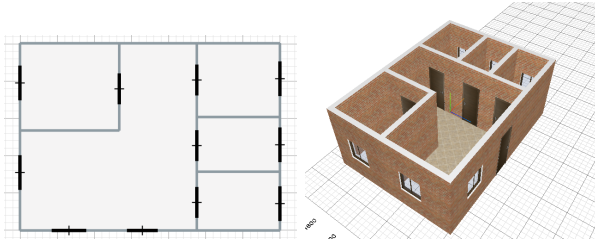


Figure 8. The 2D and 3D viewers for the state

5. Conclusions

In this work we outlined a serverless architecture to support buildings modeling in a Web environment. The serverless architecture that gives benefits in terms of availability, reliability, scalability, easiness of deployment, maintainability and upgradability is obtained by implementing the application logic as a client-side only centralized state Web application exploiting the unidirectional data flow pattern. This approach allows for a easy-to-serialize state (in the form of a JSON document) that can be pushed on a third party document oriented DB-as-a-Service and loaded back in the frontend reactive architecture, which transparently reload the state once its serialized version is passed in. The application itself is served by a CDN (Content Delivery Network) thus avoiding any need for web server. Offline routines rely on Function-as-a-Service platform as well as users management and collaboration features.

This architecture has been successfully employed by the authors in the *Metior* project [10], a tool to support selective deconstruction of buildings in the pursuit of a “zero waste” model.

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