METROPOLITAN ARCHITECTURE: the hidden design lessons

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Abstract

There is a kind of resigned consensus by many local architects, that relevant architectural references have not been produced in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for a long while. It is indeed really hard to establish an itinerary for an architectural tour which would not necessarily, and almost exclusively, include the long-standing references of our celebrated modern architecture of the 1940s-1950s. In design studios, teachers and students become therefore hostages of a visual consumerism of international collections spread over the Internet or in the numerous publications of the specialized press. As good as they are, these references always carry the difficulty of linking to our economic, social, cultural and climatic context. Despite these conditions, the extensive program of architectural tours made during the international design workshops that we have organized yearly in Rio for almost a decade allowed us to detect 'invisible' design lessons to be learned in our city by sharing perceptual experiences with foreign observers, unaware of our preconceptions. In the appreciation of these hidden lessons it is essential to transcend the formal appearance of the buidings and conceptually reactivate what is 'ugly' and always has been rejected or remains stylistically 'outdated'. This paper deals with the development of a strategy for re-presenting what could thus be the seed of collection of design studio references that is locally rooted and accessible for direct embodied experience. This strategy takes the form of analytical spatial diagrams of different case-studies presented as a tour guide for the recognition of the architecture produced in Rio de Janeiro. We believe that this strategy can favor the adoption an eye attuned to contemporary theories especially interested in the spatial and programmatic concerns that today instigate the designer. Retroactive manifestos have been important references in this sense. From the Rem Koolhaas' Delirious New York to the remarkable Made in Tokyo by the Japanese architects Kaijima, Kuroda and Tsukamoto. In their guide, the authors look at what they claim to be the 'ugly' part of the Nipponese capital and reveal a series of situations that directly concern the current debate on strategies for designing in the contemporary metropolis.

INTRODUCTION

The announcement of major sporting events scheduled to take place in Rio de Janeiro in the coming years is now attracting the attention of renowned architects of the international circuit, who should not find much difficulty in competing with local offices in major contracts. Our professional structures were strongly affected by the economic crises of the past and yielded to the rules of uncritical marketing. Having hardly any resources to do research, local practices have no visibility or proven experience in terms of innovation and seem to be unprepared to challenge the international competition. These conditions are also related to the loss of the city's status as the country's capital in the early sixties and the consequent displacement of the seat of the federal government, historically the main ally and sponsor of the internationally renowned modern architecture produced in Rio. The current local construction market is almost exclusively made up of commissions formatted by the main private builders in both residential and commercial real estate projects. Completely absent from the pages of any good collection of contemporary architecture, these projects reproduce autistic formulas devoid of experimentation and innovation regarding the current debated about the contemporary city, among which we can here highlight: the recovery of degraded central areas with reuse of pre-existing structures, the integration and coordination with the urban infrastructure or the consideration of sustainability criteria. Moreover, there seems to be no initiative in order to promote the development and implementation of new research on materiality (skins, structures, facilities or building space types...) or truly innovative programming. Much of what was achieved in terms of innovation in the best architecture produced in Rio while it was the capital of the country has been simply overlooked or ignored by today's real estate market.

In design studios, teachers and students become therefore hostages of international collections spread over the Internet or in the numerous publications of the specialized press, through which they study the Dutch and German townhouses, the Japanese and French museums or the Spanish and American public spaces...

It is striking in this context, the discrepancy between the architectural quality of what is published as the recent Brazilian production and what is produced abroad, not only in the more traditional centers of the northern hemisphere, but also in neighboring Latin American countries. This nagging discrepancy is often justified by the need for an architecture supposedly subject to severe budget constraints, an excuse used by local architects and planners, as well as our schools of architecture, that reflects the naturalization of an economic circumstance that seemed somehow inevitable or, at any rate, conditioned by the historical geographical imbalance of the world economic power. Besides being inevitably consumed in a superficial, abstract and decontextualized way, international references are hardly compatible with our social, cultural, and technological climate, with our way of living, dwelling and use the space and the city.

As good as they are, these references always carry the difficulty of linking to our context, both in the immediate physical sense and in the wider cultural, thus contributing to the traditional and endemic separation between the academia and professional practice. Outside the academic environment, these imported architectures do not work as references. The effort to inculcate them will appear vain: "the media are not our neighbors" (Virilio, 1984). The use architectural references broght by the media barely assists the effort to confront the precariousness of most of the daily spatial experience of our students due to the 'absence' of concrete, built and actual demonstrations of recent production to be studied. The production to which we refer is distinguished from traditional collections of our historic architecture. While still providing the timeless lessons, the masterpieces of the past have limited application as a design reference because they were produced in a city and society that significantly differ from today`s metropolitan condition.

RE-DIRECTING

We must however remember that international architectural firms are disembarking in Rio de Janeiro not only because they are naturally attracted by the prospect of commissions linked to the high budgets of the cities marketing strategies, but also because they are facing tough times in their respective work contexts. The recent crisis that has affected the traditional markets of the international architecture is one of the aspects of the redistribution of the global economy that seems to operate in favor of the so-called emerging countries. It is not however a simple redistribution of geographical markets of architecture, but a redistribution of the roles played by architects in terms of their strategies or attitudes about design.

Foreshadowed in the 2008 edition of the Verb Boogazine entitled 'Crisis', edited by the Catalan publishers Actar (Ballesteros et al., 2008), which has stated in its announcement that "architecture cannot continue to be made as usual", the traditional market crisis in fact comes to strengthen and accelerate a process that was already under way, challenging the production of iconic objects signed by the so-called 'star system' architects. In an article entitled 'Death in Venice', the Belgian architect Cédric Libert, former associate of Zaha Hadid, develops this question about a whole generation of architects of the first decade of this century - among which are Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and CoopHimelblau. (Libert, 2010).

If the curator of the 'Beyond Architecture' 2008 Biennale wagered on the 'icon-giver architects', the 2010 edition, coordinated by the Japanese architect Kazuyo Sejima, assumed and emphasized, instead, the critical reaction to the production of iconic objects, seeking a 'return to discipline', operated by research on space and experience using the theme People Meet in Architecture. The beginning of the sequence of the Arsenale set the tone of the show. It displayed a film directed by Wim Wenders about the Rolex Learning Center of the Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne, a building designed by of SANAA Studio, of Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, revealing it more as an infrastructure to be experienced than as an object-icon to be admired from a distance.

"The dichotomy between consciousness and the object is exposed, expressed in the disparity between the space depicted through the perspective and the space actually experienced by the subject" (Kuma, 2008). The space whose qualities are supposedly controlled by the isotropic and abstract geometry cannot resist the displacement of the observer and therefore its effective experience of architecture. Evoking the work of Beatriz Colomina (Colomina, 1996), Kuma underscores how the architectures of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were dependent on the means of contemporary photography and therefore the production of monochrome images, being thus conceived as recognizable objects to be viewed from a certain distance. To this end, they had to be clearly separated from their contexts, isolated and detached from the ground by means of pilotis (Le Corbusier) or podiums (Mies van der Rohe).

This 'formalist' modern tradition takes on later the monumental version transforming itself into a great reference for international iconic architecture. Kengo Kuma opposes this architecture to the qualities of openness and lack of space proposed by traditional Japanese architecture. The author of *Anti-Object* (Kuma, 2008) evokes the visit of Bruno Taut to the Katsura Imperial Villa where he said that there is no attempt to create an object. He goes on evoking the fact that "Taut compared it to the scene of an outdoor theater, which is essentially a place of absence until the addition of people, clothes and colorful cushions creates various spaces - which he calls 'architecturelized interrelationships' concluding that it is through them that one can establish the relationship between space and time in architecture.

RE-DISCOVERING

It can be seen just how much we move away from the paradigm of an autonomous and isolated object to approach the idea of an infrastructural architecture type, spatially continuous with ambiguous boundaries with its environment. The 'landscape-building' of the Rolex Center, like much of the work of Sejima and Nishizawa, invests on this idea of the anti-object, which opens a prospect of redemption of design modes experienced in the past but that has become invisible in a world of frenzied consumption of images and visual cues.

Motivated by these issues, young foreign architects have seen in our modern architecture some design strategies to be recycled and re-incorporated. Those who stay a little longer, will be able to recognize, beyond the possibilities of visual reference, a pragmatic and intense connection of the architecture with its surroundings, the unexpected, unplanned and informal *détournement* favored and encouraged by the simplicity and ambiguity of the spaces.

Buildings that serve as ground-organizers of large flows and as platforms of events reveal how the contemporary metropolis work, irreverent to its photogenic architecture, combining their processes in complex ecologies. Such traces could be refered to the 'metropolitan' condition, put forward by Rem Koolhaas (Koolhaas, 1978). Everywhere in these same cities you can come across situations and achievements that have become unrecognized because they were unconsciously naturalized or simply ignored by architects. The condition that we are trying to recognize here can perhaps be considered as a 'culture' in an analogical way with the vernacular kind of architecture defined by Bill Hillier when he stresses that the "act of building reproduces cultural given spatial and formal patterns" (Hillier, 1996). Created without the knowledge of aesthetic standards and criteria that use to be established by the specialized media, these cases reveal, however, hidden lessons to be learned on a number of concepts that are very present in the international debate of contemporary architecture and urbanism. The cognitive attitude that allows the re-discovery of these situations and achievements as design references was constructed through the interaction with the 'foreign eye' of teachers and students participating in the international seminars and workshops organized within the academic exchange program 'Architecture of the Contemporary City' that have been conduced since 2004 at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

In the opposite direction, our students, faced with the European sites, had high performance in their proposals, thanks to their foreign eye, but also to the use of spontaneous and informal design solutions very familiar to us, but quite unusual for the high culture of international contemporary architecture. This way of looking implies, therefore, in a denaturalization of the concepts of beautiful or ugly. This is essential to the cognitive attitude of re-cognition that seeks to transcend the external appearance or superficial image that is often 'out of date' to access a more structural and diagrammatic level of analyzing space. This reading level has already been proved to be extremely useful in the design of innovative architectural and urban configurations (Spuybroek, 2004; Blanciak, 2008; Garcia, 2010).

It was imbued with a similar attitude that the Dutch architect who grew up in Indonesia, one of the leading figures of the international contemporary architecture, looked at the 'invisible lessons' of New York and wrote his famous retroactive manifesto (Koolhaas 1978). It is in this same line of research that we intend to insert our research project. More recently, we can cite a very inspiring source for us: the fantastic guide Made in Tokyo by the Japanese architects Kaijima, Kuroda and Tsukamoto (Kaijima, Kuroda & Tsukamoto, 2001). In their guide, the authors look at what they claimed to be the 'ugly' or at least not celebrated part of

the Nipponese capital and reveal a number of situations strongly aligned with the current debate on the problems of the contemporary metropolis. The map of Tokyo re-presented through their 'invisible' architecture thus reveals an 'other' city, subverting the order imposed by the traditional monuments (see Figure 1).
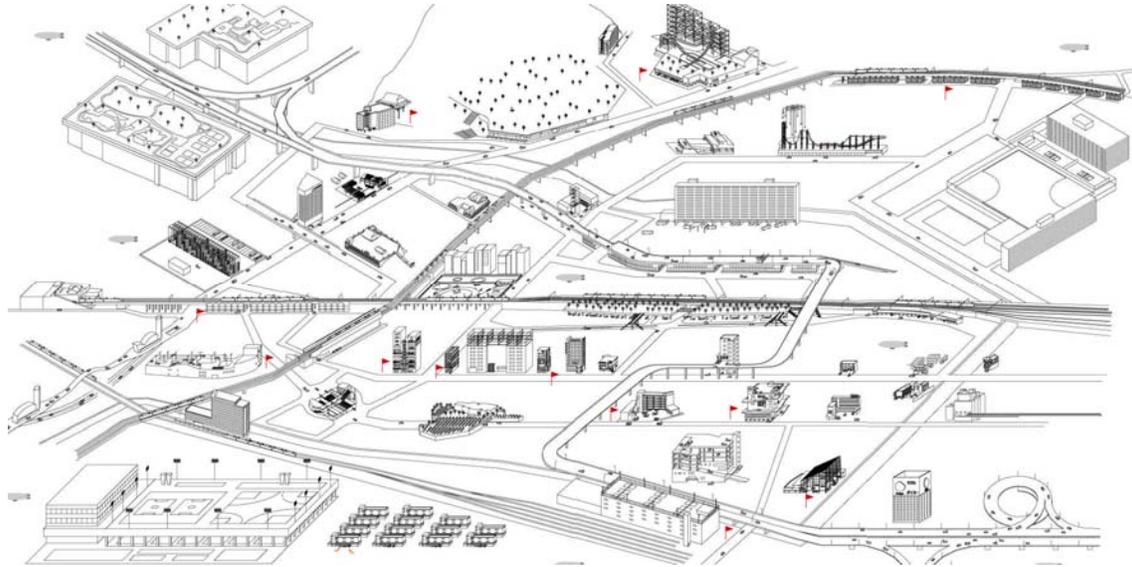
Figure 1: Map of the guide Made in Tokyo representing the city through its 'invisible' architecture (Source: Atelier Bow-Wow)

RE-PRESENTING

The re-discovery of the 'hidden lessons' contained in the architecture of our cities implies a twofold research effort that involves not only a re-reading work guided by a critical-theoretical framework that transcends the traditional historical account and description of mere formal or functional aspects, but also adds the necessary definition of a strategy of re-presentation of studied situations that could be compatible with the ambition to turn them into design references effectively used in the design studio.

Our concern to recognize these 'hidden lessons' in our cities beyond the appearance of their architecture is highly convergent with the conceptual model of the Space Syntax. Therefore, we totally agree with Bill Hillier when he says that "architecture pervades our everyday experience far more than a preoccupation with its visual properties" (Hillier, 1984), but instead of reducing the spatial structure of a building to a graph, we propose to represent it in a diagramatic way. With the diagram, we can operate on an intermediate level between the shallowness of the photographic image and the abstraction of the graph. This type of representation allows us to transcend the limited and outdated definition of what is beautiful or ugly in architecture while maintaining the possibility of precisely identifying and locating material properties associated with the spatial devices studied. This allows us not only to understand the logic of social and spatial configurations analyzed, but also, and above all, to transform them into effective references for the design studio. We follow here the position advocated by Alejandro Zaera-Polo when he draws our attention to the fact that certain forms or architectural programs are very interesting as cultural or social phenomena, but that they do not guarantee an architectural value from a disciplinary point of view. The 'hybrid-as-program', he says, has become one of the key themes of contemporary architectural culture, but it has been treated with imprecision as a design strategy. He goes on saying that we have to understand how activities

have physical, material, and geometric properties. By doing this, it is possible to "transcend the social and linguistic consistency of the program, to learn its material properties and the form of building with them" (Zaera-Polo, 2003).

In order to contribute to the definition of information that is actually related to the nature of the design problems in architecture we must enable effective spatial experience of the design references used. For this purpose, we aim to publish architectural guides that could act as effective instruments of support for this contact, since they can accompany the student in their encounter with the references, thus helping to reconstitute the missing link between the studio and physical built reality. The international workshops showed a great potential in our students when fed with design solutions that can be effectively experienced and not just consumed, uncritically, on the Internet and other means of mass communication.

Thus, a case study like that of the Menezes Cortes Terminal in Rio de Janeiro can be represented as follows (Figure 2), hence transcending the judgment of its appearance as 'beautiful' or 'ugly' in order to achieve a level of diagrammatic understanding much more able to reveal its qualities as an 'architecturalizer device' of dynamic relations with the urban spaces around it. We achieved through this type of re-presentation the possibility of working in the environment of the current debate on the city and its architecture, precisely that of the anti-object mentioned earlier, enabling students to have direct access to the contemporary architecture design references for their projects.

Opened in 1973, Menezes Cortes Terminal Garage was built in order to increase the supply of parking places in the city center. There are 100 thousand square meters, 16 floors, more than 100 stores, 3,500 parking places and a bus station. The 15th floor is occupied by a university and the 16th by the administration offices. In the 1990s, the avenue Erasmo Braga was transformed into a walkway to accommodate various uses related to the flow of pedestrians. Storefronts, restaurants and other food related venues, with bar tables taking over part of the walkway, turned this space into a kind of food strip, made compatible with the garage and the bus terminal within the building thanks to gaps in various fronts that negotiate opportunistically these conflicting flows. However, it is in the succession of garage floors that the generic quality of the space affirms itself with more power. Car parking spaces are be easily appropriated by diverse and unexpected uses. The transformation of the upper floors, considered less profitable for parking, were transformed in classrooms and office. This illustrates the continuing dynamic programmatic adjustment of the Menezes Cortes Terminal, where the use of vacant space responds primarily to the opportunistic logic of the higher profit. According to the manager, if tomorrow someone proposes a new use for any of the generic floors that exceeds the profit it generates as a parking space, there will be no problem to convert it. The spatial unit of the 'parking space' gives to the garage an amazing versatility that enables an authentic and pragmatic dialogue with the city, in which the 'garage' ssumes different potetial according to urban dynamics, but also regulates the city life.
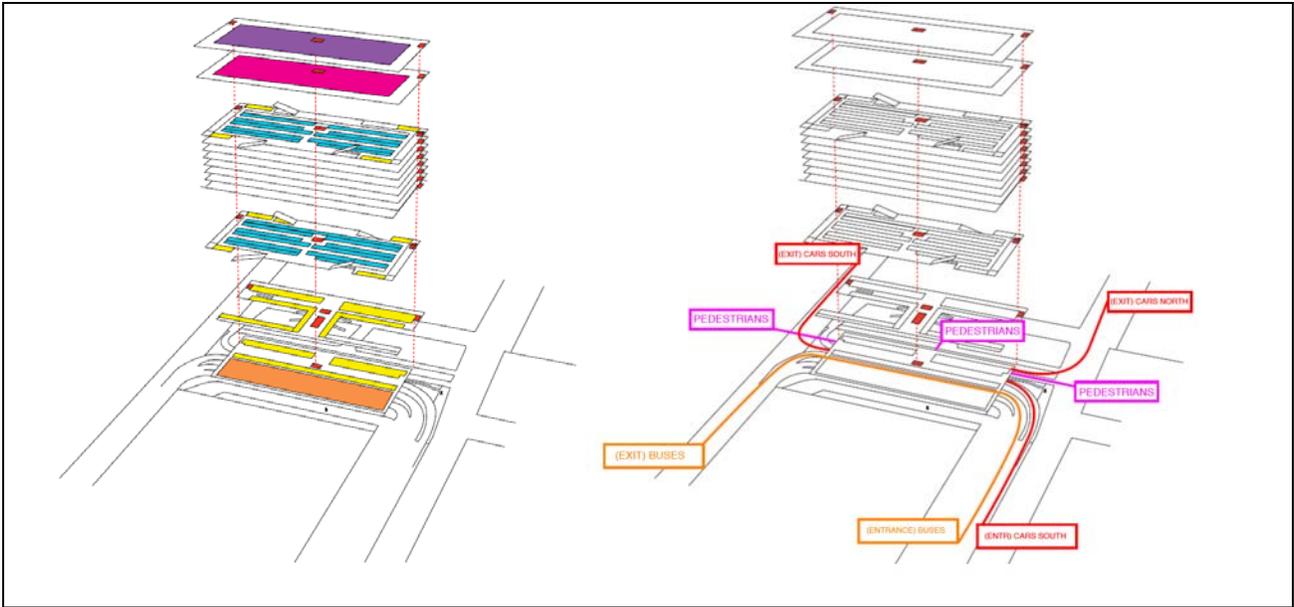
Figure 2: The Menezes Cortes Terminal in Rio (legend for the bottom-left diagram: food curt in orange, shops in yellow, parking garage in blue, classrooms in rose and offices in purple).

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