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Architectural Visualizations as Methods of Transgression: A Successive Enrichment of the Image

1. The doubted unity of architecture

The need of architecture to be visualized is completely inherent to the very core of the architectural territory. Although the use of the term ‘visualization’ is generic enough so as to imply vagueness and conceptual inconsistencies, such an accusation seems to be valid only to non architectural audiences and rather false when referring to architecturally literate communities. Architects obviously understand the broad sense of the image, even if it is sometimes not clearly stated. The architectural imagery is the common ground which is shared by architects and all the specialized professionals rooted back to architecture. Visualizations have not been employed just to entitle visual and pictorial qualities to a seemingly self-sufficient architectonic event. They have often been the vehicle to overcome situations of a broader impact.

This paper will attempt to draw analogies connecting the today’s need to employ methods of visualizing architecture and create the related imagery of the built environment, such as the procedure of architectural endoscopy, with diachronical needs of architecture to reach its non-physical qualities through the employment of the image.

There is a false impression within the architectural community concerning separating lines between advanced technological architectural applications and the body of theory, history and criticism. Instead of being partially blurred, these boundaries have been intensified by the massive prevailing of digital technology. What is missing and consequently what should be pointed out, though, is the common ground that is shared by both the technological attributes of architecture and the body of theory. Transgressions so as to overcome such separations and the ultimate unity of the architectural action will be explored through four seemingly irrelevant cases.

One cannot doubt the need for the existence of these separations at least to a certain degree. Specialization in the architectural field has led to today’s condition. This is inevitable and it has already occurred to other scientific fields. What should be avoided are the gaps that are created: The gap between the various disciplines and parameters of architecture, the gap of understanding the nature of architecture as an ‘inclusive factor’ and not an ‘exclusive’ one. Architecture’s task, among others, is to bring together input from various fields and not to draw separating lines between them.
2. Four cases of architectural visualization

This paper will present four cases of architectural visualization. They will not only operate as singular acts of architectural illustration but also as generative collective approaches on the broader issue of architectural image.

2.1 The visual identity of De stijl

The cultural movement of ‘de stijl’ has been an intense cultural expression of a whole era in the decades ‘10 and ‘20. In its beginning it obtained a character as a traditional society’s protection against the secular waves of the late 19th century. Initially described as ‘monumental art’, it was supposed to offer society a projection of pure values and a puritan hierarchy against the trends of modernization beginning to appear in neighboring countries. A strict visual rationalism occurred having such a deep impact that prepared a fertile ground (literal, theoretical and cultural) to so as to convert to an early, prude modernism. This modernism has not been merely a visual identity or an aesthetic choice, but a solid reflection of the social, cultural and ethical structure of the era (White 2003). Simple forms, basic colors, orthogonal structure and absolutely no sophistication were its visual characteristics. It projected abstract imagery that simulated the visual effect of the flat Dutch land and the fertile fields, its profoundly artificial nature and the way it is laboriously reclaimed by the sea. It resembled the open structure and the intense linearity of the Dutch built environment inside the cities (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

The artwork, initially defined as ‘collective art’ could reach the entire social depth of the local communities. This initial conservative character soon switched to the exactly opposite direction. De stijl became the vehicle for the rapid modernization of Dutch society and inspired the same effect in a European scale (Fig. 3). What is really important about de stijl is its profound roots in Dutch society, its spiritual attributes and its successive role as the visual identity of an entire country. It projected the collective creative nature of the urban communities (Tellios 2007) and has, therefore, been the main carrier of the avant-garde movement of the early 20th century. This offered one of the most successful definitions of modernism, beyond any aesthetic choices, that supersedes any seasonal interpretations and can be used also
today. Modernism each time is the true and direct projection of the civilization and the technological niveau of that time.

The use of this enriched iconography was a tool, adequate enough, so as to explore the human expression. The image of de stijl acted as a fundamental endoscopic tool for the society of that time, so as to trace internal, sometimes obscure procedures of an initially Dutch and soon western world coming out of a crisis. It projected visual expressions of a collective soul and memory. It revealed the necessity and the characteristics of the human interference in nature’s primal plot. It offered a visual path, often with attributes of spiritual nature, for architects, designers and artists. Finally it prepared the theoretical ground for the technological advances that would follow in the next decades.

2.2 Form and figure

The second case has to do with the basic notions of ‘form’ and ‘figure’ and the carefully observed transition from the former to the latter as described in Alan Colquhoun’s writings. These observations concerned a first evaluation of the modern movement with its aesthetical and philosophical implications. Prevailing opinions in the 60’s and 70’s defined a separation between functional and ethical criteria of doing architecture on one side and aesthetic rules on the other. According to such opinions, aesthetics is concerned with the shape of architecture, while logical, technical and sociological problems of building belong to the world of empirical action (Colquhoun 1985). Massive building under a modern, structuralistic architectural rule facilitated the persuasiveness of such arguments.

In his book ‘Essays in Architectural Criticism, Modern Architecture and Historical Change’, Colquhoun denounced the distinction above as false. Explaining his argument he noted that these opinions ignore the fact that architecture is inherent in a world of symbolic forms, in which every aspect of building is presented metaphorically, not literally. The two systems of thought are not consecutive but parallel (Colquhoun 1985). As an example of architecture’s ability to supersede shape and geometry, Colquhoun shows some sketches of Le Corbusier on his procedure of designing the ‘Unité d’ Habitation’, showing an ocean liner boat floating just as the Unité floats over its pilotis base. It is not just the poetics of the ocean liner that is involved in this example, though. There is a constant analogy that supersedes
the image and which incorporates basic functional elements of both the boat and the building.

Colquhoun employed the term ‘figure’ and made a distinction between the ‘form’ and the ‘figure’. ‘Form’ deals with the physical and geometrical features of architecture whereas ‘figure’ is a visual construct signified by architecture’s cultural and social action. He suggested the transition from the image of form to the image of figure. He expanded the argument above so as to underline the form’s tendency to ‘exclude’ compared to figure’s ability to ‘include’ a growing cultural complexity and to incorporate dense visual qualities. The analogies of the scheme above to today’s issues of digital designing, the limitations of cad systems, their questioned ability to capture the broadness of architecture’s basic elements, light, atmosphere, movement and the human experience are rather obvious. The use of other visualizing techniques such as endoscopy offers a chance of improving certain parts of the visualizing procedure. The hybrid nature of the image gives architects the freedom to move within a big range between plain forms to rich figures, using the terminology of Colquhoun. The challenge for technology and any new visualizing capabilities that will emerge is to reach a level of creating figures of architecture and not just its forms.

2.3 The invention of simulacra

The third case has to do with the theoretical concept of simulation and the consequent arbitrary construct of ‘simulacrum’, as conceived and described by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1994). Talking about western societies of the last decades of the 20th century, he notices an overconsumption of images and a consequent implosion of cultural and social elements that is beginning to decline ‘inwards’. This implosion is opposite to the explosion of images, which initially led to the preceding overexpansion of the use of visualizations in modern culture. This saturated system of images, also compared by Neil Leach to over-dense physical systems of constellations, had the tendency to implode respectively under conditions of a certain internal, implosive, social violence (Leach 1997).

Following this line of thought, Baudrillard invents a specific ‘super-reality’. He makes a distinction between representation and this super-reality. Representation, under his distinction, is an image of reality. It resembles reality but is different from it.
Baudrillard’s ‘super-reality’ is not just an imitation of reality; it is a separate, singular entity. He eliminates the very difference between the real and the fake, the existing and the imaginary and makes it almost impossible to tell the difference (Bauman 1992). The basic theory of Baudrillard’s super reality is the foundation for a series of science fiction, the most notable of which is the film Matrix (created by Andy and Larry Wachowski) and the parallel world that it portrays.

What comes next in Baudrillard’s plot is the invention of ‘simulacrum’. Simulacra are these separate, parallel super-realities just when they become completely independent to the initial object of representation. This happens when these autonomous representations create themselves the meaning and the information, instead of merely delivering it, as with conventional representations. Advancing McLuhan’s popular phrase ‘the medium is the message’ (McLuhan 1994), the case here is more like ‘the medium creates the message’.

Baudrillard describes three orders for his simulacra, ranging from naturalistic, optimistic approaches of reality, with clear spiritual attributes, to productivist simulacra, founded on energy and materialized by machines, to simulacra founded on information, simulation and digital hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994). The image goes through a respective succession of phases, gaining an increasing amount of complexity and autonomy:
- The image reflects a basic reality
- The image masks and perverts a basic reality
- The image masks the absence of a basic reality
- The image bears no relation to reality at all.

The four successive phases of the image and the evident transgressive qualities of this theory are in close connection with the criticism concerning digital technology today, the way architecture is represented, the percentage of truth that visual products include, the level of abstraction and the delivering of the message to the end human user.

Conclusively, and including architectural issues inside his theory, Baudrillard talks about the possibility of approaching a separate level of reality. He describes a mental journey towards an architectural place that is least accessible, or doesn’t exist anymore, or has not existed yet (Tellios 2007). There is a sense of nostalgia for the real which is inherent to the assumption above. When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning (Baudrillard 1994). The presence of the image as an
omnipotent simulacrum is evident in advanced representative technologies, as well as in the built urban environment today. Image is visible everywhere and from anywhere. Just when the notions and the magnitude of public space, the street, the monument, the forum and the stage seem to retreat into doubt, the image takes their place (Jencks 1992).

2.4 Contemporary iconolatry

The notion of nostalgia as mentioned above and the act of the image replacing reality leads to the fourth case, the tendency to a certain degree of iconolatry in architecture today. Architectural visualizations act now as substitutes for traditional symbols and mental as well as physical monuments that have previously declined within a global wave of controversy. Image is the most suitable vehicle for this objective. When referring to contemporary architecture’s visual impact, Charles Jencks talks about ‘cosmic architecture’ and ‘iconic buildings’. He describes the contemporary icons of architecture, their emblematic nature, their close dependence on their visual attributes and their overt task to interpret through vision a set of social necessities (Jencks 2005).

Architectural visualizations within an act of iconolatry go beyond the transition from the syntactic image (form) to a typological image (figure). They achieve a further transgression towards a third condition of the image, one with topological characteristics (icon), capable to define the coordinates of contemporary architecture and influence the primal act of the architects’ task. The intention behind this is sometimes distinct, but sometimes remains ambiguous. Still, it is not something completely new. Kevin Lynch speaks of blurred borders between the perception of the physical word and the notion produced by the visual products of architecture, the city’s images. He too, talked about the image and the potential for the urban environment, deriving through it, to respond to constantly changing needs, create new poetry, new meaning and to be able to communicate it (Lynch 1960).

3. The enrichment of the image and the overcoming of situations

The basic argument is articulated around these cases. These four distinguished sets of observation can be seemingly regarded as irrelevant. Nevertheless, there is at least an historical correlation
and successiveness, covering the last century. Furthermore, in all cases, visualization acts as a method of transcending a specific situation. The comparative investigation of the cases above implies a certain degree of obscurity within the argument. A substantial perceptive leap is obviously evident: Architecture is not its image and vice versa. Though, there is a creative, intellectually rich osmosis between the visual presence of architecture and the ability of the image to communicate it.

The employment of architectural visualizations as methods of transgression and consequently overcoming situations is shown in the four cases respectively: De stijl managed to create a visual identity strong enough to facilitate the smooth passing to a whole new cultural establishment. The distinction between form and figure, even when explained using other terms by other theorists, absorbed the intellectual bumps that aroused by a broad actual implementation of modernism and stimulated theoretical anxiety of the mid-century. Baudrillard's simulacrum visually and virtually expressed the implosive tendencies of an oversaturated society during the 1980's and created a fertile ground for artistic immersions the years after. Lastly, the sometimes vulgar, architectural audacity of the late iconic era managed to hide with dignity, under a great visual hallucination, the symptoms of a disproportionate cultural evolution.

There is a constant act of successively enriching the image, its capabilities and the amount of expectation invested upon it. We can see the route of the architectural image towards to an ever richer and denser condition. The image attains an ever growing duty to express more information and meaning than before. Technology opens up the way ahead. Digital design methods, advanced manufacturing capabilities and new visual techniques are the tools for this procedure.

4. The hybrid qualities of the image

The visualization of architecture does not hold the same role in all the cases mentioned above. Whether it constitutes the subject of the visual act, or the object towards where the act is directed, or merely the medium of the entire intention, a conclusion definitely encloses the notion of the architectural image as bearing a vital position in the architectonic rationale. The focal point is the image's ability to incorporate various separate qualities and then penetrate human perception. There is a slight
transition of the image's position in relation to architecture. Once assumed to hold an explanatory role next to architecture itself, now is considered to be more of an instigator of architecture's every new venture.

The use of endoscopic tools and the act of endoscopy itself might facilitate the understanding of the built environment beyond the strict and sometimes limitative frame of science and technology. Advanced digital model-making capabilities have decisively promoted the act of endoscopy. Consequently, it offers a broad consideration of the architectural procedure, involving the human factor in a richer and more creative way. This is what seems to make it superior to plain CAD techniques. The more advanced the technological visualization techniques become, the easier it gets to overcome some initial problems that technology itself has created. This oxymoron theoretical scheme reveals the quality and the character of the transgression required, so as to overcome emerging problematic situations.

As seen in the cases described previously, the image finds its place as a hybrid construct somewhere between the physical reality, the human perception and the field of theoretical discussion. Its ability to act cross-disciplinarily gives it the power to even evoke a social coordinate. This social attribute of the image and consequently of architecture tends sometimes to be neglected and suppressed. The absolute prevalence of technology has worked to this direction.

The hybrid nature of the image precisely reflects the versatility of architecture and the wide array of its coordinates and the ability for personal approaches concerning its interpretation. When viewed from the outside, this might seem as if the architect is trying to avoid the task of being absolute and definite in a scientific way and therefore hide away with dignity. Even though sometimes this is indeed the case, most of the times the role of the image is to overcome situations of alienation and separation among the various parameters of architecture and bring them
close to each other. It is a method of transgression and routing back to the core of architecture as a deep, rich, versatile human expression. It offers a method to claim the unity of architecture.

References


