

AN ARCHITECTURE OF LANGUAGE

Design Against Drawings

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“Design against is a call to action for devils advocates and dissenting opinions. It is reactionary. It takes nothing for granted and makes no apologies. Its mandate is to question tirelessly and its only promise is change. Design against is the antithesis to complacency.”

The genesis of architecture will likely lurk forever in the shadows, a fact that no-doubt frustrates every historian, anthropologist, or otherwise concerned academic interested in the subject. What shrouds this pilot light is the marked lack of documentation typical of all examples of the earliest known architecture. It is in this search for the genesis of architecture that we find indications of a possibly provocative question; if architecture existed before drawings then why has the design process become so crippled by the tool of visual representation? Instead, architecture should seek a toolset that is minimally limiting to free design explorations from the grips of representational capabilities. Conceptualization must then begin with a medium capable of engaging all senses, exploring outrageous impossibilities, and expressing ideas in their purest state. These parameters present a clear case on their own for a more refined tool which has been employed for centuries; one initially derived as an improvement of visual representation: written language.

It stands to reason that architecture would begin with pictorial representations as it was one of the earliest recorded form of human history. The Sulawesi Cave paintings¹, Altamira Cave paintings², Lascaux paintings³, and Cueva de las Manos⁴ document this pictorial history across both hemispheres and more than 30,000 years of human history. As a tool, drawings and graphics are clearly one of the most inherent human forms of documentation. Yet as civilizations developed, we see an exchange of pictorial records for increasingly symbolic tools. This transition is clearly illustrated in the development of hieroglyphs as a communication tool by the Egyptian civilization. Earliest examples of this communication form date back to roughly 3400 BC at the oldest where glyphs were used for labeling jars or denoting quantities.⁵ This same civilization was simultaneously working with Cuneiform, the earliest record of written language which further abstracted these depictions to a series of characters representative of ideas and words.⁶

The progression here makes clear two values: breadth of communi-

cation, and time invested in the representation. Looking at cave paintings, the incredibly rough medium lends itself to quick representation but at the expense of limited communication. The depictions are noun and object based, with limited ability for expression of emotion – admittedly because such needs were not likely a priority in these paintings. With hieroglyphs there was an exchange made for communicating more complex cultural ideas and phenomena which notably came at the expense of speed. Cuneiform was then the most efficient and effective of the three by far and hence became the basis for modern written language. Its ability to communicate complex ideas relied heavily on the notion of society and the inherent system of shared experiences and beliefs. Simultaneously the highly abstracted forms could quickly be pressed into tablets with very simple stylus tools. These values can be seen still at the core of language today, where the breadth of communication has been expanded by a rise in societal complexity and time of representation has been brought to the scale of milliseconds in the advent of the computer.

These values should be familiar to architects and designers alike, as the goals of our own representational efforts place immense emphasis on the ability to communicate a wide conceptual range as quickly as possible to allow for the rapid prototyping of ideas. First, we can examine the latter of these two values to understand the role of drawings in quickly creating and sharing ideas.

For the architect, sketching has become second

1. Vergano, D. (2014, October 08). Cave Paintings in Indonesia Redraw Picture of Earliest Art. Retrieved November 20, 2018, from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141008-cave-art-sulawesi-hand-science/>
2. Augustyn, A., Bauer, P., Duignan, B., Eldridge, A., Gregerson, E., Luebering, J. E., . . . Zelazko, A. (2010, September 30). Altamira. Retrieved November 26, 2018, from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Altamira>

3. Groeneveld, E. (2016, September 06). Lascaux Cave. Retrieved November 27, 2018, from https://www.ancient.eu/Lascaux_Cave/
4. Onetto, M., & Podesta, M. M. (2011). Cueva de las Manos: An Outstanding Example of a Rock Art Site in South America. Retrieved November 20, 2018, from <http://cuevadelasmanos.org/pdfs/Onetto Podesta. 2011 Cueva de las Manos. An Outstanding Example of rock art....pdf>

nature and is particularly adept at providing a method for quick studies and presentation of ideas. Layers of trace paper allow for the repurposing of previous work to generate the skeleton for new ideas. Their tools of mark making have become extensions of the mind and techniques to shake lines, draw extensions, control lineweight, and imply shade or shadow all with a single pen is no longer part of their active cognition.

Yet the beginner finds sketching still laborious. The strokes are permanent and intimidating. Ink smears and is difficult to control. Focusing on shaking the lines enough but not too much while managing pressure and still keeping the overall form straight is more than one could possibly manage. It is then of little surprise that the ideas conveyed are usually underdeveloped or misrepresented in the finished work.

This is not due to an inability to think critically or meaningfully as a beginner, but instead the nature of every current conventional methodology for representation leaves beginners paralyzed. If not sketching then physical models, or painting, or sculpting, or composing, etc. Written language, and the ability to use it tactfully to present information is a skill just as initially frustrating and eventually developable as any of these. However, it is unique in the sense that it is universal, cross-disciplinary, and therefore a more justifiable genesis for design expression. Its familiarity makes it the ideal design tool for rapid exploration, adjustment, and refinement.

The second goal to communicate a breadth of concepts is dramatically limited by architectural drawings.

For the veteran and designer, again, years of practice offer the benefit of full conceptual expression, even of the most complex ideas. The translation between visual communication and ideation has become integral to the typical design process. This is limiting to the ability to convey ideas universally but provides an even greater challenge for beginners.

Drawing only becomes a tool for such representation after the necessary skills have been practiced and developed. A stunted skillset in any form of representation will consistently lead to a stunted range of abilities to communicate, written language included. However, visual representation requires additional translation of ideas native to the designer in order to communicate with others. This inherent translation prevents complete communication of an idea visually because it is only capable of engaging a single sense. In essence, we as humans think at this point with language and any other format of expressing this language inherently involves the suppression or loss of information.

Drawings and other representations at best⁷ fail to create a convincing translation of the concept and at their worst⁸ create a deceiving depiction that seduces us to ignore the conceptual flaws. Writings however communicate the idea directly, unhampered by bias and translation from the author or orator. Where drawings are representations of an architecture, writings can be used to generate an infinite architecture. The artworks of Sol LeWitt are not the imagery created, but the instruction set by which to generate them.⁹ All of design can learn from a model where the idea lives forever in writing and the resultant solution is this idea's interpretation. When this interpretation is acknowledged as independent from the conceptualization, each can also be refined independently, offering an entirely new level of control and understanding. Minute control of interpretation and conceptualization as separate entities allows the design process to more clearly define the problem for which it intends to provide a solution.

It seems fair then to conclude that perhaps writing is the better tool for statements of the problem, or even venture so far as to suggest that it

5. Mitchell, L. (1999, March/April). Earliest Egyptian Glyphs. Retrieved November 20, 2018, from <https://archive.archaeology.org/9903/newsbriefs/egypt.html>

6. Mark, J. J. (2018, March 15). Cuneiform. Retrieved November 20, 2018, from <https://www.ancient.eu/cuneiform/>

7. Merin, G. (2013, August 11). AD Classics: Ville Radieuse / Le Corbusier. Retrieved November 27, 2018, from <https://www.archdaily.com/411878/ad-classics-ville-radieuse-le-corbusier>

8. Fiederer, L. (2017, May 15). AD Classics: Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project / Minoru Yamasaki. Retrieved November 27, 2018, from <https://www.archdaily.com/870685/ad-classics-pruitt-igoe-housing-project-minoru-yamasaki-st-louis-usa-modernism>

could help conceptualize a solution. But surely visual representation is the best tool for the interpretation of these expressions. The best tool to bring them into reality. Visual representation instead further immobilizes architecture by disengaging the definition of its problem-solution set from all but our sense of touch and sight. Without a doubt, drawings are a tool for expressing tactility through texture and capturing observable awe. Yet the failure to engage with our experience of the world through taste, sound, and smell limits its ability to represent reality without further supplementation.

The inherent strength of drawings in engaging visual senses does raise a question about writing's ability to evoke the same level of imagery. In 2001, a study focused on synesthesia documented two earlier studies of the bouba/kiki effect and linked it to this notion of multisensorial stimulation and the origin of language.¹⁰ This effect – which works on groups independent of native language – demonstrates that language may codify visual information at an instinctual level. It implies that we can have a fuzzy but visceral reaction to descriptions that the specificity of drawings inherently cannot match. Instead it would seem that drawing can act only as a supplement to the descriptive powers of language.

Where drawings were intrinsically limited in their descriptions, writing is decidedly unlimited. We find, most notably in creative writing, descriptions so finely crafted and focused as to transport the reader to a specific place or time. George Orwell's 1984 opens with a beautiful example of this ability:

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him. The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats. At one end of it a colored poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to

the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a meter wide: the face of a man about forty-five, with a heavy black mustache and ruggedly handsome features.

Readers are thrust into a scene bustling with sounds, textures, sights, and smells all crafted and constructed mentally in a matter of a few seconds. Convincing and immersive, certainly thanks to the sensory heavy description, this passage hints at the exploration that makes this book in particular notable. Just as George Orwell is free to explore a world ravaged by war in 1984 architecture is free to explore the utopian/dystopian landscape.

Surely this can be acknowledged as no new freedom; utopian visions for architecture have been the subject of written discussion as much as they have through visual representation. However, the utopias and dystopias of architecture past have been no such thing simply because they are presenting themselves legitimately as realistic solutions to realistic problems. Utopias cannot exist; Dystopias cannot exist. Only reality can exist.

The statement is practically insulting in its evidence, yet architectural movements with a manifesto for a Utopic society have presented their architecture as nothing short of such. In her 1998 paper *Unredeemably Utopian: Architecture and Making/Unmaking the World* author Lynda Schneekloth presents Le Corbusier's aforementioned *Ville Radieuse*¹¹ and Ebenezer Howard's *Garden City*¹² as examples of such utopic visions. However, she also makes note of the other pole within

9. Sol LeWitt. (2007). Retrieved November 27, 2018, from https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Sol_LeWitt

10. Ramachandran, VS & Hubbard, EM (2001). Synaesthesia--a window into perception, thought and language. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, 3-34.

11. Merin, G. (2013, August 11). AD Classics: Ville Radieuse / Le Corbusier. Retrieved November 27, 2018, from <https://www.archdaily.com/411878/ad-classics-ville-radieuse-le-corbusier>

12. Howard, E. (n.d.). *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*. Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <http://urbanplanning.library.cornell.edu/DOCS/howard.htm>

13. SCHNEEKLOTH, L. (1998). *Unredeemably Utopian: Architecture and Making/Unmaking the World*. *Utopian Studies*, 9(1), 1-25. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719740>

14. Ibid.

architecture which is markedly “practical” or “a-utopian”¹³ Schneekloth argues that architecture is actually something of a hybridization of the two, because while our world is not strictly utopian, it was “...predicted by utopian thinkers...” and is as such “...unredeemably utopian”.¹⁴ Logically this implies the need for a design system that can explore the irrational impossibility of a utopian society whilst also acknowledging that any approximation will be some form of compromise from the original vision. Logically we need a written architecture.

When writing *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas reasoned that we live “in an age disgusted with [manifestos.] The fatal weakness of manifestos is there inherent lack of evidence is a mountain range of evidence with no Manifesto.”¹⁵ Yet a built environment with an aversion to manifestos is unlikely to feature only a single mountain range. Instead we can surely expect it to be teeming with canyons, valleys, plains, and foothills of evidence all seeking purpose; each just as deserving of a manifesto. In order to parse the resultant built environment, the only logical architectural response is a written architecture to explore the landscape left behind. An architecture capable now of preserving the purity of an idea. An architecture with convictions for its engagements with all of our senses. An architecture with the agency to ask questions of the unknown. Perhaps not in a sense that can ever uncover architectures elusive genesis, but certainly in a form that guarantees architecture a future.

15. Koolhaas, R. (1994). *Delirious New York: A retroactive manifesto for Manhattan*. New York, NY: Monacelli Press.

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