Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations

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Digital spectacle and its impact on architecture and the architectural image

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We live in a world of digital excess, and architecture is a part of this: on the one hand, abundant and instantaneously available references, and on the other, a medium that takes an enormous amount of time to be finalized.

As some argue that architecture is too slow for the digital revolution[1], the recent resurrection of the collage appeared as a viable strategy to critically reclaim architecture's place: one that, unlike simulations of binary realities, was to be a raw and ambiguous like an "open project" even if computer-simulated.

Due to its success, however, the collage has been taken over by the market for its "arresting novelty". As a commodity, it compensates for architecture's slow pace: faster to produce and consume, less related to the disciplinary process of the conception, more evocative, and less ideological.

To some, the "collage era" represents the return of a more prosperous, stronger profession[2], as others claim they are blank postcards of a post-idealistic age, one where built quality rarely holds up.

The use of fictional architecture is nothing new, and the history of collage as a technic is a long one.

In the early 20th century, Picasso and Braque coin the term describing a technic of art creation consisting of an assemblage of different forms, thus creating a new whole. By breaking objects and figures down into distinct areas and refusing the use of perspective, the artists aimed to show different viewpoints, playing with the illusion of depth while emphasizing the two-dimensional flatness of the canvas.

Its reach is not exclusive to the cubist movement. It will influence the work of early modern artists – like Kurt Schwitters or John Heartfield – to architects like Aldo Rossi, Eileen Gray, or Stirling.

Today collage is a much brother concept reaching from *papier collé*, do ready-mades or found objects, all the way to 3D generated compositions, common in many fields from arts to music or film.

In the realm of architecture theory, it will only become a widely spread concept after the *Collage City* publication in 1978. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter[3] – looking to challenge the uniformity of modernism and the possibility of global design strategies and architecture research methods – found in the collage the means to reinvigorate the architecture discourse and deal with what

1 Rem Koolhas, *Architecture Has A Serious Problem Today*, AIA convention, 2016.

2 Sam Jacob, "Architecture Enters the Age of Post-Digital Drawing", *Metropolis*, March 21, 2017.

3 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978).

they considered to be a layered, often contradictory reality of cities. Theirs was their non-hierarchical, non-chronological, non-homogenous, anachronistic approach to architecture history and urban planning, a lens to capture actuality and aspiring elements alike.

Even if not theoretically well defined, the collage had long been known to architects experimenting with its incorporation as part of their design process. And it is precisely here where it interests us the most for the potential types of disruptions that seem to occur when it intermingles in daily practice.

As a means of disruption, its history could take us back to the 18th century architect and painter Giovanni Pannini, whose *Capricci* – meant as souvenirs for wealthy travelers – consisted of a depicted array of famous roman ruins, taken out of its original context and then carefully displayed in one canvas as if they were part of an existing composition, even if these structures never coexisted in real life. Despite them not being collages in technical terms, they are assemblies of explicitly heterogeneous elements forming architectural fantasies that use a given actuality to stir the imagination.

Even though foremost economically driven exercises, Pannini's depictions will be instrumental for later works like *The architect's dream* painted by Thomas Cole in 1838, where the collage potential towards utopia starts to unfold.

Framed under this light, the problem of the collage appears to mirror a quest of architects for the possibility to create a "purer form of architecture" that enabled them to exercise the kind of uncompromising creativity one can only access thru art. A quest for freedom presumably relevant in such distant acts as architects' first photographs or the renaissance architectural treatises? For one could them argue that when in 1452 Alberti published *De re aedificatoria*[4], he hailed not only the founding texts of the renascence, but he established a new form of architecture, composed not of bricks and mortar but drawings and words. It was a new medium where architecture could exist in its idealized form with little to no relationship to any constructed work.

So should we frame the Collage as another effort towards this type of "purer" architecture form accessible thru theory and image? Tools built by narratives against demise, explored down the centuries to empower architects? The same idea behind the Dogma's or Office KGDVS collages is identifiable from Piranesi's *Invented Visions of Antiquity* to Ledoux or Schinkel's drawings, Mies Van der Rohe Friedrichstrasse skyscraper or Superstudio?

More straightforward than the principles that might have motivated their existence, this imagery populates the common language of architects today – and its complex inheritance aside – ever more available to be explored by an equally eager young generation, perhaps with a bit added *naïvité*.

4 Leon Baptista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, 1452 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

So, where do we stand?

If we can agree on the collage usefulness: to capture, describe and communicate a complex, layered reality – as Beatriz Duarte for Freixo[5]; or as "a valid construction of oneself through the juxtaposition of the contributions of others"[6], resulting – as Vitor Alves describes – in a semi-conscious interpretation, not very different to the act of reading to learn how to write; the problem appears to get more complex as we make the entire architecture production process available, or in some cases, we conceived it as spectacle.

In a way, the collage makes architecture concrete and so available faster, and with this availability comes the potential of capital production, at least when it circulates. The incentives are there: for architects able to acquire status and potential new clients through disseminating their work; for investors able to measure market acceptance better and reduce risks by capitalizing beforehand. Lastly, there is the "social media market" as a whole, which depends on new imagery attracting viewers to advertise.

In becoming a communication vehicle, the collage – and by association the architecture productions they relate to – become closer to performance apparatus than to any meaningful processual and methodological approach.

As these architectural creations inhabit a virtual world, we tend to imagine them as inconspicuous. But the physical consequences of building for spectacle are tangible – as could be the case of Wembley Park in London[7].

So the question we ask in this issue is, at a time when the true cost of globalization, consumption, and constant growth is under discussion, should architecture embrace speed, or is there the need for a counter-model? And as we join the voices that start to rise, recognizing the need for a slower, more rooted architecture practice, how do we set the clock back, and has it ever been our choice to make?

5 Beatriz Duarte and Martin Molin, "Experimental persistence of change: collages of the palimpsestic temporalities of Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station (Campanhã, Porto)", in *SOPHIA no.6* (Porto 2021).

6 Vitor Alves, "For today we browse", in *SOPHIA no.6* (Porto 2021).

7 Jazmin Charalambous, "Impressions of Wembley Park: Photographic Representations in a Landscape of Corporatism", in *SOPHIA no.6* (Porto 2021).