Learning and Unlearning Precedent

Caryn Brause
Learning and Unlearning Precedent

Caryn Brause, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Introduction

Representation and visual communication are integral to all facets of architecture, from conception to realization - as generator, as mediator, as symbol, and as an end unto itself. Visualization is a central method for selling architectural services, as well as a key product of those services. But in the media-saturated world that beginning students encounter, visualization skills pose inherent certain risks. First, there is the risk that the visualization takes on a life of its own, driving and defining the design process. Then, there is the seductive, and self-contained universe of the visualization, one that seeks to erase the risks that accompany real world variables, including human occupation and the destructive reality of construction.

To counterbalance the seduction of visualization, analysis provides a stabilizing force. In beginning design courses, precedent studies of canonical buildings are frequently advanced as a primary vehicle for studying analysis, idea generation, visualization, and communication. The National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) situates precedent study in Realm A: Critical Thinking and Representation and defines the use of precedent as the “Ability to examine and comprehend the fundamental principles present in relevant precedents and to make informed choices about the incorporation of such principles into architecture and urban design projects.” Precedent studies often align with studio projects in which the analysis of buildings is tied to those with similar programs that the students will design. This form of analysis typically focuses on formal, organizational, material, and structural qualities. However, NAAB Realm A also asks that graduates from accredited programs “understand the impact of ideas based on the study and analysis of multiple theoretical, social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental contexts.”

This paper examines a visualization assignment situated in a digital skills lab in which a traditional precedent study is a device for teaching graphic communication, software techniques, and analytical methods. The author’s hypothesis is that introducing an exercise in image compositing provides an opportunity to consider multiple readings of the precedent being analyzed—it opens up the analysis to the position that architectural artifacts are dynamic rather than static, subject to interpretation and appropriation as well as decay, weather, aging, and abuse. In this manner, students are encouraged to both learn and “unlearn” precedents simultaneously over the course of the semester. Additionally, as the assignment occurs in parallel with the instruction of architectural rendering techniques, it provides a provocation to consider critically the propriety of glamorous and sanitized representations of architecture at the same time that students are gaining the very skills necessary to produce these representations.

Rendering & Responsibility

Responsibility accompanies image creation skills. As technology has advanced and become more affordable, design visualizations have become highly realistic. For the designer, these advancements enable testing of concepts with great visual accuracy. For clients and stakeholders, they are persuasive tools to convey architectural ideas, in part because laypeople can appreciate and understand perspective images even without a sophisticated knowledge of architectural conventions. However, “the rendered image evokes a notion of building in a complete state. But unlike the construction of perspectives or classical elevations drawn by teams of architectural disciples in the past, these high resolution renderings are generated off of trace amounts of real information.” In place of accuracy, visualizations often amplify desirable features while omitting or distorting undesirable ones; when realized, the built work then greatly differs from the one promised in the images.

This gap in the relationship between conception and construction is centuries old. For example, Renaissance architects used
drawing as a tool in the conception of architecture to distinguished themselves from building craftsmen, and thus enhance their roles as professional designers to acquire higher status and wider respect. Facilitated by the new methods of drawing, this shift from builder to conceiver enabled them to operate at greater distances from construction sites while still communicating their ideas and instructions to the workmen, the patrons, the project administrators, and the building officials involved in the construction process. 

These drawings were primarily produced to convey instructions for material realization in built form. However, architects developed a parallel tradition of producing images for public consumption, in which the accuracy of the images and their relationship to the final building were not always intended to have a 1:1 relationship. Palladio, for example, produced images of his buildings, stripped out of their context, in order to offer them to the public as idealized architectural models. Similarly, Le Corbusier modified images of his buildings to preserve the transmission of their ideas in perpetuity through publication, rather than privilege their realization. The Museum of Art and Design (MAD) by Allied Works provides a contemporary example of a project that is portrayed closer to its conceived state on the firm’s website—without the large horizontal picture window that the client required for the ninth floor restaurant.

Several practices have emerged to provide a check against these distortions. For example, to protect project stakeholders, some jurisdictions require visual impact studies as part of the permitting and planning process. The London View Management Framework requires that developers submit an “Accurate Visual Representation” (AVR), also known as a “Visually Verified Montage” (VVM), to assess the possible effects that new development may have on views to and from Strategically Important Landmarks and World Heritage Sites. To protect their design process, some architects have responded to the demand for photorealism by building abstraction into their visual communication strategies. They point to the risk of closing down the design process at a time when imagination is still critical to maintain the potential of the avenues of inquiry. Mansilla y Tuñón Arquitectos notes that renderings must “be open enough to leave room for the development of the project, but specific enough to communicate whatever it is that makes the project special. They should be more about the attitude with which the project is faced rather than about how exactly it is going to look.”

Course | Context

This image-compositing assignment is situated within a digital skills laboratory, which is a companion course to the first semester graduate studio. Over the course of the semester, students conduct a typical precedent study on a well-known twentieth or twenty-first century house. The houses have been selected for diversity of conceptual, spatial, organizational, structural, and material qualities in order to contribute to this studio’s design dialogue. After conducting background research on their selected precedent study, students complete a formal, spatial, and tectonic analysis of the house while they concurrently digitally reconstruct the building.

In the assigned project, students deconstruct the canonical architectural imagery of these houses and then re-compose it to create an alternate narrative—one that challenges the building’s historical and geographical context. To create their narrative, students select a passage from one of the course’s assigned readings, their case study research, a quote by the designer or client, a dictionary definition, or any other piece of text that, when combined with their re-composed image, supports, extends, or transforms their conceptual approach.

Beyond the precedent study content, this assignment has several overlapping objectives for. First, students encounter essential graphic design concepts such as typography, composition, collage, and layout. Second, students gain beginning knowledge of image manipulation and graphic design software—in this case, Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. Finally, students critically evaluate graphic architectural materials for content and message. While analyzing the ways in which architectural imagery is deployed in practice, students must consider the role of visualization in architectural ambition and deception.

Method

This assignment immediately follows a lesson on fundamentals of typography. Students analyze a range of historical and contemporary materials to examine the structure and optics of text including size, spacing, case, weight, stroke contrast, body width, posture, and visual style as well as variables as well as paragraph alignment, rag, spatial interval, and texture. In an attendant exercise, students iteratively reconfigure a single chunk of textual information, adjusting one variable at a time to explore hierarchy, alignment, clarity, and layout. (Fig. 1)
Learning and Unlearning Precedent

In the subsequent assignment, students combine their selected text with their composited image to test and refine their interaction and integration. They must create a conceptual basis for their investigations and explore potential visual relationships between text and image. These interactions pose serious challenges, but also create the possibility of examining both elements more critically. Both text and image are composed of lights and darks, open and closed spaces, points, lines, and volumes. They may share proportional attributes or stand in contrast to each other. By testing juxtapositions, students may find resonances in the shape or size of elements in each.

Other students select passages from a variety of sources that challenged them to re-site their buildings in new locales, and create narratives in which the structures are re-occupied by humans, animals, or others; As a result of these juxtapositions, the houses may host previously unconsidered activities, or respond to unexpected weather events, violence, and deterioration. For example, one student felt called, by his reading of David Gissen’s “The Architectural Reconstruction of Nature,” to imagine passing by the Villa Shodan in a ruinous state while kayaking along a nearby waterway. Employing a centered alignment for the text passage, which readers may associate with formal certificates, and tombstones, completes the poetic effect. (Fig. 4)

A student who selected a passage from Carol J. Burn’s essay “On Site: Architectural Preoccupations” then considered the detachment of building from site. Through a series of juxtapositions to create text and image collages that shared compositional qualities highlighted by the passage. For example, one student juxtaposed text about the Mobius House and then deconstructed the text, experimenting with reversing and adjusting the color, size, and spacing. The image is experienced as a series of layers—first a layer of insistently horizontal text, then a vertical layer of trees trunks and, in the background, the horizontal mass of the building. (Fig. 2) Another student, working with Tadao Ando’s Horiuchi House, chose a text that highlights distortion, and explored the occupant’s experience of looking in and out from behind the glass block wall. (Fig. 3)
tions, the student then grappled with a fluctuating relationship between text and image—Tadao Ando’s 4x4 House—aligned, superimposed, overlapping, dominating or responsive to each other which provided an analog to the issues raised by the passage regarding the relationship between building and site. (Fig. 5) Another student, studying OMA’s Villa dall’Ava, selected a George Orwell quote. The text, regarding perceived income and social inequities, then drove the selection of entourage, creating a narrative in which the Villa is situated behind a wall in a low-income neighborhood, its clad volumes resonating with the piled residences stacked on the slope in the background, and a series of tense relationships set up between figures inside and outside the structure. (Fig. 6)

**Fig. 4 Villa Shodan Collage Study, Andrew Stadnicki**

**Fig. 5 4x4 House Collage Studies, Nikki Perry**

**Discussion**

This assignment has been implemented in the curriculum in various formats for the last four years. In some years, the exercise took place at the beginning of the semester, prior to the building analysis, to provide time for students to digest the information and imagery that they are gathering for their precedent study while building Photoshop skills. At other times, the exercise occurred toward the end of the semester, after students have analyzed and reconstructed the house and gained greater intimacy with the subject matter.

Thus far, there has been more variation in outcome with respect to individual students and their text selection than there has been with respect to scheduling of the assignment. The text selection had the greatest impact on the outcomes: some students were more experimental at the beginning of the semester when they viewed the assignment as pure composition and image manipulation while other students had increased confidence after taking apart and putting back together the building digitally, which fostered more adventurous text selection and collage juxtapositions. The assignment was twice given without the text component—as an exercise solely about image composition. Each time the students seemed to have more difficulty constructing a compelling visual narrative through compositing alone. The collision of text and image produced discomfort, as well as a struggle for meaning that then drove more sophisticated overall compositions, and with it, greater skill development in both image manipulation and typography.

**Fig. 6 Villa dall’Ava House Collage Study, Rob Kane**

**Further**

Is it subversive to portray these known icons in this manner? The approach to acquiring building knowledge exhibited in this assignment posits that the architectural canon is open to contradictory attitudes and criteria. The exercise suggests that through the reconsideration and recreation of architectural imagery, we can transcend the traditional view of these precedents by replacing images of perfection with the realistic imperfection of human experience and, by doing so, engage the complex endeavor of human inhabitation. In this way, we can engender, from our student’s first semester, a multilayered approach to understanding, digesting, appropriating, and ultimately transforming our inherited environment.
Notes

1 See, for example, Balmer, J. and Swisher, M, Diagramming the Big Idea. Routledge, Taylor & Francis: London, 2012.


3 Ibid., 15.


5 Curbed NY’s Rendering vs Reality column provides regular examples. www.curbed.com


