Generating Architecture Through the Image

A case study on the use of image making in the education of architects

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ABSTRACT

The workshop and this paper address the potentiality of the image. What kind of image spurs the architectural process rather than wrapping it up? Which aspects of architecture can this image address? Why?

Contemporary architecture seems seduced by the image and has in many ways taken on the casual vanity of fashion and make-up. Yet the image can be a powerful stimulation of the imagination and holds potential for addressing aspects of the world, which seem hard to approach through other media. In 2013, a workshop with architecture students in Copenhagen investigated these potentials through phenomenological education-based research. How can the image—here as the hyper-realistic photograph of an architectural model—become an active and integrated tool in the architectural process and in this case serve as the very launch pad for its creation?

This paper describes the course of the workshop; the actual making of the images and the vivid dialogue they initiated. Through the relation between vision and the other senses, these initial images hold potential for unfolding architecture as both a full spatial experience *and* as construction, and that the images—despite their personal and individual character—seem accessible to a common and general discussion concerning the perceptual, embodied experience of an architecture yet to come. The paper finally suggests that architecture could be generated through a deliberate oscillation between this investigation of the embodied experience and architecture's more rational aspects in an iterative process, mimicking its fundamental and eternal challenge as a constant balancing act between the artistic and the scientific.

Keywords: architecture, education-based research, model photography, perception, phenomenology

Let us start by entering this image.

It looks like a home. The architecture seems quite modern: in-built storage, sparse detailing, corridor steps elaborately up to a deeply inserted window sill or bay window with a view seemingly blocked, although the slight angling of the frame and the big cat's attentive gaze suggest an opening or view to the

Figure 1. Interior model photo.

Magnus Thiemer Jensen, first week.

left. The posters casually leaning against the wall and the collection of books, stereo, and magazines suggest a relaxed and creative atmosphere. Steaming cup of coffee and papers left on the floor at the window. Someone will return soon. But who? And what is the rest of the house like? What are the surroundings like? Where are we?

THE PROBLEMATIC IMAGERY IN ARCHITECTURE

As a practicing architect and teacher of architecture, I have seen a tendency to the use of the image as evidence or conclusion of an architectural process. Often the visualization is made in the final week and added as perceptual outcome of a project developed within the Cartesian coordinate system. The image of the sensed and spatial experience is not an active part in the actual creation, which is regrettable, since the image holds potential for addressing all-important aspects of architecture such as light, material, use, and time: aspects, which are not to be approached through the metric and analytical kinds of representation such as projection drawing and diagrams. This tendency seems further amplified by the fact that many large architectural firms have them made by companies specializing in this genre. The image is made in Oslo or California by computer experts on demand. We all recognize these multi-colored, wide-angled and glossy images of hordes of happy people skateboarding, hugging, jogging and kayaking—all staged by wonderfully varied facades under the blue sky sprinkled with red hot-air balloons and flocks of foreign birds.

Juhani Pallasmaa states in his book *The Embodied Image* that we are drowning in “an endless Sargasso Sea of Images” (Pallasmaa, 2011, p. 14) and writes in *The Eyes of the Skin*: “The cancerous spread of superficial architectural imagery today, devoid of tectonic logic and sense of materiality and empathy, is clearly part of this process” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 24). He proceeds: “architecture has adopted the strategy of advertising and instant persuasion; buildings have turned into image products detached from existential depth and sincerity” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 30).

Both visualizations of future projects and the infinite number of architectural photos ready at hand for inspiration and duplication on the Internet influence architecture worldwide—but these are not embodied images. Architectural images are everywhere, but we didn’t create or photograph them ourselves. We haven’t wandered the buildings, cities or landscapes depicted. We haven’t heard, smelled or touched what’s on them, chosen the framing or seen their motives on a rainy day. The fleeting images

are not part of the architect’s personal, lived experience. They are detached from time, place and true spatial understanding and therefore dangerously misleading as tools used in the architectural process.

THE EMBODIED IMAGE

Yet we must acknowledge the powers of the architectural image. Juhani Pallasmaa states: “the embodied image is a spatialized, materialized and multi-sensory lived experience” (Pallasmaa, 2011, p. 11). He also claims that we have “to defend the poetic and embodied image and underline its central role in all artistic experience and thought” (Pallasmaa, 2011, p. 12). These quotes suggest that the imagery of architecture, despite its inherent purely visual qualities and its kitschy ubiquity holds great potential—as long as it is *embodied*. It implies that working consciously with the embodied image in an architectural process possibly enables us to discuss the actual perceptual, bodily experience, which covers all-important aspects of architecture. Aspects, which are often neglected or even forgotten. The notion of the embodied image is here characterized by Pallasmaa’s idea of the image as a *lived experience*. Not only are the images in this paper photographed by the architecture students themselves, they are depicting an architecture, which the students have built themselves as models and which is grounded in interpretations of personal spatial experiences.

As creation of architecture works through various kinds of representation of a non-existing, possible, built future, the embodied image represents aspects of architecture, which are not approached through, e.g., the rationality of the metric drawing or conventional model building. The embodied image has the capacity to open discussions on the spatial sensation as a result of visual and haptic experiences: materiality, light, scale, use, etc. These aspects relate to the phenomenological turn towards perception and the notion of a return to things themselves. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “To return to things themselves is to return to the world which precedes knowledge” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. ix). Meanwhile, Gottfried Boehm claims that the “image reaches back to the prehistory of thinking and the genesis of consciousness” (Boehm, 2003, p. 200), which indicates that Merleau-Ponty’s wish for a possible return to the pre-reflective and the rehabilitation of perception alongside science could be approached through the image.

This link to deep-seated experiences might be the reason for the suggestive powers of the image. In this workshop the images are hyper-realistic model photographs. They are photos of representations of something tested as part of a real future world, which is why they can be understood and discussed as described by Susan Sontag: "The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: 'There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.' Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" (Sontag, 1979, p. 23). The embodied images of this workshop link to our common understanding of the photograph and its relation to the real world, they invite to similar speculations: *what must reality be like if it looks this way?* The image turns into questions, which is why it should not only be used as a conclusion.

THE PROCESS OF IMAGE MAKING

Figure 1 is an initial model photo made by a student in the first week of a three-week workshop I conducted with a group of third year students in spring 2013. Here follows a description of the stages of the workshop and the actual making of the cat-image by Magnus, who was one of the twelve third year students who participated.

Monday—the first day of the course—was mandatory work at the students' individual homes. An envelope containing the brief and various texts on dwelling and possession was to be opened at 9:15 a.m. accompanied by an equally mandatory cup of coffee. The students then had to make a complete

outline of their possessions and a written description of the specific place in their home, which they had chosen for reading the assignment—their favorite place.

The remaining four days of the first week the students had to develop their new favorite place—in an unknown future home of their own, based on the outline of their possessions and the description of their existing favorite place. We worked in a nice and messy workshop in 1:10 scale architectural models as scenographic set pieces and photographed them with maximum realism in black and white.

Figure 2. Students work with big and rough scenographic set pieces in 1:10.

Stefan Gründl, first week.

The students were given a site and brought their photos along to the chosen small and secret harbor. The site is one of several intimate and secret pockets of history and autonomy in the harbor of Copenhagen, which are about to disappear. Where could their new favorite place fit in here?

Figure 3. Magnus has found his spot in the harbor, next to an old wooden warehouse. The bay window is added in 3D in first floor height.

Magnus Thiemer Jensen, first week.

In the second week we returned to the familiar setting of the studio and the week was used to “unwrap” the photos and interpret them according to the chosen site. To translate the image into measurable architecture in the metric space, Aviaja chose to work in cardboard models of 1:200 and 1:100 scale, projection drawing for facades and plan and section solutions.

Figure 4. Aviaja chooses to work in small-scale models and projection drawing in the second week.

Aviaja Torbensdatter Hermann, second week.

The final week we were back in the workshop working with architecture as scenography. Based on the work of the two first weeks the students developed an exterior photo of their house in its immediate context. This was the end of the workshop. We now knew a great deal about the projects but only parts of the plans, sections and facades.

Figure 5. Magnus measures his initial model and draws a plan “backwards” helped by the logic from the work with the cat in the windowsill. This is how far as he got during the “metric phase”.

Magnus Thiemer Jensen, second week.

Figure 6. Exterior model photo.

Aviaja Torbensdatter Hermann, third week.

DIALOGUE—FORGOTTEN DISCUSSIONS

What seemed interesting during the three weeks was the personal and common dialogue the images initiated. With reasonable ease, the students adopted the alternative scale and sequence of actions; their usual working methods were challenged and their architecture changed. Their work turned out differently when the architecture originated from the intended *experience* established in the image, rather than from rational work in projection drawing or small-scale model building. As Magnus says when interviewed after the workshop: “Hmm. I think if I had just been working at my desk, tinkering with a plan, I would never have come up with such a long corridor leading to nothing... I don’t know. I think that all these small nooks and crannies are something that when you see it in a plan, you would consider it wasted square meters. But here you realize—they are not...” His way of creating is challenged through a certain, fruitful inner dialogue between the image and his spatial life-experience: a dialogue going beyond the possibilities of his analytical skills acquired in the school of architecture and therefore adding to his established ideas about architecture and its creation.

Some students ended up working in groups doing double houses containing both of their individual favorite places, but despite the highly personal and contrasting visions created at the outset, the common work was driven by a similar, incentive dialogue. Stefan and Zina worked together as they chose the same spot in the harbor, and Zina says when interviewed: “We reached an understanding pretty quickly when we sat down and discussed it...” and as Stefan adds: “it has been surprisingly easy to solve.” These are the stages of their project after three weeks.

Figure 7. Interior model photo.
Stefan Gründl, first week.

Figure 8. Interior model photo.
Zina Laura Bosse, first week.

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Figure 9. Common section drawing from the studio with Stefan on the ground floor and Zina on first floor.
Stefan Gründl and Zina Laura Bosse, second week.

Figure 10. Common exterior photo from third week. Notice the ladder leading into the water from Stefan's ground floor flat.

Stefan Gründl and Zina Laura Bosse, third week.

The swiftness of their work and the embodied richness of their project created in this relatively short workshop also set off a fairly wide range of comments at the final review by a panel of 4 invited guests (3 architects and a philosopher). The project of Stefan and Zina gave rise to a lively discussion and these were the subjects touched upon:

Composition: "It makes sense that the building is made by two materials, because the two interiors represent two very different worlds."

"...in a way the two different parts are synthesized—or brought together [...] the act of balancing the light top on a heavier base could be expressed in a much more artistic way"

Construction: "That idea of placing a long, horizontal window is rather demanding in a wooden house. It seems more natural in a concrete house..."

References: "I haven't seen such a rustic environment for many years. It is a kind of brutalism. It resembles very early places of worship like the Temples of Mithras in Rome." (Concerning Stefan's interior space)

Dwelling: "You got the fireplace. You dive into the water indoors. You sit on the stairs like on the terrain [...] the most basic expressions of the idea of settlement..." (Concerning Stefan's interior space)

"To dwell is to leave marks [...] there are a lot of marks and scratches in the floor. These traces are interesting. They inscribe a sort of time. You move into a house, you live there—leave traces—move out, and later other people will move in." (Concerning Stefan's interior space)

Atmosphere: "It is a very charged space. It seems basic and essential, because of its extremely dense materiality." (Concerning Stefan's interior space)

Materiality: "It's like the wood cladding is too delicate for Stefan's lower part and way too rough for Zina's refined top floor."

The two first subjects on composition and construction are well-known topics in a discussion of student projects. Both are accessible through the usual projection drawings and models in small scale by which architecture is presented and understood objectively and distanced, e.g., the orthogonal facade drawing in scale 1:100 is readable as clean geometrical composition.

To compare projects to references of related architecture or art is also commonly used and is a way of approaching a position of the work through the existing world—are we talking about the same? In this case, though, the reference to ancient roman temples is triggered by the roughness of the materials—which would be neither explained nor considered in a more conventional project developed and described through metric work and smooth 3D renderings.

As for the last three topics of dwelling, atmosphere, and materiality, a similar risk exists in the logical and deductive, metrical mode of architectural creation. They are often neglected or can't be discussed, simply because the project doesn't offer the opportunity. It seems that the elaborate detailing of these images led the discussion towards very fundamental aspects of architecture such as notions of dwelling, atmosphere and time *and* at the same time very tangible and direct issues on materiality like the

character of the wooden floorboards and the width of the exterior wooden cladding. After just three weeks we had fairly elaborate discussions about aspects of architecture, which are often missing or addressed late and—if at all—after the project's rational dimensions like concept, organization, construction, etc.

VISION AND THE SENSES

So how come the embodied image apparently is such an immediate and accessible source of inspiration? First of all we have to recognize that the creation of architecture is dealing with the future. It does not exist yet. We work through representations of a possible future, which means that architecture in many ways is approached and developed indirectly and not “in the flesh”, so to speak. This is why the embodied image is a potentially plausible substitute for the real experience when we are dealing with its perceptual qualities. The image only feeds the eye yet somehow transmits suggestions to the other senses. When describing the paintings of Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty addresses this correlation of the senses: “We *see* the depth, the smoothness, softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see the odor” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 15).

The linking of the senses is established in our early investigations of the world. As Carsten Thau puts it: As a child you crawl around drooling, fingering, and biting; bump against something hard; feel fabrics or polished surfaces, warm and cold materials. These impressions later support the eye's ability to understand and decipher a room and its components (Thau, 2010, p. 31). This means that vision can open a fuller perceptual experience. Sight alone triggers deep-seated memories of acoustics, smell, haptic and material sensation, etc.

Figure 11. Interior model photo.

Camilla Højlund Jensen, first week.

In this work, the interior image is used to open an architectural design process. The image imitates a visible reality. If this interior model photo by Camilla—for example—was a photo of an actual place in the real world, we would presume that the table extended into a bigger office or dining room at the end of the corridor from where we took the picture (Figure 11). We only see parts of the scene but subconsciously extend it and link it to the rest of the world through experience and imagination. As Boehm writes: “According to Husserl, the visible front of ‘something’ presents itself in every view, implying an invisible back. The implication is therefore necessary and unavoidable, ensuring that we are spared dealing with visual things being organized like props or constructs from which the back is missing. We generally see a ‘whole object,’ even though only its visible half is presented to us” (Boehm, 2009, p. 227).

This seems eerily and strangely relevant to this workshop in which we are actually dealing with props and constructs whose backs are missing. We see the whole, even though it does not exist, and we can discuss our individual ideas of what it would be like to walk towards the bright office from the dark corridor. Through the relation between sight and the

other senses and through memory and imagination we can “construct” the backside of the image—and place it in the world. The projects are established on flat images, but the visual impact connects to material and spatial experiences of a lifetime and permits an awareness of architecture as a full, perceptual experience.

COMMON SENSING

The images correspond to the students’ own life experience, but even though they seem highly personal, we manage a joint discussion. With the same ease as the students “draw” information from their initial images, we can discuss them in more general terms, and this dialogue is fundamental in the education of architects.

When I’m asking the students to describe their favorite place in their own home, I’m actually asking them to reflect on a more or less non-reflective praxis of their life. They live in it, but they don’t really see it or reflect on it. Many of the students were not very conscious of the qualities of the place they chose for reading the assignment. Some stayed in bed. Some sat in the kitchen close to the coffee machine. When forced to describe the chosen place in words, partly subconscious and non-reflective sides of architecture were addressed. These fundamental and personal architectural experiences were brought forth, but strangely enough—and despite their subjectivity—they do not seem foreign or incomprehensible to others. I will quote Dalibor Vesely: “If we look closely at a concrete example—a French café, for instance—it is obvious that its essential nature is only partly revealed in its visible appearance; for the most part that essence is hidden in the field of references to the social and cultural life related to the place” (Vesely, 2004, p. 77). When I say French café we all summon an extremely complex multi-layered idea of such a place as a shimmering memory: the spoon beside the small cup, the white napkin, croissant, mirrors and glass, wooden, dark chairs, jingling of cutlery, close-by traffic.

Although the French café is constituted by a large set of physical characteristics, its identity is equally hidden in social habits, customs and rituals. The essential identity and meaning of the French café as both appearance and culture is highly ambiguous and diverse, but we can discuss it as a shared experience, and this fact seems interesting when discussing the embodied image of an architecture not built.

As Vesely says: “How can we remember buildings, streets, or anything else in a place that we have never seen before? And yet there is room for memory, but on a different level. Rather than being associated directly with the perceptual experience, what we remember first is linked to the more global and primary aspects of our surrounding. These memories, with the help of imagination, can make the new situation seem similar to others and finally familiar” (Vesely, 2004, p. 100).

The embodied architectural image of some possible future enables us to relate to the unknown through the known, and has the potential for a common recognition open for discussion. In the education of architects these discussions are crucial. Through the personal and shared reflection you can actually learn and understand what you are doing.

IMAGE MAKING AS METHOD

As this workshop proceeds from Pallasmaa and his sensuous and quite tangible phenomenological approach to architecture (as well as my own), the work of the students also tends toward an intimacy and safety, which seems to characterize parts of the general architectural discourse. As a colleague caustically remarked upon seeing the students images: “they all seem very cozy...”. This tendency could be challenged through an alternative theoretical angle. A touch of suspense could possibly be added through the hyper-singular and personal of Roland Barthes’ *that-which-has-been* (Barthes, 1981), elaborating on a detective-like unfolding of a (constructed) moment of a (fictive) past. Alternatively, one could challenge the ideas by the intangible fluidity of Boehm’s notion of *indeterminacy* (Boehm, 2009), possibly resulting in a higher degree of abstraction—as projects more open, abstract, and suggestive for interpretations.

On a pedagogical and methodical level one might also consider how these ideas of image-making in an experimental three-week workshop correspond to the reality of architecture as a complex synthesis of technical, economical, functional, organizational, and social factors. In fact, architecture is usually founded on a brief containing *only* these, such as demands for square meters, functions and technical specifications. The inherent rationality of these factors *has* to be addressed and easily becomes the point of departure as well as driving force throughout the process, and in this kind of process, the image tends to conclude rather than to start the work.

That is why the image in this experiment is the deliberate starting point. The architecture awakes in perception rather than in rationality. The first week the students work intuitively and haptically with the models and images in the messy workshop. In the second week, they move to the well-known studio and work at the drawing desk—dealing with the more rational sides of the project. This abrupt change of working place, tools and method is a deliberate pedagogic step and is explicitly stated: “we now move from space of perception to the metric space.” Likewise, the return to the workshop for the final week’s work making images of exterior models. The majority of time is used dealing with the architecture as perceived, which is why the strengths of the projects lie in the perceptual and embodied aspects of architecture, and not in, e.g., the analytical clarity one achieves through the geometric drawing and diagram. The shifts, though, could simulate a conscious and ongoing change of focus throughout an architectural process in general, as an oscillation between working with architecture’s rational sides and architecture as perceptual experience, as phases constantly confronting and pushing each other forward. Such an oscillation between tools and methods in the creation of architecture possibly mimes architecture’s fundamental and eternal challenge as a constant balancing act between the artistic and the scientific. The workshop insists on architecture starting in the experience—and suggests a continuous return to it—throughout the creation alongside the necessary processing of the rational and metric. In this case, the personal, perceptual experience is approached through the embodied image, which enables a common dialogue, possibly opening and changing the world.

THE CAT

So let’s return to the cat in the bay window and see how Magnus answered some of our opening questions. Magnus found his spot in the harbor and in the second week developed plans, sections and facades in drawing. This is the outcome of his work in the final week. We have a fair amount of information about his thoughts by now.

Let’s enter this image.

It is a home. Magnus lives here in the harbor with his cat in his own, small house. The house sits intimately and peculiarly close to its existing neighbor—an old painted wooden building. Magnus’ house is wood clad as well, but with a contemporary cladding, and sterling board covering the popped-out bay windows. It seems pretty closed and private with its two windows facing west and north protruding

as peepholes to the world. But how does the house meet the ground? And what happens behind it on its southern backside?

Is this a possible way to add new life and meaning to a rough and wonderful—yet fragile—environment like the harbor without destroying it? And if so, the possible future of a portion of Copenhagen started here with the embodied image of the gazing cat.

Figure 12. Exterior model photo.

Magnus Thiemer Jensen, third week.

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