

# The Painful Surface of Architecture

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**The role of representation of the built environment, with an emphasis on architectural interiors, will illustrate the interior's remote proximity to architectural discourse. Unique moments of representational innovation that have historically occupied a productive space between purely objective orthogonal projection drawings and more subjective perspectival or experiential representations of the interior will serve as touch points for understanding potentials within contemporary Fine Arts practices to re-engage both sides of the 'painful surface' of architecture.**

## DUAL DICHOTOMY

'If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides.' Bachelard's ruminations on the hostility of the inside/outside dialectic serves here as an introduction to the estrangement of interior architecture from the 'mother' discipline of architecture. At any given time, one is either inhabiting the 'immensity of external Nature' (outside) or, seeking the intimacy of an interior space.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the representational strategies of architects rarely consider the interior as anything other than the space that is defined as a result of the systematic arrangement of architectural elements.

The 'painful surface' is initiated institutionally, within the constructed curricula of the dominant American architectural educational models. Out of 146 institutions listed on the ACSA Online Guide to Architecture Schools, only 35 are noted as offering Interior Design/Interior Architecture as a 'Related Discipline'. Separating the disciplines of architecture and interiors curricularly, pedagogically and spatially, often not sharing the same facilities, faculty or resources, thereby reinforcing the surface barrier that exists between the two disciplines, to the detriment of both. The 'painful surface' then manifests itself physically, spatially and experientially in the built environment, as the lessons of the Academy spill out into practice. Of particular interest here are the ways in which this dichotomy has been challenged by unique moments in representations of the architectural interior historically, while seeking parallels

with contemporary art and architectural practices that hold the promise of re-engaging the 'painful surface' of architecture.

The objectification, hence the estrangement of experience, from Architectural design may be traced to the Ecole de Beaux Arts, which abolished the use of perspective drawings until 1850, as they were not, 'objective and analytical'.<sup>2</sup> (Which in itself is debatable, as a perspective drawing assumes a fixed viewpoint and isolated moment in time which may be deconstructed and verified.) The long term effects of this influence remain visible in the commonplace contemporary architect's continued dependence on orthographic projection drawings; plan, section, elevation and axonometric. The use of perspective in the design process has been relegated to a post-design process image that simply presents what the architect's result of a systematic response to various contextual cues may look like. The lack of ability to internalize the exterior, to harness the power of 'intimate immensity'<sup>3</sup> in the built environment is evidenced in the lack of an adequate means of representing the subjective experience of the interior.

A similar observation was made by James Corner in the early 1990's, identifying representational inadequacies within the discipline of Landscape Architecture. James Corner's, 'Representation and landscape; making and meaning in the landscape medium.'<sup>4</sup> identified shortcomings of traditionally privileged objective orthographic projection drawing modes such as plans, sections and elevations as inadequate for describing a subject as ephemeral, dynamic and multivalent as a landscape. Corner posed that elements of materiality, temporality and spatiality must be addressed in order to adequately represent, what is ultimately, a dynamic evolving sequence that is experienced over time. This powerful recognition arguably influenced a shift in the discourse of the 'mother discipline', architecture. Architecture's definition of 'context' evolved to consider not only passive adjacent formal physical cues, but engaged ecological flows, bio-systems and other dynamic ephemeral and environmental forces at work on a site. The embrace of landscape inspired contextual drivers influenced a new formal language as evidenced in works such as the Yokohama International Port Terminal by FOA and the Seattle Art Museum Olympic Sculpture Park by Weiss Manfredi.

The architectural interior poses similar challenges to representation. The subjective experience of an interior space defies traditional objective representational modes such as plan, section, elevation, axonometric, and to a lesser extent, even perspectives. Representing the dynamics of ambient conditions and unexpected social appropriations of space that coalesce to create an interior experience requires a re-investment in interior representation; one of generation as opposed to reaction, of conception rather than condition, encouraging a healthy elasticity of the painful surface, neither objective nor subjective, but eidetic<sup>5</sup>. Borrowing from the organization of, 'Representation and landscape...', this paper will look at unique moments of representation of the architectural interior as they addressed issues of materiality, temporality and spatiality. Issues of materiality in the 'developed surface' drawings of the Early Modern period, temporality and function in the 'deep section' illustrations of Parisian apartment dwellings from the early 1900's and spatiality within cubist explorations of 'phenomenal transparency' will be related to contemporary artists and architects such as, Doug Aitken, Marcos Luytens and Do Ho Suh.

#### **MATERIALITY | SURFACES AND STORIES**

The dominance of the Ecole and their ideology in the 1800's can be partially credited with the proliferation of the objectification of representation across disciplines, arts and humanities. Recognizing the inability of the objective orthographic projection drawings to communicate factors crucial to the understanding of an interior space, Robert Adam, John Soane, etc...are credited by Robin Evans<sup>6</sup> with the creation of the 'developed surface' drawing, which incorporated materiality; color, texture, ornament, shadow and reflection in interior elevation drawings and by simply reconfiguring their relationship to one another on the page, oriented as though the walls were 'unfolded' from the plan. This requires a cognitive shift on the part of the viewer introducing a subjective interpretation of the space. The deconstruction of the 'painful surface' of the enclosure of architecture, by 'unfolding' the walls was deemed necessary to reveal the interior experience.

Though not specific to representing interior spaces, Shaker Village mappings from 1820-50 are notable for their use of a 'double projection' technique.<sup>7</sup> The spatial relationships between buildings in a town plan are superimposed with exterior elevations, conveying a sense of materiality, spatiality, sequence and even social relationships are conveyed (through the notation of family ownership incorporated in a 'keyed' fashion). This 'double projection' representation provides at once objective information regarding the spatial distribution of family homeownership, as well as the subjective aesthetic and social context of the village. A similar strategy can be seen in the drawings of furnishing manufacturer, Gillow and Co. Here an interior space is represented with a 'triple projection' technique. The 'developed surface' projections of plan and splayed elevation is overlaid with perspectival representations of furniture pieces, located relative to their potential location in the floor plan depicted.

Innovations of the hybrid projection drawings of the 'developed surface' and 'double/triple projection' pave the way to a series of representational strategies deployed in subsequent movements in art and architecture. The 'transparent plastic' paintings of De Stijl artists and architects Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian abstracted and/or omitted architectural elements in favor of the exploration of color and pattern in service of the destruction of the discrete 'painful surface' that defined a singular representation of objective space. The role of materiality in representing an interior experience came into play in a more literal translation with the collages of Florence Knoll in 1945 that incorporated actual textiles and wall coverings in the creation of a 'developed surface' collage attempting to represent a more comprehensive interior experience. In 1947, Matisse was exploring the role of pattern as not only decoration, but in challenging perceptions of space and depth in his *Red Interior, Still Life on a Blue Table*. The bold black zig zagging pattern climbs from floor to wall at the interior and as it hits the window sill, turns up, engaging the foliage beyond the surface of the room, dissolving the interior/exterior boundary.<sup>8</sup>

The conflicting sensations of continuity and disruption upon the folding of the architectural surface to either enclose or expose the interior/exterior relationship has been imbued with social, cultural and personal storytelling capacity with the installation *Rubbing/Loving Project*, by Do Ho Suh. Suh's work uses the translatory medium of surface rubbings to create an imprint of every interior surface of the studio apartment where he lived for 18 years. These rubbings represent not only the physical surfaces that objectively define the space, but through the intimate process of physically engaging each scratch and crimp of every surface, Suh is also representing the cultural and historic memory held within the surfaces that enclose the lived experience of the interior. The 'painful surface' gives shape to space as well as memories that cannot be conveyed in orthographic projection drawings. Perhaps the future health of the 'painful surface' resides in the disciplines willingness to engage the materiality of the surface in a very intimate, tactile way. Through the 1:1 scale engagement with the surface, perhaps we may find a medium for translating the subjective memory of history through the objective surface of architecture.

#### **TEMPORALITY | SYSTEMS + COMMUNICATIONS**

Parisian 'deep sections', such as *The Cities of the Future* by Eugène Hénard in 1910, illustrate not only the distribution of rooms relative to the ground plane within an architectural enclosure, but they also represent the truly interdisciplinary nature of infrastructure and systems that generate the physical form of the early 20th century urban condition. The 'deep sections' do not isolate the disparate elements that are necessary to constructing our built environment into disciplinary silos. There were not yet specialized disciplines that isolated; civil engineering, structural engineers, landscape architects, architects, mechanical, electrical, plumbing engineers and interior designers and decorators from one another. The constructed environment was truly interdisciplinary.<sup>9</sup> Dynamic systems and public services that are contributors to urban form and experience such

as modes of transportation, coordinated plumbing and sewage systems, organized trash removal practices, etc., become a spatial and temporal framework against which the 'deep section' reveals the programmatic and social stratification of the urban dwellers. The life of the street and the interior of the apartment building are drawn as a unified field of activity; interiors and exteriors of the city. The 'deep section' also reveals how social systems were organized by the infrastructure of the city, depicting typical amenities and spatial norms and their distribution throughout the apartment building. Here, the 'painful surface' is represented as poche that simultaneously unites and separates the interior and exterior experience of urban life, it is the 'cure as well as the poison'.

Much of the original infrastructure of the city remains. Some early infrastructure exists as artifacts maintaining their original usefulness, or otherwise re-appropriated to support contemporary needs. However, new systems and services have evolved that have reshaped our daily rhythms and relationships with ourselves and our surroundings. A 'deep section' of the contemporary city would need to address the digital infrastructure that organizes its dwellers and has become an invisible force that manifests itself in new social patterns within the interiors and exteriors of the city. Digital and social media allow us to exist on both sides of the 'painful surface', to occupy both the interior of our private dwelling and simultaneously participate in a space of virtual socialization. Our current modes of architectural representation have not adequately evolved to explore these complex spatio/temporal conditions. The 'deep section' of the contemporary city must engage new methods and modes of representation that offer potentials for exploring the invisible 'painful surface', between the contemporary urban interior and exterior.

Contemporary artist Marcos Lutyens is seeking out these hidden aspects of contemporary life, using research in cognitive development and perception to inform works that strive to illuminate invisible forces shaping our environment. In imagining the notion of a contemporary 'deep section', the exhibit, *Social Pharmakon* provides potential modes of representing, '...electronic communication networks as an extension of the existing social world as we extend from one realm to the other and back again. The interchange between these two realities invites the visitor to consider the two different positions, and how we navigate between them...'<sup>10</sup>

Incorporating brainwave scanning tools and robotic translations into drawing, Lutyens represents the subjective individual experience through an objective lens, perhaps to make tangible the evolution of communication through the 'painful surface'. When considering the representation of the architectural interior, perhaps we should look to creating something akin to a pharmakon, the 'cure and the poison'.

#### **SPATIALITY | PHYSICAL + PSYCHOLOGICAL**

Modernism may be misunderstood as instrumental in the prolific objectification and dependence on formalism within the architectural disciplines. The modernist exploration of the concept of 'phenomenal transparency' illustrates a desire to distort, if not

dissolve, the 'painful surface' between the inside and outside in an attempt to achieve spatial plasticity, which is ultimately dependent upon choreographing the sequential perceptions of the occupant. In the seminal essay, *Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal*, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky explore the term 'transparency' and its interpretations in the work of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. Referring to Gyorgy Kepes definition of transparency in, *Language of Vision*, Rowe and Slutzky embrace the notion that a 'simultaneous perception of different spatial locations' results from figures overlapping, interpenetrating without, 'an optical destruction of each other'. Generating an 'other' space, to be occupied simultaneously as here and there, inside and outside. Works concurrent with the writing of this piece such as Picasso's *Studio Paintings*, of 1955 (perhaps in homage to Matisse's *Large Red Interior* series described above)<sup>11</sup> depicts the 'transparency of context' referred to by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, offering the viewer the 'sensation of looking through a first plane of significance to others lying beyond'. The physical plane of glass is rendered insignificant. The abstraction of underlying structures of objects superimposed with architectural elements defining the space of the studio suggest a continuity of interior/exterior experience. A third reality, not in nor out, one nor the other, but a simultaneous experience of inside and outside, before and after, now and then. Rowe and Slutzky's lengthy analysis of the sequential experience of *Villa Garches* contrasted with that of the Bauhaus, serve to illustrate the effect of space and materiality on perception and experience, scarcely objective or formal. Perhaps most revealing is their discussion of Le Corbusier's, *Palace of the League of Nations* approach sequence, which methodically describes a series of views afforded at carefully choreographed nodes along the entry sequence which begins at the exterior space of the road and ends at the interior threshold of the auditorium, notably, assigning equal weight to the role of tree and building in constructing an experience. The 'painful surface' boundary of architecture is blurred; does the architecture begin at the road, or at the boundary between inside and outside? Often reduced to objective 'formalism', perhaps the subjective perception of experience underlying these compositional formal issues may serve as inspiration for contemporary architects reconsidering the role of space, time and physical presence within the experience of the built environment.

While difficult to point to specific representational strategies, the Doug Aitken Workshop's architectural works play with the 'painful surface' of architecture in an effort to disconnect the physical self from the psychological self.<sup>12</sup> This work is solely represented by the artist via video, perhaps pointing precisely to the importance of experience and sequence in the work. Referring to the artist's words and their translation in the built work of *Acid Modernism*, Aitken and his wife, Gemma Ponsa, have designed their 'Acid Modern' home in Venice, California as, '...warm, organic modernism that's also perceptual and hallucinatory.'<sup>13</sup> The home perforates the 'painful surface' between inside and outside physically, visually and audibly. The greenery of the surrounding landscape is merged with the interior through the juxtaposition of patterned interior wall surfaces and distributed into the space of the interior through the coordinating

patterning of textiles, not unlike a living version of Matisse's interior paintings of the late 1940's. While the developed surface drawings, and by extension Matisse's Red Interior paintings, were testing the limits of our understanding of our place within representation and the third dimension, 'Acid Modernism' acts as a device for occupying a fourth dimension, breaking the surface of architecture through expanding our perception of space and its connectivity to ourselves and the environment at large. The home is 'physically connected to the vibrations of the surrounding nature' through seismically sensitive microphones embedded in the foundations of the home that amplify and transcribe the musical tones of the earth's subterranean movements, from rumbling of tectonic plate motion to the rhythm of the nearby ocean tides. In addition, music making features built into stairs and tables offer opportunities for the dweller to physically engage with the architectural surfaces and co-create an atmospheric experience with the architecture. 'Eliminating the space between the object and viewer - blurring lines and turning art into a multifaceted, collaborative experience,' is how Washington, D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum director Kerry Brougner describes the work.<sup>14</sup>

### 'JOYCEAN AGGLUTINATION'

Dominant modes of objective representation have served to concretize Bachelard's warning that, when, '...the center of being-there waivers and trembles...Intimate space loses its clarity while exterior space loses its void...We are banished from the realm of possibility.'<sup>15</sup>

To regain this 'realm of possibility' we must conjure the, '...grafting, editing, quotations and submerged whispers,'<sup>16</sup> of 'Joycean agglutination',<sup>17</sup> looking to transdisciplinary work from the past and present, to inform a new mode of representation that does not retreat to one side or the other of the 'painful surface', but engages that surface in a healthy dialogue, worthy of the realignment of the disciplines of architecture and interior architecture.

### ENDNOTES

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