



Architectural image of Self-referential architecture [Against] Architecture in a dialogue with phenomenal reality

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Architectural representation has been a rather conflicting issue in contemporary architecture on the basis of the discordance between its actual communicative and participatory nature, and the currently broadly applied instrumental representation which refers itself exclusively to isolated fragments of shared meaning and culture. The phenomenon of divided representation is a result of a series of long-term transformations of the culture as a whole, which are based on the primacy of modern (scientific and technological) thought, mass-production, cultural fragmentation, consumption society, development of artificial perspective, and hegemony of vision (1).

What is more, it is closely connected to some of the crucial contemporary architectural problems: instrumentalization, aestheticisation, and novelty and uniqueness as the only measure of quality of architectural works. It is for these reasons that architecture of today is being transformed at large into mere fabrication of seductively aestheticised images whose only objective is self-assertion in terms of admiration and iconicity, as an ultimate value in consumer conditioning culture.

Concurrently, the human body as a subject in architecture has been reduced from its richness as a bio-cultural phenomenon to a bodiless observer, by increasingly favoring the conceptual over existential, perceptually based experience of architecture, and constantly strengthening the illusionary, artificially created dichotomy between body and mind.

In accordance with these contemporary occurrences and architectural issues, the goal of this paper has been set toward underlining the differences between architectural images that are the result of two contrasting modes of representation, and secondly, indicating that architecture in its true communicative and humanistic nature can exist as such only if it is represented through the embodied architectural image. Importantly, this is to be achieved by demonstrating that the common ground of both architecture and its adequate symbolic representation – the embodied architectural image – is the phenomenal reality, while relying on the phenomenal body as their common subject. In a world overwhelmed with images and virtual (realities), this tendency to understand the [mis]representation in/of architecture can be seen as a way to bring about the strategies and potentially tools, which will allow the architects and architecture to strengthen our sense of the real, and thus, defend the undeniable authenticity of human existential experience. The opportunity for this different critical perspective lies in the application of neurophenomenological approach which argues for a central issue in architectural design to be human experience - that is, how we perceive and understand the built environment (2). In terms of symbolic representation and its pertaining architectural image, since being rooted in the phenomenal reality, the relevance of this approach can be additionally supported by the recent results from the fields like neuroscience, neuroaesthetics, evolutionary psychology, and similar. With these novel research outputs manifesting the interdependency of our imaginative and corporeal processes, implementing the neurophenomenological approach provides a promising outset for reaffirming the delicate connection between the articulation and embodiment of the lived world through architectural space

and its representation.

Phenomenal Body as a Subject in Architecture

The important determinant in distinguishing the characteristics of two types of architectural representational images is the phenomenon of the human body as a subject in architecture. Thus, it is of the essence for the paper's argument to provide a brief outline of the most relevant issues concerning this complex phenomenon.

In general, the cultural positioning of the body has been a direct consequence of the desire to recognize the presence of divine reality (presented in light, intelligibility, and order) in the human world and make it accessible to finite human understanding (3). One of the fundamental transformations in culture with far-reaching consequences in architecture has been the consideration of the nature of light as a common matter, a mediator which establishes continuity between divine and human realities. Moreover, by seeing light as a link between body and soul or as a way of affecting the «soul directly through the perception of visible world» (4), perception becomes a mean by which a body participates in the world.

It should be noted that the status and conception of the bodily phenomenon in the overall of culture has been throughout history translated into architecture and its relationship toward the body. This implies that previously described alteration in cultural thinking, has closely related the phenomenon of perception with the setting of the human body as an architectural subject, transforming it into a perceiving subject. Merleau-Ponty defines this relation in terms that what means to perceive is «to render oneself present to something through the body» (5). With this in mind, grasping the external space through the bodily situation can be seen as the process of creating relations between the points of perceived object and the perspectival center - the body, which thus becomes the referencing point for perceiving space, a «degree zero of spatiality» (6). Here it should be noted that the previously mentioned bodily situation or corporeal scheme is what gives us a global, practical and implicit notion of the relation of our body and things. According to Vesely, the corporeal scheme is a spatial and temporal unity of sensory-motor experiences, which shows itself «as an ability to come to terms with the spatial conditions of the situation as a whole» (7). The corporeal scheme is flexible because it is a scheme of possible actions, potential (communicative) movements.

What is more, the communicative movement is the shared element of both the body and architectural space, which conditions that at the time of an encounter, architecture truly brings «the world into the most intimate contact with the body» (8). The communicative role of the movement can be seen in its ability to take part in the qualitative transformation of reality by creating and organizing the unity of sensory and imaginative perceptions. As such, it is a source of structuring power and meaning in experiencing architecture, and thus, allows spatial and temporal situating – the fusion of situation, space and time into one experience, the sense of being. Furthermore, on the basis of the communicative movement and features of corporeal scheme in mind, it can be observed that the human body with its corporeality and sensoriality always belongs to the natural world, but it is through the communicative movement that it can use its corporeal existence to symbolize and signify the world instead of merely to coexist. It is precisely this characteristic of the human body that architecture should be able to facilitate, and reversely, bring sense and meaning into its own existence on the account of the phenomenal body as its perceiving subject.

The Embodied Architectural Image [against] the Image of Self-referential Architecture

As according to Vesely, our experience, occurring on different levels of corporeal involvement, perceptual experience, conceptual images, and thoughts, is united in one continuous structure of space in which the relationship between the given conditions of our existence and the possibilities of freely developing these conditions through our imagination, language, and thought, is continuously mediated and communicated (9). What renders this possible is the indication from the phenomenological viewpoint that architecture in its true nature is humanistic and communicative, and as a consequence, every architectural work is (or is supposed to be) a «condensed metaphoric representation of culture» (10).

Based on the observation that «we are always immersed in the world and perceptually present to it» (11), and on the knowledge obtained from neurosciences, it can be claimed that our involvement with architecture always has as a result an architectural image. This image is a mediating mode through which (architectural) representation enhances our ability to participate in phenomenal reality.



Bunker 599, Diefdijk, Netherland, Rietveld Landscape and Atelier de Lyon, 2010

It has been showed in recent researches in biological and neuro sciences that there is an inherent and inseparable connection of our intellectual and imaginative processes with the physical structure and functioning of our body. This mutual dependence of imagination and sensory perception can be also termed imaginative perception or corporeal imagination, and it is an essential feature of a human body that drives and determines overall and every single one experience of architectural space and grasping of its meaning. Therefore, it can be noted that we always live in our embodied images of spaces and never in pure percepts or pure concepts. With all previously said in mind, we can assert that if our engagement with a concrete architectural space has the capacity to evoke an embodied architectural image, it is conceived as an architecture which is in a dialogue with phenomenal reality. This implies the existence of communicative space, which allows architecture to structure our world and be able to relate abstract ideas and conceptual structures to the concrete situations of everyday life.

If architecture is to be understood as having a unique cultural assignment, that is, being a «plausible spatial matrix for the rest of the culture» (12), it is necessary to use a representational mode which has the ability to provide a continuity of reference between architecture and deeper levels of reality (13), and thus, the lived phenomenal world. The nature of symbolic representation can be described as communicative on the basis of its capacity to support the coherence of our cultural world, which in turn as an architectural representational mode provides the continuum of reciprocal relations between articulation and embodiment, presenting the architectural work with its situational nature.

What this brings to architecture is that what matters is what is represented and not representation in itself and what is represented is always a (lived) world that the work of architecture reveals and articulates, contributing to its embodiment. Only on such conditions can architecture accomplish its double task of showing and serving (14) through which it is able to structure our existential experiences and give them specific meanings, or in other words, the significance and finally, the beauty of architecture lies in the fact that architecture «is not as crucial in explicitly articulating the world as in embodying and implicitly articulating it» (15).



Collage House, Girona, Spain, Bosch.Capdeferro Arquitectures, 2006-2010

Conversely, instrumental (noncommunicative) representation by imposing itself on reality and establishing its own horizon of reference encourages the alternation of the relationship between experience and concept into a new dependency in which the concept (or conceptual image) anticipates experience, thus, allowing this representational mode to become an instrument of autonomy, domination, and control. The emancipated representation has been greatly sustained by the phenomenon of artificial perspective: it allowed the transformation of visible reality and vision into an idealized representation, with visible content and meaning depending more on the nature of (individual) vision than on the things represented. Therefore, it can be said that the instrumental representational mode «translates and reduces reality into an image structured more by our inventiveness and vision than by the given conditions of reality itself» (16), and this separation from the original communicative context brings forward the phenomenon of self-reference. Under the fragmentation of culture and emancipated representation taking its primacy, the architect alone has become the source of reference, of continuity and of meaning, which consequently took the form of an introverted creative process - architects invent not just the architectural work but the cultural context which brings meaning to it. To put differently, the difference between the product of imagination and imaginary reality has become vague and finally, by treating the architectural work as an imagery solution, the dialogue with phenomenal reality is replaced by a monologue of conceptual imagination. The result can be described as an autonomous or self-referential architecture, whose pertaining architectural image is characterized by being self-assertive and tends only to impress, which finally leads to its incapability of communicating images of the lived phenomenal reality.

But this tendency of mere impressionism, as Neutra argued, is abnormal and artificial, and this kind of perceptual abstraction cannot have the primacy in architectural design because it contrasts the inherent and necessary physiological and phenomenal component of architecture (17). This alert of the endangered body as an architectural subject is interesting from the aspect of new discoveries in neuro-based sciences – the brain scans have been indicating that the preponderance of our conceptualizations are perceptually and emotionally driven from below. That is to say that our basic engagement with the world, assuming the world of architecture, is structured from our more

basic corporeal responses, which are always precedent and often subliminal to our affinity for rationalizations (18). Among the most insightful findings is the concept of ambiguity: it is inherent in the perceptual and interpretative processes, and thus, the (mental) image as the final result of all our perceptions of a certain (architectural) experience, can be described as being formed through a series of microconsciousnesses. Ambiguity challenges and engages the brain to allow multiple meanings, which is in accordance with brain's biological quest for knowledge and new stimulations. If the brain enjoys the teasing of an enigma this means that in architecture, multiple potential experiences that are provided only through the symbolic representation and the embodied architectural image, are welcomed in terms of enriching and enhancing the neural efficiency and thus, the quality of our existence. It is important to notice that ambiguity is defined as a certainty of many equally plausible interpretations, each one of which is sovereign when it occupies the conscious stage (19).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the main feature of the embodied architectural image, because grounded in human condition, is being ambiguous – it carries the possibility to be interpreted, experienced differently over time, providing the freshness and novelty in every encounter with architecture – it has the capacity to re-invent itself by constantly re-engaging our brain's attention and offering it the basic nutrient that the brain is in need of. In contrast, the image of self-sufficient architecture because conceived to anticipate and guide the experience, can be described as a focused, sharp, finished image, which provides no space for imagination and has a minimal tolerance for change. The self-expression of such an image is the result of its aspiration toward originality; its uniqueness is established in the separation from direct historical and cultural references, and thus, in the fragmentary individual achievement appearing to represent the world in its wholeness, while it still expects to be universally applied and understood. In addition, an observation can be made that an architectural image of an unfinished, destabilized, or eroded scene, invites our feelings of empathy and compassion, whereas «perfected structures do not call for, or need, our sympathies as they present themselves self-sufficiently through their rational and instrumental values» (20).

What is interesting to notice is that ambiguity has its direct support in the lived world, or more precisely in the latent part of our phenomenal reality. The latent world can be explained as a silent background of the natural world, which sustains the pre-reflective levels of reality (21) and comes to our understanding only under certain conditions, holding the richness of our existence. Moreover, the latent world is always present and waiting for articulation and its main characteristic is the capacity to happen: it always preserves a possibility for unexpected alternations and events to occur. If we are aware of the fact that the essence of the natural world lies in latency then, architecture is required to create conditions as closer as possible to welcome the unscripted (life) performances (22). In order to achieve this, architecture needs to establish a dialogue with the phenomenal reality and the latent world, and based on previous assertions, this is possible by designing architectural spaces that are in accordance with the concept of ambiguity and being represented through the embodied architectural image.

What distinguishes the two modes of representation in regard to the relationship between architecture and the body is the position of the perceiving subject. Based on the legitimate perspective construction, the new coordination of space and representation presuppose that the visible unity of an architectural setting is appreciated by the spectator which holds a specific pre-determined position in relation to the perceived object. With the historical increase of the dominance of the eye, all these occurrences together have resulted in the phenomenon of the bodiless observer. This assumes that the body is taken as a referencing point in a sense that the subject's certain position in architectural space is designed to be a recommended observation point in order to comprehend the intended visual unity and beauty of the setting. Moreover, participation

of the body in this case is reduced to a mere observer of the projected images. This should be contrasted with the notion of the human body as a subject moving through the settings, an ambulant observer as a key to establishing the order of space; «continuity, interconnectivity, and complexity all presuppose the perceiving body's movement through settings as they unfold in sequence and open themselves through frontal and oblique views» (23). This concept can be also exemplified in the assertions of Steven Holl that the real test of architecture is the enmeshed experience, the experience of a body moving through space as the only way to truly understand both the idea and phenomenal part of architecture (24). Furthermore, it can be implied that the successful transformation of the subject into an ambulant observer can be achieved with the design strategy of delaying or intentionally avoiding full disclosure. This should create an architectural image which is perceived as a synthesis of situational lateral or incidental views, overlapping perspectives and incomplete perceptions, and together with the quality of light and materials, it brings about the architecture that is invisibly present. Baudrillard and Nouvel explain this concept as architecture that is invisible to the extent that it effectively counteracts the hegemonic visibility, the visibility that dominates us, the visibility of the system, where everything must be immediately visible and interpretable, as it is in the case of self-assertive architecture (25).

In other words, architecture in a dialogue with phenomenal reality is the one that has the capacity to be a «lived metaphor» (26), architecture that exists but can be quickly forgotten, since the requirement of lived spaces is not to be designed as to be continuously experienced in an active manner (27). For these reasons, architectural image cannot be an independent artistic foreground statement, but a silent and permanent impact, which by being integrated with our very life and sense of self, frames our unconscious pre-understanding (28). Therefore, a conclusion can be formed that the embodied architectural image is the only representation of architecture which nourishes its unique nature of being supportive of life, and recognizes the richness and complexity of the human body as an architectural subject in its phenomenal totality.



San Telmo Museum Extension, San Sebastián, Spain, Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos, 2006-2009

Notes

- (1) VESELY D., *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004.
- (2) MALLGRAVE H. F., *The Architect's Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011.
- (3) VESELY D., *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004.
- (4) *Ibid*, p. 123.
- (5) MERLEAU-PONTY M., *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University

Press., 1964, p. 42.

(6) *Ibid*, p. 178.

(7) VESELY D., *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004, p. 80.

(8) PALLASMAA J., *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2005, p. 60.

(9) VESELY D., *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004.

(10) PALLASMAA J., *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011, p. 118.

(11) MERLEAU-PONTY M., *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press., 1964, p. xvii

(12) VESELY D., *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004, p.103.

(13) Those are the depth of culture, human cultural world assuming the one visibly manifested and the other, hidden latent world, and earth as the primary structural reference.

(14) LEATHERBARROW D., *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2009.

(15) VESELY D., *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004, p.97.

(16) *Ibid*, p. 20.

(17) NEUTRA R., *Survival through Design*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1954.

(18) In fact, there are indications that architects (like other artists too) have developed during their professional training the mental capacity to understand and create the metaphors and symbolism in architecture, but this engagement in semantic references and operating on highly abstract planes of thought, is simply not available to majority of buildings' users because they are not in possession of the same physical and physiological brain structure and organization of such information processing.

(19) MALLGRAVE H. F., *The Architect's Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011.

(20) PALLASMAA J., *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011, p. 77.

(21) The importance of the nature of perception and human body is that in everyday experience we do not perceive things in their entirety, but we concentrate on the more conscious, intellectual functions that represent the primary (perceptual) experience only suggestively. But, because of this primacy, our perceptual experience has its unity and order already established in the pre-reflective sphere of our life. This pre-reflective world is similar to the world of praxis; it is structured as a qualitative and communicative reality that is only to a limited extent accessible to reflective understanding. This is a primordial, hidden structure, available to us a priori and situated in the depths of the human condition.

(22) LEATHERBARROW D., *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2009.

(23) *Ibid*, p. 252.

(24) BASULTO D., *AD Interviews: Steven Holl*, 2011, [Video online] Available at:

<<http://www.archdaily.com/174211/ad-interviews-steven-holl/>> [Accessed 15 March 2012].

(25) BAUDRILLARD J., NOUVEL J., *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, Translated from French by R. Bononno, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

(26) PALLASMAA J., *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011, p. 103.

(27) BAUDRILLARD J. , NOUVEL J., *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, Translated from French by R. Bononno, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

(28) PALLASMAA J., *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011.

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