

On the (Extra)Ordinariness of Drawing

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The aim of this paper is to suggest how to innovation can be taught by proposing that the manipulation and rethinking of the handcrafted “drawing” –a slow but methodical production that addresses not only the imagination but architectural space itself– is not only indelibly linked to the real world but it informs us, as makers and thinkers, of what the real world is and can be.

In 1973, when Manfredo Tafuri published *Architecture and Utopia*, his final pronouncements regarding the role that architects and architecture could play in the transformation of culture dismayed many who considered themselves radical. For Tafuri, whose initial work was centered on developing a critique of architectural ideology, the conclusion he found throughout any and all attempts at developing tendencies that went against (or tried to subvert) capitalism had been, in all instances, always-already subsumed by its logic. The role of architects within the ideological development of programs was minimal as capitalism, through design, integrated itself into all of the structures and superstructures of human existence. The “drama of architecture today,” he noted, was that “architecture [became] obliged to return to *pure architecture*, to form without utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness.”¹ In noting the decline of the profession and the ineffectuality of any “illusory hopes” for it, Tafuri proposed that in the lack of an “institutionally defined role for the technicians charged with building activity” one was “left to navigate in empty space, in which anything can happen but nothing is decisive.”²

It is this empty space, this opening in the apparent hermetic closure within the Tafurian system, that I would like to address. Given the highly labile nature of our present modernity, the academic design studio is the site –because both its separateness from the active systems of capitalist production but also because its complicity and proximity to them– where the very limits of that space can be explored. My aim is to present a form of innovation that I have explored through teaching where the “sublime uselessness” of “pure architecture” can be proposed through the manipulation and rethinking of the handcrafted “drawing” –a slow but methodical production that addresses not only the imagination but architectural space itself.



Figure 1: Drawdel: Barcelona Urban Analysis (Student: Christine Dennett)

This craft, I will argue, is not only indelibly linked to the real world but it informs us, as makers and thinkers, of what the real world is and can be. In this way, I am invoking the only example that, for Tafuri, seemed to problematize architecture’s complicity to capitalist modes of production: Hans Scharoun’s 1930 Siemensstadt in Berlin which, through irony and organic expression, contradicted its mass produced status; in Benjaminian terms, it both, consummated the destruction and recovery of the “aura” of architecture, simultaneously.

One of the most profound investigations of modern culture deals with the relationship between the solid and void, between presence

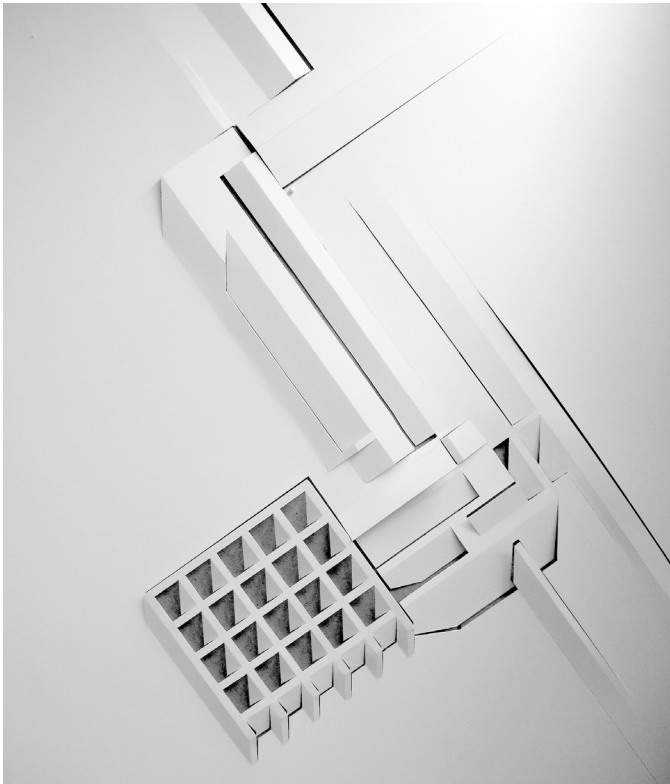


Figure 2: Drawdel: UNAM: The Other Library (Student: Mary Hayden Cullen)

and absence: within the space of the page, painting, sculpture, or the silence between musical notes. Present in the late 19th century poetry and graphic design of Stephane Mallarmé, this trajectory can also be found in the work of Kazimir Malevich, Jorge Oteiza, and John Cage, to name three. In architecture, it can be found in the condition of *poché* but also in Loos' *raumplan* or, even, in Peter Eisenman's 1970 open-ended typographic proposals in "Notes on Conceptual Architecture." Because of architecture's obvious ideological complicity to efficiency and market forces, the radicality found in the other arts regarding the problem of absence has seldom been addressed and considered as a viable alternative to architectural practices.

Because of its simultaneous distance and proximity to practice, the academic design studio is where space and absence can be explored and materialized through the use of representational and discursive strategies in the same way that Milorad Pavic suggested through Atanas Svirar, the main character, in *Landscape Painted with Tea*: "While still an architecture student, he noticed that one of the striking virtues of great writers was their silence on certain important matters. And he applied this to his own profession: here the unused space, equivalent to the unsaid word in a work of literature, had its form, the emptiness had its shape and meaning, just as strikingly and effectively as space filled with buildings."³ Yet, it is this emptiness – this absence – where our experience and our lives take place; where human agency is active and alive.

Representation and explorations with representation allow us to alter and modify our perceptions and understandings of that space. They do so more pointedly when we treat the very elements and idea of

representation as amorphous and open ended; allowing the page to be one element in an ever-changing puzzle of possibilities. One of the means is through the Drawdel (DRAW-ing mo-DEL), a representational strategy that consists of thinking that drawings can be extrusions of the drawing page into three-dimensionality. This allows the drawing surface to continue operating two-dimensionally (that is, it can still be drawn upon, collaged, etc.) in order to integrate into its three-dimensionality the complexities of space, materiality, experience, etc. that the simple drawing surface simply cannot express. In some cases, "drawdels" can be considered "drawings without paper," as the German-Venezuelan artist Gego defined some of her wire sculptures, in order to reproduced synthetically the material and tectonic effects and operations of certain two dimensional drawings to define three-dimensional space.

Central to the "drawings without paper" as "drawdels" is that they follow the logic of architectural drawing which, according to Robin Evans, "are projections, which means that organized arrays of imaginary straight lines pass through the drawing to corresponding parts of the thing represented by the drawing."⁴ These "drawings," therefore, maintain a projected relationship with the thing represented but through the thing itself. But, because of their ambiguous character vis. object/representation, they can be considered generative and open and not, as is many times thought of models, as finalized materializations of the design. In many cases, these "drawings" can also have tectonic or stereotomic characteristics. The tectonic ones reveal and/or are made materially of thin pieces of wire, wood, string, etc. and their joints and material changes can be expressed and explored. The stereotomic ones are traditionally formed through single gestures (ie. casting), through accretion (additive accumulation of similar or different materials), and/or through carving and usually consist of heavier materials (wood, plaster, wax, plastiline, cement, books, etc.)

In the end, the simultaneous return to craft and the exploration of space (both, literal and phenomenal; real and representational) is a strategy intent on countering the sense of displacement caused by modern techno-tele-mediatic apparatuses that, more and more, compromise not only architectural production but also its understanding and experience; this is especially true in a world where students glean and share most of their information via Instagram, SnapChat and Facebook and where ArchDaily becomes the go-to source for precedents, historical references, and other design research. The engagement with the phenomenological conditions of presentness and experience that the "drawdels" activate counter (or, stand in as localized metonyms for/against) the broader global shifts in the unpredictability of production and our lack, as Frederic Jameson noted about postmodernity, in understanding, or worse, controlling space, time, and the flows of capital. What is crucial, however, is that the "drawdels" suggest and materialize real spaces (anthropological in their three-dimensionality [ie. as noted by Marc Augé vis. non-places]) that rely, for their understanding, on experience itself (and onto which the other factors of experience –time, movement, changing light, etc.- influence) rather than only relying on abstract (or linguistic) conventions characteristic of architectural drawings.

Furthermore, as such, they aim to revalue human agency in its creative power (to develop new forms and experiences), to highlight the phenomenological condition of our empirical knowledge, and to open up channels of the imagination (by allowing us, through their open-endedness, to read them in multiple ways: backwards, frontwards, as shadow making devices, etc.) By blurring boundaries, they create rich experiences; by accentuating place (the place of their representation but also the place of their performativity), they work to deny the spectacularization of architectural form. If a radical gap exists between teaching and practice in the context of a post-industrial world, then it is because the profession has become ineffective in its critical stance and has forgotten that, to enable change, architecture must prompt us to perceptually understand the world around us; to open it up for examination and comprehension. Architecture has to evoke our agency as humans, the specificity of our moments in time, and the actions that take place within them, without which nothing can happen. Our work as scholars and makers must aim at creating new subjects: critical and aware.

ENDNOTES

1. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1976), ix.
2. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, x.
3. Milorad Pavic, *Landscape Painted with Tea* (New York: Vintage International, 1991).
4. Robin Evans, "Architectural Projection" in Eve Blau and Edward Kaufman, eds., *Architecture and Its Image: Four Centuries of Architectural Representation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 19.