Architectural Design In A Broader Spectrum Of Cultural Experiences: A Case Study For Hermeneutics In The Architectural Education

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ABSTRACT

While there has been a growing number of attempts, since late 1980's, to bring pressing questions of cultural relevance into architectural education, from issues of globalization and sustainability to philosophical discussions of socio-symbolic values and cultural mobility, the architectural design studio, the pedagogical core of architectural education, is still mostly formulated and conducted on the basis of a traditional pragmatic model of making buildings with a given set of parameters. Seemingly going beyond architecture as making buildings as a determination of form and perception, the attempts to weave architectural education into a broader cultural sphere usually fall back onto another way of making buildings, this time under other parameters than just form and perception, but actually without questioning the traditional modalities of place, program, occupation, or structure. From one extreme of Gestalt geometries and phenomenological fundamentalism to the newly emerging techno-scientific determinism, the *commonsense* understanding of buildings as responders to psychological / environmental / social *givens* form the underlying operational structure of the traditional architectural studio. While architecture is inevitably tied to other cultural constructs, the traditional studio setting falls short of addressing these other cultural constructs as themselves narrative structures and runs the risk of overlooking the inherent modal bond between architectural making and narrative construction. In what follows, I argue for a narrative modality for architectural studio education that levels architectural work with other cultural work in the making of our reality, rather than taking these as givens, and is formed around a hermeneutic exchange between various cultural experiences in the making of architecture. My presentation uses an architectural design studio conducted under these premises as a case study and critically presents the outcome of this studio as a model for an architectural education that is more responsive to representing our historical reality as it is constructed and re-constructed through cultural dialogue.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important insights offered by architectural theory is that a building task cannot be solved through intuitive improvisation. (Norberg-Schulz 1965, 217). There are days when no one should rely unduly on his 'competence'. Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed. (Benjamin 1928, 447)

When Norberg-Schulz was critical of an interiorized knowledge of making architecture under the characterization of 'intuitive improvisation', he might have been overlooking the fact that our relation to objectivity outside of us has always some degree of epistemic unpredictability. Our actions in the immediacy of here and now of concrete situations indeed necessitate a kind of practical judgment / imaginative projection (thus 'intuitive improvisation') beyond our categorical knowledge and theoretical judgments. Aristotle called this kind of judgment 'phronesis' realizing the limits of 'theoria'. Thinkers of the twentieth century, like Martin Heidegger (1927), Ernst Cassirer (1960), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960), Ernesto Grassi (1980), and Jacques Derrida (1973) among others, have constantly returned back to some form of this Aristotelian notion of practical judgment to reflect upon the problems of a pseudo-rationalized techno-bureaucratic modern world. Rather than focusing on possible structural epistemic conditions as with the Enlightenment philosophies, thinkers of the practical judgment take the meaning horizon one lives in as a starting point for the conditions of our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us. Marking the cultural unity as the background, the operating premise of phronesis is the interwovenness of various modalities of meaning in a broader field of consciousness. Unpredictable as to its historical movement, this broader view of knowledge leaves room for human agency, critical dialogue, and constructive imaginative leaps in the making of culture beyond the confines of a scientific or historical deterministic trajectory.

With the aim of bringing this insight into architectural education, I conducted a series of elective design studios between 2010 and 2013 at the University of South Florida School of Architecture and Community Design, where the emphasis was not on making buildings per se with a given set of parameters but thinking possible architectures to come within a larger set of cultural experiences derived from other narrative modalities like art and literature. Varied as to their specific contents, the underlying pedagogical core of these studios formed around the Aristotelian phronesis as a guideline for a critical formulation of architectural design as a hermeneutic action and unfolding the design process in terms of an internal unity of thinking in / through making beyond established disciplinary knowledge. In the following section, I present one of these studios where we investigated a city through the lenses of a filmic narrative with the aim of bringing forth unforeseen phenomenological structures that may overlay on our day to day interactions within the city, thus enriching the sense of urban life towards a more human and poetic modality.

HERMENEUTIC MEMORY AT THE EDGE OF MEANING:

RE-CONSTRUCTING COPENHAGEN

Because it is a world, the world of the text necessarily collides with the real world in order to 're-make' it, either by confirming it or denying it. However, even the most ironic relation between art and reality would be incomprehensible if art did not both disturb and rearrange our relation to reality.

(Ricoeur 1983, 361)

Architectural making is an act of speculation[i] to the degree that the architectural construct offers a new way of seeing and framing things in the way it narrates a life. The narrative possibilities of architectural space, the way the architectural object interprets life in its narration, are directly related to the structures of our lived experience where spatio-temporal consciousness is inseparably tied to our socio-psychological sense of being. However, the mainstream conceptions of architectural experience in contemporary literature mostly revolve around an idea of phenomenological consciousness which views our engagement with architecture at the level of a subject – object relation. The subject, however much her intentionality is embedded in her surroundings and life traditions, is still a subject as one hermeneutical node confronted with architectural objects. On the other extreme, there is also a strong literature in contemporary theory that dismisses the notion of experience altogether from the field of architecture. This latter view, in direct opposition to phenomenological approaches to experience, tends to understand architectural making solely based on socio-historical codes as part of a larger cycle of cultural production. I think that neither of these extremist views can fully account for the speculative nature of architectural making and our engagement with architecture when we understand architecture as a narrative intervention in the event space of life above and beyond a subject – object relation or a socio-economic determination.

Building on the interpretative and speculative nature of making architecture as a way of thinking in and of life, the studio first articulated on the narrative aspects of organizing space and time as making of an event in the texture of life, and then further explored these conceptual findings on a particular design exercise. The main conceptual apparatus of the study developed upon the notions of architectural image and design process by visiting writings of Gaston Bachelard (1958), Vittario Gregotti (1996), and Bernard Tschumi (1981, 1975). These two architectural issues were then discussed in a broader frame of the narrativity of artworks which is explored through the writings of John Dewey (1934), Theodor Adorno (1970), Martin Heidegger (1971), and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986). Beyond the notions of place or a particular programme or typology, the notion of image holds a poetic seed for an architectural unity that is cultivated in the multiplicity of mostly unpredictable life events. As an ensemble of things and events, and associations, projections, image goes beyond architecture and becomes a specific node in the texture of lived experience. Thus, with this notion of image as the starting point of design process, process becomes a hermeneutic journey into the possibilities of a given content. Much more challenging than a traditional setting where the design process usually starts with a given site and a program, image based design process forces the designer to cultivate a deeper sense of experience and understanding of constructed environment beyond habitual ways of making architecture. Of particular significance in this conceptual frame is the idea that our engagement with architecture is a function of a deeply layered memory where organizing space and time through objects is also a thinking of possible subject – subject relations in the experiential texture of life. This act of organizing space and time through architectural making is beyond a conception of making in the Platonic sense of concretization of a collective ideal because here the design act always involves an imaginative projection that re-informs reality through an individual interpretation.

Almost at random, our choice for a city to study was Copenhagen. Random, because any city can be a potential case when paired with a strong narrative. In this particular case, the choice was based on a film that takes place in Copenhagen (Christoffer Boe, *Reconstruction*, 2003) and opens up for different readings of the city in a rather convoluted socio-psychological terrain. In order to discuss the idea of city as a socio-phenomenological construct beyond the physicality of built environment, the students were asked to 'look at' Copenhagen through the interpretative lens of the film that has direct references, albeit in a dispositioned temporality, to its places as they become event-places within the narrative structure of the film. In a sense, the film was used as a probing device into the city, dissolving Copenhagen into a more fluid condition of memory-places beyond its tangible physical structures.

UNFOLDING THE FILMIC AND THE URBAN

Beyond a construction of the physical environment, the studio encouraged the students to unfold the indispensable narrative constructs that give shape to our experience of the city and architecture. Critically interpreting in collage studies how the film establishes its plot through making episodic event-places, the students further investigated the construction of their own Copenhagen as a new synthetic entity between the film and the city. Deriving heavily on the memory of event-places of the film, this new Copenhagen was first studied as a two dimensional map which reconstructs the existing map of the city according to the narrative structure of the film interpretations, literally by dislocating portions of the city and arranging them in a new order and scale. In the following phases, this imaginary map of Copenhagen was then interpreted to construct three dimensional models of the new city as a synthetic memory context that transposes both the existing Copenhagen and the filmic structure into a new narrative unity.

The film, with a photographic reference to memory, consisted of a series of distinct episodes which are place-time bound and shorter transitions between these (Figure 1). While viewing the film, the students
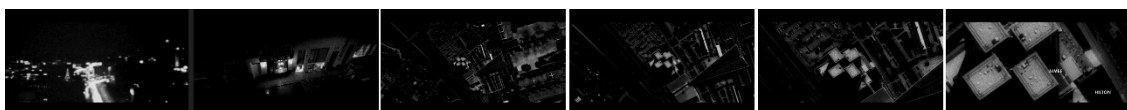

Figure 1.

were asked to pay close attention to the multiple camera angles strategically chosen to construct the layering of episodic place-events and characters' inner worlds. Of particular importance for us in our speculative readings of the film were the

following interrelated parameters:

1. Multiplicity of scales at any given moment: scale as an analytical too to establish relations. Physical scale and event scale.

2. Spatio-temporal distinctions: in-out / scale / vertical-horizontal / time-

pace / intersection- threshold-boundary.

3. The moving frame sequence and the narrative (story as one imagines it).

4. Characters' stream of consciousness.

5. Concealing-revealing, presence-absence, of things, characters, visions. Unfolding of place.

6. Gaze, parallax, act of framing and layering information on a filmic strip: camera movements (spatial and focal), angle of views, movement as measure, movement as making space, movement as revealing, body-vision-camera dialogues, reciprocity of things, characters, visions, movements.

7. Light / texture / space: the materiality of the filmic image.

8. The score and its relation to the moving image.

Thus, the initial objective in the studio was to unfold the construction of the filmic tectonic beyond the literary narrative, focusing on how the events of the movie were embedded and depicted through the construction of certain spatial conditions between objects and people and between people that have a specific bearing on the urban condition they are located in. The first set of studies were memory mappings that discussed the construction of the episodic urban locales in terms of the parameters listed above (Figure 2).
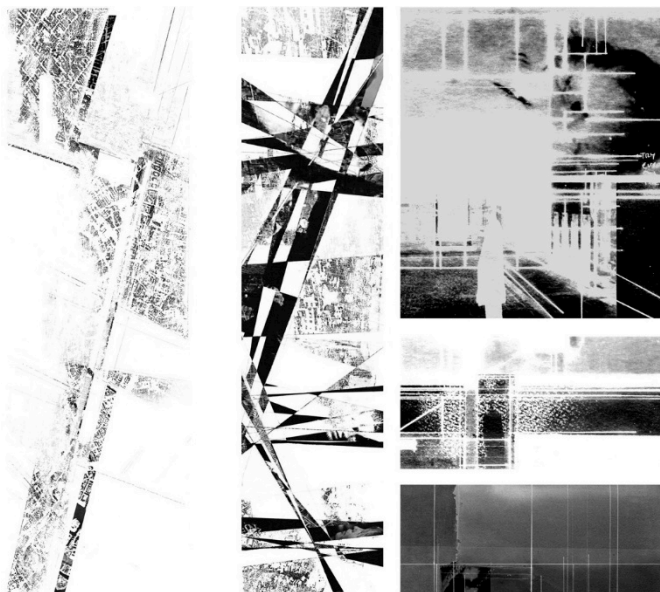

Figure 2.

Our second iteration was collage studies that further explored the construction of events and places as they unfold into an urban structure fluctuating between the physical and the phenomenal in an unlimited web of mnemonic trajectories. Special emphasis here was given to translations of the perspectival images into planar organizational ideas as a distinct moment of being in some place and in some situation (Figure 3).
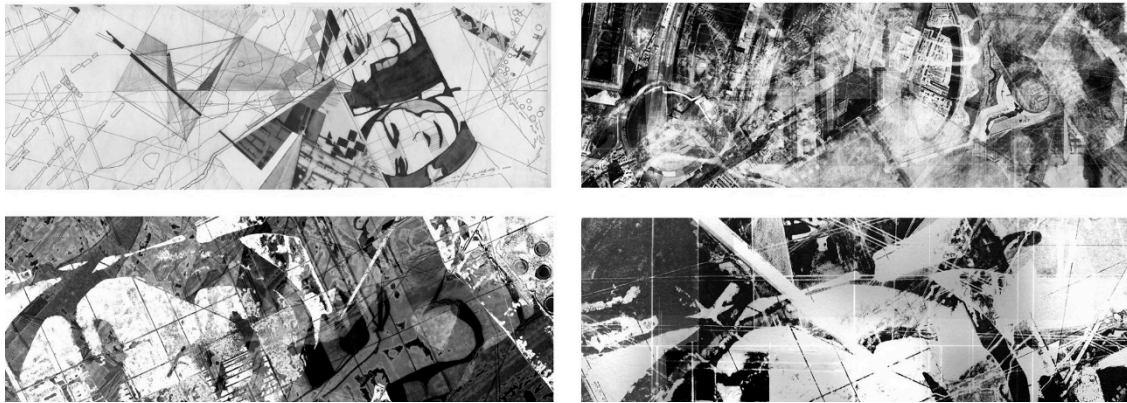
Figure 3.

The collage diagrams were more about capturing the phenomenal unity of places and events as they are constructed in time and space through various experiential modalities. In this sense, they were beyond any literal depiction of place-events as with traditional notations. Sublimating the original maps of Copenhagen, these diagrams can be understood as notational devices that could be translated into architectural possibilities in terms of the experiential content they embody without specifying a context of meaning or scale yet. They are at the edge of architecture, but not architecture yet. In the multiplicity of their synthetic references, they project architectural images, some being-in-such-and-such-a-condition, before the concretization of architectural forms or objects.

With this in mind, our next step was to look at projections of possible plan and section ideas for a construct-to-come out of these diagrams that will carry the experiential qualities of the interpreted episodes / scenes unified with a transformed Copenhagen (Figure 4). At this moment in the exercise, our relation to the city split into two related but distinct contexts of meaning. First, it was to be looked at as tectonic ground that could hold a multiplicity of experiences. Second, as the melting pot of the multiple experiences, it was also a fluid and layered matrix that was open to transformations as its narratives changed from moment to moment. These two conditions of the city were further investigated separately in changing scales of drawings and models. The first condition, city as the tectonic ground, was studied in mostly linear and planar diagrams where the aim was to establish a possible three-dimensional matrix structure that could accommodate plug-in interventions at different scales (Figure 5). The second condition, city as a morphing structure, gave way to larger scale diagrams that looked into possible ways of transforming the city texture by programmed interventions that opened up questions of occupation and lived experience as a knot tied between the larger patterns of the city morphology and the micro scales of the intervention (Figures 6-7).
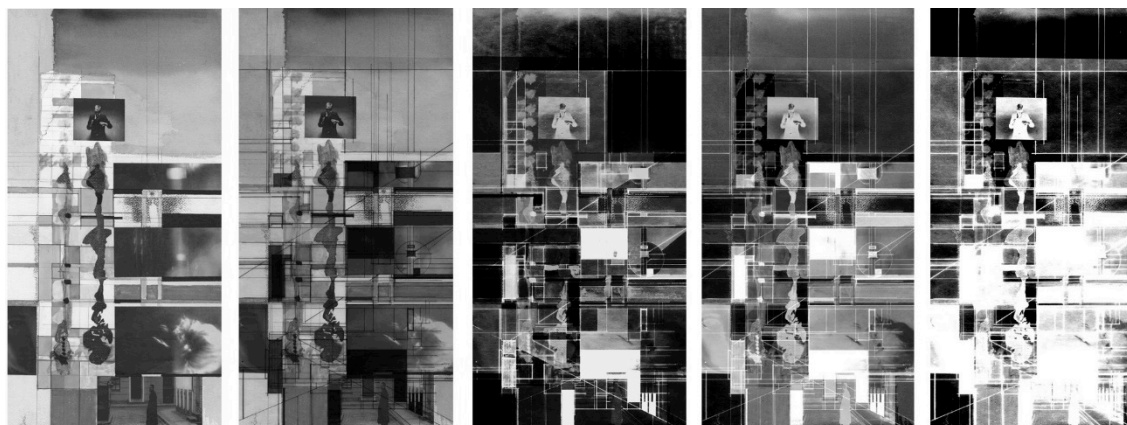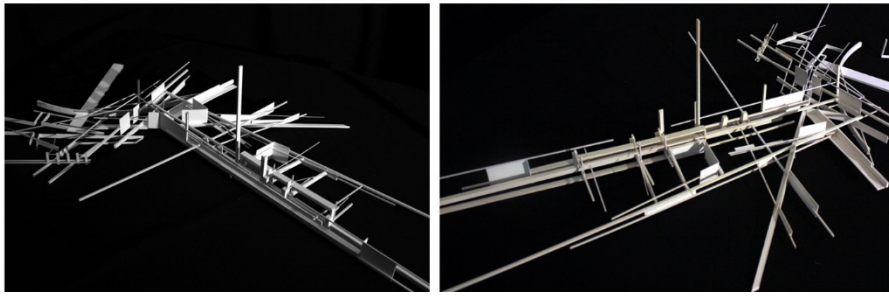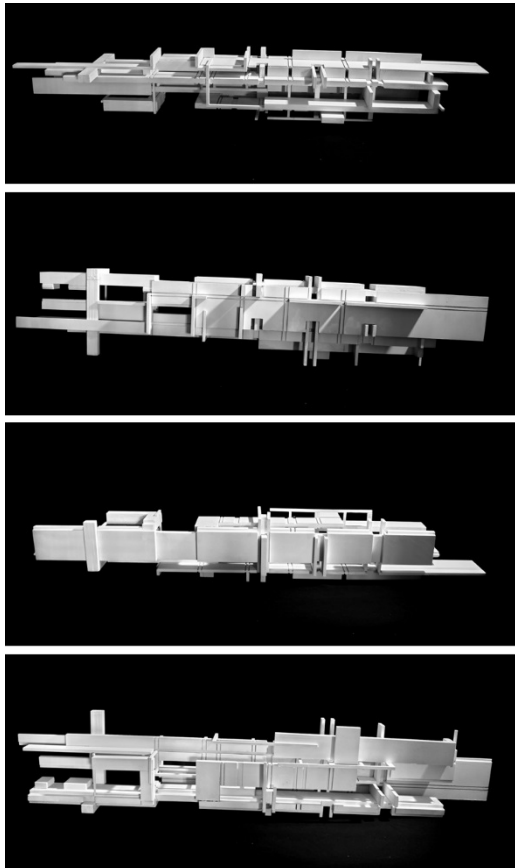

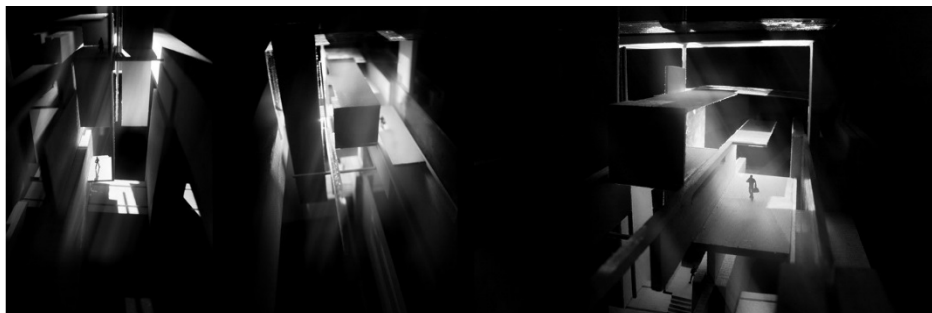Figure 4.

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

At the intersection of the physical, the phenomenal, and the social, the work in the studio at various scales and with various intentions, formulated a sense of place-events that were neither the filmic nor the architectural as we knew them prior

to this exercise. Beyond using the filmic narrative as a structural / symbolical analogue for architecture, beyond a metaphorical translation between the film and architectural space, this exercise through its intuitive steps shows the possibilities of using cultural catalysts in meaningful ways that contribute to our understanding of the nature of place making in the contemporary society not only as a distinct cultural modality but in its embeddedness within other modes of cultural experience, in the broader spectrum of a hermeneutic texture. This view is important in order for a healthy assessment of the value of cultural narratives in the making of architecture. While architecture is inevitably tied to other cultural narratives in the way it sets and regulates specific life conditions in the texture of life, to make these cultural narratives authoritative in architectural experience, or rather, to make these cultural narratives a necessary condition for experiencing architecture, misses the agency of architectural making in culture as a speculative act of thinking and making that forms new pieces of reality through imaginative interpretations that project possibilities out of the existing texture of culture. [ii]

DISCUSSION: HERMENEUTIC CATALYSTS IN THE DESIGN STUDIO

While using catalysts from various cultural modalities has been a common practice in architectural design since 1980's, the epistemic grounds of this practice and its pedagogical implications remain yet to be fully analyzed. The mainstream arguments in favor of using catalysts from other fields of culture in the making of architecture usually advance a sense of autonomy of the architectural design process in the construction of our cultural reality. However, a critical examination of the use of non-architectural cultural artifacts as generative devices in the architectural design process leads not only to an understanding of architectural making as a specific medium of intentionality, as the mainstream arguments conclude, but also underlines the organic embeddedness of this intentional modality within a broader space of experience, thus within the broader space of cultural making. In our first-person phenomenal experience, various works of art and culture stand in different experiential modalities. However, the possibility of translations between these, in particular the possibility of interpreting different cultural artifacts into architectural space and place, also points to a common ground of spatio-temporal consciousness that holds various modes of experience and media of intentionality together.

If our main mode of existence is a series acts of phronesis in a mainly hermeneutic universe, the web of cultural constructs that give shape to reality, the architectural design studio presented here acknowledges the multiplicity of narrative possibilities in the making of architecture. Rather than being in the service of this or that cultural narrative, architectural design registers its agency in a critical dialogue with other cultural constructs, and shows its ability to bring a new light into the larger texture of culture that holds various narratives, attempts at meaning, together. On the contrary to its traditional counterparts, where architecture is mostly left at the level of cultural re-presentation, where buildings respond to certain givens, this studio embraces a performative space for architecture, where the act of building is preceded by a thinking of the conditions of the object as a hermeneutic moment embedded in a larger dialogue. This performative space for architectural design merges the notions of thinking and making in the unity of a single action which is very different from the traditional notion of making as making within or upon received notions of what the object to be made is.

While not easy to argue for in the face of increasing conservative demands on architecture, because there is nothing architecturally produced in the traditional sense, no plans, sections, etc. of buildings or urban designs, a studio education like the one presented here may help cultivate a new generation of architects who do not just answer the questions posed upon them by society and culture at large, but can become agents that not only transform existing questions but also can register new questions with the intention of a better realization of our historical existence.

NOTES

[1] 'Speculation' is used here in reference to Igor Stravinsky's idea of poetic making as speculation: "The phenomenon of music is nothing more than a phenomenon of speculation. There is nothing in this expression that should frighten you. It simply presupposes that the basis of musical creation is a preliminary feeling-out, a will moving first in an abstract realm with the object of giving shape to something concrete" (1947, 28).

[1] The view that takes cultural narratives as the necessary condition for the meaningfulness of architectural experience is well exemplified in the writings of Marco Frascari and Dalibor Veslely. Underlying both authors' thinking on the value and role of cultural narrative is what Gunter Bandmann calls 'a wider nexus of ideas' as the source of any meaningful making in the broader space of culture. "To say that a work of art has a meaning is point to something, to some arrangement within a wider nexus of ideas that transcend the material and formal organization of the work of art. The realm of artistic is transcended in that the work of art comes to be understood as a metaphor, as a representative, as the material emanation of something else" (Bandmann 1951, 19). See also Frascari 1984 and 1991, and Vesely 2004.

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