Are We There, There!?
Swissness Applied

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This paper "Are we There, There[1] – Swissness Applied" contributes to the discussion on the role of the cultural image and its use in description of Swiss themed building codes in New Glarus, Wisconsin. The research focuses on the analysis and projection of the built environment that is generated by graphic and verbal[2] images in these codifications.

New Glarus is one of many culturally appropriated towns that represent challenges in architecture and urban design as an example of current social transformations in global contexts. The project focuses on the transference and fidelity of the Swiss image described in the codes, and will result in an exhibition, 'Swissness Applied', that uses different representation techniques to document and project upon the architecture in New Glarus.

Figure 1: Main Street New Glars, 2018; Buildings adapt Swiss Architectural Theme.

INTRODUCTION

Spread across the American landscape are enclaves that exude qualities and characteristics of European themes. Located in the countryside and founded by European immigrants, today their physical built environment constructs alternative worlds that narrate back to a popular European destination through imagery. Highly curated, with imported historic forms of traditional architectural styles, they resemble what we all know as being 'German', 'Dutch', 'Swiss' or 'Swedish'. With names, such as: Frankenmuth (Germany, Michigan), Lindsborg (Sweden, Kansas) or New Glarus (Switzerland, Wisconsin), they create unexpected transcultural scenes that are based on imported elements and local constraints.

In these towns the architecture becomes foreign to both worlds, and also strangely familiar to its genius loci of the setting. A common aspiration of the townspeople is to preserve and perpetuate the architectural charm of their cultural heritage to enhance the social and economic base of the community. While they all have a distinct history of how they adapted to the desired image, today their setting is supervised by a review committee: The Board of Architectural Review (Solvang, California), the Design Review Committee (New Glarus, Wisconsin) or the City Beautification Committee (Frankenmuth, Michigan) to name a few. With the help of photographs of traditional building elements these committees, made up of five to eight community members, decide if the building proposal meets the aesthetic standards for the town.

SWISSNESS APPLIED

New Glarus, Wisconsin is one such example of a town that has undertaken cultural appropriation. Since its founding by Swiss settlers in 1845 it evolved from being a dairy farming and cheese production village to a popular tourist destination. After suffering through an economic downturn in the late fifties, it discovered a way of survival, a lucrative niche by embracing the image of its cultural heritage. In 1950, a hand full of businessmen, some native to Switzerland, decided to remodel their commercial buildings by 'Swissifying' the main façades to attract visitors. To the New Glarners, 'Swissifying', is the transformation of the built environment to the Swiss Chalet style.

When it was originally undertaken, the plan was known as 'Project Edelweiss.' A 'systematic transformation' into a Swiss Town similar to "[how] Solvang, California, has become Danish and a town in Georgia without the remotest connection to Germany has become Bavarian." [3] Too the journalist Calvin Trilling, the development of these towns is a phenomenom that is simultaneously a model for economic prosperity and connection to their country of origin.

Today, the town's Swiss-look is regulated in 'Chapter 118: Building Construction, Article II: Swiss Architectural Theme' in the villages building codes. It states "Any and all buildings, structures, walkways or lighting in the C-1 Commercial District and C-2 Highway Commercial District in the Village of New Glarus, shall conform in exterior design to the Swiss architectural theme adopted by the Village and as presently

Figure 2: Portraying the Swiss Chalet Style through pictorial representations. Selected photographs from books that are referenced in Chapter 118: Building Construction "Article II: Swiss Architectural Theme"
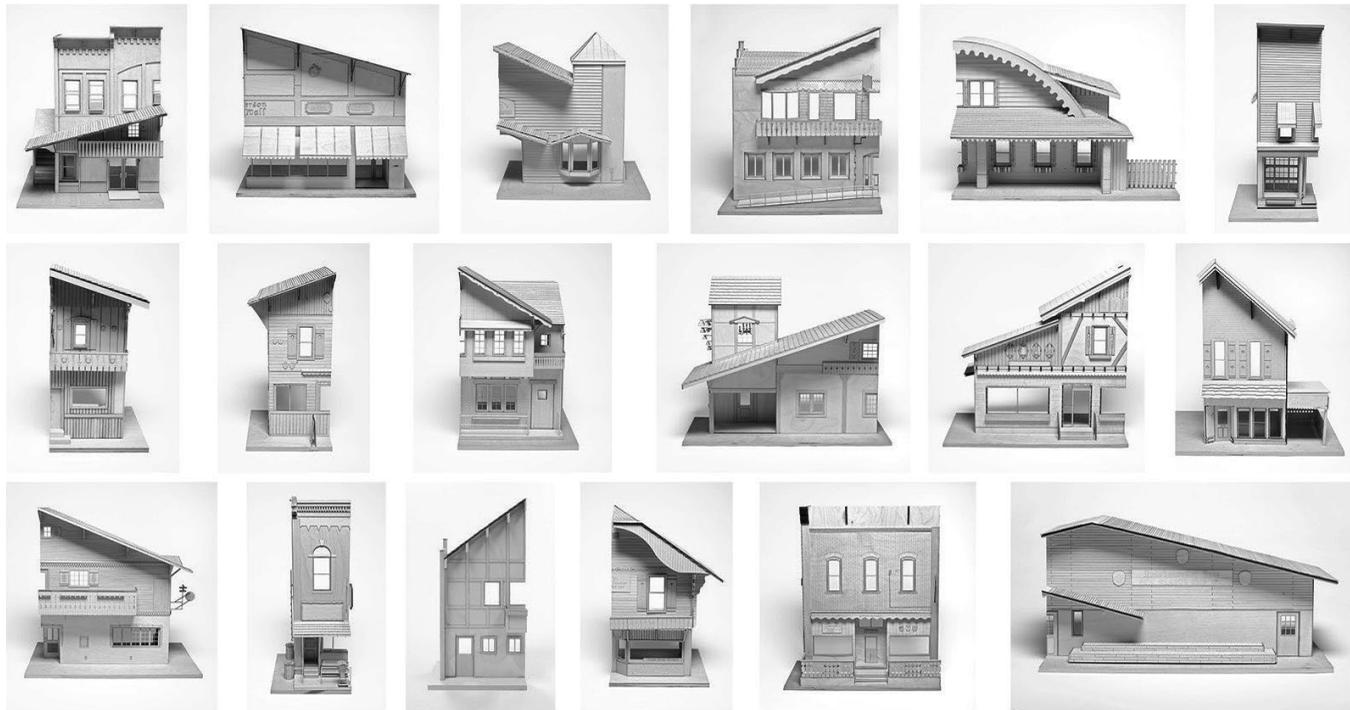
Figure 3: 'Tell No Cabbage' Models display the misalignment of the Swiss image applied onto an American structure.

evidenced by the Swiss architecture in the commercial zoning districts of the Village."[4] The codes regulate the implementation of the Swiss architectural theme within two areas: an eight block area of the downtown commercial district, and the highway commercial district that stretches for nearly a mile along the highway leading into town. Article II specifies that swissifying applies to all new construction or substantial alteration of remodeling of existing construction for commercial purposes. It exempts all existing single-family residence dwellings that are not used for commercial purposes.

In pursuit of an authentic look, the New Glarner Building Codes attempt to accurately portray the Swiss Chalet Style through written and pictorial representations. To do so, they rely on Swiss buildings that are illustrated in seven picture books that depict a variety of traditional chalet styles in the cantons of Switzerland. Furthermore, a seventeen-page folder with photography of traditional Swiss architecture and postcards of other themed towns further simplifies these very distinct versions of Swissness into a composed style recognizable as 'Swiss.' And like every other Building code; they are rules that are more than abstract forms or descriptions. To Alex Lehnerer, rules, "possess an inherited character…" that sets in motion "[an] intertia designated as orderliness, [that] thereby produces reliability and calculability for an otherwise unpredictable future."[5] In New Glarus the rules that frame an 'orderliness' is described through photographs and written descriptions, each is prescribed to reinforce the image of the Swiss Chalet Style in the commercial districts of the village.

TRANSMISSION OF IMAGERY

As part of the submission package, an incoming design proposal must reference a repertoire of building elements found in approximately 500 photographs. Different than other aesthetic guidelines , such as Celebration in Florida, that use graphic images (i.e. Pattern Books with drawings), the images of New Glarus are photorealistic depictions of the surface, materiality, form, and color that construct the desired Swiss style. The photographs are from books and a folio that portray existing Swiss Chalets (from as far back as the 17th century) in a specific contextual setting, including: people, furniture, and landscape.

To image theorist Vilém Flusser, these photographs act as technical images,[6] they influence how "we experience, perceive, and value the world and ourselves differently." By deploying the pictures alongside written descriptions in the building codes, the images are no longer "one dimensional, linear, process oriented, [or] historical way," but rather are understood "in a two-dimensional way, as surface, context, [or] scene." The combination of the written description alongside the photographs affect opportunities for translation from building code to new construction. To support this point, it is important to note that we read technical images differently than verbal images. In western culture, we are taught to read written codes from left to write and top to bottom. While rules govern the reading of text, the understanding of a photograph is of a different sort. Its' rules are not taught, and, it is read in many different ways that are specific to the individual.

On one hand, Flusser argues that reading images are fairly 'superficial,' that the observer can interpret it immediately through a glance. On the other hand, 'scanning' the image deepens an observer's understanding of the thing. The appearance of the image is individual to each observer and the act of 'scanning,' "represents the synthesis of two intentions: one manifested in the image and the other belonging to the observer."[7] Simply put, this process of observation leads to an infinite amount of interpretations and combinations in New Glarus yet stays true to the superficial appearance of the photorealistic illustrations of the Swiss Chalets. Due to different traditions of building construction, and available materials in America, despite the earnest attempts to reconstruct the desired image of the traditional Swiss Style, the characteristics of the built form are estranged. The transmission of the imagery, from code to building motif, is a process that results in an American town that at some moments appears like the original Swiss images. It is unclear if we are there, there.

EXHIBITING SWISSNESS

The exhibition, Swissness Applied, documents and constructs interpretations of the Swiss Image that are actively constructing the Commercial District of New Glarus. By interpreting the photographs and texts in the building codes, the exhibition deploys models and an interactive software as alternative physical and digital models that document and project upon the existing conditions as found today.

For example, the 'Tell no cabbage' Models are large scale basswood corner models that document, the exterior

Figure 4: 'John Whate Henry' Husamis' that are relocated into foreign, yet familiar backdrops (Example; movie 'Sound of Music'). Each foreign scene produces new associations.

sheathing and Swiss motifs of eighteen buildings in the commercial district. They analyze the construction details of the buildings and show the misalignment of the Swiss image applied onto an American structure. One can see clearly that characteristics of built form and material are shifted, and tectonic values were lost in translation.

'John What Henry' simplifies the shape of the existing buildings through a continuous paper folding technique (Husami [8]), that leads to continues edges and flattening of the building façade, eliminating all unintentional overhangs and additions In the original. By relocating the Husamis' into other traditional backdrops, each foreign, yet familiar movie scene produces new associations. Resulting in building models whose cultural significance changes based on its' environment and context.

The projective models in 'It Has As Long As It Has,' show less conventional opportunities within the strict formal guidelines. The models are assembled from shutters, balconies, doors and other building elements taken from standard Swiss Faller model kits, resulting in an estranged building form whose combination of familiar parts allude to a Swiss identity but create another whole. Like in New Glarus, the work reconstructs heterogenous parts of the Chalets' shape, material, and assembly that lower the fidelity to the original Swiss image.

CONCLUSION

In architecture today, there is interest in the global dissemination of imagery through digital networks, and their impact on the built environment. Vilém Flusser predicted the importance of the "growing problem of the nonliterate Messages in our surrounding" in both 'the so-called developed countries and in societies where illiteracy is still widespread."[9] New Glarus is an example of the transmission of nonliterate images that influence the building codes of towns found across America. Rather than understanding the precise description of written codes, the photographs lead to various, often unexpected interpretations. Criticized by experts of the field, one could argue that the challenge of reading the photographs lead to a distinct built environment in New Glarus, that reveals the specific transcultural identity of this town. Unlike roadside attractions or theme parks, or, developer led communities, New Glarus, is a fascinating case study because of its' heritage rooted in a country of origin. Resulting in the development of codes that generate defamiliarized forms that appear to be but are not the same as the thing they represent.
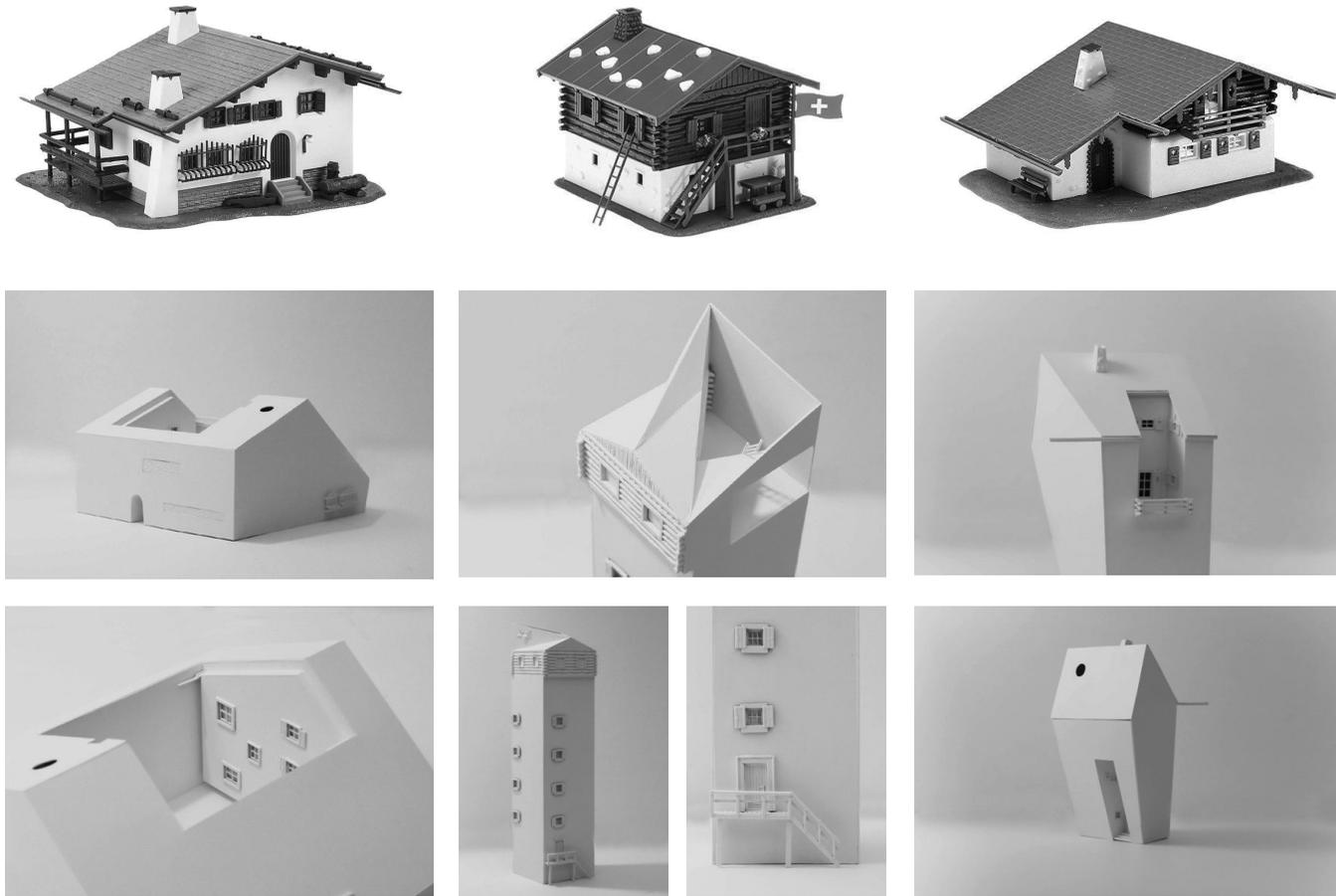
Figure 5: 'It Has As Long As It Has' Swiss Faller model kits, resulting in an estranged building form whose combination of familiar parts create a new whole.

ENDNOTES

1.   The "Are we there, there?!" research is analyzing and projecting on the condition where immigrant towns in the United States transform to their image of heritage, by adapting design guidelines to reintroduce the traditional image of their country of origin. It is the reversed condition of the famous quote by Gertrud Stein 'There is no there, there', that expresses a painful nostalgia about Oakland, her home, being gone and the area around it being completely changed. The quote was used many times in history to condemn the city. Gertrude Stein, 'Everybody's Autobiography', Random House 1937, 289

2.   Image families are further described in 'What Is An Image'. Mitchell categorizes images into five genealogies (graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal), whereas verbal images can exist as writing, descriptions and metaphors and graphic images as pictures, statues and design. W.J.T. Mitchell, "what is an image." new literarary history vol 15 no 3. 1984, 505

3.   Calvin Trillin, "New Glarus, Wis. – Swissness" in *The New Yorker,* U. S. Journal Jan. 20, 1975 Issue, 48

4.   Chapter 118: *Building Construction, Article II: Swiss Architectural Theme'*, https://ecode360.com/9800057 (accessed November 5, 2018)

5.   Alex Lehnerer, "Grand Urban Rules", nai010 publishers 2009, 62

6.   Flusser describes the technical Images as photographs, films, videos, television screens, and computer terminals that take over the tasks of formerly linear text, the task of transmitting information to society. For more information see: Vilem Flusser, "Into The Universe Of Technical Images", trans. by N. Roth, Univ of Minnesota 2011 [1985], 5

7.   Vilém Flusser, "Towards a Philosophy of Photography", trans. by A. Mathews, Reaktion Book Ltd. 1983, 8

8.   Hus in Swiss German means House and ami stands for origami, the Japanese art of folding paper into decorative shapes and figures or in this case represents a building in New Glarus illustrating its' overall building shape and elements. www.en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/origami (accessed November 5, 2018)

9.   Vilém Flusser, "Writings," [1983-4], ed. A Strohl, trans. E Eisel, University of Minnesota, 2002, 63