DESIGN AS MOVEMENT IN SPACE

Author   Patrizio M. Martinelli

Assistant Professor at Miami University, Oxford (OH), Department of Architecture+Interior Design

"This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with names of harbours, the names of capes, the name of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text….space as inventory, space as invention". (Perec, 1997, p.13)

This statement is by Georges Perec, taken from his book *Species of spaces*, where we can find a taxonomy of the spaces we are living in, an analytical dissection which starts from lists and definitions. The list is actually one of the main descriptive analytical procedures towards knowledge, because from an indistinct "magma" we recognize things, we extract them, we give them an order following rules (similarity, difference, contrast and so on) and we give them a name: the first description starts from here. This inventory of words, Perec says, become an invention. Research and knowledge, like it happens in my work, need often to start from words. Words like invention and map, that we find in this page, fascinate me: invention as the necessary step into design processes that start from memory, and map as a promise of future journeys, trips, movements, and as result of previous, past journeys, trips, movements. Movements in space and time, then.

DESIGN

According to a definition of Emilio Ambasz, taken from the catalogue of 1972 exhibition at MoMA *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, design is "an activity whereby man creates artifacts to mediate between his hope and aspirations, and the pressures and restrictions imposed by him by nature and the manmade environment that his culture has created". (Ambasz, 1972, p. 19)

The word DESIGN comes from Latin DESIGNARE, that means *mark out, devise, choose* and from French DESSEIGN, as *purpose* or *project*.

In English is a verb and a noun.

As a verb its meanings are

- - to plan artistically or skillfully
- - to intend for a definite purpose
- - to form or conceive in the mind
- - to assign in thought or intention
- - to mark out, as by a sign; to indicate

- - to prepare the preliminary sketch or the plans for a work to be executed

As a noun DESIGN means, among other things:

- - organization or structure of formal elements in a work of art; composition
- - the combination of details or features of a picture, building, etc.; the pattern or motif of artistic work
- - the art of designing
- - a plan or project
- - a plot or intrigue
- - an outline, sketch, or plan, as of the form and structure of a work of art, an edifice, or a machine to be executed or constructed.

In this design-related context, some other words have a strong relationship with this world, like MACHINE (from German MACHT, as *power*, *strength* coming from Greek MECHOS, that means *device*, as something, made of parts and elements, designed for a purpose). Or the word TECHNOLOGY, whose etymological origin is from Greek TECHNE, which is *art,* and it's related to another Greek word, TECHTON, which is the *carpenter*, the craftsman who transforms a material (wood) in a machine or a piece of art. TECHNE, in Latin is ARS, which takes us to the English ART, of course. The archaic root of the word ART has the meaning of "to join", which takes us very close to what the carpenter do: joining elements in order to build devices or pieces of art, for a particular purpose.

So we can say that the word DESIGN have this ambiguity, which gravitates between the

artistic disciplines and activities (i.e. painting, sculpture, music) and the scientific and technical disciplines (i.e. engineering, mechanics and so on). Like Vilém Flusser writes in his book *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, "the words design, machine, technology, and art are closely related to one another, one term being unthinkable without the others, and they all derive from the same existential view of the world. However, this internal connection has been denied for centuries (at least since Renaissance). Modern bourgeois culture made a sharp division between the world of the arts and that of technology and machines; hence culture was split into two mutually exclusive branches: one scientific, quantifiable and 'hard', the other aesthetic, evaluative and 'soft'. This unfortunate split started to become irreversible towards the end of nineteenth century. In the gap, the word design formed a bridge between the two. It could do this since it is an expression of the internal connection between art and technology. Hence in contemporary life, design more or less indicates the site where art and technology (…) come together as equals, making a new form of culture possible". (Flusser, 1999, pp. 18-19).

PROJECT

The actual first outcome of design activity is the PROJECT.

From Latin PROJECTUS that comes from PRO (*forward*) and IACTUS (*thrown*), the verb IACERE's past participle. Project is the act *throwing out, throwing forward* (the same concept is present, for instance, in the word "projectile"). But before this throwing out, it is necessary to see, anticipate, imagine. Actually, imagination is the instrument of our mind which gives us the possibility to see before, to anticipate the future, in order to take the right decision, to make the perfect move, in the first place

analyzing the situation and imagining the consequences of every action. That's what we find in Hilary Putnam's words: "A man is climbing a mountain. Halfway up he stops, because he is unsure how to go on. He imagines himself continuing via one route. In his imagination, he proceeds on up to certain point, and then gets into a difficulty which he cannot, in his imagination, see how to get out of. He then imagines going up by a different route. This time he is able to imagine himself getting all the way to the top without difficulty. So he takes the second route". Imagination, therefore, is one of the climber's most precious quality: and the same is for every designer. Architects, urban planners, interior designers, in order to design and realize their projects, must have a vision of the future, at the small scale of the building and its interior space but also at the big scale of city and society. And this can be possible through the knowledge of what they are dealing with (thanks to analysis), but most of all through imagination, which can help in asking questions, finding answers and solving problems. As the Italian architect, professor, and one of most important Aldo Rossi's disciples, Antonio Monestiroli recently wrote, "imagination, based on a rational analytical system, can produce architectural projects, as a hypothesis of transformation of reality". (Monestiroli, 2013, p.140). The design outcome, the project, has to deal with the future, it's the designer's act that offers a proposal, through culture, sensitivity, hope, imagination, for a positive, future, enhanced scenario. In a word, for something good, for people and environment.

So it is, actually, a MOVEMENT IN TIME: but not only towards the future. In fact, when we design and we teach to design, this movement needs another direction: the past. Any act of design needs a precedent, an origin, a starting point. One of the most important ingredients that feeds the design activity, is, actually, the past.

This is why I think that design is an act of invention, which means, again from etymology, to *find something* (that already exists). "I do not seek, I find", said Pablo Picasso. And past is a magnificent archive to look at: that's why I would represent the designer as a sort of Janus, the roman god with two faces, one looking towards the future, and one looking towards the past. So, in design, I would talk about *invention*, more than *creation*: the latter is a term that I relate to an act which reminds me (keeping the eye, again, on classical mythology) of how Greek goddess Athena was born coming out, fully grown, adult and armed, from Zeus' head.

And getting back to our discipline, I think that as designers, this sensitivity for past (both historical, belonging to mankind, and autobiographical, belonging to the designer) is absolutely necessary, in order to build a project for the future. We have to teach our students the knowledge of the precedents, the capacity of choose among them, and transform and transfiguring them (maybe also betraying them) in new elements of the project, following Mahler's statement: "Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire". As teachers we have to push our students to collect their own archive of elements, pieces, parts, fragments, useful for their projects. We have to form this background founded on interests and affinities beyond places and times, which is, actually, a sort of family, a "spiritual family" as defined by Henri Focillon in his book The *Life of Forms in Art*: "these affinities are not defined and limited by any particular moment, but develop broadly throughout the course of time. Although every individual is contemporary first of all with himself and with his generation, he is also contemporary with the spiritual group of which he is a member. This is even more the case as regards the artist, because to him his ancestors and friends are not recollection, but presence. They stand immediately

before him, in full life (…) The artist inhabits a country in time that is by no means necessarily the history of his own time…with equal consistency he may select examples and models from the past, and create from them a new and complete environment. He may, again, outline a future that simultaneously strikes into the present and the past". (Focillon, 1989, p.134, p. 154)

So, in the moment of teaching, we have to assume this overlapping of movements in time, where memory, history, past, present and future become tools and elements that give depth to the act of design, and to its outcome, the project. This stratification is, for instance, a fundamental component of every domestic interior, where the residents' stories and memories add meanings and emotions to the spatial experience and the narrative of their life. Or where, simply, they live their life, moving, doing things, eating, sleeping: one of last semester assignments in my Design and Human Behavior seminar was about that. Starting from the chapter "The Apartment" taken from Georges Perec's *Species of spaces*, where he defines a timetable of the things that happen in a family apartment, from morning to the evening. Every student had to analyze this time sequence and to draw a map of this relationship between space and time and action, for each member of the family. Overlapping all those information and analysis, at the scale of the apartment and of the human body, the result is a map (both topographical and behavioral) of the family life in its domestic interior.

This stratification is also a primary condition of the city, of course: the city is a palimpsest where layers on layers actually build our urban environments, and tell us a story in which we inhabit and dwell, that from the past goes towards the future. The studies on the city by Colin Rowe on one side, and by Aldo Rossi on the other, dealt with this: *Collage City* and *La Città Analoga* (*The Analogue City*) interpret the urban environment as a montage and a stratification, Rowe through a profound analysis, Rossi with an imaginative representation that actually is a project for the city, using the tool of collage.

In fact, I think that one of the most powerful instruments for design and representation is

collage, a tool that I use both as an architect and as a teacher. We can interpret this technique as a metaphor for designer's relationship with time: collage's stratification and overlapping of elements and parts, coming from history or from designer's personal archive, can originate little by little a new reality, a new unity in which the value, like Karel Teige said, lies in the whole composition of the work more than in the fragments of which this work is composed. Future represents this whole and, in collage, does not need to be precisely described or correctly represented, but simply evoked, transmitting ideas and feelings of the quality of an urban or interior space, more than detailed, cold and accurate data: we cannot control future, often neither the built project will be as we planned, but we can define the basis for what we hope it will be. Moving from past, through present, towards future. Collage, actually, is designer's time machine.

This is what happened in the Design Studio at Miami University: the site is in Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati, and the assignment is to work on the adaptive reuse of a series of existing and abandoned underground spaces, actually the basement of a former brewery, demolished in the past. Before starting to design, I pushed the students to visit the site, with a particular attention to the multisensory analysis of the place, involving all the senses, taking care of sounds, textures, colors, lights, sequences of spaces. And the mixed media technique of collage has been the perfect tool that helped them to organize the analysis, the comprehension and a narrative of that experience.
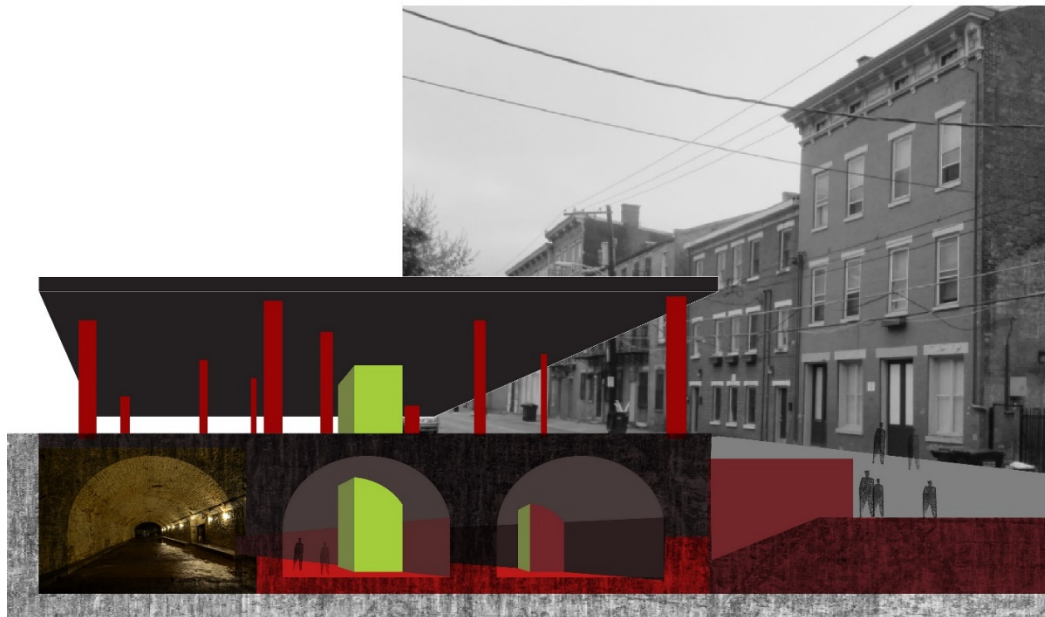
Figure 1 Patrizio M. Martinelli, Urban interiors. A project for OTR, digital collage, 2018

Collage, then, is one side related to analysis and representation, but on the other side is a tool for design: this is how I use, myself, collage for my own work and in teaching.

For an international Summer Workshop in University IUAV of Venice, in 2016, focused on the urban regeneration of the industrial harbor of Porto Marghera, close to Venice, I made a series of collages which represent the main concepts and theme that the students were going to work on, and they all deal with elements and types of architecture, partly taken by my own cultural and theoretical background in a surreal and provocative combination (Aldo Rossi, Costantino Dardi, Venice, Rome, monuments and pieces of industrial archaeology). These collages has been made to emphasizes the urban and architectural topics, and to evoke design strategies for those places: the cube building in the park (where you can recognize Aldo Rossi cemetery building in Modena and the park made by columns by Costantino Dardi and some cranes belonging to the harbor); the Egyptian museum in Luxor by Costantino Dardi, overlapped on the Pyramid of Cestius in Rome, and some existing cooling towers; again Costantino Dardi's proposal for the Accademia bridge in Venice for 1985 Architecture Biennale, together with a crane, an industrial concrete building.
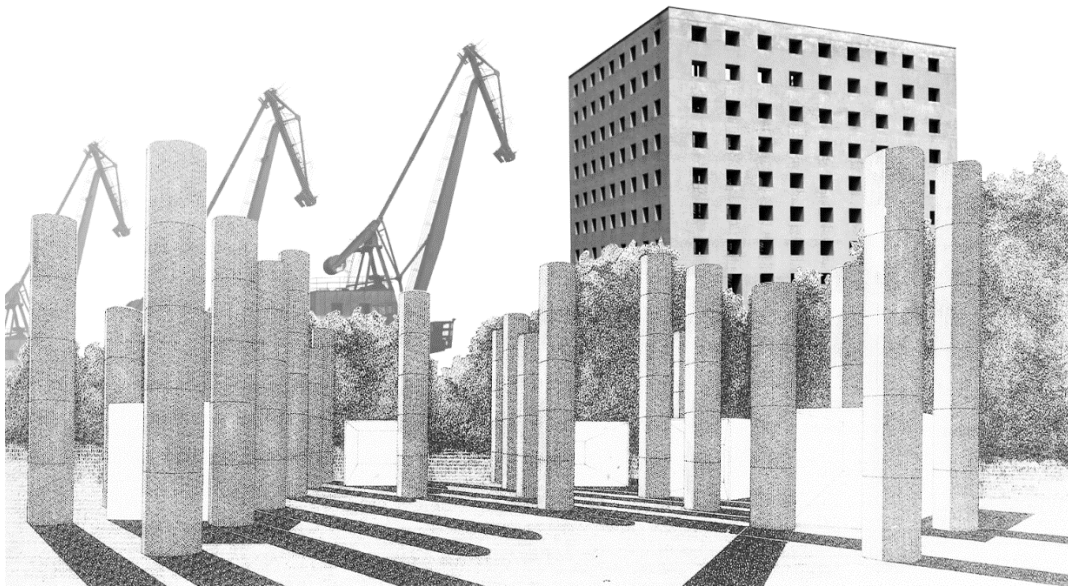
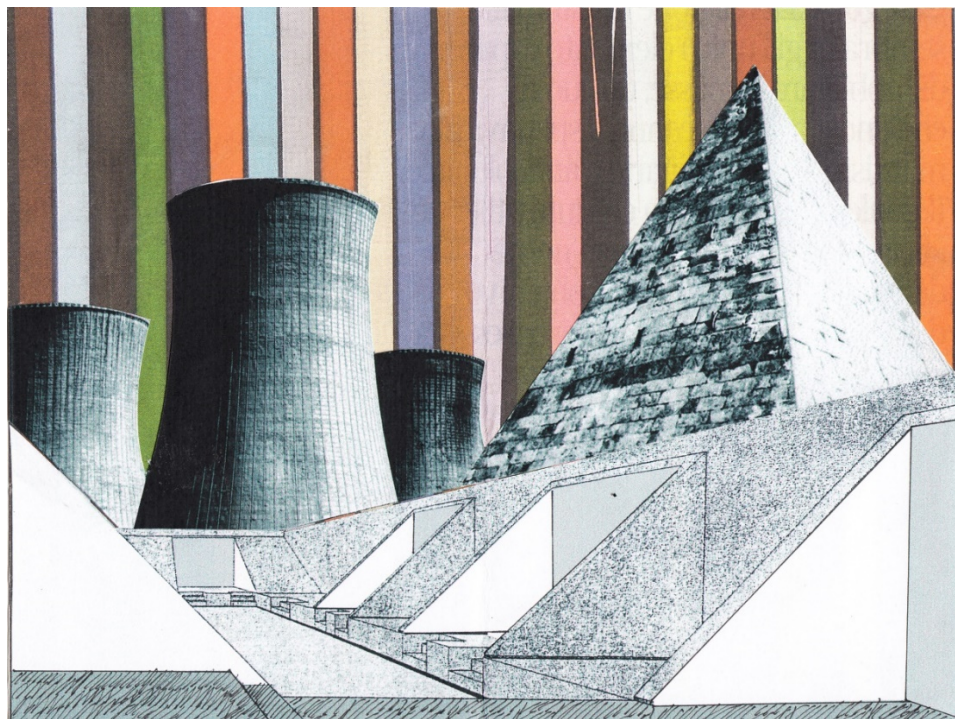*Figure 2 Patrizio M. Martinelli, Elements Construction Regeneration I, paper collage, 2016*

Figure 3 Patrizio M. Martinelli, Elements Construction Regeneration III, paper collage, 2016

Figure 4 Patrizio M. Martinelli, Elements Construction Regeneration II, paper collage, 2016

Here I used collage in the same way Aldo Rossi used it for his magnificent project for *Città Analoga*, learning from the city itself, Venice in particular, where he taught for a long time: and learning from some representations of the city as the "Capricci", the fictional representation of Venice made by 18th century venetian painter Canaletto. The most famous "capriccio" he painted is the one that represents the Rialto area as a montage of Palladian buildings: in the center we see the Rialto Bridge as Palladio's proposal, the Basilica in Vicenza on the right, Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza too, on the left. Here the real city and the city of imagination, perfect because made by perfect building, overlap in one magnificent invention: as a project, actually.

Figure 5 Patrizio M. Martinelli, La Rotonda in the Lagoon (a tribute to Joseph Losey), digital collage, 2018

And speaking of architecture, of invention, of Venice, of Palladio, I think that another imaginative example comes from cinema, from the movie "Don Giovanni", directed in 1979 by American director Joseph Losey. Losey decided to shot the entire opera composed by Mozart not in a theatre, inside a fake cardboard or wooden scenery, but using the buildings designed and built by Palladio as a stage: so the action took place, like life, in the reality of built architecture, environment and interiors. But what is interesting is that often Losey manipulated this reality, using cinematic montage to his advantage, as an artist, and as often happens in movies. And one of the most fantastic invention of Losey is when a

group of masked characters are on a boat, in the lagoon, approaching a palace on the water. Little by little we recognize this palace, that actually is Villa Capra, La Rotonda, a building, as we all know, close to Vicenza, built above a hill, in the country landscape of Veneto region. But thanks to filmic montage, the director moves this architectural masterpiece into the water, inside the lagoon. Cutting and pasting footages (like a collage maker cuts and pastes pieces of paper), he invents and evokes a new scene, a new landscape, a new environment.

This is the act of design, this is the invention, this is *finding again* something, and transforming it in a spectacular new narrative: a movement in space (the real movement of the cinematic action of the characters), a movement in time (a character coming from the end of 17th century, narrated by a musician at the end of 18th century, represented by a movie director at the end of 20th century, using places built by an architect in 16th century), an invention of a new place (the Rotonda moved from the hill close to Vicenza to the Venetian lagoon).

References

1. Ambasz, E. (1972) Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. New York: The Museum of Modern Art

2. Flusser, V. (1999) The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design. London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

3. Focillon, H. (1989) The Life of Forms in Art. New York: Zone Books (first edition: Paris 1934)

4. Monestiroli, A. (2013), 'Aldo Rossi e la Tendenza', Casabella, 831

5. Perec, G. (1997) Species of Spaces and Other Pieces. London: Penguin Book Ltd (first edition: Paris 1974)