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*architectural  
image*  
Davide  
Tommaso  
Ferrando

*Abstract*

This paper investigates some of the effects that the global proliferation of web and social media is having on our capacity to understand architecture, and as a consequence, on the ongoing redefinition of architectural culture itself. More specifically, given that, nowadays, the vast majority of our architectural

experience is mediated by digital images published online, the paper problematizes their current role as the main vectors of architectural knowledge, situating them in the cultural context in which they are produced and disseminated. In order to do that, the paper approaches the architectural field from the disciplinary point of view of Visual Culture Studies. The first part of the paper is dedicated to a brief discussion of the role of media, and particularly image, in our culture at large. The second part of the paper investigates some of the key features that determine the formal, material, technological and social aspects of architectural images once they are produced for and disseminated on web and social media. The paper analyses the phenomenon from a theoretical and empirical point of view, making reference to some specific case studies.

## One

*Images are mediations between men and the world. Men “ek-sist”, in the sense that they have no direct access to the world, therefore images have to make it representable for them. But in the moment in which they do, nevertheless, they position themselves between men and the world. They should be maps and become schemes: instead of*

*representing the world, they alter it, until men start living in function of the images they have created. (Flusser 1989:5.6)*

Before regarding the architectural field, that of the image is first of all an issue that concerns our culture at large, and especially today, since we live in a period characterized by a dramatic growth in the production and consumption of digital images – now the principal medium through which get in touch with architecture –, which has been recently accelerated by the diffusion of social media. Such acceleration is just the latest step of a slow but constant invasion of visual communication in our society: an “iconic turn” [1], as it has been called by Gottfried Boehm, whose beginning can be dated back to the nineteenth century (Pinotti and Somaini 2009:42). Far from being anecdotic, the fact that we are becoming more “visual” and less “textual” is deeply changing the way in which we experience reality, to the point that, according to Giovanni Sartori, we are assisting to a new step in the evolution of man: from *Homo Sapiens* to *Homo Videns* (Sartori 1997). More often than not, such condition is interpreted in problematic terms, questioning the capacity of images to act as tools for the emancipation from – rather than the subjugation to – dominant discourses. After all, criticism of the

downsides of images is a traditional feature of Western philosophy, at least since Plato, who famously fought a passionate battle against them, blaming painters for producing illusions that “have an inferior degree of truth” and therefore concern “an inferior part of the soul” (Plato 360 BC).

Similar positions have been formulated, during the twentieth century, by several thinkers who have criticised the effects of the proliferation of images on society. Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1967/1994), for example, elaborates on Karl Marx’s principle of the commodity fetishism, so to adapt it to a culture characterized by mass media and consumption. According to Debord, the representations that the capitalist economy produces, in order to legitimize itself, have become so pervasive that images are now experienced as the real world. The result of this substitution is the emerging of the “spectacle”, whose definition – “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 1967/1994) – sounds like an *ante litteram* description of how platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat work.

Twenty years later, Jean Baudrillard further develops Debord’s idea, recurring to the concept of

“simulacra”, i.e. images “that bear no relation to any reality whatever” (Baudrillard 1983). Images, according to the French philosopher, have murdered the real: they are signs emptied of meaning that have come to establish an independent reality: a “hyperreality”. The disappearance of meaning – which seems to describe, again *ante litteram*, the post-truth condition to which social media are apparently leading us – depends on the way in which mass media transform communication and information.

According to Baudrillard, in fact, “rather than creating communication, [information] exhausts itself in the act of staging communication” (Baudrillard 1981/1994), and it does so because the contents of the messages get neutralized by the forms of their respective media, following the principle that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964/1994). Marshall McLuhan’s well-known formula means that, since each form of communication is a form of transport (of goods or information), it is also a form of metaphor [2], in the sense that

*Each form of transport not only carries, but translates and transforms, the sender, the receiver and the message. The use of any kind of medium or extension of man alters the patterns of interdependence among people, as it alters the ratios among our senses. (McLuhan 1964/1994:90)*

By shifting the attention from the *contents* to the *effects* of media, McLuhan expands Walter Benjamin's intuition that there exists a correlation between the history of perception and the history of technology. According to the German philosopher, in fact, human vision evolves together with the evolution of the technical apparatuses that articulate it, since they reorganize each time the medium of perception (Benjamin 1935/1969). Benjamin's claim implies that images don't exist in pure, abstract form: they are always mediated – they are *pictures* [3] –, and the specific nature of their mediation is responsible for their effects on society. In this sense, media shouldn't be intended as simple supports, but as “the system of instruments and operations that constitute the conditions of possibility of every form of experience, knowledge and cultural process” (Pinotti, Somaini 2016:184). If this is true, considered the intrinsic relation that has always tied together architecture, images and media, it only makes sense to ask how strongly image-based media, such as Facebook, Tumblr or Instagram, are influencing the way in which we experience, understand and therefore produce architecture.

That media influence architecture should be widely

accepted by now. Around the 1530s, to make an example, the invention of the modern print format changed the history of architecture forever. The possibility to print and distribute books in greater quantities and better quality, in fact, together with the introduction of the printed image – i.e. of a kind of high-quality image that is the exact reproduction of an original –, directly and permanently affected architectural theory, given that architectural knowledge could be recorded and transmitted at a much wider scale and in a new visual format. This had great consequences on built architecture too, given that, as Mario Carpo writes:

*When we speak of architecture we may mean either something built or a body of knowledge – a collection of experiences that may be transformed into models or rules and that continues to exist only if these are recorded, accumulated and transmitted. Recording and transmission are dependent on the instruments, vehicles and media used to carry them out. Such mediating techniques change over time, and as information science has shown us, no means of communication is either universal or neutral. [...] In general, then, one may posit that the constant interaction between architectural thought and means of communication must have had rather marked effects on the history of built architecture as*



*well.* (Carpo 1998/2001:13)

Now, my claim is that the invention of social media will have effects of comparable proportions on architectural history. Nevertheless, little ink has been spent on this matter until now, probably because it is still too close to our eyes. The scholar who has come closer to the topic is Beatriz Colomina [4], who in 2014 gave a lecture titled *Privacy and Publicity in the Age of Social Media* (Colomina 2015:118-131), which nevertheless does little more than scratching the surface of the problem, since she treats social media in a rather generic way, avoiding the problem of their medium specificity. Something similar can be said about the 2011 interview *From Xerography to HTML*, in which Colomina acknowledges that we are “witnessing a whole new world related to media and communication formats” and that “Blogs, Twitter, Facebook are these new tools”, without going any further than that, though.

So to say: it seems to me that architectural culture is no more prepared to encounter social media than the society of the 1960s was able to cope with radio and television.

## Two

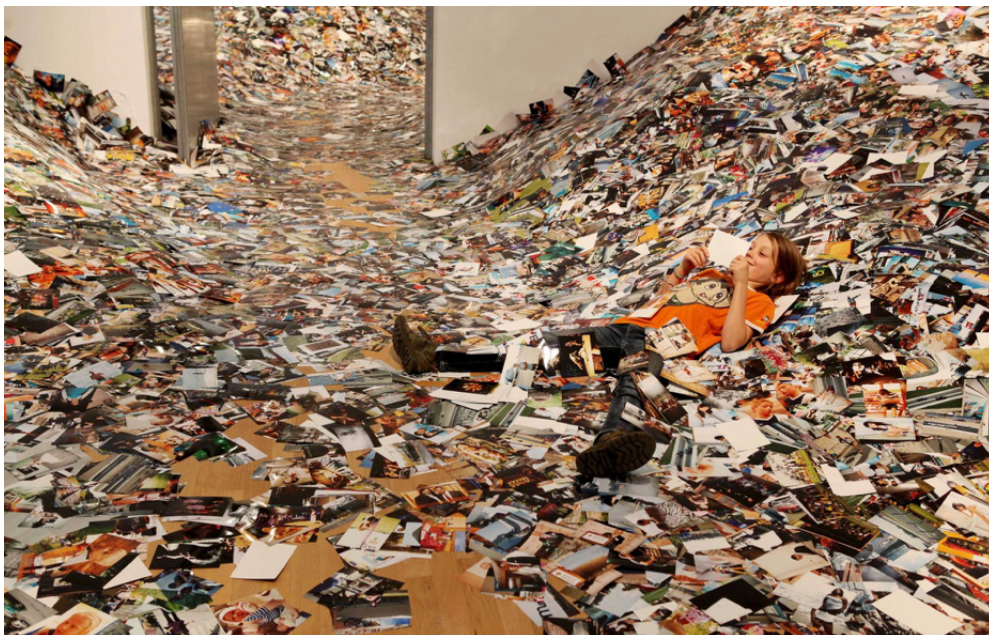
*While the territory of poor images allows access to excluded imagery, it is also permeated by the most advanced commodification techniques. While it enables the users' active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production. Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of poor images. (Steyerl 2009)*

I was recently invited to contribute to an exhibition titled “24 Hours” [5], meant to highlight “the amount of specialized architectural information that is launched in the cyber world in just one day, chosen at random, taking as reference some of the most visited architectural sites in the world”. Part of the material presented in “24 Hours” was a selection of super-short texts (maximum 40 words) gathered from a group of architects who had been invited to comment, in less than 24 hours since the reception of the curators' e-mail, the topic of the exhibition. Incapable of writing a meaningful 40-words sentence, I decided to condense in the form of a list some of the topics that I believe to be crucial, when the relationship between architecture and social media is questioned.

This is what I wrote:

*Architecture on social media must deal with: Accessibility, Atemporality, Archives, Capital (social), Commodification, Consumption (visual), Diplopia, Distraction, Images, Information (excess of), Likes, Meaning (absence of), Narcissism, Obsolescence, Participation, Proximity, Reputation, Simulacra, Spectacle, Speed, Time (lack of), Transmediality, Transparency, Videos, Visibility.*

If I could rewrite this text, I would now squeeze in it at least three more terms – *Abundancy, Low Resolution* and *Filter Bubble* –, but anyway, the list is simply meant to show the amount of issues I believe to be at stake: issues that I will only partially address in the following paragraphs, which are exclusively dedicated to the topic of the image.



### Erik Kessels, "24 Hours", 2011

The first thing to consider, when dealing with how architectural images are being transformed by social media, is their abundance: a condition that has profound effects on the way in which they are perceived, and that depends on the excess of information being daily produced on the web. The numbers are impressive. According to Statistic Brain [6], an average of 52,000,000 pictures are uploaded each day on Instagram, while 1,650,000,000 is the average number of daily "likes" that are given on that platform. In 2013, there were 1,200,000,000 Facebook users uploading a total of 350,000,000 pictures per day (Cooper 2013), while today, according to Statista, Zuckerberg's platform has reached 1,860,000,000 users [7], and although there are no recent statistics on the current number of daily uploaded pictures, we can easily make ourselves an idea of its magnitude.

According to Omnicore, finally, 1,000,000 snaps (images & photos) are created every day on Snapchat [8].

The question arises spontaneously: how is today's gigantic flow of digital images affecting architectural culture? An interesting interpretation of the present condition comes from an architecture photographer,

Philipp Schaerer, who for a period worked at Herzog & De Meuron as “office knowledge manager”: a position that deeply influenced him, since it allowed him to directly deal with the studio’s immense archive of digital images, and therefore to gain a crucial insight into how architecture images are constructed, organized, disseminated and consumed today. Schaerer’s *Diary* series is an explicit comment on this first experience: a sequence of pictures made of 25,000 thumbnails each (125 columns of 200 lines) taken from the photographer’s digital archive, which make visible the way in which “quantity” is assuming a new value in contemporary culture.



**Philipp Schaerer, Diary, 2012**

Images exist only if they are seen: the more abundant they are, the more competitive is the milieu in which they circulate, the more strategic is their capacity to travel at higher speed and spread at wider scale so to

instantly reach more public, given that in our “positive society” the value of communication, as Byung-Chul Han claims, is measured exclusively “on the quantity and speed of the exchange of information” (Han 2012/2014:20). The possibility to travel fast and spread virally, nevertheless, is inversely proportional to the weight of the images’ files, and therefore to their definition. It is for this reason that, after being long dominated by the big dimension and high quality of the printed image, architectural culture is now being redefined by what Hito Steyerl calls the “poor image”:

*The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. (Steyerl 2009)*

The main quality of poor images is that of being accessible: their effectiveness is not based on their content or form, but rather “on their quick and massive distribution” (Cardoso, Zerené 2014:321). They lose information in order to gain in circulation, but with what consequences? A second project by

Schaerer, titled *Bildbauten*, offers a subtle commentary to this phenomenon. The series is made of digital collages showing close up shoots of decontextualized architectural objects, defined by a lack of complexity and details counterbalanced by the hyperrealism of their texture (Vassallo 2016:97). By providing a sequence of iconic images with little information, *Bildbauten* speaks not only of the progressive reduction of the amount of knowledge produced by online publications, but also of their distracted [9] audience, whose attention span is being challenged by the growing amount of information that overwhelms it.





**Philipp Schaerer, Bildbau 23, 2009**

Another consequence of the abundance of architectural images circulating on social media is that, being it impossible to grasp the totality of what is published each day, architectural knowledge cannot take any more the form of a common discourse.

Rather, it reconfigures itself as an archipelago of discursive fragments mainly vehiculated by images (the most efficient medium in the fast and distracted milieu of the internet) produced by and circulating inside of transnational networks of online communities, not necessarily in contact with each other. Such fragmentariness is further exacerbated by the so-called “filter bubble”: a mechanism based on algorithmic formulas that affects the results of Google searches and Facebook feeds, personalizing them in order to meet the preferences already expressed by their users’ past clicks and likes behaviour. As a result, we tend to consume more and more contents that confirm our pre-existing views (not only about architecture), therefore developing “tunnel vision” without even realizing it. As Han writes:

*Social media and personalized search engines build on the web a space of absolute proximity, in which the external is eliminated. There, it is only possible to meet ourselves and those that are similar to us. (Han 2012/2014:60)*

The fact that social media displace us in a “space of absolute proximity” deeply influences our understanding of architecture, since we naturally tend to generalize what we know of a phenomenon to its totality, and therefore also conditions the way in

which we are able to act as architects, editors, critics, etc., since all action is a reaction to something known. In other words: the systems of architectural images that circulate among the members of online communities, are becoming the mediators through which those same communities understand architecture. They are the *archives* from which their architectural imaginary is shaped, and from which a specific kind of architectural knowledge, which depends on *montage* processes, is produced.

As a matter of fact, those of “archive” and “montage” have once more become fundamental concepts for visual – and therefore architectural – culture, following a long tradition of inquiry on the gnosiological value of images that has some illustrious precedents in Aby Warburg’s *Atlas Mnemosyne*, André Malraux *Imaginary Museum* and Joseph Rikwert’s *Atlas*. In such tradition, montage – the disposition of images in space and time – is used both as an analytical and heuristic tool: a technique meant to produce knowledge by means of “the fecundity of the dialectical tensions and anachronistic juxtapositions” (Pinotti and Somaini 2016:102) that are established among groups of images. In the last decades, the growing availability of visual documents, as well as of accessible tools to reorganize and manipulate them,

has transformed montage in a vast cultural phenomenon, practiced by architects and architecture editors as well. The diffusion of social media has further exacerbated this process, basically allowing anyone with a Tumblr account to become, with very little effort, the editor of a “curated archive” [10] of architectural images. Two are the phenomena following this recent “editorial turn”, that I find necessary to stress.



**Aby Warburg, Mnemosyne-Atlas, 1926**



**Andre Malraux, 1953**

First, that most architecture-related curated archives, such as Mariabruna Fabrizi and Fosco Lucarelli's *Socks* or Daniel Tudor Munteanu's *OfHouses*, tend to publish contents that are not selected from the "mainstream" imaginary promoted by web platforms such as *Archdaily* or *Dezeen*, but rather from printed or less known online publications, therefore allowing images otherwise "forgotten" to circulate at a wider scale. Paradoxically, this is as much a process of *construction* as it is one of *destruction* of imaginaries. Since the

natural condition of digital images, in fact, is their multiplication and accumulation on the web, “giving life” to only few of them means also “killing” all the others. As Georges Didi-Huberman writes:

*The essence of the archive is its gaps, its “holey” quality. Now, frequently, the gaps are the result of deliberate or unconscious censorships, of destructions, aggressions, or auto-da-fé. The archive is often grey, not just because of the time that has lapsed, but because of the ashes of all that surrounded it and has burned. (Didi-Huberman 2004/2009:248)*

The editors of architecture-related curated archives, in this sense, are iconoclast and iconodule at the same time: they venerate images to the point that they have to destroy them, becoming the subjects of what Bruno Latour defines as an “iconclash” (Latour 2005).

Images, nonetheless, can be destroyed with little resentment today, given that on the web and social media they have copies everywhere. In this sense, it is necessary to stress the existence of two fundamental conditions, without which editorial projects such as *Socks* and *OfHouses* would be unimaginable: on one side, the instant and free availability of vast archives of digital images; and on the other, the possibility to appropriate and manipulate them with no

restrictions. Both conditions depend on a normative and technological gap that has made obsolete the concept of “copyright”, which has historically dominated all forms of publication, given the impossibility to monitor and discipline the way in which digital contents travel on the web and are transformed by a growing amount of “prosumers”.

With the evaporation of the distinction between producer and consumer, as William J. Mitchell writes, the nature of images switches to that of

*fragments of information that circulate in the high-speed networks now ringing the globe and that can be received, transformed, and recombined like DNA to produce new intellectual structures having their own dynamics and value. (Mitchell 1994:51)*

Once fixed and controlled by a small number of museum, universities, publishers and magazines, on social media (architectural) images become the unstable object of a continuous process of collective reappropriation. They are selected, gathered and broadcasted in bottom-to-bottom channels, and their force of attraction is such that they give birth to online communities of prosumers who, suddenly tied by a mutual visual bond, start to gravitate around them. On social media, (architectural) images

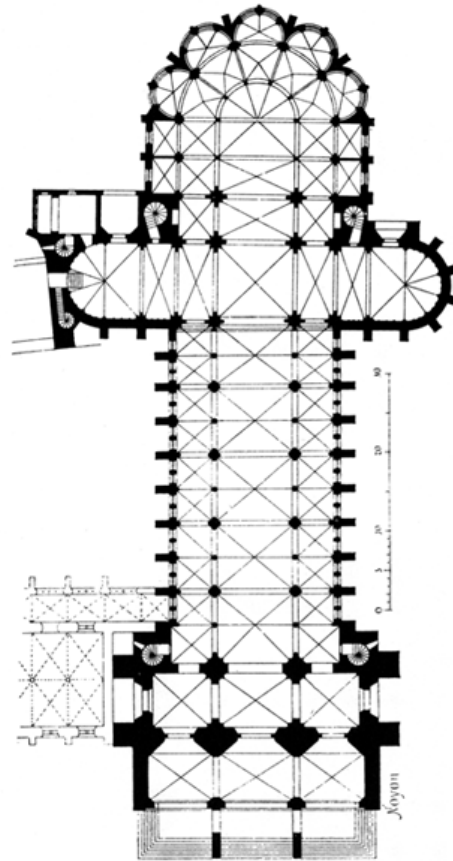
become the vehicles of a counter-information, the place where the commodifying imaginaries of “mainstream” media can be defaced and refaced.

While the urban sphere is being progressively privatized, images become more and more *public*, as they belong to everybody and to no one at the same time. On social media, (architectural) images become Commons.

The second phenomenon to stress has to do with the fact that most architecture-related curated archives gather and juxtapose images coming from (sometimes very) distant historical periods. These, once associated, begin to resonate, establishing a kind of mutual relation that Georges Didi-Huberman defines as “anachronism”: a relation that redefines images as montages “of places and times that are different, even contradictory” (Eco, Augé, Didi-Huberman 2004/2009:65), and that makes the “memory” that is incorporated in each one of them, i.e. their genealogy, come to the surface. Huberman’s idea of anachronism can be clearly observed in Davide Trabucco’s *Confórmí*: a digital collection of square pictures made of two right-triangular images each, which are juxtaposed along their diagonals so to create a third image containing both. Coming indifferently from architecture, art, cinema and pop



culture, as well as from different historical periods, the sources from which the montages of *Confórmí* are made make visible the patterns of “migration” along which man-made forms have been travelling through time, literally reproducing an effect of “diplopia”, i.e. “a seeing double thanks to which the culture-specific eye of the spectator [...] is capable of unfolding different temporal horizons starting from one single image” (Pinotti and Somaini 2016:124). Trabucco’s recent experiments with animated gifs have brought the *Confórmí* project one step forward, as they allow him to densify the anachronism of his montages, by multiplying – hypothetically *ad libitum*– the number of references they incorporate.



### **Davide Trabucco, Who is your God, 2017**

Regarding this, Tess Thackara has observed how the juxtaposition of old and new is a growing trend in art exhibitions, believing it to be the manifestation of an

impulse to expand in size and scope the programs of art museums, which is made possible by the fact that “in the globalized, digital present, [...] the whole world (and archives of the past) [is at] our fingertips”. This, according to Thackara, is giving birth to a new historiographical method that she defines “Big Art History”, whose largesse

*is arguably more illustrative of a shift in perspective — an impulse toward a greater inclusivity and generosity of vision, one that sees history as running alongside the present, the Renaissance alongside the contemporary.*

(Thackara 2016)

Could the specific way in which social media are transforming architectural images be the first step of a soon-to-come “Big Architecture History”? And what kind of architectural production could this mediatic turn lead to? Although it seems difficult to foresee how “architecture in the age of social media” will be, it is nevertheless possible to imagine one direction towards which architectural production could move in the near future, under the effects of media that are more than ever based on the (fast and global) circulation of (abundant and poor) images. My claim is that such direction will be rooted in the works of those architects who have investigated the value of the

image as a design element, of the archive as a design tool and of montage as a design method. Among them we could mention Eduardo Souto De Moura, Herzog & De Meuron, Valerio Olgiati and especially Aldo Rossi, with his idea of an “analogical architecture”, i.e. an architecture that is made by means of an association (montage) of fragments (images) belonging to individual memory (archive):

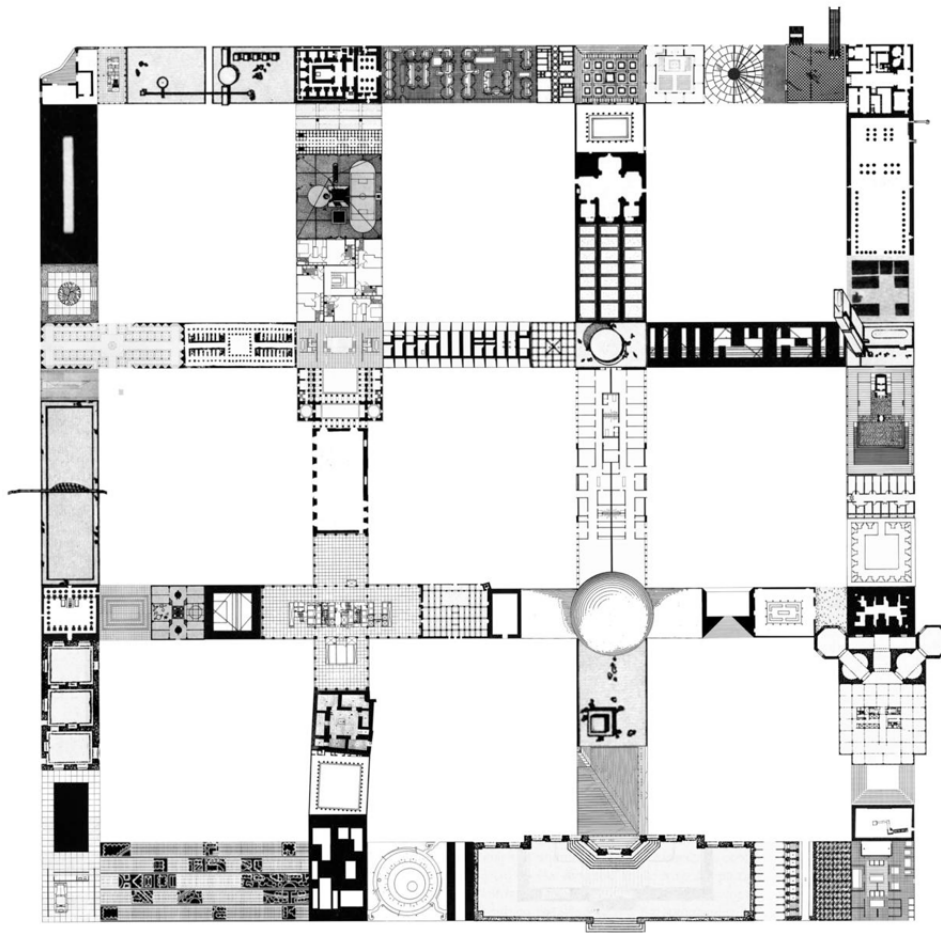
*I could put together an album relating to my designs and consisting only of things already seen in other places: galleries, silos, old houses, factories, farm houses in the Lombard countryside or near Berlin, and many more – something between memory and an inventory. (Rossi 1976/1996).*

The idea of an architecture based on the association and manipulation of fragments of reality deeply resonates with Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea of art as “post-production”, and of the artist as “dj” and “programmer”. According to the French curator, since the early 1990s the task of the contemporary artist has been to select cultural objects and then put them in a new context, as a response to the increasing amount of works being produced and disseminated in the globalized information age. Such change of attitude eradicates “the traditional distinction

between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work” (Bourriaud 2002/2005).

A series of architectural collages by Andrew Kovacs, the editor of *Archive of Affinities*, well represent Bourriaud’s concept: they are made from fragments of floorplans taken from buildings of different periods and scale, which, once put together, form a new coherent unity, a form made from an archive of images, with no manipulation apart from their disposition. Kovacs’ montages make visible an approach to architecture that seems to be deeply coherent with the new conditions that characterize images on social media. Nevertheless, they don’t account for the way in which the *social* part of these media – i.e. the kinds of interactions established among prosumers – have an effect on architectural theory and production.

This, I believe, is the next urgent topic to address.



**Andrew Kovacs, Plan for a 9 square grid, 2012**

## Notes

**1. The use that Gottfried Boehm does of the term “iconic turn” in the 1990s has to be understood as a reaction to the idea of “linguistic turn”, with which Richard Rorty, in the 1960s, sought to bring back all issues related to knowledge to a linguistic problem. Against the supposed primacy of the text, speaking of an iconic turn was meant to stress the fact that “images are not words, they don’t behave as words, they are not structured (semantically and syntactically) as a language, and they bring to life worlds that are radically different from the ones that emerge when speaking a word” (Pinotti and Somaini 2009:17).**

**2. From the greek *metapheréin* – “to transport”.**

**3. Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini define the difference between “image” and “picture” in these terms: “One of the distinctive traits of visual culture studies is that of taking in consideration all those elements that configure *animage* as a *picture*: a material, concrete, so to say *incarnated* image, whose presence inside of a specific cultural context is determined by a series of material, technical and spatial factors, that can’t be ignored. (Pinotti, Somaini 2016:137)**

**4. Colomina’s research starts from the assumption that, starting from the twentieth century, architecture is known almost exclusively through its representations, and therefore, that its site of production is “no longer exclusively located on the construction site, but more and more displaced into the rather immaterial sites of architectural publications, exhibitions, journals” (Colomina 1996:15).**

**5. The exhibition, curated by Andreia Garcia and Diogo Aguiar, was on show at Porto’s Galeria de Arquitectura, between January 14th and March 4th, 2017.**

**6. <http://www.statisticbrain.com/instagram-company-statistics/>**

**7. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>**

**8. <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/snapchat-statistics/>**

**9. Interestingly, the topic of distraction as the specific modality in which architecture is perceived, which was first introduced by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction*, is assuming new meanings today.**

**10. The term “curated archive” first appeared during a series of discussions I had with Paula Victoria Álvarez for the *Editor Talks* project. I then further investigated it together with Daniel Tudor Munteanu, with the *Unfolding Pavilion*: an independent exhibition showed during the days of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale**

[www.unfoldingpavilion.com](http://www.unfoldingpavilion.com)). In that occasion, we defined curated archives as “periodically updated collections of images that share one or more common themes. Material published in these archives may be original or pre-existing, left as found or manipulated, scanned from print or reblogged, commented on or not. They may be drawings, collages, photographs, animated gifs or short videos which, once gathered, become interrelated fragments of the editors’ architectural thinking, taking the form of lists of references published according to meticulously defined protocols”.

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