Use of Technology to Create a View

Alexander Ćetković
Ph.D. Research Fellow at the Planetary Collegium
University of Plymouth
Plymouth, Great Britain
acetkovic@acm.org

ABSTRACT

From 1929 – 1931 Le Corbusier built a penthouse for Charles de Beistegui in an existing building on the Champs-Elysée. The apartment, intended for parties and to receive visitors, was designed more to the taste of the host in a surrealistic style. At the same time Le Corbusier was fascinated by the technological aspects of the apartment. While it had only candle lighting (the only to give a living light - Beistegui), there was great deal of electronic technology built in the house to achieve many special effects, above all to control the (outer and inner) scenery. Although the house is situated in one of the most prominent parts of Paris, the view to the surroundings was deliberately prevented by a tall wall. Only the towering icons of Paris – Eifel Tower, Arc de Triomphe and Sacré-Coeur could be anticipated or partially seen over the seam. Push-button movable hedges and a periscope were part of the technology used to orchestrate the view to the surroundings. For this reason the apartment is an ideal example to analyse Le Corbusier's thoughts and ideas about the view. Sixty years later, in 1989, Diller + Scofidio designed a weekend retreat on the Long Island waterfront for a Japanese art investor. The clients request for "a house with a view" provoked the architects to question the term view and to ask why is "architecture a technology that creates a view"? The outcome of the research was a design for an (un-built) retreat consisting a window-framed view coupled with a video monitor that replicated the same view. This paper tries through the two projects to analyse the different aspects they approached in the creation of the view through technology, the comparison of the real and virtual (in one case) or the artificial (in the other case).

Keywords

View, Architecture, Technology

Making Reality Really Real November 4-6, 2010, Trondheim, Norway.
.

> "Why is architecture a technology that creates a view? Because it mediates it with a window frame."
> Elisabeth Diller[6]

1. APARTMENT CHARLES DE BEISTEGUI BY LE CORBUSIER (CONSTRUCTED 1929-31) IN PARIS

The apartment of Charles de Beistegui, which no longer exists, was situated on the Champs-Elysées, one of the most thriving and attractive areas of Paris. It was commissioned by count Charles de Beistegui, an eccentric multi-millionaire art collector. The apartment was intended mainly for parties to which the count invited many artists and celebrities of the time. What strikes one looking at the pictures of the apartment is total lack of views to the vicinity from the terrace, negating the favoured location. It had also in many other ways a special setting. The prevailing style was more surrealistic, as Beistegui, renowned for his interior design, used elements such as Venetian glass and Napoleon III embellishments. The pictures of the apartment do not at all remind one of the modernist idol Le Corbusier. Nevertheless, Le Corbusier did integrate many of his ideas, although they are not obvious at first sight. A significant motivation for Le Corbusier was the technology involved in the project. Although only lit by candle-light (the only "living light", according to Beistegui), the apartment had about four kilometres of electrical cables installed for special effects used to impress guests. There were moving walls, chandeliers that would lift to reveal a cinema projection room, and doors that would open automatically, invisible like the "docile servant"[1]. However, many of the interventions were included to emphasize something that at first sight was architecturally obscured: the view. The rooftop terrace, organized on four levels, was on the entry level bounded by a high hedge, leading to a high platform outlined only with walls, a fire-place on one side, and a grass floor, creating "la chambre à ciel ouvert". In images, one sees tips of the Arc de Triomphe, Sacré Coeur, Notre Dame, and the Eifel-Tower, the four icons of Paris (lieux sacrés de Paris - Le Corbusier) peeking over the edge of the walls. These four precise places Le Corbusier described as "moving views" ("perspectives émouventables" [2]), in place of the suppressed panoramic view of Paris. The vistas reproduce the "reality" of Paris as depicted

[1] pp. 297 [2]
[2] pp. 303 [2]

by contemporary postcards[3]. On the lower levels, the press of a button moved parts of the hedges electrically, revealing Notre Dame and its surroundings. Of the inside spaces, the salon has two picture windows (one facing Eiffel Tower, the other Notre-Dame); half of the window towards Eiffel Tower moves electrically, opening the view on the big terrace where the Arc de Triomphe appears, and with trimmed trees used as a framing device. In 1928, three years before the apartment was accomplished, Valéry wrote:

> "Works of art will acquire a kind of ubiquity... They will not merely exist in themselves but will exist wherever someone with a certain apparatus happens to be... Just as water, gas electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual and auditory images, which will appear and disappear at the simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign... I don't know if a philosopher has ever dreamed of a company engaged in the home delivery of Sensory Reality."
> [10]

The only way to fully enjoy the metropolitan spectacle was by watching the projection in a "camera obscura" of a periscope on the rooftop.

> "The distance interposed between the penthouse and the Parisian panorama is secured by a technological device, the periscope. An 'innocent' reunification between the fragment and the whole is no longer possible; the intervention of the artifice is a necessity"
> (Tafuri n.d.)[1]

> "But if this periscope, this primitive form of prosthesis, this 'artificial limb,' is necessary in the Beistegui apartment, it is only because the apartment is still located in a nineteenth-century city: it is a penthouse in the Champs-Elysées. In "ideal" urban conditions, the house itself becomes the artifice."[2]

The view was presented on a table in the darkened room, projected through an optical prosthesis, a forerunner of the digital surveillance-camera. Unlike the classical "camera obscura", that displayed the objects mirrored and upside-down, the periscope presents the projection in proper orientation. The setting of the periscope allowed a 360° view of the environment. The motif of the periscope, the rooftops and landscape of Paris, was more or less fixed. On the other hand, the observer was obliged to move around the table, following the periscope if he wanted to see the projection properly - thereby reversing, in a certain sense, the roles in the cinema, where the spectator is fixed and the images mobile. The dark room had the same effect on the spectator as in cinema, bringing him closer to the picture.

> "The power of artificial light to create its own reality only reveals itself in darkness. ... The spectator in the dark is alone with himself and the illuminated image because social connections cease to exist in the dark. Darkness heightens individual perceptions, magnifying them many times. The darkened auditorium gives the illuminated image an intensity that it would not otherwise possess. Every lighted image is experienced as the light at the end of the tunnel — the visual tunnel, in this case — and as a liberation from the dark."[8]

[3]pp. 318 [2]

2. "THE SLOW HOUSE" DESIGNED BY DILLER + SCOFIDIO, HAMPTONS, LONG ISLAND, 1991

In 1991 the architects Diller + Scofidio were commissioned to design a weekend retreat for a Japanese art investor. "Our client came to us and said he wanted a house with a view". That request made them analyse the term "view" – for instance, the evolution of the picture window and the terminology in real-estate ads – proposing a design that didn't resemble the typical weekend-house. Knowing that the client would arrive by car, for them the intervention begins at the moment of the departure from the city, the windshield of the car framing the commute. When the car stops at the end of the road, the approach continues by foot to the front door of the house. Actually, the front door is the front façade, four feet wide and eight feet high. Immediately behind the entrance, the passage is divided in two: one way ascending and leading to the kitchen, dining, and living areas; the second remains level and leads to the bedrooms and bathrooms. Either choice of the divided passage leads to a picture window and the view. The shape of the house, bent like a banana, at first prevents seeing the window in the back. When the picture window is finally reached, the view is partly obstructed by a video monitor, displaying the same vista. A tall stack holds a window camera forty feet above the ground, capturing the water view. It transmits the live image to the TV monitor in front of the picture window – in front of the "real" view. The camera can pan, zoom, and record. If the view is recorded, it can be replayed showing day when it is night, or displaying fair weather when it is foul outside. The view can be played fast-forward or in slow-motion, and can be frozen in slow-motion. It can be even transported to another location.

> "In the slow house, the tele-visual view to the horizon is seen concurrently with, and compressed against, the view framed by the picture window. The TV screen electronically reconstitutes the portion of the image that it blocks. The "view" is thus grafted together in two representational models, though the horizon lines are out of register. Despite the leisure posture, the body sunk into the recliner with remote control in the hand, only one thing eludes the control of the passive viewer: the horizon can never be realigned. Thus, the vacant leisure gaze is arrested at the window's surface and forced to contemplate the instrument of its contemplation."

> "The Slow House is a vacation home – a second home, and as such, it exploits the freedoms of the surrogate. Taking issue with the construction of visual pleasure for the leisure eye – both its production and its denial – the house regulates three optical devices of 'escape' from and to

culture: *the car windshield*, a reversible escape in the vehicular space between city and vacation home; *the television screen*, a solitary escape into mediatic space, a social space that connects viewers with an electronic weld; *the picture window*, the escape into a proprietary scenic space, a space measured by market value."
Diller+Scofidio[3]

The house itself was never built. Soon after the foundation was dug, the art market crashed, and the financially stricken client withdrew the commission.

3. COMPARISON OF THE TWO HOUSES

3.1 The house as technology to create a view

Both Le Corbusier as well as Diller+Scofidio see architecture as a technology to create a view. In a series of drawings around Rio de Janeiro that represent the relation between domestic space and spectacle, Le Corbusier shows his relationship to the view:

> "The house is installed in front of the site, not in the site. The house is a frame for a view. The window is a gigantic screen. But then the view enters the house, it is literally "inscribed" in the lease: "The pact with nature has been sealed! By means available to town planning it is possible to enter nature in the lease. Rio de Janeiro is a celebrated site. But Algiers, Marseilles, Oran, Nice and all the Côte d'Azur, Barcelona, and many maritime and inland town can boast of admirable landscapes."
> Le Corbusier[4]

But as Colomina put it, Le Corbusier doesn't mean that architecture is independent of place. It is the concept of place that has changed. "We are talking here about a site that is defined by sight." Viewing a landscape through a window implies a separation. A "window, breaks the connection between being in a landscape and seeing it. Landscape becomes [purely] visual, and we depend on memory to know it as tangible experience."(Rosalind Krauss)[5] In de Beistegui's apartment the technology imposes even more – electricity is used as a technology of framing: doors, walls, hedges – traditional architectural framing devices – are activated with electric power, as is the cinema projector[6]. The views from the inside and outside spaces are technologically controlled.

And for Diller+Scofidio the picture window constructs nature and domesticates it, it commodifies the view and turns it in an artifact:

> "If the picture window turns any view into a representation, collapsing the depth onto the surface of glass, the framed ocean view in the Slow House is no less "mediated" than the "technologized" view on its TV screen. The terms of mediation are thus put into question, as are the designations "high" and "low" in relation to technology. As advanced technology strives to dematerialize its hardware, leaving only its effects, is not the picture window, in fact, a more advanced technology than the television set, in that its socially and economically driven mechanisms are virtually invisible, leaving only a simple frame?"
> Diller+Scofidio[3]

3.2 The movement as opposed to the fixed observer of the perspective view

In both projects movement has a major role in experiencing the architecture. As in other projects (Villa Savoye, Villa Stein, Villa Roche), Le Corbusier creates a promenade architectural, which has been often compared to mise-en-scene of films. Eisenstein in his essay "Montage and Architecture" [4] compares the setting in architecture to the montage in film where, as Friedberg[7] explains, Eisenstein was drawn to the paradoxical relation between the mobility of the architectural spectator and immobility of the cinematic viewer. It is important to note that in both projects the Albertian perspective view with the fixed spectator is negated though the setting that conveys movement. Of course it is not only staged for the view, but to create a tension, an arousing by the movement in building.

3.3 The virtual and the real

In both projects the 3D landscape is reduced to a 2D view. Furthermore, the view is compared with the virtual presentation on the TV-screen or the projection of the periscope where the vertical facades and the sky are displayed horizontally. Also in the Slow House there is this aspect of "multiple" screens, like windows in the computer, where several presentations are viewed at the same time, corresponding to the broader consciousness of our time. The reality is projected in the virtual, or more precisely it becomes a mediated reality.

4. CONCLUSION

With the two houses, the apartment de Beistegui from Le Corbusier, and Diller+Scofidios' "Slow House", I was interested in the relation of technology to architecture and the possible role of technology to help interpret, analyse, or redefine certain aspects of architecture. The two houses are not typical architecture. Moreover, they are, each one for itself, special in the typology of architecture they represent, the fun house and the vacation house, both planned not for general, but for only specific tasks. Both of them are, more or less, designed around the theme of the view. What makes them special, in my eyes, from other projects of this kind, is the integration of technology to reflect on the theme of the view. Indeed both projects wouldn't be the same in their meaning if they were stripped away of the technology. The technology is used as a prosthesis to achieve certain effects, and at the same time to bring deeper insight.

5. REFERENCES

[1] H. A. e. Brooks. *LE CORBUSIER. Essays by: Rayner Banham, Tim Benton, H. Allen Brooks, Alan Colquhoun, Charles Correa, Norma Evenson, Kenneth Frampton, Danièle Pauly, Vincent Scully, Peter Serenyi, Jerzy Soltan, Manfredo Tafuri, Stanislaus von Moos, André Wogenscky, Iannis Xenakis.* Princeton University Press, 1987.

[4] pp.319-323 [2]
[5] pp. 133 [2]
[6] pp. 301 [2]
[7] pp.172 [5]

[2] B. Colomina. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture As Mass Media*. MIT Press, 1980.

[3] E. Diller and R. Scofidio. *Flesh: Architectural Probes*. Princeton Architectural Press, 1 edition, Jan. 1996.

[4] S. Eisenstein. Montage and Architecture. *Assemblage 10*, (December 1989):111–131, 1938.

[5] A. Friedberg. *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. The MIT Press, Oct. 2006.

[6] A. Lubow. Architects, in Theory, Feb. 2003.

[7] J. Scanion. Making It Morph. *Wired*, (8.02), Feb. 2000.

[8] W. Schivelbusch. *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*. University of California Press, Dec. 1995.

[9] B. Stafford, F. Terpak, and I. Poggi. *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*. Getty Research Institute, Feb. 2001.

[10] P. Valery. The Conquest of Ubiquity. *Ralph Mannheim (trans.) Aesthetics. New York: Pantheon Books."La Conquète de l'ubiquité", first published in De la Musique avant toute chose. Éditions du Tambourinaire*, 1928.