Images for *Imagination*

Architecture and its Mediations

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'We are literally called into the picture' Lacan suggests, it is there that we are then 'represented as caught'\(^1\). We become fugitive captives of images and the life that they imitate or render possible.

The 'other' life of images and that of the viewers are what drives the Slow House (1991), a project by Elisabeth Diller and Ricardo Scifidio (D+S).

**Text as footnote**

Most of this essay is treated as footnote; a text that attempts to capture the layers within images and is to be read in correspondence to them. I have attempted to read the story of Slow House and its production through the images that introduce it on the D+S webpage. In addition I have tried to detect the interests, strategies and identity of the D+S collaboration at the time.

**Image 1**

A trajectory leads from the car with an expression that it extends not only beyond the building grounds but also suggests that the car would have not been in the picture if the photo had been taken a minute earlier. The trajectory at the other end extends to the frame of the distant horizon of the sea. An Escape is implied- This Project is about an escape. A vacation house is a place of refuge; a second house for a second chance to live. I would go as far as to say this escape is a second chance for architecture too. Diller and Scofidio come upon this project as artists concerned in their work with the body and space as a container of the human body. 'Architecture typically enters into a role of complicity, to sustain cultural conventions' write D+S 'However, architecture can be put into the role of interrogator. Given the technological and political reconfigurations of the contemporary body, spatial conventions may be called into question by architecture. Architecture can be used as a kind of surgical instrument to operate on itself'\(^2\) D+S question accepted values in current architecture practice. In the most positive sense of the word, they are not professionals. This project is also an escape from the confining walls of architectural professionalism; A projection above and beyond it.

The drawn escape trajectory also underlines a continuation in time; this house is passage, a slow passage that starts at Manhattan and leads to a view, the view of the sleeping horizon, a passage that gradually slows down. This is the Slow House.

**Image 2**

'The Slow House begins at the moment of departure from the city'\(^3\); the windshield frames the journey from the city garage to the country garage, then the automobile is left inside the dwelling-machine where a slower 100 foot journey sets out to the picture frame of the window. It is 'simply a door to a window'\(^3\). The north façade is only a front door four feet wide and eighteen feet high. The House does not have a direct axis; the visual axis constantly shifts, subsequently changing the view frame. The subject is teased off centre, almost looses balance
and is made aware of a spatial change; different rules apply here. The curvature keeps the view hidden till the last moment and creates suspense. Finally the horizon is revealed; the only direct view frame. Now it is time to stop and optically depart.

This passage is a mechanism for viewing. It acts like an extension of the subject’s optical sense, a prosthetic device almost that involves more than the eye or even the mere moving eye it engages the movement of the body through its passage. This is an architecture that acts on more than just the subject’s body but also on the body it projects outside itself, ‘like a second sort of body incorporated into and extending corporeal powers’ 4. The subject and the architecture become one and cannot be excluded from one another. Machine and body become interchangeable and the body is reconfigured.

Images 3 and 4

To either side of the Picture Window at the end, on the exterior, are two antenna-like stacks: The chimney is to the right, and at the summit of the left stack sits a live video camera forty feet above ground and directed at the water view. It feeds a monitor that hinges in front of the Picture Window. The electronic view is operable; the subject can steer the image. The camera can pan or zoom by remote control. When recorded the view may be deferred- day played back at night, fair weather played back in foul; ‘A second day, a reserve day which can replace the ordinary day, the lived day’ 5. The view can be replayed fast forward, slow motion or can be frozen into single frames. The composite view formed by the screen in front of the Picture Window is always out of register, collapsing the opposition and the mediated. Questions of technology and resolution arise and amuse. The monitor rebuilds that part of the view that it is blocking.

The human hand in image 3 expresses how the recoding and relaying are additional props of the prosthetic viewing device of the house. This extension includes the monitor that collapses into the view of the Picture Window; the third screen we encounter in the passage. It equips the subject with a loophole: the opportunity to escape from the escape (from civilisation to nature and back).

Images 5 and 6

‘Shall we eat now or later, inside or out, in bed or in the boat?’

The Slow House with its curving body, anchored at Long Island Beach shore resembles a boat. It is simultaneously a mode of transport; an ‘auto-mobile’, and ‘audio-visual’ vehicle and a passage passed through by the ‘auto-mobile’ and the ‘audio-visual’. Part of the Slow House Passage is covered in the car and the rest on board of the building. Once the subject is transferred in this second vehicle (the building) it can continue on the passage tangent. However this part of the journey is slower and not always in physical motion. The subject is invited to embark on a journey towards the horizon. The site
structure of the house is like a boat in more than one way, it takes you toward the sea horizon and its structure and construction also resemble that of a boat. What we see in image 6 is a stressed skin structure, made of vertical ribs, it is clad horizontally with two by four structural lumber, which is then skinned with one layer of ply on the interior and two layers on the exterior

Image 7

'It is not high-definition anything. It’s a window’ 6

We are simply made to recognise that the image plane is more than a mere visual appearance that it has materiality and a medium through which it can mediate. The windshield is a sheet of secured glass that frames a different view in every moment of motion. It is also at an angle and at times will superimpose the moving image above, the treetops and the skies reflected onto it, with that of the view ahead. The next screen is the ‘picture window’ that frames a certain piece of the ocean depending where the subject is situated but endures changes in time and at night reflects the interior once the lights are on. The monitor is of an altogether different material it is not immediate and can only be transmitted through mediation, it is a video recording that is displayed through a monitor, it has a lower resolution than that of the wind shield and that of the Picture Window, it is repeatable and can be stopped, re-wound or even moved to the kitchen counter. Yet it somehow manages to inhabit the non-technological media of the Picture Window or the windshield at times. These three images and their movement or the movement inherent in them are the main constructs that make the Slow House what it is. The Slow House Project is made and explored through images but is also about images and how they can be a source of imagination.

20 years later: Images 8,9,10 and 11

Are these images that of a recent D+S project? We are left wanting or even at loss with no appetite to want: Nondescript images of a non-descript project that could easily be swapped with images from another practice or project without raising suspicion. Architectural culture has surely shifted during these years; the use of computer generated design, the commercialisation of architecture the increasing power and influence of developers, and the capital available has made more profitable construction and less paper projects possible amongst other things. D+S have too become officially part of the scene and seem to have adhered to what they once called ‘conventional values’. They are finally professionals.

These four images are an attempt to represent The Board (2013). One could even claim that this project is about representation. This can be traced in the blurb on the D+S website where the project is dubbed as ‘the veil and vault’. The appearance of this metaphor is a symptom of representation that forges a complexity and a further hidden meaning while it is no more than a literal translation; a one-liner that is spelled out. In
comparison the relation between the Slow House and the boat is only implied and is left to the viewer to discover.

Another symptom detected through the text of the blurb is that of content. The project is introduced through categories of programme. For the architect programme becomes a tool for design with the empty promise of meaning; an escape from the fear of the tabula rasa, the blank canvas of an empty site. The first thing done is to plot the circulation. The circulation of what and to where? None of these questions seem to matter when the logic of programme rules. The circulation will be the constraint that instructs where to insert things; buildings, or other programmes. 'Its carved underside shapes the lobby below and public circulation routes. Its top surface is the floor of the exhibition space'.

Where The Board discusses circulation Slow House discusses the movement through space, a passage in time endured and the issue of speed. The blurb about the Slow House speculates what happens there and how things might or might not happen. The Slow house belongs only where it is, is site specific, but the board has landed on a nondescript corner of some city. In Images of the Slow House there are no people but the human presence is so strong that people are inseparable from the architecture, however the many people in Images of the Board are mere gauges for scale or even worse; a pretence of an architectural narrative.

These images simulate innocence and neutrality and pretend to be faithful to reality. It is there that they miserably fail; they are neither reality nor a promise of a different reality. What they claim is not unlike what Benjamin says about translation ‘it (...) produces the idea of myth and purity and in doing so subordinates itself as impure’, since it will never be a mirror to reality. Images of the Slow House depict but also explore an aspect, essence or event within a project and can therefore be true and laden with potential of becoming more. They are not the mere transmission of reproduction, or an image of an original that preceded it but actually ‘producing what they appear to reproduce’. This suggests that the final product of architecture is not an original idea that is represented, but a true project that is shaped through imagery; a process whose aim is not to reproduce life but to change it. This is ignoring that reality is inevitably so complex that it cannot be reproduced in such polite imagery. The original and what is real is in itself not a complete whole and contains many layers of complex and even contradictory nature therefore cannot be represented as a complete harmonious straightforward entity. If anything can reveal the essence of a reality it would be in the form of violence or provocation.

The Slow House is made of slow images, images that cannot be accessed immediately and do not have an initial presence they gradually disclose different layers of a narrative to the viewer. Images of The Board are however immediate, accessible and simple. Slow images tell but Fast images can only sell.
Images for imagination

It seems that image making as a way of thinking has been long forgotten in architecture. These days images are no longer ‘seductive’ but ‘sexy’ they are to sell but not to entice and suggest; they are retrospective makeovers and not explorative tools. Images can be a practice of architectural production in themselves and the many unbuildable projects of the architecture canon can be called upon to testify here for they have never ceased to inspire because of the forever giving power of their imagery. Representation can only lead us to casual relations where as an image for imagination can lead to a variety of relations that can be connected or disconnected. Imagery can determine the framework and outcome of a project and save it from fashion and cliché. When representation takes over important issues of space and time are replaced with the empty promise of programme, and objectified categories such as tectonics, envelop, and matter. To view and draw architecture in such reductive terms is to forget that architecture actually happens in their void.

References

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6. NewYorker cartoon caption (image ?), 2001
8. Walter Banjamin, The Translators Task, 1923

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2. What do Pictures Want?, W. J. T. Mitchel, 2005