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Bildbauten: An interview with Philipp Schaerer



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[Joao Pereira de Sousa](#), Architect & founder of [BRAVDESIGN](#), recently shared with us an interview he did with Architect/Illustrator Philipp Schaerer.

As an ETH-trained Architect, [Philipp Schaerer](#) (1972) currently works as a freelance image designer. He is specialised in digital montage techniques and CGI (Computer Generated Imagery). After graduating from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) as an architect in 2000, Philipp Schaerer worked as an Architect, knowledge manager and image creator in the field of digital image editing for [Herzog & de Meuron](#) in Basel during six years (2000-2006). He created many well known architectural visualisations for this office and has substantially influenced the visual language of today's established architectural visualizations. During his four years working as a research assistant at the chair of Computer Aided Architectural Design (CAAD) at the Faculty of Architecture (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich) under Prof. Dr. Ludger Hovestadt, he was able to continuously develop his knowledge in the area of digital image techniques. He gives lectures and conducts workshops at several universities in Switzerland.

I have been in touch with Philipp's work for some years now. At first, I found a small image of one of his artworks somewhere in an architecture magazine. Though I was not totally interested in finding more about its author at the time, later when I decided to google his name, I found out his website with showcase of some of his work. That was when I got a great deal of interest in the kind of work he was doing. Most of his commissioned work I had already seen published in numerous magazines, but when I was introduced to his personal artworks it was like taking a step into a completely new reality. And in fact, the term real is what really interests me the most about his work. Philipp usually starts from an idea and a simple sketch and then, through the use of photomontages, he then generates a whole new semi-abstract image based on existing textures and elements which are put together into generating a whole new dimension. His work is definitely worth a long look and deserves the kind of attention which Philipp engages into all his artworks.

I then decided to contact Philipp in order to get a more in depth knowledge about his work and the process of designing such intricate images. He has been kind enough to answer all of my questions and gave me an insight about the kind of work he is currently developing.

When did you first started to develop commissioned illustrations for Architecture Studios? I started working on digital architectural illustrations as collaborator in the office of Herzog & de Meuron. Already during my internship in the same office in 1998, there was tendency towards more graphic based submission and presentation. One reason was certainly the emergence of computers in the field of architecture offices, in general around this time. Coming from my studies with my T-square, I was immediately taken by the computer. It not only comprised a whole CAD-Environment, but also a series of other applications like the Software Photoshop – and that on the same ‘small’ space – all easily accessible. I think this new ability for switching immediately from one application to another and the possibility to exchange components among each other, has encouraged me to do experimentations concerning different representation modes and has shifted my interest more and more to the image based environment.



© Architecture: Herzog & de Meuron Project: Elbphilharmonie, Kaispeicher A, Hamburg/D Project Phase: Schematic Design Image by: Philipp Schaerer Date: 04/2005

That’s an interesting evolution, from being an Architect to more of a illustrator.

So when and how have you decided to focus entirely on visualization? I think I never really focused entirely on visualization. When doing visuals I always had – and still need – another intellectual balance activity. During my time at Herzog & de Meuron, I also worked as Knowledge Manager from 2002-2006 – developing strategies to improve information and know-how transfer between project teams. And after leaving the office in 2006, still continuing to do visualization – but on commission now – I simultaneously worked as a research assistant at the chair of Computer Aided Architectural Design (CAAD) at the Faculty of Architecture (Swiss Federal Institute of

Technology Zurich) under Prof. Dr. Ludger Hovestadt. Today, beside doing commissions, it's important for me to do personal work and image experiments in order to develop continuously my knowledge in the area of digital image techniques and in visual perception ability.

Your commissioned work for Herzog & de Meuron Architects is quite interesting in the way you transform and interpret their designs in order to generate award-winning images. How important is for an Architecture Studio to develop such high quality images of their design proposals, in order to win commissions and new clients? Let me say just something about your notion of 'interpretation'. When starting doing images for Herzog & de Meuron, there was of course 3D modeling and rendering software. But in 2000, the computer power in architectural offices was not really high-end and the available renderers were not very convincing on the level of dealing with complexity, textures lights and shadows at this time. Specially working on large scale public projects with a very large amount of polygons, it was quite impossible to render the scene in a reasonable time, and the visual quality of the rendered images was not very convincing at the end – it always looked a little bit too clean and inexpressive. So what I normally did when creating images, I started with a simply calculated model as starting image – in order to maintain the perspective legitimacy of the project – and made all the refinement work in the image editing software (Photoshop) by adding objects, textures, lights and shadows. This method of image montage helped me to selectively elaborate parts of the image. By means of this detailed elaboration of surface areas, the light and variations of contrast and colour saturation, individual parts of the image can be elaborated in a more sophisticated manner. Thus, the concreteness and the presence of the important image elements can be increased considerably. This characteristic is one of the major advantages over the purely calculated CAD-visualisations and helped me to generate – what you call – these 'award-winning images'. I really think – specially today in our visual world – it's important that architecture studios should develop not only the skill doing high quality, but also to develop their own image language, which is not just the result of a commercial software renderer.

Save this picture!



© Architecture: Herzog & de Meuron Project: National Stadium, Olympic Games 2008, Beijing/CN Project Phase: Design Development Image by: Philipp Schaerer Date: 09/2004

Your work seems quite complex and time-consuming, can you give us an insight on your working methods?

As I've mentioned already above, I create architectural visualization mostly by means of the digital image montage. It consists of the combination of several images or image parts, which are put together on the computer to create a new image. With this technique, almost everything can be newly created. Sketches, photographs and calculated CAD-components serve as a basis. The entire work depending on the complexity of the project, lasts easily up to 20 hours. There is showcase of a 'making of' on my website, where you can see how I build up images: www.philippschaerer.ch/e/w-com-showcase.html

It's really nice that you share your techniques with everyone through that making of. You have developed an interesting series entitled 'Bildbauten', where you have created a set of fictional Architectures that look so realistic, but at the same time they give you and odd feeling of not being real. Can you explain us your ideas behind this series? First of all there was a personal reason doing this series. I mean doing architectural visualization for offices like Herzog & de Meuron, normally big scaled public projects with a lot of image components – I simply looked for a balance in my personal work when doing images – to be more minimal and looking for

simple composition – to take only a floor for example, a vertical surface and a sky and to question at which moment an image becomes an architectural one – by the minimal use of image components. An other reason for doing the series – less personal but about the question of the claim to reality of images in our time was the following: I mean architecture and image have always been directly linked to each other. The creation of architecture is always preceded by a phase of imagination, be it in the form of a sketch, a diagram, a plan or a perspective – abstract or not. Architecture has always been imagined and communicated by means of images and pictures. Now, the rapid development of computer and information technology has fundamentally changed the relationship between image and architecture as well as their perception. In addition to the conventional types of mostly abstract images used until now in the design and planning phases – sketches, plans, elevations or axonometric drawings – a new type of image is now being used: a digitally created image that appears to be a photograph. In the context of architecture, this type of image has until now exclusively been associated with the image of built architecture. Now, it is increasingly used to let something appear real which has yet to be built. This leads to confusion and challenges the claim of the reality of the images that appear to be photographs. I mean the series of images with the title 'Bildbauten' deals with this effect and the claim of the credibility of architectural images that appear to be photographs. It further questions the medium 'photograph' as a documentary piece of evidence depicting reality.

Thank you [Philipp Schaerer](#) for the time and effort you have dedicated on all these questions. It is much appreciated!

Author: João Pereira de Sousa Published on Bravdesign.net on September, 13th 2011



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