

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Reading and Tentative Design [Forming Place, Informing Practice]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1md5r1ph>

Journal

Places, 12(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

De Carlo, Giancarlo

Publication Date

1999-04-01

Peer reviewed

In context of this discussion about forming place, I would like to propose a few observations about two concepts that seem to be central to the issue. The first concept is reading, the second is geometry.

Reading is not the same as analysis or survey. The notions of analysis and survey are both based on neutrality. Their results are credible if their approach and development have been made in a vacuum of values; value judgments, if necessary, come later, when the analysis and – or the survey are accomplished.

The notion of reading, on the contrary, is based on commitment, and this implies values. I like to say (paradoxically, of course) that reading, to really be sharp, needs to be sectarian, meaning that while reading, one has to hold in mind how what is being read could be transformed. In other words, “reading” means to explore and comprehend specific situations of the physical space with a designing mind.

Everything is recorded in physical space in the form of layers of signs. Some layers are buried, or worn out, or so thin as to have become almost invisible; some are hidden and some are altered and even forged; but they are all there. If we were able to detect and decode every layer, we could understand the essence of the physical space we want to re-design: past, present; strength, weakness; attitude or reluctance to change; potential, future. But we are no longer able to do so, and reading is a means for recovering that skill, a skill that gives us the capacity to penetrate the meaning of a space in order to transform it into a place that is significant in our present time. The process of de-structuring and re-structuring imprints the method of design which, if related to reading, must be tentative. The solution is reached through a sequence of endeavors that tempt the problem and push it to reveal its real substance.

The second observation is about geometry. Geometry was in the past a fundamental tool for architectural design. It doesn't seem to be so anymore. Most architects ignore geometry and organize the components of their projects casually. A minority tries to theorize the abandonment of geometry and maintains that architectural design should be instinctive and, therefore, without rules; otherwise, architecture loses its freshness and becomes conventional. Finally, a few architects recognize that geometry is an essential reference for architectural design but maintain that it is no

longer possible to use Euclidean geometry; therefore, they argue, it is necessary to look at other, more complex, geometries (relativity? quantum physics? Brownian motion? Which, it is not said) in order to attain spatial configurations as complex as those that appear in contemporary society.

I do not like the tendency to expel geometry from architecture: I believe that it is an incompetent and, above all, vain attitude. I instead share the idea that the society in which we live is very complex and that, to be able to express in spatial terms its intricate events and its contradictions, architecture should refer to a complex geometry. But I also believe that the complexity of geometry cannot but be a particular version – a complex one – of Euclidean geometry.

Architecture is perceived through the human senses, for the simple fact that it is an extension, and at the same time a field of action, of human senses. This field of action can be described and represented only by a geometry that the human senses can perceive. Other geometries, those that refer to the fields of the infinitely small or infinitely large universe, cannot produce descriptions and representations that the human senses can perceive; therefore they have no use in architecture.

But how to attain a geometry that matches the complexity of contemporary society starting from Euclidean geometry? I believe that it is possible to start from Euclidean geometry and overlap, intertwine, layer, its rules and figures so as to obtain a tool that describes and represents a complexity similar to that of our contemporary society. This complex tool can still be used in the field of human perception and produce configurations that, although complex, are perceivable. It also allows to bring in the compositional game of proportion, which has almost disappeared from architecture but is still a very effective means for defining configurations that are balanced, not aggressive and able to be shared.