Introduction

Drawing Drawings:
Toward a Narrative Architecture

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Architectural drawings are traditionally seen to have two principle functions: they communicate practical information regarding the design, organisation and construction of the architectural project, or they communicate aesthetic information regarding the material or stylistic aspirations of the architecture. Sometimes they even do both. However, within this framework, it is generally assumed that the proposed outcome of such architectural drawings is a building.

Robin Evans in his influential essay 'Architectural Projection' (Evans 1989) stated 'Architects do not make buildings they make drawings for buildings', while this is an important qualification reminding architects about the nature of their practice, one shouldn't assume that drawings are the only output of the architect, nor that all drawings made by architects are necessarily 'for buildings'. The creation of a building involves producing a lot more information than just drawings and, many buildings do not require any drawings at all, especially as most buildings do not involve architects.

Evans also argued that the architectural drawing functions as an intermediary between the architects' intentions and the final outcome (Evans 1997), thus differentiating it from the work of the artist where the site of production is the outcome. Yet due to the way architectural drawings have historically produced, and even more so since the advent of CAD / BIM, they can be the work of multiple hands none of which belong to the architect often credited with authorship of the drawing (this is equally true of fine art).

In many of his writings, Evans understood that rigid distinctions regarding intent and authorship only held for a part of the mainstream of architectural practice. The ubiquitous nature of current digital technology, including transformations around production work-flows, and the concomitant principles of authorship they imply, have seen the centrality of architectural practice change considerably. So, while it is true that the architectural drawing may still be one of the 'principal' outputs of most architects, these wider changes call into question the relationship between the drawing and the outcome, but more significantly the relationship between the drawing and the practice of the architect itself.

The later part of the 20th century saw the proliferation of highly stylised signature drawings often associated with high-profile individual architects, or their practices, the drawing seemingly became fetishised to the point where its significance was perhaps greater than the outcomes it purported to represent.

The evolution of digital drawing at the start of the 21st century from CAD, to renders, animations and 3D printed models (included as specific sub-set of drawing) has shifted the primary trajectory of the mainstream discourse into more literal and photo-realistic approaches to representation and an obsession with process and formalism. The use of these digital technologies to manifest types of literalised architecture is perhaps one of the dominant aspects of the contemporary architectural profession with an extreme version of that tendency as the mainstay of commercial urbanism and master-planning.

This tendency to treat the processes and representations as coincident with the final outcomes is inherent in the development of many parametric systems and digital fabrication methodologies, the potential of a direct translation from representation to output, seemingly without modification, has the possibility to see the drawing as a reality but in practice can create outcomes that are reductive and homogeneous.

Visualisation drawings are no longer things that indicate what the building might look like, or how it goes together; these drawings become the model that the architecture itself aspires to. We make buildings to look exactly like the render, and the use of materials is not to develop an 'authentic' tectonic language but simply make materials look like the textures of computer programmes. The stone is not meant to look like stone taken from a quarry but the stone texture of the 3D programme, glass does not need to have the optical characteristics of traditional fenestration, but the visual qualities of rendered glass and the people often look as they are simply Photoshopped in after the event.

It is clear that this strategy of simulation is not being pursued its aesthetic and theoretical interest, that such a conceptual blurring between representation and object might entail, but rather is an outcome of the complicity between the architectural profession and the economic pressures of neo-liberalism and its compression of the production and procurement processes resulting in a shift to creating buildings that look like their advertising images and marks the further descent into architecture as a form of commodification and building aesthetics as an offshoot of corporate styling and branding.

The space for a more experimental and esoteric approach to architectural production and representation still occupies an important place in the development of creating new architectures relevant to the 21st century and beyond. An important aspect of the representations contained in this publication is that these drawings are not a vehicle for something else unless that is the creation of more drawings; they are an end in themselves. These projects demonstrate approaches to architectural drawing that use speculative narrative modes of architectural representation to communicate a wide range of ideas and positions some of which may include information regarding 'possible' buildings, and some do not.

The role of the architectural drawing presented reflects many of the wider debates around what a future might be like, not simply what it might look like. Contained within these projects are multiple possibilities, even the definition of what constitutes the drawing is not fixed and solid, but contingent and fluid. The drawings are not organised around conventional taxonomies as it is often difficult to differentiate between various types of drawings and drawing practices. The works move between digital and analogue forms of making, and there is none of the parametric evangelism that may be found elsewhere.

The underlying theme of these projects is that drawings are no longer simply a tool for performing a denotative function and describing the functional aspects of architecture; instead, their capacity is utilised for communicating complex connotative aspects around the wider concerns of the constituencies from which they emanate. This drawing becomes expressive of a whole litany of external factors and ideas, situating architecture within a wider cultural milieu. Even in the drawings where they seem to exclude any obvious stylistic reading, those reductive technical aspects are motivated conceptually.

Jonathan Crary in his book 'Suspension of Perception' (Crary 1999) points out that the introduction of photography in the 19th century facilitated developments in painting that freed it from its mimetic requirements, allowing the painting to focus on experiential qualities around movement, colour and time and changed irrevocably the way we see the world. Drawings have always contained the possibility of being more radical than the architecture they represent. Given the status of architecture within the current building industry, architecture needs to be oppositional to the values of laissez-faire capitalism and its environmentally catastrophic consequences. In many ways, the development of digital forms of representation has freed the architectural drawing from its historic association with its role as a vector for traditional forms of building. Architects no longer need to make drawings for buildings, but now have the opportunity to make drawings for other things.

References:

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