

The Faculty of Mimesis

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ABSTRACT

This paper originates from a text that was developed in close relation to one of my works of art, with the title Audience point of view. Like this work, my text is an argument for a profound change in attitude concerning mimetic representation, where neglected associations in every day life provide a resource in planning of society and its design processes. This change embraces a higher sensitivity towards small spaces and events that are going on in a minor scale. My opinion is that the architectural model by this gets a new meaning. It is no longer just a mockup, second to what might be called real architecture. It is central in several types of design processes.

Keywords

Mimesis, representation, architecture, art, model

INTRODUCTION

In one aspect, architecture is regarded as a liberating process where creativity is a central concept. Also in the architectural education this is one of the most important and powerful motives. Of course this approach is in line with a romantic-modernistic tradition, which worships the act of creativity and the abandonment of rules. Here, the ability to see, or realize, something as something else is in focus. By this we also touch upon the concept of mimesis, or mimetic representation. This approach to architecture also gives rise to a very special type of ambiguity, which could be put like this: It is all right to be inventive and see possibilities in the constellation of facts and artifacts, especially when hiding aesthetical arguments in rationalistic ones. But it is not accepted, I would say, to over do it and play with things, even if you have very serious intentions. The scaring horizon for many architects is here the risk that his or her work will be condemned as kitsch.

Hereby, I am not arguing for banal types of architecture where, for instance, houses look like ducks or binoculars. This type of Architecture is problematic since it, as single examples in most cases risks to confirm its opposite. Houses that look like enlarged artifacts hereby play the role of comic effects, in contrasts to a dull surrounding. Rather I want to suggest the notion of a profound change in attitude, where neglected associations in every day life provide a resource in planning of society and its design processes.

THE MODEL

This change embraces a higher sensitivity towards small spaces and events that are going on in a minor scale. Here, the architectural model gets a new meaning. It is no longer a static representation of buildings and urban settings, which is a very conservative attitude to mimetic representation. The model is no longer an architectural wannabe. Instead it is a generative part of architecture itself.

It is not revolutionary, or all pervading new, to elaborate on the relation between architecture and the model in terms of representation. Already in the end of the sixties, the American architect Peter Eisenman coined the concept "*Cardboard Architecture*". At this moment, he was inspired by Noam Chomskys linguistic deep structures, in the search for an autonomous architecture. In describing his two first houses, *House I* and *House II*, Eisenman talked about a nonspecific scale that "was achieved by employing conventions of the architectural model in the actual object. The houses looked and were constructed like models. They were built of plywood, veneer and paint, and were without the traditional details like mullions, flashings and copings conventionally associated with an 'actual' house. Viewed without the external, scale-specific referent, these houses could just as easily have been models as mega-structures", writes Eisenman in his book *Houses of Cards*, from 1987 [1]. An example taken from contemporary art, that happens to illustrate Eisenmans intention with his *Cardboard Architecture* is Charles Rays *Fire truck*, from 1993, which has the character of a mega-structure model, or rather a toy in the size of a real fire truck.

In *PDC 02 Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference*, T.Binder, J.Gregory, I.Wagner (Eds.) Malmö, Sweden, 23-25 June 2002. CPSR, P.O. Box 717, Palo Alto, CA 94302 cpsr@cpsr.org ISBN 0-9667818-2-1.

Cardboard Architecture Is definitely not one of Eisenmans better known concepts, even if he elaborated the confusion concerning representation in a slightly different way in some later works. A general theme in the post structuralistic discourse, which Eisenman at least took part in, was (or is) questions regarding representation, or hierarchies. According to this, *The Cardboard Architecture* is a typical product of a post-structural era. This also means a fixation to questions about "What is represented – what represents". Later on, questions concerning representation have taken a new turn into a diagrammatic paradigm.

THE DIAGRAMMATIC PARADIGM

It is tempting to see recent examples of avant-garde architecture, grounded on diagrammatic aspects, as the final controversy with mimetic representation. But even here, we have to face the ever-returning concept of Mimesis, although it takes many new directions.

In the history of architecture, the diagram has been an important tool in the production, as well as in the analysis, of architecture. Its status has varied through the years. Traditionally, it has been regarded as something technical, something separated from aesthetic values. In short, the diagram has other iconic qualities than the traditional drawings and models. The latter shows a more straight (and mimetic) representation of the building or the city. In most cases, the possibility to be built is inherent in a plan or in a drawing. Here, the form of the diagram is related to itself rather than to an external object.

In his article *Diagrams of Utopia*, published in the architectural magazine *Daidalos* [2], Anthony Vidler highlights when diagrams are transferred directly into architecture. The illustrated example here is the Japanese architect Kazuyo Sejima's *Study for urban housing* from 1996. Vidler mentions a tendency, where a second, 'formal', current of diagramming has emerged, that distinguishes itself from the more functional aspects of diagrams in architecture. Here I would like to add that this also means a reestablishing of a mimetic relation between, what we can call, the real architecture and its representations. Beside this type of vertical relation, where an object represents another object in a mimetic way, other, more horizontal relations are emerging. In these relations models or diagrams looks like other models or diagrams. I just mention this, but will not elaborate further on this theme, since it has to do with a more general level, which actually also is a catalyst in the development of trends and fashions. Rather, what is important here is the returning of mimetic representations or

look a like effects.

CONCLUSION

In my presentation of some approaches to contemporary architecture, the mimetic representation tends to be a problematic dilemma. Why, might one ask? I think one of the main reasons is the avoidance of banality. Since architecture is a very serious matter, perhaps the most important contribution to the infrastructure of society, the architect must avoid banal motives in his, or her, practice. Here, the mimetic treasures of everyday life, are in most cases condemned as something easily found, or cheap. Abstraction and reason are still the virtues of Architecture.

In other branches of art (if we consider architecture to be a branch of art) this does not seem to be problematic in the same way. In contemporary art, there is a wide spectrum of personal approaches to serious matters and political issues. Architecture is, after all, strongly limited to concepts as representation, diagram, processes and infrastructures, whilst contemporary art in one aspect, seems to be more unlimited in establishing new possibilities. It is also interesting to notice the big interest for architecture in contemporary art. Personally I see this as an opportunity to vitalize the architecture of today. To make this possible, it is of great importance that the interest is reciprocal, that architecture also takes care of the influences from art. I will underline that I am not arguing for an unreflecting approach to art as a salvation to all problems. Rather I am talking about the possibility that the multiplicity in contemporary art can influence, and subvert narrow-minded attitudes in the field of architecture.

ABOUT MY ARTWORK

My artistic contribution to the Participatory Design Conference 2002 was produced in close relation to this text. Its title is *Audience point of view*, and might best be described as a mimetic constellation of traditional office equipment. The result is a lecture hall in a small but unspecific scale, where about hundred chairs are made from paperclips. Hereby the mimesis is meant to provide a further generative principle in the fields of architecture and design.

REFERENCES

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2. Vidler, A. *Diagrams of utopia. Daidalos* (74, 2000)