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Digital Architectural Archives – Aesthetic Reading

Abstract: My aim in this paper is to examine the impact of digital technology on the perception and practice of architecture. Online activities leave discernible traces, challenging the traditional ontological view of the subject's independence from the material world. I will offer an exploration of the Internet's role as the primary communication medium transforms architectural practice, emphasizing digital archives and distribution. Platforms like Pinterest, ArchDaily, and Instagram have transformed how architectural practices are shared and consumed, cultivating a new culture of multimodal communication. Within this context, I will discuss how digital technologies have profoundly altered perceptions of materiality, space, and information. I will explore how architects and artists now operate within an interconnected network of social, economic, and technological forces, moving away from traditional media to embrace digital fragmentation. This shift impacts how architectural objects are perceived, from complete forms to fragmented digital representations that are accessible to a global audience.

Keywords: digital technology; architectural practice; digital archives; digital images; aesthetic communication; architectural representation.

Introduction

In contemporaneity,[1] the Internet has become the main form of communication. Art and architecture, as the most representative visual fields, utilize the Internet for distributing drawings, pictures, and photographs, thereby creating digital archives. These digital architectural archives have become the primary means of exchange, communion, and presentation with regards to the creativity of individual and collective *architectural practices*. It is important to emphasize at this point that the term 'architectural practice' refers to the expansion of architecture beyond the traditional realms of design, construction, building design, interior spaces, and urban planning. The term 'practice' signifies an ongoing process, something in progress, unlike 'artwork' or 'building', which denote a completed and built architectural project. Therefore, architectural practices encompass a broader spectrum, including marginal and unconventional activities that imply architectural spatiality. This can extend to unrealized works such as concepts,

[1] Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* 32, 4 (2006): 681–707.

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drawings, plans, and diagrams, representing not finished products but open-ended, unfinished endeavors. In this process, architectural practices necessarily arise from specific social situations, movements, relationships, and actions.

With the beginning of the 21st century, internet applications such as Pinterest, ArchDaily, and Instagram became primary platforms for the distribution of architectural practices and cultural archives. These applications broadcast architectural practices globally, immersing viewers in the world of visual representations – one might say, a virtual spectacle.[2] Such digital architectural archives can be created by a single author, an architectural bureau, cultural institutions, or anonymous individuals.[3] The Internet allows authors to make their art accessible to almost everyone around the world while simultaneously creating a personal archive of it.[4] A significant factor in this context is that every instance of viewing an image or reading a text on the Internet is meticulously documented, leaving discernible traces. In the offline realm, the act of contemplation leaves no trace, corresponding to the traditional ontological view that the subject exists independently of the material world. On the other hand when online, every act of contemplation is recorded, thereby eroding the ontological autonomy of the subject.[5]

Nowadays, as Boris Groys perspicaciously remarked: "One can say that on the Internet there is no art or literature, but only information about art and literature."[6] The shift from traditional mass media to horizontal communication networks based on the Internet and wireless technologies has introduced varied communication patterns, leading to a significant cultural transformation. As virtual interactions become essential to our daily lives, a new culture is emerging, centered around multimodal communication and digital information processing.[7] For that precise reason, wireless communication has become the leading platform for distributing a variety of digitized products such as games, music, images, news, and instant messaging. These services encompass every facet of human activity, from personal support networks to professional tasks and political mobilization. As a result, electronic communication networks permeate all our actions, regardless of location or time. That said, the key feature of wireless communication is not mobility but continuous connectivity.[8]

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[2] Here, 'spectacle' is understood in Guy Debord's sense: "The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images." See: Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2005), 17.

[3] There is another aspect that does not have enough space to be covered here, but it is important to mention what Gilles Deleuze pointed out: the question of control. For Deleuze, it was important to critically re-examine the relationship between digital technology and control. In his view, the basic idea is that power and control in contemporary society are exerted through digital means, contrasting with the more physical forms of control seen in earlier disciplinary societies. That is to say, digital technologies play a crucial role in control societies by enabling continuous modulation and monitoring of individuals' behavior. See: Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.

[4] Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 177.

[5] Groys, *In the Flow*, 185–86.

[6] Ibid., 174.

[7] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xviii.

[8] Ibid., xxx.

This connection is made possible by the circulation of photos through digital photography technology, resulting in uncontrolled and chaotic distribution across social networks. Instagram and Facebook constitute systems of technologies that facilitate the movement, transfer, presentation, selection, deletion, replacement, and censorship of images. These platforms exemplify the transformation of images from physical hard copies to digital entities, fostering a complex interplay of visual exchanges. As Paul Virilio articulated, with the advent of synthetic images through info-graphic software and digital image processing in computer-aided design, we are now approaching synthetic vision, signifying the automation of perception.[9] In *The Information Bomb*, Virilio indisputably grounded his debate about the change in our sensory perception in the digital age. He argued that as audiovisual, tactile, and olfactory information increasingly goes digital, the shift from immediate sensations to numerical probabilities of distant phenomena threatens to disrupt our sensory ecology irreversibly.[10]

For British philosopher Peter Osborne, a digitally produced image is inherently shareable and capable of global distribution via the Internet. In other words, the extensive and diverse social interactions facilitated by the endless possibilities for visual reproductions bring about a substantial transformation in social space.[11] This is precisely what Walter Benjamin underlined in his well-known statement: "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized-the medium in which it occurs-is conditioned not only by nature but by history."[12] This famous thesis, perpetually relevant with each new era, precisely explains that in contemporary times, the visibility and sensory perception of the world differ from those of all preceding epochs. What is evident is that digital technologies have dramatically altered our perceptions of materiality, space, and information, inevitably shaping our understanding of architecture, habitation, and the built environment. These transformations are most evident in the advanced systems developed for simulating, storing, and disseminating information.[13] That is to say, we are experiencing a profound media revolution characterized by the transition of all cultural production, distribution, and communication to computer-mediated forms. As Lev Manovich would put it, this revolution impacts every stage of communication, including accumulation, manipulation, storage, and distribution. Moreover, it affects all forms of media, including text, still images, moving images, sound, and – crucially for this paper – spatial constructions.[14]

[9] Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1994), 62.

[10] Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 114.

[11] Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (London, Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018), 136.

[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 104.

[13] Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from Outside* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001), 75–76.

[14] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 43.

Numerous interfaces and processes nowadays are already capable of linking human perception to the computer's program and the so-called Mixed Reality virtual environment.[15] However, this paper will focus on two-dimensional representations and the experience of architectural space on social networks, serving as everyday forms of digital architectural archives.

Technological innovation and artistic expression: from avant-garde to postmodernism – a brief overview

Innovative aspects within the technological sphere (such as new media like film and photography) were significant characteristics of the avant-garde, particularly in terms of artistic expression. For the avant-garde artists between the two World Wars, the project of new media was utopian. In contrast, the neo-avant-garde pursued the synthesis of art and science. After the Second World War, with the formation of the *Welfare State*, many technological products became available to every household. With the neo-avant-garde, the artist assumes the role of the scientist. The neo-avant-garde approach in architecture, for instance, aimed to dismantle the traditional, expected, and rigid forms of post-war architectural practices by synthesizing architecture with art, science, technology, politics, and everyday life. It sought to concretely realize the utopian ideals of historical architectural avant-gardes within a new ideological, political, technological, and social context. In other words, Neo-avant-garde artists after Second World War saw new media practices as both fulfilling the avant-garde's utopian vision of merging art and technology and integrating themselves into the commercialization of new technologies accessible for widespread consumption beyond specialized scientific and technological settings. With postmodernism, high technology becomes widely accessible for mass consumption. The postmodern artist becomes a participant in information marketing, utilizing programs and appropriating their effects. More precisely, postmodern artists employ pre-existing operations in their artistic practice. Bruno Latour says that modernity is "much more than an illusion and much less than an essence. It is a force added to others that for a long time had the power to represent, to accelerate, or to summarize – a power that it no longer entirely holds."[16] This is not to imply that contemporary times have not introduced novel forms of technology and modes of living (e.g. internet, digital age). What architecture theorist Jeremy Till will emphasize is that Latour is acutely aware of these modern innovations, but perceives them not merely as outcomes of technological advancement, but rather as components of a more intricate network of social, economic, and technological forces.[17] Today, the process of information and communication shapes human labor, facilitates the exchange of goods, and establishes the ideological digital sphere.

[15] Wolfgang Strauss, Monika Reischmann, "Implosion of Numbers: Performative Mixed Reality," in *Disappearing Architecture: From Real to Virtual to Quantum*, ed. Georg Flachbart and Peter Weibel (Basel: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2005), 123.

[16] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 40.

[17] Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), 57.

Contrasting perspectives on the digital age: Baudrillard's hyperreality and Kittler's technological determinism

In this section I will refer to two different theoretical perspectives: French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's and German media theorist Friedrich Kittler's, who have differing views on the digital age. Baudrillard views the digital age through the lens of hyperreality and simulation, arguing that digital technologies blur the line between reality and its representations, creating a world where simulations replace the reality. When Baudrillard talks about a society dominated by the proliferation of images, signs, and simulations that frequently obscure or replace reality, this allows him to consciously evoke the concept of simulation and its impact on contemporary life.[18] Baudrillard pursues a prominent discussion of the digital in his concepts of hyperreality and the simulation of reality through media and technology. He contends that in the digital age, reality becomes indistinguishable from its representations, resulting in a state of hyperreality where simulations are mistaken for reality itself. For instance, transferred to the architectural field, a simulacrum is understood as an architectural work that appears to correspond to reality but is, in fact, an artificially created reality with no reference to actual architectural buildings.

In clear contrast to that position, Kittler conceives the digital realm as fundamentally shaped by the material and technical aspects of media, emphasizing the deterministic influence of technology on culture and society. The argument of Kittler's *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999* runs as follows: Unlike film, television ceased to rely on optics. While one can inspect each frame of a film reel by holding it up to the sun, television signals are inaccessible visually as they exist solely as electronic signals. These signals are only perceptible to the eyes at the beginning and end of their transmission chain – in the studio and on the screen. Therefore, digital image processing marks the complete dissolution of this final vestige of the imaginary realm.[19] In short, Kittler's point is that digital photography represents the dissolution of its ontological basis, no longer portraying a fixed feature of reality but rather an effect of symbolic organization or algorithmic processes. Moreover, within network systems, it becomes detached from fixed tangible objects, circulating continuously through social networks. That is to say, in the digital age, we no longer merely depict life through images; instead, we construct events as artificial or virtual realities. The fundamental ontological aspect of this shift is that control over processes in the supposed 'real' world is now achievable only through these constructed events.[20]

[18] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), xx.

[19] Friedrich Kittler, *Optical media: Berlin Lectures 1999* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 226.

[20] Žarko Paić, *Tehnosfera I. Žrtvovanje i dosada: Životinja – Čovjek – Stroj* (Zagreb: Biblioteka Sandorf & Mizantrop, 2018), 42.

Digital representation and the sensory perception of architecture

In the context of this paper, the real question is: how does all this concern architecture and its representation on the Internet? As Groys would argue, contemporary artistic events, unlike traditional artwork, cannot be preserved for contemplation but can be documented and commented on, shifting the focus from creating art objects to generating information about art events.[21] In this theoretical context, at the intersection of the digital and artistic spheres, one can argue that digital art facilitates novel methods for accessing, appropriating, and manipulating information on technical, epistemological, and emotional levels. For example, techniques in digital art include hypermedia, databases, search engines, data comparators, image processing tools, visualizations, simulations, and interactive technologies, among others.[22] In this process, a digital artist who adopts technical skills of an IT professional engages with media records rather than direct material reality, focusing on accumulated representations and data. They explore the possibilities for transforming and disseminating these records, creating artificially constructed audiovisual texts that are experienced individually or collectively through sensory distribution.[23]

That being said, we are facing a shift in the perception of architecture within the previously accepted frameworks. It involves a kind of reanimation through new technology and drastically new forms of communication. The digital realms of Instagram, Facebook, and similar platforms represent spaces of transition between different states and continents. Viewing these digital archives on a computer, laptop, tablet, or phone, rather than in their full natural dimensions, has become an accepted norm.

Such a perception of architectural representations is produced by distance that separates the visual depiction from the real, materialized presence of architecture. It is the inflation of architectural images, photographs, and renderings within digital production and consumption that creates this effect. As stated, in the digital realm, architecture is observed from a distance, leading to an artificial sense of understanding the architectural space – an understanding that is fundamentally incomplete when compared to traditional, firsthand experiences. For the architect and theoretician of architecture Steven Holl, the issue of perception is inseparable from the archetypal experience of architecture itself, in which feelings occupy a central place.[24] In contemporaneity, in cyber culture, unlike over half a century ago, the distinction between the real, virtual, and illusory blurs, leading to continual transformation of form.[25]

As mentioned earlier, there has been a shift away from realistic representations of architectural objects in everyday life towards the creation of digital copies intended

[21] Groys, *In the Flow*, 4.

[22] Miško Šuvaković, "Skice za teoriju novih medija," *Kultura* 147 (2015): 64.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture* (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2007), 40.

[25] Vladimir Milenković, *Forma prati temu – petodelni metodološki esej* (Beograd: Univerzitet u Beogradu – Arhitektonski fakultet, Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 2015), 27.

for websites or social networks. In present times, the aestheticization of reality, as well as digital spaces, is more dominant than ever before. To exemplify this, I will refer once again to popular platforms such as ArchDaily, Instagram, and Pinterest. They are characterized by a visually-driven approach that emphasizes high-quality images and visual content as central to their platforms. These platforms often feature minimalist designs with clean, uncluttered layouts to highlight images, and they incorporate interactive elements such as likes, comments, and shares to engage users. Typography tends to be simple and understated, using sans-serif fonts that complement the visual content without distraction. Presentations are polished, with a high degree of attention to image quality, reflecting current design and visual trends through the use of filters and selected feeds.

These necessarily copied photos target specific audiences and, due to the global reach of the Internet, have the potential to reach a broader audience. The aesthetic contemplation of the architectural work has been supplanted by the aesthetic contemplation of its copy. An important aspect of aesthetic communication here is that the frame of the computer screen (or smartphone, tablet, etc.) separates the drawing from the material world.[26] That is to say, perception has changed as a result of the transition from a horizontal to a vertical surface. A traditional paper drawing is perceived in its entirety at a glance, whereas a digital drawing is viewed in segments. Digital drawings can be constructed by integrating multiple files, which can be modified and collaborated on by individuals across vast distances, often concurrently.[27] This kind of abandonment of viewing architectural objects in their entirety has led to a shift towards digital fragmentation. To put it crudely: in digital aesthetics, interaction refers to the communication process among living systems within a network that lacks a central point or boundaries.[28]

In other words, architectural objects are no longer perceived in complete forms; instead, they exist as specific segments distributed through social networks. In this sense, digital archives of architectural practices, whether realized or conceptual, become easily accessible. They provide access to extensive databases containing diverse examples from the history of architecture and civilization. Through digital architectural archives available on social networks or specific websites, it is now possible to make historical comparisons, analyses, and identifications like never before. This can also be related to the existence of digital archives in the context of heritage presentation.[29] For instance, one can use various photo and video editing software to analyze how the German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe incorporated elements of the ancient Parthenon temple into his Barcelona Pavilion project, exhibited at the 1929 International Exposition in Spain, but recontextualized in a new historical setting.

[26] Jonathan Hill, *Immaterial Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 59.

[27] Christopher Height, "Manners of Working: Fabricating Representation in Digital Based Design," in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, ed. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns and Hilde Heynen (New York: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2012), 414.

[28] Paić, *Tehnosfera I. Žrtvovanje i dosada: Životinja – Čovjek – Stroj*, 152.

[29] Marko Nikolić, Boško Drobnjak, and Irena Kuletin Ćulafić, "The Possibilities of Preservation, Regeneration and Presentation of Industrial Heritage: The Case of Old Mint "A.D." on Belgrade Riverfront," *Sustainability* 12, 5264 (2020); Milja Mladenović, "Mixed-reality Heritage: Edutainment Potential in Students Square Area Public Spaces," *Serbian Architectural Journal* 15, 23 (2023): 314–31.

Digital archives have emerged as temporary repositories of architectural activity. Contemporary digital architectural archives are documented and processed, enabling interventions (such as meme practices) and comments by followers of specific institutions or individuals who post images of architectural objects on their social network or internet accounts. However, these digital representations lack a complete sensory understanding of the architectural environment they depict, such as comprehensive sensory perception of space including sounds, smells, or the warmth of its lighting.

Following the Finnish architect and theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa, this digital turn fails to bring us closer to understanding architectural space. Pallasmaa is known for his phenomenological approach to architecture, emphasizing the importance of human sensory experience and perception in the design and understanding of architectural spaces. Pallasmaa argues that contemporary architecture often prioritizes visual elements at the expense of other sensory experiences. He believes that this visual dominance can lead to a sense of disconnection and detachment in the built environment. Pallasmaa advocates for a more holistic approach to architecture that engages all senses, creating spaces that resonate with human experience on a deeper level.[30]

Swiss architect and theoretician Peter Zumthor stands on the same theoretical lines, he emphasizes the importance of sensory experience in observing architecture by saying the following: "The sense that I try to instill into materials is beyond all rules of composition, and their tangibility, smell and acoustic qualities are merely element of the language that we are obliged to use."[31] In his work, Zumthor focuses on creating atmospheres that evoke feelings and memories, emphasizing materiality, light, and bulding tactile qualities. These sections in particular contain Zumthor's insights into how architectural spaces can evoke specific emotions and sensory experiences, providing a deep understanding of his approach to creating atmospheres in architecture: "We perceive atmosphere through our emotional sensitivity – a form of perception that works incredibly quickly, and which we humans evidently need to help us survive… We are capable of immediate appreciation, of a spontaneous emotional response, of rejecting things in flesh."[32] Both Pallasmaa and Zumthor advocate for a sensory-rich approach to architecture, valuing the full range of human sensory experiences in creating meaningful and engaging spaces.

In other words, architectural spaces reproduced through digital platforms inevitably lose some aspects of their full sensory perception, making it challenging for observers to fully grasp the entirety of the space. Instead of focusing on a single comprehensive representation, the observer's attention shifts from one depiction to another. Digital architectural archives use images of architectural events to evoke a specific, individual atmosphere that directly engages the subject, observer, or recipient encountering a digital architectural representation (copy). However, such digital copies are detached and isolated from their original contexts, existing within the digital sphere.

[30] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 26–30.

[31] Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser Architecture, 1999), 11.

[32] Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects* (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2006), 13.

Conclusion

My intention with this paper was to show how digital archives, such as Pinterest, ArchDaily, and Instagram, have fostered a culture of multimodal communication, where architectural practices are increasingly fragmented and disseminated through digital images. This very evolution challenges conventional perceptions of architecture and art, highlighting the absence of fully sensory engagement crucial for experiencing architecture in the digital age. Further, I discussed how, despite the unprecedented access to architectural knowledge and global connectivity offered by digital archives, these platforms (although change in this matter is surely coming in the future) impose limitations by reducing complex, sensory-rich experiences to visual information on screens. This digital fragmentation, following the theoretical paths of Peter Zumthor and Juhani Pallasmaa, detracts from the holistic, sensory engagement essential for fully appreciating architectural spaces. However, as mentioned, in the future, with the continued evolution of VR and AR technologies, there is potential to significantly enhance sensory experiences in digital architecture. These technologies promise to simulate immersive environments where users can engage with architectural spaces not just visually, but also through auditory and tactile feedback. On the other hand, this promise of enhanced sensory immersion, while seductive, masks a deeper ideological dilemma: instead of truly enriching our experience of architecture, it may merely substitute one form of virtual spectacle for another, creating a further distance from architecture as a reflection of reality within a specific social-historical context.

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