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Catching glimpses. The fragment-anthology as a strategy for architectural research.

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Towards a (new) Historiography of Architecture for a Digital Age.

Historicizing the desire to historicize.

Space and the otherness. An anthology.
Towards a (new) Architectural History for a Digital Age. Archdaily as a Dissemination Tool for Architectural Knowledge.

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Abstract

In our modern society people is more than ever a passive subject faced to a vast flow of information. Inspiration and problem solving can take the form of direct citation from the mass of examples disseminated by digital social media, websites and other sources. Focusing on the architectural field, the increasing development of Social Networks and of mono-thematic channels like archdaily, worldarchitecture, divisare, just to cite a few, offer every day a large amount of realised and unrealised projects which easily can serve as inspiration for the development of new designs. Among many other values ubiquity, immediateness and easiness are the most interesting effects which are of interest for this paper.

It could be argued that critical practice is substituting a more traditional theoretical body of thought related with the practice of architecture. Analysing the culture of instantaneity impulsed by digital social networks, we focus on the effects of immediacy, reliability, trend and democratisation for the dissemination of architecture. As any new project developed is based on a previous work or methodology, based on quotation or interpretation of earlier works, we could consider 'new knowledge' a combination of previous information and/or methodologies. One of the results shows how synchronicity between inspired and inspiring works leading to homogeneous bodies of work in very different latitudes make difficult to record a proper history of contemporary architecture in the digital era. The attempt to create a historiography of the digital age contemporary architecture should start to consider new methodologies, tools and strategies to apply. Apart from considering the effects of these technologies on architectural education and practice, suggestions are made to create a tool to show the evolving propagation of information, which should be used by contemporary historiography of architecture in order to adapt to the new digital environment permeating our society.

Key words: Digital publications, Architectural History, Historiography of Architecture, Archdaily.

1. Introduction.

At the beginning of the millennium, Charles Jencks (2003) looked at the new architectural paradigm raising when both the post-modern of the sixties and seventies and the theory of complexity of the eighties were fading. The domain of the computer in the definition of contemporary architectural design was the dominant strategy underlying new architectural processes despite the pluralism of different parallel thoughts. The vicious cycle in which the architecture of these decades has been trapped by promoting public buildings increasingly more ambitious in their form to respond to the so-called Bilbao effect, has had an abrupt end with the outbreak of the crisis in 2008.

The crisis mentioned by Jencks at the beginning of his text as the only event which could bring a change in a society anachronistically anchored in the past, was also a key point in architectural practice. Star-architectures became over-popular at the end of the twentieth century, even if they had uncertain effects on the place where they arose. They were developed by few architects working on a global scale and generated objections from a wide spectrum of the society which could not understand the reasons for their expenses. The phenomena has anyway evolved and is still present in several regions of the world where the rise of cities over nations, and their competition to reach a leading role over competitors, encourage the commission of iconic global buildings realized by a reduced elite of architects. One of the outcomes of this period in the critic of architecture can be found in “Superdutch: new architecture in Netherlands” (Looftsm, 2000), which was rapidly criticized (Bouman, 2006). As described by Solá Morales (1995), architecture has to be part of the capitalist society at the end of the 20th century, being at the service of powers with hidden and manipulated interests. The role of critics has been, after supporting the ideals of the Modern Movement, to distance from the practice to raise awareness of the subtle interests hidden behind building processes. We have to recognize how the role of critics is nowadays fading, in all social activities, substituted in many occasions by the rates and comments given by the same users, also thanks to the introduction of web 2.0.

This technological shift impulsed by Information Technologies (IT) is a second key point to understand the evolution of architectural practice at the beginning of the millennium. They are producing important and fast transformations on the structure of society that are undoubtedly reflected in our profession as architects. The physical limitations of the environment are becoming irrelevant. Architects have to face complex political, social and historical dynamics, and equally influenced by the same evolution of the architectural field and external constraints. Social networks and web 2.0 are the most relevant tools that are widely transforming our life and relationships. They make obsolete the traditional approaches based on chronological and geographical contexts, and establish a simplification based on the culture of the immediacy. If the aforementioned crisis brought a shrinking of the editorial market, the digital environment offers an interesting alternative for publishing with low budgets – although with unclear economical returns. While established journals delayed their digital conversion worldwide and social networks dissemination tools have been multiplied taking advantage of the fast and unpredictable transformations related with the information society. This trend is currently being research by the Master en Proyectos Arquitectónicos Avanzados, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Juan Lijrán, 2016), and at the online course “Escribir arquitectura: pautas y criterios” at the Universidad de Málaga, also if published outcomes are still limited. Mono-thematic web channels like Archdaily, Dezeen, Worldarchitecture or Divisare, just to cite the ones with the higher traffic, offer everyday a large amount of built and unbuilt projects which create a huge flow of information difficult to organize and classify. These platforms have become the first channel to inform about architecture events, new projects and material innovation. With them, small projects or lesser known firms can become viral, hence democratizing a field which only few decades ago was restricted to the few who were able to use effectively the communication media to reach a wide audience or influential clients (Colomina, 2010).

This new model raises doubts and questions about the trending topics in architecture. On the one hand, some architectures only last until they disappear from the screen when are replaced by new ones or, in some cases, just the life of a tweet. On the other hand, it also opens awareness over under-represented and marginal experiences, but with great interest, for a more inclusive understanding of the development of architecture. In fact, the huge amount of architecture designed worldwide, which wouldn’t fit on magazines according to the criteria of the eighties or nineties, can offer great insights on the understanding of architectural histories as they represent the common relationship between design and society (Ballantine, 2006). This same global post-colonial approach is also being promoted in the academic world with the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative (GAHTC), fostered by professors Mark Jarzombek and Vikramaditya Prakash, as the first attempt to open the History of Architecture to under-considered periods, regions and styles.

2. How to register and tell the history of architecture in the digital age.

The practice of architecture has evolved by adapting itself to the society and its new requirements. This change of model has been recently analysed by Zaera Polo (Zaera Polo, 2015; sa, 2018) with his proposal to create a compass of contemporary architecture and to start mapping its development on a
global scale. It is possibly the first attempt to understand the new trends in architecture at the beginning of the millennium and to categorize them. It also shows how difficult it is to follow the evolution on a global scale – more than 150 practices are mapped – on a compass which has been disseminated through the same social networks that make possible to know about their existence and their projects. This paper focuses on the importance of the culture of immediacy. This is originated by new technological applications and wider and faster dissemination of architectural projects, even before they are built, and focuses on the importance of the time to filter the architectural experiences. Once we no longer have to record changes and mutations, we could think of the tools that databases and digital archives are able to give to us or analyze how and where do we need to grow, or to what type of architecture do we need to grow. The new digital technologies allow to gather and analyze images in a way that is not possible with traditional media. This can be seen as an opportunity for architects to explore new ways of working and to create new forms of expression.

According with Andrew Leach (2010:2) "there is little agreement on what architectural history is and what it should be as it is how and how should it be made. If this discussion has been present during many decades when the practice of architecture was not really changing, this question is extremely relevant today, when we experience strong and fast transformations that are challenging the structure of our society. If the ability to access platforms related with architecture is an unquestionable way in today's architectural habits, this paper aims to understand not only the practice of architecture but also the habits of architects and students (the first target of Archdaily) looking for clear and concise results segregated for domain, shows the dominant role of this conglomerate in the architectural field, but also the habits of architects and students (the first target of Archdaily) looking for clear and concise results segregated for domain, shows the dominant role of this conglomerate in the architectural field.

The 25% of the whole set in concentrated in only three countries: United States (11,5%), Spain (7,76%) and Japan (6,10%), followed by France, Australia and China. If we look at the countries of origin of the users of the platform, the reasons can be clearly understood. The repository highly depends on the projects that are published on Archdaily by their interest in the projects published on Archdaily are regular user of the platform. We can also imagine the existence of a greater interest in new works, making the editorial team to prioritize the publication of works from these countries. Looking at this data in an aggregate way, results for continents are quite homogeneous. Also if with great differences, we can see how rather all countries in the world are represented – even if there are countries with only one project published like Madagascar, Syria or Sierra Leone, among more than 20 countries – being possible to have a great understanding of architectural trends worldwide. The second point of interest is related with the publication of projects as older ones can also be uploaded by the developer of a professional office. Thus, Archdaily offers also projects realized before 2008, the year the web site was established, also if they are not, as we will see, the majority. Something more difficult to clarify is the consistency of the construction year, because it depends on the criteria used by the designer and the editorial team when the year of the design or the year the construction was completed. We found also a significant number of projects (more than 9%) which lack this information. Many of them belong to the AD Classics, a category created by the editorial team to emphasize the projects that are realized in the last decade, when we consolidated that data with the year of publication.

AD Classics category is worth to be emphasized, as it offers the opportunity to access masterpieces of the domain Archdaily.com which duplicated the contents of the former to address more specifically the visitors, now also offering its contents in Portuguese and Chinese. As it is stated in the same information page, Archdaily was created as a tool to offer quality documentation about architecture and possibility to link them to other news, related or not with the current topic. An additional field, used also data related with users – but also with the interests of the provider - the History of Contemporary Architecture flawed. Obviously, there are several objections to this proposal that will be discussed at the end of this paper.

We scrutinize Archdaily.com, unanimously considered as one of the most relevant repositories of architecture. It was born in the late 2008 as a Spanish web page called PlataformaArquitectura.cat. Nonetheless, it soon incorporated English as a second language to reach a wider audience creating the domain Archdaily.com which duplicated the contents of the former to address more specifically the visitors, now also offering its contents in Portuguese and Chinese. As it is stated in the same information page, Archdaily was created as a tool to offer quality documentation about architecture and possibility to link them to other news, related or not with the current topic. The section of architecture, developed by Amazon company, offer interesting data related with this repository: Archdaily is ranked 2,944 as global popular site -calculated from an algorithm which takes into account single users and number of pages visited- and has an audience prevailing from the USA (16,2%) and China (13,4%). VS for each 100 visits, 38.45 pages are visited and 20% of users leave the site after reading 3 pages per visit and a mere 0.8% continues to read the content, a result which is quite consistent with the results segregated for domain, shows the dominant role of this conglomerate in the architectural field, but also the habits of architects and students (the first target of Archdaily) looking for clear and concise information.
accessible through categories searches – is possible to find other iconic projects from the late twenties like Menara Mesiniaga by Hamzah & Yeang, the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art by Steven Holl, the Grand Louvre by IM Pei or the same Yokohama International Passenger Terminal by FOA, a project only completed in 1995. The rapid changes of our society, or the digital natives users of this platform, quickly translate this idea into action, realizing an average of 3,300 projects per year from 2011 onward there is an project submitted, being 2013 the year with the highest activity, with 4,033 items. The stabilization of contents, which can also be confirmed by the items published during the month of January 2018, can offer different insights. Firstly, it is possible that Archdaily reached its critical maturity, especially considering the existence of similar platforms, and possibly a stabilization, as Archdaily, as well as Archdaily, can be considered as an alternative. Secondly, it can be imagined that the architecture circle interested in publishing their work has also reached a critical level, also related with the volume of works which are realized every year. It will be interesting to contrast these results with other platforms, and verify if their hypothesis is also to consider other alternatives. Looking at the year when the projects are realized, we can observe a sustained growth since 2004 - the first year considered relevant - with 122 projects, until 2013 with 2,974 projects published. In the following years, our database, which includes a substantial number of projects, could be also confirmed by the items published during the month of January 2018, can offer different insights. Firstly, it is possible that Archdaily reached its critical maturity, especially considering the existence of similar rival platforms, and possibly a stabilization facing new challenges. Secondly, we could also imagine that the architectural circle interested in publishing their work has also reached a critical level, also related with the volume of works which are realized every year. It will be interesting to contrast these results with other platforms, and verify if their hypothesis is also to consider other alternatives. Looking at the year when the projects are realized, we can observe a sustained growth since 2004 - the first year considered relevant - with 122 projects, until 2013 with 2,974 projects published. In the following years, our database, which includes a substantial number of projects,...
7. Figures, tables and pictures.
Notes

1. We don't use differently the terms History of Architecture or Architectural History. For a theoretical discussion on the differences, a good starting point is Glavin, Suna. «Frontiers of Fear. Architectural History, the anchor and the sail» in Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut, and Belgin Turan Özskaya. Rethinking Architectural Historiography. New York: Routledge, 2006: 74–81.

Image Captions

Fig. 1. (Map of) Countries with larger number of projects in the website. Fig. 2. (a) Relation of projects built and published the same year vs. others. (b) Comparison of built projects and published projects by year. Fig. 3. [DONUT] Distribution of projects among categories. Contribution by categories for countries with larger number of projects published. Fig. 4. Ranking of the offices with the highest number of projects published on Archdaily.

References


Biography

Guido Cimadome, Lecturer at the Department of Art and Architecture and Coordinator for International Mobility at the School of Architecture, University of Malaga (Spain) since 2010. Architect (Italy, 1998), PDI (Spain, 2014). Guido is Expert member of the ICOMOS’ scientific committee CIPA for the Documentation of Architectonic Heritage and of UNESCO’s Forum «University and Heritage». He shares the practice of architecture working on the design of cultural and sport facilities and on documentation, rehabilitation and dissemination of cultural heritage. Coordinator of the online course “Writing architecture: Pathlines and criteria” from 2010 to 2017, focuses his researches on the ways to disseminate architecture and on the tools to empower citizens in the transformation of urban environments. He has recently published the book “Cesare Brandi. El lenguaje clásico de la arquitectura” and curated “Breve curso de escritura crítica”, both for Asimétrica Editorial.

Rubén García Rubie, Ph.D. in Architecture from the University of Valladolid (2016) and PhD in Architecture from the University of Roma Tre (2019). He has been “Visiting Scholar” in the American Academy in Rome in 2012. He has been Professor in several Schools of Architecture in Europe and has also been Guest Professor in many international institutions. As a professional, his work has been awarded with architectural prizes and thoroughly published in national and international architectural magazines. At the present, he is teacher at the Al Ghurair University (Dubai, UAE) and combines it with a research activity in several university projects and his works in his architectural office RRA. He is also the Editor-in-Chief of the architectural weblog CajondelaArquitecto.com.

Vishal Shahdadpur Aswani. Vishal is a young researcher with a strong interest in algorithmic design processes, robotic manufacturing techniques and predictive modelling for urban development. In 2014, his passion for learning made him pause his career as an architect to train in the field of programming and thus expand his knowledge in a field that he considered fundamental. After this, the same passion led him to develop his studies in the United States and Australia, before returning to Spain in 2017. During his stay in Australia, Vishal joined the robotic fabrication laboratory of the University of Technology Sydney as a specialist and technical teacher, working on various research projects involving advanced computational design, generation of complex forms, programming for digital manufacturing of construction elements and development of robotic manufacturing processes.

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