UC Berkeley

Title
Worlds for Habitation: Architecture and the Moving Image   [Dispatches]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8838x46f

Journal
Places, 7(3)

ISSN
0731-0455

Author
Payton, Neal

Publication Date
1991-07-01

Peer reviewed

Worlds for Habitation:

Architecture and the Moving Image

It is the fourth scene of *Citizen Kane*, in which the image on the screen moves up and over a building and comes to rest, momentarily, on a skylight. The camera begins to zoom in on the image until it dissolves to reveal the scene taking place under the glass. There, a woman is slumped over a table as a reporter sits down to interview her, apparently against her wishes.

It is a startling sequence. The viewer, unaccustomed to penetrating a room in quite this manner, is acutely aware of the violation of this woman by both the reporter's prying inquiry and the viewer's own voyeuristic position. Not only is a character being interrogated, but so is the architecture in which she sits. In the transformation of a skylight into a panopticon, Orson Welles has made available a unique spatial experience. At this moment the boundary separating two distinct media, architecture and film, is blurred.

While such drama does not always characterize the relationship between architecture and film, there is a tradition of connection that was the subject of "Architecture and the Moving Image," a conference held at The Catholic University of America, Department of Architecture and Planning, last fall. The event featured films and papers that explored how the study of film could shed light on the making of architecture, and vice versa.

The conference was inspired by the simple fact that both filmmakers and architects propose worlds for habitation. Filmmakers design the events that occur in that habitat; architects imagine how people will experience and act in spaces they design. Having such an imagination is important to architects if they are to overcome the abstraction of drawings and fully understand the spaces they are creating. This is why architects should have an interest in critically viewing films.

Cinema, because of its immediacy, tends to be a compelling form of storytelling or narration. It is capable of eliciting emotional responses more visceral than those elicited by other art forms, certainly architecture. Film's impact on a viewer is further strengthened by the almost hyperawareness of reality — characterized by attention to the most minute details of human habitation — that successful filmmakers bring to their craft. Were architects to have this level of awareness, they could make a more intimate analysis of the human experience of habitation.

Conference speakers focused primarily on three themes: the documentation of architecture, or how it is represented in film; the idea of narrative, or the story line in film and its equivalent in architecture; and the concept of structure in both media.

The most obvious connection between architecture and film is represented in the first theme, either in the form of documentaries about architecture, or in the use of architecture as a setting for cinematic action. Films can be an excellent vehicle for representing architecture because the layering of images in a rhythmic, sequential manner allows a closer simulation of the way people experience architecture than do still photographs.

The risk is that such simulations will focus simply on the gestalt of the image, providing the best possible representation of shapes and colors without providing any underlying narrative or story. Such films are likely to be quite dull. Narration should not only evoke a visual experience, but also construct a critical analysis of it. There are a number of ways to do this, as Daniel

Doz pointed out: composing a setting, moving people through a setting, and implying settings that are beyond the frame. Ultimately, as Charles Guggenheim suggested, the most important aspect of any cinematic documentation involving architecture may be the ability it gives viewers to imagine the way they would experience the built form.

The link between making architecture and making film extends to the consideration of narrative, or storyline. In architecture, the narrative may take many forms. Lily Chi suggested that an architectural program may serve as the equivalent of or at least contribute to the making of a plot. Another form of architectural narration entails the composition of spatial sequences and individual rooms that, in turn, suggests relationships among individuals or between people and the landscape, the city, or the cosmos.

George Johnston offered the concept of frame as a cinematic analog to the room. The design of the former, referred to as *mise en scène* (literally, "putting in the scene") involves the relationship of characters to cameras and the constituent elements of the set. This relationship is a dynamic controlled by the director in an analogous manner to the control an architect often attempts to exert on the design of a space.

James Sanders documented this in a spatial analysis of the sets used for interior scenes in *The Heiress* and *Life with Father*. The human interaction between public and private space, a narrative of architectural significance, was reflected in the point of view with which the camera (and, therefore, a person watching the film) observed family life. Architectural narrative may not be as well defined as its cinematic counterpart, but it may exist, nonetheless, at the level of experience imagined by architects and revealed in film.

The concept of structure was another overlap between architecture and film highlighted at the conference. The issue of montage, which means putting together or editing, was of primary interest. George Dodds noted that Russian film theorist Lev Kuleshov developed the concept of montage as the creation of "parallel and simultaneous actions that would be gathered in one place" in a film. Sergei Eisenstein, Kuleshov's student, elaborated the concept to mean the building up of images in such a way that segmented images would relate to each other — so that A and B would combine to produce another meaning, C.

Architectural analogies are numerous and could include, as David Bell suggested, movement between places (what Le Corbusier referred to as *promenade architecturale)*, in which a series of spaces or scenes are revealed over time by movement along a path. Another analog might exist in the concept of the *parti*, the organizing structure of a building, usually expressed in a sketch that delineates relationships among the various parts of the design.

Writing in his essay "Montage and Architecture," Eisenstein himself reflects on the overlap between architecture and film. "The Greeks have left us the most perfect example of shot design, change of shot and shot length...," he writes. "It is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one that our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis." The Acropolis, he concludes, has "an equal right to be called the perfect example of one of the most ancient films."

— *Neal Payton*