



What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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RESEARCH, THINK, CREATE ARCHITECTURE: Thesis and project design as parallel methodologies.

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Abstract: The preponderance of the sciences in the academic world has established methodologies that are clearly inoperative in doctoral theses exploring the humanities, and specifically the creative processes of art or architecture. In fields where the image, symbols, the social aspect or culture in the broadest sense are crucial to creating and producing new research, scientific methodology becomes a restrictive corset. If we set out from the idea that project design is research, as the design of a project is not just a creative act but also a constant process of research, we can argue that thesis and plan merge into a similar methodology. Researching and thinking in order to understand the world are a need in both cases, and this is where the knowledge built up through images, symbols and cultural landmarks becomes an essential tool in creating new projects in art, culture and architecture.

Keywords: Thesis, Design, Atlas, Architecture, Project

1. Anti-Scientific Method

A dictionary might define the word thesis as a "Conclusion or proposition that is sustained by reasoning." A thesis can obviously be focused on different fields of knowledge, but in general the preponderance of a certain identification of science and technology with the academic world as a whole has led to the use of a scientific methodology to articulate this reasoning.

In general, "Pure scientific research focuses on proving the truth through the rigorous application of scientific method and statistics" (Meadows, 2003).

Theses of a scientific nature are necessarily based on concrete data from experiments, data that is quantifiable, measurable and provable. In this kind of thesis, the author carries out empirical research using scientific and statistical methods to compile and analyse data in order to establish a reasoning that assures the logic, proof and even reproducibility of the research. This is necessary in order to articulate rigorous, objective research that seeks to prove or refute a hypothesis.

On the other hand, theses exploring the humanities, and specifically the creative processes of art or architecture, cannot work with these logics, which are too closed for them, stopping them from making progress in raising new design processes or ideas.

Both types of thesis call for extreme dedication and rigour, but they differ in the methods and tools they use to arrive at their conclusions.

"Research in the humanities focuses on exploring the human aspects of life and culture. These disciplines do not seek to prove the truth, but rather to interpret the complexity of the world around us." (Bowen, 2013).

These theses concentrate on topics linked to culture, memory, the symbolic or the image, as well as on understanding the specific places where these works are located. They discuss the analysis and interpretation of works of art or architecture, as well as - and more importantly - the creative processes that generate them.

Unlike scientific theses, humanities theses do not need to follow any specific scientific or statistical method. They interpret and analyse the information gathered from observation and reflection. They can therefore use a wide variety of sources, from historical and critical documents to interviews with the artists or architects involved in the creative processes in question.

It is critical interpretation, the ability to relate these creations with their historical and cultural context, as well as with other relevant aspects of society and culture in general, that allow these disciplines to advance, so this is therefore what such theses must aim for. Their academic aims generally include "possible and necessary advances in the field" of their discipline.

2. Thesis and Project Design

Producing a thesis in the field of knowledge of architectural projects involves a process of research and reflection concerning cultural and social aspects. And this process calls for a profound understanding of the cultural, social and historical dimensions involved in the construction of the architectural space. As Edward Said put it, culture is not just a collection of elements, but a complex web of meanings, norms, values and practices (Said, 1994). The critical interpretation of culture and history is therefore an essential part of producing a thesis, but the same goes for project design.

This focus on the critical interpretation of culture and history is also relevant to the process of designing an architectural project. Architecture is a discipline closely linked to the culture, history and society in which it works. As Bernard Tschumi explains, architecture is not just the production of an object, but also the critical analysis of the context in which it happens (Tschumi, 1994).

In this respect, the process of designing a project and that of producing a thesis are analogous, with similar methodologies. Both processes require a profound understanding of the cultural and social context in which they happen, as well as critical interpretation of the aspects intervening in their creation.

The research and reflection involved in producing a thesis must be seen as a form of preparation for the process of architectural project design. As an operative tool to help boost the ability to create a project.

Creating a project involves two practical things. As Juan Herreros points out, a project, as the word itself indicates, is a projection of something that is going to happen. So architecture is prospecting for the future, a possible future but above all a better future (Herreros, 2021).

Therefore, creating a project means making a proposal for the future, taking a step forward, saying something hitherto unsaid, just as the thesis advances the discipline. But as Peter Zumthor also suggests, architecture is a job that involves not just the technical side, but also an understanding of the memory, identity and history of a place (Zumthor, 2006).

3. The Atlas as a Methodology

"Creating a project design involves recognising a discipline in which rationality is mixed with the expression of the accidents of a culture or with the architect's own expression." (Moneo, 2020)

Therefore, this random reality of culture must be analysed, in a process that involves gathering the necessary information, turning it into knowledge and finally being able to advance on a new path on the basis of this security.

It is curious to see that many artists - or architects - refer to this material gathered when they talk about their research or project design practices.

There is a story told by the artist Marcela Correa that is a very good example of this kind of unpremeditated journey. Marcela Correa explains that she and her partner, the Chilean architect Smiljan Radic, would walk the streets of Santiago noticing things that were of value to them (Radic, 2018).

They realised that almost nobody looked at them, giving them the feeling that they could disappear at any moment, as they did not appear to be of any importance. They decided to collect these remains, a railing, some slabs of granite, some pallets of old paving stones; and what they couldn't take away they would photograph.

What they collected, or rescued, spent years in a workshop that served as a warehouse, waiting their turn, until they found their place in some future project.

The few times Smiljan Radic discusses his project methodology, he insists on one idea: "I always collect things everywhere. And this is what I do. There isn't much more than this: there isn't much invention. In spite of everything, one must end up talking, saying things," (Radic, 2017).

One might think that from this point of view architecture is a sort of open cardboard box containing tools from everywhere, to take and use. Things can be put into this box and used to build different kinds of things. And it could also be said that this "saying things" is the mere fact of doing architecture, reordering, adjusting, placing those found objects at a certain time. Applying a series of strategies from the discipline to a repertoire of materials that the architect carries in their hand luggage. Made-to-measure hand luggage, like a tool making it possible to understand the complexity of the world.

As we have said, this system is reinterpreted by different authors. To quote one, Peter Zumthor explains, "When I work on a project, I let myself be carried away by images and moods that stay in my memory and I can relate to the architecture I am looking for," (Zumthor, 2004).

And Valerio Olgiati first devoted an illustrated article, "Iconic Autobiography", to this travel luggage stored away in his head. "When I design or invent a building, they're about somewhere; they're the basis of my designs. They're there when I sit down in front of a blank piece of paper," (Olgiati, 2006).

This was followed by a book, "The Images of Architects" (Olgiati, 2014), which is religious in appearance: maroon, the size of a hymn book and presents a collective scene based solely on images as the carriers of ideas. As they are ordered alphabetically by author, they show the roots and origins

of projects and research through highly personal images, not all of them photographic, that reveal interests, obsessions, myths, references, homages and intimate pleasures.

The pictures chosen are highly varied, and include the thought processes of architects like John Pawson, Ryue Nishizawa, Glenn Murcutt, Herzog and Meuron, Venturi, and Alvaro Siza; showing a common practice, a shared way of doing things. The final impression is not that of a book of more or less attractive photographs, but of a work that makes us think, that expresses more unknowns than certainties. A book of silences and blank pages that explore the interior of the creative process.



Figure 1. Different pages from the book *The Images of Architects*, coordinated by Valerio Olgiat. With pictures selected by Mario Bota, Peter Zumthor, Peter Eisenman, Alvaro Siza, Junga Ishigami, Glenn Murcutt, Smiljan Radic and Valerio Olgiat himself. Creative Commons

This collection speaks of the need to construct that personal panorama that feeds both architectural research and projects, a practice similar to Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*.

The *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* by the German art historian Aby Warburg, created between 1924 and 1929, is a visual atlas containing more than 80 plates with a wide variety of images, mainly of ancient and renaissance art.

However, it is not intended as an archive or collection, but as a practical system, a tool to research and show how certain images, themes and symbols have been passed on through time and space, and how these influences have affected culture and thought over history.

For Warburg, the atlas allows human knowledge to be organised and mapped through images. Warburg believed that human knowledge was not limited to books and writing, but could also be transmitted through images and iconography. In fact, the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* can be seen as a continuation of the tradition of the cabinets of curiosities, also known as wonder-rooms, collections of rare, exotic and strange objects exhibited in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. These collections were very popular among the nobility and intellectuals of the time, and were considered a sign of their owner's wealth and knowledge.

The objects displayed in cabinets of curiosities could be of any kind, from dried exotic animals to minerals, shells, archaeological specimens, works of art, rare books and other curious items. They were open to interpretation and to the establishment of complex alternative realities.

"It represents a new form of visual thinking that allows human knowledge to be organised and mapped through images. Warburg's work reminds us of the importance of images in the transmission of knowledge and culture, and encourages us to explore new connections and relations between images and symbols," but understood in the way explained by Georges Didi-Huberman, as a tool to explore or advance in new relations, whether in terms of projects or theory. (Didi-Huberman, 2011)



Figure 2. Atlas Mnemosyne, by the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929), begun in 1924. Named after the Titan Mnemosyne of Greek mythology, who as well as being the mother of the nine Muses is known through her allegorical association with memory. London. Creative Commons

4. Conclusion

"Project design is research: An architectural project is a piece of research." (Campo, 2021)

This quote from Alberto Campo Baeza leads into a defence of the architectural project as a research methodology, one that ends with the anecdote that throughout an academic career in which he rose to become a professor, he has always compared his research work with architectural projects, as it could not be otherwise. He sums up his argument by saying that to teach one has to know, and to know one has to do.

As Javier Raposo explains, "The material for designing architectural projects is transformative images, images that act as proto-architectural catalysts in the creative process," (Raposo, 2015).

In this respect, in order to advance, to make the leap, to say something new, one needs the support of a kind of crutch, of references to help understand the world around us.

An architectural project design is, as we have explained, a path characterised by chance, that must in the initial stage of the creative discourse involve open, imprecise and speculative mechanisms; in successive stages these are defined, refined, to establish a final conclusion at the end of the process. It is in fact an identical path to that of research, where compiling information, codifying it, ordering it, turning it into knowledge and applying it are similar processes. This is where the atlas reveals itself as a valid practical system, mechanism or tool to help take these steps towards a final conclusion, whether in the form of an architectural project or as the final theoretical expression of a doctoral thesis.

If, as Didi-Huberman reminds us, the atlas is a tool made up primarily of images and therefore constructs new imaginary structures through the relations created between them, we may wonder about the tools currently used in architectural practice and research.

That is to say, the atlas is a deployment - or unfolding - of images that acts as a mental landscape in which to imagine different constructions or assemblies to enable us to think about ourselves in the world, to reconstruct new scenarios and make up new cartographies. On the other hand, today's method of recording or storage based on digital folders and/or files structured in hierarchical tree systems cannot deploy ("unfold") the diversity of visual relations suggested by the atlas to trigger research and theses about projects.

Juan Herreros himself, in an interview for the ETSAM blog, recognised that Warburg's Atlas is a highly powerful tool for thinking about architecture. Herreros favours the idea of thinking about architecture as a sequence of images related to each other, and therefore believes "that the Atlas is a very interesting example of how this can be done systematically and rigorously."

The necessary unfolding of the material collected for research and the project therefore brings us back to the manual, physical set of plates put together any Aby Warburg. Like this, as Juan José Lahuerta explains, the process becomes a kind of entanglement of reality. As he says, "It is a configuration in which heterogeneous, i.e. opposed, things are shaken up together: never synthesisable, but impossible to disentangle. Never separable, but impossible to combine in a higher entity," (Lahuerta, 2011)

How to go about research? How to entangle if not by unfolding?

Architectural research and therefore project design are necessarily constant, unstable unfolding, folding and refolding of relations between images, relations that must be at once together and shaken up.

Accepting the Atlas as a catalyst for architectural research and project design therefore leads us to question - rethink - the tools currently used for documenting and storing the processes in research, project design and therefore in the teaching of architecture and design.



Figure 3. Banksy's 2007 work "Flower Thrower", as an assemblage of images. Picture from the Palestinian Intifada struggle. Photographs of Celeste Caeiro and of Portuguese soldiers during the Carnation Revolution. 25 April 1974. Creative Commons

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