

Penetrable Buildings

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Place yourself in Greenland, before the Portuguese discovered Brazil and after Brazil discovered happiness. Greenland began to show up on maps around 1502, after a Portuguese expedition searching for a passage to Asia stumbled upon it. They didn't find Asia, only that land that had nothing green about it, only white foaming seas and aurora borealis.

Greenland featured in Alberto Cantino's 1502 map, and more recently, in the visual arts circuit, falling in the good graces (and on the tongues) of those interested in architecture|design|drawings. The new buildings – volumes – harsh, contrasting, with diagonal lines, sometimes colorful and sometimes exposing their building materials, make up a residential complex in the center of Nuuk – capital of the country, which is administered by Denmark. The surprising shapes also stand out for the way they were conceived – through the free association of images on a computer.

Architects set up an image database with references from global architecture and typical Greenland architecture at the invitation of the Nuuk Town Hall. Using the program Labrador, developed to associate the images from this data base, the townsfolk were able to access the program on the town hall's website for three days and click enter to create the image of a new building. The material produced was placed in the internet and the 25 most voted images were built, and became the new residential complex that has caused such a stir. Yes, the computer-generated collages became 3-D penetrable buildings. And yes, everything is real.

Everything is possible

It was 1938, and Orson Welles, via radio broadcast, exclusively narrated Earth's invasion by aliens. There was mass panic. Now, we can say that here is Philipp Schaerer, imbued with the same impetus that drove Welles to his successful radio broadcast. Schaerer is the real "author" of the images on these pages. Yes, they are buildings. And no, they are not buildings. They are images built by Schaerer on Photoshop, collages made from sketches and images manipulated by him.

The series is called "Bildbauten", a word that is in itself a collage of two separate words: in German, "bild" means picture while "bauten" means buildings. Therefore, "buildings that exist only in pictures." The name synthesizes the fundamental aim of the work, which, according to Schaerer, "deals with the effect and the claim to credibility of images of architecture that appear to be photographs. It further questions the medium 'photograph' as a documentary piece of evidence depicting reality." In other words, neither photography nor architecture. The irony lies in the fact that the finished work has the exact opposite effect: it looks like a photograph of architecture.

With a degree from the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), in Switzerland, Schaerer worked for the offices of Herzog & De Meuron, where he processed images and created a database. he was an assistant researcher at the School of Architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, in Zurich. During that time he expanded his study of processing digital images.

To him, "the fast development of the computer and information technology has fundamentally changed the relationship between image and architecture as well as their perception." He further explains, "ten years ago it was much more important to travel around and see architecture. You went to visit Ronchamp or the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, or La Tourette, or wherever. Today you simply visit something on the web, where architecture is reduced to the visual layer. My work is about dealing with an image language that is based on photography, that deals with this new 'reality'."

From the beginning to the future

A not-so-new reality. Ever since the project was reborn in architecture during the Renaissance, the image has been its biggest ally, alongside language innovations. At that time, it was all about perspective – and everyone would get a glimpse of what Piazza San Marco would look like. And, as one medium evolved, it freed its predecessor from representing reality, allowing it therefore to move forward and create new realities. That was the way it worked with paintings-collages and photomontages, since the beginning of the 20th century. The avant-garde movements – cubism, futurism, Dadaism, constructivism... None used the instruments (mediums) as vehicles to an already existing reality. In architecture, photomontages were amply used to give us a “preview” of what might be. From avant-gardes to the pop artists of the 1960s – Archigram, Superstudio and Archizoom are a few examples. Made-up cities like Archigram’s plug-in city or walking city propagated in staged images – drawings, schematics, photomontages. Not a single blueprint. The big difference these days is that architecture is no longer “reduced to the visual layer”, especially because something purely visual will never fully replace the experience of touch or our haptic perceptions that are aroused by a real building – and that is where the essence of architecture lies. What exists once again, now, is in what Philipp Schaerer demonstrates using image editing and digital image data bases: anyone can design a building, write a text, make a video, film, produce a music album. The development of medias breaks the barriers of fragmented titles and specializations. And from there a new reality may arise. Everything is possible. All you need to do is draw.