

DOUGLAS DARDEN'S "SEX SHOP": DIGITAL RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SITUATION OF ARCHITECTURE'S DREAMS

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Abstract

This paper explores Sex Shop, a work by Douglas Darden. Darden's work is grounded in the tradition of the architectural fantasy and its special drawings that no longer simply represent architecture, but are the architectural experiences in and of themselves. Darden's drawings for Sex Shop construct the project's unique imaginative space by intensifying the terms, techniques and technologies of that tradition. The paper initially describes Darden's practice of using a complex figural and verbal montage to construct his projects. It then discusses the drawings of the project in the context of his unique practices. It finally uses unique capacity of the digital technologies to show the transparency, simultaneity and immediacy of the layers of the figural and conceptual montage and that allow one to inhabit and experience the project in the way that Darden intended: through the mind's dreaming eye that calls forth the impossible situation of our dreams.

1. Introduction

Sir John Summerson suggests that the production of significant architectural discourse is the province of a very particular kind of drawing. He writes:

“When once we resort to the arena of representation we remove the weightiest and most obvious restrictions on imaginative flight. We are free at last to depict those things which architecture might do in certain circumstances - circumstances bounded only by the remotest confines of probability. Here is the sphere of the maker of architectural fantasies. He [she] can explore a great margin of territory - nearly virgin territory - capable of yielding architectural treasure, unique and enthralling. (Summerson, J. 1998.112)

For Summerson, it is the special drawings that hold and conserve the architectural fantasy that produce significant architectural discourse: that yield architectural treasure, unique and enthralling. The maker of the architectural fantasy produces works that use the techniques of simulation rather than those of construction to explore architecture's important questions. Her/his works give rise to images that raise questions and interrogate

architecture's canon and its tradition. The outcome of those interrogations are works that 'in/form' architecture and almost always yield that architectural treasure, unique and enthralling.

It was Piranesi who, in his fourteen *disegno* for the Carceri, first introduced viewers to the experience of a drawing that “no longer simply represents but is an architectural experience in itself. . . (and in which) the spectator become inescapably involved in the creative process. Each drawing embodies a set of endless possibilities” (Wilton-Ely, J. 1977. 85) It is in Piranesi's remarkable drawings for the Carceri that we first encounter the possibilities of a drawing that presents the reality of the architectural experience, rather than merely representing and objectifying ideas about architectural form and space.

There is a long line of designers who have explored the geography of the architectural fantasy and its nearly virgin territory since the Galli di Bibiena and Piranesi first unwrapped the possibilities inhering in drawings that present rather than represent architecture in the mid-eighteenth century. For Darden, it was these special drawings that held and proclaimed architecture's intrinsic and unique power 'to give us back the situations of our dreams.' (Handwritten note, signed DD², Project File,

Darden Archive, unattributed quotation from Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*³

The new tradition of the architectural fantasy emerged as the singular technique that was - and still is - a defining practice through which the architect legitimized and defended his/her symbolic contract with the general culture. The practice of drawing “*has such crucial value for architects that being unable to think without drawing becomes the mark of one truly socialized into the profession of architecture,*” as Rayner Banham puts it. (Banham, R. 1990. 22-25) He suggests that: “*if architecture could to its own self be true, accepting that it is not the whole art of building everywhere but just the making of drawings for buildings in the manner practiced in Europe since the Renaissance, it could be recognized as something that belongs valuably at the heart of western culture.*” (Banham, R. 1990. 25)

Banham’s characterization of the architect’s work as a matter of making drawings representing buildings, and Summerson’s sense of the drawing being the appropriate locus for the presentation of the architectural fantasy, is echoed rather forcefully by the sociologist Garry Stevens in his study of the contemporary aspects of the architectural profession. He writes: “*Nothing reveals more the supreme importance of the symbolic aspect of architecture than the fact that drawings of buildings are at least as important as the objects they depict. An unexecuted project has virtually the same symbolic force as an actualized building.*” (Stevens, G. 1998. 97)

Drawing is the way that architects think. Drawing is consequently, for the maker of the architectural fantasy, the special means through which he or she engages in and advances the appropriated discourse of design. The drawing can be seen as a uniquely appropriate vehicle for the production of significant architectural discourse within the privileged domain of the architectural fantasy as it contains within itself the only record of the thought that informed its production. (Schneider, P: 2000. 55:3. 141-145)

2. Darden, the orthographic and the importance of surface

Darden’s approach to the construction of his architectures was complex, but his practice of drawing was restricted by what he saw as the only real way to present the possibilities of architectural form and space so as to unlock the pleasure of its hidden text. He worked exclusively in plan, elevation and section. There are no constructed perspectives of any of his projects, even though the constructed perspective was a primary tool of many of the other architect’s who inhabited the domain of the architectural fantasy.

He did build exquisite models of each of his projects. Each model was discarded as soon as it had been photographed. It was carefully photographed: intentionally flattened and compressed with a long lens. Three or four views were carefully chosen. Those black-and-white enlargements look exactly like the exquisite rubbed graphite drawings that illustrate each of his projects. They transform the image of the model from a representation of the real to a presentation of the possible: from a simulacrum to a *paradeigma*. The model was mimetic, a miniature copy of the thing as it is. The photograph was an *epiphania*, a bringing to light of the possibilities inherent in the thing: a revelation of just what that thing might be.



Figure 1: Photograph, Saloon for Jesse James, Douglas Darden, 1983

For the ancient Greeks, surface and appearance/appearing were the same thing: *epiphania*. (McEwen, I.K. 1997. 43-44.) Its meanings of 'letting appear,' 'making visible,' 'embodying' and 'revealing' point to a letting appear, a revealing, a showing forth. Darden's choice of the orthographic was an intentional choice favoring surface over space, revelation over representation, appearance over reality: a deliberate choice of *epiphania* over *mimesis*.

For Darden, the orthographic and Euclidian space of the sheet of hot-pressed Strathmore paper was the only appropriate warp on which architecture's special fictions, its unique texts, could be woven and written. His act of allowing the surfaces of the work to become visible on, in and through the surface of the paper is the same as a weaver letting the pattern – the *paradeigma* – of a weaving appear at the instant that the surface of the fabric itself appears. Fabric and pattern, surface and appearance, paper and figure become superposed through their simultaneity. They are a 'surface-appearing,' to use Indra McEwen's term.

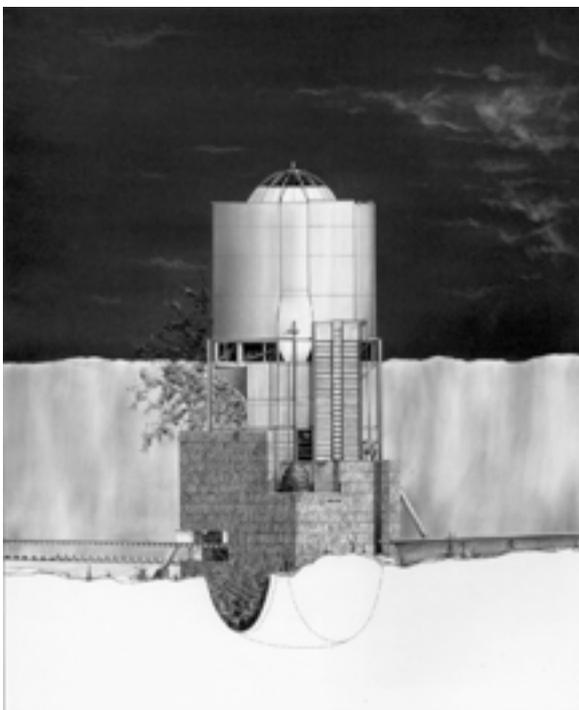


Figure 2: Final Presentation Drawing, Oxygen House, Douglas Darden, 1989.

Darden exploited and subverted the medium of architectural drawing to plumb the mythological depths of architecture's genesis. His drawings, like Duchamp's *Large Glass* and *Etant Donnés*, works that had an extraordinary effect on his architectural inclinations, exist in mythic time and mythopoeic space. Compressed, compacted and flattened: their surfaces become pressed and impressed with meaning.

Darden's materials for his final drawings – watercolor paper and rubbed graphite – were carefully chosen to make his buildings appear and become visible through this superposition and simultaneity. They mark his acts of drawing as acts of construction rather than acts of representation. Each project is quite literally 'built' on the 'site' of the paper through the intensely physical act of burnishing powdered graphite into the surface of the paper. Its shining graphite surface catches not only the light, but also the mind. Its purpose is to illuminate – to bring to light – an understanding of architecture.

Darden's finished presentation drawings allow the mind and the imagination to wonder in the forms and spaces

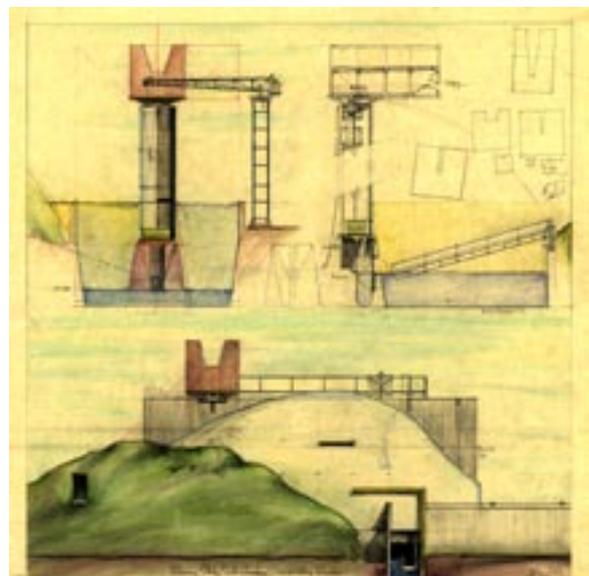


Figure 3: Preliminary Drawing, Clinic for Sleep Disorders, Douglas Darden, 1987.

of his projects, encountering unexpected glimpses of architectural possibility. It is however his preliminary drawings – what he referred to as his working drawings, that give one access to the many layers of image and text that established the *paradeigma* for the project and its epiphanies. His materials for his preliminary drawings are yellow trace and an astounding assortment of materials and techniques that layer and embed his ideas and images into/onto/through the paper. It is those drawings, rather than the final presentation drawings that give us access to the multiple layers of meaning embedded and inscribed in those final ‘texts.’

3. Darden, sex shop and its archaeology of knowledge

Of the ten projects illustrated in Darden’s monograph *Condemned Building* one, “Sex Shop,” is marked by the dramatic fact of the absence of the project itself. It is the only project that just isn’t there. The following note explains that startling absence:

While local St. ***** ordinances permitted the shop, requisite backing from American sponsors was rescinded in 1989 due to charges of obscenity brought against the architect’s proposal. Presiding authorities confiscated the architectural drawings and models.(Darden, D. 1993. 123.)

During the process of cataloging Darden’s work after his death, documents describing Sex Shop were discovered in a box and cardboard portfolio. The drawings found in the portfolio were worked on intermittently between the 26th (“twenty-sex”) of June and the 29th of August in 1995, four years after the project’s supposed confiscation. The drawings explore his ‘obscene’ project, and make public its erotic epiphanies.

The contents of the box and the three completed studies on trace reveal aspects of Darden’s intentions and insights for this ‘absent’ project and its intentionally ‘vacated’ site. (Schneider, P. 2004. 9-13.) They also point to the fact that there never was a project for the authorities to ‘confiscate’ and destroy. Sex Shop – the missing project

- was intended to be an architecture constructed in and through the unique gaze of our own, singular mind’s eye: our erotic day-dreams and sensual night-fantasies. The drawings themselves were for Darden’s own use: instruments to give back the situations of his own dream, and his own fantasies. The coupled themes of feminine

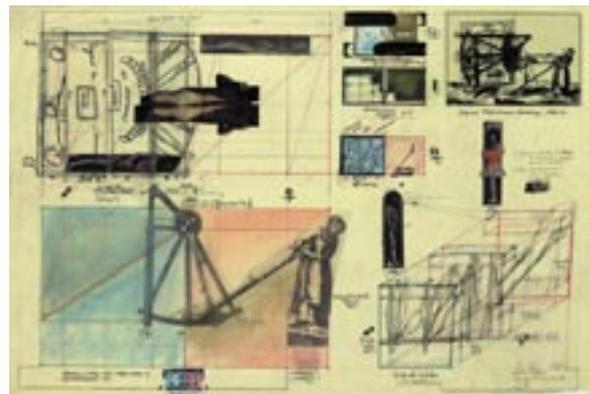


Figure 4: Study, Sex Shop, Douglas Darden 1995



Figure 5: Study, Sex Shop, Douglas Darden 1995



Figure 6: Study, Sex Shop, Douglas Darden 1995

and masculine, pleasure and pain and vice and virtue, and the mythologies of longing, prohibition, denial, desire, nakedness, shame, sensuality, sexuality, carnality, power, judgment, sinfulness, sorrow, and loss embedded in and embodied by these drawings exist as the loom on which Sex Shop's rhetorical territory is then woven.

The tension between word and image – between the textual and the figurative - is the fundamental force that informs each of Darden's architectural explorations. That tension establishes what Philippe Duboy characterizes as an '*archaeology of knowledge*.' Duboy argues that the veiled 'archeology of knowledge' was the device used by both Jean-Jacques Lequeu and Marcel Duchamp as the principal means of shaping their work. The archaeology of knowledge for Sex Shop establishes the surface on and in which the altered stories and dismembered figures strip and reveal themselves amidst the "ruins of the classical mode of architecture's representation." (Duboy, P. 1987. 79.)

There are three drawings illustrating Sex Shop, each measuring 24 inches by 36 inches. One sheet presents the conceptual and formal framework for the project. A second establishes the basic geometries and the architectural structure of its parts and pieces. The third presents images of the project in some detail.

Those three drawings are ironic, rhetorical and above all mythopoeic. They are simultaneously surface and appearance, image and text: the inevitable products of architecture's own veiled agenda for presentation rather than representation. As intricate rhetorical constructions, they weave an elaborate narrative fabric. That fabric wraps the project and, in its wrapping, exposes and reveals the erotic figures and texts that the work conceals in its bright 'surface-appearing' Darden's Sex Shop is imagined a theater for the projection of texts, and for the presentation of meanings.

4. Digital reconstructions, exposing the hidden truth

The digital technologies have the unique capacity to project texts, to animate surfaces and to present meanings. They are able to present the transparency, simultaneity



Figure 7: Digital Montage, Section, Sex Shop, Peter Schneider, 2005



Figure 8: Digital Capture, Macromedia Flash, Barbara Ambach, 2005



Figure 9: Digital Capture, Macromedia Flash, Barbara Ambach, 2005

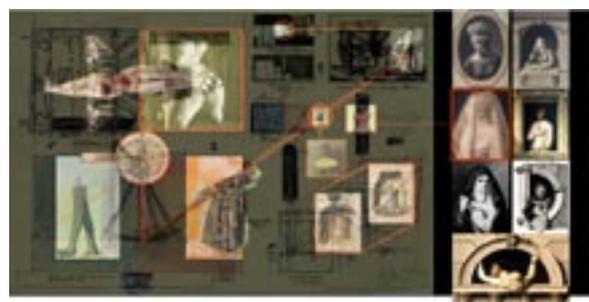


Figure 10: Digital Capture, Macromedia Flash, Barbara Ambach, 2005

and immediacy of the interwoven layers of the figural and textual montage that supports Sex Shop. They allow one to inhabit and experience the project through its

drawings in the way that Darden intended - through the mind's dreaming eye, and the imaginations erotic gaze. They invite us into his architectural reverie in a way that traditional drawings cannot. The digital presentation is able to show those things which, in Darden's terms, architecture just might do in circumstances bounded only by the remotest confines of probability: the impossible surfaces of our dreams, appearing.

Darden's three drawings are the substrate for these new, digital surfaces. Macromedia Flash is the tool with which their surface has been burnished, and through which the texts and figures - the archaeology of knowledge - embedded in those original drawings have been released and set free. The drawings are populated with a host of familiar figures: Adam and Eve, the Marquis de Sade and Juliet and Justine his precocious protégés. We encounter traces of Marcel Duchamp, Hans Bellmer, Man Ray, and Le Corbusier. Jean-Jaques Lequeu and Diderot are also there, as is Sexy Sadie, the unfamiliar figure who is the protagonist and the "projectionist" in this particular tableau. She introduces us to enticement, disobedience, exposure and shame. To longing, prohibition, denial, and desire. To nakedness, shame, sensuality, sexuality, and the carnal. To power, judgment, sinfulness, sorrow, and loss. It is through her presence in and on the surface of each drawing and each digital presentation that we come upon the ephemera of Darden's dream: the encounter with that reverie in which appearances surface and fade,

surface and fade in that sublime cycle that Roland Barthes identifies as "the ritual that orders pleasure." (Barthes, R. 1976. 5)

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