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**Digital Photographic Collage:
The New Alternative to Drawing
in Basic Design Development?**

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The development of perspective drawing during the Renaissance was a watershed event in the history of architecture. Finally, architects were able to graphically represent three-dimensional ideas and objects on a two-dimensional picture plane through a systematic projection process. This development equipped architects with a new set of graphic representational tools, techniques, and methodologies which allowed them to better investigate and communicate spatial ideas to a wide audience.

By the mid-1960's, architectural groups such as Ant Farm and Archigram, and individuals such as Peter Eisenman became dissatisfied with these traditional modes of architectural representation that had dominated the profession since the Renaissance. They were interested instead with "pushing the limits in all media the notions of what architecture could be."¹ This experimental approach yielded early works by Archigram such as the "Instant City" scheme using photographic collage as a method of image creation. This and other proposals were theoretical, yet they inspired a successive generation of young architects to look beyond the traditional limits of architectural representation for new modes of creative problem solving.

In 1981, Bernard Tschumi, a young architect in New York, followed on the heels of these unconventional thinkers when he wrote of "wanting a different reading of architecture in which space, movement and events are independent and yet stand in a new relation to one another, so that conventional components of architecture are broken down and rebuilt along a different axes."² In his *Manhattan Transcripts* drawings of the same year, Tschumi produced a series which described an architectural interpretation of reality using multi-media. The transcripts contained "photographs that witnessed events with section, plan and elevation diagrams that outlined space and indicated movements in an architectural stage set. The purpose of the transcripts was to translate things normally removed from conventional architecture, Tschumi said."³

Today, Tschumi's vision of architecture constructed along a new axes is coming to fruition. "We are in the midst of a new renaissance in the architecture profession, not seen in such enormity as that period," says Mitchell Schwarzer in his recent book *Zoomscape*. "We are experiencing architecture within a technically expanded visual field – not just objects in a continuous space,

but also variable assemblages in intermittent space.”⁴ Visual information absorbed by culture through the technological delivery of advertising, news bites, and popular film and media marks a disassociation from the geometric, regular, and easily digestible rules of traditional linear perspective. Today, we live in a new digital culture in which perception, and specifically our ability to see and understand the built environment, is composed of and influenced by the saturation, dislocation and proliferation of images culled from all over the world.

As educators, we are confronted with a student community that is a product of this technology-based, image-centric culture. As such, there is an opportunity and necessity to evolve our studio assignments to incorporate this new way of seeing and understanding the built environment. To engage our students architectural study that is relevant, vibrant, and current to the culture. To this end, sophomore level students in a beginning architectural design class at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign were asked to create a series of digital photo collages as part of a project to design a student pavilion structure of roughly 120 square feet. Students were initially required to document the project’s site, function, and cultural context using photography. The students were then asked to combine one or two photographs from each category (site, function, context) and create a digital photographic collage using Photoshop. The juxtaposition of these disparate categories were intended to create a “sweet spot” between place, context, and use, creating a conceptual, spatial or structural platform that would guide the project’s development to its final architectural expression. As a first step in the design process, the project was intended to provide broad visual strokes that would connect disparate components of the project together on a single picture plane. Students could then use these images as roadmaps to inform sketching, formal perspective projection drawing and models.

The assignment yielded many excellent results. Brodie Bricker created two digital collages that he describes as the “void of culture” on campus. Here, the digital arrangement and manipulation of photographs create an image about alienation, non-communication, and disconnection. Colors are cold and reserved, the posters found on campus are either screened back or whited out (rendering the communication is unreadable). Lots of chairs, empty, are digitally enhanced to disappear into the background. In another collage, the digital manipulation of color and the geometric splicing of photographs results in a composition that visually expresses atmospheric isolation. Due to these digital tricks, the collages give up a sense of realism for fantasy, bringing the viewer into an unknown world. Yet in both works, the use of digital photographic processes allows Bricker to visually investigate conceptual and spatial parameters of his project in a very fluid, visual, and personal manner.

Mary Miss is a well known designer who uses photographic collage to investigate spatial constructions in a similar fashion as Bricker. Writes Miss, “The photo-drawings are a great release because I can visually investigate things without actually building them – looking for that which is so compelling to me physically in a situation.”⁶ For Miss, the photo-drawings are not strictly photographic, but an exploratory graphic form – a species of photo-collage in which several

views of a single structure or site are spliced together to form a slightly altered whole.”⁷ In her collage *Untitled #2*, it is possible to notice how repeated vertical connections between lines of light intensify the visual pull exerted by portrayed hallow space, suggesting a downward movement. This is achieved by splicing together prints from three sequential negatives in a unifying gesture that establishes the spiral of images.”⁸ Each operates as a spatial interpretation of a specific physical experience and prompted by a specific place.

Bricker and Miss both note the ability of collage to sometimes supercede drawing for its ability to visualize and construct space. With Miss, “each photo-drawing becomes a hieroglyph about a remote archaeological situation which is hardly accessible through direct survey”⁹ And Bricker, states that “there are ideas from this process that I can’t get easily from drawing such as manipulations in color, shapes already present in the photos, new shapes made from digital manipulation, and the conceptual interactions from the three photographs...the thing with drawing, even sketches, is that its takes too long, and I am more worried about it looking good than actually getting the work done.”¹⁰

Another student, Rosey Kotelova adds that “drawing is still important, but with drawing, it is harder to visualize space. Through photographic collage, you can see what you want to do first and then you can draw.” In *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Cray elaborates on Kotelova’s observation, “if formal modes of perspective representational drawing imply homogeneous and potentially metric space, new machines for seeing disclose a fundamentally disunified and aggregate field of disjunctive elements. Cameras have the ability to unnaturally crop images, on one hand giving the photographic image a certain fragmented look, and yet on the other has the ability to uncover aspects of space that would not normally be viewed given the naked eye.”¹¹

Kotelova uses photography in her *Fragments* collage to visualize and join odd fragmented parts of traditional architectural detailing to create a mass reminiscent of a structure. “Here I combined interesting forms that might represent the beginnings of my project”¹², she states.

Brian Albrecht comments that “in the process of working digitally with photographs, you always have to think about how space can be articulated.” In his *Inner Girl* collage, space is constructed using a foreground and background division with the girl on the rock acting as both the focal point and the division between these conditions. Psychological space is achieved through color shifts from grey to green, and from the downward gaze and general pose of the girl. Albrecht says about his ability to examine space through digital collage “they are like planning tools. You can see space differently in different contexts, and you can shift the spatial context of space using this method a little more easily than drawing.”¹³

Another notable aspect to this exercise is in its ability to visually inspire the eventual pavilion structure solution. Jeff Sandler draws obvious visual cues between his initial collage, *Tent*, and his dome pavilion. Sandler first discovered the dome structure from his photographs of the

Follinger Auditorium on the quad. He says, “my dome refers to the Auditorium...I wanted to make a connection between this and a new structure that both referenced and differed from the original building.”¹⁴ In this case, the process of seeing using photographs sparked visual connections that became the foundation for the project’s eventual design, operating similar to a sketch.

There was a consensus among the students that this exercise was effective in helping them to organize their initial ideas, paving the way for well-informed conceptual sketching, three-dimensional models, and traditional projection drawings. This digital photographic collage work engages the students in methods of image creation that taps into the technological culture with which they are familiar. And while not foolproof, this familiarity encourages a personal investment in the project early in the design process. “Architecture is entering the age of fluidity without the ontological anchor that geometrically defined space previously supplied, now it must create new models and open up to new worlds” states Hani Rashid of Asymptote Architecture in

New York.”¹⁵ Perhaps student assignments that place digital culture at the forefront of architectural investigation will help build those new models.

Notes

- 1 Margolies, John. *Design Quarterly – Conceptual Architecture*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, 1968, p. 10.
- 2 Schwarzer, Mitchell. *Zoomscape*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P.26.
- 3 Schwarzer, Mitchell. *Zoomscape*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P.26.
- 4 Schwarzer, Mitchell. *Zoomscape*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P.21.
- 5 Schwarzer, Mitchell. *Zoomscape*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P.64.
- 6 Miss, Mary. *Mary Miss*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P. 74.
- 7 Miss, Mary. *Mary Miss*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P. 73.
- 8 Miss, Mary. *Mary Miss*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P. 77.
- 9 Miss, Mary. *Mary Miss*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 2004. P. 78.
- 10 Interview with Brodie Bricker, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 4/24/08.
- 11 Interview with Rosey Kotelova, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 4/24/08.
- 12 Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1990. P. 125.
- 13 Interview with Brian Albrecht, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 4/25/08.
- 14 Interview with Jeff Sandler, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 4/24/08.
- 15 Rashid, Hani and Couture, Lise Anne. *Asymptote: Architecture at the Interval*, Rizzoli, New York, NY, 1995. P.6.

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