Urban Aporias and Disguise

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Resumen

El concepto de "aporía", del griego "aporia", que significa dificultad, perplejidad, es utilizado por Josep Acebillo para referirse a lo que él llama "una dificultad lógica insoluble que resulta de la mala utilización de conceptos teóricos." (2007:86) Además, el autor nos advierte de sus posibles efectos, ya que vivimos una auténtica eclosión de aporías: "Una de las consecuencias de este mal uso es la aparición de posiciones disciplinarias que pueden ocasionar que la arquitectura vaya a la deriva. "(2007: 86).

A este respecto, hay muchas intervenciones en el campo de la arquitectura y el urbanismo que pueden causar perplejidad en el espectador por su tendencia a ignorar la verdad y a proponer una confusión entre realidad y deseo. Una de ellas es el uso de "disfraces" para enmascarar lo que hay debajo. Es también lo que le sucede a menudo a muchos urbanistas que consideran el paisaje como una simplificación de la complejidad territorial e intentan reducir un problema serio e interdisciplinario a un mero problema de revestimiento, de fachada.

El objetivo de este artículo es explicar cómo la arquitectura y el urbanismo utilizan diferentes tipos de disfraces, distinguir entre los distintos tipos de ocultamiento y reflexionar sobre cuáles son las principales razones de su uso. Además, se llamará la atención sobre el hecho de que algunas de las categorías descritas llevan consigo un despilfarro económico que debe controlarse en el interés de todos en una época en la que palabras como sostenibilidad y ahorro suponen un deber moral.

Palabras clave: Aporia, disfraz, identidad, superficialidad, "skin landscape."

Abstract

The concept of "aporia", from Greek "aporia", meaning difficulty, perplexity, is used by Josep Acebillo to refer to what he calls "an insoluble logical difficulty that results from the misuse of theoretical concepts." (2007:86) Besides, he warns us about its possible effects, as we live an authentic blooming of aporias: "One of the consequences of this misuse is the appearance of disciplinary positions which may cause architecture to go adrift." (2007:86).

In this respect, there are many interventions in the field of architecture and urban planning that may cause perplexity to the viewer for their tendency to ignore the truth by proposing a confusion between reality and desire. One of them is the use of "disguises" to cover what is underneath. Besides, it is also what often happens to many urban planners who take landscape as a simplification of territorial complexity and reduce this huge and interdisciplinary matter to the problem of skin landscape.

The aim of this paper is to explain how architecture and urban planning use different types of disguise, to distinguish among different types of concealment and reflect on what are the main reasons that lie underneath. Besides, a point will be made on how some of the categories described bring with them an unnecessary wastefulness that should be controlled in the interest of citizens in an era where words like sustainability and savings are a must.

Keywords: Aporia, disguise, identity, superficiality, skin landscape.

About the Use of Disguise in Architecture and Urban Planning

A world of images

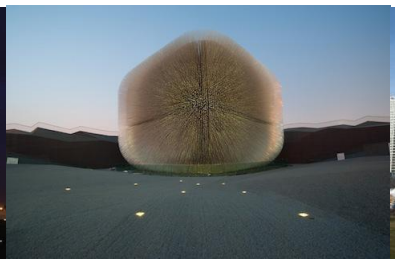
Two decades ago Gerald Gutenschwager realised that "The fragmented, ambiguous, and uncertain world economic order has been matched by a similar confusion of information in which images have increasingly replaced words in the commercial vocabulary of symbols" (1996, p. 252). Such a statement is nowadays truer than ever and can perfectly be applied to the architectural realm. The world of images invades our daily lives and is very often translated into an economic profit. But the other side of the coin is that the social problems and those of functionality within the city also require an answer, and is often not given. As Josep Acebillo says, in contemporary cities, pieces of architecture are often considered as objects and architects as sculptors (2007, p. 87). Social issues remain in the periphery, unable to catch the attention of "the powerful".

In this world of images monumentality is often translated as money and power. In fact, it has always been like that since the construction of the first architectural icons. But together with the importance of size there are other features that characterize current architecture like the loss of a context. Most of the iconic buildings constructed nowadays could have been built elsewhere. In that respect, Rem Koolhaas refers to the current architecture as a residue mankind leaves on the planet (*Junkspace*, 2013) and the anthropologist Marc Augé characterizes contemporary cities and buildings as for the presence of "non places" (*Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, 2009), which is

just one of the many symptoms that indicates that something is not working the way it should in our globalized world. But can "Modern" architecture and Urbanism be defined in terms of the relationship or dissociation of space, culture and identity? Is the architecture of the digital era the architecture of the non-place?

Indeed, it seems to be so in some cases. The importance of the envelope or the iconic value of buildings overrides the essence of contemporary architecture: space. "Modern" architecture seems, somehow, lost in a world with an excess of visual stimuli. There are hundreds of examples of this architecture that focuses on the spectacular and the visual stimuli. Among them, and to refer to just a few concrete examples, we have Bahá'í House of Worship in Delhi, India, Thomas Heatherwick´s Seed Cathedral for Shanghai´s 2010 World Expo or Santiago Calatrava´s Art Museum in Milwaukee. These constructions could be almost any type of building because, in fact, their first and main aim was to surprise the passerby, and not to adapt their architectural forms to a given function.

1. Bahá'í House of Worship in Delhi, India.



2. Thomas Heatherwick´s Seed Cathedral.

3.Santiago Calatrava´s Art Museum.

What lies behind the construction of this kind of architecture is that iconic buildings now play a major role in the new political economy of autographed buildings. Very often, they have megalomaniac proportions, cutting-edge designs and have been built by famous star architects. Some of these mega-structures were built for the occasion of the Olympic Games in Beijing, such as Paul Andreu´s National Theater (that cost US$350,000,000), Herzog & De Meuron´s National Stadium (US$400,000,000), Norman Foster´s Beijing airport (US$1,900,000,000), and OMA and Rem Koolhaas´ CCTV (US$600,000,000). In all those cases (as well as in many other current constructions) the author's signature value overrides the use value so that image and reputation supersedes economic rationality. The construction of city icons brings money and tangible investments to cities, that is why in many cases, welfare programs loose out and other collateral damages are dismissed in a city´s race to gain symbolic pre-eminence, such as in the case of Beijing and

many other Chinese cities.

Architecture and disguise

To mask or to disguise oneself or something is as old as human civilization. As Gottfried Semper maintained, the denial of reality, of the material, is necessary if form is to outstand as a meaningful symbol, as an autonomous creation undertaken by the man (*Escritos Fundamentales*).

In fact, nowadays, the classic correspondence between the interior and the exterior of buildings has lost its meaning and importance, since the mechanisms are too complex to be seen (Graziella Trovato, p. 19). The word façade that comes from the Latin word "facies", face, refers to the most important elevation and, therefore, indicates a spatial hierarchy and a privileged view. But today the hyper-surface is a comprehensive, flexible, moldable skin, that is open to infinite territories of experimentation and analysis. The use of transparency is one of them, in the growing search for spectacle in architecture. Another strategy is the use of a green coating in "green" architecture and green-washed buildings (those that "look" green but that are not really sustainable). Also landscape architecture uses similar types of surface strategies. Besides, we could also refer to postorganicism, that applied to architecture produces designs that are inspired by nature, and to biomimicry, that looks at nature and imitates the attributes of organisms to solve human beings´ problems.

Ultimately, we can see buildings in today´s architectural world that are beginning to function like the nerve endings in our body, a research field that will, undoubtedly, have an undeniable impact on future architectural strategies and that will be the future of intelligent buildings, able to dialog with their surroundings.

Trovato distinguishes three stages in the separation of the building structure and its façade (p. 75-76). According to the architect, first we find a figurative decoupling, then a structural dissociation and finally a separation of the architectural object into two distinct entities: the bone structure or structural skeleton and the skin or lining. The process started in the nineteenth century with the introduction of industrial technology in architecture and it is still in process: the separation of the building structure and its façade, its exterior image, started with the construction of the Crystal Palace in London Great Exhibition of 1851, by Joseph Paxton. In architecture it presupposed the beginning of an unprecedented debate about the need to disclose or mask the architectural object. Any piece of architecture was considered to be divided into a supporting structure or skeleton and an added skin or lining. Paxton explained his work at the Royal Commission

in 1852 using the simile of the table and the tablecloth which was inspired by the construction of greenhouses. From that moment on refining the tablecloth, that is, the enclosure, became the priority.

Currently, the envelope of the building often constitutes a double layer that houses the nervous system of the building and that, in the near future, as we mentioned above, it will become the place where the building will react to the external environment. In fact, in many cases the façade no longer responds to the formal and structural requirements of the inside of the building but merely echoes the formal and communicative needs of the outside (Trovato, p. 76)

Learning from Las Vegas and Chinese Architecture

When reading Robert Venturi´s *Learning from Las Vegas* and going through the chapter "Symbol in Space before Form in Space: Las Vegas as a Communication System" we could think we are reading about the present China. Indeed, impressive new Chinese architecture can be interpreted as the new Las Vegas´ billboard, visible from everywhere. As Venturi says: "This architecture of styles and signs is antispatial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates spaces as an element in the architecture and in the landscape. But it is for a new scale of landscape" (p. 8). To move through a piazza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive texture: the mega-texture of the commercial landscape. Symbol dominates space and architecture becomes a tool.

Chinese monumental buildings occupy the place of ancient Baroque domes. They were symbols as well as special constructions and, therefore, bigger in scale and higher than the rest of the buildings in order to dominate their urban setting and communicate their symbolic message: "I am here and I am powerful". In fact, the commercial nature of many of the Chinese contemporary constructions is obvious. Many houses have been demolished to make way for this spectacular architecture characterized mainly by its size. We were accustomed to seeing buildings with the shape of what they contained: a basket shaped building, a hamburger shaped building. The buildings were examples of commercial persuasion and gave us clues about what they contained (a basket building, a hamburger building, etc.)

But in China the way many new buildings look (a nest, a pair of jeans) does not have much to do with the building´s use in many cases. As Venturi would say, space is communication and that is the reason why most gigantic contemporary Chinese buildings are surrounded by big empty spaces. The difference being that while in Las Vegas the big sign and the little

building was the rule, nowadays current buildings like the Chinese ones have turned into signs themselves:

> *Modern architecture´s expression has become a dry expressionism, empty and boring–and in the end irresponsible. Ironically, the Modern architecture of today, while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous appliqué ornament, has distorted the whole building into one big ornament. In substituting "articulation" for decoration, it has become a duck* (Ventury, p. 103).

According to Ventury, when "Modern" architects abandoned ornamentation of buildings, they started to design buildings that *were* ornaments in themselves. In such a way, they distorted the whole building. Ventury advises us not to forget Pugin´s warning: "It is all right to decorate construction but never construct decoration." (p. 163).

"Space is what displaced symbolism." (Venturi, p. 148) And it is space, precisely, one of the most obvious features of Chinese architecture. The fact that the look of many Chinese buildings has nothing to do with their purpose can be easily seen in several contemporary Chinese constructions such as Suzhou's Gate of the Orient, that looks like a pair of long johns; Beijing´s CCTV's Headquarters, which many Chinese say looks like a man sitting on a toilet; the Oriental Pearl TV Tower in Shanghai, that could be considered a giant hypodermic needle; Shanghai Museum, that looks like a stockpot, Shanghai´s South Railway Station, that resembles a turtle shell, Shanghai´s World Financial Center whose shape is similar to that of a bottle opener, etc. etc. Besides, as explained previously, open space plays an important role in contemporary Chinese architecture, the bigger the building the larger the spaces are around them.

4. Suzhou's Gate of the Orient .

5. Shanghai´s South Railway Station

6. Beijing´s CCTV's Headquarters

In fact, French intellectuals had anticipated, in the 1960s that the image, the spectacle, and their consumption would dominate the end of 20th century society (Anne-Marie Broudehoux, p. 383). All the Chinese constructions mentioned above prove that the French were right. In these examples we also observe a misuse of superficiality with an explicit refusal to transform the heart of the problem. It is the application of the Japanese mentality where the wrapping is almost as important as the gift and it is used to hide what is inside, underneath or on the other side. In all these projects the final image is the priority as this is the only understandable aspect of the proposal. Therefore, the complexity of the whole project is reduced to its aesthetical exterior image. In this category we could mention the buildings that are the result of artistic concept abuse. In some cases the building is treated like of a work of art, it is considered as an object and, as a consequence, there is a loss of interaction with its immediate surroundings. Nearly all the examples previously mentioned belong to this category.

> *While everyday urban experience has been commodified, the city itself has been transformed into a space of performance, centered upon commodity display and symbolic consumption. Today, the spectacle has become essential to the survival of postindustrial cities, which, having been converted from centers of production into centers of consumption, must now reinvent themselves as entertainment destinations and urban spectacles* (Broudehoux, p. 384).

The display is so important within the new urban economy that one of the most effective ways for cities to improve their image in the world is to organize world events and exhibitions, international conferences or sporting events such as the World Cup or the Olympics. These both represent major venues regarding international competitions. Holding high-level events not only increases global visibility by promoting the image of the city as a vital and dynamic place, but also acts as a catalyst for local development by representing a way of legitimizing large-scale transformations, giving local governments license to undertake the new priorities of the urban agenda without the public scrutiny they would normally receive. (Broudehoux, p. 384).

In many respects, Beijing's spectacular Olympic projects have acted as a smoke screen to hide China's fierce new capitalism in present day panorama dominated by rising social inequities, speculation and corruption. (Broudehoux, p. 384).

In its attempt to modernize its image and leave a mark in Olympic history, Beijing has continued the path of other cities in their use of iconic architecture to stand as a cultural capital. Used as a mark of distinction, architecture has served in that respect, to gain

advantage over its rival destinations, playing a major role in the new political economy of autographed buildings. In this sense designer buildings have become essential tools for a city, offering through their flashy façades a marketable image.

By applying the symbols of progress, efficiency and economic success in the redesign of its capital city, China claimed to the world that it no longer wanted to "catch up" with the rest of the "modern" planet, but that it had arrived on the scene to stay. After winning the bid, Beijing commissioned a series of iconic Olympic projects whose common denominators were their megalomaniac proportions, cutting edge designs and spectacular price. The first major project with the Olympics in mind was the National Theater in Beijing, but many other projects of a similar nature followed in an attempt to exploit the emblematic power of these constructions.

Different disguises

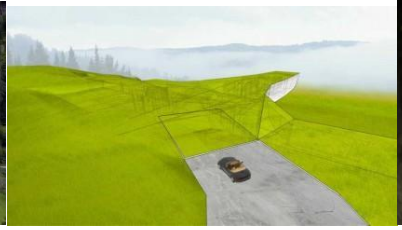
As we have mentioned previously contemporary architecture uses different disguises and strategies to stand out and become a focus of attraction. In some cases the final aim of these architectural pieces is to become integrated within the surroundings while in others, the purpose is just the opposite: to call the attention of the passerby mainly forcommercial interest.

A strategy that has a good number of followers nowadays is that of building "green". But as mentioned above, we can also see disguises in other types of architecture such as green-washed architecture, landscape architecture, buildings that look like what they sell, spectacle architecture or, what we could call, "invisible architecture", i.e., those types of constructions where the façade has partly or completely disappeared.

Some fine examples of what we could define as green architecture are the following: The hydroelectric power plant Punibach', engineered by SEL AG, in Italy, with a stunning sustainable design. All the plant´s machinery is hidden within the Italian landscape in order not to invade the wonderful alpine environment. Another good example is the Hidden House built by Polish KWK Promes in Lower Silesia, Poland. Situated near Wroclaw, a post-German city where most of the buildings are steep roofed villas, the building is integrated within the surrounding area becoming part of the underground city, a place where there are thousands of kilometres of partially buried tunnels. As the house has been sunken into the ground it is completely invisible from the driveway, making us feel that it is a part of the landscape where it lies. A third example is Moesgård Museum Extension in Denmark designed by Henning Larsen. Its rectangular shaped flat roof seems to grow out of the landscape and serves as an ideal place to have a nice day

out, to have a picnic, a barbeque, or attend a lecture. It is a massive but unobtrusive building and a fine example of green architecture.

All these examples of green architecture camouflage the buildings into the surrounding landscape in order to go unnoticed.

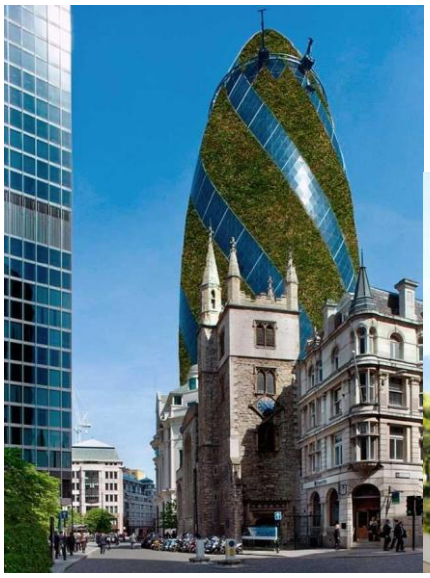


7. Hydroelectric power plant in Italy. *8. Hidden House in Lower Silesia, Poland.* *9. Moesgård Museum Extension, Denmark.*

In the case of the so called green-washed constructions, there is a superficial treatment of the surface that says nothing of the building's function. In the postmodern façade, the generic envelope is superficially decorated to respond to the external communication requirements usually related to a global business strategy (Trovato, p. 117). An example of this "green-washed architecture", is the AZPA´s proposal for a new gas power station in Wedel, Germany, that intents to turn the plant into a local attraction by disguising the building and turning it into a "green mountain". While initially, the architectural firm´s aim would be to erect a green textile structure to create an immediate green visual barrier this would be replaced after some time with meshes that would support climbing vegetation. The project foresees also to plant trees around the power station and although both, trees and vegetation, would trap some CO2, the proposal is motivated aesthetically rather than environmentally. According to AZPA, the ultimate goal is to resolve the conflict between the natural ecology and manmade environment.
(http://www.archdaily.com/367792/azpa-proposal-to-transform-german-power-plant-into-a-green-mountain/) Nevertheless, what seems to be the true aim of the project is to call the public's attention and make the power station a successful attraction.

10. AZPA´s proposal for a new gas power station in Wedel, Germany.

Galije Resort by MVRDV in Montenegro is a luxury holiday resort that seems to be covered by a green blanket. It is a grass-clad hotel that seems to perfectly blend with the surroundings. Perhaps the extreme cases of these green-washed constructions are Andy Spain´s proposals for Central London more emblematic buildings. Spain seems to make fun of the so-called "green" concept by "decorating" in green London's traditional buildings. Spain´s wrappings would not make those constructions become sustainable buildings.



11. Andy Spain´s proposal forLondon´s Gherkin. *12. Galije Resort by MVRDV in Montenegro.*

In all these examples there is a superficial treatment of the surface that says nothing of the building's function. In the postmodern façade, the generic envelope is superficially decorated to respond to external communication requirements usually related to a global

business strategy (Trovato, p. 117).

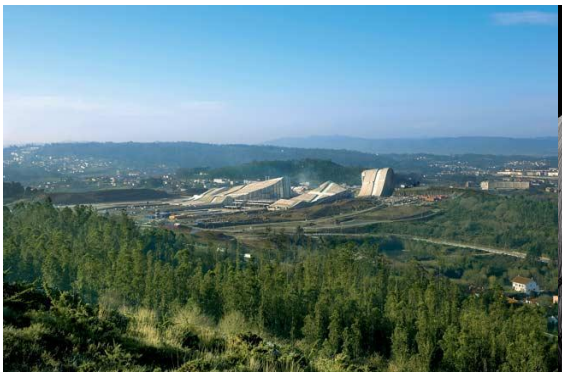
We could say that in all the cases mentioned above the façade becomes a commercial logo, a manifesto, ready to welcome any meaning. The form and function are, in some cases, independent, interdependent, or even conflicting. What unites form and function, exterior and interior in all these constructions is technology.

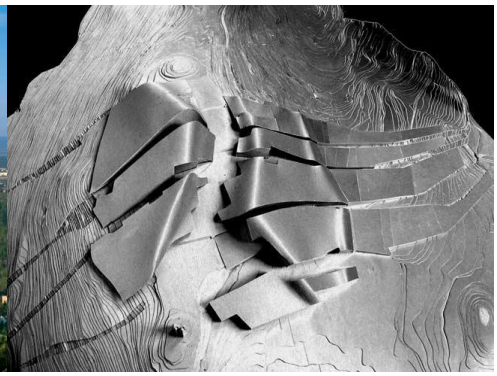
Indeed, in all these artificial enclosures where nature itself is exposed as a commodity behind the glazed surfaces of greenhouses, everything is apparent and everything is possible and ephemeral. The "honest" facade makes no sense any longer because the humanist correspondence interior-exterior has finally disappeared. Rem Koolhaas made reference to this process of the breakup between form and function calling it a lobotomy as it implies a separation between the inner and outer spaces like the one that takes place in the brain. (*Delirious New York*, p. 119).

The green costume becomes necessary. The absolutism of forms, wrapping, dressing, extends to bodies and objects without distinction, imposing the domain of the superficial, as a reaction to the humanistic model of depth and context. The envelope is frivolous as it is ambiguous and reversible. As Trovato explains, everything that is wrapped can also wrap in a sort of game between container and content, resulting in the supremacy of the first and the consequent simplification and often cancellation of the second. (p. 137).

Regarding landscape architecture, a good example is Peter Eisenman´s City of Science in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, that tries to hide into the surrounding area until it appears partially sunken into the landscape. Trovato´s words could also be applied to Eisenman´s piece of architecture: "… the perception of continuity prevails over the real fragmentation around us. Folding creates unique landscapes and uncontrolled costs and makes architecture become a mask depicted with philosophical concepts only accessible to a selected group." (p. 166).

It seems quite useless to spend a shameful amount of money to make a cultural centre look unobtrusive, when, perhaps, there is no need for a building of those huge dimensions in the first place, and in the second place, a cultural centre does not necessarily need to "look" green and integrated (or nearly buried) into the landscape.





13. Peter Eisenman´s City of Science in Santiago de Compostela., *14. City of Science´s model.*

But not all landscape architecture should be seen in negative terms, of course. Common sense tells us that an exercise park does need to look green and integrated in the area where it is. Such is the case of Zhangmiao Exercise Park, in Shanghai, designed by Archi-Union Architects, that offers a well integrated ecological system while meeting the basic requirements of citizens.

15. Zhangmiao Exercise Park, in Shanghai

Another category of buildings are those that are disguised so that they look like the items they sell. In this respect we can find Longaberger basket-shaped-building in Newark, Ohio (EE.UU), a piano-shaped-building in the Anhui Province and a robot-shaped-building in Bangkok. All of them constitute gigantic billboards that tell us what they are and sell. Besides these flamboyant cases there are others of a more humble nature: In that respect we can name Nana´s Treat House in Pflugerville, Texas, a cupcake building where you can buy cakes, but there are other buildings that resemble a hamburger or a bag and that are, in each case, exactly what they sell. These buildings have a more "obvious" nature since the commercial purpose of them all is very evident. As Robert Venturi would say, they are all "ducks" (p. 103)

16. Longaberger building in Newark, Ohio *17. Piano-shaped-building in China* *18. Robot-shaped-building in Bangkok.*

One more kind of concealment can be seen in the so called "Spectacle buildings", among which we can find the already mentioned Chinese buildings, CCTV Headquarters-OMA, built by Rem Koolhaas in Beijing or the famous Suzhou´s Gate of the Orient, that looks like a pair of jeans. As Robert Venturi would say, space is communication, that is why all these grandeur buildings are surrounded by big empty spaces.

> *In Las Vegas the big sign and the little building was the rule. Nowadays it is the buildings that have turned into signs themselves. Modern architecture of today, while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous appliqué ornament, has distorted the whole building into one big ornament. In substituting "articulation" for decoration, it has become a duck* (Venturi, p. 103).

Other examples of this spectacle architecture are the Shanghai South Railway Station, Shanghai Financial Center, Shanghai Bund Centre, Gehry´s Marqués de Riscal Hotel at Elciego, Spain, Gehry´s Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, etc, etc. Spectacle architecture is common all around the world. This is a controversial issue, nevertheless, and architects like Frank Gehry, who is well-known for producing good examples of spectacle architecture, denies that he does it, as seen from his interview in Oviedo (Spain) after being awarded the Príncipe de Asturias Prize for the Arts last October 2014.

19. Frank Gehry in the press conference at Hotel Reconquista, Oviedo, after being awarded the Principe de Asturias Prize for the Arts, 2014.

The disappearance of the façade

The last example of disguise in architecture that we would like to point out is the one represented by "Invisible architecture". In these cases the shop window disappears, to allow the passerby to literally enter into the building. In this way we all become actors and part of the showcase. This process implies the dematerialization of architecture and there are many good examples such as SANAA´s Louvre-Lens Museum, Diller and Scofidio´s Blur Building, Cartier building in Paris, Pei´s pyramid in the centre of the Louvre's courtyard, etc.

20. SANAA´s Louvre-Lens Museum.

21. Diller and Scofidio´s Blur Building.

22. Foundation Cartier´s buildin, Paris.

The skin becomes the building´s dress and the point of convergence between nature and artifice, body and architecture, as McLuhan had predicted in the 60´s (Trovato, p.140).
The following step is that architecture becomes an environmental filter that adapts to different situations. Shopping invades the world so that the city itself turns into a giant shop and the different buildings become the shop´s shelves. As a consequence, the identification between building and program is lost and we are no longer able to distinguish amongst different categories of buildings, as mentioned before. Many current buildings could be nearly "anything" and have many different functions.

23. Models in designs by Percy Irausquin agai the glass wall of the Cartier building

24. Window Displays: Converting Passersby Into Shoppers

The skin becomes more open and flexible and, therefore, able to change and answer to constant exterior demands. The façade-screen makes the building become, therefore, some sort of computer that receives information from the outside and reflects the changes that take place in our cities and lives (Trovato, p. 205).

Aporias

Some of the cases formerly described could be considered examples of aporia. The term, that comes from Greek "aporia", meaning difficulty, perplexity, (http://literarydevices.net/aporia/), is applied by Josep Acebillo to current architecture and urban planning: "The 'urban aporia' is an insoluble logical difficulty that results from the misuse of theoretical concepts. […] We live an authentic blooming of aporias" (2007:86).
Since Aporia is an expression of doubt or uncertainty, when it is genuine it can stimulate the audience to consider different options for resolution. In that respect, its main objective

may be to provide the spectator with the chance to analyze and judge a situation.

Following this reasoning we can conclude that current architecture is, to some extent, the architecture that is the reflection of a society based on image, on the appearance, and that it does not believe in the permanence of anything, maybe due to the fact that nothing seems to be significant enough for its existence, worthy, therefore, to be remembered. Ours is a society swamped of visual stimuli due to consumerism. As a consequence, the logical way of conceiving an architectural project seems to have changed: in many cases, specific details are designed before global ones, what leads to the construction of buildings where the user suffers a fever of anecdotal creations and a feeling of disorientation and uncertainty. This could make us think of Pugin´s warning: "It is all right to decorate construction but never construct decoration." (Venturi, p. 163).

Architecture seems also to be the slave of politicians, economy and fashionable trends. For example, skyscrapers and spectacular buildings are particular products of contemporary architecture often used by political entities as the symbol or image of economical progress. Architecture and architects throughout history have always been in the hands of others, used as powerful political and economic tools to transform cities and societies. Nowadays we can look at the case of Dubai and some Chinese cities as an example of how architecture has been translated into political and economic power.

Current architecture seems to suffer from the same disease as our modern society. It seems to lack the referential space and the referential values for either present or future.

Consumerism and a superficial approach to life apply to architecture and urban design as well. Not only because of the lack of common sense and responsibility of the so-called professionals, but also because the ones who use and who benefit from this architecture are the same masses mentioned above. This is where we find the confusion between reality and desire, between our false needs, of a temporary superficial character, and the real ones, which define important aspects of our lives. After all, architecture is designed by professionals to be used, mostly, by non professionals, and since they are not educated in this field, they tend to appreciate architectural and urban qualities based on a different set of standards from the ones professionals have, usually standards that have to do with appearance (form, colour, employment or new materials).

If the masses keep accepting superficial yet attractive architecture, then architects and urban planners will keep on tending to focus only on the visual aspects of the problem, without ever going to the heart of it. In other words, it is the exterior that matters in these kinds of projects, the beautiful, revolutionary seamless façade system, which is anyway, the only part of a project an ordinary person might understand. So why not, yet again,

settle for what catches the eye and sells, and reduce the complexity of a project to that? It is not only in the case of buildings, but also of urban design, since many planners avoid solving real problems such as accessibility, mobility, traffic, etc. and go for the eye-catching design intervention: a pretty pavement, nice urban furniture, a few trees here and there. But in the end the city is stuck with the same flaws, since they reduce a complex problem to the problem of townscape, using a skin, a nice wrapping to disguise what lies underneath. Perhaps it is time to start paying attention to the problem and look for possible solution for the common welfare.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Bahá'í House of Worship in Delhi, India. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lotus_Temple
2. Thomas Heatherwick´s Seed Cathedral.
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3. Santiago Calatrava´s Art Museum in Milwaukee.
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4. Suzhou's Gate of the Orient.
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5. Shanghai South Railway Station http://law.sjtu.edu.cn/International/Detail11094.aspx
6. Beijing´s CCTV's Headquarters. http://www.e-architect.co.uk/beijing/central-china-tv
7. Hydroelectric power plant in Italy.
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8. Hidden House in Lower Silesia, Poland.
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9. Moesgård Museum Extension, Denmark. http://danish.tm/category/architecture/
10. AZPA´s proposal for a new gas power station in Wedel, Germany.
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11. Andy Spain´s proposal for London´s Gherkin.
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12. Galije Resort by MVRDV in Montenegro.
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14. City of Science´s model.
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15. Zhangmiao Exercise Park, in Shanghai.
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16. Longaberger building in Newark, Ohio.
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17. Piano-shaped-building in China.
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18. Robot-shaped-building in Bangkok.

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19. Frank Gehry in the press conference at Hotel Reconquista, Oviedo, after being awarded the Principe de Asturias Prize for the Arts, 2014 Schjeldahl, P. (2014) Frank Gehry´s Digital Defiance, The New Yorker, 27 October 2014 [Online]. Available from: http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/frank-gehry-digital-defiance?mbid=rss [Accessed: 23 April 2015]

20. SANAA´s Louvre-Lens Museum http://www.dezeen.com/2012/12/17/louvre-lens-by-sanaa-and-imrey-culbert-photographed-by-julien-lanoo/

21. Diller and Scofidio´s Blur Building. https://www.pinterest.com/pin/425590233510555454/

22. Foundation Cartier´s building, Paris. http://www.e-architect.co.uk/paris/cartier-foundation. Image © Jean Nouvel ; photograph: Philippe Ruault

23. Models in designs by Percy Irausquin again the glass wall of the Fondation Cartier building. http://www.dutchfashionfoundation.com/dutch_touch/dff_dt_news_01_topic_04.html

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