CONTEXTING OUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PAST: TRANSFORMATIONS OF MAKING

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Change happens slowly in architectural history despite the speed to which our perceptions can allude. When skimming back through the relevant images and narratives of our built past, snapshots seem isolated and frozen in time. The sequence of these milestones stack like sheets of paper, numbered and ordered by dates, years, days in the life of a space. And while the chronologies of these ideas and events do follow a linear path carved through time, our experiences of both architectures and cities does not. They are a richer, more complex amalgam of layered influences, biases, knowledge-bases, and support data that fuse with a place for create both collective and singular perceptions of the built environment. But how we engage this history and culture surrounding our temporal spatial settings is only partially conscious, the other side of our perception happens through the unconscious.

Artists, social scientists, architects and more have studied the effects of the unconscious mind and the creative process since the early twentieth century, and yet it is still an ongoing opportunity to discover the connection between form and narrative in architectural history. There is a strong correlation between the design process as an adaption of previous experiences of designers to their current situation. This process of pulling from previous experiences, both historic and cultural, happens on the unconscious level, like the process of being an expert on a topic or specialty. It is the state of mind allows that a professional musician to play their instrument unconsciously, or without a thoughtful intention. The transformation of thought to notes is seamless. This accumulation of experience through making, whether music, or in form of architectural models and drawings, can be enriched by the breaking of traditional patterns and the acceptance of the intuitive actions and reactions to forces, criteria, and relationships of context. Maybe even, the happy accident or, the stumbled upon eureka, can only be understood by diving below the surface of our intentions.

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.²

But, the complex layers and fragments of experience certainly influence both the making of and the perceptions of our built environments. Events such as the blurring of facts, the superimposition of remembrances of the past, and future projections communicate the ideas of space. Looking through lens of the past while sitting in the present begins mix and mash ideas from our cognitive catalogue of known forms with the imaginative projections of the future to change our understanding of space.

The transformation vehicles become the hand-sketched diagram, cartoon scale representation, and models. The process of the paring down to the essentials is an important step of establishing design communication. Then, with the slip of a pen, the recognition of the result, and the magic of drawing and seeing, a new kind of purposeful confusion that can enable alternative seeing to emerge. There is a temporary amnesia of scale and program and even at times intention, that transforms our perceptions into alternative way of seeing, understanding and connecting relationships of the present to the past and beyond into the future.

The emphasis of this research is design communication through the medium of drawings and models from a collage-based generator. The generative content spans the historic through contemporary time line of architectural form and meaning. The jumps of realization and description of an idea into the formal language is rich with recognizable patterns, details, and motifs that transform the associative meanings of the content, much like the found paper and material of a Dadaist collage. Through collage, the unconscious mind can merge with the recognition and analysis to unlock unlimited possibilities. The traditional structures can be temporarily rejected. The original content fuses and creates new realities based on the layers of new suggestions found in the formal references.

Contextualism: The Embrace of the Unique

It is suggested that a collage approach, as approach in which objects are conscripted or seduced from out of their context, is – at the present day – the only way of dealing with the ultimate problems of, either or both, utopia and tradition; and the provenance of the architectural objects introduced into the social collage need not be of great consequence³.

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter’s, Collage City, 1978, starts out describing architecture and urbanism at a point of crisis. They fight through theories and methods to provide a common sense solution to the problems at hand. What results is the idea of contextualism and the idea that an environment are collaged from separate pieces through time and history, can be interpreted by the masses in differing, interesting, and sustaining ways.

² Albert Einstein.
The term contextualism refers to a new way of developing aesthetic strategies to represent the city’s preconditioned geometry. Through the use of figure-ground analysis of urban configurations as a form of site study, they were able to introduce the idea of the intervention into the city systems. The result of these exercises was one of unpredicted magnificence in the sense that new understandings both formal and their social and political implications were brought to light. The research into a city, thought of as metaphorical collage, was a unique and fascinating fresh approach to the standards of urban design at the time. It flipped the previous associations of urban from a flat, two dimensional array of homogeneous elements into the transformative concept that a city is layered over time, with multi-faceted pieces of different origins and endings. There was an inherent poetry to their drawings and writing that validated the complexity of ambiguity of cities. Their research concluded that over time, these associations could change, transform, and suggest new things in the form of program, architecture, and space.

Many of these formal arrangements brought an intuitive flair back into the investigations of the city. Architectural histories, latent with sets of meanings through time, could be imaginatively investigated. These uncovered formal, social, and geometrical associations have the potential for suggestive and interpretative appeal in the contemporary city.

We are again at an interesting moment of design and its education. Designers are both embracing and fighting the seduction of the digital and virtual means and methods of representation. Digital media enables us to skip certain process steps of a conceptual strategy by cleaning up an idea quickly and adding a level of precision and intent from the start.
Fig. 3. Elevation: House of the Rising Sun
Source: Mark O'Bryan - Prismacolor on paper.

Fig. 4. “R” House Model
Source: Mark O'Bryan - Chipboard, Corrugated Cardboard, Paint, Chalk Pastel.
The computer eliminates the sublimal and subconscious remembrances of the past and simply follows our directions of making. It does not make mistakes with its algorhythms and code. It does exactly as it is told; it reproduces with efficiency and precision. The computer does not allow for the mutation.

But even before the manifestos of Rowe and Koetter, collage had been established, perhaps as an unlikely process in the beginning, by those in reaction to the political, social, and economic forces at play within the movement of Modern Art early in the twentieth century. The disintegration of a fixed image was embraced by many artists and designers as provoked by a series of contradictions at the time⁴.

Fragments, both physical and emotional, were pieces that a Post World War society was struggling to recombine. And, what started as a process of bitter irony soon became the beginning of a process that would later unlock many of the compositional conventions of architecture and urban design.

Those early collages that were crafted from the raw materials found in waste baskets and piles of rubbish, torn photographs, old buttons, ticket stubs, and newspapers, started the transformation from one mode of visual communication to another.

They bound together all these fragments which were taken from their original context and had no logical connection whatsoever, and this random conglomeration of unrelated, fragmentary signs of meaningful pictures revealed an unexpected power of expression. Each material, each shape, each photograph carried within itself characteristics of the world from which it was

taken. The observer was forced to find order in the unrelated fragments, to trace back some latent meaningful connections in the basically meaningless haphazard dada and merz-pictures, collages, or photomontages. The wider apart the elements were in meaning and the more impossible it seemed to find integration for them, the greater became the tension of the spectator as he struggled to find a source of integration. This tension was a zero point of the meaning-organization. It served as a basis for redirection.5

There is tangibility to a physical drawing or model that allows for a subconscious wandering, thinking, and resonating that can enlighten a design. It can uncover forms, elements, and conceptual strategies of the past into new interpretations of the present or future. The process can bounce between action and reaction of the design forces at play, cumulatively building or constructing an idea piece by piece. This is where the unconscious and conscious mind can toggle between the rational and irrational world. It is precisely these in-between areas that we resonate with all the past experiences mixed with new ideas.

### Digital vs Physical: Developing an Emotional Connection

At times, there is a struggle for an emotional connection and meaning in our cultural age as we transition into the era of the digital space. The virtual and digital realms, have seduced our formal sensibilities, yet, there is commodity of style and design that exists. Led by the disciplines of film and gaming, digital spaces have become the normative for architectural software development and project execution. Yet, while the space of the digital constructions can be initially breathtaking, it is the formative states of creativity that it questions. The computer asks precise questions very early in a design process that has the tendency to not allow the subconscious to drift into a creative solution. Its exactitude eliminates the element of a mistake or of chance to enter into the discovery of idea or concept.

As humans, our livelihoods for thousands of years have been based on our body’s senses plus the intuition to drive them. Early Civilizations have thrived from the capitol campaigns of building cities and urban communities in which to live, work, play, and protect populations. Our set of needs have produced both utilitarian and majestic works of architecture.

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – the precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself.6

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5 ibidem.
The methods of a collage generator for form and embedded historical meanings is not a new one. But it could, in fact, challenge the self-similar repetition and spatial continuities of digital practice as alternative method to introduce elements of the unconscious roots of history and culture back into design. While these systems have become the hallmark of algorithm-driven design, today the most prevalent strain of making is through digital practice. Patrik Schumacher writes: “Give me any collage of unrelated elements and I can generate connections and resonances, invent correlations. So I reject the pure interruption, the pure discontinuity, collage.”

If the algorithm provides the possibility of smoothing over differences by absorbing them into a cohesive system of controlled relationships, its outcome arguably falls back into the Modernist vein of consistent, homogeneous space. It is a critique of this tendency today that animates the possibility of an aggregated project. If parametric or algorithmic-based design paradoxically lapses back into homogeneous space, how might an idea of aggregation produce the possibility of heterogeneous space, or more specifically “heterogeneity within an intensive cohesion rather than out of extensive incoherence and contradiction?”

So the debate goes on and on. Can a collage space directed by chance from both a conscious and unconscious endeavor create and uncover latent understandings of place, history, culture and design? We would argue yes, in spite of criticism, that the unconscious indeed is a valid tool of exploration alongside the ever-expanding world of the digital.

**Works: Perceptions of the Past, Visions of the Future**

*The Love Hotel*

Architectural precedent defines the past and historical fabric of cultural marks through civilization and time itself. Unlike the fickle evolution of style and taste, precedent dives deeper beyond the appearances of the aesthetic and into the collisions of program and use. Whether public baths were common in Ancient Rome to fulfill a hygienic or social need, or the development of a the “drive-thru” window on restaurants to access the speed or convenience of modern life, precedents define the existence of needs of a place on a timeline. Like the fossils, these historic snapshots narrate a cultural existence.

Removing aspects from their historical resting place and re-positioning them into a new collage of temporal space strips them of the cultural baggage, frees their meanings and logic and they can transform into a new set of ideas and spaces. Perhaps without explicit definition, it allows for the mind of the architect to imagine and wander more freely.

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8 ibidem.
The Love Hotel is a conceptual design strategy to rekindle the flames of an architectural past coupled with a contemporary position of space…a dichotomy for sure. The very name is suggestive of the boudoirs and parlors of the 19th century while its program supports its wildly provocative opportunities for love. Its architectural tectonic, however, is a mixed, collage-style collection of eclectic detailing and formal gestures rooted in various times from history. Is it modern? Perhaps in its very assemblage of pieces is favors a contemporary feel. Is it historic? Maybe for its nostalgic nature and antiquated references to both the primitive and the ancient it can seem familiar. Is it crazy? Definitely. It hosts a large, colonially-decorated Elephant sculpture on its roof which harkens the element of the surreal, is meant to conjure the reference of the object-super-sized to beyond the human rational. It represents a piece transformed as a marker in time.
Fig. 7. Concept Model of Love Hotel

Fig. 8. Plan Process Drawings for Love Hotel
Source: Mark O’Bryan - Ink, Prismacolor Pencils.
The Love Hotel is not a digital construction; it is conceptual project that has been constructed with pencil and prismacolor lines…mark by mark, element by element. Progress has been a non-linear journey of experimentation and discovery. It has progressed as a series of reactionary layers that have cumulatively grown from its embryonic idea into an act of illustrational mastery and architectural wonder.

The hand-made model also exhibits the roughness of a sketch model yet the precision of a detailed program. It has been a collage of materials from chipboard and cardboard to the skin of a paper mache and gesso. It is a “real” microcosm of the idea that exists as a miniature form in space, with shadows and phenomena at its disposal.

These are the transformative moments that give such physical models and drawings their power, their wonder. It is the very primitive roughness and messiness of the collage itself that creates a new space with new meanings from the connection of its original, historic and other, parts.

**Epigram to a City**

The urban experience presents an interesting typology of architectural representation through models and drawings. Our understandings of the collective, the urban, is based on the key elements of the multiple. The question of how and why a city has developed shifts between the forces of evolution and interventions. The Epigram to a City project is a conceptual study that looks at the contemporary city and begins a narrative based on the ever-changing and transforming nature of programmatic and cultural elements through time.

The premise of this project is that a mythical, ancient city is discovered with a series of three prose narratives. All that is left of the city are ruins, the architecture of the incomplete. So, an archeological grid is superimposed upon the formwork of the city and each square is examined both formally, spatially, and collectively. A poetry emerges that bisociatively describes the urban context.
Fig. 10. Model: Collective Reconstruction of the City
Source: Melody Farris Jackson - Digital Collage of Individual Model Photographs.

Fig. 11. Process Diagram of City Fragments
Then the order of the grid and squares is lost, and only with the reassemblage of the city, in many ways, can we begin to decipher the “story of the city”.

The aspects of a collage space city are relevant tools in which we understand how architecture, both singular and urban, transform our experience of a spatial environment. The disparate pieces that are taken out of their original context and reconnected into new compositions can seek to challenge our understanding of both the old (historic) and the new (contemporary). Our minds can wander through the synaptic connection of one piece of historic fabric to the next, connecting the dots in new and interesting ways.

Similar to the fabrication of the Love Hotel, the Epigram to a City project was made by a series of drawings and models. The models final form is in a series of conceptual art pieces, oil-relief paintings, short stories, and wood/glass constructions. The models became the artifacts for the project itself. The drawings became the history. The narratives became the common threads that stitched the artifacts to the history and connected the ideas.

**A Collection of Summarizing Thoughts:**

Perhaps a movement back to the hand-made, the speculation of unknown, and the precedents collaged into a contemporary context just might bring that element of the unconscious, both individual and collective, back into our built environments of architecture. The creative process itself, that has developed and evolved, into the tools and technologies from pencil to mouse and back to pencil then back
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to mouse…might be an agent of transformation in the digital statics that are tending to drive the trends of human experience.

“ If one looks at cloud formations, or the pattern made by chance with an ink blot, and finds in them faces, mountains, animals, one creates images which are modelled by unconsciousness mental processes. The created image, a painting, has similar genesis; it is dictated by emotional necessities, thus stemming from unconscious realms.”

Ultimately, as designers and educators, we hope that our thinking can influence the quality of not just an architectural space, but of its perception and its context. We hope that spaces can emotionally connect with an audience and transform the visceral experience beyond just the image, but holistically. We should learn to embrace the imperfections, and look for ways to engage and embrace the uniqueness of cities and architectures through time. We can use our imaginations to project and connect the ink dots and rivets through time and use history to question, reexamine, and reposition a transformative context within our world.

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9 Gyorgy Kepes. op.cit.