

From Representation to Presentation and Back

La Defense, Un Studio, Son-O-House, NOX architects

How do we as users describe and evaluate the emotional, imaginary and symbolic impact that architecture has on us? Do I feel at home or at bay in this building? Does this space have a therapeutic effect or does its magic challenge me? Does it feel like a prison or is it pure hypnosis? Do I feel part of a community or am I moved by personal desires? These and other feelings are aroused by the way the architect designs and organizes a building. It is not the objective space of the building (the number of square metres, the corridors, the rooms, the construction, etc.) that count in this regard, but the political, cultural and poetic implications of a space. The way a space is clad can give rise to specific narratives and atmospheres between the building and its context. Most architects do not comment on the political, cultural or poetic qualities communicated by the cladding, the organization and the form of their buildings, preferring to confine themselves to the facts and figures of the objective space. Yet all the while they are creating a theatre of effects and atmospheres, even when the structure is covered with nothing but a thin layer of paint.

Architects who deliberately concern themselves with the effects of the cladding and the symbolism of the shape of a building fall into two groups. On the one hand there are architects who focus on representation. Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, but also Dutch architect Sjoerd Soeters, attempt to appeal to public sentiment by means of the ironic manipulation of popular symbols. The iconography of their work is all about identity, meaning and language. On the other hand there are architects who concentrate on presentation, on the performative of architecture. NOX and UN Studio, for example, resist representations which reveal only a small part of reality, are full of clichés and habits and show above all the familiar. Representations organize reality in order to facilitate purposeful consumption. The blue and yellow of the Ikea boxes, the McDonald's logo along the motorway, a church typology or even the layout of a Renaissance garden tell you what you can expect. It is an 'architecture for Dummies' says Venturi. 'Viva realism over Idealism? Dumb can be good!'² Presentations try in the first instance to escape the cliché by creating the new. Their second goal is the active involvement of user or viewer in interpreting what happens. Unlike signs and symbols, presentations are not about eliciting ready-made answers or endorsing habitual responses. An architecture geared to presentation is not concerned with symbols but with the organization of affect; with discovering how to use physical experiences in a space to stimulate the senses and move them towards the unknown. Projects that concentrate on presentation are not concerned with functions but with effects beyond the symbolic order. In relation to La Defense, Ben van Berkel remarked that '...it gives the people an atmosphere to function, so how can we stretch the utilities in the building'.³

Inside the UN Studio-designed La Defense building in Almere, you are surprised by visual intensity, in particular of the colours. It is like walking through a painting or a digital photo, says Van Berkel. The rapidly changing reflective colours do not represent the building's function, nor do they turn the building into a kind of brooch or a diamond; rather, they act as a cosmetic layer. Colour is not a code here but a hypnotic seducer. Through the combination of innovative technology⁴ and atmospheric perspectives based on the animation of visual effects, affect is created in actual and direct use. 'Eight thirty in the morning, red time: men

and women enter their offices. Eleven o'clock, orange time: seven meetings start. Two-thirty, blue time: a few late eaters are enjoying a company lunch. Five o'clock, yellow time: three junior partners are discussing company dealings, the last meeting ends.⁵ Colour and light reflection are not part of any technical signage system here; instead they provide emotional effects. UN Studio does not pursue the presentation model ad infinitum, however. Seen from the air, the multi-company building resembles the logo of its developer, Eurocommerce. And behind those scintillating facades, everything is strictly in accordance with the demands of the market.

In Son-O-House, NOX's experience machine in the multimedia corner of the Ekkersrijt industrial estate in Son, the presentation is not about a colourful surface activated by visual perception as in La Defense, but an open structure with different sound rooms, each with their own sound mood and acoustic. The composer Edwin van der Heide positioned the loudspeakers and movement sensors in such a way that computer generated compositions move around with you as you tour Son-O-House. While in UN Studio's La Defense, as in the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, the facade dissociates itself from the conventional building behind as, respectively, hypnotic presentation (affect) and rhetorical representation (symbol), NOX weaves the surface and the organization of the space together into a 'deep surface'. The structure, the surface and the social order are, as Spuybroek says, vague; it is impossible to make out where the supports or the roof begin. From every angle Son-O-House has a different appearance: opaque or transparent, shiny or matte. It is a modest experiment with a circulation machine that attempts to complicate your route, is intent on promoting spontaneity, on conjuring ever-different moods, and staying well clear of any suggestion of objective space.

UN Studio and NOX try, with their digital technology, to integrate gadget-like qualities into architecture. Gadget-architecture seeks to elicit a committed response; it does not entail a functional, rational task, but the evocation of an intimate experience. Just as a gadget stimulates you to press and activate buttons, gadget-architecture is pseudo-alive. The interactive function of the cladding has become decoration, not as representation in this instance, but as presentation. To what extent the associative processes and enigmatic cladding of NOX and UN Studio can contribute to certain pressing social tasks is a moot point.

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1 Peter Trummer and Ludo Grooteman, 'De architectuur als materiële praktijk', *de Architect*, Jan-Feb 2005, pp. 22-25.

2 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, *Architecture as Signs and Systems. For a Mannerist Time*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 2004.

3 Interview with Ben van Berkel, April 2003, <http://www.designboom.com/eng/interview/vanberkel.html>

4 The application of 3M film originally developed for perfume bottles.

5 Quote from: <http://www.unstudio.com>.