Archi-objects of desire and their role in cities of the information age[i]

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Abstract

Virtual space is, in our information era, a new site for the emplacement of architecture. In virtual space buildings become detached of their immediate context, they are exposed through real or virtual images aside many others, and acquire the condition of desirable objects that gravitate before our eyes. This research paper poses a reflection on the objectification of architecture, the urban consequences of satisfying large scaled desire, and the possible relationships of these phenomena with the media coverage of architecture's scaled appearance. This research paper also pretends an approximation to contemporary diminishment of visual retention in those who consume and apprehend architecture, since the staging of buildings in the virtual world; and how this demands architects a prioritization of aesthetic expression and visual coherence in order to captivate and promote interest on their proposals. Following this virtual and globalised staging of architectural events, cities are now promoting and disclosing archi-objects of desire as a positioning strategy. All the reflections mentioned above will be raised based on a concrete case study that, within Latin American socio-economic constraints, may help explain a global phenomenon. The city of Medellin is a regional example in social renovation and civic integration that faces future commitments through the systematic generation of archi-objects of desire as an urban strategy.

Keywords: archi-objects of desire, objectification, media coverage, virtual space, Medellin

Virtual space is, in our information era, a new site for the emplacement of architecture. In virtual space buildings become detached of their immediate context, they are exposed through real or virtual images aside many others, and acquire the condition of desirable objects that gravitate before our eyes. What has been previously described evidences the growing objectification of architecture. Buildings are seen today as archi-objects of desire due to the media coverage that their appearance receives and to the inference that this media coverage has on project processes.

1. Archi-objects of desire

The object, very soon, acquires before our eyes the appearance or the existence of a thing that is inhuman and that insists on existing (Barthes, 1994)

The notion archi-object of desire is proposed here as the manifestation in the internet of a building, no matter whether it has been built or not, and that pretends -from the exhibition of its object-like condition-, to provoke and to arouse desire. Archi-objects are architectures that from their scaled condition of objects exhibited in media, offer

themselves to the world.

The archi-objects that are mentioned in this text are understood as unique productions, that result from an apparently singular creative process and that seek exhibition. While archi-objects of desire attend to laws that govern consumer goods, they aspire becoming much more than just consumer goods[ii].

There is also a more esthetic treatment of the object, presented as if it were hiding some sort of essence that has to be reconstituted. (Barthes, 1966, 2)

Because archi-objects privilege desire over satisfaction, their ideal emplacement is the global network and not local plots. The archi-object of desire is placed on the internet before it reaches the physical world or in parallel with its placement in the physical world; it is found in between the world from which it comes from and the world where it is heading to. That is what differentiates it from the consumer good that extinguishes or vanishes upon its acquisition and consumption.

The object is commonly defined as a "thing that is useful for something". The object is therefore, and at first sight, absorbed by a finality of use, that is called function. And therefore exists, spontaneously sensed by us, some sort of transitivity of the object: the object serves man to act upon the world, to modify the world, to be in the world in an active manner (Barthes, 1966, 2)

The main utility of the archi-object is, precisely, to arouse desire. It is for this action and through this action that it affirms itself on media. This does not

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mean that the physical concretion of architecture behind the archi-object is unable to satisfy the common needs, determinants and variables of the discipline in the real world. Arousing desire does not surrender an object incapable of being useful in the strict sense of the word, if it has been built or if it is going to be built.

The archi-object has been mainly conceived as an object that arouses desire through media coverage. "The function of the object always transforms, at least, into the sign of that same function" (Barthes, 1966, 3). For the object to arouse desire it has to become imprinted with desire. For this impression of desire to take place, the creative process or the act of registering, distances from satisfaction as an end; or the entire process is deliberately interrupted, giving the object an unfinished quality or a sense of impossibility.

"There is always a sense that goes beyond the use of the object" (Barthes, 1966, 2). This sense beyond its use has been imprinted in the archi-object since its conception. It's been imprinted in the experience of the archi-object that preceded the one conceived. The desire to create a desirable archi-object comes from longing other similar objects seen before. It is through this succession of linked impulses that media becomes the field of permanent dissatisfaction and vehement desires and offerings.

We see that a sort of escape from the object towards the infinitely subjective is incessantly taking place and for that same reason, precisely, in the end, all these creations tend to show that the object develops for men some sort of absurd, and that has in a certain way the sense of no-sense (Barthes, 1966, 2).

With the archi-object there is desire in two directions. On one hand, the object arouses desire towards itself and on the other hand it arouses desire outside itself. The desire that the archi-object arouses towards itself partially relies upon its very controlled and limited exposition (a necessary condition for a provoking exhibition). It is because of this capacity to be shown incompletely that spaces seem unclear, uncertain, unoccupied or not human. They resemble possible spaces instead of evident spaces, and they invoke something that is more than human. It is with these insinuations that each individual approaches the archi-object, generates a singular impression of it or projects upon it a certain liveliness or life style. The individual becomes co-participant of the work that he has desired.

2. Seeing affects making

The proliferation and multiplicity of archi-objects that coexist in the internet exposes the user to an overlapping of overexposures. The quantity of incomplete information that is thrust into the net and then offered to users determines the quality of its reception. The result of the increase of the information

delivered is the reduction of the visual retention in those that consume and apprehend architecture in its staging in the virtual world. In consequence, and to attend to the new ways of seeing, architects prioritize the objectification of architecture. In media, architecture is not spatially apprehensible but can be externally perceptible. As Paul Virilio says:

The emergence of forms as volumes destined to persist as long as their materials would allow has given way to images whose duration is purely retinal (Virilio, 2000).

With the intention of raising an interest for archi-objects, their creators have paid less attention to those aspects that are virtually elusive and have destined greater effort to those perceptually comprehensible aspects related with objectiveness. More attention is dedicated, for example, to volumetric and sculpture-like expressions of buildings or to the performance of their facades. Ways of seeing determine ways of making; and ways of seeing in this information era have changed altering in its path creative processes.

Ways to project change because ways to experience change. Experience therefore affects design. But the new ways to experience can only be fully recognized when the different ways of design that succeed them have become manifest.

The current retentiveness seems inferior than before but visual appetite seems greater, conditions that modify the ways that objects communicate and therefore modify objects themselves.

The new mass-media of contemporary art have not merely unsettled the old reading of the bourgeois era. With the preeminence of the sign over the world, with their shock effect and plethora of stimuli which supplant the understanding enjoyment of reading, with the manipulative power of information which can merely be stored but hardly integrated any longer in personal recollection, they also threaten the growth of aesthetic experience in the traditional sense (Jauss, 1982, 61).

For the current approximation to the world of objects in media, new terms such as: zapping, skimming, navigating or surfing are used. This last verb that alludes to movement on a surface is analogue to the knowledge we can acquire of archi-objects through media. Even if media stimulates our capacity to recognize, value or judge the surface of what we see (the waves), highlighting its appearance, we miss or lose the capacity to elucidate the context, the circumstances in which things come to being or the consistency of their results (the depth of the sea).

The generalized manner in which architecture is disclosed, taught and learned, coherently engages with the performance of media. It is currently evident that first hand understanding of space and the comprehension of layouts, descriptions or abstractions lose importance to the exhibition and register of three

dimensional objects in architecture. In order to communicate more, architecture is subtracted from its context and is presented in its objectified dimension. Through this exposition the subjectivity of the photography or of the render becomes partially responsible for the disposition or indisposition that the observer should feel towards the object itself. A good photography, like a good render, may influence by suggestion our consideration towards the archi-object up to a level that our corporeal experience could never reach. Suggestion by influence is analogous to desire. It is because pure formal conditions of architecture are enhanced or highlighted from all areas, that pure formal approximations in design processes are favored.

The structures of divulgation books and magazines emulate the macro structure of the web. With the emplacement of archi-objects, a breach between renders and photos is closed, differences between renders and photos are set aside, and decisive matters such as the existence or non existence of a building cease to matter. In the approach and overlapping of these two ideal points of view, certain substantial matters such as the performance of contingency upon space and the effects of human and natural involvement upon the built environment are diminished.

In the counter where archi-objects are displayed time detains. The web presents architecture with an emplacement where buildings never grow old or suffer alterations or deformations caused by use or weathering. In this location archi-objects remain just as the creator desires them to be and as he desires others to see them. On the other hand, the context of the web is conveniently set by those that create or disclose creations. The archi-object coexists with other singular objects and this coexistence displaces the interstitial, the anodyne or the ordinary, that is in fact the surrounding physical context of a great amount of these gravitating and exclusive archi-objects.

In the counter heterogeneous archi-objects with various scales and for diverse uses are exposed as if they belonged to a collection or catalogue of the desirable. The new power of architecture exposed this way is that of making itself desirable in the word of supply, demand and consumption. Archi-objects are to the present what monuments were to the past. They are milestones of battles won in the settling of globalization, landmarks of conquered territories in cyber-space. With the current cult towards desire architecture recovers its fetish character.

3. The new emplacement of the archi-objects of desire.

Deprived of objective limits, the architectonic element begins to drift, to float in an electronic ether devoid of spatial dimensions yet inscribed in the single temporality of an instantaneous diffusion (...) With the interface of monitors and control screens, "elsewhere" begins here and vice versa (Virilio 2000, 544).

In the sensationalism with which the archi-object is thrust to the world, in the exaltation of its singularity and originality, in the concealment of its context, in the new condition it acquires when adjoining other diverse objects, in all these phenomena, the desire that the archi-object might arouse, increases.

"From now on, urban architecture must deal with the advent of a 'technological space-time'" (Virilio, 2000). Every archi-object is found outside its context but leads us towards its context. It invites us towards an idea of a context that has to be interpreted, completed or projected. It is in this sense that the archi-object arouses desire out of itself and towards that in which it is actually inscribed.

4. Merchandise offered by cities in media.

The city is transformed into a system of abstract objects, definitively loosing the possibility of becoming the place in which the "affective-emotional identity of a collectivity" is realized. The city of objects, instead of the city of buildings where everything is merchandise and where everything is change. The social environment, the sphere of interpersonal relationships, that constitute the identity of a collectivity, faces the process of the totality of the traffic of merchandise (Barcellona 1991, 42)

The city is projected in media through its most representative singularities. Pietro Barcellona says that the "abstraction of citizenship is realized in the individualism of the mass of consumers" (Barcellona 1991, 42) and adds that "the citizen of the planet does not need a "known domicile", just necessities that must be satisfied (Barcellona 1991, 42)

Collectivism and individualism, universalism and localism co-exist on the web. The archi-object tends to both individualism and collectivism because it seeks a longing human being that shares, from each dissected fragment of the world, a common emplacement on the web. On the other hand, the archi-object administers an incomplete condition of spatiality for human beings as universal subjects in a specific context.

Object design that archi-objects emulate has demonstrated a double condition throughout time. Utensils, for example, serve every human being with no distinction of national frontiers or natural conditions. Utensils and design objects must be useful everywhere and for everybody. However, their appearance must invoke singularities and in this measure they appeal to what is local in order to conceive novelty that will make them desirable, set aside from mass production.

¿Should architectures offer us a real place from which to attend to the surrounding physical world? Or, ¿should architectures offer us an ideal place, and

therefore a different world from that which is physically surrounding us? The archi-objects in the virtual world offer us an ideal world, isolated, unlimited and projected forward, different from the physically surrounding environment.

The presence of archi-objects is inseparable from their appearance. For that reason, archi-objects are mentally stored, not with things that are experienced but with things that are seen, not with that which is consumed but with that which is desired. The archi-objects that are extracted by the mind from media share mnemonic registries with selected catalogue objects, highly recalled logos, striking graphic representations, and attractive faces, works of art or movie trailers. All the above are stimuli that arouse desire towards themselves or towards what they represent. Media is an endless provider of stimuli that in their perpetuation can supplant architectural experience. The web is the emplacement of most of the archi-objects for most of the population. It as an emplacement where architecture comes together with no apparent discrimination –apart from selection and election-. In the virtual emplacement democratization can be glimpsed, not only for common exhibition but also, and above all, for the exercise of the profession. A fair staging of architecture in the world can be foreseen.

the way one gains access to the city is no longer though a gate, an arch of triumph, but rather through an electronic audience system whose users are not so much inhabitants or privileged residents as they are interlocutors in permanent transit. From this moment on, breaks in continuity occur less within the boundary of a physical urban space or its cadastral register than within a span of time (Virilio, 1991)

In the global network all archi-objects can, in appearance, coexist. In this way, remote cities share a scene with metropolis, and modest interventions abut with mega projects. In fact, and because of the vehement demands for novelty, marginal environments make desirable contributions to media. In the centripetal inclusive action of the web, the eccentric becomes centric. Archi-objects seek to transcend globalization while they consolidate it.

To distinguish one city from another, to discern its attributes when emplaced in the web, the consolidation of desirable stimuli that cooperate becomes necessary. Each city conceives for itself a cohesive identity that is made of a logo, a slogan, an advertising strategy and a collection of cultural objects that include, of course, the monuments of the past and the archi-objects of the present. The city must arouse desire in potential visitors longing to visit it, rest in it, invest in it or work in it but not remain in it. In this order of ideas, the conception of archi-objects demands marketing strategies as natural parks, endemic species or typical dishes do. Archi-objects, like handicrafts, appeal to the vehement awakening of affective craving.

Explora **park in Medellin. Architect: Alejandro Echeverri. Picture taken by Juan Pablo Aschner**

The sculpture-like modeling of archi-objects increases and decreases; exceeds or is controlled, according to the pressure or depressurization of the economy. Economy is what truly insufflates or deflates the desire that leads to consumerism.

To possess an archi-object of desire is as important for cities as it is for a museum to have a memorable painting. For both the archi-object and the painting the same principles that fixate things or phenomena in memory apply. It is known that human beings, in general, are inclined to visit or become acquainted not with the unknown but rather with what is endorsed by consensus. It is following this principle that the same cities and the same museums are still being intensely visited by those who want to see the same monuments and the same works of art. But every now and then a new work of art emerges, a new archi-object mediated by the web and by an unexpected consensus. This approved new work is quickly fixated in collective memory as a new fetish.

Fetish architecture, however, should be provided with a certain material or symbolic incompleteness that detonates imagination, mystery and desire. That is the case of the pyramids, the Parthenon or the Eiffel tower; or should be elemental and yet complex, simple but convincing. A work called to encourage must denote a collectivity with certain individualism. The Guggenheim is the architectural fetish of recent years. It is not necessary to be thorough in order to remember, in general terms, the singular object-like condition of this building emplaced in media; and together with the surname, the last name is frequently recalled: Bilbao, which is the city that engendered it. The city acquired a memorable and profitable archi-object of desire.

The consumer society promotes the narcissistic election of the object. This election favors in turn the isolation of individuals (Barcellona 1991, 42).

Contemporary cities are requiring architects to conceive archi-objects of desire instead of spaces.

Visibility is privileged as a force that promotes attraction and cohesion within a collectivity. Architects cooperate with these new requirements to perform in the city because they also desire visibility and because this is a great way to extend a political and social veil upon the artistic conception of archi-objects. Cities long for unique works, in which they can also participate as co-authors, since they have commissioned architects something outside mass production.[iii] The act of commission, already extinct in the other arts, delivers the individual or collective client with an alter-ego.

To conceive and care for an archi-object of desire requires as much imagination from the architect as it does from the collectivity that longs for it. It is because of this longing and projection that the work becomes a collective act and therefore a cultural act.

5. Medellin as case study

Colombia has also surrendered to media. Medellin, second city in importance in Colombia, leads a national tendency towards a cultural emplacement on the web. Medellin is committed to the conquest of media and has a tendency to proudly exhibit its archi-objects. This is fortunately solving media coverage imbalances that take place within a markedly centralist country. Medellin has wanted to differentiate itself from the capital city by aesthetic means, as generally occurs in the history of tense brotherhoods, as can be exemplified by physical contrasts between architecture in Barcelona and Madrid, Porto and Lisbon, Graz and Vienna or between Guadalajara and Mexico City. In all of the above, architecture and creation in general plays an important role in the positioning of a city and in the statement of difference.

Archi-objects efficiently procure a forwarded appearance to a city, prompting the user to see it as a cosmopolitan city. Being cosmopolite implies having cosmopolite architecture or architecture that seems at home anywhere, that is to say, architecture whose emplacement in global media seems natural. Architecture of this sort must be attractive and inviting, refreshing as a coca-cola commercial, youthful, gay, playful and toyish.

The adjectives playful and toyish may well qualify the conditions and propensities found in recent archi-objects. That architecture can be playful and toyish is a demonstration of how things that enter our mind through vision -in so far as objects of desire-, stimulate and incite emotions that during childhood are occupied by a world of toys that come to life with media. The word toy, used as a verb, is defined as flirting or to dally amorously. That is what archi-objects do, in a very positive way, when they perform in media. Current generations have grown up with advertising stimuli that use the uncertain and enhanced appearance of things and in particular of toys, to awaken desire.

It is during childhood that a toyful attitude towards the world of desirables is fixed. This attitude relies less upon experience and more upon media. That is why the most popular archi-objects today are also the most childlike in appearance, using the word in an affirmative sense that refers to what is innocent, frank, candid and inoffensive as well as joyful, enthusiast and astounding. In occasions the most childlike objects awaken greater enthusiasm and affection than others; that is the case of the recently proposed archi-objects for Medellin and that have been received with great enthusiasm by the local and international community.

The archi-object Public Library of Spain in Medellin won the prize as best building 2004-2006 in the VI Latin American Architecture and Urbanism Biennale, has been recognized as best architecture in America in the Pan-American Biennale in Quito, received the *Lápiz de Acero* prize as the best architecture in Colombia and was declared the best project of 2009 by the visitors of the *Plataforma Arquitectura* site that reports an average of 8 thousand visitors per mont

Public Library of Spain in Medellin. Architect: Giancarlo Mazzanti. Picture taken by Juan Pablo Aschner

It wasn't necessary for juries or web visitors to experience the building or to note its current material state in order to desire it. It is a beautiful and playful toy that offers an amazing social contribution. The material condition of the building and its experience move to the background and the archi-object that gravitates timelessly on media is enhanced.

Dubai is the current sand box of the world; its contemporary playground. It is the site for the most daring toys and playful objects to formalize. Both Dubai and Bilbao are examples of how fetish archi-objects can serve a community through the invocation of disciplinary cult and the attraction of tourists. These are models that are partially taken into account by many other cities including Medellin. But

in this last case, archi-objects are conceived not only to be seen by the world but also to be approved by a community and to serve specific social causes.

Archi-objects of desire are motives for pride and cohesion, because of the singularity and optimism they irradiate and the civic integration they promote. Surprising as may be, autonomous conceptions such as archi-objects can become physical symbols of a participatory model that brings together public administrations, citizens and architects as performers or interpreters of emotional longings of a collectivity.

The archi-objects that come from Medellin compress, in their shapes and appearance, social and cultural densities. Because part of a circumstantial and contextual halo accompanies their emplacement on media, the city is tacitly present and represented by them and the archi-objects, on the other hand, are empowered by the collectivity. An object so charged by the hint of its origin must certainly highlight in a virtual emplacement. The word Medellin adjectives the virtues of the archi-objects that represent it.

Archi-objects, fetish as they are, are not everyday architectures, utensil-architectures or ordinary constructions. Conventional or neutral architecture that is forged by means of experience and repetition is utensil-architecture. A good spoon, for example, beyond its appearance must be a good spoon and serve to transport liquids into the mouth. But an archi-object, when compared with a spoon, is more and is less than a utensil. A spoon that resembles an archi-object would be the type of spoon that due to its attributes ends up exhibited in a wall instead of serving its basic purpose. That is why archi-objects, no matter if they serve a basic purpose or not, are so comfortably emplaced in media, promoting a sense of pride and well-being in the communities and architects that conceive them.

Park of wishes in Medellin. Architect: Felipe Uribe de Bedout. Picture taken by Juan Pablo Aschner

Medellin is a revitalized city partially due to an important amount of archi-objects, the result of successful alliances between administrations with initiatives and architects with ideas. Medellin has sufficient toys to move inhabitants and visitors to a playful and joyous mood –in opposition to the solemn and sometimes somber state that Bogota has to offer-.

It is through play and desire that the emotional connection between archi-objects and human beings cements. And whatever brings this emotions into life must bring about hope into the world because enjoyment is an affirmative condition of creative actions. Architecture is currently playing and media is its stage.

Plaza Mayor convention center. Architects: Daniel Bonilla, Giancarlo Mazzanti, Rafael Esguerra. Picture taken by Juan Pablo Aschner

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[ii] Roland Barthes presents the consumer object as that which is fabricated; standard, formed or normalized, that is to say, subject to manufacturing and quality standards (Barthes, 1994).

[iii] This is a paraphrase of a dialogue proposed by Hans Robert Jauss between creator and client (Jauss, 1982).