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ICONOPHOBIA. ARCHITECTURE AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Abstract

On February 9, 2011, the Yale School of Architecture (YSOA) hosted a symposium titled *"Is Drawing Dead?"* Organized by Victor Argan, the event featured a number of renowned speakers, including Massimo Scolari, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Peter Cook. It was accompanied by the exhibition *Massimo Scolari: The Representation of Architecture*, whose contents served as a bold statement and a clear negative response to the symposium’s provocative title.

However, the defense of traditional drawing offered by the speakers, alongside the artistic aura of Scolari’s work, seemed insufficient to ease the concerns of Yale’s faculty. Seven years later, in February 2018, the same institution hosted another exhibition—*The Drawing Show*, curated by Dora Epstein Jones and previously displayed at the A+D Museum in Los Angeles. This exhibition revisited many of the unresolved arguments left in the wake of the 2011 symposium. “We now find ourselves,” said Dean Deborah Berke in her opening statement, “entering a new phase of representation as the *fear* of losing authorship, identity, and control to the computer subsides.” Epstein Jones joined the conversation, passionately observing: “The practice of architectural drawing has changed *dramatically* over the past twenty-five years. The traditional pro forma of the sketch (or *parti*) that

would eventually lead to a plan, section, and elevation has given way to exploratory forms of representation."

This growing concern over the evolution of architectural drawing gained further momentum in 2014, when David Sheer, a practicing architect and Yale graduate, published *The Death of Drawing*. The book contributed to the ongoing discourse on the state of drawing and the implications of advanced digital tools. At the same time, another Yale faculty member, Mario Carpo, entered the debate from a less critical and more exploratory perspective, publishing *The Second Digital Turn* in 2017. Carpo's work examined many of the same issues as Sheer but with a more nuanced curiosity about the potential of the "digital revolution", seen from the point of view of a scholar of architecture theory and criticism.

The Yale sequence of events is just one among many platforms where the role of drawing in the digital age is being critically examined. Even considering the specific school's relatively "conservative" approach to architectural design/drawing, it is clear that the issue remains pivotal. It will inevitably shape the future of architectural representation, underscoring the need for further research and investigation.

Research Themes

Building on this broadly acknowledged context, this paper aims to explore two interconnected themes: one internal to the theory and practice of architecture, and the other broader, encompassing the wider universe of representation, imagery, and visual culture.

The first focus is on how the established role of drawing in architecture is being challenged, not only by advances in digital technology but also by external forces in visual and performative arts, social and political commitment, and environmental consciousness. The second highlights a range of interdisciplinary topics that arise when shifting from traditional representation—rooted in the use of analog and early digital media—to simulation. These simulations are not only easily achievable through advanced technology but also rapidly expanding in scope and application.

Structure of the Presentation

The presentation is structured into three sections:

1. **Historical Context**:

   The first section outlines the historical role of drawing in architecture, beginning with Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (1452, printed only in 1485), whose eco on the theory of drawings will reverberate into Raphael's famous letter to Leo and the illustrated edition of Vitruvio's *De Architectura* (Fra' Giocondo, 1511). It traces the evolution of architectural drawing through to the 20th century, culminating in its recognition as both an autonomous art form and a valuable commodity, as exemplified by works from Luigi Moretti, Carlo Scarpa, Aldo Rossi, Giorgio Grassi, and others, many of them now housed in the MAXXI collection.

2. **Contemporary Perspectives**:

This section, closely tied to an ongoing curatorial project we're developing at MAXXI, investigates the current state of architectural drawing. It examines three conditions that challenge the medium:

- The **hyper-digital**, where the design process is a dynamic, algorithm-driven continuum that resists the possibility of static representation.
- **Alternative practices**, which draw on methods from the art world, including collage, performance, modeling, photography, and textile-based approaches.
- **Activist attitudes**, where architecture becomes an instrument of social and political action, critiquing traditional design processes as environmentally harmful or profit-driven.
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3. **Future Directions**:

The final section broadens the discussion to address the evolving role of the image in a world where the very concept of representation is being questioned. This includes examining its dual role as both a medium for conveying meaning and an object of inquiry in its own right.

Summary of Approach

In summary, the presentation begins with a concise review of the cultural history of architectural drawing, transitions to a curatorial analysis of its present state, and concludes with a scholarly exploration of emerging research directions. Together, these sections aim to illuminate the evolving role of drawing and representation in architecture and beyond.

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1. CONTEXT (*The State of the Art of Drawing*)

We're aware that this presentation is today primarily addressing an audience of non-specialists in architecture. However, many of them are likely familiar with the concepts of visual communication, image, and representation. Therefore, this first section, which introduces the debate on the state of architectural drawing, can focus on highlighting key features that distinguish architectural drawing from other forms of drawing and representation in the arts and visual communication.

From this perspective, it is worth emphasizing a few main characteristics of architectural drawing. First, unlike art, architectural drawing is not the work itself but a representation of another object, which is the actual work. In essence, it is the representation of a representation. Second, especially when used in the design process, it represents something that does not [yet?] exist—an object to come, or an illusion. Finally, unlike other fields of visual communication, architectural drawing often adheres to rules defined by conventions or, in many cases, by the rule of law.

Based on these premises, we can draw from the many studies on image and visual communication developed both within this institution (David Freedberg, Andrea Pinotti, Michele Cometa) and elsewhere (Alloa, Montani, Bruno, Wood, and others). However, we must also recognize both the unique limitations and the alternative powers of architectural drawing.

[A Brief Historical Overview]

As is widely known, architectural drawing became an unquestionable public and disciplinary tool with the publication of Leon Battista Alberti's *De Architectura*. Illustrated books written by Renaissance architects or theorists served as media both for the viewer or user of architecture and, more importantly, for communication among architects. This development, as clarified by Alberti, marked the separation between drawing (*disegno*, meaning also "design") and construction (*materia*, meaning "materials" or "building"). This separation allowed architecture to emerge as a discipline and made theoretical discourse possible.

Subsequent treatise writers—such as Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Sebastian Serlio, Vignola, Palladio, and Scamozzi—built on Alberti's achievements and the first illustrated editions of Vitruvius's *De Architectura*. The autonomous power of *disegno* is particularly evident when used to communicate ideas not intended to become actual buildings. For instance, the famous "Tavole di Urbino" (paintings produced in the context of the Montefeltro court) represent the *ideal city* as opposed to the real one, created decades before Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and over a century after (1602) Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*. Since the 15th century, the concept of utopia has been a key ally of the visionary power of architectural drawing (see for instance the city of Sforzinda by Filarete mid 60's of XV century). In fact, what really happened was that political and philosophical ideas often served to strengthen the power of drawing and design rather than the reverse.

After the rise of Academies and the Grand Tour, where drawing served primarily as a study tool, the visionary power of drawing resurged during the late 18th century, a period marked by intense global political change. Compared to the early utopias of Urbino, the revolutionary works of Boullée, Ledoux, and Lequeu reflect a more *modern* approach to politics and space, trying to incorporate early ideas of democracy and territory in their work. In any case these works confirm the role of drawing as a medium for ideas rather than mere information.

In the 19th century, the rise of technical knowledge shifted again the role of architectural drawing into a platform for exchanging knowledge and information. Two exemplary figures illustrate this shift: Paul Letarouilly and Auguste Choisy. Letarouilly traveled to Italy in 1820 and produced a generous series of engravings of Roman buildings. These were intentionally "unfaithful" portrayals that often strategically altered the buildings' real measurements to convey his own architectural grammar. Choisy, on the other hand, introduced isometric drawing as a tool for studying the history of buildings and structural design.

Architects of the Modern Movement sought to overcome the separation between design and building established by Alberti, aiming instead for pure "objectivity" (*Sachlichkeit*), which was often represented through isometric drawings. Later the conceptual swing of drawing moved again from technotopia towards utopia, and the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s saw a resurgence in the autonomy of architectural drawing, presented as a straight forward manifesto for social and political statements. This period is exemplified by figures such as Yona Friedman, Cedric Price, and Lebbeus Woods, along with a generation of Italian architects whose works are preserved in the MAXXI architecture collection. Drawing from their legacy and their "beautiful" works, we can now explore the evolution of drawing tools in the present day.

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