Ethics and aesthetics of vision

Competitve advantages and the race for the sky

Looking, but looking askance

Three papers in the previous issue of **arq** (11/1) hovered above architecture, looked through it, walked past it. They barely referred to buildings. The papers were about looking, but looking askance, like worldviews related, as if unwittingly, to architecture. All described the desire to see *more*. The inclusion of these articles in an architectural journal implies that architecture wants to be included in expanded worldviews, and not by dominating or constructing them, but by correlating architecture with a sense of the whole.

Stacy Boldrick's report 'A tool of explanation, wonder and domination' (pp. 11–14), on research currently under way into the history and the cultural meanings of the aerial view, sent the eye on its travels by Ferris wheels, microscopes, balloons, satellites, plans, cartography, computers. During the early modern period, linear perspective was Western art's entry into an extended reality and standardised architectural projection, but, as Penelope Haralambidou brooded in 'The stereoscopic veil' (pp. 36–51), it necessarily placed vision in a monocular bind. In Alexander Eisenschmidt's paper 'Visual discoveries of an urban wanderer: August Endell's perception of a beautiful Metropolis' (pp. 71–80), we accompanied Endell on his drifts through a developing 1908 Berlin, looking less at structure than at its relationship to the world's spatial and optical events.

Endell concertedly drew attention away from *intentions* in design by showing *of what* architecture is a part. On balance, though, the papers gathered here drew attention (as sociologist Jürgen Habermas might put it for us) to 'systems' rather than to the 'lifeworld' of things as lived prior to their schematisation. The papers offered us a choice of visual analytical fetishes – zooming, glancing, staring. Haralambidou drew on arguments about the construction of illusion that have become familiar to artists and art historians usually *en route* from pictorial systems back into the lifeworld, whereas her response seems to bring us back into a pictorial system where we are each locked down, now by our two eyes instead of one. Certainly, Haralambidou's ambition is to do more than simply enrich perspectival representation, just as it was for Duchamp: 'the study of stereoscopy [...] can affect intellectual rather than optical processes and reveal spatial qualities of sound, tactility, kinaesthesia, memory, imagination and language.' But how? Wouldn't this outward reaching be achieved by actually building? Why is it that 'the expansion from the plane of a single image into deep space' is generally stranded in a backwater of movie theatre polarising spectacles, computerised virtual reality and Magic Eye stereograms?

Endell's vision came close to an encounter with the 'lifeworld'. Endell transpires as one of the long line of writers, social critics, aesthetes and artists – notably in this context, the Impressionists – to find that the urban assembly as a whole has barely the outline of conscious intent, and so demands revised ways of perceiving (frequently analogous with techniques for observing nature). But Endell appears not to have linked his visual impressions to any larger sense of society, culture and economy, investing instead in a deep, should we say bourgeois, subjectivity that bordered on connoisseurship:

'Endell distinguished between orientation guided by knowledge and a vision that relates to the individual's feelings or moods as a pure reflection of what is seen. Endell called for the form of the object to be freed from its context. For him, this meant that the metropolis becomes dissociated from its overwhelming totality, which, in turn, would make the aesthetic comprehension of moments within the city possible.'

Eisenschmidt astutely notes that one legacy of this mode of perception is 'the contemporary fascination with mutated urban environments and their re-
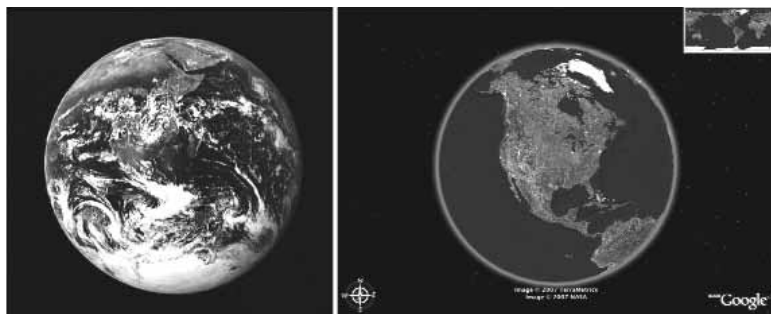
The earth as represented by NASA and Google Earth

evaluation into productive concepts', which suggests that an Endellesque voyeurism may be currently lurking within some supposedly critical architectural methodologies.

As it approaches a depiction of the absolute whole – that of planet Earth and its ecosystems – it is not certain whether the aerial view can any better evade this lure to aestheticise. Boldrick nonetheless reports that there have been ways in which the aerial view has led back to understanding: 'the elevated view grew out of ancient philosophical and medieval geographic and cartographic conventions, where images of the earth or world encouraged contemplation of its immense size and order, and the relativity and insignificance of human affairs.' If this sounds like pre-modern defeatism, it also indicates a way forward to the modern sublime in which astonishment forces a recoil to rational analysis.

> *'Geographical imagination transported the viewer from the representation towards an understanding of its reality; experiencing this transportation*

was made possible by "similitude": the mental ability to move from the small to the large and from the large to the small [...] help[ing] the viewer to form an image of the parts and the whole.'

There is a surprising correlation here with Endell, or more trenchantly with Georg Simmel, as reported by Eisenschmidt: 'the impressions of the metropolis needed to be engaged in order to facilitate an understanding of and to be able to navigate within modernity. [...] Both Simmel and Endell aimed at seeing not the entirety but fragments of the whole'.

The undertaking to see everything in relationship may be tragic and yet somehow moral. In 1968 the *Whole Earth Catalog* introduced to a mass audience NASA's first high-quality colour images of Earth by publishing them on its cover, providing the ecological movement with its icon. Yet the *Catalog*'s founder-editor Stewart Brand did not long entertain the idea that he could really see the whole earth in the *image* of the whole earth; he recognised it more, it seems, as an

'imago', an idealised mental picture, in this case of a world without political boundary or restriction to enquiry. In fact the problem of relating the parts to the whole is historically all too familiar to architects. It was a lesson learned, for instance, by the urban designers of the nineteenth century that a *sense* of the aggregate, always *out there*, was preferable, aesthetically and for the perception of the civic realm's extent, to focusing upon a single monument summarising a core truth.

The papers reviewed here show that architecture struggles with its vitiation by nature and political economy. Architecture could roll over and die, or go on the offensive with commanding schemes; but it might also offer a mediation with totality that does not further mystify or reify it. In *Design and Crime* (2002), the art historian Hal Foster asks what critically valid role remains for art. Foster says that art lives on in much the same way that Theodor Adorno decided that philosophy 'lives on because the moment to realize it was missed' – which is to say that philosophy, art, and (let us add) architecture are not ended by their inability to picture and transform everything, but rather find themselves still hard at work, compelled to speak of extrinsic concerns against 'the presentist totality of design in [consumer spectacle] culture today'.[1]

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Note

1. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 130.

E. Reclus, Frontispiece to *L'Homme et la Terre* (Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1905)

Critical distance

Even in photographs, there is something disturbingly 'in-your-face' about Marcel Duchamp's *Given* – which presumably was partly his intention – but it is also, to some extent, indicative of the inherent inadequacy of conventional photography to capture the nature of a piece that is so dependent on direct experience. Photography at once dispensing with the concealment provided by the door (through two eye-holes in which the work is intended to be viewed), and at the same time collapsing the deep three-dimensional space within which a reclining nude figure can be glimpsed. But for those of us who have never seen

Etant Donnés in the flesh, and are therefore reliant on such photographs, Penelope Haralambidou's fascinating account does much to explain the qualities of Duchamp's artfully constructed diorama (**arq** 11/1, pp. 36–51).

Its structure, we learn, can be understood as a model of perspective, in which the picture plane is represented by a wall through which an opening has been struck, and which thereby allows visual access to the naked figure that lies beyond. The picture plane, ordinarily a two-dimensional screen, separating the observer from the tangible solidity of three-dimensional space, is broken through and the scene 'blossoms' into the full spatiality of stereopsis. It is fitting, then, that a central feature of Penelope Haralambidou's analysis is her study of the irregular brick opening that frames and separates the viewer from the scene – its profile carefully manipulated by Duchamp to control and limit visibility. By accurately

Penelope Haralambidou's anaglyphic representation of Marcel Duchamp's *Given*

documenting the differences in view afforded by looking through each of the two peepholes, Haralambidou demonstrates how the managed relations between the viewpoints, the breach in the wall and the elements of the diorama are used to construct a highly controlled visual space. Out of this analysis, a convincing argument emerges, one that parallels the experience of viewing the *Given* with images viewed through the stereoscope. Binocular vision is here understood to offer visual contact – touching, as it were, the body with an aspect of vision that reaches out into the space. And as with the closed environment of the stereoscope, creating a 'private engagement between the observer and the secret luminous spectacle in the box [...]'.

Haralambidou's argument is utterly compelling not least, it seems to me, because there is something inherently ambiguous about the role of binocular vision in this scenario; a contradiction that Duchamp appears to have endeavoured to hold in delicate balance. Just as stereopsis can provide extension which reaches into the space, 'that sucks in the gaze, which remotely senses every element and visually touches the naked body' – it is also always just that – remote; binocularity by definition pushing the scene away into depth. Set against the accessibility offered by stereopsis in normal binocular vision, are the constraints and fixity imposed both by Duchamp's construction and by the stereoscope. Haralambidou's analogy between the *Given* and the stereoscope holds true, and as in the stereoscope this is also an exercise in distancing. The space in both the *Given* and in the stereoscope is accessible only through vision and, significantly, in both cases the viewer is fixed to the spot. Movement is restricted to the eyes alone. As Haralambidou explains, the *Given* captures a moment and as such, we are unable

to move from the point defined by that moment. Positioned thus (behind the door), we are held back, prevented from approaching the 'picture' – a distance and separation is maintained. And it is perhaps also the lack of such distance in conventional photographs of this piece that make them seem so disconcertingly close at hand. Only stereoscopic analysis, as Penelope Haralambidou so convincingly demonstrates, can hope to capture the unique and extraordinary viewing conditions under which the scene should rightly be observed.

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Judging the competition

I read with interest Torsten Schmiedeknecht's paper 'Karle / Buxbaum: the ordinary in procurement and design' (**arq** 11/1, pp. 16–35), in which the author comments, in relation to a pair of projects by the German architectural practice Karle / Buxbaum, on two approaches to design (the typological and the narrative) and their respective suitability to radically different procurement methods – the anonymous competition and the direct commission.

Coming from a practice whose commissions to date have resulted from competitions in 85 per cent of cases, I could not help myself making comparisons with our experience while reading the text. These observations form the basis of my commentary.

An additional layer of subject matter in Schmiedeknecht's text is Karle / Buxbaum's underlying interest in 'the ordinary'. While this is of course relevant to his argument, because the direct commission procurement method is more sympathetic to such an interest, I will not in particular address this issue, but rather his comments on the competition system.

Schmiedeknecht's thesis, logically presented, leads one to conclude with the author (and presumably the architects) that the competition process fails as a procurement method – both from the point of view of the architectural practice and the city,
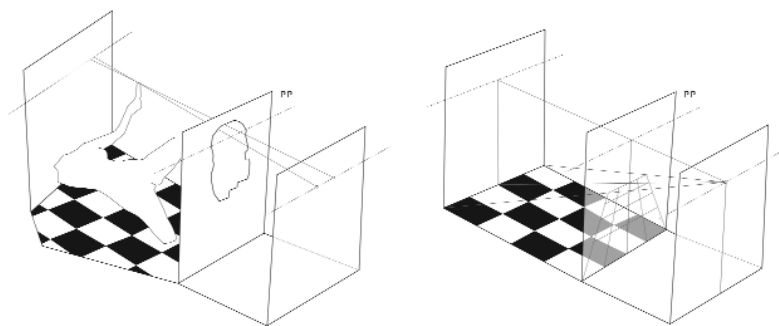
Comparison between diagram of perspective construction and layout of *Given* and Google Earth

Two projects by Karle / Buxbaum: Protestant Regional Administration building in Gernsheim (top), won through a competition, and the extension to Käthe-Kollwitz Primary School in Darmstadt, a direct commission

and by implication the client – even if one's interest lies outside 'the ordinary' or other areas that may be comparably difficult to communicate. However, I think that the author is greatly simplifying some of the issues under discussion.

For example, consider the jury. It is obvious that a successful anonymous competition is absolutely dependent upon the quality of the jury, and in particular on that of its chair. There is no reason why a jury comprising intelligent professionals – both from the realm of architecture and from that of the city and the client – should not understand the subtleties of an architectural or urban proposal, if these are well presented. A design whose main content (for the architects) lies in the refinement of its architectural design will also have to convince on

a strategic level, in terms of both its urban as well as its architectural concept.

Having sat on many juries (and having chaired a few of them), I agree with Schmiedeknecht's point that the jury, by the second or third round, will often tend to categorise the entries into formal types – the tower, the slab, the block, the free-form object, for example – for the purposes of initial comparison and discussion. But I cannot see this as a practice that *per se* is in any way detrimental to the fair judging of the schemes. If, however, the jury insists on taking only 'one of each' into the final round, rather than judging on the intrinsic merits of each of the schemes, then the author's criticism of a jury using typologies as a criterion for assessment may be appropriate, but this is simply a misguided and lazy practice.

I disagree with Schmiedeknecht's observation that the competition process encourages thinking about design in typological terms – and implicit here, I think, is also a criticism that thinking in types may preclude the evolution of more subtle ideas. Where is the problem? All architecture needs to be based on a sound strategy, both urbanistically and in the treatment of programme. In these strategic choices 'types' may occur within a competition as several designers make similar choices. But this certainly does not preclude the refinement that is necessary to allow the naked strategy (perhaps here read Schmiedeknecht's term 'typology') to evolve into both a sophisticated urban solution and a promising piece of architecture. Such refinement is certainly achievable within the parameters of most architectural competitions, so that the jury can be confident that in their selection both client and city are best served.[1]

Of course all good architecture is produced through a process of development that continues through all phases of design and realisation until the building is standing – and one has admittedly seen too many '1:500' buildings that do not seem to have evolved beyond their initial conception (whether procured through the competition process or not). But here I would also venture to state the corollary – that if a design cannot show its virtues at the preliminary design stage, it is unlikely to recover. Schmiedeknecht mentions that the subtle qualities of a scheme may only be developed in the later stages of design – this may be true, but they are of not much use unless applied to a design that already has a sound conceptual basis. I think therefore that there is no reason why Karle/Buxbaum's school could not have been procured in competition and subsequently developed – in dialogue with the client – to its final form.

In the author's description of Karle / Buxbaum's Gernsheim project, a method is described in which both the image and the construction of the project were not conceived at the time of the competition but followed later. In contrast, in all of our projects aspects such as image, construction, structure, material and sustainability are all integral to and inseparable from an integrated initial concept. Of course any building evolves considerably from its formation at the competition stage, but without

a strong guiding idea or concept such evolution may just end up being arbitrary.

Perhaps because the architectural competition is really the acquisition process with which we are most familiar, I also feel the need to point out what we believe to be two compelling advantages of the well-run architectural competition over the direct commission.

First, the independent work on a 'fully fledged' design prior to conversations with the client or city gives the architects a chance to question the brief and to come to conclusions that are outside the range of preconceived ideas and criteria. Too many conversations with the client or city, particularly at the early stages of a project, can seriously limit the intelligence of the solution.

The second advantage, however, is still more important. The jury acts as a consulting committee to the client. If a client body can trust the decision of a jury, it may choose an architectural concept that may be well beyond its own imagination. In many cases the competition process is one of learning for a client and often gives him a choice of solutions he had never expected. If a winning scheme has been selected with the authority of the jury, the starting point for the designing architect is obviously much more advantageous than a comparable situation with a direct commission. It again obviously depends on the client, but particularly institutional clients value the advice of a professional jury and act on their recommendation – much to the advantage of architects and architecture alike. Post-competition there is still ample time for interactive dialogue. However, should the communication be difficult, there is always an agreed competition concept to which one can return.

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Note

1. Until the 1980s there was a notable tendency in German competitions for the entries to concentrate on the strategic (mostly urban) solution and hardly to address the architecture at all. In all cases now, not least because of an increased awareness of and commitment to the sustainable agenda, facades are required to be detailed to 1:50 or 1:20 scale.

The contextual skyscraper?

Samer Abu-Ghazalah's paper (**arq** 11/1, pp. 81–88) tells an accurate, but unfortunately all-too-familiar, story. The International-Style skyscraper has progressed little in design terms since the pioneering work of Mies van der Rohe in 1950s Chicago created the ultra-efficient, rectilinear, air-conditioned box. The vast majority of tall buildings since then have been designed as either vertical extrusions of an efficient floor plan, or stand-alone pieces of high-rise urban 'sculpture'. In both cases the only relationship with the urban setting is a visual one – there is little connection between building and place.

This has led to the syndrome of tall buildings as 'isolationist' architecture – stand-alone, non-site-specific models that are readily transportable around the cities of the world. This has served to create an alarming homogeneity across global urban centres – a creation of a 'one size fits all' skyscraper 'mush', which dilutes rather than develops the essential cultural differences between places. In addition, tall buildings have become synonymous with the greatest excesses of energy expenditure – in both embodied construction and operation. In short, these tall buildings are helping to negate both the local and the global, which is the picture that Abu-Ghazalah paints in Amman.

It does not, however, need to be this way. In the need for denser, more concentrated sustainable cities which reduce the loss of green space and energy-intensive transport/infrastructure networks, tall buildings have an opportunity to reinvent themselves as the typology for a sustainable urban future – concentrated centres of live, work and play. These new skyscrapers will employ innovative forms, technologies and environments to face the challenges of the future climate-changed world. In this reinvention of the skyscraper form, designers finally have the opportunity to address the problem long-ignored; how to create appropriate local responses for a typology which has no local-vernacular precedent?

The future in this lies not in the literal or abstracted cultural symbolism that has seen numerous tall buildings based on smaller-scale vernacular forms internationally (e.g. Chinese pagodas), but in the reversion back to the initial, predominantly environmental influences on vernacular form. As Ken Yeang, perhaps the greatest advocate of this approach, has proclaimed:

'As the location's most endemic factor, climate provides the designer with a legitimate starting point for architectural expression in the endeavour to design in relation to place, because climate is one of the dominant determinants of the local inhabitants' lifestyle and the landscape's ecology.'

Abu-Ghazalah doesn't need to look too far for inspiration for this. Although a region with numerous (and increasing) examples of tall buildings that draw from only the international-iconic palette, the Middle East also has a few excellent examples of tall buildings that are inspired by place, in the process rejecting the somewhat perverse notion of creating all-glass, air-conditioned boxes in a hot, desert climate. The inverted glass facades and skygardens of SOM's triangular 1984 National Commercial Bank Jeddah make it certainly worthy of study (as no doubt Foster did with his Commerzbank Frankfurt proposal a decade later), as are the development of the stone skin beyond the NatCom Bank's austere facade, and the permeable stone skin of Nikken Sekkei's 1993 Islamic Development Bank in the same city. Both express something profoundly Islamic in their designs, as well as being a logical response to climate. And if there is a need to look to other Islamic regions for precedent, then it would be hard to find a better case study than BEP's 1984 Dayabumi Tower in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia – surely a model for a vernacular Islamic skyscraper if ever there was one?

Abu-Ghazalah's paper touches neatly on other disturbing aspects of the tall building in Amman – not least the fact that four-fifths of Jordanian inhabitants in the study

Image of the Jordan Gate project, currently under construction in Amman

want to see more (and taller) skyscrapers, but less than a fifth actually want to live in one! The fact that 98% of people surveyed in the study intimated that they would like to see the 'world's tallest building' built in Amman is testimony to the power such titles hold on the international economic (not to mention global-cultural) stage, but the tall building needs to be about more than icon and status. The quest to build tall has always been with us and, in the face of rapid urbanisation in the East, changing social demographics in the West and the need for more energy-efficient cities and lifestyles globally, the skyscraper is likely to become more ubiquitous. As Abu-Ghazalah hints, it is time that the designers of these buildings looked to 'place' for inspiration. A new, flexible vernacular for the skyscraper, malleable to place, is required. Architects like Yeang have been describing the way forward for some time now, but only a few have been listening …

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The good, the bad and the 'tall': the myth and misuse of the skyscraper in Middle Eastern cities

The paper by Samer Abu-Ghazalah (**arq** 11/1, pp. 81–88) presented a comprehensive account of the development of skyscrapers in Amman, Jordan. The author examined the context of recent development in Amman and proposed measures to improve the distribution of investment directions for urban growth in order to create a balance between real estate development, especially building projects, and other industrial and commercial investments that create jobs.

The situation in Amman represents a phenomenon that is sweeping Middle Eastern cities, to build the 'highest', the 'tallest' and the 'biggest' structures sticking out from the face of the earth to be viewed by the rest of the world. Dubai is constructing Burj Dubai to be the tallest building in the world. Kuwait has plans to build the 'One Thousand and One' metres high tower in its new Silk City project. The new skyscrapers act as 'map pins' to draw the attention of the world to cities of Middle Eastern and Gulf states. They are cries for

recognition and acceptance as part of the rapidly globalising world.

As a reaction to the pressures of globalisation, part of the society opted to retreat to the familiar inherited traditions and customs; another part elected to join the new world order and prove their competence and contemporaneity; and a third part is still struggling to integrate the new and the old, the local and the global, and the traditional and the modern. The skyscraper presents a challenge as a new building type that did not exist in traditional architecture of the region. While some attempt to 'dress-it-up' with elements and features borrowed from traditional buildings, the majority of skyscrapers constructed in Middle Eastern cities are comparable to skyscrapers found in other parts of the world utilising the same materials and construction technologies.

The Arab culture is in a state of duality, trying to incorporate the inheritance of the past utilising the resources and opportunities of the present. What is missing is a clear vision of what they want to be. To avoid the pitfalls of 'rigid' masterplanning approaches of the mid-twentieth century, a more dynamic and sustainable planning approach is required. Sustainable city planning should address issues of environment, economy and equality among people. It should continuously assess the impact of these new mega-projects and be flexible to adjust to changing needs and conditions. Planning should be viewed as a process not a product. People's participation in the planning should be an integrated part of the process. As illustrated by the paper, the spontaneous building of skyscrapers is causing many problems for the inhabitants of Amman City.

The growing number of tall buildings under construction in Middle Eastern countries is alarming. The skyline of Dubai looks more like 'a forest of tower cranes' than a city made for people. The price of these skyscrapers is counted not only in dollars but also in degraded urban environment, traffic congestion, and low quality of life. Only those residing on the upper floors of skyscrapers will enjoy a comfortable view of the bottom from the top.

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