

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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For today we browse

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Abstract

It will be difficult to understand the full impact of the digital on architecture without the internet as its privileged territory; they are, to some extent, inseparable, in the same way that it become inseparable in how architects consume and produce architecture today. Although not always organized, the internet has become architecture's biggest archive, one made up mainly of images.

Using Luca Galafaro's montages and their dissemination as a paradigmatic example of a contemporary architectural practice that takes full advantage of the internet as a medium, this text problematizes both the conception and consequences of the digital image on the discipline. The former, how images are consciously constructed, as a kind of graphic *hupomnemata* for the one who "ingests" the work of others and incorporates it into his own; the latter, the effects to be constrained to a specific medium. If one of the internet's characteristics is the ability to support simultaneously redundant and contradictory discourses propagating the same type of content within each "niche", how can we bypass the mashed-up state that the discipline has become? Is it possible through the fruitful use of the digital medium or are we expecting more than what it has to offer?

More than taking sides for or against the internet, perhaps we may ponder one that does not consider it in terms of exclusivity – pixel vs. paper or analogue vs. digital –, but in complementarity with each other, taking the advantages of different media in order to build a more consistent discipline, one that is able to go beyond temporary nodes of aligned interests.

Keywords : *Digital, Image, Internet, Media, Montage*

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[Fig. 1]
Luca Galofaro, Postcards #21, 2015, courtesy of Luca Galofaro.

As a medium, the internet can be considered an architectural practice in its own right, analogous to specialized paper publications as Beatriz Colomina demonstrated in *Clip/Stamp/Fold*.¹ In fact, some digital architectural magazines follow similarly the same structure with which specialized journals have been identified since the 19th century: the dissemination of contemporary architectural practice, critical comments, space for debate, specialized and updated technical information, and advertising aimed at the universe of potential readers. Likewise, the disciplinary consequences produced by digital media are comparable to their analogue counterparts: influencing architectural practice, recording events, creating movements, inventing trends and promoting unknown architects to international figures. However, following McLuhan's famous aphorism – the medium is the message –, the digital effects are slightly different.

The architectural digital media causes the content to spread more rapidly and on a global scale, preferring image over text and favouring contemporary references to feed the incessant production of the “new”. This model has *Archdaily* its paradigmatic example; “the world’s most visited architecture website” with approximately 14 million monthly visits². In this case, the specificity of the medium is revealed in a symptomatic way. Despite being a platform with a worldwide scope, it appears that the countries with the highest number of published projects are also the largest users of the website.³ This coincidence suggests that producer and consumer have the same profile; that the platform adapts the supply to demand, stressing its circular character; and that the selective criteria are those of the proponents themselves and numerical ones (the higher the number of visits, the more likely to reproduce the same type of content).

Another pertinent feature of digital media is the preponderance of images as a way of transmitting architectural information in the contemporary digital space. According to an investigation realized at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, the space that the images occupy in the articles of websites such as *Archdaily*, *Designboom* or *Dezeen*, is approximately 70%. The same study also notes that the high quality of the image's contrasts with the lack of information in the technical drawings.⁴ This is a scenario that, when associated with the worldwide dissemination of content, can perhaps explain a certain visual proximity between projects from different geographies.⁵

1 “The little magazines acted as incubators of new ways of thinking and a key arena in which the emerging problems facing architectural production could be debated.” Beatriz Colomina and Craig Buckley, eds. *Clip/Stamp/Fold: The radical architecture of little magazines 196X to 197X* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2010), 11.

2 <https://www.archdaily.com/content/about>

3 Guido Cinamono, Rubén García Rubio and Vishal Shahdarpuri Aswani, “Towards a (new) Architectural History for a Digital Age. Archdaily as a Dissemination Tool for Architectural Knowledge”, *Criticall*, no. 3 (2018): 67.

4 Lluís Juan Liñan, “Copyright en el Rasto. De la Protección del Dibujo a la Globalización de la Imagen”, *Criticall*, no. 2 (2016): 238.

5 Cinamono, Rubio and Aswani, *op. cit.*, 64.

Confronted with this new "international style(s)", populated by glossy photographs and hyper-realistic renders, some practices, either by choice or need⁶, have reacted. Returning "cold media" techniques (to use an McLuhanian expression) due to their ability to activate the observer's gaze, but with the new digital tools, they refocused the importance of drawing within the disciplinary culture that had become known as the "Post-Digital", with the usual supporters⁷ and detractors⁸. But just as the global reaching of digital content normalises formal solutions, so the projects' illustrations tend to get closer, especially when it offers better production conditions. When compared to photo-realistic renders, the "Post-Digital" illustrations beat them in easiness, speed and pragmatism: they require less technical knowledge; do not need three-dimensional modelling; have a vast library (*Google Images*) with ready-made PNG's at their disposal; and short video tutorials that explain all the best "tricks" to achieve a "perfect image". The downside of it is that, as the *same* video is seen by thousands of eager students and professionals trying to achieve the *same* results, they end up producing the *same* type of image, replicating, in turn, the *same* type of architecture.

It is in this context that one should understand Michael Meredith's proposal that seeks to positively react to the way in which the digital media and the image's ubiquity have change the manner of consuming and producing architecture today (one that, according to Meredith, is more concerned with its popularity than cultural relevance):

"In order for architecture to propose meaningful difference in its state as a mashed-up discipline, we need to re-imagine how the apparatus of the internet can function as a platform for a new format of architectural practice, one that wholeheartedly rejects these earlier polemical models [that are unable to articulate the niche system that contemporary architecture has become and the ubiquity of digital images] without eschewing all semblances of meaning, ethics, or politics in the process. [...] Once the operations of collection and curating are understood as an extension of the architect's toolkit, I think we will be able to reassert a sense of agency for the discipline, to reclaim a kind of disciplinary specificity that seems to have been otherwise lost in the stockpile."⁹

6 In an interview to A+U magazine, Kersten Geers tells how OFFICE KGDVS started making collages: "The story we always tell – and, a story is always a story – is that we started making these collages from the very beginning, for the simple reason that we were unable to make renders." Kersten Geers and David Van Severen, "Excerpt from "A Conversation with Kersten Geers and David Van Severen", *Architecture and Urbanism (A+U)*, December, 2019, <https://au-magazine.com/interviews/a-conversation-with-kersten-geers-and-david-van-severen/>.

7 Sam Jacob, "Architecture Enters in the Age of Post-Digital Drawing", *Metropolis*, March 21, 2017, <https://www.metropolismag.com/architecture/architecture-enters-age-post-digital-drawing/>.

8 Mario Carpo, "Post-Digital 'Quitters': Why the Sift Towards Collage Is Warring", *Metropolis*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.metropolismag.com/architecture/post-digital-collage/>.

9 Michael Meredith, "Collection. One Thing Leads to Another", in *Under the Influence*, ed. Ana Miljacki (New York, Barcelona: Actar Publishers, 2019), 92.

Meredith presented this idea in the publication that brings together the communications and discussions produced during the *Under the Influence* symposium¹⁰, presented at the MIT in early 2013. Although this was an event dedicated to the issues of copy and authorship in architecture, one can detect the presence of the digital universe and the internet in almost all communications of the symposium. This suggests that, not only is this a topic that is difficult to escape when discussing contemporary issues, but it also seems to be a breeding ground for the spread of “influences”. Perhaps it is not by chance that, in the same decade in which the issues of originality, copy or authorship acquires renewed attention¹¹, it is the same one in which the first critical analysis on the impact of the internet and the use of digital images on architecture appear¹².

An example of a possible response to Meredith’s proposal is the work of Luca Galofaro, in particular his montages and their dissemination, which are not intended to illustrate a particular project or to its “Post-Digital” condition, but rather to be used as a reflective tool. These montages mix different techniques, both analogue and digital, collecting images from old newspapers, postcards, travel books, in which he later intervenes, or images gathered from the internet that he transforms with image editing software. The relevance of the montages produced by the Italian architect cannot be dissociated from the moment they are made – *today* –, using an “out-dated” technique with its disarming evidence and sincerity, comparable to that used by architects of the 20th century like Mies van der Rohe, Superstudio or Hans Hollein (with whom he probably has more affinities).

By doing so, these mashed up images, draw near, perhaps, to what can be considered one of the elementary purposes of architecture: to give meaning to a set of fragments, be they bricks or images, material or digital, while reflecting about its own condition. In an era in which everyone doubts the “reality” of images, Galofaro’s montages deliberately assume this illusion, overlapping or imposing, different times and geographies in the same image in an “imperfect” way. Without hiding the marks of their manipulation, they are not self-absorbed, egocentric or redundant, but generous apparatus for dialog, debate and confrontation. (Fig.1)

10 The symposium, organized by Ana Miljacki, took place at the MIT on the 23th of February of 2013, and was attended by Alexander D’Hooghe, Florian Idenburg, Enrique Walker, Michael Meredith, Sam Jacob, Cristina Goberna & Urtiz Grau, Armanda Reeser Lawrence, John McMorrough, Simon Kim & Mariana Ibañez, Timothy Hyde, Ines Weizman and Eric Höweler. Moderating were Michael Kubo, Ana Miljacki and Armanda Reeser Lawrence.

11 Besides the *Under the Influence* symposium and publication, the magazines *Masscontext* 21 (2014) and *Perspect* 49 (2016), and the book *Copy Paste. The Badass Architectural Copy Guide* (2017), are some examples.

12 For example: Davide Tommaso Ferrando (2014) Lluís Juan Linan (2016), Igor Sikman (2018), Lluís Ortega (2020), just to name a few. Among them, stands out Ferrando, who has developed the theme consistently with several articles on the subject. His latest essay, from 2020, can be interpreted as a brief summary of his investigation. Davide Tommaso Ferrando, “All that is Social Melts into the Network”, in *Italian Collage*, ed. Davide Tommaso Ferrando, Bart Lootsma and Kanokwan Trakulyingcharoen (Syracuse: LetteraVentidue Edizioni, 2020), 44–61.



[Fig. 2]
Luca Galofaro, Evoked #3, 2016, courtesy of Luca Galofaro.

The anachronistic sensation that some images produce, exposing some innate indecision or contradiction, frustrates any immediate interpretation, resists their superficial assimilation (but also, given this same difficulty, causes them to be equally ignored), and highlights the difficulty of architecture, in its built dimension, to be a political agent of *effective* change in the world (montages are just images and architecture is just building). In Galofaro's combined images, one can witness a permanent process of destruction and construction of meanings, removing the initial significance of the images and creating others by the juxtaposition of multiple pieces. Being fragmentary, they expose the disparity between the elements, drawing attention to the instability and impossibility of the assembly, causing a disjunction of the real. But, as a whole, they assume several attempts to approach an ideal (or at least a commitment to a mission), which, because they are recurrent, is presumed to exist. (Fig.2)

In some of these montages, the place to which they belong is not immediately recognizable, but as they are made with the fragments of other images of architecture, they are always "contextual"; the place to which they refer exists, even if only in the imagination of its author. In others, it is the function that is unknown, or that function is not specific or evident; they are "just" form, a kind of reduction of architecture to its limit, to the enclosure, declaring a certain self-sufficiency. The reuse of an already-said can be considered an act of resistance to the disposable and doubt about the necessity of the new. The images produced are above all an act of admiration, humility and generosity towards those who pay homage in the sincerity of the "theft". But it is also an act of "violence"; the identification with what one admires means taking for himself what belongs to another, and, ultimately, take his place. They are also an act of faith, the belief that the discipline still has some specificity of its own, that it still has something to say and, more importantly, an ability to be programmatic and a useful instrument to think about a future. (Fig.3)

Equally relevant in Galofaro's images is the use of different formats and media for their production and dissemination. Therefore, paper and glass prints, installations, digital files, books, exhibitions and social media like *Pinterest*, *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Blogger* are parallel, functioning, the latest – *The Imagelist and The Booklist* –, as his own "little magazine", where he is simultaneously the author, editor and publisher. In this context, the dubious position in which the images find themselves is significant. They are both "resistant" to certain type of images that the architecture industry produces (redundant glossy photographs or hyper-realistic renders of a too perfect reality), and also consumed in the same massive way due to its digital dissemination; they take a critical position in the face of a reality, without, however, committing themselves to a solution since they are speculations.

Nonetheless, for Galofaro, social media have the specific function of organizing his archive of images (the ones he produces and others, manipulated or not), creating what he calls

"a kind of visual autobiography."¹³ One could say that it is through the images of others and their transformation organized in a chronology, that Galofaro builds his own personal history, meaning, that he builds himself.¹⁴ (Fig.4)

Equally relevant, is the way he describes how his montages work: as a mode of confrontation and thinking, to produce new meanings, to interpret other images and the real, as a discursive practice, a research tool and as a form of writing in itself.¹⁵ What is interesting and revealing about Galofaro's description is its proximity to Michael Foucault's explanation of the *hupomnemata* and its importance for the subjectivation of the discourse.¹⁶ According to the French author, the *hupomnemata* were personal notebooks that served as an agenda, a kind of conduct guide or book, quite common among the cultivated public in ancient Greece. These objects gathered "quotes, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind".¹⁷ Nonetheless, Foucault warns that:

However personal they may be, these *hupomnemata* ought not to be understood as intimate journals [...]. They do not constitute a "narrative of oneself" [but] to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.¹⁸

Through a set of fragments of several origins, from different geographies, authors and times, the "shaping of the self", according to Foucault's description, is done by the words of the "other". The one who writes them "constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said. [...] Through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read."¹⁹

13 Luca Galofaro, "About the Idea of Montage as Form of Production", in *Italian Collage*, ed. Davide Tommaso Ferrando, Bart Lootsma and Kanokwan Trakulyingcharoen (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue Edizioni, 2020), 142.

14 But this is not a particular feature. For example, Davide Trabucco identifies the same effect: "The archive [different platforms of *Conformi*] thus become an autobiography made of images, in which the selected works built up my world vision, each time represented by its single fragments." Davide Trabucco, "Conformi.tumblr.com", in *Italian Collage*, ed. Davide Tommaso Ferrando, Bart Lootsma and Kanokwan Trakulyingcharoen (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue Edizioni, 2020), 181.

15 Luca Galofaro, "Writing by Images, Thinking by Images", in *Luca Galofaro. Writing by Images, Thinking by Images*, Luca Galofaro et al. (Rome: Divisare Books, 2018), 7-16.

16 Michel Foucault, "Self Writing", in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 207-222.

17 *Idem*, 209.

18 *Idem*, 210-211.

19 *Idem*, 213-214.



[Fig. 3]
Luca Galofaro, *Un'atra macchina per vacanze*, 2014, courtesy of Luca Galofaro.



[Fig. 4]
Screenshot of Luca Galofaro's Instagram page, 2021.

Eventually, the *hupomnemata* can be considered a dated model, a kind of hazy memory of a specific culture and historical time that has almost been forgotten by now. Yet, when analysing Luca Galofaro's montages and writings, traces of that ancient practice are still recognized today: "In my work, montage takes on great importance because it is the operative tool, the medium for the interpretation of the personal archive by constructing the annotations that form an interpretative atlas of the real."²⁰ In other words, this annotation of the collected elements is how he appropriates a certain reality. The closeness between Foucault's characterization of the *hupomnemata* and Galofaro's description is equally impressive and revealing. And continues throughout both texts: the annotations as frequent exercises in relation to the "other"; as a way to fight the dispersion caused by excessive reading/viewing; as a sedimentation of what has already been read/viewed; as a regular practice of meeting with the diverse; and how the deliberate heterogeneity does not exclude unification, not in the set of elements collected, but in its concentration on the one who bring them together.²¹ (Fig.5)

This proximity also coincides in Galofaro's practice of two complementary movements: the internalization of the external reality of the one who take notes and the consequent externalization in the world; the same ones that, according to Foucault, make possible the constitution of one's own body, i.e., that materializes the construction of oneself:

The role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a "body" [...]. And this body should be understood not as a body of doctrine but, rather – following an often-evoked metaphor of digestion – as the very body of the one who, by transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard "into tissue and blood" [...] It becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself.²²

Therefore, the body – or the construction of oneself – is constituted by two specific moments: by the "ingestion" of the words of others and by the act of writing, i.e., through a production: the set of realized elements that structures the matter of its existence. The materialization of the body has to do with what is produced, and in the example of Galofaro, by the montages he creates.²³ Consequently, if Galofaro's work (both the montages and their digital publication)

20 Luca Galofaro, *op cit*, (2020) 137.

21 Michel Foucault, *op cit*, 211–213.

22 *Idem*, 213.

23 The awareness of this effect is even more evident in Beniamino Servino's words, another experienced architect in the montage technique: "Montage is an instrument (among others instruments) to adapt a text [existing images] to oneself [...]. The author himself can become the object of the montage." Beniamino Servino, "Montages for the Construction of an Architecture [Beter: of Architecture] that is Italian [Better: Universal]", in *Italian Collage*, ed. Davide Tommaso Ferrando, Bart Lootsma and Kanokwan Trakulyingcharoen (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue Edizioni, 2020), 98.



[Fig. 5]
Luca Galofaro, *Paper works #1*, 2002, courtesy of Luca Galofaro.

function in the same way as the *hupomnemata*, then it is reasonable to assume that it has identical effects; meaning, that it functions as a subjectification of his discourse and that it is a digital element of the shaping of his architectural self. But, and it is important to underline it, with the digital media influence such as superficiality, constant redefinition, instability, speed and global dissemination, individuality, etc. And this could be a problem if its production and dissemination were limited to the digital and internet universes, since the constitution of his body would be assembled on a fragile ground. The way in which Galofaro overcame the particular constraints of the digital medium is not to limit itself to it. By simultaneously exploring other analogue media such as paper publications or exhibitions, he is able to construct a more complete and stable architectural self.

Then, maybe, it is through the set of these interpretations deduced from Galofaro's example (from the exploration of the internet's specificity, working from within the images' centrality through the act of collecting, curating and manipulating them in multiple formats and techniques, while constructing his architectural self and thus inquiring the disciplinary boundaries), that one may reflect on the impact of the digital and the internet on architecture beyond polarized positions and might rehearse a response to Meredith's proposal. However, as Ferrando notes when observing several "curated archives" similar to Galofaro's *The Imagelist*, in none of them one can find any type of social content or go beyond the purely aesthetic dimension, even if he prefers to wait until the full potential of the media is exploited before moving on to a definitive answer.²⁴

In fact, the internet is too big to be ignored and its impact too extensive (and the same goes for the use of images in contemporary culture), still, it cannot be considered as the *only* lifeline for the architecture's meaningful difference. Instead, it must be taken into account with other types of media, each one of them with its own specificity. Of course, this shouldn't diminish the significance of Meredith's proposal or Galofaro's practice, nor erase Ferrando's hope; actually, they are the evidences that the discipline's sense of agency hasn't been lost in the stockpile.

24 Davide Tommaso Ferrando, *Victor Hugo's Tumblr Account*, December, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/39112764/Victor_Hugos_Tumblr_Account.

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