Chapter 14
Design Surrenders to Virtual Reality

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ABSTRACT

Before moving into a house, each of us consults a drawing of a plan. But what turns that plan into the interior of a house? The representation of the architectural design produces a drawing for the project: they may become the same thing or perhaps different things. We know that each interior space is only truly designed by living in it. The designer narrates (draws) a design to make it become reality. But what kind of gap is there between knowing how to draw and knowing how to build, that is, between the ability to render in a drawing and the ability to construct a building? Compared to classic systems of representation (plan, elevation, section, and perspective), rendering has become the simulation of constructed reality, which does not yet exist and won’t have exactly the form envisaged. If in the design VR (virtual reality) tends to dominate the RR (real reality), the RR will end up revealing VR to be a fake reality (FR).

INTRODUCTION

The idea for writing down these remarks on the relationship between drawing and design, or rather on the way in which architecture is first represented and then “built” came to me while considering the work of two great masters of twentieth-century Italian architecture, Carlo Scarpa and Aldo Rossi. I won’t dwell on them here, because too much has already been written about them. I will instead ex post look at the way architectural drawing, now banally called design, was produced until the mid-twentieth century, that is when a drawing was still done by hand, before the advent of CAD systems or similar forms of “graphic rendering” that produced a Copernican revolution in the perception and vision of architectural interiors and exteriors. But was that previous kind of drawing real, virtual or unreal representation? The simplest and most direct possible analogy is with the change from a manuscript written with the quill to Gutenberg’s printing with movable type. But even in this case the comparison is not a good match: a printed book reproduces an original text with exactly the same words, even if not the style of the calligraphy of a manuscript. As an example, it is more interesting in critical terms to consider how Carlo
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Scarpa (1906-1978) and Aldo Rossi (1931-1997) mutually defined each other with an aphorism: one made the modern in the ancient (Carlo Scarpa), the other the ancient in the modern (Aldo Rossi). We are now witnessing the demise of the superficial critique of postmodernism along with a stimulating reappraisal of artistic craft skills, which have in fact pushed aside all the illusory Baroque-isms of celebrity architects. Both Scarpa and Rossi worked systematically, starting from inside the building and the built city, and re-proposed the small in the large and the large in the small. That is to say, a total interpenetration of interior and exterior in the light of the production of architectural art as it emerged from the designer’s pen-pencil. Significantly, they designed single-handedly. Carlo Scarpa’s design sheet was a table with the tracing paper glued on it, on which he drew the plan first and then the drawings of the elevation and the section, one superimposed on the other. The different drawings were distinguished simply by various pastel colors in a real structure, in which the three fundamental representations were compared. Plan-elevation-section became a unicum, all one. Although perfectly legible, the design sheet did not have a very rigorous, tidy appearance because the surplus blank spaces were minutely covered with small drawings of details either in perspective or axonometric views, or even sketches and caricatures of people snooping around his work. It was a drawing – in the case of Scarpa – drawn and redrawn as if it were a superimposition to be compared in the plan being simultaneously transformed into the various elevations, stressing that the real design that makes the actual construction of the architecture possible consists of the cross section and the longitudinal section.

Unlike Scarpa, Aldo Rossi preferred architecture that was first described and narrated, then drawn. His notebooks are like the ideas and jottings of a serialized novel written down on post-it notes and then reassembled and developed like the latent image of a photographic plate that changes from negative to positive. His drawings are neither woven nor interlocking like those of Scarpa but loose and geometrically knotted like a Peruvian khipu: precisely delineated and sequenced, as found in the same arts that bring to mind the suggestion of an “ancient [invention] in the modern,” as classical is to neoclassical. Ideas, like icons, are very boldly drawn in ink. They are mostly small-sized elevations or axonometries, but tend to a single-dimensional sequence, like individual movie stills used to make the visual memory flow and enchant. This is, however, a typically Italian Neorealist film effect, rather like when the idea of a costume design, cut out and glued into a personal diary, jumps out at you with the almost naive wonder of a pop-up.

DRAWING SURRENDERS TO VIRTUAL REALITY

Everyone knows how difficult it is to find a home, even just a room. Or rather, find a house that we really like. No one is aware of this until forced to find a home, even just a room.

We are used to buying or renting a house that has been used by others or to choosing a house that is not there yet. And then be able to live in it for who knows how long.

The tools for viewing house interiors are generally very primitive and inadequate. At least they were until recently. Although people are taught enough to be able to make a house, they are not taught how to choose a house. We choose a house with less specific knowledge than when ordering a lunch. Any restaurant menu with its list of dishes and specialties provides much more precise information than what an elaborate real-estate agency design tells us and explains, when we have to decide to buy a house “on paper.” A lunch is not a house, of course, but a menu list is much more refined than a plan of an apartment drawn on scrap of paper proffered to anyone who decides to go find a house to live in the city and,