FORGERY AND NARRATIVE IN ARCHITECTURE DESIGN COMMUNICATION

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DESIGN COMMUNICATION
DIGITAL COLLAGE
LOUVRE
ALBERTO CAMPO BAEZA
RAPHAËL GABRION

Although in the wake of the tradition of photomontage and collage, the communication Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion adopted to present their architectural proposal for a new facility building for the Louvre in Liévin demonstrates an innovative connotative power of intertextual elements added to the basic renderings. In particular, artworks and cinema-referred elements added to the perspective renderings are used to unfold their semantic range, to orient the reception and to discuss on the threshold between fictive and scientific, where forgery can be paradoxically used to tell the truth.

INTRODUCTION

In *L'image ouverte*, the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman recalls how painting has often been defined as "minor-being, a work of appearance". He also adds that "Whoever says to paint says to pretend" (Didi-Huberman, 2007, p. 44), reiterating a critical position towards images that has ancient roots. Such a judgment comes from an age in which the sight was underestimated. The truth was rather transmitted through the 'word' (the Lord's word), the 'touch' (Thomas' proverbial 'finger in the wound') or ancient written sources, which were given an absolute value for centuries. Pictures were instead considered "unreliable and deceptive" (Nuti, 2008, p. 10). Isidore of Seville declares it bluntly around the 4th century:

> the painting is an image that reproduces the appearance of some reality and which, when you look at it, brings that reality back to mind. The painting was called *pictura* almost to say *fictura*: it is, in fact, a strong image, that is, false, not real [...] in fact there are paintings that, striving to reproduce the original exactly, go beyond reality itself and, wanting to be more credible, offer a deceptive image. (Isidore of Seville, 615-636, XIX, 16)

Imitation, intended as the derivation after a 'model', was formerly based on aspects such as the material used, the proportions or key figures, the arrangement between the parts or the use of specific formulas (Krautheimer, 1942). During the Renaissance, this relationship shifted to a fundamentally visual level and the pictures acquired credibility and centrality in the formation and transmission of knowledge. The invention of print, of photography, and, recently, of computer-generated imagery, have given images a more important but also more ambiguous role, especially in a context, such as the architectural design communication, which lies on the slippery threshold between scientific illustration and artistic expression. Digital technology has not only allowed the production of photo-realistic

pictures, often indistinguishable from a photograph, but also promoted the transformation of existing images, whose semantic reservoir can be put at the service of the communication of the architectural design. In this way, architects can communicate their proposal by constructing visual anticipations that easily combine 'denotation' –the projective and scientific representation of the architectural body and the environment it belongs to– and 'connotation' – elements and treatments adopted in order to recall meanings that belong to the reader. In some cases, the connotative contribute takes superiority over the denotative one.

The architectural 'envelope' is only evoked while accessory elements such as textures, human figures, vegetation or signals become intertextual filters through which the design space is given further sense (Colonnese 2017, 2019, 2020).

Waiting for visual studies addressed to interpreting the iconographic production of modern architecture in the expanded field of media, the author analyzes the graphic results of a project developed in 2015 by Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion as an entry for the competition for the deposit of the Louvre to be built in Liévin. In particular, the innovative renderings, which involve both recognizable human figures and artworks belonging to Louvre, are here decomposed in layers and connected with the external sources and meanings. They are then discussed both to illustrate the communicative power of the intertextual network they perform and to investigate their specific critical role in connoting the project as a piece of truth out of the fictive, virtual context it is immersed in.

DESIGNING FOR ART

In 2015, the Spanish architect Alberto Campo Baeza and the French architect Raphaël Gabrion took part in the competition for the Conservation and Storage Facility for the Louvre Museum in Liévin. Together with Elena Jiménez,

Fig. 1 Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion, *Conservation and Storage Facility for the Louvre Museum in Liévin*, 2015. Digital rendering of the building on the lake (Courtesy of Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion).

Tommaso Campiotti, María Pérez de Camino, Imanol Iparraguirre, Ignacio Aguirre, Alejandro Cervilla, as well as Raphaël Gabrion's collaborators in Paris, they designed a concrete cubic storage crowned by offices and laboratories around narrow patios in a place marked by two sturdy coal chimney stacks as memory of a previous anthracite mining centre. The competition entry is presented by a number of different drawings and pictures: plans, sections, photographs of a *maquette*, an exploded axonometric view and view and a perspective section after a digital model. Added to these, no less than 15 perspective views, seven outdoor and eight indoor views, explore the project (Figure 1). While plans and elevations reveal the mostly functional nature of the

building, made of neutral rooms open either to courtyards or landscape, both the architects' report and renderings are entrusted with the mission of make a 'cultural artefact' out of it.

The building, which is designed on the shore of a small lake, is described as "A large, dark podium housing all the workshops and services, with the cubic part of this great warehouse emerging like the chimney of a great boat" (Campo Baeza, 2015). Such a primary metaphorical reading is suggested by the words *bateau ivre* (drunken boat) that comments a sketch of December 14, 2014, and are assumed as the entry's motto for they echo the title of the well-known Rimbaud poem. But this is only the first step, as most of the connotative work is performed by the renderings, which can be organized in three distinct groups, according to the complexity of their semantic device.

A first group consists of black-and-white perspective views of exteriors and interiors, with a few figures of technicians in charge of packing, moving, analysing, or restoring the works of art. Actually, the artworks, together with the landscape, are the true protagonists of these pictures. Some large sculptures are arranged in the full-height room covered with Carrara marble square tiles to demonstrate the use of that exceptional space. Generally, the 'pasted' works, such as the sculpture known as *The Marly Horse* or Eugène Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le people*, are popular, recognizable and immediately relatable to the original Louvre. In one case, Hubert Robert's *La Grande Galerie*, it directly shows its magnificent interiors rooms and pay homage to their architect (Figure 2).

A second group consists of three black-and-white renderings of exterior or interior. In addition to the works of art, these renderings feature recognizable human figures, which obviously constitute a precise choice of the architects and visualizers. Some of the figures look compatible with the program of the building, such as a group of art historians intent on appreciating the restoration of Leonardo da Vinci's *St Anna and the Vergin*. The group is presumed to be pasted

Fig. 2 Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion, *Conservation and Storage Facility for the Louvre Museum in Liévin*, 2015. Digital rendering of the large format unpacking area with people admiring Hubert Robert's Grand Galerie (Courtesy of Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion).

from a screenshot of Stan Neumann's *Leonardo da Vinci: The Restoration of the Century*, a documentary presenting the restoration accomplished between 2010 and 2012. This rendering is particularly interesting in demonstrating how architecture is evoked by four grey lines and two photographic maps stretched to frame a view of the landscape while the quality of space is expressed mainly by the people, and their shadows, around the painting (Figure 3).

Conversely, other figures, such as the Italian actor and director Vittorio De Sica or the Australian actor Geoffrey Rush, appear to be 'out of place', in temporal, geographical, and logical terms. Their presence has the consequence of unfolding the semantic field of the images to a wide range of suggestions. De Sica's 'architectural cameo' has been cut out of a photograph shot in London in the 1950s and recently shown in the exhibition *Tutti De Sica* (Farinelli, 2013) but his narrative role in the rendering of the building entrance is
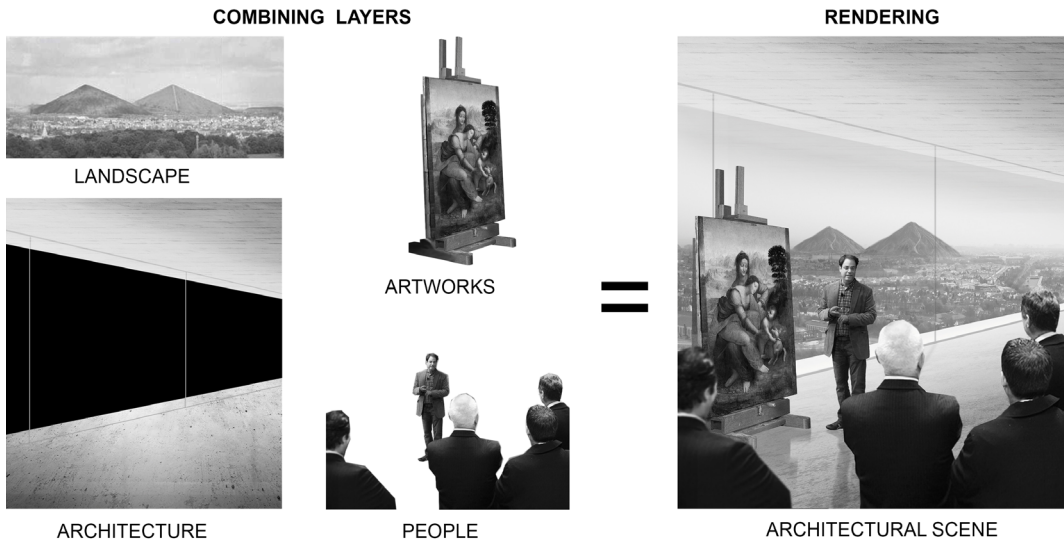
COMBINING LAYERS   RENDERING

LANDSCAPE

ARTWORKS

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ARCHITECTURE   PEOPLE   ARCHITECTURAL SCENE

Fig. 3 Alberto Campo Baeza and
Raphaël Gabrion, *Conservation
and Storage Facility for the Louvre
Museum in Liévin*, 2015. Digital
rendering decomposed in four
layers (Courtesy of Campo
Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion;
elaboration by the author).

quite enigmatic and needs to be justified. Besides being a
general homage to the artist and a dimensional reference
for design space, De Sica evokes here a general relationship
between cinema and classic art. But there is more. Standing
in front of the museum entrance, his face looks serious and
he looks like a guardian of the art institution, maybe indirectly
condemning the current spectacularization of museum space
(Figure 4).

By taking into account his movies, he can be associated
with the black-and-white quality of the renderings. By taking
into account the famous *Umberto D.*'s (De Sica, 1952) sequence
shot by the Pantheon, his figure can even be interpreted as
Campo Baeza's homage to his favourite Roman monument.
But he is best known as the father of Neorealism and this
specific quality of his 'motion pictures' seems to deal with
the authenticity of the architectural representation and the
spatial data it conveys.

The presence of Geoffrey Rush in the rendering of the 'large
format unpacking area', dressed as an elegant gentleman
looking at pieces of sculpture and potteries among wooden
boxes, is even more ambiguous (Figure 5). Although seen

Fig. 4 Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion, *Conservation and Storage Facility for the Louvre Museum in Liévin*, 2015. Digital rendering of the main entrance with Vittorio De Sica cut, mirrored, and pasted after a photograph of 1950s, here added at left (Courtesy of Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion).

from behind, we can recognize him as Virgil Oldman, the standoffish and aloof art auctioneer of Giuseppe Tornatore's (2013) *The Best Offer*. Virgil uses the expertise in forgery of his friend and painter Billy to manipulate the mind of the bidders and acquire original artworks at a very low price.

The figure in the rendering is cut-out of a sequence in which he is revealing his secret collection of woman portraits to his beloved Claire. She is a fragile lady apparently affected by agoraphobia, eventually revealing to be a member of thievery plan organized to steal Virgil's priceless collection.

The concepts of 'simulation', 'copy', 'fake' and 'authentic' are central in the whole movie, as symbolized by the man-shape automaton being restored by Robert, one of Claire's accomplices. Billy states that "everything can be simulated, even love". Virgil does not agree with his friend, as proved by the following dialogue:

> Claire: "In an old article of yours I found on the internet, you said: There's something authentic in every forgery. What did you mean?"

Fig. 5 Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphael Gabrion, *Conservation and Storage Facility for the Louvre Museum in Liévin*, 2015. Digital rendering with Geoffrey Rush after Tornatore's *La migliore offerta*, compared with a partial view of the original shot at right (Courtesy of Campo Baeza and Gabrion).

Virgil Oldman: "When simulating another's work the forger can't resist the temptation to put in something of himself. Often, it's just a trifle, a detail of no interest. One unsuspected stroke, by which the forger inevitably ends up betraying himself, and revealing his own utterly authentic sensibilities".

While this dialogue offers Virgil the hope of a true love, even after his secret collection has been stolen by Claire herself, it casts a different light on the rendering, on the museum project and, by extension, on the practice of architectural representation. Any rendering of an architectural design is commonly designed to 'sell' a building and commonly mixes real and fictive elements. But what is 'real' or 'authentic' and what is 'fake' or only 'fictive' in the rendering of an architectural project? A building like the Louvre facility building is somehow 'summoned' from the mind of architects and, although copied-and-pasted from other sources, human figures, artworks, and the landscape outside the windows look like the only 'authentic' elements in these pictures. At the same time, nowadays an architecture scene is always a combination of layers of visual information coming from the 'machine' (a computer-generated scene) and elements coming from people arranging and finalizing the picture itself (the forgers?). But, maybe another sense can be found.
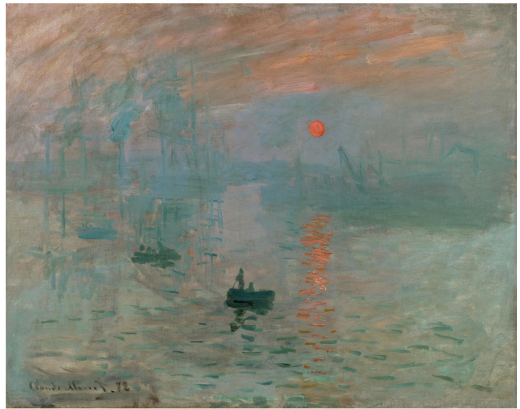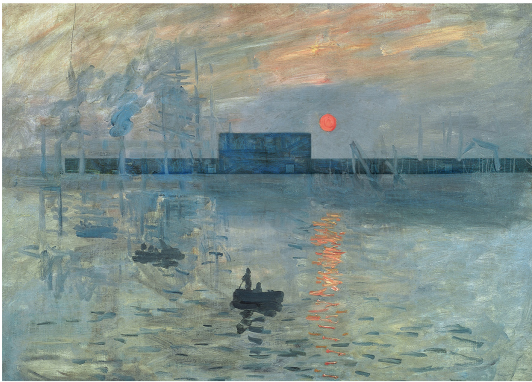
FORGING PAINTINGS

The third group of renderings consists of digital views produced by inserting an image of the building model into three paintings of the Louvre collection. The museum design appears into the background of Jean-François Millet's *L'Angélus* (1857-59), in the waterscape of Claude Monet's *Soleil Levant* (1872) and as a model onto the table of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *L'Enfant au toton* (1738). From an operative point of view, the digital insertion of a picture of the model into the paintings required some collateral interventions. For example, the higher part of *L'Angélus*, with some ducks flying in the sky, were cut out and the two figures in the foreground were distanced to frame the building shape in the background. Quite the same building shape has been placed in the upper part of *Soleil Levant* and textured with impressionistic brushstrokes captured from the painting itself, eventually removing the artist's signature.

These three pictures (Figure 6) are neither architecture renderings with figures pasted onto nor paintings made on purpose for illustrating an architectural design, in the wake of a long-lasting tradition. They are properly existing paintings that were turned into architecture design presentations by inserting a small picture of the design building. They are digital reproductions of a painting reproducing a scene into which a view of the digital model of the designed building was inserted. Added to their layered structure, an actual iconographic short-circuit occurs as the artworks literally embody the building designed to contain them.

These three pictures provide different levels of information. One reacts to these images as if in front of an experience of Augmented Reality, scrutinizing the elements to evaluate their authenticity and conjecturing syllogisms to connote them. For example:

1. the picture reproduces a painting;
2. the painting belongs to the Louvre collection;

Fig. 6 Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion, Conservation and Storage Facility for the Louvre Museum in Liévin, 2015. Digital renderings after Jean-François Millet's *L'Angélus* (1857-59), Claude Monet's *Soleil Levant* (1872) and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *L'Enfant au toton* (1738). (Courtesy of Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion).

3. the painting recalls a set of consolidated meanings related to the author, context, technique, etc.;
4. the painting has been slightly modified to add a small image of a designed building or, in one case, the explicit image of one of its models (representation of a representation);
5. the painting is therefore a representation of the architectural project inserted in a pictorial context;
6. the architectural project is linked to the Louvre and may be associated with the meanings of the painting, an artwork;
7. the architectural project is an artwork.

This chain of deductions, with its radical conclusion, is only one of the many possible. Certainly, the denotative content of the designed structure is almost insignificant when compared to the connotative contents of the context it is inserted in and, therefore, to the semantic range. Further interpretations emerge by observing the specific elements contained (or missing) in the chosen painting (Figure 7). For example, in Chardin's painting, the model is onto a table, close to a pair of books, a roll of paper, and a gorgeous quill in an inkwell, all of them instruments for writing and drawing. Moreover, the model replaces a spinning top the boy is playing with. This replacement gives further meanings to the model and, consequently, to the image, the project, and the building. The model is connoted as a game in itself, a sort of innocent board-game or a mysterious mathematical box explored by the boy's right hand. When indulging this 'path of breadcrumbs', the whole picture can be interpreted as a puzzle to solve. In this sense, the missing spinning top cannot but recall *Inception*. As known, in Christopher Nolan's (2010) movie, Leonardo Di Caprio plays a man who uses a spinning top to reveal whether he is currently living in the reality or in a multi-level dream. By adopting this suggestion, the image reveals to be a sort of 'matryoshka' inspired by the four-level structured dreams explored in the movie, a chain of connected representations in which any clear boundary between reality and representation, and between true and false, is challenged and deceived.

Fig. 7 Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion, *Conservation and Storage Facility for the Louvre Museum in Liévin*, 2015. Digital rendering after Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *L'Enfant au toton* (1738) compared to the original painting (detail). (Courtesy of Alberto Campo Baeza and Raphaël Gabrion).

CONCLUSION

Although in the wake of the tradition of photomontage and collage, the visual communication conceived by Campo Baeza, Raphaël Gabrion and their collaborators to present a new building for the Louvre in Liévin is paradigmatic of the current evolution of the visual models for architecture design communication in the extended field of the digital media. Somehow, their presentation of a building for preserving pieces of art became an opportunity for considering the current role of architectural images.

Although the renderings of the building are based on realistic views after a digital model or digital collage, they are retouched, simplified and integrated to convey meanings coming from outside the building and the picture. This intent is evident since the motto, the 'drunken boat', which connotes the whole building as an ark preserving meaningful exemplars of human art with a bit of irony that seems to cast a critical shadow on the program or the place chosen. In particular, while most of the human figures and artworks serve to express size and uses of design space as well as the connection with the Louvre as an institution, some are chosen with the specific goal of questioning the actual sense of the pictures themselves, forcing the readers to deal with the many possible layers of meaning.

The presence of 'uncanny' figures in the rooms of the Conservation and Storage Facility of the Louvre, like De Sica and Rush/Oldman are a sort of homage to their artistic performances and indirectly demonstrate the renderings are explicitly fictive. At the same time, they provide a semantic contribute to the project presentation. Both De Sica and Rush/Oldman are connected to cinema, the Dream Factory, which seems the main critical filter to interpret the pictures. De Sica, the father of Italian Neorealism, possibly inspired the black-and-white documentary-like renderings and seems to remind that more than fiction, these renderings are authentic gazes onto reality.

Rush/Oldman could simply recall the power of visual se-duction of art as well as the excesses and risks of its trading, but there something more. He associates the renderings with the work of a forger, who, in recreating a work of art, may give in to the impulse to customize the copy through a detail that belongs to him or her. This opportunity is testified by the three paintings transformed into pictures presenting the project. As a sort of iconographic short-circuit, they liter-ally turn an 'unreliable and deceptive' *fictura* into a message of truth. The insertion of the building in the digital copy of the painting is the personal, authentic contribute coming from the mind of the architect/forger, a small piece of truth left on the uncertain border between the domains of real and virtual. Besides this specific contribute, the architects convey the idea of an interrelated system of representation not only in a projective or visual sense but also in a narrative sense, in which each single view may provide clues to inter-pret the others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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