Metamorphosis. On the role of fiction in architectural education
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once upon a place & haunted houses imaginary cities

1st International Conference on Architecture and Fiction

2011
Introduction

In tune with the groundbreaking ambition of the conference to discuss the ‘reciprocal effects of architecture and fiction’, my paper proposes a debate on the role of fiction in design pedagogy. Why address this issue? The interest of the conference’s motto ‘form follows fiction’ lies in the need to imagine the unexpected and the unpredictable. It is often said that fiction is escape, but the question is in what sense. According to Gilles Deleuze, ‘writing has an essential relation with flight lines. Writing is tracing flight lines, which are not imaginary, and which one is forced to follow, because the act of writing (écriture) really engages us with them, really makes us embark on them.’

Escape means a way out, and fiction has the capacity to invent just that. According to Richard Rorty in the 19th century literary fiction started to rival with science and religion, questioning their truths and multiplying their perspectives. ‘The great virtue of our newfound literary culture is that it tells young people that the only source of redemption is the human imagination. Literature offers redemption through making the acquaintance of as great a variety of human beings as possible.’ Rorty argues that literature liberates us from questions such as: ‘What is Being? What is really real? What
The logic of fiction

At the crossroads of the inevitable and the escape, fiction acts in a complementary way to design by sharpening the sense of reality and simultaneously instilling a sense of possibility – a famous word coined by Robert Musil in his novel ‘Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften’. How can reading a novel support the design of a building? What is the use of the mechanisms of fiction in architecture? Are they able to influence the script of the uses of space? How does the pedestrian, horizontal, retrospective, sometimes tragic gaze of the writer affect the more vertical, future addicted and epic gaze of the designer?

The Situationist movement of the 1960’s contributed to the critique of the paradigm of functional planning of the Modern Movement. Its ideas of narrative mapping of urban space criticised the assumption that the built environment is entirely the product of public authorities, professionals, institutions, and companies, and that the use of space is purely a matter of programmed consumption. The ‘narrative turn’ in spatial thought rehabilitates the ‘consumer’ and points to the role of representation, and therefore fiction. The issue is to understand and resist ‘the society of spectacle’ (Debord) and also to discover the ‘invention of everyday life’ and the vital creativity of ordinary people to ‘do with’ (faire avec) the space that is given (Certeau).

The logic of fiction

To read a novel, to watch a film or to see a play can make a student aware of the way people use rooms, buildings, streets, cities, and landscapes. It deepens the understanding of the ambivalent notion of habit (Bourdieu) by relating it to memory and oblivion, to desire and fear, to language and the unconscious, to action and dream. Could the logic of fiction and its power to mirror the reading subject in the opaque object that a text constitutes, result in architectural figures, or even in a method of design? Describing a hypothetical novel, Philippe Sollers, novelist himself as well as theorist, proposes a spatial idea of the text. To enter a text by reading (and to leave it by writing) involves the imagination of space. ‘A strange reversal has happened: the reader believed he was penetrating a sort of tunnel extending in front of him. Pushing the frontier of a representation of that of which he would have remained the more or less interested or sceptical reader [it is] as if the form he finds before his eyes possessed the opacity of a tympanum at the same time as the clarity of a mirror.’ (‘Logique de la Fiction’, p. 16, my translation) ‘The book he is holding in his hands, this novel, seems right from the first pages to escape from the fatal announcement of the mental landscape to which a reader one day decided to limit himself. In fact, our reader has always dreamed of meeting a story that was not irrevocably past, unreal, an action that he would immediately ascribe to.’ (ibid. p. 17) Sollers defines the ideal power of fiction as follows: ‘Man does not really know what he can think – fiction is there to teach him. The world, my mind, I myself, all of them are fictions. Fiction is the antidote. Reality is to be extracted.’ (ibid. p. 19)

Student projects

I will now discuss show a few surprising products of architectural students who combined fiction and design. It is not at all about simply translating a novel into architecture. Rather, the novel is used as a machine of inner vision: beyond images it offers imagination. Two spaces communicate: that of literature and that of architecture. A few years ago I started a graduate studio where on the side of literary space were figuring, for example, Kafka, Metamorphosis, Burroughs, The ticket that exploded, Danielewski, House of Leaves, and Walter Gibson, Neuromancer, corresponding respectively to the architectural spaces of a minimal refurbishment of an empty leather factory to suspend its imminent demolition, to the purposeful shock of a district in Brussels by a design of an urban Certosa (monastery), to a seepulchral memory park entered across the motorway, and to an eerie health resort in a birch forest on a coalmine debris.

The last design, a ‘technological oasis’ as ‘an escape to a multisensory virtual reality’ was made by Jeroen Helder who graduated in March 2009 and is now a practising architect. He read cyberpunk literature to understand the digital era. He programmed the corporeal experience of virtual reality in the guise of a resort that cures the over-stimulated body. Bathing, floating, and almost flying you experience the ‘bodiless exultation’ described by Gibson and enter the ‘nonspace of the mind’. At first sight looking like a clinical laboratory, the sanatorium appears in a different light when you undergo its treatment. It is white in many gradations, misty, steamy, milky, and crystal clear. White are both the atmosphere and the tectonics, the latter materialized for instance in nano-foils that behave as interface. Jeroen made detailed designs for all the attributes, like sauna’s, salt baths, or whirl pools, to find non-standard solutions for integrating the installations in space.

Servie Boetzkes graduated in September 2009 with the design for a monastery, which he called a ‘psychodysepticum’. The term is borrowed from William Burroughs and denotes a shock that frees images of the words that label them, which is also the effect of his famous writing method: the cut up. Servie walked and mapped
the centre of Brussels, a city that intrigued him for its aggressive contrasts, and chose a ‘terrain vague’ on a boulevard bordering on a neighborhood labeled as the most disfavored. Rejecting politically correct or economically viable solutions he ultimately proposed the idea of the monastery. He elaborated the self-sufficient program in a labyrinth that should offer moments of enlightenment to the secluded monks, as wonderful light ‘cuts up’ the repetitive life they live. An oasis in the urban desert, it presents itself as a formidable monolith – the distillery of ‘Chartreuse’ provides the only link.

Boundaries

I will now discuss work of an ongoing studio that tackles the Via Flaminia in Rome between Porta del Popolo and Ponte Milvio. In 1764, in his Ichnography of the Campo Marzio, Gianbattista Piranesi reconstructed this area in imperial days as a horse-racing track surrounded by labyrinthine buildings devoted to funerary and religious cults, and to sport and leisure. When, shortly after Piranesi’s death, Giuseppe Valadier was commissioned to make a design for the extension of the city to the north, he called it ‘Nuovo Campo Marzio’. His grandiose scheme with planted avenues was not carried out, but somehow the geometry persisted. Since the late 19th century it was slowly built up with ‘Case Popolare’ and bourgeois ‘palazzine’ as well as state institutions. Later it also became the place for sports and games, which it still is. It is a desirable residential district, with shops and services, between the river Tiber and the Pincio and Parioli hills. The district was recently ‘put on the map’ by Renzo Piano’s ‘Parco della Musica’ and the just opened MAXXI art and architecture building designed by Zaha Hadid.

The students did fieldwork, prepared with Ferdinando Fava, an urban anthropologist who studies the poetics of inhabitation. After a week of intensive observations they chose a neighbourhood called the borghetto Flaminio: overlooked by official authorities and the informal tactics of inhabitants, also read a novel about insidious state power. The shadow of the wind a novel by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, describes Barcelona in the days of rising fascism, against which - and partly in complicity with - the world of the book wields a desperate battle. Jeroen decided to situate a stage’ intimacy (for which he drew on The journals of Curt Cobain). The solid hollows (galleries, balconies), the ones accommodating the ‘swarming intelligence’ of crowds (which he analysed in the film Koyaanisqatsi) and the others offering ‘back stage’ intimacy (for which he drew on The journals of Curt Cobain). The solid hollowed like a Swiss cheese stages personal lives at the cross roads of popular events.

Reading a novel is entering someone else’s head. It helps architects to unlearn patronizing attitudes towards the users and to be able to adopt their point of view. Chantal Spaan read novels about blind persons and/or of blind authors, like Touching the rock by John M. Hull, and Ruw (Rough) by Marie Kessels. Then she explored the Via Flaminia blindfolded. In her design of a house for a blind sculptor she uses her discoveries to shape the invisible, which is partly tangible (bodily sensations except sight), partly intangible (thoughts and feelings). The idea is to conceive space like a blind person explores it: from detail to totality. This haptic experience permeates the visual realm shared by the other inhabitants and visitors.

In Rome official planning and popular behaviour clash as nowhere else. Jeroen van Poppel, who studied The Invention of Everyday Life of Michel de Certeau to understand ‘spatial practices’ in the tension between the formal strategies of public authorities and the informal tactics of inhabitants, also read a novel about insidious state power. The shadow of the wind a novel by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, describes Barcelona in the days of rising fascism, against which - and partly in complicity with - the world of the book wields a desperate battle. Jeroen decided to situate a prison for young criminals in our area, and confront a dilemma: does the prison serve to satisfy and protect society or to punish and educate the delinquent? Jeroen adopted the usual conception of a closed prison with schoolrooms, workshops, and playgrounds, modifying the official strategy to leave room for individual tactics of sensorial and mental escape towards the city.

The flaneur, one of the heroic types of metropolitan life, is trapped today in a consumer paradise. Benjamin described the defeat of the arcades in the face of the rise of a new phantasmagoria of merchandise: the department store. What is the meaning of parading the street today, when digital media copy shopping malls and vice versa? After reading Benjamin, Hofmann, and others about taking a bath in the masses or roaming deserted streets, Percijn Vlaming was intrigued by a film by
Hitchcock. It set him on the trace of the immobilized drifter, an injured photographer, whose worldview is reduced to a rear window on a back yard. Pericijn transposes this view to artist studios grouped around a court. The windows are designed for glimpses rather than for the view. Exhibits will attract flaneurs to catch a glimpse.

The borghetto Flaminio has a history of traffic related business, to which a monumental cast-iron streetcar depot testifies. In synergy with existing enterprises, mainly car repair, Tim Loeters designs a ‘scuola tecnica’, a college for pupils aged 12 to 17. Key issue is to prevent anonymity, causing pupils to drop out and teachers to burn out. Tim read Louis Paul Boon’s novel De vergeten straat (‘The forgotten street’) about a rural road cut off by sprawling Brussels. Through a back yard, it communicates with the metropolis and succeeds in surviving by becoming a miniatura city. This fiction became the key to unlock an interior landscape of classes, shops and ateliers and bring the street inside.

Somewhere in Budapest a street has ceased to exist because of war. It is still there but the people who lived there are gone. It relives in memories, and thanks to a book: Katalin Street, a novel by Magda Szabó that Sarah Boschman read. Fiction may offer reconciliation, instilling a sense of possibility in an unbearable reality. Sarah transplanted this attitude to prostitution. Rome is full of ‘piquant’ stories, from the ancient lupanar to the brothel scenes of Fellini Roma. More than to legalize (Berlusconi is against, but a growing majority of Italians is for), the idea is to urbanize a phenomenon that is inseparable of the street. Sarah designed a series of spaces, where the gaze of the client will match the gaze of the prostitute, the roles of the voyeur and of the ex-patient that is inseparable of the street. Sarah designed a series of spaces, where the gaze of the client will match the gaze of the prostitute, the roles of the voyeur and of the exhibitionist exchanging masks. Having read about Freud’s word for repressed anxiety, ‘unheimlich’ (a concept inspired by a novel!), she explored reversals of the familiar.

The last of the seven designs is a TV studio by Leonie de Heer. She is intent on hitting the Achilles tendon of Italian politics, which controls the media that constantly diffuse stories to detract people from reality. Leonie read novels and essays dealing with street life and urban space in general, among them ‘Let the party begin’ by Niccolò Ammaniti. Dissatisfied with the mere creation of a satirical magnifying glass, she adds an open-air theatre for commedia dell’arte and debate. The TV studio should act as a kind of ‘third space,’ that Soja defines as the space where action and representation are simultaneous. Studio, theatre and café are a spider in the local network, jealously guarded by the neighbourhood against the mafia, as it is broadcasting real news and different stories that contribute to the creation of a different reality. More than the other projects it is this designs which joins those of the seven students in a super-story.

Conclusion

If the literary gaze is instrumental in the pedagogy of design, it is because of its singular knowledge. Taking place in subjective space, fiction doubles the existing world with a possible world – not just any possibility! For it is the art of fiction to steer a story on a circuitous course to redemption after traversing the ‘wishless unhappiness’ (title of a novel by Peter Handke – meaning not an undesired misfortune, but a life lived without desire). The redemption is not in the (happy) end (rarely) but in the way. Blanchot has written about ‘literary space’ that it opens the way for ‘the book to come’, which in our studio meant the city to come.⁸

I hope that the exchange of fiction with spatial disciplines and practices can make architecture students immune to a generic design culture that promotes the forever new. Literary culture sharpens our sensitivity for the existing environment. A ‘poetic realism’ which spells the opacity of the letter and deploys the subjectivity of the figure, could inspire imaginative transformations of the given city by conceiving its metamorphosis. The belief in tabula rasa planning that dictated the ‘functional city’ can be abandoned in order to do with the tabula plena and enjoy it.⁹

ENDNOTES

2 Gilles Deleuze, Claire Parret, Dialogues, Paris: Flammarion, 1977
10 Alessia de Biase, ‘Pour une poétique du “faire avec”’, in Donner lieu au monde. La poétique de l’habiter, actes du colloque Cerisy-la-Salle, 11-17 sept. 2009 (forthcoming)