

Poetry and Material Space

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The potential for interplay between differing but related fields such as architecture and poetry, provides us with a means for experiencing new relational combinations similar to the effects of the imagery of the surreal poets. These poets have the ability to create startling images through the unanticipated combinations of words, providing us with the chance to relish in the exquisite pleasure of their exceptional amalgamations. Poetry, especially the poetry of the surrealists, acts as a medium for us to escape from the physical world for a short time into the world of the dream and to delight in its wonder. The world of the dream colors our feelings of the material world. The effect is cyclical and for the artist/architect it is transformative. Transformations of formal, structural and material means provide again occasions of wonder and, perhaps joy. This paper describes the thesis and resulting work for a graduate level course in architectural representation which found the interplay between architecture and poetry.

"The poets have learned how to see."¹

Both Poetry and Architecture have the power to emotionally and surprisingly affect us. Poetry has the power to change perceptions, create startling images and reveal hidden creases. Poetry connects bodily rhythms with sonorous pleasure, existential insight and imaginative delight. Architecture further connects bodily movement in space, physical gravity and material form. Both reveal in unexpected ways, how the world touches us².

The course sought to find connections between poetry and architecture through

language, imagery, structure, and making. It investigated the relationships between word and image, rhythm and structure, material and space, material-space, and space through time, as potential prompts of architecture and representation.

The inhabitation of the words, images and the spaces of selected poems were studied through drawing, recording, constructing and making as simultaneous endeavors. These explorative investigations were made in appropriate media and materials. Emphasis was given to translations into spatial and material constructions towards elements of architecture. The students gained experience with the potential for the interplay between differing but related fields. Additionally, they gained an understanding of the compositional potential between rhythmic structure and figurative image, and the inherent latency of formal and material translations into sequences of material/space and time/space studies. Responsive interactions between the instructor and students, students and students, students and their work, were achieved. While providing a framework and a series of starting prompts (assignments), the development and transformation of these initial conditions into unexpected directions was the aim, as opposed to the simple performance of assignments. The course was 'alive' in this respect.

Word and Image

Combinations of words and their startling images shake us up from an anesthetized life commonly experienced through the recognitions of things.

. . . *lead balls* . . .

. . . *concrete balloons* . . .

. . . *frothy space* . . .

. . . *adjusting foundations* . . .

These startling images cause us to slow down and consider things anew, freshly, *to see* instead of *to recognize*. Art is a knowledge of things through sight instead of recognition, it has the power to return sensation to an anesthetized life³. This can be taken in two directions. One direction is such that we should learn to see things in an unbiased way, (without rational mediation) into the essence of things, in the manner of Cezanne. This comes into play (tension) when working with the potentials and constraints of materials. At the moment though, the direction is into the internalized world of the dream as manifested through the surrealists unusual combinations of words. This has the potential to let us see new thoughts and reflections; and connect these back to the world. Andre Breton refers to this as *prime matter*, as the pure potential of the subconscious dream: "The whole point

for Surrealism was to convince ourselves that we had got our hands on the *prime matter* in the alchemical sense of language" Poetry, especially the poetry of the surreal poets, acts as a medium for us to escape from the physical world for a short time into the world of the dream and to delight in its wonder.

Students were encouraged to explore the imagery of the poems through drawings made by hand. These sketches and drawings were a search for the forms of the imagery in relation to ones perception of reality. The imagery was imagined and brought into the physicality of the drawings for the potential responsiveness of the artist/architects. Their responses to the drawings allowed the drawings to take on their own life, and potentially instigated other drawings and forms.

The value of the handdrawn and the handmade was preferred over digital means because it was primary to developing skills which inherently reveal the indescribable spirit of the artist-maker. It is intimate in this sense and also in the sense that it allows one to be spontaneously or deliberately present in their work. The development of the drawings were encouraged as a performative activity practiced through time. The work made by the hand is analogous to the tenderness present in an informal photograph which makes perceptible the spirit of the person, in all of their charms and flaws; as opposed to the posed portrait which offers a mask⁴. Digital media, at present, offers a mask.

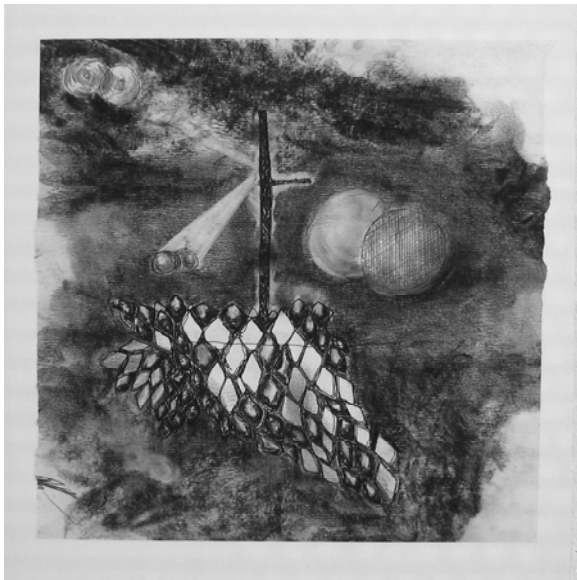


Fig. 1-2. Drawings exploring imagery of the poem

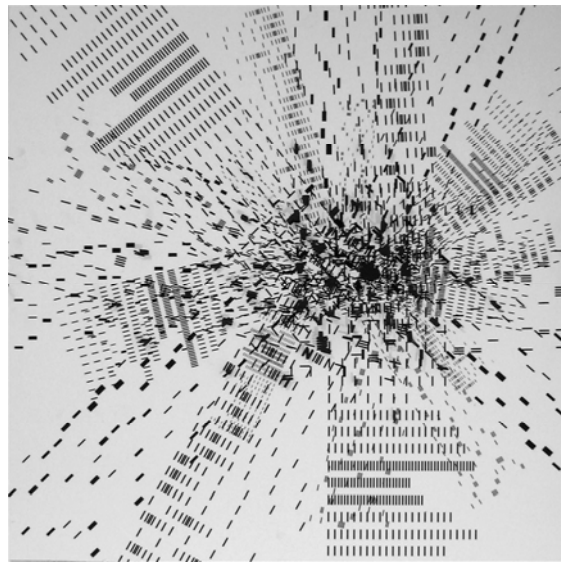


Fig. 3. Rhythmic structure study



Fig. 4. Material and space study

Rhythm and Structure

Sound structures were studied through both visual and spoken means. The sound structure studies brought together the senses of vision, hearing and the bodily rhythm of breathing. The students' readings of their selected poems and speaking the poems were part of a simultaneous visual marking of the sounds of the words, some being hard and quick, others being soft and luxuriant. Hearing the poem read, even performed by the poet while looking at the poem as it was written and spatially presented by the poet gave the students surprising insight into the relationships between the written word, the spoken/performed word and rhythmic structures. The work of poet Carolyn Bergval was especially fruitful in this way. Some of the students became especially sensitive to rhythmic structures and focused on the imagery of sound and the time sequencing of rhythm through their work.

Material and Space

The world of the dream colors our feelings of the material world. The constraints of the material world refine the dream, the potential of materials can inform new dreams. The influences of the dream needs to be brought into the physical realm of matter and material in order to fulfill itself. The direction of flow is not like the flow of a streams current, it is to ebb and flow like the tide.

Artists are different than other people because of the way they deal with materials. Artists and craftsmen have a very sensitive way of working with materials. They are more in tuned with the local circumstances of material. Wood has knots and grain, which affects what can be done with it. To work *with* materials is to see the potentials contained within them. It is not by a willful act imposed from above but by a symbiotic interaction with the process of development.

At one level, designers will force ideas into form, or impose a form around an idea, and ignore the variables and circumstances of

material, for example, grain, or brittleness; or they might ignore the production process, the craft of making. Too often, materials are subservient to the designers wishes or are selected as a pallet and applied. There is often a separation between structure and form; form becomes confused with shape. Shape is the external appearance of something whereas form is a result of an internal structure, material process or relationship. To re-establish the connection between form and structure turns form into a verb, *to form*. Material and form are dependant on, or conditional to physical forces such as gravity, wind, light, water. As such, if the material is thoughtfully set in relation, a poetic understanding or insightful knowledge –a knowledge of connections– is possible. The students were challenged to work in this way.

If materials are considered a *medium*, all of a sudden a wealth of possibilities and insightful illuminations emerge. The widely used term, *Material Imagination*, then has potential to inform and enlighten ourselves, and architecture becomes an act of imagination⁵. Architecture unfolds itself. The 'material as medium' process engages the mind and imagination through internal and external conversations, pragmatics and memories. It presents both humble and confident positions. Humbleness, in the sense that one's will is removed. Confidence, in the sense of learning to trust oneself that the work will be good in the end

Conclusion

There are many ways to explore further connections between poetry and architecture. I am interested in the potentials of the poetic act, for one. As such though, the course was successful in that it served to foster the development of skills essential for an architect: drawing, making, *seeing*, critical and reflective thinking, knowledge of a continuum of ideas, discursive knowledge, solving the problems of the technical nuts and bolts of making, the creative process, the ability to play, the ability to imagine; founding a *belief in the work*.

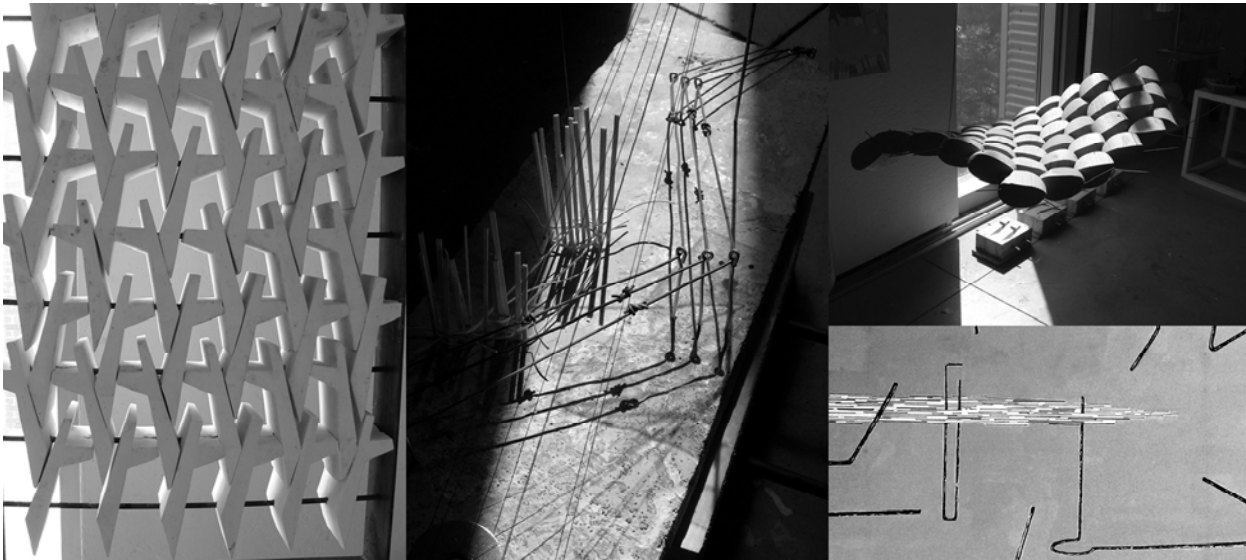


Fig. 5. Work by Joshua Lunn based on *A Dead Oak* by John Hejduk

Endnotes

¹Statement attributed to Richard Exner, as published in Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters on Cezanne*. Fromm International Publishing Corporation, New York p.xvii

² Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Academy Editions, London 1996. p. 22

³ Shklovsky, Viktor. *Theory of Prose*.

⁴ Strand, Mark. *The Weather of Words*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2001. p. 21-24

⁵ Mullin, Roger. *Drawing on the Visible, The Invisible and the Particular*. Dalhousie University Graduate Thesis 1998. p. 38