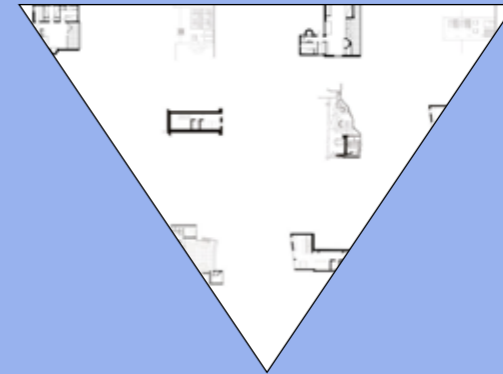




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VISUAL ARCHITECTURE



03



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Syllabus
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Syllabus presents experiences and research made inside formative courses at different levels: bachelor, master, doctorate. The goal is to offer these results, provisional and incomplete as they can be, to the scientific community, enhancing dialogues and exchanges.

All contributions are evaluated by the scientific board with a review process.

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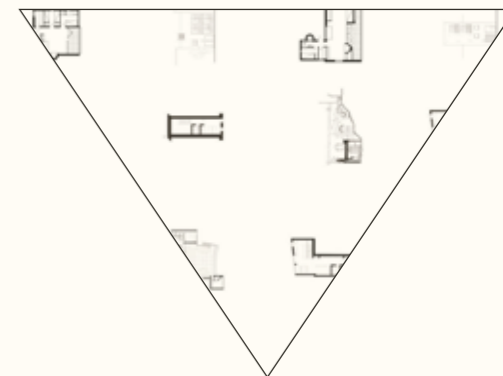
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03

CONTENTS

INDEX

Alessandro Rocca _ The Image, between Words and Things	008
Andrea Gritti _ Architectural Design as a Theoretical Practice	012
Stamatina Kousidi _ Placing Design in Architectural Research	018

VISUAL ESSAYS

Fuat Arabaci _ Questioning at Every Step of Architectural Research	022
Beatrice Azzola _ On Rules and Tools, in Architectural Design Research	034
Nicola Campri _ Nazca Lines	044
Chiara Caravello _ Five Acts, of Research in Architectural Design	058
Michela Caserini _ Approaching drawing driven research	070
Jiarui Cui _ Typological Analysis	082
Majdulin Elmansuri _ The Thin Table, a research by Design	096
Aya Glida _ Design and research are inseparable	108
Jin Lin _ Defining, Tracing, Theorizing	120
Yidan Liu _ Human Space	132
Valentina Noce _ Digital Deconstruction of the Body	144
Filippo Oppimitti _ 13 Tools for Architectural Research	156
Michele Porcelluzzi _ Synopsis: on Comparison and Seriality	172
Francesca Ripamonti _ Space as Embodied Practice	186
Stefano Sartorio _ In search of the Design, in Architectural Design Research	198
Arianna Scaioli _ Framing: an Explorative Approach	210
Yona Schreyer _ Re Collection. Design Driven Research	222
Jiajia Wei _ Design Research Architecture	234

THE IMAGE, BETWEEN WORDS AND THINGS

Alessandro Rocca

8

In the Architectural Research Agenda seminar we have given some ideas, references, coordinates with respect to the question of doing research in architectural design. This was a difficult task in front of a large class of doctoral students, some thirty or so, who each have a different topic, a different interest, a different background and who are brought together only for a relatively short time in group work. For this reason, the lessons held by professors Andrea Gritti, Stamatina Kousidi, and me had the character of a test, a survey, a sampling of possible situations and research. One of the main issues that we tackled across the board touching the various

topics was that of the communication of an architectural thought within a cultural and technical framework in which the drawing, the images, the graphic composition are not auxiliary elements but substantial and foundations of the practice of architectural design. Since our teaching is therefore aimed at young architects, we have tried to solicit them at the beginning of their doctoral career, in a phase in which their cultural attitude must in some way expand, move away from the original starting focus, which is on the project, to include other modes of learning and expression. The first of these other modalities is of course writing, towards which architects

historically have a creative, original, and interesting approach but also not always and not easily aligned with the recognized and recognizable, homologated characteristics of scientific research. Therefore, starting from this specific anomaly, or peculiarity, of the architectural culture, we decided to ask the doctoral students to summarize some of the contents of the lessons that they considered closest to their interests through a visual essay. In this way we thought that a stable link could be opened between the culture of architects, essentially based on drawing, on the form, on the figure and on the composition, and the need to communicate

Visual Architecture

9

complex concepts by addressing critical and theoretical issues. The bet was to deal with these themes essentially through visual representation, converting them into materials organically inserted in the elaboration of architectural thought.

We therefore proposed to the PhD students to create, with the visual essay, a critical summary of the topics covered in the lessons of the course, a personal reworking of what they had heard and what we had discussed in the seminar meetings.

The first problem for us teachers was to define what a visual essay was and therefore what indications to give to doctoral students, how to direct their work. We started from obvious considerations, namely from the desire to favor images over texts and therefore to overturn the dimensional relationship, and of content and centrality of the message, between images and text. In our idea, this meant going back to thinking about the basic tools of the project, such as drawn tables, sections, elevations, and plans, and replacing them with other images that had a similar capacity to carry out a discourse on architecture. We have therefore stimulated an analogical process

by asking to imagine the pages of the visual essay as if they were project tables, working on the gap that separates the denotative and descriptive aspect of the technical drawing and the discursive one of the essays for images.

Therefore, the formal basis of the essay had to refer, or at least it was logical that it refers, to the layout of the technical drawing. At the same time, when the doctoral students set to work composing their pages, a first immediate effect was the evidence that an architectural thought could be articulated by resorting to non-architectural images which nevertheless managed to represent ideas, attitudes with great clarity, reasoning.

In this exercise, a hybrid reflection space has been freed up which holds together some fundamental components of the architectural imagination: keywords, some synthetic concepts, slogans, images, and architectural and bibliographic references. The results are not all equal care and effectiveness, but I believe that the educational objective has been achieved, i.e., that a way of thinking has been illuminated which is normally not very accessible and

communicable and that therefore intuitions and reflections have become operational which often remain hidden, hidden from the conscience of the author.

In the memory of a labyrinthine book that explored, glorified, and deconstructed the literary space, we tried, in a much more modest and instrumental way, to create a possible architectural space where the various components of the disciplinary culture could coexist, interfere and strengthen in a framework of proposals original, personal and freely and autonomously expressed.

The template of the visual essay was therefore our Aladdin's lamp, the formula which, activated in the dark, produced a particular luminescence that allows us to glimpse suggestive, and still mysterious, research paths.

In this regard, the reference is to the concept of Tacit Knowledge, i.e., to an unexpressed, and sometimes unconscious, knowledge that seems particularly present in the ways in which architectural knowledge and design practice develop. Starting from the famous text by Michael Polanyi², Tacit Knowledge has recently been revived by the ethnographic approach to

architectural studies, as in Albená Yaneva's essay on the study of Rem Koolhaas³, and has become the subject of a complex research, currently ongoing, conducted in partnership by ten European universities, including the Politecnico di Milano⁴.

Analytical recursiveness

In his book dedicated to the relationship between words and things⁵, Michel Foucault opened his survey of knowledge by vivisectioning Las Meninas, the painting by Diego Velázquez, which he uses as a device capable of unhinging the relationship between language and reality thanks to the power of image. Beyond the many implications of Foucault's discourse, it remains clear how the image becomes a primary element, infinitely analyzable but not decomposable, a prime number capable of assuming a myriad of different meanings, depending on the position in which it is placed, but also capable of always and in any case possessing its own undeniable and irrepressible individuality. The image, indeed, appears, as a synthetic element necessary to develop architectural creativity and to question the relationship between thought and form,

between abstraction and construction⁶. Recently, discussing Stephen Bates' projects⁷, Stefano Guidarini underlined the total lack of abstraction as their identifying trait. The affirmation is definitive, and could be refuted, but it strongly captures an interesting point, namely how the (alleged) lack of abstraction generates an architecture pervaded by a feeling that approaches magical realism, producing images that appear to manifest themselves by force own, hiding the intentional process usually so evident in the design process. This hypothetical retreat of the formal will therefore constitute a critical point on the reflection around the logical construction of the architectural project. Stephen Bates did not explain why the first term of the title was precisely "Figures", but in that term lurks a delicate theoretical node that invests precisely the relationship between form and image. Other comments, in the discussion sparked by the lecture, highlighted the breadth of references present in the architecture of Sergison Bates, evidently based on a constant re-reading of elements acquired from architectural culture, but also the difficulty of isolating them, of tracing the etiology of

their architectures. The discussants surrender to the compactness of an architecture that explicitly does not want to invent anything new, but which produces, by rewriting known elements, a rigorous, original, and complex architecture, resistant to copying and repetition.

At the end of the course, having examined, discussed, and appreciated the works produced by the PhD students, we believe that the collection of these visual essays can constitute a useful contribution to research in architectural design, arousing and reinterpreting from personal angles some themes identified in the lessons of the ARA course. The alphabetical alignment of the essays produces an alternation of differences and repetitions thanks to the recurrence of some themes, words, images, which have most attracted the attention of young researchers. This collective process therefore finds its strength in the recurrence, in going repeatedly on the same ideas, words and images, contextualizing them in a framework of hybrid references which is partly formed by the contents of the course and partly due to the specific training of the

10

author. The procession, the theory, of the contributions therefore outlines a journey that has a circular dominant, which passes and repasses in the same places, topoi but which, like the water of the river flowing in the same place, is never the same, it is always new and bearer, within the shared themes, of an original contribution.

FOOTNOTES

1. Blanchot, Maurice. *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
2. Polanyi, Michael. *The Tacit Dimension*. New York: Doubleday, 1966
3. Yaneva, Albená. *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: An Ethnography of Design*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2009.
4. <https://tacit-knowledge-architecture.com/>, access on May 19, 2023.
5. Foucault, Michel. *Les Mots et les Choses : Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.
6. Rocca, Alessandro. *Totem and taboo in architectural imagination*. Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2022.
7. Bates, Stephen. *Sergison Bates, Figures, Doors and Passages*. Lecture at the Politecnico di Milano, on May 18, 2023.