Image compositions of apparent realities
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Our activities increasingly take place on the web and in front of screens. The production of architecture and its perception did not escape this fact. Digital image processes afford a hitherto unknown freedom as far expressions of compositions are concerned; these might be only used sparingly at the moment but will certainly be of increasing relevance in the future. Furthermore the expanding accessibility of digital components and their ever more sophisticated editing functions will create a working environment where composition as an architect's ability and competence will be of growing importance.

Buildings are unwieldy. Stubbornly remaining in one place, they can only be adequately known through on-site inspection. But in today's media-savvy world, the "classic inspector" is challenged by a far larger number of other people interested in architecture who consume architecture through depictive media such as images, texts and plans:
"Architects live and die by the images that are taken of their work, as these images alone are what most people see. For every person who visits a private house there are maybe 10,000 who only view it as a photo."(1) This quote by Julius Shulman is even more valid today since the Internet has joined the venerable print media of the post-war era as a far more potent distributor of images.

Quite understandably, the architects take advantage of this distribution channel as a means for self-marketing. The Internet allows samples to be distributed to the public quickly and in an uncomplicated way. Predominantly young architects with yet little experience in buildings and only a small personal network take advantage of this opportunity to make people aware of the existence of their work at all – therefore it is nowadays compulsory to put your own website online as soon as your company is established.

The dynamics in the distribution of architecture is not necessarily due to the websites by individual authors but might rather be caused by the ever-increasing number of different weblogs. It is the aim of these, as in the example of „www.spaceinavading.com„ zu nennen - „ to collect the best architecture and design across the webosphere". Whether this is really the case, remains to be seen. The fact is that, in addition to people with a general interest in architecture, nowadays art directors of the most diverse architecture, design or other life style magazines make use of this platform in their search for new content. The focus seems to be the pictorial quality of the contributions.

The picture has doubtlessly become the most powerful medium for the distribution of visual content regardless of location. Unfettered by any particular carrier, it can be multiplied at will and transported anywhere. The growing use of the image is mirrored in the publication of architecture. In print or online, the contents have become biased towards graphics and images. Taking pictures has become an integral part of the making of architecture.

(1) Zitat aus dem Dokumentarfilm „VISUAL ACOUSTICS – THE MODERNISM OF JULIAN SHULMAN", Regie: Eric Bricker, USA 2008

Admittedly, architecture and image have always shared an immediate connection. A phase of imagination has always preceded the actual production of architecture, be it as drawings/sketches, diagrams, plans or perspectives, abstract or not. Architecture has always been thought in terms of, and communicated by means of, pictures. Things have changed, however. The usually abstract types of images used during the planning and design phases such as sketches, plans, elevations or axonometric projections have been joined by another types of image: the digitally created photorealistic image. The latter, in the context of architecture so far used nearly exclusively in connection with the representation of achieved architecture, is also now being used to make not-yet-built buildings seem real and to anticipate the finished architecture in an image. The digitally created image has inherent power as it allows the architect to portray their vision as an apparent physical reality, far removed from "interfering" constraints of reality and without having to await the completion of the edifice to capture it believably on film. The digital construct is seductive, not only because of the marketability of the product, but also due to the fact that the architecture – in the architect's view at least – is shown in a completely controlled and idealised way. Nowadays, image design software makes possible a high degree of photorealism, so that it has become difficult even for experts to differentiate between a photograph and digitally created image. The software know-how to create such images is quite easy to acquire. Hence, today, digital image processing is introduced in the early stages of the planning process, be that in the rendering, image editing or a combination of both. Using these techniques already during the pre-project stage might disconcert some image critics but these methods are of increasing importance as a design tool for the architect, as they may be used at the same time for broad marketing of the project marketing.

I am deeply convinced that using visualising methods for an architect working supra-regionally is no longer a matter of choice but simply of necessity. Let us not address the locally active architects, usually of an older generation who owe their direct contracts to an active participation in community activities or other networks. We are talking here about those architects having to face the competition in the increasingly more penetrated and supra-regional markets. A "merely" well thought-out project is no longer enough, because the competition is stiff. Projected pictorial spaces or key images are required to additionally convey the project in an effective and urgent way or at least not jeopardize it.

Bearing this in mind, it is all too evident that architects, when looking for new acquisitions or in project marketing, increasingly turn to visualization in order to use imaging methods to monitor and control the appearance of the project from the outset. It is imperative to review the image potential of the project as early as possible, to make necessary adjustments in order to improve its optical clarity and hence to make the bid more competitive. The view, often voiced in contemporary discourse on architecture, that architects are turning into decorators and suppliers of photographs is certainly somewhat farfetched. But I believe that today's prevailing circumstances do not offer the architect many alternatives. The reputation of the architect as an "all-pervasive genius of construction" is quite definitely a thing of the past. Apart from small building structures, the phases of planning and building have undoubtedly become more multilayered and complex. The current high professional specialization in the building and planning industry reflects this fact. Furthermore, general contractors have assumed the architect's classic responsibilities, such as tendering, cost planning and construction management. Apart from the creation of a spatial organization as well as the consideration of materials and details, it seems the only discipline completely vested in the architect is the one centred on the image-based development and visualization of the building's appearance. It is probably due to the architect's immense increase in the output of

picture production as well as the ensuing continuous growth of acquired know-how that the architects are holding on to their discipline and that their role is not curtailed even more.

The fact that the architect increasingly conveys image matters via digital imaging methods ties him ever more to the functionality, the expressiveness and the editing tools offered by such applications. Whether it is 3D-modellelling with rendering or digital image processing, the crucial point of these methods is the fact that both, rendering as well as montage, are part of a component-based imaging method. Whereas modelling / rendering requires a collection of 3D components placed in position, the photo-montage requires separate picture fragments to be combined into a new whole. In both cases, one uses separate digital building blocks that are put in relation to each other according to a determined sequence – similar to buildings where the building elements relate to one another spatially. This process on the screen has of course a lot to do with composition, being primarily directed at the creative relationship of elements. The elements shown on the surface constitute a purely figurative reference, with no physical attributes and no spatial expansion. Architecture is increasingly developed and represented using tools working two-dimensionally and compositionally and this creates a tension between the appearance envisaged by the architect and the final finished building. Visual arrangement on a surface ensures a much greater artistic freedom than the arrangement of building elements in reality that are bound by physical laws. You can construct compositional images that have only little or nothing at all in common with reality. This can doubtless lead to difficulties, such as stating explicit design requirements with the use of image software which can not (yet) be fulfilled in reality or which prove to be unfeasible financially. The huge potential of using digital image software is the degree of freedom with which to think about, develop and present architecture. Idealized intention of design can be expressed, far removed from physical-constructional constraints and the forces of gravity and quite unlike any classic model-making.

An effort to move into this direction would be of direct use for achieving good architecture. If the intention of design is thought out and presented more clearly and more concisely, more of the initial creative intent will be reflected in the finished building – even after having gone through the phase of actual realisation, often full of compromises Not only the architect as designer can profit from the often overstated and freely composed image constructions, but the whole of the construction industry. The claim of/for plausibility generated by photorealistic image tools in pictures also triggering a new dynamics in the development of new static systems and constructions, along the lines of “anything that looks so real and believable should be implemented”.

I do not necessarily want to dwell on the way in which digital imaging tools are generally used in the production of architecture – and hence “taught” that way at schools. In the sense that practically all the imaging methods are used only to emulate photographs and therefore concentrate on recreating known picture-creations without wanting to exhaust the new capabilities.This situation resembles the invention of photography in the 19th century when the first usage was the imitation of themes and picture compositions, borrowed from classical painting. We now know the way that over the past 200 years, the art of photography has emancipated itself considerably from painting, and it is hoped that digital image processing will follow suit. The aim would be to develop a broad lexicon of imagery, allowing the architect to communicate with the most suitable “imagevehicle”, depending on the project status as well a offering an alternative to the often employed yet also questionable use of photorealistic renderings at the very beginning of a project phase. The methods are to be separated from the mere simulation of photographic images and one should try to envisage image strategies and aesthetics that do not simply pursue the implementation of the

photographic way of expression. The point is rather to utilize the possibilities of abstraction offered by these digital tools to find visual languages and compositions that may serve as models and be exaggerated and therefore in the long run be able to also convey the intents of design abstractly and succinctly.

The growing freedom in compositional means of expression offered by the component-based digital imaging method will increase demand in the architect's composition ability. This is in large part due to the fast paced increase of accessible digital components and their ever more open editing functions.

The architect will in future have access to an increasing number of improved open planning components: whether construction products, material components or design components gathered together in other libraries, even today the architect is faced with a large number of single components offered online, to say nothing of personal digital work archives. The fact that greater storage capacity will be available on increasingly smaller storage media raises the question as to the quality of the indexing. Here is an example: I have been collecting images, pictures, graphic representations, plans, schemas, text and layout documents in digital form since 1998. Any document deemed important and interesting is entered into my media database. The files are labelled according to my own logical system, imported into the database, and each file is given a corresponding record with keywords. I have been doing this for years and have accumulated more than 60,000 data records, organised into various groups with more than 4,000 key words. Search criteria allow me to quickly and comfortably penetrate this data and retrieve anything. However, I do see only subsets, taken out of context and isolated.

The existence of this ever-increasing number of individual modular components invariably creates a vacuum as far as our compositional creativity is concerned. The call "to want to relate" is becoming ever stronger. I think this phenomenon has taken hold especially in architects' offices, where computer and information technologies are used increasingly during the development phase. Whereas there used to be sketches/drawings and plans hanging on walls, today one encounters large-scale wall installations – a patchwork of various image, text and plan fragments. These wall montages, which are similar to mood boards used in marketing, try to relate various serendipitous and interesting media fragments to make ideas and connections more visually evident to oneself and to others. The fact that we will have more access to digital components will increase the need "to relate things to each other". Most of the software manufacturers have already reacted to this fact. In the beginning, CAD programs used to be vector-based only, i.e. they worked only with lines, surfaces and points. Nowadays a plethora of layout tools have been added to help arrange various media freely within the area and put them into relation to each other. A similar trend can be observed with pixel-based programs. Nobody could have imagined a few years ago that with the application Photoshop, the true classic among image editing software, one is now able to import even 3D components and to align them at will on the screen, to texture and to render them. Bearing this development in mind, I am totally convinced that the boundaries of the initial core abilities of the various programs will be weakened. Eventually, we will have the possibility within a single set of applications to edit and interrelate every kind of media component, so that the interface of the programs mutate into a sort of montage screen for the various components.

Whether classically on the wall or increasingly on digital screens, the growing number of indexable components and the progressively unrestricted editing possibilities force us to pursue the compositional activity, in that we look out for, sort and relate components to one

another in a well thought-out manner.

The fact that the computer by now offers a wide range of digital creative and editing possibilities is not taken sufficiently into consideration within today's teaching. This is shown in the design atelier in the fact that the computer is mostly used merely as a means of reproduction, either as an electronic copier of a design idea, a simple photo scanner that translates the design through rendering into a pseudo-photorealistic image, or as a construction robot that transports the design with CAD/CAM into material reality. These are all examples that show only the transfer of a more or less thought-through design idea into another format. The computer is "only" used to translate one piece of data into another medium and it is not used explicitly as a design instrument but, consciously or unconsciously, as an output machine defining the aesthetics, a fact that may also be reflected in the rather drab and stereotypical layout graphics and architectural images of our times.

There would be a considerable gain not only for the apprenticeship of architecture but for the contemporary production of architecture if digital means of expression and editing were included much earlier and in a less restricted way in the design process. Furthermore, the new ways of abstraction offered by digital image software might herald the arrival of a multitude of ways of expression, which in turn might lead to more individual points of view of architects. However, using digital means of expression is hardly taught or cultivated at our universities. Experimental approaches would be needed to transmit a broad range of expressions allowing each individual student to transport their personal design vision in a succinct form and in the most suited manner. This would certainly be a great enrichment.