SAMPLE READING RESPONSES, FROM FOUR DIFFERENT STUDENTS IN TWO DIFFERENT SEMESTERS

Throughout the course we have been looking at the manner in which language affects the creation and reception (reading and writing) of architecture; the codes it speaks (and the epistemologies wrapped up in those codes). In that light, it is of note that this weeks readings speak not only to the languages, or sign-systems that architecture materially speaks, but also of the systems which are used to speak about architecture.

Specifically Wright speaks to the manners in which new forms of media (widespread printed magazines and books) constructed Victorian era American notions of a proper dwelling, moving it-for the middle class- beyond conceptualizations of house (or houseness) and towards that of home. These new conceptualizations, fostered in Wright's view by "plan books", created a specifically American sense of the home in that they wrested control from the elites (specifically trained architects) and instilled mid to late 19th century notions of individualism, freedom, liberty, et all in terms of who designed the house and the sign languages those homes spoke. The spread of American middle class home ownership was inscribed by both ideology and aesthetic, spread by magazines, which served to home the house and by association write onto the living space certain Victorian notions of "being American" as well as particular class, gender and socioeconomic signs. Thus by making the language of architecture something what was not held by an elite class and was instead part of the everyday/everyman vernacular architecture was popularized and more open to discussion and planning by those who were to inhabit the dwellings.

Likewise, in speaking on how architecture is in media and vice-versa Colomina shows how new forms language about architecture (full scale models in particular) change public conceptions of domestic space.

It is interesting to relate these two readings to the lecture/presentation you gave several weeks ago which investigated how new modes of computer generated architectural renderings change the manner in which public discourse work in and around public architecture projects. (While I remember your talk focusing upon public libraries in particular, it seems logical that it could extend to any public design process, or even the act of hiring an architect for a private project). It seems that in the case of modern CAD (and 3D fly-by's etc.) an increased ability for the language used to conceptualize what might be in space in manners which are complete and un-ambiguously "readable" by the general public have the counter-intuitive effect of closing-off the ability for true dialogue about what should-be to take place. It seems that working backward through history the same may be said to be true of earlier types of vernacularization of languages used to speak about domestic space. In the specific case of "plan books" did this generalization of the language engender organic living oriented spaces which served every family or instead re-inscribe unhelpful Victorian industrial notions of capital, gender roles, and consumption?

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Manufacturing Desires: Plan Books, Packaged Design

"An act of interpretation [of architecture] is also present in the different modes of representational discourse: drawing, writing, model making and so on." With this quote, Beatriz Colomina sets the stage from which this week's readings, and our thinking thereof, proceed. Representational discourse here is a function of the reproduction of the architectural object, a reproduction that does not exist separately from the actual production of architecture, but is instead cyclically intertwined with that production. The architectural "object" itself no longer has the same strength of meaning or authority (in the classical sense, or even in the Modernist sense that Colomina argues must itself be "reinterpreted"); rather, it is its reproduction, and its wide dissemination through media forms, which represent the new production of architecture. In mass production-oriented capitalism, according to Colomina, it is the audience of consumers (the new "users") that gives meaning to architecture. Reproduction is an act of interpretation, and so is consumption. The media provide a new context for architecture's production, a context "existing in parallel with the construction site," which is a notion that gets right at the heart of the matter.
Lacan's "mirror stage" has fascinating implications for understanding the relationship between architecture, media, and culture. The mirror, according to Lacan, constructs the self. The media can be conceived of as a mirror for architecture, thereby constructing architecture and transforming its cultural meaning by virtue of that construction, a meaning located in the distribution and consumption of media itself. Media can also be considered a mirror held up to culture; individual consumers might construct their own identity through this mirror, as they do in the case of Neil Leach's "Wallpaper Person". Architecture (and design), as exemplified in Wallpaper, are less "real" things and more akin to dreams and fantasy, a situation that comports with a larger cultural sensibility—shaped by wealth and material excess—wherein lifestyle consumers live in a narcissistic bubble of aesthetics (and anaesthetics, as Leach puts it). Magazines like Wallpaper reflect and construct this sensibility all at once. Architecture is divorced from its actual construction. Indeed, it is divorced from any social conditions whatsoever, which is one of the troubling aspects of contemporary mediated life in general.

Of course, architecture's interpretation through the media, and the interpretations made by the architectural consumer, are not 20th century postmodern phenomena. Gwendolyn Wright teases out the relationship between architecture, media and consumers in a 19th century context. Clearly there are parallels with Leach: the dissemination of pattern books and "house beautiful"-type publications that expressed and reinforced increasingly powerful interpretations of home as a zone of the "private" and a site of consumption. This developing interpretation merged with increasing mechanical production of both homes and furnishings, which takes us back to Colomina. One major difference between the Victorian and the Wallpaper Person, at least as personified in these works, is that there was an acknowledgement of class differences in the Victorian building programs, and a strong belief in the association between the home and the larger morality and well-being of society.

I found all this week's readings extremely interesting, especially Pierluigi Serraino's discussion of the class-coded visual lexicon used in architectural photography and James S. Ackerman and Robert Ewall's retracing of the practice's roots in landscape paintings, travel literature, engravings, and early photography. Most enlightening, though, were the strange similarities and contrasts between Serraino's discussion of the parallel careers of the architect and her/his photographer, and Ackerman's allusion to conservation efforts built around architectural photography. These two uses for images of buildings call to mind two opposite impulses: using photography to immortalize a particular vision of architecture; and using photography as part of an argument for the conservation of the actual building. Photography suddenly serves a double purpose with respect to architecture: freezing a building in a specific time and state for diffusion far from its physical location; and providing evidence of a building's merit in its particular state and place.

This immediately evoked two Roland Barthes analyses, The Death of the Author and Camera Lucida, both of which address an interpretive obsession with authenticity. In the former Barthes questions the necessary validity of authorial intentions, instead arguing that great works of art can and should produce different interpretations upon each reading. In Camera Lucida, Barthes contemplates the strange temporal dislocations introduced by photography, suggesting that its subjects are inherently ghostly because the moment captured on film is immediately gone. The collaborative artwork of architectural photography, and its use in conservation campaigns introduces an interesting ripple to this discussion.

After all, as we've discussed since the beginning of the semester, architecture is among the most polysemic of artworks, its interpretation at least slightly different for each viewer. Architectural photography, especially the variety discussed by Serraino, seems aimed at fixing a building's interpretation based on one or a series of author-approved images. Here, then, the architectural photographer could be said to be imposing a particular interpretive articulation of a building. As Barthes might put it in The Death of the Author, architectural interpretation is focused and restrained by the author's selective photograph imagery. Meanwhile, photography for conservation purposes presents a different, contradictory interpretive paradigm. Here, the image becomes a kind of argument for the importance of the building itself. By highlighting certain unique features and qualities, the architectural conservation photograph presents an argument for the value of the original building. The photograph isn't intended as an art object in its own right (though it may become one, as Ackerman shows), but instead serves as proof of a (potentially) lost original. Architectural photography, it seems, substitutes itself for the building as the object of interpretive significance. These disjunctures point to a more fundamental question recurring throughout this class: the inherent un-reproducibility of architecture and the persistent obsession with trying to represent it in various mediated reproductions.

In this week's reading, Mark Hewitt and James Ackerman build on our course-long investigation of the rhetorical and semiotic functions of architecture by evaluating the role played by the technology of architectural conception: drawing. While their sort of genealogical methods of charting a communication practice and technology as it developed over time is not a novel approach among our readings, they do provide us with a critical shift: emphasizing the means of conception, a distinctly cognitive approach. Calling upon Gombrich and Foucault, Hewitt argues that architectural drawings are rich objects of study that "touch upon aspects of the psychology of representation and the structure of thought." This line crystallizes our work over the course of the semester, as I believe we can in some sense consider every aspect of the interrelationship of media and architecture from the angle of "representation and the structure of thought."

Hewitt considers how a drawing embodies a certain perceptual framework, largely through the particulars of its perspective. And he seems to assert that architectural drawing is a powerful tool for studying a kind of social cognition, for evaluating the dominant or even simply the existing optics. He comments that "larger issues about the nature of thought processes and the way drawings are made deserve consideration by theorists and scholars."

This articulation is quite useful for considering our course in broader sociological context, in terms of the role communication forms play in revealing to us particular "structures of thought," especially when we evaluate these form in relationship to some sort of productive human enterprise. As I have noticed in previous weeks, the interrelationship of architectural production and the communication forms and technologies used to describe, explicate, design, and document it is both general and particular. While architecture carries its own unique relationships, much of our study seems transferrable to other productive human enterprises that might also evolve roughly in step with these communication forms and technologies--- say, sports or music. As products, I imagine we could chart similar genealogies, and glean similar insights in terms of representation and structure of thought. To put it another way---beyond an exclusive concern with the role of media, these studies allow us to consider the interrelationship of tools and products.

While symbolic form is relevant---Ackerman is sure to emphasize the importance of paper's rectangular shape, for example---Hewitt and Ackerman also provide an opportunity to reflect on a certain materiality of thought, or at least the role of materials in helping to shape that thought. Ackerman, especially, explores how various drawing instruments create different impressions on a page and in so doing constitute a specific phenomenology for the drawer. As an idea or sketch of building is constituted by these technological factors, the end result is likewise its expression.