Architecture Beyond Images

The Storytelling in the Collage of Fala Atelier

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Abstract. While in the past, education in architectural design took place through books and specialized magazines, current times show how communication is strongly related to new channels of digital dissemination, which, even in architecture, favor the use of visual storytelling tools. In fact, the strong evocative power of images, in fact, returns an insightful reading that stimulates the imagination and arouses instant emotional reactions. Currently, architecture is faced with representational techniques that present architectural design through an engaging and novel narrative.

Specifically, young architects choose the collage as a graphic solution able to lead the interlocutor to the understanding of the project through a schematic and intuitive representation. In fact, the visual artifact is filtered by a subjectivity declined in the graphic, stylistic and chromatic choices. The collage technique returns constantly evolving images, which change their meaning according to the observer's interpretation. Faced with the vastness of tools available in the digital age, the contribution aims to investigate the potential of collage as a visual storytelling tool through the analysis of the work of Fala Atelier and other contemporary firms in order to communicate design intent and educate the audience to the reading of the architectural artifact.

Keywords: Fala Atelier · Collage · Storytelling learning · Image-based education · Visual communication

1 Collage: Fragments of Architectural Thought from the Twentieth Century to Nowadays

Architecture has always been considered a hybrid discipline, a combination of technique and art based on visual communication and dependent on external perception. In this context, the drawing becomes an effective means of representation capable of conveying architectural thought and educating on design:

"It can be said that the history of drawing, or the protolanguage of architecture, coincides with the history of architecture and that the evolution of the concept of the space conformation is inextricably linked to the way it is represented and prefigured." [1] (p. 168, translated from Italian).

However, the methods of representation are multiple and have always been in constant change thanks to the evolution of media, digital devices, and social media.

According to the type of audience to which it is addressed, the design can be evocative, an expression of an intuitive narrative aimed mainly at a non-specialist audience, or technical, characterized by objective and functional contents of the construction process, therefore aimed at professionals.

Collage and photomontage, as forms of visual thought crystallized on paper, certainly fall within the first meaning, and still represent a powerful communication instrument nowadays. The use of collage (from the French verb *coller* 'to glue') for the creation of avant-garde works dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. Its origin is attributed to Picasso and Braque and it immediately represented an absolute revolution in artistic language. Following a process of deconstruction and reconstruction, the collage reconciles fragments of newspapers, photographs, wallpaper cuttings and other heteroclite materials on a single support, which acts as a basic matrix. On the other hand, photomontage has its roots in Dadaism and consists in the selection of elements and their subsequent re-composition. The main difference between these two figurative art procedures is that collage leads to a *unicum*, whereas photomontage also finds meaning in the serial reproduction of a composition [2]. The architect investigates the quality of space, which is contaminated by photographic cuttings of landscape views, paintings by famous painters and, nonetheless, sculptures, until it reaches an increasingly immaterial dimension in which only the careful composition of the elements allows the perception of space itself.

This narrative strategy, based on the dialectic between the elements of the pre-existing context and those of the project, began to be used by architects at the end of the nineteenth century and then it developed during the first decades of the twentieth century. As it happened in the well-known Mies van der Rohe's drawings, the space is not necessarily confined with wood, glass, or marble panels, following an already experimented intention (e.g. in the Barcelona Pavilion).

The project of the *Museum for a Small City* (1943), in which the drawing is completely overlaid by the photographic collage, was the climax of this representational expedient.

If Mies van der Rohe proceeded to define the concept of space in his views, eliminating traditional drawing in favor of collage, on the other hand, Le Corbusier created photomontages with a strong theoretical vocation, exploiting the realism of photography to prefigure visionary scenarios where the utopia of design thinking is framed in a pre-existing context. From the 1960s onwards, this technique became an ideological manifesto, transferring critical and political thoughts onto paper [3].

The collages by Hans Hollein impose mechanical objects catapulted onto landscapes with cultivated fields; moreover, the cities designed by Archigram with the insertion of futuristic machines, as well as the collages by Superstudio and Archizoom, lead to a critique of contemporary capitalism [4]. These provocative representations convey, through the manipulation of the urban fabric and the insertion of megastructures and imaginary machines, a social and political criticism.

Finally, Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp and Elia and Zoe Zenghelis must be mentioned in this scenario. They collaborated on a series of eighteen collages entitled
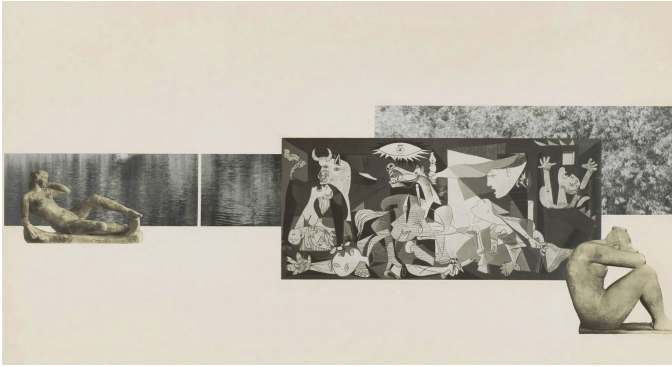
Fig. 1. L. Mies van der Rohe (with G. Danforth), *Museum for a Small City*, 1941–43. (Source): Ref. [4].

Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture [5], which was the catalyst for the formation of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). The provocative drawings propose a walled settlement within the city of London which, formed by high barriers, overlaps the urban fabric, which is no longer able to adapt to metropolitan life.

Fig. 2. R. Koolhaas, M. Vriesendorp, E. Zenghelis and Z. Zenghelis, *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*, 1972. (Source): http://www.tehranprojects.com/Exodus-or-the-Voluntary-Prisoners-of-Architecture.

From the end of the nineties and the beginning of the new millennium, it is possible to notice a dual scenario. Architects as Rem Koolhaas and Jean Nouvel, interpreters of the paper collage of the end of the century, are facing with digital technologies in order to master tools which had been unknown until then. On the other hand, emerging practices as Dogma, Office and Fala Atelier, among many others, are rediscovering the conceptual and experimentalist nature of paper collage by transferring it as a Leitmotiv in the digital images design [4].

2 Fala Atelier: Visual Storytelling in Architecture

Fala Atelier was founded in Porto in 2013 from the desire to put into practice all the experiences shared between Switzerland and Japan by Filipe Magalhães (Porto, 1987),

Ana Luisa Soares (Porto, 1988) and Ahmed Belkhodja (Lausanne, 1990). After working in architectural practices of the caliber of SANAA and Toyo Ito, the three young architects are faced with a difficult national situation where small projects are the only opportunity for a fledgling firm. Aware of the national panorama, the first aim was to find their own design style, and therefore, their own identity [6]. It is no coincidence that the name Fala, in Portuguese, means 'informal conversation', to emphasize the desire of establishing an informal dialogue with the client. The collage technique helps to outline a narrative style, especially communicated through social media, which gave them the opportunity to build some notoriety and get their first assignments.

"We started making digital collages without understanding their real media impact. They are immediate, easy to understand and quick to produce. By making a lot of them we reached a good level of quality and created what we can call a style. […] We didn't expect this kind of representation to become so popular among students and young architects." [7].

The studio has succeeded in establishing its own language through the realization of small-scale projects, including residential renovations, installations, and some new buildings. In contrast with the preponderant digital hyperrealism proposed in the render, the choice to use collage plays a pivotal role focusing the attention of both clients and professionals on the main design themes: surfaces, spaces, materials and furniture elements (e.g. *Graça Apartment,* 2016). In the practice of collage, it is made possible by the decomposition of the space of intervention in its essential geometries, subsequently ordered by importance, recom-posed and enhanced through the choice of iconic materials. Finally, the inclusion of furnishing elements not only contextualizes the representation, but also outlines even more the space in its overall view.
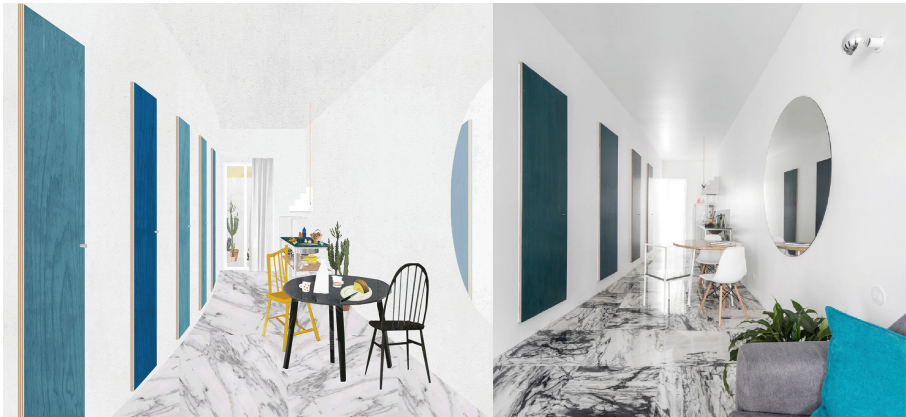
Fig. 3. Fala Atelier, *Graça Apartment*, Lisbon, 2016. (Source): https://falaatelier.com/.

Therefore, collage is not only a seductive visual tool, it has a very precise purpose: to discretize space through two-dimensional representation, so as to create a sort of inventory of geometric shapes and recurring architectural elements. The abstraction of image fragments, obtained by careful selection, guides the viewer to understand the

hierarchy of elements through defined planes, visual cones, and symmetries [8]. In fact, as Filipe Magalhães says, "The two [space and image] are like a binary system. Without one, you have no idea what you are looking at." [9].

Nevertheless, the use of collage, in addition to the elaboration of the design idea, is a useful tool to establish a constructive dialogue with the client by appealing to the storytelling technique. The project *Garage House*, realized in Lisbon in 2016, is an emblematic example that represented a great challenge both from the architectural point of view, in the realization of an apartment in a garage of 200m^2 without openings, and from the communicative point of view, educating to an unconventional project where the designed environment does not reveal the emptiness of the pre-existing space.

Fig. 4. Fala Atelier, *Garage House*, Lisbon, 2016. (Source): https://falaatelier.com/

"You actually need to talk the same language as clients." Magalhães explains, but he isn't describing pantomime. "If you can do that, they learn to detach themselves from reality. They know that the form of the kitchen is not that form, that the cat in the garage is not part of the project. You can then discuss architectural ideas with them." [9].

In this context, the collage turns out to be not only a mere method of representation but, above all, also a communication tool that allows the interlocutor to sense the value of the staged elements in order to abstract their meaning and consequently return to discuss the really important issues of design.

3   Architectural Design Education Through Collage

Fala's experience is part of the contaminated and multicultural European context where, at the very beginning of the twenty-first century, the desire to recover the collage technique by a generation of young architects was born. According to the lessons given by Italian radicals between the 1960s and 1970s, they glimpse the possibility of the reaffirmation of architecture as a cultural instance. In this context, interesting and cultured experiences emerge and bring the collage to the stage, underlining the importance of a representation which stimulates the processes of generating the idea. The skillful use of references from the adjacent artistic landscape allows the Belgian firm OFFICE-Kersten

Geers and David Van Severen to create collages characterized by a fantastic realism that implies a clear ideological intent. In fact, the representation recovers the creative momentum of the photomontages of the Italian visionaries, with the aim of conveying, in the light of the potential offered by the most recent digital techniques, "the project for the re-foundation of contemporary architecture." [10] (p. 124).

The drawings drawn up for the *Border Crossing*, a project competition for customs at the border of the pedestrian transit digital collages with a radical aura that follow the OMA lesson, meanwhile they certainly recall the work of David Hockney and Edward Ruscha in its perspective setting and pictorial narrative [11].

In the same way, this methodology allows the invention of a story of urban architecture which summarizes every experimentalist expression that emerged in the debate on the shape of the city opened in the last decades of the twentieth century. The resonance of the work *Collage City* by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter (1978) is reflected in the visionary projects *Grammar for the City* and *Proto Town* drawn up for the foundation of a new city in South Korea in 2006 [10]. The collage technique recovers the cultural and narrative dimension of the manipulation of 'images' of the 1960s and 1970s and seals its 'digital' variant. In this case, OFFICE-KGDVS collaborates with Dogma, an architectural firm founded by Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara and based in Brussels.

The duo of Italian architects assign a key role to collage relating to the development of the architectural project, which becomes a privileged tool for the definition of the idea, as it is able to restore a balance between the abstraction/reality binomial relationship. In this sense, Dogma seeks an architectural and, consequently, design language where "images were simultaneously clear explanations of architecture and real abstractions." [12] (p. M33).

Practically, this means avoiding the splitting between design and representation, by stimulating the investigation of images without losing control over the architectural project. In 2003, Aureli and Tattara proposed a digital collage for the first time, in collaboration with Elia Zenghelis, for the transformation of the former Hellenikon airport in Athens into a large metropolitan park. These images, executed mainly in Photoshop, combine various fragments of different sources, with the intention of underlining "the

Fig. 5. Office-KGDVS (in collaboration with Wonne Ickx), *Border Crossing*, 2004–2005 © courtesy of divisare.com. (Source): http://officekgdvs.com/projects/#office-15.
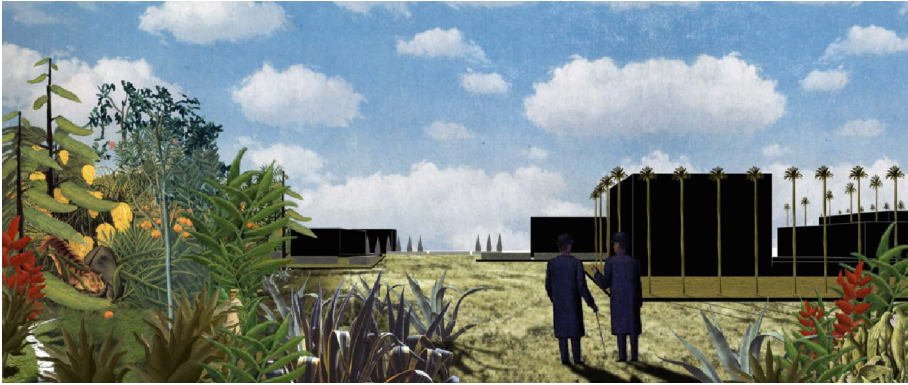
Fig. 6. Dogma (with Elia Zenghelis), *Marienbad*, proposal for the Hellenikon Metropolitan Park in Athens, 2003 © courtesy of Dogma. (Source): Ref. [12].

artificiality of the park as a synthetic environment against the naturalness that is often attributed to this urban amenity." [12] (p. M39).

Furthermore, it can be said that, paradoxically, the flattening of the common depth of the photorealistic image, in favor of a representation with a central perspective, guarantees the sense of abstraction that allows architecture to return to the fore. Moreover, the lack of stylistic-decorative elements and the absolute anonymity of the furnishing objects do not dominate the architectural layout and allow observers to imagine multiple uses of the same space, without indicating a preferential one. The ephemeral nature of collage favors, in fact, the construction of an interpretative imaginary capable of completing the intentional void left by the representation and stimulating the participation of the audience in defining those silently omitted details.

4   Conclusions

With the definition of 'age of post-digital drawing' Sam Jacob - architect among the founders of the London firm FAT - seals, on Metropolis (March 2017) [13], the work of a generation of architects who was born with the internet and communicates through social media and, within the main digital channels, it strives every day to make its voice heard in an attempt to build its identity. In fact, despite their young age, they had the opportunity to live all over the world and experience different places and cultures, realizing the need for an inversion of educational trends and conventional language.

From the radical collages of OFFICE-KGDV to the 'manifesto-images' of Dogma, up to the 'naivety' of Fala Atelier graphic style, the collage technique coincides with the desire to affirm architecture as a cultural instance, which identifies, among the traditionalisms of the technique and in previous experiences, the potential for a new digital representation [14]. In particular, the experience of Fala Atelier finds its communicative strength working on the simplification of the images and, returning a reading for insight that stimulates the observer's imagination and allows the mutual involvement of the

interlocutors. In fact, Fala Atelier expresses how the collage was, especially at the beginning of their career, the tool capable of both establishing a constructive communication relationship with the customer and educating to the reading of the project.

The digital collage, therefore, becomes an architectural style that is as original as it is in contrast with the contemporary panorama. Through a realistically abstract representation with clear communicative power, not only reveals the architectural and design aspects but, above all, conveys a disenchanted idea of detachment from the finitude of reality and, especially, of representation.

"These images are somehow disconnected from reality. They show more than a room or an elevation. They are speculative, because most of the time we don't even know who will inhabit the spaces we propose. They are also far from reality, since their geometry is not accurate, and their textures and materials are imperfect representations. In this way they contain less resolved information than a render, but actually express more information by not merely representing the space but conveying the ideas behind the space. […] Nevertheless, the idea is the same: we defined a canvas, and the users are now the actors of their own play." [15].

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