THE FEAR OF THE DIGITAL
FROM THE ELUSION OF TYPOLOGY TO TYPOLOGICS

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Abstract

It might seem that architecture has been forced to choose, once again, between two worlds of existence. One of them might be the construction of the tangible, the other, a "formal fantasy" that will never reach a legitimate status among the "tectonic" or the "structural". This vague spectrum has confirmed the fear of loosing typology as a proof, of loosing a foremost validation for architecture. But one could see the virtual as a possibility to generate a structure of discourses and interactive tactics to reformulate the typological. This meaning that the virtual could transcend the so called "graphic" stigma and actually produce the discourses and spatial strategies to radicalize typology and move towards a radicalization of content.

The fear of the digital

The digital design process had revealed a consistent distance from the typological referent. In the one hand, this "elusion" from the referent might be linked to the tendencies of many current typologies to be defined by forces outside the architectural. In the other hand, the digital has opened a space for the construction of discourses (constructs) which describe and inscribe dissident architectures that disrupt themselves from typological continuance. Not in few occasions, this evasion is seen as a "stigma" that challenges prevalent discourses that relate to the ways an architectural object is conceived and resolved. The "fear" of these digital selves of architecture is exacerbated in many instances by the fact that the discourses involving the digital reveal morphological determinisms that do not involve an experiential content. But as suspicious as these determinisms might seem, there has been a plausible radicalization of the image of architecture and its technology. This intersection reveals the potentials that reside in this elusion from the typological. If the digital process and devices

had manifested the capacity to articulate dissident architectural images and discourses, then there is a potential to propose alternate processes, rituals and perceptions in space.

One of the most intriguing consequences of digital design in the last twenty years perhaps has been the emergence of images of architecture that do not necessarily manifest a lineage that could be easily traced within spatial or constructive traditions [Figure 1]. The radicalization of the image of form might well be one of the most compelling effects of the digital design process in architecture. In this (r)evolution of the architectural image, new discourses (imagery and language) had come to describe the new breed of buildings that, in many cases, exist only among the virtual and those that had radicalized construction processes and technologies in order to reach a material existence. In both cases, architects had engaged in the task of "naming" these new breeds of images with discourses that are not inscribed in the traditional structures of our discipline. An example of this might be described by the biological metaphors associated to digital design, where the design process is described as an autonomous biological process [Figure 2]. Or the inclusion of technologies from other disciplines like motion caption in order to define/materialize these possible architectures. In a way, the digital has become an extension of the human conceptual capacity where both the images and technologies of architecture are being reformulated. But the "genesis and exegesis" for such architectures has been articulated by and within the digital realm itself, a notion like this describes the state of dissidence of the digital with respect to a typological framework. A condition like such might suggest a transgression from a discourse of typological continuity.

The elusion of typology

Typological recurrence is understood as a pre-defined codification of the image and its spatial/constructive configurations. In many aspects, the typological today might be considered a contingent discourse as well. These "typological codes" achieve their signification by a convention of their discourse. It is imperative as well to recognize that recurrence in the typological established the continuity of the meanings of the architectural object [Figure 3]. The very same meanings that in our contemporary condition might seem more fragmented than continuous[1]. A reason for such might lie in the fact that contemporary typologies, in many cases, do not reveal an experiential content. Nonetheless, today recurrence of such typologies is perpetuated by consumption or real state. The banalization of programs and construction has eroded much of the experiential possibility in typological content.

Ironically, traditional recurrence of types was purged in many ways of the experiential at the end of 18th Century. "The fascination with enciclopedism, taxonomies, comparative studies, different kinds of measured observations and like" brought forth the typological science[2]. "If we study the pages of the Recueil", confronts Durand's typological science," what unfolds before us is not a history of architecture but a collection of systematically selected examples organized into a comparative survey similar to comparative studies and taxonomies of contemporary science"[3]. In many ways typological recurrence was turned into a "mécanisme de la composition".

This is the very condition of "recurrence" that the digital escapes. This condition implies is an elusion from the referent. This "evasion" of the referent" has been revealed in other cultural and social dimensions as well. In such emancipation is where the "fear of the other", that is the digital self of architecture, might reside. There is a resistance to the supposed loss of typological continuance. Which in fact, we have seen that such continuance is not as linear as one might think.

Many of our current spatial or constructive configurations resulting from digital experimentations had not come to be conventionalized yet. They have not revealed specific social contracts to structure their meanings. Their aesthetic quality defies conventional connections with notions of decorum or proportions, quintessential values derived from typological recurrence. This is perhaps where the "fear" of such elusion resides, which in fact refers to the resistance to acknowledge digital architectures coexistence with other traditions in the discipline. This brings forth the notion that typology might not be the only and foremost validation of the architectural object. This condition reiterates the idea of simultaneity of paradigms. In this context, the digital process has opened the conceptual space where paradigms are created.

A similar statement might be said of Modern Architecture, the difference being that the radicalization of social and material reality occurred before a radicalization of image of architecture had taken place. In the other hand, Modern Architecture looked upon Classical Antiquity to validate its aim to establish universal values as a prevalent discourse; hence a link with tradition might not be explicit but could also be traced.

The radicalization of the image and form revealed in the digital design process originated in the representation and visualization of architecture, a field that had became the forming ground of the images of its technology as well [Figure 4]. There is perhaps where the potential of digital architecture might reside. Not only in the radicalization of the image of architecture but also in the radicalization of its content.

If the typological is no longer our referent, critical intersection is being revealed: if typological recurrence is eluded then the reformulation of current typological codes might be triggered. In this context, the digital might be understood not only as an extension of the architect's conceptual framework but also as a strategic allocation of technology within space to enhance our perceptions and experiences of space. This might suggest a shift from typology to typologics.

From typology to typologics

The notion of typologics departs from the experiential nature of digital technology. It recognizes the potentials of the enhancement of the sensorial within space as a mechanism to articulate potential spatial discourses in proposed or existing contexts. But it is also born from the preoccupation of the limitations of the embodiment of the digital itself. At the moment it might seem that we are mostly confined to "interiorized" results or to limited scales. But does these results have the capacity to be expanded to attend latent possibilities within larger environments like urban perhaps?

Typologics might suggest economy of plural perceptions that focus in the intersection of space and technology in order to re-signify a pre-existing typological content. The implication in this premise is that the recurrence of the typological code might be reformulated in content along with its image. These reformulations seek experiences triggered by the strategic allocation of technology, not only as means of materialization, but also as experiential devices within the given environment. In this context, this merging might well be informed by the inherent or proposed rituals of a given environment. Both architecture and the digital are superimposed into an experiential assembly that might generate more than a visual perception, but a spatial experience that proposes an alternate interpretation of a specific typological referent. The value of the architectural element might be transcribed at the scale of pre-existing spatial contracts.

If the walls of a classroom are individually wired with impact sensors, a student can throw a ball to the wall and create a particular musical note [Figure 5]. Then other walls could be orchestrated into musical device where the experience of music could be integrated to physical dynamics. The discourse of "classroom" is then dismantled and reconfigured into a new interpretation [Figure 6]. If the unit of the pre-existing typology, in this case a "classroom", is re-signified, the experiential content of a "school" could be reconfigured in its image, its form and content.

The idea of "meta-tectonics" is expanded from this spatio-technological intersection. Digital explorations have questioned the very idea of "statics" in tectonic assemblies. As Kurt W. Foster describes "numerous recent projects are no longer based on the millenary dialectic of supports and weights"[4]. Instead the idea of "structure" has mutated into the realm of actuating architectural assemblies. The notions of "skin" perhaps are strengthened in this stance. The "structurality" of the components becomes radicalized into dynamic entities that support but respond as well in an "organic" fashion [Figure 7]. Levels of permeability might be achieved by the "interactivity" of the architectural element and the subject. The presence of the subject might very well be registered by the response of the element. The suggestion is that the building gains its life with the occupant. Perhaps many other associations are derived. The image and content of the structure is transfigured into an alternate discourse or expand the pre-existing discourse for that matter [Figure 8].

The notion of the "digitized ritual" springs to mind as well. The re-articulation of non-experiential contracts by means of the digital device gains relevance. As we have seen already many cultural rituals have been "virtualized". Consumption, education and sex are perhaps some of the most notable examples of digital rituals today. But in a way these provide for an alternate spatiality that is parallel to physical public life. The rituals have been individualized by an alternate "public engagement". The interface remains its only spatial constraint. Digital rituals escape the dependency of certain spatial configurations. If this is the case, then non-experiential transactions could be re-articulated with multivalent experiences [Figure 9]. The case could be that a particular typology is no longer necessary in order to the subject partake in the ritual. Instead an alternate spatial configuration could be proposed. It is possible that by means of the hybridization of form and content, virtual interactions might displace "consumption" as an omni-experience and open a way for a multidimensional public interactions and the "spatialization" of infrastructure [Figure 10].

In a way, the question of typologics is a question of further applicability of the digital device in architecture. It is the preoccupation with the tangible effects that we as architects might be able to translate into larger contexts as the urban or the suburban. The direction is to transgress the limitations of the "interiorization" or the limitation of scale and reach the integration of the digital as an option to the "literalness" of many of architectural experiences. It also elevate serious question about the agency of the subject vis a vis the autonomy of the digitally augmented experience of the element or space. The extension of the digital might remain a parallel universe in which divergent individual or public dimensions will coexist but never be experienced simultaneously. Perhaps we do not need them to.

As we continue to expand on the possibilities of the digital in our discipline we must test its latent capacities to affect our public experience [Figure 11]. The effects of recent exploration might reverberate in palpable effect at an urban scale. This is particularly critical from an ecological standpoint.

The sophistication of digital design has presented us images of architecture that defy convention. The advancements in digital fabrication have also presented significant shifts in constructive technology. The pace in which the idea becomes form has been accelerated. The numerical ornament has reformulated the surface once more. This means that the limitation that once confined digital architecture in to the realm of the "graphic" is no more. But within this emancipation there is also the critical recognition of the digital as a conceptual extension of the human mind. This brings the idea of a new craftsmanship. What role does craftsmanship plays in the discourse of the digital? The digital is not exempt of banal applications (or duplications for that matter) and it will not presuppose the auto-sufficiency of architecture. The critical recognition here is that craftsmanship will remain in the architect's conceptual capacity. This is perhaps better explained by Heidegger: " Because the essence of technology is nothing technological essential reflection on technology and decisive coming to terms with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such realm is art"[5].

Endnotes

[1] see Vesely, D., "Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation. The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production", Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.
[2] see Laplace, "A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities", p. 4; S. Villary, J.N.L Durand (1760-1834) : "Art an Science of Architecure" New York: Rizzoli, 1990.
[3] see Vesely, D., "Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation. The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production", Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, p242.
[4] see Forster, K. W. (essay) "Architecture, Its Shadow and its Reflections" Metamorph, Focus. 9th International Architecture Biennale Vol. 1 2004, p.2
[5] see Heidegger, M., "Vortrage und Aufsatze" *In:* D. Vesely, "The Age of Divided Representation". Boston: Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 282-315.
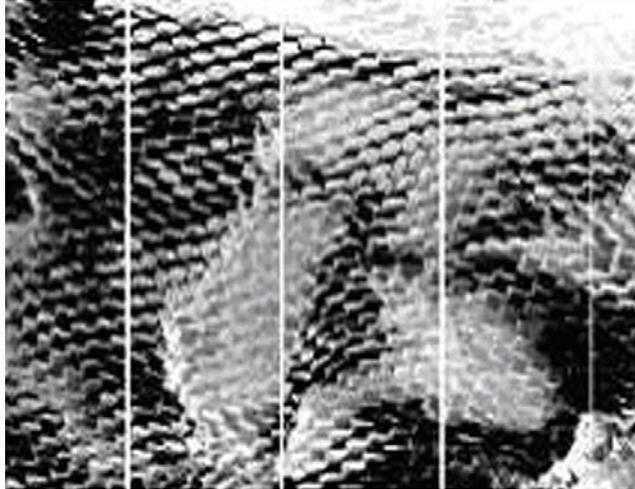
Figure 1: Surface Study. IN_TROPE. 2005.
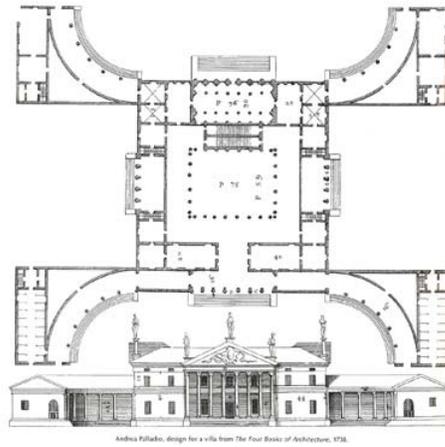

Figure 2: Computer Rendering. Marcos Novak. 2000
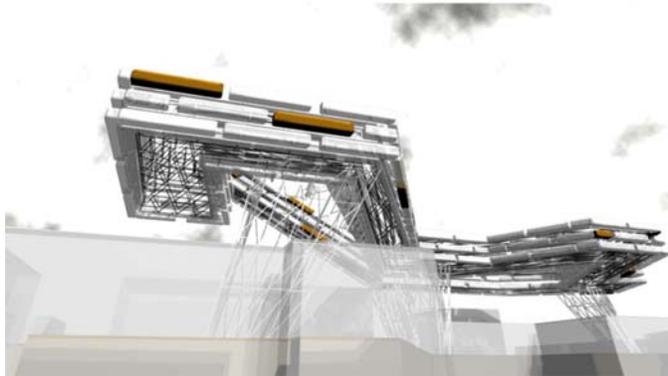
Figure 3: Typological Rendition.

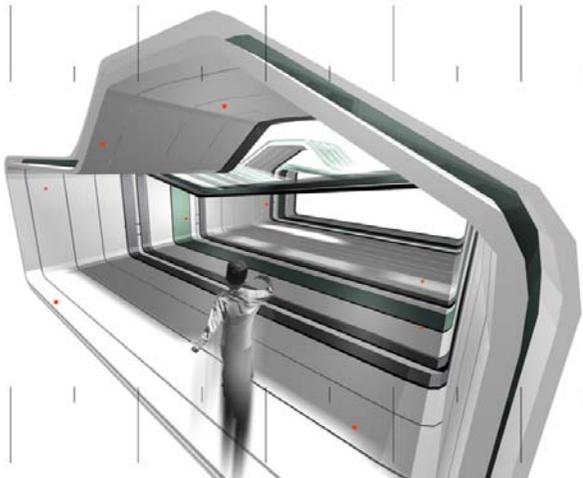Figure 4: Torre de Valencia Antena. Madrid. IN_TROPE. 2007.
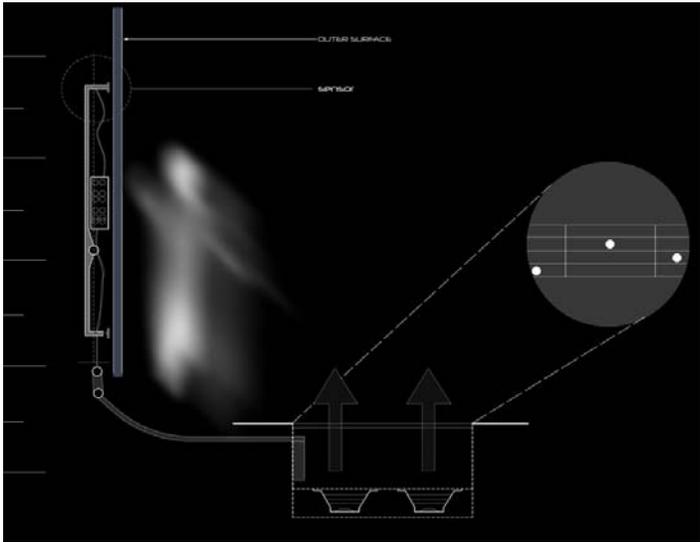
Figure 5: Music Space Project. IN_TROPE. 2006.
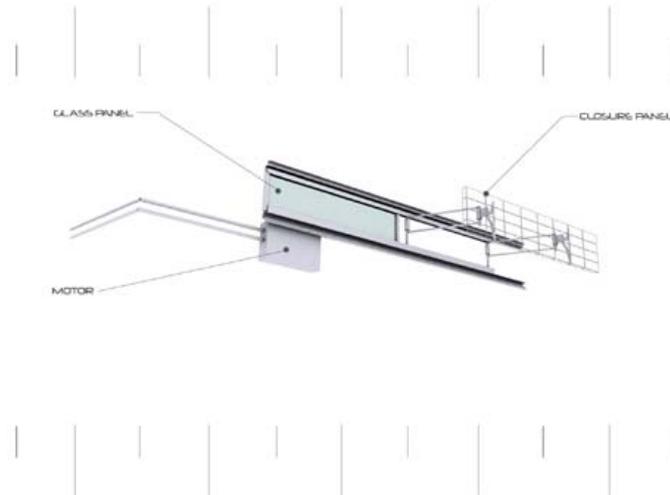

Figure 6: Music Space Project. IN_TROPE. 2006.
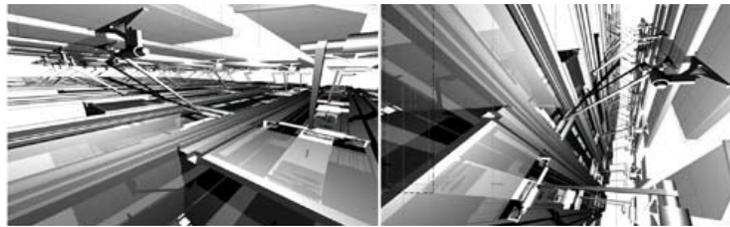
Figure 7: Mediateque. IN_TROPE. 2007.
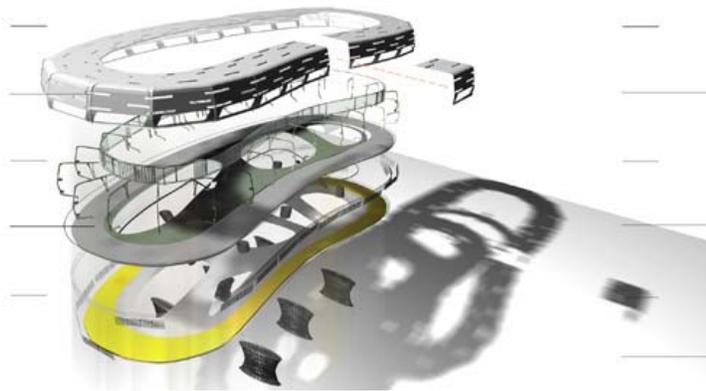

Figure 8: Mediateque. IN_TROPE. 2006.
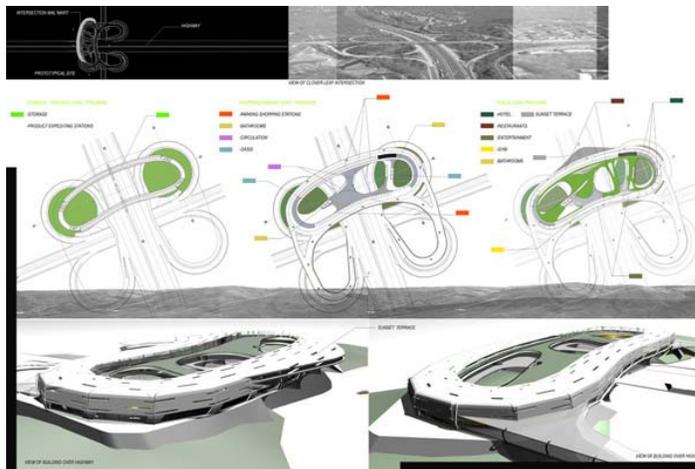
Figure 9: Wal*Mart Project. IN_TROPE. 2006.

Figure 10: Wal*Mart Project. IN_TROPE. 2006

Figure 11: Wal*Mart Astrodome Project. IN_TROPE. 2006