Chapter 4

Reconceptualizing Visual Literacy in Architectural Education: Decoding and Encoding the Visual Language of Architecture

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ABSTRACT

Understanding, developing, and controlling visual literacy is a major part of architectural education since the role of the architect in society is to have an advanced skill level of visual literacy and transmit the codes and functions in a complex form of communication, which includes visual, perceptive, social, and psychological languages simultaneously. Dominating the discipline discernibly requires a good understanding of the definitions, interpretation of former studies, and an improvement of the self-model of visual communication in design. This study documents ways of developing visual literacy during architectural education and evaluates the models of learning for its improvement. The main objective of this study is to offer intuitions both for educators and students through working the concept of visual literacy in architectural education and architectural language of communication itself.

INTRODUCTION

Since its first definition as a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences (Debes 1969), researchers and practi-
tioners have developed more complex definitions and have built theoretical maps explaining relations of the term visual literacy with contributing disciplines and building factors of visual culture. Architecture, design, and urban design are disciplines acknowledged as part of visual culture since they are high forms of culture and have a major role in everyday visual communication together with other low forms while visual content and codes are transmitted from one form to another.

The main objective of this chapter is to raise questions about the understanding of visual literacy in architectural design education and discuss the concept in its unique context of the architectural design process while overviewing existing methods of using visual literacy in architectural education.

BACKGROUND

The term visual literacy had its first definition by John Debes, co-founder of the International Visual Literacy Association. While advocates of the concept try to construct a satisfactory definition, theorists in other disciplines have tried to substantiate their own perception of visual literacy by examining how this new concept will find meaning within their own disciplines and specific working systems.

Since the objects and living spaces produced by architectural design have inevitably a dynamic perception, understanding, mental representation and re-visualization process ongoing in the mind of its user in daily life; or basically its nature of producing human involved spaces; the discipline of architecture has to define the concept of visual literacy in its own design practice and integrate the outputs to its ongoing system.

During the following years, different definitions had been made such as: all of the skills which make an individual to understand the visuals and use them for communicating with others (Ausburn & Ausburn, 1978), the skill of reading and writing images and thinking and learning in terms of visuals or thinking visually (Hortin, 1983), the skill of understanding the communication of a visual statement in any medium and also expressing oneself with at least one visual discipline (Curtiss 1987) and these definitions revealed new aspects of the term (as cited in Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997, pp. 281-282).

As Avgerinou & Ericson (1997) stated; during continuing attempts of definitions by others, which added new dimensions to the term; also there had been some reactions by theorists who tried to narrow the scope or re-name it. Sinatra defined visual literacy as “active reconstruction of past experiences with incoming visual information to obtain meaning” (Sinatra 1986) and build a connection of it to human thinking and memory. On the contrary, Suhor and Little (1988) claimed it as not even an area to study or recognized as a discipline; “but, at best, an ingenious orchestration of ideas”. Burkbank & Pett (1983) approached to the definition of visual literacy as a problem of one’s viewpoint and concerning discipline and stated that the built definitions should convey different explanations of it, grounding on the builder’s viewpoint. This statement should be considered as emphasizing the term’s need of having its own definition in the architectural context, instead of stating the term’s difficulty in having a proper definition.

Documentation created during a conference held in January 2004, produced a white paper on the subject of visual literacy at the end. This output of the conference known as The White Paper of Visual Literacy; included another definition of the term as “understanding how people perceive objects, interpret what they see, and what they learn from them” (Elkins, 2008).

Debes defines the term visual literacy as focusing on human’s visual capacity to perform and states this capacity might be developed by combining the act of seeing with integrated data collected and clustered by other senses. On the other hand, the above mentioned white paper makes the definition focusing on