

# The Climax from a Conceptually Transparent Architecture towards a Digitally Transparent Image

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*The image which is usually digitally produced using CAD products does evoke a series of distinctions compared with a traditional version of imagery which initiates to photography or even handcraftsmanship. The major shift observed, when expanding this issue in a period of digital dominance in architecture, is this image's transparency. This transparency either appears as a tangible, almost tactile quality, or as a vague sense, accessible only to a watchful observer. In both cases, transparency animates the digital image of architecture using a certain morphological vocabulary, closely defined by its transparency itself. The procedure, with which transparency retracts a set of physical laws, automatically places its architectural product among the broad array of the so called 'virtual environments'. The examining of digital transparency as merely an additional quality of the architectural matter, which allows the human sight to cross the material, while blocking the physical transition, is definitely a safe suggestion. It leaves, though, a whole field of qualities and identities unexplored. These qualities are connected to the perception of space as simultaneously uniform and fragmented. One can argue, with a relative safety, that the physical usage of digital transparency as a choice of construction materials, as well as its potential as a representative tool, seem to renegotiate the terms and the conditions of architecture's very procedure. The very nature of the architectural image each time is a transparent, lightweight and ambivalent one.*

**Keywords:** *Transparency; image; ethics.*

## Introduction

There exists an issue that occupies a serious part of the architectural discussion. The origins of the issue trace back to when architecture was initially conceived as a distinguishable and, at a certain degree,

independent process of producing space. It has to do with the amount of credibility with which architecture can be evaluated and appreciated employing trivial criteria of numerical measurements and physical sizes. A widespread opinion belonging to the many that have an established presence is the

one that suggests that architecture cannot be evaluated with the criteria that are used for the evaluation neither of other regions of scientific production, nor for evaluating primary and pure artistic creation.

Each one of the two sets of criteria mentioned above, when judged separately, is proved insufficient and elliptical, concerning the results that they produce. Perhaps a special set of criteria, or a specifically customized each time combination of other criteria mainly used for other scientific regions could corresponded more effectively with the profoundly complex phenomenon that we all recognize as architecture. An attempt to talk and write about architecture and its qualities through its natural, measurable attributes is biased to be partial, insufficient, myopic and definitely disorientating. Architecture has its own communicative qualities, and what is interesting about it seems to be the outcome of a cumulative structure of mediations (Rattenbury, 2002).

Through the prism that was described above, transparency constitutes perhaps the most particular and perhaps idiosyncratic among the qualities supposed to define and set the criteria to evaluate architecture. The reason is rather simple. The notion of transparency, literally, is deprived of its very own existence, if existence is mainly or exclusively documented through the presence and natural geometries of the architectural body.

The examining of transparency as yet an additional attribute of architectural matter, the one which allows the look to permeate the material, is certainly rational. It leaves, however, uninvestigated a whole array of other attributes and qualities. Transparency is not simply the possibility of optical continuity between spaces; at least it is much more than this.

## Conceptually transparent architecture

Using a simulated research methodology and its potential related criteria, it appears as relatively legitimate to attempt a perceptual leap and try to reach, successively, those attributes of transparency that

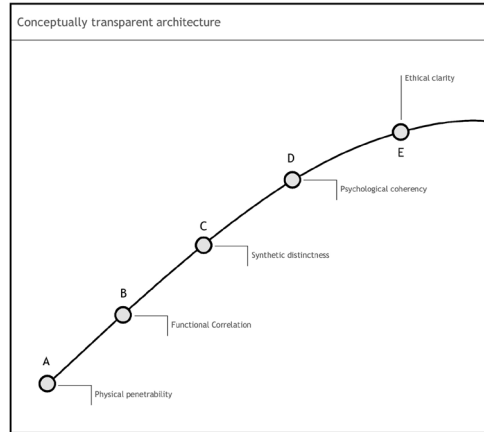


Figure 1  
Conceptually transparent architecture/climax part 1

are less obvious (fig. 1). The fact that they are not so obvious, however, does not mean necessarily that they are not intensely present in contemporary visual representations of architecture, especially in the way that this is expressed through digital representation and the array of tools employed.

### A. Physical penetrability

As point of departure we can consider the obvious, the natural attributes of transparency to allow the look to penetrate the physical volume of architecture. By using the term 'obvious', there is no negative value implied. Transparency, within this frame of comprehension, reverses the natural limits of materials, reverses their natural weight and their geometric displacement. It establishes a visual continuity and a constant optical and perceptual connection between the building and the environment in which it is installed, between inside and outside, trailing the route from the confined towards infinity.

### B. Functional correlation

Architectural transparency here has to do with that functional regulation that keeps close certain programmatic operations, situations and individuals,

which otherwise would be found in isolation and in distinguishable territorial settlements. Functional transparency ensures a high level of cross-correlation and grouping of similar operations. This is often dictated by the functional programs themselves, or else it is added in the program and constitutes part of the architect's intention.

### **C. Synthetic distinctness**

Apart from the functional regulation of spaces, transparency constitutes also an important notion at an early stage of architectural composition. It is the synthetic perception, which allows the reading of space through successive conscious groupings and divisions, following the architect's will. Synthetic transparency is perceptually closer to the notion of synthetic distinctness. As a perceptual episode, furthermore, it has been distanced at a certain level from the natural attribute of transparency. It is already moving at a hyper-textual level of comprehension and it constitutes one from the non-physical characteristics of transparency. It, therefore, enriches the empirical imagination (Dufrenne, 1973) and avoids any repression that might be caused by the elusive aesthetic perception.

### **D. Psychological coherency**

The next stage of the climax has to do with the psychological quality of the notion of continuity, union and belonging. Something which is present and accessible, at least visually, is recognizable and familiar, conceived as natural. Since vision appears to be natural, it transforms memory into a seemingly natural experience (Birksted, 2000). Sentiments of query, stress and insecurity are less likely to be caused in environments that are characterized by transparency. Psychological familiarization of space, whether it is private or public has a direct relation with the degree of the available transparency, visual and functional. The social coordinate of transparency is obvious in this case and it is the subject of a certain discussion between architects, urban designers and sociologists.

### **E. Ethical clarity**

Transparency here is raised in parallel realms with the noble notions of ethics, clarity, sincerity, truth. The territory of existential introspection and metaphysics is not something unanticipated at this level. The philosophical implications that transparency is holding at this point are particularly interesting. While they are related to a noble, immaterial notion, simultaneously there is a potent, direct link with the first version of transparency, the natural transparency, that involves the concepts of natural nakedness, instinctive human reflexes in this, self-exposure, indiscretion etc.

The escalation described above does not attempt to lead to some strongly documented argument. After all, the very definition of the several levels raises serious issues for discussion, involves scientific loans from other scientific and research fields, relevant or not to the subject or transparency itself, psychology, sociology, metaphysics and philosophical speculation, to name a few.

Two fields for the examination of architecture are distinguished, regarding the way that architecture incorporates transparency, whether as an abstract, generally theoretical quality, close to notions such as consequence and sincerity of documentation, or as a physical, practical application. The escalation above, therefore, attempts to show the volume and the thematic breadth of questions raised by transparency towards the architect, not only the researcher of theoretical issues, but also the practice architect, the one with direct experience of physical sizes.

The qualities described above, point towards a direction of a constant comprehension of transparent space as continuous and fragmented at the same time. The transparent architectural space is continuous from the moment that we experience it as such through his transparency. It becomes fragmented, from the moment when what is seen is substantially only the successive projections of other spaces, functional differentiated.

One can claim, with a certain amount of reliability that the physical use of transparency, as a material,

but, at an equally important degree, the possibility of its use as a representative tool through digital means of visualization, seems to redefine the terms and the conditions of the very architectural process. The nature itself of almost every digital architectural image is a nature transparent and light.

## Digitally transparent image

The transparent matter in the way that it is visualized and ultimately materialized has clear dependences on the attributes and the possibilities of digital creation and representation. The use of any means aiming to the creation of an image of architecture presupposes the acceptance and the integration of the visual result in the frame of terms and regulations set by the means themselves. An interesting point for discussion would include the conventions that are agreed during the creation of the image concerning the final architectural product. It is of particular importance to study the amount and degree with which the architect negotiates transparency in the successive stages of the architectural process.

It was clearly suggested, that transparent space is not simply a space, in which the human look infiltrates and is moving unhindered. The same counts, in bigger degree though, for the image of transparent space, the one that is the result of digital tools of representation. The reason is the ease and extreme speed and efficiency that transparency can be actually applied on architecture through its digital representations. And just like the dimension of information was added to the two dimensions defining the world before the digital leap that occurred during the last decades, mass and energy, (Beckman, 1998) the disclosure of transparency was a similarly important addition, a literally third dimension, to the two dimensions of the images produced so far.

What made this development even more important was the accessibility that architects gained to transparency. The digital image gives the power to the architect to apply a 'difficult' quality on a piece of architecture. Even though the notion of transparency

was already highly appreciated since a long time before the digital evolution of our time, it has always been hard to apply and test its features, its results and its visual implications. Digital transparency has liberated the produced image by the architect and the artist. It has helped 'representation to become self-conscious'. E. H. Gombrich (1985) writes about 'fragments of representations, which follow a mysterious order of their own'. The hard quality of transparent matter is offered to all, due to the digital representation techniques.

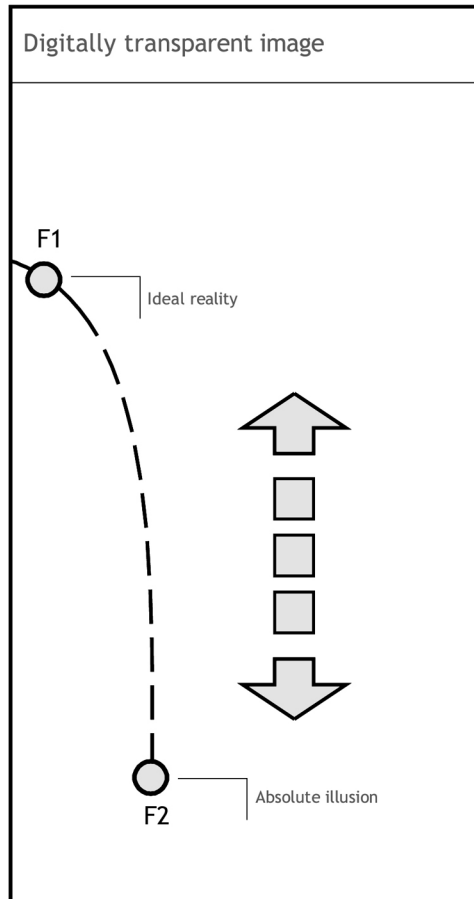


Figure 2  
Digitally transparent image/  
climax part 2

The image has the particularity and the luxury to speak about reality without bearing any of the relevant responsibilities that architecture has when doing so. This is happening because architecture does not speak about reality, it constitutes the very reality. The way, with which the digitally transparent image perceptually reverses a whole sum of physical laws, automatically includes its architectural product in the broad realm of potential, virtual environments.

Examined under such a prism, the most discerning among the observers can already trace the possibilities for a complete creative liberation of architects' intention. At the same time, they definitely receive the depreciatory attitude with which many treat big parts of architecture's digital representations as mere realization of personal representational fantasies.

The digitally transparent image of space conceived as described above, is an image in a condition of constant transition and regression between two extreme poles, which constitute the double conclusion of the escalation described here (fig. 2).

### **F1. Ideal reality**

The first border is the fascinating purity of absolute truth. It is the addition of all previous stages. It is the perceptual territory, where transparency potentially attains features of an ideal reality. It is the top point of the whole climax. It is the almost elusive, virtual arrangement, when transparency materializes a crystal, transparent version of the world, physically, functionally, socially, politically and morally transparent.

### **F2. Absolute illusion**

This escalation, however, is so dramatically close to its complete inversion, to the opposite extreme. Transparency has just as much to do with the precisely opposite of the ideal reality. It holds that almost surreal ability to express the absolute fake, the complete imitation of truth. No lie would be convincing, if an image of truth was not projected on it, or to be precise through it, practically materializing transparency.

Here one can evaluate transparency as a powerful tool of modern digital representation. It is not reality which is crystal clear, but its digitally represented hallucination. Here someone can recognize the fertile grounds of imitation, simulation, the absolute fake, all the 'simulacra', according to Baudrillard (1994). And of course, one can recognize that all the combinations in-between are included in these conceptual grounds. A slight digital change on one of the transparent projected filters can drastically alter or even completely reverse the meaning of the whole architectural gesture.

Transparent architecture acquires through induction all the attributes of the digitally transparent image. It is a sensual architecture, illusionary, vague, not concerning its geometries, but related to the percentage of truth that it contains, related to its further intentions. It is a kind of architecture occasionally subtractive, not in its morphology, but in its possibility of being persuasive and reliable.

## **Conclusion**

What is really special about the way transparency is handled by digital means as representation is first of all the quantity  $\tau_1 \epsilon \nu \alpha \iota \eta$  digitally transparent architecture

Digitally transparent architecture it is an architecture conceptually transparent. An architecture, where reason retreats in front of the sentiment. No ideological loads seem to be held by this architecture. Any potential ideological implication, when presented, remains at a level of informal annotation and in most cases it does not attempt to formulate any serious intervention. Transparency allows the architecture to materialize aesthetic architectural researches. And this is its big strength. This is also the reason that the digital representation embraced transparency surprisingly intensely, used it, and proved it to be an irreplaceable component of the procedure of architectural images.

Whether the issue raised is about a dialectic and mutually agreed relationship between the producer

of architecture and its 'consumer', its end user, a relationship that ultimately gives life to a conceptually transparent architecture, without ideological burdens and without the task to respond to expectations other than aesthetic ones, this is yet to be judged in practice. Till then and perhaps even afterwards, transparency will be a vital part of the architectural experience, not just through the architect's vision, but also from the final user's own viewpoint.

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