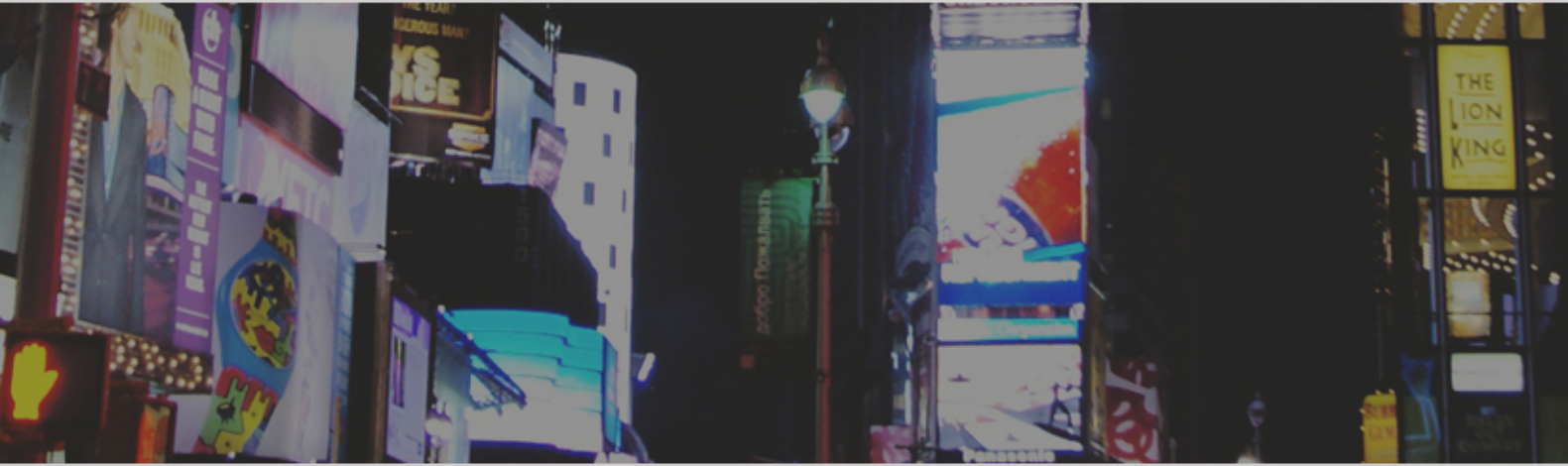# AMPS Proceedings Series 12

Conference:

CRITICAL PRACTICE
in an AGE of COMPLEXITY

An Interdisciplinary Critique of the Built Environment

AMPS CONFERENCE 12

CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY – An Interdisciplinary Critique of the Built Environment

AMPS, Architecture_MPS; University of Arizona
22—23 February, 2018

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INTRODUCTION

Every generation of architects, urban designers, planners and artists engaged with the built environment face a set of seemingly intractable and isolated problems particular to their time. Mid 19th Century city planners addressed questions of public health while architects engaged in a 'battle of the styles'. Early 20th century architects argued for a 'contemporary style' while architects / urban designers created visions of cities in the sky. By the 1970s ecological forerunners argued for a future of sustainable living while post-modernists looked to the past for aesthetics. Today, Donald Trump promises investment in infrastructure while simultaneously relaxing environmental regulations and targets. China continues to urbanize and pollute while industrial cities in the West continue to decline and 'go green'. Internationally, global cities of commerce can be surrounded by slums and in many cities housing is unaffordable as a place of living while it functions as a major form of capital investment. This all happens against a backdrop of the arts and cultural industries seen as economic motors, conflicting media representations of urbanization, and the emergence of new medias altering the experience and forms of reporting on life in cities. To design and understand the built environment in the middle of this complexity and contradiction requires reflection and vision. It also requires critique and multiple practices.

The publication, and the conference which it documents, were organized to create a space for critical engagement with this scenario and facilitate the cross disciplinary approach it obliges. It was organised by the research organisation AMPS, its academic journal Architecture_MPS, and the University of Arizona.

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CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY – An Interdisciplinary Critique of the Built Environment

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THE PROJECT IS PRESENT: MINIMAL ART AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF A NONREPRESENTATIVE ARCHITECTURAL MEDIUM

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INTRODUCTION

Political clash is entailed in every architectural project as the opposition between the designer's normative role with regard to future occupants and the attempt of these latter to fulfill their specific needs. Nevertheless the present paper argues that this gap cannot be bridged through the engagement of affected subjects during project conception, because their needs, especially in the case of complex projects, are divergent and contingent: they cannot be met on paper but only in situation. Therefore future occupants' contribution to the definition of the project must be promoted directly during its situated fruition in terms of the inventive uses they are allowed to enact.

Architects must adopt new tools addressing the realm of sensation rather than representation if they want to consider the project as defined through situated fruition rather than during its abstract conception. Indeed representation is information prepackaged by the architect who expresses his particular viewpoint in a transposed moment with respect to the scenario he addresses, thus missing both the contingent and plural characters of fruition, which are instead met by sensation, i.e. raw physical stimuli expressing no single viewpoint and occurring alongside the event which physically stimulates the occupants.

The nature and usability of such tools addressing sensation is the research focus of this paper: which media can represent, or better present, the sensory dimension where uses arise? This question is better answered in the artistic domain, especially in Minimal Art. Robert Irwin provides us with a model describing the production of representations from sensation which will be used for understanding how to invert the process in order to address sensation directly. Nevertheless the adoption of concepts derived from artistic practices in the architectural field requires a disciplinary adaptation which will be discussed in the conclusion.

Dealing with Occupancy through Representation

Architects make decisions from their single perspective and in a transposed moment with respect to the fruition of the project, so that future requirements are identified once and for all with regard to a fictional subject modeled by the architect. On the contrary, occupancy concerns specific subjects engaged with the project here and now. This gap can lead to unfitting occupancy practices, especially in the case of complex projects where preordained requirements can hardly be defined because of the large scale and long term involving a plethora of present and future subjects.

Representative tools adopted in the architectural field are not able to deal with specific and situated occupants. Indeed through representation the architect freezes flowing reality into persisting states, thus missing the situated character of fruition, and moreover he selects those frozen states as desired

by himself, thus missing its plural character too. Even when the architect cooperates with stakeholders in the framework of participatory practices, decisions take into account only present stakeholders and their abstract rather than situated perspective. The opposition is not between architects and occupants, but between reality and its representation.

Which tools can address reality if representation is not a viable solution?

The answer to this question must follow a deep inquiry into the nature of reality before it is represented and the way an idea of reality as such redefines the field of intervention for architecture.

The Architectural Return to the Real: a Definition

Representation deforms reality as perceived from a subjective viewpoint frozen in time. But what is reality before it is perceived?

Traditionally, reality before perception is considered a sort of darkness from where things can be rescued by the consciousness of a subject working as a beam of light. Whether the beam is radiated by an absolute reason as stated by Idealism or whether it is powered by the anchoring of the subject in the world as stated by Phenomenology, light is always on the side of consciousness. Actually, these theories must be reversed, because consciousness does not work as a beam of light, but rather as a black screen impressed by a light which is outside and is reality itself.[1] The function of the black screen is to reduce the blinding light stimulating perceptual organs into meaningful information for the subject. Meaningfulness is therefore subjective and consists in the identification of objects as targets for subject's action and in the identification of persisting states the subject desires for those objects and wants to achieve through the action. Instead reality before perception, as radiating light, is a chemical-physical continuum which cannot be divided into objects and which cannot be partially affected, so that it lacks any inherent request for action, the determination of which is left to subjects.

In short, reality before perception is flowing-matter received as sensation by the subject, who later splits it into objects and persisting states through representation in order to guide his action.

What would a return to the real mean for architecture?

First of all, since reality at the interface with occupants is sensation, it would mean the foundation of an aesthetic regime of architecture. From an operative point of view, the project would no longer concern the composition of objects, but the distribution of chemical-physical events, potentially stimulating a subject occupying a location in the environment. Moreover, while the composition of objects is confined to objects themselves, the chemical-physical distribution engages all the external factors, even the ones out of the control of the architect. Finally, the distribution is influenced by external factors in its turn, so that it is continuously regenerated in terms of a qualitative transformation of the whole. On the contrary, objects are influenced as objects by external factors only during their conception, on the basis of the aspects the architect considers significant for the project, but then they persist unvaried during their lifespan.

TOWARDS A NONREPRESENTATIVE MEDIUM

What kind of tools can address this new architectural field of intervention?

Architectural tools based on representation are unable to work with the project in terms of chemical-physical distribution because they deal with a version of reality already processed into information depending on designer's objectives.

What are the alternatives to representation and its mediated relationship with reality?

Rancière identifies three kinds of relation between reality and the sign referring to it: the ethic, the mimetic and the aesthetic regimes.[2]

These different regimes propose reality more or less processed towards information. As information is processed, reality is substituted by increasingly fictional reproductions, so that the way these fictions refer to the original must be agreed upon in stricter and stricter ways to be comprehensible in the context of a community.

The ethic regime substitutes reality with meanings it is supposed to automatically elicit in the context of narrow cultural or disciplinary groups on the basis of conventions. The sign carrying these meanings refers to a connoted version of reality and it does not recall its observable characteristics. Instead the mimetic regime, which is actually the representative one adopted in architecture, substitutes reality with objects which are recognized in the context of broader communities on the basis of members' previous experiences with their properties. The sign conveying objects refers to a denoted version of reality the properties of which are recalled by the properties of the sign. Finally, in the aesthetic regime the sign does not substitute reality, it rather partakes in it as producer of stimuli. It is therefore accessed raw by the subject who can subsequently process it on his own: this is the reason why the aesthetic access to reality is considered private.

The aesthetic regime constitutes the most suitable condition for a medium intended as operative tool for an architectural return to the real. The medium as producer of stimuli is included in the continuum and it is therefore affected by the same issues related to the project as chemical-physical distribution, especially in relation to its dependence on external factors and to its continuous regeneration. This dependence of the aesthetic medium on the environment and vice versa is what makes it differ from the representative one. Indeed while the latter concerns communication of information existing only as a mental fact, the former concerns the production of chemical-physical events having consequences on the environment where it is displayed.

Such a kind of medium has never been adopted in the architectural practice, but Minimal Art can provide many examples.

The Representative Concern in Minimal Art

Minimalist artists shared the concern about the relationship between representation and reality. Robert Irwin unequivocally formalized it into a model explaining how representations are produced starting from stimulation.[3] Representations are arrangements of meaningless perceptions into structures of intelligibility. To Irwin, the concern is that these structures are established in advance on a cultural or disciplinary basis and acquired by the subject so that they become unconscious lenses mediating between the subject and reality: "we do not begin at the beginning, or in an empirical no-where. Instead, we always begin somewhere *in the middle of everything.*"[4]

He also answers a question that could arise when the mimetic regime of the sign, which is convincing in the way it refers to reality, is claimed to be a construction: why is the observer unaware of its abstractness? To Irwin the answer lies in the fact that abstractions are compounded, i.e. they are developed and taught over a so long period of time and through so imperceptible steps that they become second nature for the observer.[5] The conclusion is that the only thing which is real, and as such must be the subject matter of art, is perception before any operation of abstraction.

Irwin's model is a sequence of abstraction levels which parallels Rancière's categories in the way these levels refer to reality according to rules which become stricter and stricter as they are shared in the context of increasingly specialized cultural or disciplinary groups: "it is indeed the fact of the contextual nature of experience which will allow for the further compounding of the abstraction."[6]

To Irwin the purpose of art is to reverse the abstraction process described by the model, that is to pass from what has been previously defined the mimetic regime to the aesthetic one.

From Theory to Practice: Presence of Modalities and Presence as Difference

From an operative point of view, the first step taken by Minimal Art towards an aesthetic regime of the medium in general and painting in particular is to cross the limits of the frame separating the side where the observer stands from an imaginary beyond. The content of the painting is a pure mental fact or representation when it is beyond the frame, because it has no chemical-physical consequences on the other side. The content must rather cross the frame and become present in the space of the observer to affect it in an aesthetic way. In Minimal Art this crossing occurred by degrees.

At the beginning, the support is emphasized, because it is the only thing which is actually present in the environment of the observer. The content is consequently arranged as the geometrical subdivision of the support, in order to be considered part of it and therefore present in the environment in its turn. Of course the classic rectangular form of the support offers limited possibilities of subdivision, and even if supports characterized by different shapes can be adopted, at the end the exploration of the single plane is exhausted and has to give way to the exploration of the three dimensions.[7]

Nevertheless three-dimensionality does not mean sculpture: while sculpture represents something else through a correspondence of properties, this new medium stands for itself as producer of stimuli. It achieves this goal through wholeness, singleness and indivisibility, which prevent the identification of parts and their possible representative and meaningful relationships.[8]

But what is the usefulness of media which are present rather than representative?

First of all, they reproduce experience in terms of modalities, or at least they offer the illusion of these modalities.[9] For instance, when Tony Smith wants to convey his experience of a car ride taken at night on an unfinished turnpike, he claims that there is no way to frame it and that every painting would result too pictorial: the only way to understand it is to experience it. The solution is to reproduce the modalities of its experience, such as "the constant onrush of the road, the simultaneous recession of new reaches of dark pavement illumined by the onrushing headlights, the sense of the turnpike itself as something enormous, abandoned, derelict."[10]

Secondly, the subject matter of such media can be the difference they produce in the site due to the fact that they are absorbed in the chemical-physical continuum. Indeed they influence, and are influenced by, the external factors of environment, and difference is a measure of this influence. More exactly, since in the continuum no parts are recognizable, the medium cannot even be distinguished from the environment, it cannot be accessed as something present, but as difference as such. From this perspective, difference is not only a measure of the effects, but the detector of one thing which is not perceivable as an object. On this topic, Light and Space current of minimalism is a model in the way it uses transparent prisms which are mainly noticed as light effects.

CONCLUSION: THE ADOPTION OF NONREPRESENTATIVE PRACTICES IN ARCHITECTURE

Minimal Art addresses the same architectural concern of a return to the real. In particular, it provides some operative ideas to deal with reality as flowing-matter, first of all in relation to the fact that the work of art is extended to the environment and secondly in relation to the fact that it is continuously regenerated. The result is that the object disappears, and the only thing which can be observed is the difference produced in the environment and experienced in terms of modalities. But the adoption of these artistic practices in the architectural field raises some methodological questions.

What is the relationship between the difference a medium produces in the environment where it is displayed and the difference the project presented by the medium produces in the environment where it is deployed?

The relationship is not direct but based on analogy. By substituting the elements, i.e. the medium with the project and the laboratory with the site, only the properties emerging as relationships between the elements and not depending on single elements can be saved. Therefore the design focus should be the difference induced in the environment as far as these emerging properties are concerned, because these are the values aesthetically presented by the medium and also present in the project.

Moreover, these values are freely discovered by occupants independently of architect's intentions because of the private character of the aesthetic regime. However the architect must adopt some objectives to orient his design process. Which objectives can be pursued by the architect if the project must be defined in its situated fruition by the occupant?

The objective would exactly be the construction of necessary conditions for an active engagement of occupants. The premise is that some conditions of perception are more suitable than others for the processing of individual meanings and requirements based on the situation. In particular, more indistinct and long-lasting the perception, more creative and engaging its processing for the occupant.

To Shklovsky "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."[11]

In a similar way, the purpose of an aesthetic regime of architecture is not to design the way an environment must be known and consistently used, but the conditions for a challenging perception which takes time because of the active engagement of subjects in its processing into their individual knowledge and ends. The result is the same: perception becomes an aesthetic end in itself.

The project based on such a practice is present in two ways. The first one is related to its presence during the design process through the aesthetic regime of the medium, while the second one is related to the fact that during occupancy it is always able to addresses contingency since its uses are enacted in situation: the gap between conception and fruition as well as between representation and reality is bridged.

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[3] Robert Irwin, "Notes Toward a Model," in *Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, ed. Matthew Simms (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017), 169.

[4] Ibid., 167.

[5] Ibid., 168.

[6] Ibid., 173.

[7] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 149.

[8] Ibid., 150.

[9] Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 144.

[10] Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 159.

[11] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 277.

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