
THE ARCHITECT'S VISUAL PRACTICES AS SOURCE OF POWER

RICHARD KLOPP

Vanier College

INTRODUCTION

Drawings and other forms of visual representation are ubiquitous in design and construction, yet rarely do we consider their negative effects on teamwork or on relations between building professions. For example, the use of sketching in early design team meetings would seem from the architect's perspective to be an essential means of engaging in the work and facilitating discussion. Why then is it often experienced as an act of exclusion, stifling the contributions of other project team members?¹ This reoccurring observation from personal experience on multidisciplinary design teams, both in commercial practice and in simulated studio projects, involves the architect disengaging from group discussion in order to sketch a *parti*, which is subsequently proposed as the design direction for others to follow. In an attempt to make sense of this behavior and its affect on others, research was conducted in four fields related to architectural production: visual practices, teamwork, power relations, and professional ethics.² As we will see, the architect's visual practices, when viewed through the lens of power relations, reveals motivations that are of particular relevance to the study and advancement of integrated design practices.

The built environment is primarily the work of multidisciplinary project teams engaged in a variety of design, construction and management practices that demand regular sharing of information by its team members. Visual representations have an essential mediating and structuring role in the negotiation of design decisions and they cover a broad spectrum of object types and methods.³ All team members participate in and are subject to the influences of visual practices, but architects, by nature of their specific role and training, usually have the greatest command over their use, production, and interpretation. They are therefore the most inclined and able to use them to forward personal agendas, which may or may not be compatible with project objectives or the interests of other team members.

In his ethnographic treatise, *Why Architects Draw*, Robbins offers a historical critique on the development of the architectural profession through its visual practices and reveals the wide-ranging social implications of drawing.⁴ He is emphatic in stating that we cannot properly study drawing or other visual practices without an understanding of its effects on the social relations of those it involves. This echoes Latour's broader concept of inscriptions, or

what he calls *immutable mobiles*, which are not only essential instruments of visualization and cognition, but also the very means by which rationality is formed, and by which power is concentrated and mobilized.⁵

The interaction of these two dimensions of visual practices – as both a mode of communication and a means to influence social relations – is the subject of this paper. More specifically, it examines the architect's use of visual materials as a source of power and the consequences for multidisciplinary teamwork. It begins with a brief description of visual practices and their operative qualities in architectural projects. Since visual practices serve project teams and their members, it is important to also make a few points on collaborative process. The main body of the essay then explores the architect's use of visual representations as a means to acquire and deploy power. The work of Robbins and other sources are applied to Law's five-part definition of power⁶ to demonstrate how visual practices, which are so closely tied to the architect's identity, also serve as their primary source of influence: both social and cultural, rational and political. Since much of this power has been historically acquired and normalized in practice through a process of *essentializing*,⁷ its legitimacy is rarely questioned. A concluding discussion reframes this as an ethical challenge for all professions to be more proactive at assessing and disclosing the sources of power that stem from their privileged knowledge and abilities.

Once embedded in the conventions of practice, the effects of visual practices on power relations may go unquestioned, yet be a hidden cause of unproductive working relationships among team members or an unspoken source of deep-seeded resentments between professions. This issue has high stakes given the growing body of research that links effective teamwork or integrated design practices with such things as improved building performance, reduced project costs and delays, and even a more vibrant and sustainable built environment.^{8,9} If the quality of team decisions has such a profound effect on outcomes, especially early on in the design process, and if these decisions depend on the collaborative use of visual imagery, then it is of practical concern to all members of the project team, to learn how to identify and avoid – or even better, to redress – the negative or disempowering effects of visual practices. Each stakeholder must become aware of the power dynamics at play in decision-making processes, if they wish to fully bring their knowledge

and expertise to bear on the prioritization of values and objectives that will inform the projects evolution from concept to reality.

In its broadest reading, this paper is intended as a voluntary disclosure by an architect to the other collaborating actors that are routinely engaged in the design of buildings. Its aim is to contribute to the ongoing process of self-reflection and renewal that takes place within the professional body of architecture as well as to encourage a rapprochement between the diverse disciplines represented on project teams. The premise is that a shift from traditional hierarchical and directive modes of project engagement to more integrated, consensus-based models must coincide with a rebalancing of power relations and a mutual exchange of knowledge regarding the values and practices specific to each professional culture. At the very least, the dynamics of power must be revealed and understood, so that its effects on decision-making can be taken into consideration. Taking inspiration from the words of Flyvbjerg and his influential case study on the abuse of power in local planning processes: "Understanding how power works is the first prerequisite for action, because action is the exercise of power."¹⁰

A few qualifying statements regarding the scope and contents of this essay are necessary at this point. Visual practices are just one source of power and do not encompass the full range of an architect's influence. This paper focuses only on the negative effects of visual practices as a pathology, not the many legitimate uses of visual persuasion in the service of client objectives, occupant needs, project team goals, public interests, or the architect's cultural contributions to society.¹¹ Neither does this paper address the many strategies available to the other project team members to counter or trump the power effects of architect's visual practices.

VISUAL PRACTICES IN ARCHITECTURE

The use of visual imagery in building design encompasses a broad range of material objects and activities: from hand sketches to computer rendered perspectives; from red-marking revisions on a drawing set to laser-pointing on projected images. Richards defines the communicable value of a diagram as "the ability of users to recognize in it spatial relations, which in some way correspond to the relationships represented."¹² But seldom are visual representations pure diagrams: more commonly, they are combined with text or used as a support for verbal or written communication.^{13,14}

In the design and execution of building projects, visual representations fulfill diverse functions: as an instrument of memory, experiment, self-education, communication, consent, and for directing construction.¹⁵ Van der Lugt offers four basic categories of functions: thinking, talking, prescriptive, and storing¹⁶. Bendixen and Koch, building on previous work^{17,18,19} in *Science and Technology Studies* of design, propose a set of terms relating to the possible forms of association between visual representations and their users: inscription, prescription, and conscription. *Inscription* is the recording of human interests on a material object; *prescription* is

the ability of that object to impose on human actions; and *conscription* is the interaction of human and object actors. 20

According to Robbins, "[d]rawing's power and its importance to architects emanates from its complex and dual nature[:] ...conceptual, subjective, and cultural representation of an architectural creation... [on the one hand, and] ...practical, objective, social instrument of the material production of building... [on the other]."²¹ In addition to this social/cultural pairing, visual practices can also be described by two other important binary modes: hollow/saturated²² and fluid/frozen.²³ Early or novice sketches are *hollow* in terms of the quantity of embedded information, but with each successive addition of coded information, they become more *saturated*, gaining stability due to the amount resources invested and the complexity of coordinating changes.²⁴ *Frozen* visual materials are those considered temporarily fixed or unchangeable – e.g., a survey plan or an approved concept image – and as such become fixed references informing the development of the *fluid* or changeable materials.²⁵ These binary qualities can be exploited for tactical and political reasons by project team members, as demonstrated by the authors of the references cited.

CHALLENGE FOR INTEGRATED TEAMWORK

Teams may be defined as "groups of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose and hold themselves mutually accountable for its achievement."²⁶ Mutual accountability is dependent on the strength of the team identity and how its participants value team interests over their own, or those of their organization or discipline.²⁷ In the context of commercial practice, this idealized social unit is fraught with expectations and sources of conflict stemming from differences in professional cultures, work methods, fee agreements, contractual obligations, personality types, and professional experience – to name just a few.

In building projects, the architect has traditionally taken the privileged lead role, and as such would prepare – often with just the client alone – a design concept that would in large part define the scope and nature of subsequent engagements. This approach, in which a single or small group of expert consultants prepares a design proposal prior to involving the rest of the project team and the broader contingent of project actors, is typified by its efficient decision-making process, but often protracted consent-building process, resulting from its directive-reactive mode of interaction.²⁸ This is what is behind Oliver's assertion: "Architects are trained in the skill of persuasion rather than relationship building."²⁹ It is through their visual practices that architects persuade and direct others; it is also what asserts their cultural status as principle author of the design.³⁰

Integrated Design Process (IDP) proposes an alternative, participatory model of engagement that is less hierarchical and adversarial in nature.^{31,32} It involves early interaction with all key stakeholder groups to identify and prioritize project values, goals, and con-

straints, with regular follow up meetings to review progress and mobilize consent. Proponents of IDP state that this approach results in higher quality decision-making leading to a more informed and appropriate design; reduced risk of cost overruns and delays; and a higher value, better performing building. A sustainable built environment is often stated as the ultimate purpose of IDP.

A major hurdle to greater participation and user responsiveness in design is the architect's ingrained set of values that holds more dearly the cultural aspects of authorship, inventiveness, and public recognition than the social aspects of consensus, practicality, and public need.^{33,34,35} These values are embedded in and transmitted by the educational and professional institutions that define architecture and are reinforced by a reward system of design prizes, which give primacy to the main cultural artifact of architectural production: the conceptual drawing. One can begin to understand why the architect might resist engaging in a participatory process that takes away their opportunity to "act first," thereby undermining their claim to authorship and their control over the design direction.

THE POWER OF VISUAL PRACTICES

Foucault defines power relations as "[t]he relationships in which one wishes to direct the behavior of another."³⁶ Power in social relations is context dependent and never purely social; often finding its embodiment in the technical, corporeal, architectural, textural, and natural.³⁷ Handcuffs, a bodyguard, an imposing façade, municipal bylaws, and defensible topography are respective examples of the means that may be employed to reinforce power relations.

*Do visual materials or practices have power? – or can they be "imbued with power?"*³⁸ An object may be the instrument and embodiment of power, but the motivations for its use ultimately find their source in a person or a group. To understand the power of drawings or visual practices then, one needs to expose the interests of those it empowers: in this case, the architect.

Law's five-part definition of power offers a particularly useful template to explore this broad and multi-dimensional concept, which includes the following distinct notions. Each will be examined individually in relation to the visual practices of architects:

1. Empowerment (power to);
2. Influence (power over);
3. Authority (power storage);
4. Discretion (power development); and
5. Power/Effects (power maintenance).³⁹

1. Empowerment

Visual practices empower architects in a number of ways. As a medium, visual representations enable the architect "to conceive, test and realize the best possible design;"⁴⁰ to work independently from the builder and at a distance from the site; and to capture "a place

for themselves and their art within the broader social making of the built environment."⁴¹

In terms of social status, both the architect's value to clients and the architect's central mediating role on project teams stem from their specialized knowledge and abilities: to produce, manipulate and interpret the visual representations that are essential to the design and procurement of buildings. Architects also claim authorship and cultural status through their conceptual processes that ultimately defines the architectural expression of the built work.

While architects rarely influence the underlying decisions of a building project, such as the choice of site, program, budget or schedule, their command of the architectural discourse empowers them "to reappropriate a critical say in the process of decision making, and to reframe decisions initially made by others within a world of the architects' making."⁴²

2. Influence

Architects skillful at manipulating visual imagery have considerable power at their disposal to influence the interpretations of others, by making specific choices with regards to: the type of representation; the perspective and frame; the level of abstraction, precision and fuzziness; the fixed and changeable elements; and the quantity and relevance of the information presented. By concealing specific aspects or highlighting others, the architect may use visual representations to direct, distract, reassure, overwhelm, or even mystify, depending on their motives and which strategy is deemed most effective to achieving them.

From the first concept sketches, the architect sets the agenda and influences the context and scope of work for other participants involved in the design or production. Robbins explains that

"...when architects draw they are building a whole structure of relationships that they will control... not only the conceptual framework for what will follow, but a social location for themselves in the structure of relations that produce architecture, a discourse with which to control that structure of relations, and a material embodiment of both the structure of relations and the nature of the architectural object."⁴³

3. Authority

The architect's authority is the capacity to command or judge by virtue of title and membership in a profession possessing valued and specialized knowledge. Authority legitimizes the actions of those having *power over*. In exchange for this privilege, and to avoid abuse of public trust, the architectural profession is self-regulated using a code of ethics to define the appropriate conduct of its members.⁴⁴

Visual practices define and assert much of the architect's title to authority. Many years of education and specialized training are re-

quired to first gain proficiency in the use of visual representations; many more years of experience are then necessary to demonstrate mastery over the full scope of its ramifications in practice. The authority of architects, while founded in their unique abilities, is manifested in the roles entrusted to them by their clients: to lead the design process, to negotiate consent, to coordinate the production of tender documents, to administer the contract, or to act as expert witness when interpretation is required.

In *Professional Vision*, Goodwin describes how professionals use coding schemes to shape events within their domain of scrutiny.⁴⁵ Two inherent qualities of design representations enable the architect to validate their authority by masking a subjective decision-making process under the cloak of objectivity:

- drawing sets have a relational logic that is self-reinforcing;⁴⁶ and
- design involves complex and ill-defined problems, in which solutions inform – as much as they are informed by – the project objectives.⁴⁷

To quote Goodwin: “Graphic representations constitute a prototypical example of how human beings build external cognitive artifacts for the organization and persuasive display of relevant knowledge.”⁴⁸

4. Discretion

How an authority chooses to use or develop its power base is what Law refers to as *power discretion*.

Much of the architect's power is founded on the perceived value of visual representation. Robbins describes how the evolution of the architect's role and status in society, the emergence of the profession, and the justification for the architect's exclusive right to practice are all linked to, if not the result of, the privileging of drawing over other means of conceiving and producing buildings. He claims that “[b]y essentializing drawing, architects have shifted the discourse about the built environment to issues that drawing can and does address best; i.e., formal, aesthetic, and cultural issues.”⁴⁹

Robbins states that the centrality of visual representations in design tends to limit or exclude the nonvisual issues of craft, practicality, livability, and other “social realities of everyday life.”⁵⁰ Architects, whose cultural status stems from their conceptual work, tend to insulate themselves from, or try to control the interactions with, builders and aspects of construction; users and their concerns; and the many other project stakeholders that may pose a challenge to their authority or interfere with the conceptualization process. As a result, architects are often criticized as being socially disengaged problem-solvers or artists that offer limited – albeit valuable – technical or aesthetic services which increasingly fall short of their professional obligations to society.^{51,52}

5. Power/Effects

There are no power relations if social interaction ceases or in a situation of complete domination. The means by which social relations are stabilized so that power may take effect is what Law refers to as *power/effects*. In his words, “one of the best strategies for stabilizing relations and their downstream power effects is... precisely to embody them into durable materials – relations that... generate effects that last.”⁵³

Visual representations are a means of communicating project information, which also sustain the architect's authority and discretion in the deployment of power. These visual materials are often a core component of design proposals, public consultation presentations, permit applications, sales and marketing packages, tendering documents, and construction contracts. At each new demand for drawings and their use as a tool for negotiation, the architect appears as the expert and helpful service provider – or pesky middleman.

Power stems from the real or perceived necessity of visual practices, providing the field within which the architect may operate. This is not to imply that architects are consciously or maliciously scheming; but at the same time, they are not actively engaged in exposing or relinquishing this power either.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Having described five modes in which power operates, and applied this to the architect's use of visual representations, we have set a framework for understanding how architects use visual practices to acquire and deploy power. This brings us to questions of motives and ethics.

Visual practices may assist the design team to achieve the best possible project for the client, occupants, and broader public. At the same time, they may serve the architect as a source of influence and status. They may even benefit the entire profession of architects by reinforcing certain hierarchical structures, social divisions and claims to practice. As a self-regulating body with considerable power to shape its own destiny, the architectural profession must carefully reflect on the ethical implications of these motivations and take the necessary action – or risk the loss of public confidence.

The architect has a responsibility to uphold the highest ethical standards in their use of visual practices, in particular during concept design, which is especially prone to manipulation. As empowering a drawing may be for the person sketching – to inspire, test, and record a concept – its lack of transparency makes it problematic as a medium of communication and negotiation. The value of a concept depends largely on the architect's professional capacity to infuse it with multitude of project objectives, standards, codes and technical constraints that come to bear on the design in a legible and accurate representation. Since most of this information is absent or implied in the sketch, it is very difficult to analyze or

evaluate objectively, even if one is at the same level of competency. The architect is therefore entrusted with leading the project team with a design that is not immediately comprehensible.

In order to fulfill their obligations to society, architects, as a profession, must cultivate greater self-awareness and make the appropriate ethical disclosures. If it were a common goal of all project stakeholders to improve teamwork and the effectiveness of multidisciplinary collaboration, then this type of self-analysis and exposure might not be considered an act of professional mutiny, but rather one of interprofessional trust-building and a catalyst for positive change.

CONCLUSIONS

Visual practices are a source of power. Any study of visual communication and its effectiveness must take this aspect into consideration. Visual practices are central to design and power dynamics will always be present in social relations. To understand how each operates in the multidisciplinary team context is the first step in defining appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Interests drive power relations. To understand the nature of a particular power structure (and the key to transforming it) requires an introspective and critical examination of the motivating forces and cultural biases. Principled negotiation,⁵⁴ based on revealing and negotiating interests rather than positions, would seem a relevant approach to promote multidisciplinary collaboration.

A redefinition of architect's sense of identity is required. The architect must embrace the notion of shared authorship if they are to find their place on the team. Oliver points the way:

"...the locus of architects' contribution should not be limited to the ability to impose a form from their repertoire of professionally gathered ingredients, but rather to discover in dialogue the appropriate terms and direction of the demand for form. This calls on the self-same treasure chest but is treated as a privileged resource activated by the dialogue between many parties. We can then acknowledge how rich the contributions can be from all the team members that are engaged, and thereby establish respect and appropriate leadership."⁵⁵

Power relations will always exist, but they can be managed. Once a power dynamic has been exposed, it is more difficult for it to operate in the same way.⁵⁶ This is not to say that power relations disappear: new power relations will always emerge as a means of achieving needs and interests. In this regard, it is appropriate that Foucault has the last word:

"The problem is not of trying to dissolve them [power relations] in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication, but to give... the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics... which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination."⁵⁷

ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper takes the lead offered by the guest editors of *Building Research & Information* 35/1 (2007), entitled "Visual Practices: Images of Knowledge Work," which presents a series of papers on the collaborative use of visual materials in the complex social environments of commercial practice. In their conclusion, Ewenstein and Whyte suggest that "[f]uture work could explore both the power relations surrounding visual imagery, especially in multidisciplinary contexts, and the ways in which communication is also hampered, not just sustained through them." They are specifically referring to the deliberate misuse of visual materials for the sake of control. Quotation from:
Bruno Ewenstein and Jennifer K Whyte, "Visual representations as 'artefacts of knowing'," *Building, Research & Information* 35, no. 1 (2007): 87.
- 2 The academic research context for this paper is the University of Cambridge's *Interdisciplinary Design for the Built Environment* (IDBE) program, which offers building industry professionals an opportunity to engage in, and reflect upon, design collaboration and to produce praxis-based research. The author was a member of IDBE Cohort 15.
- 3 Ewenstein and Whyte.
- 4 Edward Robbins, *Why Architects Draw* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
- 5 Bruno Latour, "Visualization and cognition: thinking with eyes and hands," *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, no. 6, (1986) 1-40.
- 6 John Law, "Power, discretion, and strategy," in *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology, and Domination*, ed. John Law, 165-191 (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 7 Robbins.
- 8 Constructing Excellence, *The Business Case for Integrated Collaborative Working: Benefits for both Clients and Contractors* (2007) http://www.eclipseresearch.co.uk/download/consruction_research_best_practice/CE-Business-Case-Report.pdf (accessed May 15, 2012).
- 9 Alex Zimmerman, *Integrated Design Process Guide* (Ottawa, ON: CMHC, 2006).
- 10 Bent Flyvbjerg, "Empowering Civil Society" in *Cities for Citizens*, eds. Mike Douglass and John Friedmann, 185-211 (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 208.
- 11 When taken together these often conflicting priorities form the "ethical dilemma" referred to in: Nicholas Ray, "The Cambridge History Faculty Building," in *Architecture and Its Ethical Dilemmas*, ed. Nicholas Ray, 23-34 (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005).
- 12 Clive Richards, "The fundamental design variables of diagramming" in *Diagrammatic Representation and Reasoning*, eds. Michael Anderson, Bernt Meyer and Patrick Olivier, 85-102 (London: Springer, 2002), 87.
- 13 Rachael Luck, "Using artefacts to mediate understanding in design conversations," *Building, Research & Information* 35, no. 1 (2007): 28-41.
- 14 Remko Van der Lugt, "Sketching in design idea generation meetings," Doctoral dissertation, Delft University of Technology, 2001.
- 15 Robbins.
- 16 Van der Lugt.
- 17 Latour.
- 18 Louis L Bucciarelli, *Designing Engineers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
- 19 Kathryn Henderson, *On Line and On Paper: Visual Representations, Visual Culture and Computer Graphics in Design Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 20 Mads Bendixen and Christian Koch, "Negotiating visualizations in briefing and design," *Building, Research & Information* 35, no.1 (2007): 42-53.

- 21 Robbins, 8.
- 22 Henderson.
- 23 Jennifer K Whyte, Bruno Ewenstein, Michael Hales and Joe Tidd, "Visual practices and the objects used in design," *Building, Research & Information* 35, no. 1 (2007): 18-27.
- 24 Benedix and Koch.
- 25 Whyte et al.
- 26 Constructing Excellence, *Effective Teamwork: A Best Practice Guide for the Construction Industry* (2004), 5. http://www.constructingexcellence.org.uk/pdf/document/Teamwork_Guide.pdf (accessed May 15, 2012).
- 27 Constructing Excellence (2004), 12.
- 28 Environment Council, *Models for Engagement* <http://www.the-environmentcouncil.org.uk/models-for-engagement.html> (accessed June 29, 2009)
- 29 Giles Oliver, "Responsive practice" in *Architecture and Its Ethical Dilemmas*, in *Architecture and Its Ethical Dilemmas*, ed. Nicholas Ray, 55-68 (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 64.
- 30 Robbins.
- 31 Nils Larsson, *The Integrated Design Process*, International Initiative for a Sustainable Built Environment (2004). http://www.iisbe.org/download/gbc2005/Other_presentations/IDP_overview.pdf (accessed May 15, 2012).
- 32 Zimmerman.
- 33 Robbins.
- 34 Jeremy Till, "The negotiation of hope" in *Architecture and Participation*, eds. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till, 23-41 (New York: Spon Press, 2005).
- 35 Oliver.
- 36 Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom" in *The Final Foucault*, eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, 1-20 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 11.
- 37 Law.
- 38 Formulation used by Whyte et al.
- 39 Law.
- 40 Robbins, 297.
- 41 Robbins, 299.
- 42 Robbins, 299.
- 43 Robbins, 49.
- 44 RAIC (Royal Architectural Institute of Canada), *Canadian Handbook of Practice for Architects*. (Ottawa: RAIC, 2009).
- 45 Charles Goodwin, "Professional Vision," *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 606-633.
- 46 Robbins.
- 47 Michael Whelton and Glenn Ballard, "Wicked problems in project definition," in *Proceedings of the International Group for Lean Construction 10th Annual Conference*, Brazil (2002).
- 48 Goodwin, 32.
- 49 Robbins, 49.
- 50 Robbins, 45.
- 51 Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic, 1983).
- 52 Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till, eds. *Architecture and Participation* (New York: Spon Press, 2005).
- 53 Law, 174.
- 54 Ralph L Keeney, "Creativity in decision making with value-focused thinking," *Sloan Management Review*, Summer (1994): 33-41.
- 55 Oliver, 65.
- 56 Bent Flyvbjerg, *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 57 Foucault, 18.