

## Questioning models and drawings

### Representing space in drawing, film and writing

#### Models and drawings

*Igea Troiani*

This double issue of *arq* includes a number of papers first presented at a conference held in Nottingham in November 2005 which was hosted jointly by AHRA (the Architectural Humanities Research Association) and the School of the Built Environment at the University of Nottingham, in conjunction with the Nottingham-based Image Studies Network.

The theme for the event was set by Professor Marco Frascari, Director of the School of Architecture at Carleton University, Ottawa, and also a Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the University of Nottingham in 2005-06. Both 'models' and 'drawings' have been interpreted in a particular way by Frascari, who wrote in the event's Call for Papers:

'Nowadays, we know what kinds of drawings architects make. They have been codified by tradition, by profession and by legislation. Although this canonisation is a relatively recent event nevertheless

it has reached a condition where innovation is almost impossible. The architect's drawings have become "models" and generate "models" to be preserved in museums, magazines and archives. To challenge this idle condition it is necessary to question the imagination of construction and the construction of imagination and how these processes affect and effect the envisioning of architecture in absentia'.

The conference thus addressed relationships between drawings and buildings around four key themes: the tendency of architectural representations to become 'models' for imitation, following Frascari's interpretation of that word; the claim of new imaging technologies to make visible what could be described as the previously unseen; the cognitive spatial implications of traditional imaging practices relative to CAD; and the critical potential of the architectural image.

The two day event began on 18 November 2005, an unusually cold day; a fact worth mentioning because it was in sub-zero – just below zero – conditions that the conference was opened in the university's Sustainable Research building; none of us sure if the lack of heating was the politically correct way in which conferences should nowadays be hosted.

Proceedings were started by Jane Rendell from the Bartlett School of Architecture, who presented the first keynote speech entitled 'Déjà Vu: some things you see will remind you of others', and her colleague Jonathan Hill whose talk was simply entitled 'Drawing Forth'. Two of four co-conveners of the first annual international AHRA conference held at the Bartlett School of Architecture in 2004, Rendell and Hill linked their presentations to the theme of the earlier conference 'Critical



'Captive' by Catherine Hamel

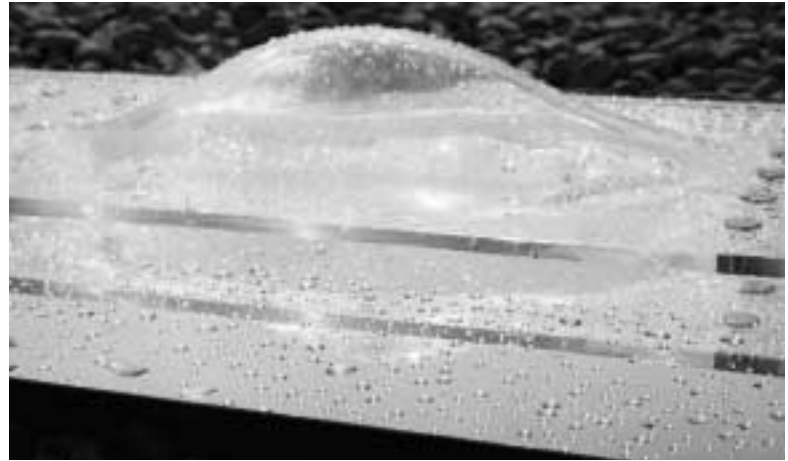


'Falling into the Image: travelling through the digital trompe l'oeil' by Mathan Ratinam, Lmno Studio

Architecture'. Hill followed his previous paper by discussing the origins of the word *disegno*, noting its meaning both as the drawing of a line on paper and the drawing forth of an idea. While continuing her studies of how other art practices inform the practice of writing and drawing architecture, Rendell referred in her talk to the works of Janet Hodgson. Hodgson's reference in her exhibitions and built works to the drawing methods of archaeologists, recording time and space, was discussed in detail.

After warm-up coffee, the delegates split into two session themes which ran simultaneously in different buildings, separated by a frosty courtyard. Unable to attend both, I chose sessions by presenters with whose work I was unfamiliar or concerning topics new to me. The coverage of my review should be considered in this light. The papers I discuss can be loosely clustered together in themes different to those of the sessions.

One interpretation of 'models and drawings' appeared in papers which reflected closely on the theme of invisibility in relation to building architecture and producing drawings of buildings. In this category – not by coincidence since he set the conference theme – was Marco Frascari's keynote address 'Models and Drawings: The Invisible Nature of Architecture'. Frascari reflected on his personal acquaintance with Carlo Scarpa. In an intimate account, he made public Scarpa's tactics of physically fixing working drawings to timber boards so as to reduce the loss of drawing information which can occur when drawings are replicated. The paper brought to the audience's attention the point that information is lost or made invisible by the distance between the making of drawings, and highlighted the issue of the mobility of drawings. Also in this category was the paper, 'The Ronchamp Mary Wall "in the sky with diamonds": Scaffolding as Invention', by Marcia F. Feuerstein



'Post Secular: A Spiritual Model' by Bradley Starkey

from the Washington Alexandria Architecture Centre of Virginia Tech. Feuerstein contemplated the origins of Le Corbusier's church through a Beatles allegory. She explained Le Corbusier's idea to situate the Virgin Mary in the sky 'with diamonds' noting that the trace of scaffolding on the surface of the church – 'star-holes [which] were absent in sketches, drawings and models' – highlighted an invisible process of construction that the drawings did not represent.

Another interpretation of the conference theme appeared in papers which explored the act of representing space where the delegate was the 'drawer'. In her essay, 'Drawing the Virtual of Space', Jenny Lowe from the University of Brighton referred to her exhibitions and a competition design to trace the influence of her interest in The Red Earth Plain. Through the study of her varied art practices and resultant drawings and proposals, Lowe aimed to interrogate the question 'when does space become architectural?' In a similar personal vein to Lowe, Catherine Hamel from the University of Calgary presented her beautiful braided sketches<sup>[1]</sup> alongside her text 'Drawing-Lines of Confrontation'. The drawings extend her scholarly research on 'identity and estrangement in post-war landscapes' and emerge from

her examination of the idea that 'in drawing, there is confrontation'. Unlike the non-virtual drawings from Lowe and Hamel, Mathan Ratinam from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology showed CAD representations produced by his firm Lmno Studio. These representations did not adopt conventional methods of inserting information numerically, rather electing to explore how designs can be represented by collating edited photographic stills of designs<sup>[2]</sup>. His refreshingly different paper was titled 'From Effect to Affect: Contemporary Film Technologies and Architectural Representation'.

Papers that intersected film studies or writing, in particular poetry, with architectural space and drawing offered another interpretation on the theme. In 'The Constantly Evolving Mediated Surface', Renée Tobe from Sheffield Hallam University referred to 'the well known montage sequence from Antonioni's film, *Blow-up* (1966)', in order to discuss how architecture is envisioned and to heighten awareness of how space can be imagined optically. Also in this group is the paper 'Reflectings and Silverings: Specifying Material in Language' by Katie Lloyd Thomas from the University of East London. Delivered on the second day of the conference, Lloyd Thomas began with reflections on silvering. The paper extended to how poet Francis

Ponge made the mirror the subject of his 'fable'. Lloyd Thomas then riskily tested the impact of writing material specifications for architectural documentation like poetry, a methodological feat which brought forth considerable debate.

Architect and academic from the University of Adelaide, Sam Ridgway was in a small category of architects who discussed their designs. In his paper, 'The Imagination of Construction', he spoke about the production of his private house and its origins in drawing and technology. The physical product of the designer was also the topic of University of Nottingham lecturer Bradley Starkey's paper, although unlike Ridgway, Starkey's projects were not built. Models cast in clear polyester resin made by Starkey were presented and discussed as emerging from the influence of Merleau-Ponty's writings on the presence of the invisible [3].

In the sample of papers reviewed here, interpretations of the theme have ranged from invisibility; building and drawing to space; the 'drawer' and their drawings to film and poetry; and space and documentation to architect, architecture, model and invisibility. This loop or return to material, although something I have constructed artificially in the structure of this review, also occurred in the conference presentations. At numerous times, the subject material of papers overlapped or the same slides appeared in different presentations. For me this showed that the conference theme was interrogated at multiple levels.

Connected with the depth and rigour at which the theme was discussed was the diversity of presenters. Practitioners and academics spoke; some at the beginning of their careers, others mature, accomplished and arguably more skilled. Speakers came from the United States, Italy, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, to name a few. Not only this, the conference welcomed speakers from a range of disciplines. Looking only at the keynotes – outside of architecture as represented by Rendell, Hill, Frascari and Alberto Pérez-Gómez from McGill University – Judith Mottram from Nottingham Trent University spoke on the theme from the perspective of visual arts and Don Ihde from the State University

of New York, Stony Brook addressed the concept of 'visualisation' from the perspective of philosophy.

In summary the Nottingham AHRA conference offered an international arena in which thinkers from different disciplines at different stages of their research lives could debate issues associated with a common theme. The conference was testimony to the commitment of AHRA to encourage interdisciplinary discussion and to nurture collaborative networks.

The forthcoming third Annual International AHRA conference will aim to continue and expand the network and its relevance to practice as well as extend and link previous conversations. Hosted by Oxford Brookes University, it will be held at St. Catherine's College, Oxford, 17–18 November 2006. The theme of the conference is 'The Politics of Making: Theory, Practice, Product'. Details of the call for papers and conference registration are available on the AHRA website: [www.ahra-architecture.org.uk](http://www.ahra-architecture.org.uk).

*Igea Troiani is a Senior Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, and a member of the conference organising committee for the third AHRA conference.*