Chapter 4
Human Figure as a Cultural Mediator in Architectural Drawings

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ABSTRACT

In architectural drawings, human figures generally express the scale of design space. Their presence is supposed to be a sign of a particular sensibility toward human scale and needs and over the centuries, figures were capable of playing a number of different cultural roles. From the anthropomorphic attitudes of Renaissance architects to the Functionalists’ diagrams, human figures have illustrated and mediated the cultural development of human environment. Even if architects maliciously used them to convey layered meanings into their architectural renderings, they are an implicit index of different ideas about men and women and express architects’ ideological positions toward society often beyond their intents. This paper analyzes the use of human figures in architectural designs with a particular attention to the twentieth century, to the passage from the mechanical to the digital age, in which the diffusion of cut-and-paste procedure is changing and enhancing their use in the globalized architecture.
INTRODUCTION

According to Quinan (1993), who had been informed by the Taliesin Fellow Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer,

... sometime during 1958, Wright prepared a series of large-scale perspective drawings to demonstrate to the board of trustees of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum how the ramps and walls of the museum would accommodate paintings of various sizes. In one, ‘The Masterpiece’, a small girl leans on the interior parapet wall and looks down into the rotunda space. Moments before meeting with the trustees, Wright took out his pencil and deftly added the yo-yo that hangs from the girl’s hand, saying to his apprentices, ‘Boys, we must never lose sight of our sense of humor.’ Indeed, Wright would need a sense of humor to see this project through. (Quinan, 1993, p. 466)

Thus, the yo-yo dangling from a bored child’s hand would be a small ironic touch to the draftsman’s work. But it is not so easy. On December 29, 2012, in the Save Wright chat, the sense of this particular figure was deeply discussed related to the adults admiring a large abstract picture, properly ‘The Masterpiece’. According to JimM:

Wright is showing a child bored with the ‘masterpiece’, while the adults solemnly and dutifully ponder its (in)significance”, as “looking into the rotunda was more rewarding than viewing the silly art. (“Guggenheim,” 2012)

Some hours later, Peterm interpreted,

... the girl with the yo-yo as a reminder of the democratic nature of this particular museum ... If Wright were really critiquing the art that the adults are contemplating, why would he make it his own brand of art? (“Guggenheim,” 2012)

Later, SDR questioned why,

... the art shown in the Wright illustration (none of it in his hand?) seems a cross between Kandinsky and Wright’s own sort of abstraction, published in the previous decades? ... Would he have been (secretly) delighted by the work of the early Suprematists and Constructivists, and (later) Klee, Arp, etc.? (“Guggenheim,” 2012)

This little story is an exquisite example of not only the numerous possibilities of interpreting a human figure with regard of space and details, but also of the
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