An Online Spatial Portfolio: Documenting the Legibility and Literacy of Architectural Space

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Abstract

There is a pressing need within and across many disciplines to re-think the associations of image and text in the age of high-resolution flat screen technology. These questions are studied in the context of the nature of architectural space. The goal of the research is to find new ways to fuse our understandings of text and digital photographic images. The promise of such an undertaking is to discover how modes of contemporary technology can better inform our questions.

Introductory Essay

The following online portfolio consists of a selection of digital architectural photographs paired with textual excerpts. These introductory remarks serve as an intellectual guide to assist the reader/viewer of the portfolio – especially those not familiar with the discipline of architecture and the complex nature of architectural space. The intention is for the photographs to be read and the texts to be seen. The pages of the portfolio are composed to form a digital tension between legibility and literacy in which a profound reversal occurs.

The photographs were taken during travel to world renowned architectural sites in Europe and the Orient in 2008-2011. The intention is for the images to be ‘read’ as informal travel sketches rather than formally posed photographs in the manner of great architectural photographers such Ezra Stoller (1915-2004). The texts are intended to augment the images opening them to new readings. The portfolio is a play of the legible and the literate, of the lines of an architect and letters of a writer. The purpose is to discover new ways to understand the logos of architectural space in our post-industrial digital age.

The images can be read as direct scans of the environs of architectural space – like a digital cut through a living cell. The digital photographic sketch is a form of resistance to counteract the flattening out of architectural space in our age. The photographs and their textual emendations serve as digital biopsies in search of remaining healthy tissue. They form clear cataracts making the blurry come into focus. In an improbable reversal the digital brings the retina of the eye in front of the cornea and the response before the stimulus.

The architects’ sketchbook, since Villard de Honnecourt (active in the 1220s and 1230s in Europe), is the traditional form of study for an architect, whether in the form of a travel sketchbook or sketches for a new design. Typically a travel sketchbook contains informal drawings, measurements and written notes made in-situ at various buildings and sites. Architects’ sketches are lineaments of spatial experiences and memories. Readers may refer to the seminal travel sketchbooks of architects such as Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Louis Kahn (1901-1974), for exemplary instances of travel sketches. These sketches are literally rites of passage in the education of an architect. Today the digital camera has supplanted the sketchbook and digital photography is the new form of sketching architectural space.

From Giambattista Piranesi (1720-1778) to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) the sketches of an architect (or poet) demonstrate in a spontaneous way how one sees and thinks in space. Architectural space is the very medium of this spontaneity. Today the immediacy of the digital image makes available to the architect an informal way to study the formal space of architecture with the improbable casualness and rapidity of a sketch.

The pages of the portfolio intentionally juxtapose images and texts. The purpose of this juxtaposition is to create a rapport sans rapport between language and the digital photographic image. In this way legibility and literacy are loosened from their respective historic moorings. The technologies of the high-resolution flat screen allow for an unprecedented interpenetration of the disciplines of legibility and literacy in light.

The pages are not part of the tradition of ‘works on paper’ but works and words suspended within the visual emulsion of light, color and technology. The images and texts immanently occupy the plane and surface of technology. Although both a plane and a surface theoretically have no thickness, a plane has edges whereas a surface is an extent or field cropped just before it reaches an edge or line. Today architectural space is in and on a surface.

In architecture spatial figures are clearly legible and can be read. This reading is what Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) termed the ‘lineaments’ of architecture or the primary immaterial lines of a design.
The legibility of architectural space can be read as non-material points, lines, planes, surfaces, edges and their deformations. For example a window can be ‘read’ as an interruption of the continuity of a wall. For a writer, letters, words, and texts have a visual quality regardless of what they mean – especially when hand written. A dictionary tells us the meaning of words but nothing of their idiographic dimension. Where there is literacy there is legibility and the reverse is also the case. Today due to the use of computers both the texts of a writer and the drawings of an architect are typed on a keyboard following the commands embedded in software programs. The stylus of a pen has been all but eliminated from the space of our thinking and making.

An architects’ sense of space is as important as a doctors’ sense of health. The poetics of space for an architect is the highest professional responsibility and has the solemnity of an oath. Nothing could be more crucial for an architect than the ability to think not just about space but also in space. However, thinking-in-space is one of the most difficult things to teach and learn in architecture. To think in spatial terms is to think as a maker and understand a human being as homo faber. As human beings we fabricate things, such as architecture, amidst a broader pre-existing spatial temporal horizon. This portfolio focuses on the spatial horizon and the illusive being of architectural space.

The excerpted texts are drawn from a variety of authors (artists, art historians, poets, architects, philosophers, theologians, and writers). They are purposively handwritten rather than typed. The content of the images are matched with the content of the texts each illustrating the other. The handwritten excerpts serve as calligraphic reminders of the role of the hand and the fingers in the spatial thinking of an architect.

The freehand text presents a resistance to the appropriation of images by digital technology. It is the unique font of a person, not a digital typeface. Its coherence is its consistency. To write freehand is to draw. In this sense both handwriting and freehand sketching are forms of drawings as well as writing. To paraphrase the words of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, all the work of thinking is rooted in the hand. To think about space in architecture is to think and feel with our hands and fingers. Spatial thinking is a finger craft as much as a handcraft.

Taken individually and together each page of the portfolio poses a challenge to a reader/viewer to simultaneously see texts and read photographs on the luminous backlit screen of a computer. This chromatic backlit condition is a fundamental constituent aspect of architectural space in our time. The images attempt to document rare examples of healthy architectural spaces and landscapes amidst a global environment characterized by an ever-increasing spatial degradation.

The flat screen, in essence a rectified technological monocle, looks at us like rays of light emanating from the technology itself rather than our eyes. Our binocular human vision is confronted with the monocular eye of technology. We do not see things in space but rather stare at them as they stare digitally back at us. This can be understood as a form of digital/ophthalmological cancellation. This study attempts to redeem and recoup this cancellation, if this is at all possible.

A surface in architecture, as the boundary of space, is the holder of impressions like the surface of a cast in-place concrete wall. A surface in architecture, no matter how rough or polished, simultaneously catches and reflects light. A digital photograph instantly captures the superficies of this simultaneity. It is a mode of seeing rather than a style of seeing.

The digitally produced flat surface is the frameless backlit ornament of our time, whether it is a computer screen or the exterior or interior elevation of a building. Today buildings and their spaces imitate, not always successfully, this digital condition. We feel as if we have seen this before and in some cases can be confused as to whether the image on a computer screen is actually a real place. The reverse is also true when the real place reminds us of a digital image. The image on a flat screen is a new form of surface as ornament staring at us from its flattened out monocular eye. In this sense, technology, in the guise of the flat screen display, is constantly and continuously watching us.

The digital camera is a technology of immediacy akin to the sketch of an architect. It is like opening one’s technological eyes for the first time. The camera collects with relative ease wafer-thin spatial extractions from the contemporary global environment. The apparent casual aspect of this instant imaging, where one really never runs out of film or pages in a sketchbook, obscures a profundity worthy of study. These kinds of hi-resolution images so prevalent today have become almost invisible to our perception.

**Conclusion: The Simultaneity of Legibility and Literacy**

With this introduction it is hoped a door into the world of architectural space has been opened for a reader/viewer to pass through
like walking inside a room. Le Corbusier believed architecture was a patient search for ineffable space. Scrolling through the pages of a portfolio demands a similar patience. Given the inseparability of spatial legibility and textual literacy due to technological advances one can no longer sequester them as separate notions. They inhabit and inspirit the same surface. There is pleasure and knowledge in bringing both image and text proximate to each other.

In our technological world there is a demand to read and see at the same time. The historic distinctions between reading and seeing have collapsed and no longer hold. The simultaneous education of literacy and vision in the next generation is essential. Architects and others have been slow to accept such changes arising by the confluence of new technologies.

**Afterword:**

Images and texts on a flat screen ‘see’ and ‘read’ us in ways we may be unaware. Technology receives us as much as we receive it. The monocular vision of the screen comes face to face with our binocular vision. The complex chain of technological custody from spatial artifact to digital camera to memory card to computer to webpage is worthy of additional reflection. If only we could question technology and ask it what it sees and reads. It is not so much a question of our technological literacy but rather the literacy and legibility of technology itself. Perhaps if technology had a voice it would tell us the remarkable mixture of color and light in the guise of space – that is the very essence of architecture – is one of the highest forms of being human. To be human would be nothing less or more than inventing a new technology of the question – a question both read and seen in space.

**REFERENCES FOR QUOTATIONS IN THE PORTFOLIO**

(Note: the references are in the order of appearance in the portfolio)


**SUGGESTIONS OF FURTHER STUDY**

(Note: Date of publication is for the first English edition.)


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Manshuin Temple
Kyoto, Japan
...The statue glorifies the marble. The painting is not made from material ingredients added to a canvas; it is the presence of this matter, which without it would remain hidden to us. And the poem likewise is not made with ideas, or with words; it is the point from which words begin to become their appearance, and the elemental depth upon which this appearance is opened...
Are you speaking of the end of space? Yes.

Of the end of space. That’s right. There is a different understanding, and if one enters into it one can see that the end of space is not the end of everything...

Daniel Libeskind
That perceptual and spatial void made man perceive the density of his own body, the physicality of his own substance, the limits of the body and the very limits of his brain, with an intensity and violence never before experienced. Fontana’s “empty” art, as will be repeated also in the holes and cuts, beginning in 1949 and 1958 respectively, paradoxically leads to an intensified and “heightened perception of solids” of the earthly substance of which individuals are materialized.

Francesca Alinovi
When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened and astonished at being here rather than there; for this is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then.

Pascal
Space was represented with an increasing breadth over the centuries. Baroque was a leap ahead in this sense: it represented space with a magnificence that is still unsurpassed and added the notion of time to the plastic arts. The figures seem to abandon the flat surface and continue the represented movements in space...

It was determined that movement is an imminent condition of matter.

Lucio Fontana
Is it too late to dream ourselves back to a place under celestial domes whose interiors would permit domestic feelings of order?

Peter Sloterdijk
The sound of bells stirs within us the feeling of distance.

Romano Guardini
This question... like the history of making space, like the spacing of time and voice, cannot be separated from the history of the visible (immediately mediated)... from the entire history of architecture...

Jacques Derrida
Corpus Christi
Rudolf
Schwarz
Aachen,
Germany
...the luminous mist that is not body, that has no shape, weight, quantity, or quality, that does not see or hear, that cannot be sensed, that is in no place, in no time, and is not soul, intelligence, imagination, opinion, number, order, or measure.

Neither darkness nor light, neither error nor truth.

Umberto Eco
Cornices are the spaces of architecture where the greatest reality is condensed, and this is not only in virtue of its own figure, but in so far as they are counterposed to the free spaces void of profiles.

Luigi Moretti
Whatever can see wants to be seen,
whatever can hear calls out to be heard,
whatever can touch presents itself to be touched

Hannah Arendt
Imperial Palace
Kyoto, Japan
Space exceeds us and translates things:
That the trees being may succeed for you,
Cast around it the inner space, that space
which announces itself in you. Surround it with restraint.
It knows not how to limit itself. Only in taking form
from your renunciation does it truly become a tree.

Rilke
Indefinite expansion and in every sense, in all directions of the internal invisible proliferation of virtual pages that the screen swallows and bounces back, digests and regurgitates at will, and where do they go, lying low, compressed, vaporized, reduced to a gaseous state a luminous state in order to spring back out of storage shining and ready for printing again for Gutenberg returns as a rapid laser jet burst of ink printer blocks of wood transmuted into ink cartridges or block powder but what always comes back is pressure, stamping, inking, how to do without ink, shining in the middle of this lucid sky?

Jean-Luc Nancy