

PHILIPP SCHAEERER

Built Images: On the Visual
Aestheticization of Today's
Architecture

Imágenes construidas:
Sobre la estetización
visual de la arquitectura
actual

**Abstract**

Architecture and image have forever shared an intimate connection. A phase of imagination has always preceded the production of architecture, be it as drawings, diagrams, plans or perspectives, abstract or not. Architecture has always been thought in terms of, and communicated by means of, pictures. Nowadays, however, we increasingly encounter architecture that —consciously or unconsciously— seems to be preoccupied with its visual impact; an architecture moving ineluctably towards the mere production of enticing images, foregrounding its visual aestheticization. Today's trend in architecture of using images both as tools for development and for communication might be traced back to the interplay of various changed contextual factors. This essay aims to highlight certain factors seemingly favouring the visual aestheticization of today's architecture.

Keywords

Image and Architecture, Design, Visual Aesthetication, Visual Impact, Digital Image Processing, Reality and Fiction.

Resumen

La arquitectura y la imagen han compartido siempre una íntima conexión. Una fase de la imaginación ha precedido siempre a la producción de la arquitectura, ya sea como dibujos, diagramas, planos o perspectivas, abstractos o no. La arquitectura siempre ha sido pensada en términos de y comunicada por medio de imágenes. Hoy en día, sin embargo, nos encontramos cada vez más con una arquitectura que —consciente o inconscientemente— parece estar preocupada por su impacto visual; una arquitectura que se mueve inevitablemente hacia la mera producción de imágenes seductoras, poniendo en primer plano su estetización visual. La contemporánea tendencia en la arquitectura de usar las imágenes tanto como herramientas para el desarrollo proyectual como para la comunicación se puede remontar a la interacción de varios y cambiantes factores contextuales. Este ensayo pretende destacar algunos factores que aparentemente favorecen la estetización visual de la arquitectura actual.

Palabras clave

Imagen y arquitectura, diseño, estética visual, impacto visual, procesamiento digital de imágenes, realidad y ficción.

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Introduction

Buildings are cumbersome. Stubbornly remaining in one place, they will divulge their contextual identity only through on-site inspection. But in our world of media-reality, the "classic inspector" is far outnumbered by other people interested in architecture who consume it 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. 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.

Specialization and international markets

The growing use of the image within architecture might also be understood from an economic point of view, as a result of previous specialization in building and planning industries, and also as a result of international markets no longer bound by borders and the ensuing intensified competition among architects.

With the exception of small building projects, the planning and building processes have doubtlessly increased in both intricacy and complexity. This fact is mirrored in the significant degree of specialization now prevalent in the construction and planning industry. Furthermore, general contractors have

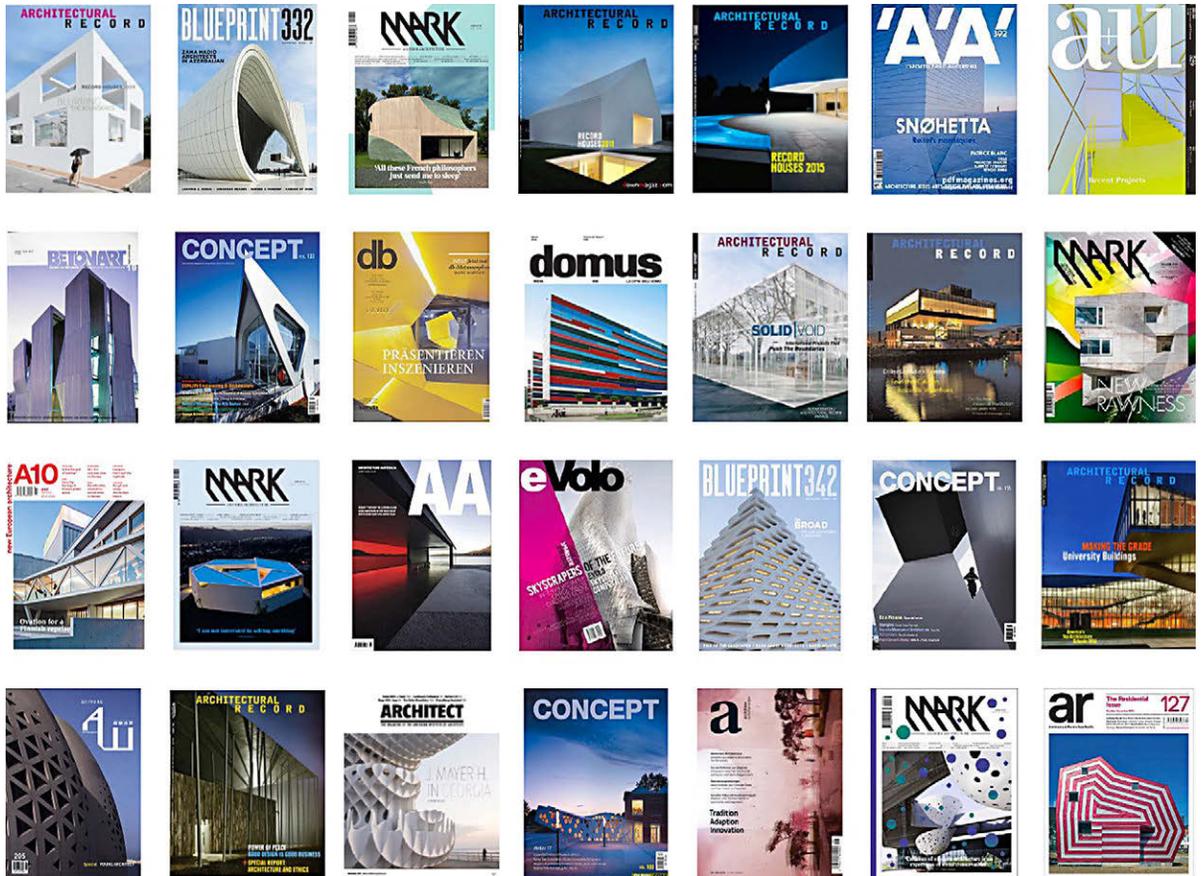
1 Arthouse Films. 2008. *Visual Acoustics. The Modernism of Julain Shulman*. DVD.

Arquitectura, mirada y cultura visual
 Architecture, the Art of Looking and Visual Culture

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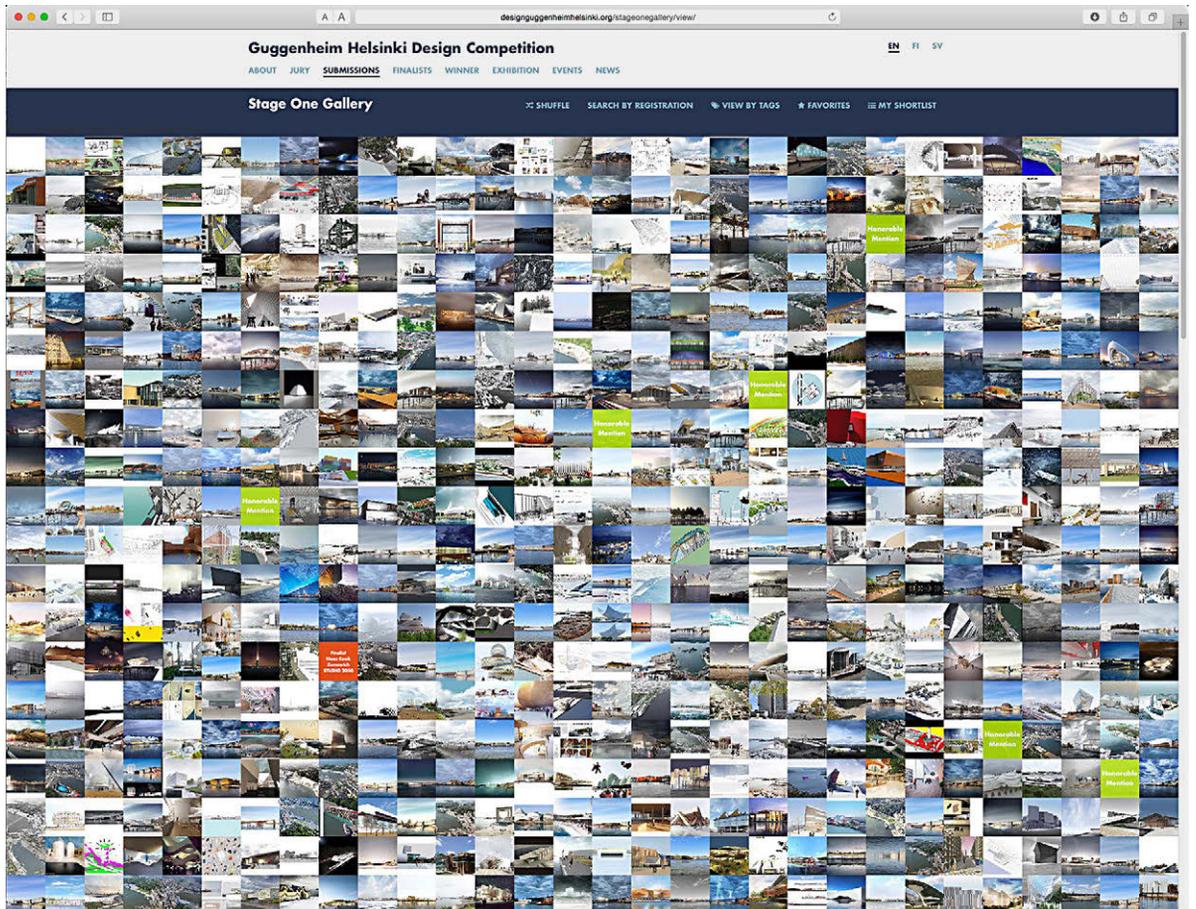
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[Fig. 1] Covers of contemporary architecture magazines.

assumed the classic responsibilities, of the architect, such as tendering, cost planning and construction management. Apart from the creation of 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. Today's architects tend to affirm the role assigned to them and to predominantly engage in image production.



[Fig. 2] Front page website Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition 2014, Key Images of the 1715 Competitors. www.designguggenheimhelsinki.org.

Thus the use of digital visualization technologies in the context of today's architecture seems omnipresent. In an ever more competitive, supra-regional market, a "merely" well thought out project design will no longer do. Key Images are all the rage; they are to serve as an additional, effective and forceful carrier for the project. From the outset, imaging techniques are used to manage and monitor the project's appearance, the visual potential is assessed and necessary adjustments are effected — everything is done to further enhance the project's pictorial resonance in order to gain a competitive edge over the competitors' entries.

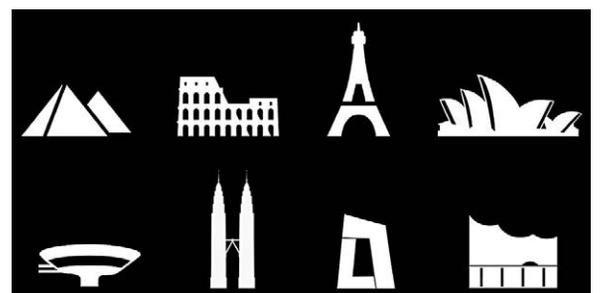
Instant seduction

Ours seems to be a narcissistic time, characterized by self-communication and self-promotion. The credo of today's world could be: to communicate, to crave attention, In adverts, in the news or on social platforms, the world is primarily conveyed via images, whose contents are exaggeratedly staged, often far removed from what is generally thought of as an objective reflection of reality.



[Fig. 3] Lady Gaga, EP Cover *The Fame Monster*, 2009, Photograph by Hedi Slimane. www.hedislimane.com.

Although we continuously surround ourselves (and are surrounded) by architecture, we tend to consume it mainly indirectly, by means of descriptive media such as images, texts or plans. The ongoing digitization of contents and their distribution over the internet has created a deluge of contents. Websites and Internet platforms compete against each other and are vying for our attention. The Internet as well as traditional printing favour contents with heavy use of graphics and pictures. Online, architecture is also deconstructed into quickly accessible visual media-bits. The projects, whether built or not, are mostly conveyed by means of a condensed set of media based predominantly on graphics and images. The overriding concern is the visual impact of the presentation: photorealistic views, an ingenious staging of the objects by professional photographers or visualization artists — these are the eye catcher, they form the key Images and serve as anchor points. They make up the major core component of the project, if not the whole of the project. Indeed, diagrams and plans —if offered at all— are often treated to a graphic refinement in order for their message to be more easily communicated. They are simplified for more immediate visual salience and broken down to schemata for fast legibility. A written description of the project is often missing. If present, it will mostly contain project information only as meta-information, as a list of key words for key figures.



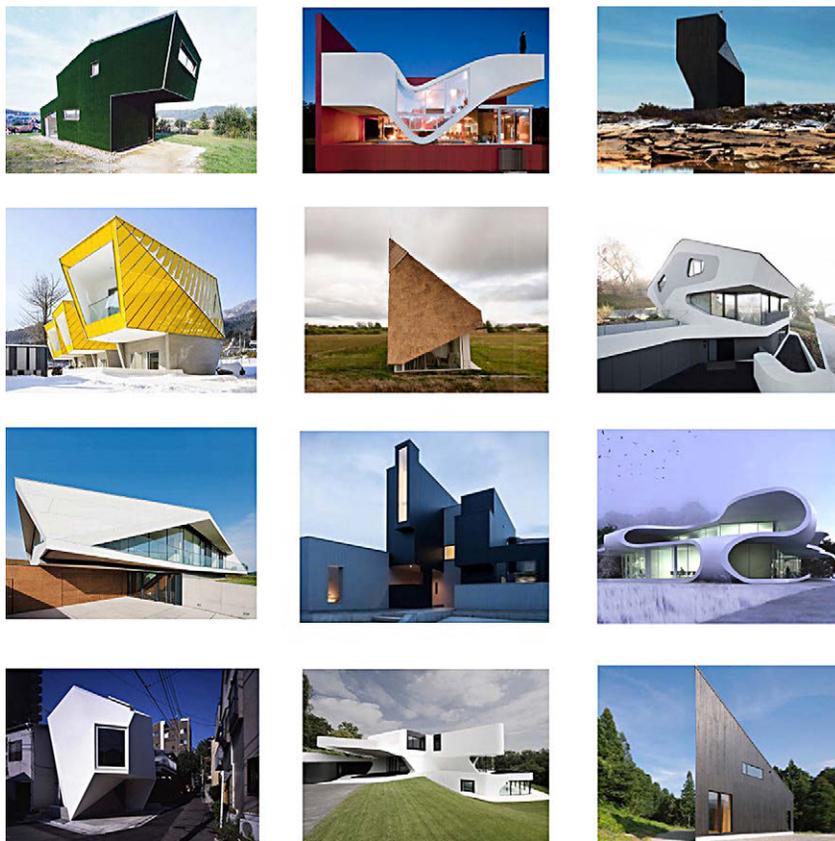
[Fig.4] Architectural icons. Drawing by the author.

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The recording of architecture is also subject to the basic mechanisms of image reception, as it is increasingly accessed via image-based media. In order for it to be memorable and to produce a long-lasting effect, architecture is nowadays being articulated using the vocabulary of simplified and eye-catching images. The pictogram or icon is probably the most powerful and most quickly recognisable of all images. Linguistically and culturally neutral, a true general-purpose image symbol, it reduces the object to a simplified pictorial figure-cum-ground composition. It is therefore no coincidence that the most widely recognized and most memorable architectures worldwide, because of their formal characteristics, can easily be translated into a simple, recognizable and graphical character. Whether they are older examples of architecture, such as the Pantheon, the Coliseum, the Eiffel Tower or the Sydney Opera House, or more contemporary examples such as the National Stadium and CCTV headquarters in Beijing, the Rolex Learning Center or the recently built Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, thanks to their concise, self-sufficient formal characteristics, all these buildings can be easily captured in a simplified sketch or a black-and-white graphic, and can thus unambiguously be identified and recognized despite being obviously uprooted from their place of origin. In addition to the well-known architectural icons, we now also encounter a large number of contemporary projects on a smaller scale that employ these simplified, exaggerated and formal image-object recognition mechanisms. Single family houses that turn, twist, fold and swell; they are up to all sorts of formal antics and vie for our attention.



[Fig. 5] Compilation - Contemporary Houses. Miscellaneous.

Of course, times are quite difficult for “quiet architecture”. Architecture that emerges from complex social and spatial contexts and is been less formally articulated does not easily communicate itself in single concise pictures. In the global dance for attention, it is often left behind.

Sculptures

Our society has undergone fundamental changes and developments during the last decades. The architect has to try and meet the most varied needs of individuals and social groups. Single parents, elderly citizens in residential communities, childless couples and working nomads —whose work and lives are not bound to a fixed location— all of these groups have particular spatial requirements, which are also more difficult to predict because of accelerated social upheavals. The architects seek refuge in providing functionally non-specific or multifunctional spaces, which try to accommodate the disparate work-housing scenarios. Cooking and washing areas, the only remaining general “requirement-constants”, are being reduced to compacted units, freeing up space for non-connoted free spaces, unspecifically articulated. “This means that we use architecture less and less in its concrete meaning. Furthermore, our aesthetic interest in architecture increases exponentially with the shrinking of the functional link

between human and house”², to quote Gerd de Bruyn’s apposite words during a lecture in Weimar. As a consequence, the architect is noticeably confronted with the planning and formulation of fundamental space-shaping building components. He artfully stacks, forms and layers the remaining primary design elements such as floor, wall and ceiling, thus joining, transforming and composing the parts into whole spatial architectural sculptures. In this way, he seems also to share —if only indirectly— in the ongoing development of the visual aestheticization of architecture.

Detached and cropped

Images always show only excerpts. Their borders frame and also cut out. Built architecture, however, always operates in a spatial context. It interacts and is perceived in and through overall spatial connections. If architecture is communicated more and more through images —put in a frame— it is always removed from its spatial environment. The image favours the object and less the “in-between”, that which places the object in a relationship. Architecture as image points to the body, emphasizes the objectuality and releases itself from its context.



[Fig. 6] René Magritte, *Les charmes du paysage*, 1928. www.wikiart.org.

If architecture is increasingly thought of and communicated with images, it will favour this circumstance. Many realized examples of architecture today manifest themselves thus: object-oriented, self-centred and inward-looking, seemingly disinclined to establish (or seek) any neighbourly bonds. Whether depicted or built, architecture is evermore shedding its context. Buildings work according to their own design rules. Scale, material and form are no longer taken and developed from their surroundings and context. They detach themselves from the environment in which they are embedded and become more and more independent and interchangeable artefacts.

Key frames

Hence we increasingly encounter built architecture that —consciously or unconsciously— seems to aim mainly at achieving a visual impact. Since this architecture has been visualized, checked and optically optimized during the planning phase several times over, as well as virtually staged visually on websites prior to its realization, the finally built examples hardly give rise to any surprises. Although the buildings seem familiar to us from certain angles, because rendering has already anticipated our physical views, the architectures based on a series of key images prove usually less powerful in their actual spatial extensions. There is a clear lack of spatial cohesion. Comparable to the digital animation technique, in which the motion sequence is achieved by means of individual key frames which are connected by filler or intermediate images (in-betweens), a similar phenomenon is in evidence in the perception of this image-architecture. It is mainly derived from the built key images. These visual hooks —which were already drawn up by the architect before the realization, which usually made an appearance in architectural competitions or which were later created for self-promotion, marketing or

2 Gerd De Bryun, “Von der ephemeren zur pervasiven Architektur oder: Die Kraft der Bilder”, en *Gerd Die Realität des Imaginären Architektur und das digitale*, Jörg H Gleiter, Norbert Korrek and Bild Zimmermann, eds. (Weimar: 10 Internationales Bauhaus-Kolloquium, 2007), 33.

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sales purposes— form the fixed visual anchor points of the project. Even in the case of major hiccups in a project development, this will not be abandoned. Savings are made elsewhere. Thus, experiencing the buildings as a whole is usually seen as mixed blessing, a heterogeneous and disembodied encounter. The key frames, now projected into space and materially manifest, can be experienced only from very specific and predetermined points of view. They are the main visual hooks, the business card of the building, whereas less cultured intermediate and transitional fragments serve as fillers – not very meaningful in-betweens —between the visual hooks. The inspection of such buildings often turns out to be a sobering affair. Although they do create a re-recognition effect— the published pictures from the media compared to the actual structure — the buildings often do not deliver what they promise. The free access to the building adds nothing special to it. Architecture does not unleash its force in its entire spatial extent, but is reduced to individual key frames with their predetermined viewing points.

Images in general and, in particular, perspectives, show only sections and in the latter case, presuppose a position and a visual axis. An architecture that is developed and conveyed based on a series of perspective images is thus always subject to its underlying pictorial laws. Perspective provides a scale and shortens the objects depicted therein according to their rules of projection — it assesses objects and foregrounds them. In the case of an architecture that is thought of and conceived in terms of perspective, some parts are inevitably expressed in more detail and others are placed in the background; this architecture is thus no longer formulated as a homogeneous spatial whole.

Graphic sampling

Nowadays architecture is predominantly finalized digitally on the computer, developed and designed using two-dimensional instruments. The cumbersome drawing board has outlived its usefulness. High-performance drawing and graphics applications, which open up new worlds of simplified editing options for architects, have replaced it. In earlier times, different parts of a picture had to be elaborately cut out and glued together to create architectural collages. Now, the new digital tools offer a far greater freedom in visual arrangements. Detached from a physical carrier, today's digital media modules can be easily placed next to each other and connected to one another. More architectural projects are making growing use of these digital imaging possibilities. The projects are enhanced with graphic patterns and photographic textures, dipped in colour to boost their graphic brilliance by means of various tonality and saturation corrections.



[Fig. 7] Compilation - Graphing Sampling. Miscellaneous.

Nowadays, the more intense use of these tools that assist the image production and montage in the production of architecture can also be directly read in the realized designs of our built environment: buildings whose façades are extensively covered with graphic patterns and textures, or buildings that parade themselves in glaring, eye-popping colours. All these buildings share one thing: they no longer speak to us through building materials, their construction and their natural colour resonance, but appear increasingly as graphically superimposed wallpaper, detached from their support. Thus, the perception of architecture as a three-dimensional construct ends up being relegated to a single plane and reduced to mere two-dimensionally modulated surfaces.

Acrobatics

Obviously, arranging images and symbols in a plane ensures far greater design freedom than the arrangement of objects in space, bound as they are by the laws of physics. In an image, it is possible to compose constructs that need have nothing or very with little in common with reality, in other words: anything goes. Static constraints can be cancelled out in an image. Projecting, floating, gravity-defying building constructs can be created; in the image, architecture courts and kisses weightlessness.



[Fig. 8] Victor Enrich, *Defense* (2009), *Shalom 2* (2008), *Tango 2* (2010), photo montages. www.victorenrich.com
www.unframedphoto.com.

This can doubtlessly create difficulties; stating explicit design requirements with the use of image software which cannot (yet) be accomplished in reality or whose implementation proves to be economically unfeasible. And yet we are confronted with an rising number of buildings that seem to be descended from expressive und exaggerated image constructs. Buildings with seriously overdone projections, volumes seemingly weightlessly stacked onto each other — buildings whose origin invariably seems to lie in pictorial fiction and which in reality present themselves to us equally as frozen and materialised image constructs.



[Fig. 9] Antwerp Port House, Belgium, 2016, Zaha Hadid Architects, Photograph by Laurian Ghinitoiu. www.archdaily.com.

Is that real?

Digital image software allows images to be designed that can hardly be distinguished optically from photographs. Clear boundaries can no longer be drawn between a photographic image and an image that is completely computer-calculated. The transition has become increasingly blurred. This development has occurred at such a tremendous speed that crucial questions concerning the reception of such images, as well as the probing of the currently practiced image generation in architectural production, have been mostly left well behind. The fact that photography and computer rendering — two utterly different imaging methods — can result in the creation of images that are no longer distinguishable by means of optical features constitutes a milestone in the history of image production that should not be underestimated: an image derived from a fictitious 3D scene is now in competition with a photographic image taken from the physical environment. Fiction mingles increasingly with the distortion of our physical reality.

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In the sector of architectural publications, we now encounter a proliferation of visualized project designs as computer renderings that are hardly distinguishable from the photographs of actually realized buildings. These digitally constructed images are powerful in so far as they allow the designers to reproduce their idealized visions as apparent (f)actual reality, far removed from “interfering material constraints and without having to await the completion of the building. With escalating competition in magazines and on Internet platforms to ensnare our gift of attention through evermore spectacular, staged images, there will come a point in time (always assuming that this trend will continue) when the photographic image of a constructed reality – on the level of visual staging – can no longer keep up with the artificially staged image. Even today it is possible to observe how architectural photography makes use of a rising number of individual image characteristics from computerized renderings. In a number of published photographs, for example, cleaned-up celestial spheres dance over the photographed buildings, in analogy to the lighting dome common in computer renderings, which can illuminate a scene without any atmospheric interference, using artificial light calculation methods.



[Fig. 10] Left: Computer Rendering, Architectural Exteriors Vol. 12 / Right: Galaxy Soho, Beijing, 2012, Zaha Hadid Architects, Photograph by Iwan Baan. Rendering: www.evermotion.org. Photograph: www.archdaily.com.

Thus a built architecture that orients itself primarily towards its visual impact, captured in photographs, needs to be scrutinized more closely in this context. An architecture that seeks to be perceived primarily by means of its image, and is increasingly discarding its functional, spatial and social functions, no longer necessarily needs to be built. It might be more honest if it kept on existing as image only, thus saving important resources.

Copy and paste

The dissecting, extracting and recycling of content is now shaping many aspects of our digital culture. The growing availability of digital content over the Internet and the increasing ease of using desktop programs with these contents has resulted in substantial content recycling. Fragments from texts, music, pictures or other graphic works as well as entire sections are now conveniently extracted and rearranged. “Copy and paste” as a contemporary cultural technique has also taken root in architecture and so left its mark in the area of design process. This is most notably the case with visually based design approaches practiced by architects, who “specialize” in viewing, recording and incorporating fragments deemed visually stimulating. There used to be mostly sketches and plans on walls – nowadays they are covered with extensive wall collages – a potpourri of photographs and pictures from books, magazines and the Internet. A patchwork of reference images and inspirational pictures which have been uncoupled from their original sources to be reassembled and connected as design components.

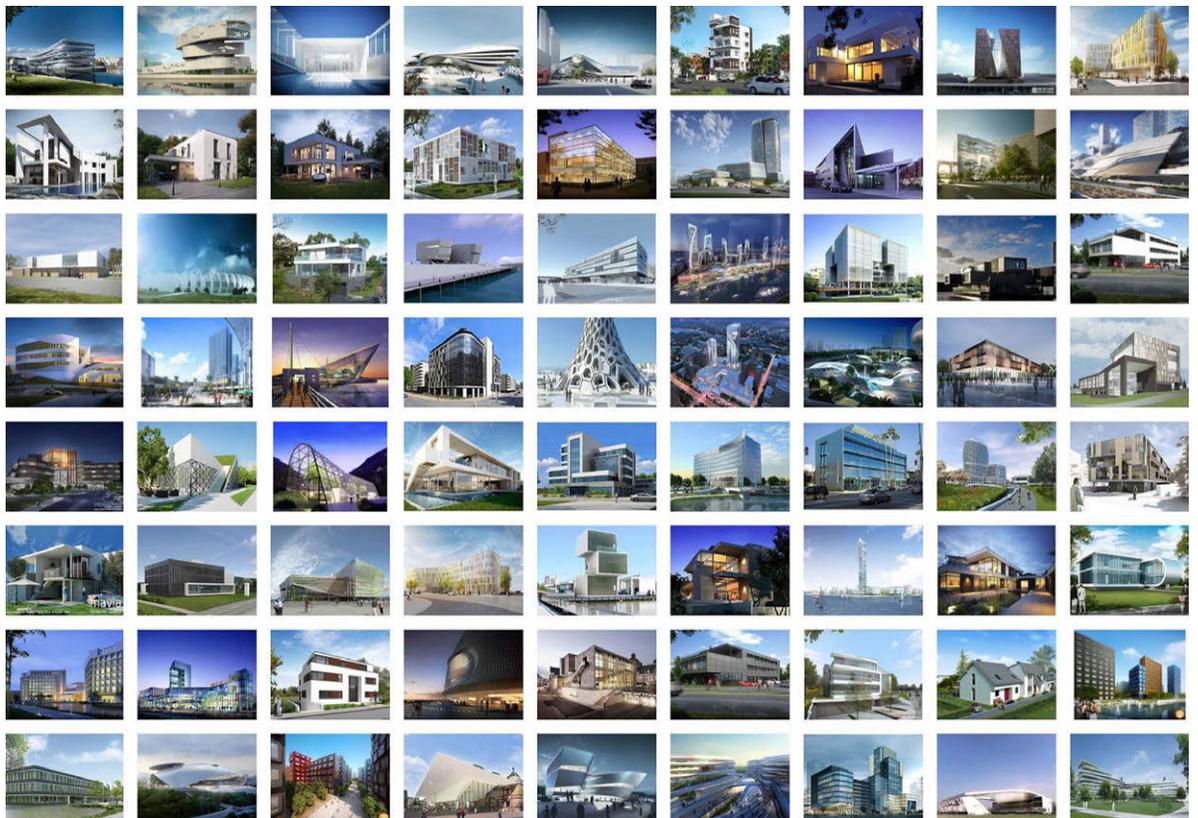


[Fig. 11] Architecture Office – Sampling. Photograph by the author.

The Internet as a world-wide distributor of images and as source of inspiration also gives rise to a more somber and sobering tendency: concurrently and in different locations all over the world, architects are incorporating the same trends, stylistic features and architectural characteristics into their ongoing designs. It is not surprising, therefore, that for the past decade, built designs are becoming increasingly alike. They seem to display very little interest in regional peculiarities and have become increasingly interchangeable – wherever they can be found, in Seoul, Berlin, Brussels or Zurich.

Image stereotypes

This global tendency of an increasingly similar and interchangeable architecture is evident not only in realized buildings, but already in the imagery and visual vocabulary of visualized project designs, which are now increasingly being communicated by means of computer renderings.



[Fig. 12] Compilation – Contemporary architectural visualizations. Miscellaneous.

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As a matter of fact, the aesthetic of the imagery is basically handed over to the computer or the chosen render engine: the design is modeled in a 3D program, textures and light sources are applied to it and finally it is rendered into an image by means of a selected camera position. The computer or the rendering machine independently generates an image. The images thus calculated are well nigh indistinguishable from each other as far as their image aesthetics are concerned. This also translates into the rather uniform and stereotypical architectural visualizations of our time. And should there be any, these —to put it bluntly— can be traced back to the type of software used or to the computational model of the render engine applied.

What next?

We are experiencing profound changes and will be confronted with even more fundamental upheavals in the areas of technology, society and ecology. Environmental factors such as global warming, climate change and limited natural resources all lead us to subject our current lifestyle to close scrutiny. Demographic factors like the global expansion of human population, its structure and migration



[Fig. 13] Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1490-1510, Museo del Prado, Madrid. www.wikiart.org.

patterns, will manifest themselves in ways that are increasingly difficult to anticipate. The ongoing evolution of information technology that already affects many areas of our lives will in future probably define our lives in an even more pervasive manner. Whether we like it or not: these and certainly more factors that could be listed will decide how we will live, work and move on this planet — they also thus also include basic issues of architecture.

One thing seems certain: there will be no easy answers or tried and tested solutions to many of the challenges to be faced. Creativity, inventiveness und mental agility will be in high demand especially among the current and future generations of students and trainees. Acquiring specialist training and incorporating information technologies into the respective work place is of considerable importance. Yet this in itself will not suffice to solve tomorrow's problems. Although digital platforms offer a plethora of instantly accessible bits of information and knowledge for every conceivable subject, they cannot provide viable "best practice" recipes for future challenges. With that in mind, it is crucial for the current focus of knowledge acquisition to move towards a connecting of knowledge. This involves the ability to relate information or knowledge blocks, to (re)arrange them and place them into new contexts — and in this way, be able to articulate unconventional solutions when facing new challenges. In particular, this refers to experimental creativity techniques that are hardly taught in university contexts. Creativity is nurtured by a mentally agile, playful, sometimes near naive approach. This mental act, not always logical, mostly driven by intuition, is also of paramount importance for our continued existence because —in an environment characterized by rationally operating computers and machines— it is this non-rational and elusive tactic that will offer and secure a safe and irreplaceable place for us humans in future.

The architecture in our latitude nowadays has a problem in terms of its contents. In a time characterized by substantial changes, it continues to promote the aestheticization of buildings, to care about the “beautiful” building and hide behind formal questions and built images. If today’s architect again wants to play an active role and a valuable part within the current radical upheavals, he would do well to get off the catwalk of vanities and to face the more fundamental questions of content: to search for scenarios, to articulate content, formulate utopias and thus to create hypothetical exemplars for our changing society. The architect seems to be predestined for it: through his sketches, plans or images, he always conveys fictitious content — from the idea for a work until its realization.

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Philipp Schaerer is a visual artist and architect. After graduating from the EPFL in 2000, he worked from 2000-06 as an architect and knowledge manager for Herzog & de Meuron. Until 2008, he was responsible for the Postgraduate Studies in CAAD at the Chair of Prof. Dr. Ludger Hovestadt at the ETHZ. Since 2008, he has been a lecturer at several universities and, from 2014, a visiting professor at the EPFL. His work has been widely published and exhibited and is represented in several public and private collections —among others in the collection of the MoMA; the ZKM Center for Art and Media Technology; the Canadian Center for Architecture; and the Fotomuseum Winterthur. www.philippschaerer.ch / www.constructingtheview.org. info@philippschaerer.ch

Philipp Schaerer es artista visual y arquitecto. Después de graduarse en la EPFL en 2000, trabajó de 2000 a 2006 como arquitecto y gestor de conocimientos para Herzog & de Meuron. Hasta 2008, fue responsable de los Estudios de Posgrado en CAAD en la Cátedra del Prof. Dr. Ludger Hovestadt en la ETHZ. Desde 2008, ha sido profesor en varias universidades y, a partir de 2014, profesor visitante en la EPFL. Su trabajo ha sido ampliamente publicado y exhibido y está representado en varias colecciones públicas y privadas —entre otras en la colección del MoMA; el ZKM Center for Art and Media Technology; el Centro Canadiense de Arquitectura; y el Fotomuseum Winterthur. www.philippschaerer.ch / www.constructingtheview.org. info@philippschaerer.ch