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Allusion, Illusion and the Beginning Design Student

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Introduction

This paper explores aspects of media that concern illusion and allusion. It will present some examples of beginning design student projects to question and elucidate both the inherent differences of these potentially dichotomous terms and how they might lead us in a more concordant direction for teaching beginning design and visual communications in architecture. In recent history, we have seen examples of drawings such as those published by Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind that have had an inclination to place architecture into a greater state of allusion. These drawings are exciting and provoke the thoughtful references to the possibilities of the design. We can also view renderings, produced on our computers, which appear to offer us the ability to easily create highly detailed and precise modes of exact-ness. Because of their seductive nature we should look at both drawings and models and wonder about the issues of illusion. These examples may seem, on the surface, to show the potential opposition of the connotations of allusion and illusion in the production of architecture in relation to the media that we use for designing. But it is when we consider the deeper meaning of these terms; we may conclude that these somewhat disparate ideas may really be two sides of the same issue.

We may comprehend a micrcosm of the tension created between these two sides of the illusion and allusion of media within architectural education especially in the design of curriculum. Tensions between faculty teaching these beginning design and visual communications courses, have revolved around those interested in practical (technical) techniques versus faculty trying to connect these courses to current theoretical design trends and thus question the ways we use and design with media. On one side of the debate, we find faculty interested in teaching techniques to their students but who generally ignore the critical use of these techniques. All too often, the results of these courses are seductive images that have little basis in concern for materiality, function or design aesthetics. On the other side, we find courses overly fascinated with the popularity of ambiguous, emotional overly personal markings that can refer to anything the student is thinking. We may find many of the projects developed in such courses, are equally hard to critique as they become so personal they are lost in the allusion of the beautiful and constantly referencing image. We are reminded of the concept of 'free play' as endlessly described a decade ago, where play never provides boundaries for inclusion or exclusion.[1]

This debate may not only be seen as a local discussion on the direction of beginning architectural education but also touches on the broader debate in architecture between the image as illusion and the image as allusion. Certainly the issue of the image has been well deliberated, especially in the way we perceive the post-modern world, and has become a common discussion concerning representation and what associations it conveys.[2] We believe that this issue, of the representational image, is still important and timely especially as we are currently questioning the ability to quickly and easily create drawings and other images on the computer.

We can see this questioning reflected in recent arguments, as deconstruction and post-modern thought have attempted to denounce doctrines and to abolish standards.[3] This was seen as a "provocative method, aimed at discovery and discovering ourselves" and professed that, "according to what is written; and any type of inscription can only carry out secondary and subordinate functions as vehicles of speech, where meaning always precedes what is signified (precedence to what is purely intelligible with regard to what is merely tangible)."[4] Because of this history, it may be valuable, not to rehash, but to readdress and build on some of these issues through a discussion of the manifestations of these relationships. It is important to understand, that in building on these ideas through the act of design (manifest through drawing and modeling), it may also be necessary to challenge the tenets. It is through questioning the relationships between our forms of reference and their illustrations that we create a chiasm, a 'joining in the back,' as one might say, that may allow each to interact with the other or become the same. In a similar way, by seeing a chiasmus of the illusion of allusion and the allusion of illusion, and finding relationships of definition, may help us to proceed in discussions of media in architecture.

Play and definitions of illusion and allusion

Allusion can be defined as a reference; the word takes on connotations of a brief or indirect mention. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the etymology of allusion as; [alludere – to play with joke or jest with, touch lightly upon a subject, to + ludere to play, or to play with]. An allusion may be a step removed, from an original, in abstraction. It may be the playful dialogue of memory and imagination. An allusion might help us understand the world better but it also may keep us forever suspended in a time of or place of unknowns. Similarly, an allusion with its roots "to play with" provides opportunities for a playful dialogue. Here, the cyclical web

leads into new interpretations and allows the representation to remain fluid for as long as possible, a function that may be an advantage in the design process. Alternatively, the etymology of illusion is presented as; [illudere – to make sport of, jest, or mock at, ridicule, il + ludere, to play, against play].[5] Illusion is a mocking false or unreal appearance, deceived or eluded by appearances, a false conception of ideas, and unreal visual appearance, deceptive belief or the sensuous perception of an external object. The illusion then, may be seen as the illustration to envision the new and never before seen. Although illusion viewed as a falsity may also be the ability to see the future, to visualize the conceptual and physical idea. Both of these words with their roots in 'play,' assist an understanding of how media such as drawing and models, influence the process of design. Play, as a philosophical concept, provokes the actions of 'give and take' that can become a design dialogue. Other aspects of play include the boundaries that surround the activity of play, along with representational qualities that makes something 'stand for' something else and qualities that allow participants to become so involved in the play that they feel outside themselves. The importance of play is often the intelligibility or the learning that results from the activity of play; the repeatability allows the chance to alter and manipulate to discover something new. We learn through the simulation, the process of representation.[6] Again, we return to the question at hand, how does the ability to see media as having propensity to 'play with' or act as an agent 'against play' influence how we use and perceive this media?

Allusion of illusion and the illusion of allusion/ Chiasmus

This dilemma concerning our use of media may be explored through viewing allusion and illusion through a chiasm. A chiasmus describes a word play where reversing the order of a phrase, clarifies through its new noun/verb position. Additionally, it can be "a grammatical figure by which (opposing diagonal arrangement) the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other."[7] Here the reversal of the order may help us to better understand the opposition in these words.

The first half of the chiasmus "the allusion of illusion" questions the long-standing validity of the illusion. We may compare illusion to magic, something that is conjured up out of no-where, hiding or concealing, where allusion shows us the process of connections and relationships that may be more truthful.[8] A 'realistic' image may not allow play or finding the truth through play. In using allusion as a modifier to an illusion, the reference may be giving the illustration qualities that question how this image may also convey something less definitive. The question may arise if we, as architects, wish not to make conclusions, if the life in the ambiguous image helps us continually enjoy the process of imagination and reference.

Museum Project

The museum project, (developed with Julio Bermudez), was designed to introduce beginning students to basic issues of architectural communications.[9] Our general position was that architects depend on representation for the description, design, communication and criticism of architecture. We believe there are at least two reasons for this. First, architectural designs cannot be developed and tested in full scale for obvious and practical inconvinences. Second, the human mind has clear limitations in generating, sustaining and communicating credible simulations of architecture without external recording.

We assigned this project after a series of conventionally based graphic studies of a new art museum recently built on the campus. This final exercise of the semester involved the subjective qualities of the building. Here representation was to become an expressive yet abstract instrument used to capture the metaphoric nature of architectural sensations. The students were asked to represent the intangible, unmeasurable and the felt, as the end result of a progressive realization of architectural attributes. Using 3D digital models our students were asked to create four alternative depictions of the art museum. Each representation was to express different sensorial conditions found in the objective realm. The students were asked to develop a radically abstracted transformation of the existing architectural grammar to express the following: 1). The sound of the place, 2). The smell/taste of the place, 3). The feeling of the body in the place (kinesthetics), and 4). The synthesis (an edited combination of all three).

This project was pedagogically important to our students because through their translations they were required to clarify (a) the sensations of the place, (b) its metaphoric correlation to the visual field, and (c) its architectural expression. Through the project the students learned about issues of conceptualization, metaphor, analogy, caricature, grotesqueness, exaggeration and symbolism. By using representations to articulate and communicate architectural actions and thoughts, architects not only give solutions to these problems but also create a language without which no architectural work would be conceivable. In this project the students could begin to understand the reference of the image (allusion of illusion). Distorting the "look" of the museum conjured up associations and references. It questioned how the emotions of the building, the intangible, could be expressed tangibly. The students could employ colors or shapes that evoked dimensions of sensations to find the allusion of the illusion.

The second half of the chiasm that reads the 'illusion of allusion,' may evoke the picture of the thing that is less tangible. A seeming impossibility, this may involve how we try to make more defined the not-yet-physical forms of our architecture. For example, the fact that the drawings of Michelangelo or DaVinci are 'accurate' does not destroy their allusive qualities. They may still create emotive or ephemeral qualities. In comparison, our renderings on the computer, may seem a clearer view of the future building, again they resemble an abstraction as they present a three-dimensional building on a two-dimensional surface.

Place/Architecture/Ritual

The Place/Architecture/Ritual project explored ritual as a powerful means of architecture that is an expression of the relationship between human activity and cosmic order.[10] The purpose was to have students understand the architectural decisions and forms of movement through space using, the worlds of myth and storytelling, basic architectural elements and strategies of enclosure (wall excavation, skeleton, opening, covering) and to explore concept of site as a source of architectural insight. This was the second project of the fourth year, the second year of the professional architecture sequence. The students were given a rural site, Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake. The sites given to the students were desert, beach, mountain and a valley terrain. Additionally the students were to explore one of the following conceptual approaches to their place; Nourishment, Healing, Cleansing or Meditation. As a typical beginning design project, we as faculty were concerned with the student's conceptual thinking, the use of closed, semi-closed on open spaces as interdependent, avoiding stereotypical issues of enclosure and the nature of movement through space for various human tasks.

The representational intent of the project was to have the students think about presenting their design and site, both descriptively and through the character of the place. Their first drawings were emotional cosmological impressions of the site and the last drawings were both experiential and descriptive of their architectural solution. Specifically, besides the emotive sketches, we began with cosmological explorations, diagrams and study models. These two and three-dimensional explorations were seen as allusions, the references to the unseen and the interpretation of the seen. By the end of the project the students were expected to also be able to visually describe (plan, section and elevation) their project. This effort at illusion was tempered by the degree of their skills and the ambiguity of the functions described. Most projects were best in ·evoking the temporal qualities of the site and the experience of meditation, cleansing, healing and nourishment. The conventional drawings of rather simple but thought provoking spaces made the students realize the drawbacks of conventional representation when describing the ritual of space. They were conscious of the representation as an "illusion of an allusion." The poetic drawings evoked the atmosphere unable to be captured in plans. They tried to explain, or put into tangible language, the associations and references they needed to convey. Here the students needed the illusion to bring closure to the project, hoping that it did not keep the references form being realized. Also, they were able to question conventional views, as also being abstractions. In this way the illusion and allusion join to create both a vision of the future and one that allows us to use our mind's facilities of association to envision what the future will be.

The understanding that the terms illusion and allusion are semantically diverse and that they 'crossover' to have a relationship that is symbiotic, questions whether media must be categorized as one or the other. Finding a place of their unison, where each has validity, might be revealed in a project called the Exquisite Corpse.

Exquisite Corpse

A student project that views the hand sketch both as a creative process and a collective endeavor, is the Exquisite Corpse. This project reveals the fantasy and "possibilizing," aspects of sketching, which can be accompanied by creative inspiration. Andre Breton, a major verbal representative of the Surrealist Movement, writes about a game that views creativity as an act of association. The "Exquisite Corpse" was played in a group, where each player in turn drew a sketch of partial image, turned over the edge of the paper and passed it to the next player.[11] The "Exquisite Corpse" is not unlike the stains on rocks or cloud formations since they all entail a haphazard image. This game requires that each person place fragments from what is momentarily running through their minds onto paper, the resulting image is fantastical, comical and absurd in its incongruous combination. For students, this project expresses how the few lines given to them were a chance to play with associations. The project also questioned where ideas came from and how hand sketches facilitate a quick flow of imagery. The students must play with the associative dialogue of imagination as they react to the few lines they are given. They also have limits of space and time in which to stimulate their imaginations and sketch quickly. The images they produce are not intentional and thus they are surprised and fascinated by the forms appearing on the page, as well as the combination images that are the end product.

The Exquisite Corpse is allusionary and also associative in that the resulting images are collective. As the sketches are passed between the players they become interrelated. The media is now collective through several minds and results in new ways to think about creative inspiration for architectural students. The students learn to appreciate and not pre-judge the origins of ideas. The allusion of illusion and the illusion of allusion, speaks of how the media assists the reference to the illustration and the falsity of the perceived reality. This project, we believe, touches on just this integration of the two. The students were able to use the references left from the person before them to create their own vision on paper. In reverse they were also able to see, when the entire projects were finally displayed, the falsity of what they had anticipated. This also revealed how they interpreted and how the disparity of the final result showed. Here they were able to question the definition of their perceptions. In this instance, the question of definition, as inherently opposite to an associative reference, might be resolved by looking to concepts of definition.

Defining the allusion and illusion

If we question the drawing representations of illusion and allusion as defining either a process or a future building, then it may be necessary to question how they may define. An illusion with a more definitive pictorial outlook may, on first inspection, be the better definition of the architect's intention. But the allusion with more depth and questioning may better give a view of what the building 'will be.' The philosopher John William Miller may give insight into this dilemma when he writes that the only way to approach this issue is through

defining our terms.[12] Again, we may consider the atmospheric 'finished' look, the image that best defines. In opposition to this basic tenet, Miller questions the validity of a set definition, by stating that "a static definition is neither experimentally or logically possible."[13] The seeming advantage that images look completed may now be a disadvantage. Since the design is substantially set, these images do not allow for further definition, or recalibration of definition. To further clarify this point, any object continually needs new relationships, but it first requires a beginning to specify its mark.[14] The major focus in this explanation of definition might be the idea that in the process of making a mark to start to define, it is necessary to allow the manipulation and alteration that can continually refine and re-define.[15]

We may need to ask if this makes all architecture a system of constant re-definition? An answer needs to be yes, as the architecture is defined through the architects' mind, takes on new connotations as it is built, and takes on new definitions as it is inhabited. We may liken this to an example of fourth phase simulacrum, where the simulation takes on new and unique qualities that separate it entirely from the original intention.[16] Is it then, futile to attempt definition if we know it will constantly change? We may find little use for definition, if it is elusive and impermanent. Miller questions this problem of ambiguity, and concludes that although definition changes with respect to other definitions we are continually compelled to "search for a relative permanence."[17] The allusion may embrace this change and does not necessarily make the illusive image invalid. Being undefined it embarks on a questioning that asks about the change, how is it possible and what does it mean.

Conclusions

Having begun with the concept of the chiasmus, we are reminded of the two faces of Janus that indicate the two-sided-ness of an issue.[18] Janus was the god of gates in Roman mythology and is depicted as a face facing opposite directions. In his role as the guardian of gates and doors, he was also thought to represent beginnings (January). The explanation for this belief comes from the idea that one must emerge though a gate or door before entering a new place. The 'beginnings' also speak of the mark that is the first definition. It also may mean that we must go back and forth through this door to understand both sides and unite our comprehension. We may also be going back and forth through the gate to make the things invisible, now visible.[19] The faces of Janus see both ways and find the place to begin, providing the mediation that helps in the complex issue of architectural representation.

If the chiasmus helps us see new relationships in reversal, then we may start to view how the place of their conceptual crossing makes them less distinct. Possibly viewed as an "X", the moment of their crossing causes them to resemble each other. Although the illusion may be immersed in the false image, it is the only image we have, especially since the illusion

is an attempt to state a future in known terms. We may allude to, or refer to, the illusion but we depend upon its view. In a similar way, the interpretation can also be misleading, sending us in many associative directions. Since the illusion is human made and inherently imperfect, we must constantly question its role and how we use its vision. Maybe the object of our attention is not necessarily human made, as much as human conceived, a statement that still puts the illusion in question.

In conclusion, allusion and illusion need each other since they are two sides of the definition (the future building) and help us to comprehend both the conceptual beginnings (allusion), and the view of the future (illusion). This may be the value of 'playing with' our design media and the way to use constantly changing definition. In our schools, it may also be artificial to separate the communication classes from the studio, since the definition of the product may need the reflection of design. This attitude may also keep our beginning design students from being seduced by the 'eyewash' of their skills in making beautiful renderings. And again, it may be artificial to separate the 'illusion' from the 'allusion' as they may be one and the same (two sides of the same issue).

Notes

1   Joel C. Weinsheimer, Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of 'Truth and Method' (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) p. 104. "[N]o play is perfectly free play ... to play is to sacrifice freedom and accept limits ... being limited, being played, is a condition of playing at all."

2   Richard Kearney, The Wake of the Imagination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), the theme of the whole book.

3   Jorge Gluesberg, editor, Deconstruction; A Student Guide (London: Academy Editions, 1991).

4   Gluesgerg, op. cit., p. 7.

5   Definitions of allusion and illusion, The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary

6   Ideas on Play come from; James S. Hans, The Play of the World (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind (London: Jason Aronson, 1972); Hans-George Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens; A Study of the Play Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

7   Definition of Chiasmus, The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary

8   Marcel Mauss, A General Theory of Magic (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972.

9   ARCH 3050 Julio Bermudez and Albert C. Smith, Fall 2001, Graduate School of Architecture, University of Utah.

10   Arch 4010/6010 Julio Bermudez, Kazuo Matsubayashi, Peggy McDonough and Kendra Schank Smith, Fall2001, Graduate School of Architecture, University of Utah.

11   Patrick Waldberg, Surrealism "The Exquisite Corpse" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 93-95

12   John William Miller, The Definition of the Thing (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1980), p. 38.

13   Miller, op. cit., p. 42.

14   Miller, op. cit., p. 41.

15   As a diversion, etymologically the word 'design' has connection to the ability to 'make a mark.' It is through the

making of a mark that we can attempt to begin to design.

16   Jean Baudrillard, Simulations (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 1-79.

17   Miller, op. cit., p. 50.

18   See Thomas Bulfinch for a definition and history of Janus.

19   "[T]he line no longer imitates the visible; it renders visible, it is the blueprint of a genesis of things." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Primacy of Perception (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 183.