

Allusion and Illusion; the Two Faces of Architectural Drawing

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Architects through history have used the media of drawing in their design process. Filarete, the Renaissance architect, writes that architects must sketch out their solutions for the client to see, and that it also helps architects themselves to see.¹ Carlo Scarpa also writes about the importance of drawing to visualize, that drawing helps make the object more understandable. He writes; "I want to see, and that's all I really trust. I want to see, and that's why I draw. I can see an image only if I draw it."²

In this paper, we would like to explore an aspect of drawing that concerns illusion and allusion. This discussion will present some contemporary and historical architectural drawing examples to question and elucidate both the inherent differences of these potentially dichotomous terms and how they might lead us in a more concordant direction for communications in architecture. In recent history, we have seen examples of drawings such as those published by Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind that have had an inclination to place architecture into a greater state of allusion. These drawings are exciting and provoke the thoughtful references to the possibilities of the design. We can also view renderings, produced on our computers, which appear to offer us the ability to easily create highly detailed and precise modes of exact-ness. Because of their seductive nature we should look at these types of drawings and wonder about the issue of illusion. These examples may seem, on the surface, to show the potential opposition of the connotations of allusion and illusion in the production of architecture in relation to the drawing media that we use for designing. But it is when we consider the deeper meaning of these terms, we may conclude that these somewhat disparate ideas may really be two sides of the same issue.

We may comprehend a microcosm of the tension created between these two sides of the illusion and allusion of drawing within architectural education especially in the design of curriculum. In our school, this can be seen in questions that arise as to the intention of differing media courses within the program. Surprisingly, at our school of architecture almost a quarter of our classes in the curriculum, directly concern the issues of communication in architecture. These courses range from computer modeling to theory, photography and drawing. Constantly the tensions, between faculty teaching these courses, have revolved around those interested in practical (technical) techniques versus faculty trying to connect these courses to current theoretical design trends and thus question the ways we use and design with media. On one side of the debate, we find those faculty interested in teaching techniques to their students but who generally ignore the critical use of these techniques. All too often, the results of these courses are seductive images that have little basis in concern for materiality, function or design aesthetics. On the other side, we find courses overly fascinated with the popularity of ambiguous, emotional overly personal markings that can refer to anything the student is thinking. We may find many of the projects developed in such courses are equally hard to critique as they become so personal they are lost in the allusion of the beautiful and constantly referencing image. We are reminded of the concept of 'free play' as endlessly described a decade ago, where play never provides boundaries for inclusion or exclusion.³

This debate may not only be seen as a local discussion on the direction of communications courses in architectural education but also touches on the broader debate in architecture and architectural education between the image as illusion and the image as allusion. Certainly

the issue of the image has been well deliberated, especially in the way we perceive the post-modern world, and has become a common discussion concerning representation and what associations it conveys.⁴ We believe that this issue, of the representational image, is still important and timely especially as we are currently questioning the ability to quickly and easily create drawings and other images on the computer. This is especially compelling, because in current architecture, that makes use of postmodern media referencing similar to a mirror ever reflecting on itself, there has been a movement that questions the value of illusion over allusion.⁵

We can see this questioning reflected in recent arguments, as deconstruction and post-modern thought have attempted to denounce doctrines and to abolish standards.⁶ This was seen as a “provocative method, aimed at discovery and discovering ourselves” and professed that, “according to what is written; and any type of inscription can only carry out secondary and subordinate functions as vehicles of speech, where meaning always precedes what is signified (precedence to what is purely intelligible with regard to what is merely tangible).”⁷ Because of this history, it may be valuable, not to rehash, but to readdress and build on some of these issues through a discussion of the manifestations of these relationships. It is important to understand, that in building on these ideas through the act of drawing, it may also be necessary to challenge the tenets. It is through the questioning of our forms of reference and their illustrations that we create a chiasm, a ‘joining in the back,’ as one might say, that may either feed on each other or become the same. In a similar way, by seeing a chiasmus of the illusion of allusion and the allusion of illusion, and finding relationships of definition, may help us to proceed in discussions of drawing in architecture.

PLAY AND DEFINITIONS OF ILLUSION AND ALLUSION

Allusion can be defined as a reference, the word takes on connotations of a brief or indirect mention. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the etymology of allusion as; [*alludere*—to play with joke or jest with, touch lightly upon a subject, to + *ludere* to play, or to play with]. An allusion may be a step removed, from an original, in abstraction. It may be the playful dialogue of memory and imagination. As a representation, the word allusion questions whether its use can be conclusive or if the design it is referring to is ever changing and interpretable. It may represent the tangent and is often playful in its dependence on the knowledge of the reader or listener. To look at our modes of

representation the *allusive* may be the conceptual ideas tied to, but not obvious in the building’s conceptual framework. As in a postmodern world where everything is reference and little can be defined, an allusion might help us understand the world better but it also may keep us forever suspended in a time of or place of unknowns. Similarly, an allusion with its roots “to play with” provides opportunities for a playful dialogue. Here, the cyclical web leads into new interpretations and allows the representation to remain fluid for as long as possible, a function that may be an advantage in the design process. Alternatively, the etymology of illusion is presented as; [*illudere* - to make sport of, jest, or mock at, ridicule, il + *ludere*, to play, against play].⁸ Illusion is a mocking false or unreal appearance, deceived or eluded by appearances, a false conception of ideas, and unreal visual appearance, deceptive belief or the sensuous perception of an external object. Again the illusion’s falseness may express the mirror-play of the object truly unformed. The illusion then, may be seen as the illustration to envision the new and never before seen. Although illusion viewed as a falsity may also be the ability to see the future, to visualize the conceptual and physical idea. Both of these words with their roots in ‘play,’ assist an understanding of how media such as drawing influences the process of design. Play, as a philosophical concept, provokes the actions of ‘give and take’ that can become a design dialogue. Other aspects of play include the boundaries that surround the activity of play, along with representational qualities that makes something ‘stand for’ something else and qualities that allow participants to become so involved in the play that they feel outside themselves. The importance of play is often the intelligibility or the learning that results from the activity of play; the repeatability allows the chance to alter and manipulate to discover something new. We learn through the simulation, the process of representation.⁹ Again, we return to the question at hand, how does the ability to see media as having propensity to ‘play with’ or act as an agent ‘against play’ influence how we use and perceive a drawing?

ALLUSION OF ILLUSION AND THE ILLUSION OF ALLUSION

This dilemma concerning our use of drawings may be explored through viewing allusion and illusion through a *chiasm*. A *chiasmus* describes a word play where reversing the order of a phrase, clarifies through its new noun/verb position. Additionally, it can be “a grammatical figure by which (opposing diagonal arrangement) the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other.”¹⁰ Here the reversal of the order

may help us to better understand the opposition in these words. A bridge is a common example of a chiasm, the reflection of the bridge on the water creates a mirrored copy, comparing what is below, with what is above. The *Carceri* etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi provide examples of a chiasmus. The opposing relationship between the ambiguous underground environments and the spaces that feel large, airy and populated give us a reversal of this order.¹¹ Piranesi plays with light allowing it to seemingly stream in from above in omnipresent filtration. He also provides a visual chiasm, as he reflects the roman arches with the cantinary curves of hanging cables. The inherent meanings provoked by reversing the order of the terms might help us understand more about the relationships between allusion and illusion.

The first half of the *chiasmus* "the allusion of illusion" questions the long-standing validity of the illusion. We may compare illusion to magic, something that is conjured up out of no-where, hiding or concealing, where allusion shows us the process of connections and relationships that may be more truthful.¹² It is possible to ask if the illusion is truly formed or how it pretends to be formed? A 'realistic' image may not allow play or finding the truth through play. In using allusion as a modifier to an illusion, the reference may be giving the illustration qualities that question how this image may also convey something less definitive. The question may arise if we, as architects, wish not to make conclusions, if the life in the ambiguous image helps us continually enjoy the process of imagination and reference.

To start to explore the allusion of illusion, we may look to another architect's drawings to help explain these relationships. An example of a rendering, this emotive sketch by Aldo Rossi, reveals the illusion that portrays the seductive image (figure 1).¹³ Rossi is providing the visual clues for us to view a future with the suggestion of three dimensions and the 'realism' of structure, one that can help us envision a possible place. We are seduced by the fantasy and attractiveness of the illusion. On the other hand, the image is also an allusion. The colors, and the 'soft' style create an atmosphere that takes us to an emotional place of the undefined and the not-yet-defined. This references the sunny shores of Italy or the memories of our visions. In trying to define certain aspects of his conceptual thinking, Rossi is also presenting an allusion to the qualitative aspects of this project. He is allowing the meaning to change as we are presented the associative memories and imaginations that carry the project, and thus an allusion of illusion.

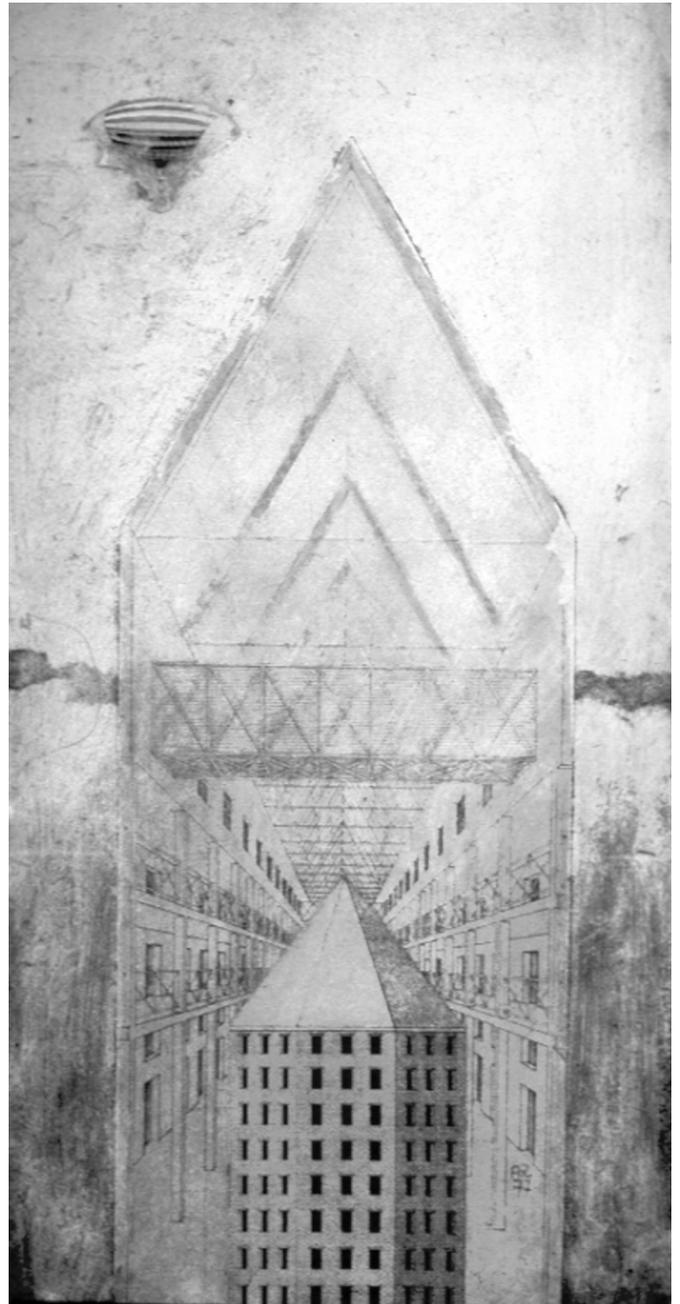


Fig. 1. Study for student house in Trieste, 1974. Aldo Rossi.

At this point, the differences between these two seemingly opposing concepts, begins to become murky. If the chiasmus helps us see new relationships in reversal, then we may start to view how the place of their conceptual crossing makes them less distinct. Possibly viewed as an "X", the moment of their crossing causes them to resemble each other. Although the illusion may be immersed in the false image, it is the only image we have, especially since the illusion is an attempt to state a future in known terms. We may allude to, or refer to, the illusion but we depend upon

its view. In a similar way, the interpretation can also be misleading, sending us in many associative directions. Can the reference to the falsehood give us greater understanding of what we are trying to accomplish? Since the illusion is human made and inherently imperfect, we must constantly question its role and how we use its vision. Maybe the object of our attention is not necessarily human made, as much as human conceived, a statement that still puts the illusion in question. We are reminded of the atmospheric drawings by Hugh Ferriss, which express darkness and light, conveying strong dramatic impression. In architecture we are always attempting to capture a future and especially provoke a client's imagination, as we are dependent upon media support to realize our visions.¹⁴

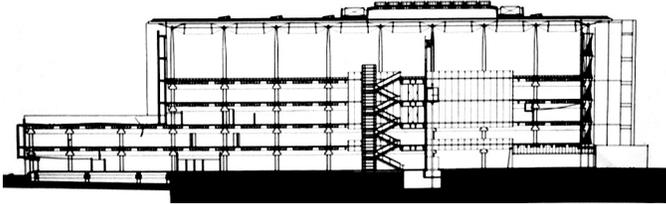


Fig. 2. Phoenix Library, Section, Will Bruder Architects, Ltd.

A section drawing from the office of Will Bruder for the Phoenix Library, might help us understand the way a drawing may be a conclusion and also represent a constantly moving meaning (figure 2). The section is a typical 'technical' section. It is a 'hard-lined' drawing and describes the structure, circulatory and lighting technicalities of the space. It may not be viewed as an allusion because it successfully *describes* the intention of the future space, in that it implies materials and volumetric relationships. There are very few emotive qualities to seduce our vision of the future. But if we contemplate the whole question of a section drawing, Bruder is describing an impossible view. This sectional view is impossible to see in 'reality,' and as is obvious in the conventions of architectural drawing, we are contemplating an image that requires a certain amount of imagination to comprehend.¹⁵ This has been a reoccurring argument in architecture, and one of the main issues of media representation, but we need to reiterate that here the illusion and allusion join to create both a vision of the future and one that allows us to use our mind's facilities of association to envision what that future will be like. This drawing is less of an illusion than a conventional perspective, but it conveys none of the emotive qualities that may label it as an allusion. On the surface it may resemble a definitive view, but it operates as an abstraction. The representational qualities, with dimension removed, give the observer a

chance for interpretation. Here we are recognizing that images have specific uses and specific purposes. This may be the crux of the polemic as each mode of visualizing, can describe in various ways. We may need to examine what we mean by reference to view the hidden expectations.

It is possible to suggest that the reference is a metaphor or analogy, one that speaks in a 'poetic' language rather than that of description.¹⁶ In this case, the illusion is modified by the suggestion that it is one thing speaking for another. It may then, be easier to accept a falsehood if we understand it as representation and not expect it to have the clear dimensions of the thing signified. Here the illusion of allusion may seem a reversal but in fact it may reflect some of the same issues.¹⁷

The second half of the chiasm that reads the 'illusion of allusion,' may evoke the picture of the thing that is less tangible. A seeming impossibility, this may involve how we try to make more defined the not-yet-physical forms of our architecture. For example, the fact that the drawings of Michelangelo or DaVinci are 'accurate' does not destroy their allusive qualities. They may still create emotive or ephemeral qualities. At one time, models may have been used in the hope of finding a greater illusion, and probably Michelangelo for example, used his models in this way. These three-dimensional images cannot lie as easily as a drawing, because the third and fourth dimensions provided thousands of views. In comparison, our renderings on the computer, may seem a clearer view of the future building, again they resemble an abstraction as they will present a three-dimensional building on a two-dimensional surface. The result, as always with architectural representational media, is that the media remains a picture of the vaguely defined future.

In this example of a drawing by Massimo Solari, we may view what seems a fantastical archway in the water with a structure on a mountainside behind. Although not an architecture from our experience, it may be a metaphor to a conceptual environment. The techniques used to draw this image, present the environment in a precise way. We question the very clear and well-rendered images in contrast to the theme of the illustration. The dichotomy of the 'realistic' technique in comparison to the fanciful content may question how this project is the illusion of an allusion.

In this reversal we can view a questioning of whether there is falseness in the reference. Can we doubt the hint or the metaphor as being illusory? This dichotomy may actually be the important point, that we may

never be able to separate the qualities of illusion and allusion to distinguish the falsehood from the associative. In this instance, the question of definition, as inherently opposite to an associative reference, might be resolved by looking to concepts of definition.

DEFINING THE ALLUSION AND ILLUSION

If we question the drawing representations of illusion and allusion as defining either a process or a future building, then it may be necessary to question *how* they may define. An illusion with a more definitive pictorial outlook may, on first inspection, be the better definition of the architect's intention. But the allusion with more depth and questioning may better give a view of what the building 'will be.' The philosopher John William Miller may give insight into this dilemma when he writes that the only way to approach this issue is through defining our terms.¹⁸ Again, we may consider the atmospheric 'finished' look, the image that best defines. In opposition to this basic tenet, Miller goes on to question the validity of a set definition, and expresses that "a static definition is neither experimentally or logically possible."¹⁹ The seeming advantage that images look completed may now be a disadvantage. Since the design is substantially set, these images do not allow for further definition, or recalibration of definition. To further clarify this point, any object continually needs new relationships, but it first requires a beginning to specify its mark.²⁰ The major focus in this explanation of definition might be the idea that in the process of making a mark to start to define, it is necessary to allow the manipulation and alteration that can continually refine and re-define.²¹

We may need to ask if this makes all architecture a system of constant re-definition? An answer needs to be yes, as the architecture is defined through the architects' mind and may take on new connotations as it is built. Subsequently, as humans inhabit this architecture, it takes on still new definitions. We may liken this to an example of fourth phase *simulacrum*, where the simulation takes on new and unique qualities that separate it entirely from the original intention.²² Is it then, futile to attempt definition if we know it will constantly change? Is trying to find definitions an attempt to negate the whole? In this case, we may be unable or find little use for definition, if it is elusive and impermanent. Miller now questions this problem of ambiguity, and concludes that although definition changes with respect to other definitions we are continually compelled to "search for a relative permanence."²³ The allusion may embrace this change and does not necessarily make the illusive image invalid. Being undefined it embarks on a

questioning that asks about the change, how is it possible and what does it mean. We may also need to consider the 'relative permanence' and understand the concept of playing with a drawing, knowing that it does not contain the dimensions of the final built building.

CONCLUSIONS

Having begun with the concept of the chiasmus, we are reminded of the two faces of *Janus* that indicate the two-sided-ness of an issue.²⁴ *Janus* was the god of gates in Roman mythology and is depicted as a face facing opposite directions. In his role as the guardian of gates and doors, he was also thought to represent beginnings (January). The explanation for this belief comes from the idea that one must emerge through a gate or door before entering a new place. The 'beginnings' also speak of the mark that is the first definition. It also may mean that we must go back and forth through this door to understand both sides and unite our comprehension. We may also be going back and forth through the gate to make the things invisible, now visible.²⁵ As architects, we may need to continually pass through the door from different directions to make use of the rich understanding of allusion and illusion. The faces of *Janus* see both ways, providing the mediation that helps in the complex issue of architectural representation.

In conclusion, allusion and illusion need each other since they are two sides of the definition (the future building) and help us to comprehend both the conceptual beginnings (allusion), and the view of the future (illusion). This may be the value of 'playing with' our drawing media and the way to use constantly changing definition. In our schools, it may also be artificial to separate the communication classes from the studio, since the definition of the product may need the reflection of design. This attitude may also keep our students from being seduced by the 'eyewash' of their skills in making beautiful renderings. And again, it may be artificial to separate the 'illusion' from the 'allusion' as they may be one and the same (two sides of the same issue).

NOTES

¹ Filarete, *Treatise On Architecture*, Translated by John R. Spenser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 70.

² Francesco Dal Co, *Carlo Scarpa, The Complete Works* (New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1984), p. 242.

³ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of 'Truth and Method'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) p. 104. "[N]o play is perfectly free play ... to play is to sacrifice freedom and

accept limits ... being limited, being played, is a condition of playing at all."

- ⁴ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of the Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), the theme of the whole book.
- ⁵ Kearney, op. cit., p. 5., and throughout the introduction.
- ⁶ Jorge Gluesberg, editor, *Deconstruction; A Student Guide* (London: Academy Editions, 1991).
- ⁷ Gluesberg, op. cit., p. 7.
- ⁸ The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary
- ⁹ Ideas on Play come from; James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (London: Jason Aronson, 1972); Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
- ¹⁰ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*
- ¹¹ Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture From Piranesi to the 1970's* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), pp. 27-30. The reversal also may be expressed how the people wandering in these immense prisons seen as though they are tourists. The polemic of the Bourgeoisie so evident in these images helps understand the repression of the society Piranesi is portraying.
- ¹² Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972)
- ¹³ "[D]rawing is the medium that offers the least resistance to imaginative vision ..." Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture in Drawing* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1985), p. 6.
- ¹⁴ "Now my suggestion is that in so far as we see a drawing as a representation, instead of a configuration of lines and strokes, the incongruity between what we draw and what we see disappears." Richard Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 22.
- ¹⁵ A definition of 'Reality' has been attempted by many philosophers, here we mean the physical world.
- ¹⁶ Wolfgang Meisenheimer writes about the poetic drawing as referring only loosely to its 'referent.' "The Functional and the Poetic Drawing" *Daidalos* 25, p. 111.
- ¹⁷ Wollheim, op. cit., p. 24. "[T]o see a drawing as a representation of something is no longer to take it, or to be disposed to take it, for that thing; it is rather to understand that thing by it."
- ¹⁸ John William Miller, *The Definition of the Thing* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1980), p. 38.
- ¹⁹ Miller, op. cit., p. 42.
- ²⁰ Miller, op. cit., p. 41.
- ²¹ As a diversion, etymologically the word 'design' has connection to the ability to 'make a mark.' It is through the making of a mark that we can attempt to begin to design.
- ²² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 1-79.
- ²³ Miller, op. cit., p. 50.
- ²⁴ See Thomas Bulfinch for a definition and history of *Janus*.
- ²⁵ "[T]he line no longer imitates the visible; it renders visible, it is the blueprint of a genesis of things." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 183.