Enigmatic Assemblages

Follies at the Intersection of Architecture and Photography

Annabel Pretty

Abstract

Hyperreal architectural photographic assemblages proliferate within contemporary media: artists, photographers and architects envision digital worlds that operate at the intersection of hyperreal architectural renders, artistic media and photography. The manifestation of these assemblages can be examined in the works of French artist Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy (1986–), and Canadian artists Carl Zimmerman (1951–) and David Trautrimas.

Gaudrillot-Roy's assemblages from the series *Façades #3* interrogate the notion of architectural form, how buildings impose and connect with their environments. The photographs present the buildings in a superficially twilight aesthetic; the viewer's immediate glance registers a possible reality, but a second glance confirms the flattened buildings can only be a discourse on the enigmatic notion of spatial qualities. Zimmerman's photographic practice questions the notion of imagined environments by using the mechanism of the folly or ruin within a utopian world. In contrast, Trautrimas's assemblages use pastiche, montage and collage to extend on both Zimmerman's and Gaudrillot-Roy's images, creating surreal utopian possibilities that transform an actuality by creating and manipulating spatial qualities, redefining how we conceive and perceive space.

These pluralistic assemblages draw insights and multiple narratives, as digital architecture has become pervasive and ubiquitous in the search for spatial properties. Unique and enigmatic narratives are constructed, allowing investigations to further the Deleuzian concept of 'assemblage' (in French, agencement). This paper aims to shed light on how this contradiction is a central engine for the articulation of relevant discourses and narratives, which have a significant impact on contemporary spatial conception and practices, and push the creative research beyond the limits of the mere superposition that one experiences daily with the digital augmentation of reality.

Introduction

Photography and architecture share an uncomfortable co-dependent relationship. Paradoxically, architects need photographic imagery to showcase and describe buildings in a rational and comprehensive manner prior to the built form (a rendered image, as precognition of potential future vision of architecture), and invariably architectural photographers are contracted to create compelling marketable images post-construction to both promote the architectural practice and as consumable accessible evidence of the building to wider audiences. Spanish architect and writer Jesús Vassallo[1] writes, of this consumable evidence, that once an architect completes a project, it is handed over for someone else to translate its consumption – "Photography then certifies the ossification of the project" – indicating that the representation of the building, therefore, becomes rigid and unimaginative as a singular viewpoint – an antithesis of the hyperreal assemblage[2] image. Philosopher and cultural theorist Jean

1   Jesús Vassallo, "Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture," in *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Jesús Vassallo, 165–90, Architecture at Rice University (Zurich: Park Books, 2016).

2   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, ed. Félix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1987); Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

Baudrillard (1929-2007), in *Simulacra and Simulation*,[3] establishes the notion of the hyperreal as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" and further illustrates the valuable successive phase most fundamental to the understanding of hyperreality, that of the blend of reality and representation characterised by Baudrillard's concept of the simulation, where simulation no longer takes place within the physical realm.

The simulation thus "envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum,"[4] and is not a copy of the real but a truth in its own right and thus creates four steps of reproduction: (1) a reflection of a profound reality; (2) a mask of reality; (3) an absence of reality; and (4) simulacrum, which "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever."[5] Hyperreal images sit at the intersection of these preconceived images (the hyperreal render as a possible building): the hyperreal post-built image (the slick hyperreal marketing image, heavy with Photoshop); and the hyperreal, photo-montaged, digitally assembled possibility. Artist–architect–photographers blur these boundaries and create a sort of fantastical hyperreal hybrid possibility, also termed by architect, curator and writer Pedro Gadanho (1968-) as 'architecture fiction'[6]: believable, unbuildable, but questioning spatial relationships; manifest as Enigmatic Assemblages.

Assemblage Follies Framework

The plethora of hyperreal, photo-montaged, digitally assembled images that proliferates within contemporary visual architectural media would indicate that image makers (artists, photographers, Photoshop artists, architects, et al.) do not require architects to generate plausible spatial constructs. These spatial constructs – or rather hyperreal collaged/assemblage images – break normative boundaries of spatial attributes, causing the viewer to reappraise and rethink their relationship with architecture, imagining a pluralistic view of spatial qualities. Within the context of this paper, these fantastical speculative-hyperreal spatial constructs (assemblages) will use the synecdoche of the folly[7]

as a mechanism or instrument to describe these hyperreal assemblages, similar to that of the painter's strategy of the 'architectural capriccio.'[8] Architectural follies have an extensive history of the un-contextual building within the picturesque landscape (illustrating power and wealth) as well as the double entendre of the meaning of the word: folly being foolish, extravagant, somewhat transcendent, or delightful with little practical purpose. A folly, therefore, is one of the most extreme embodiments of a conceived system of desire and representation[9] and is the vehicle by which to bring forth new ways of interpreting relationships of space, landscape and architecture. These spatially subversive hyperreal virtual follies deploy a type of spatial transduction,[10] for the production of images of incompatible juxtapositions of heterogeneous elements, creating Enigmatic Assemblage follies.

The intention of this investigation is to compare and contrast the spatial interpretations of such artist–architect–photographer–designers who represent the hyperreal follies: Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy (1986-), David Trautrimas and Carl Zimmerman (1951-). All three pay homage to a previous generation of artist–architect–photographers working within this intersection, such as Filip Dujardin (1971-), Victor Enrich (1976-) and Dionisio González (1965-). Filip Dujardin is ubiquitously associated with the genesis of these hyperreal assemblage image-makers. Writer Stefan Devoldere,[11] in the book *Filip Dujardin: Fictions*, quotes Dujardin speaking about his hyperreal images: "Without reality, there's no fiction. I detect building types and mechanism in real architecture, which I then enlarge or make more extreme in my imaginary architecture but always bounds of plausibility." These hyperreal images are also described by Enrique Encinas, Sara Božanić and Oleg Šuran as "high-fidelity fictional artefacts,"[12] and in the writing of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby[13] they are designated 'speculative'; however, Ivice Mitrović et al. expand this to encompass a vast constellation of adjacent terms from Sjef van Gaalen, including Design Fictions, Futurescapes and Speculative Fictions to name but a few.[14]

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3   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

4   Ibid., 6.

5   Ibid.

6   Jan De Vylder, Stefan Devoldore, and *Pedro Gadanho, Filip Dujardin: Fictions*, trans. Robrecht Vandemeulebroucke (Brussels: Hannibal, 2014), 6.

7   Pedro Gadanho in De Vylder, Devoldore, and Gadanho, *Filip Dujardin: Fictions*, 7.

8   The painter's 'architectural capriccio' is a device to construct an architectural fantasy or fiction by an assemblage of composites of building ruins and other architectural agents, as evidenced by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778).

9   Sophia Psarra, *Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009).

10   'Spatial transduction' coined by Gilbert Simondon (1958). Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier et Montaigne, 1958); Paulo de Assis, "Transduction and Ensembles of Transducers: Relaying Flows of Intensities," in *Transpositions: Aesthetico-Epistemic Operators in Artistic Research*, ed. Michael Schwab, 245–66 (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2018).

11   De Vylder, Devoldore, and Gadanho, *Filip Dujardin: Fictions*, 60-61.

12   Enrique Encinas, Sara Božanić, and Oleg Šuran, "Methods, Approaches and Tools: Ambiguity, Tensions and Scopes," in *Beyond Speculative Design: Past – Present – Future*, ed. Ivica Mitrović, James Auger, Julian Hanna, and Ingi Helgason (Split, Croatia: SpeculativeEdu; Arts Academy, University of Split, 2021), 84.

13   Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

14   An online survey by Sjef van Gaalen of the names of adjacent design practices identifies 80 different names, from Design Fiction, Future Design, Antidesign, Radical Design, Interrogative Design, Discursive Design, Adversarial Design, Futurescape (van Gaalen, 2018, in Encinas, Božanić, and Šuran, "Methods, Approaches and Tools," 70). De Vylder, Devoldore, and Gadanho's 2014 book is titled *Filip Dujardin: Fictions*.

The Intersection

The gap the research addresses is that of architecture-fictions being created without architects by utilising hyperreal assemblage to test, develop and expand spatial qualities. Three central concepts are used strategically – firstly that of the Deleuzian assemblage, secondly Henri Lefebvre's notion of 'perceived' and 'conceived' space, and finally that of the 'bricoleur'[15] from Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln – to critique and analyse the three case studies of Gaudrillot-Roy, Trautrimas and Zimmerman. The philosopher Rosi Braidotti[16] (1954–) discusses the notion that an assemblage can be a montage, not a given point in time or space but rather a 'quilt' of retrieved material that buttresses into Denzin and Lincoln's notion of the 'bricoleur' as someone who borrows from many disciplines, creating new understandings of the blended, overlapping, new representations: an intersection. Lefebvre further reiterates within this context the notions of plasticity and assemblage,[17] the nature of photography and its relationship with architecture, which is particularly evidenced within the speculative-hyperreal folly as encompassed by the images of Gaudrillot-Roy, Trautrimas and Zimmerman.

> Cutting things up and rearranging them, decoupage and montage – these are the alpha and omega of the art of image-making. As for error and illusion, they reside already in the artist's eye and gaze, in the photographer's lens, in the draftsman's pencil and on his blank sheet of paper. Error insinuates itself into the very objects that the artist discerns, as into the sets of objects that he selects.[18]

Lefebvre examines within this quote the issue of 'error,' which is very perceptive and pertinent to the hyperreal folly, and woven into the intersection of the bricoleur and within the general understanding of assemblage theory.

Assemblage Follies – Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy

French artist Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy's assemblages from the series *Façades #3* interrogate the notion of architectural form, how buildings impose and connect with their environments. The photographs present the buildings in a superficially twilight aesthetic; the viewer's immediate glance registers them as a possible reality. But a second glance confirms the flattened buildings can only be a discourse on the enigmatic notion of spatial qualities. Gaudrillot-Roy discusses that the series offers a vision of himself as a 'flâneur' as he walks around the city; the first 'punctum'[19] points of initial interaction with a building are the pure façade without depth, and a type of 'other' where daily life is but a scenery. Gaudrillot-Roy further goes on to suggest that he is not

Figure 1. Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy, *Façades #3* (12/14). Hyperreal folly.

Figure 2. Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy, *Façades #3* (11/14). Hyperreal folly.

questioning the artificiality[20] of the scene but rather questioning the perceptions of a specific environment.

One may conclude that Gaudrillot-Roy's images question and expand on the concepts of spatial subversions pertaining to speculative-hyperreal follies by interrogating the notion of spatial subversions using assemblage theory.[21]

Assemblage Follies – Carl Zimmerman

Canadian artist Carl Zimmerman's photographic practice questions the notion of imagined environments by using the

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[15] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2011).

[16] Rosi Braidotti, "Lines of Flight + Suicide," in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, rev. ed., 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 151–152.

[17] As previously discussed by Deleuze and Guattari.

[18] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), §IV:97.

[19] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1st American ed.), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1982).

[20] Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy, "Façades #3," ZGR, http://zachariegaudrillot-roy.com/en/portfolio-20289-0-0-facades-3.html

[21] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*; Adrian Parr, *The Deleuze Dictionary*, rev. ed., 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

Figure 3. Carl Zimmerman (1951-), *Exterior with Windows*, *Cold City* **[9], 2010-2014. Hyperreal folly.**

Figure 4. Carl Zimmerman (1951-), *Exterior with Columns*, *Cold City* **[5], 2010-2014. Hyperreal folly.**

mechanism of the folly, or ruin, within a utopian world. Like Trautrimas, whose work is discussed in the following section, he, too, is harking back to the Cold War-era, however meshing with early memories of civic and industrial building within the town of Hamilton, Ontario.[22] Combining the use of neo-classical fabricated architectural models and digital post-production, plus in-camera techniques, in the series *Cold City* (2010-2014) he creates a type of monumentality in which he suggests:

> *Cold City* doesn't represent any literal place, but rather it is an amalgamation of gigantic parts – part Cold War memorial, part unchained industrial behemoth, part Stalinist Neo-classical temple, part Constructivist pipe dream, part past, part future.[23]

It is this dichotomy that is illustrated within Lefebvre as:
> Wherever there is illusion [which resides in the photographer's lens] the artist's eye and gaze, the optical and visual world plays an integral and integrative, active and passive, part in it. It fetishizes abstraction and imposes it as the norm. It detaches the pure form from its impure content – from lived time, everyday time.[24]

Lefebvre's opinion is further validated by Jesús Vassallo,[25] who states:
> This democratization of forgery shatters the indexical link of photography with reality. We are now much more vigilant when we approach an image, aware that we may be looking at something other than a registration of reality. In severing the umbilical cord between the photograph and its object, the introduction of the digital blurs the division between observation and action, between representing the world and proposing new worlds.

Assemblage Follies – David Trautrimas

In contrast, David Trautrimas's assemblages use pastiche, montage, and collage to extend on Gaudrillot-Roy's and Zimmerman's images, creating surreal utopian possibilities that transform an actuality by creating and manipulating spatial qualities, redefining how we conceive and perceive space. The bricolage[26] of elements merges sculpture, photography and Photoshop elements, such that each structure is composed from a constellation of disassembled household appliances: "devices of destruction are assembled from the very appliances that promised deliverance to a post-WWII paradise."[27] Each assemblage is based on the Cold War era of industrial design and its utopian promise, creating moody, futuristic-seeming, military-esque landscapes.

22   Wayne Baerwaldt, *Untitled: New Work by Carl Zimmerman* (Sackville, Canada: Owens Art Gallery, 2001).

23   Carl Zimmerman, "Cold City (2010-2014," http://www.carlzimmerman.ca/cold-city.html

24   Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, §IV:97.

25   Vassallo, "Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture," 171.

26   Denzin and Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

27   Catherine Warmann, "The Spyfrost Project by Dave Trautrimas," Dezeen, April 26, 2010, https://www.dezeen.com/2010/04/26/the-spyfrost-project-by-dave-trautrimas/

Figure 5. David Trautrimas, *Seismic Conduction Tower*, 2009, color pigment ink print, 30 × 20 inches, edition of 14. Hyperreal folly.

Figure 6. David Trautrimas, *The Aurora Maker*, 2009, color pigment ink print, 17 × 14 inches, edition of 16. Hyperreal folly.

Since many of these follies are a pastiche or montage of multiple elements, is it anticipated that it is possible to generate innovative ways of perceiving and conceiving the architecture fictions, aligning with philosopher Henri Lefebvre's (1901–1991) notions of perceived and conceived space.[28] Moreover, by decoding the threads of the multiple spatial qualities of these sublime follies it is shown that their photographic representation cannot be considered a pure unbiased recording of intent but rather a means of sublime spatial production.[29]

Concluding Remarks

"Enigmatic Assemblages" is a research investigation that utilises a literary backbone to question the construal intersectionality of hyperreal photorealistic architectural representations. The necessity of this research is to survey these contemporary hyperreal sublime follies to untangle and appraise their connections within current architectural and photographic theories and discourse, and to find new ways of defining and interpreting the spatial qualities. American architectural educator and critic Cynthia Davidson (1952–)[30] proposed the belief of the dichotomy of the lived experience and its problematic digital representation within the field of architecture – what Lefebvre called 'social space.'[31] Davidson and Lefebvre, therefore, retrace our steps back to Baudrillard's concept of the 'simulation' being simultaneously a reflection of a profound reality, a mask of reality, an absence of reality and therefore a simulacrum. All of which can be evidenced in varying degrees within the works of Gaudrillot-Roy, Trautrimaus and Zimmerman. Davidson also raises corresponding awareness of these issues by wrapping into her below quote Walter Benjamin's speculations on the representation of the image thus:

> as Benjamin wrote … a new kind of ritual making, one that ensnares the original, or the 'real,' in the digital. The consequences of this are a return to privileging of the visual; in the digital, the image becomes the architecture.[32]

To circle back to the paper's introduction, which utilises a quote that refers to the tendency of architectural photography to create a particular type of 'ossification' of the actual representation of an architectural building: the quintessential iconic image. Nonetheless, the dialogues of such artist-architect-photographers as Gaudrillot-Roy, Trautrimas and Zimmerman counter this notion. They allow for new narratives and interpretations, creating a bricolage of circuitous interpretations of space and the reading(s) of the spatial qualities within the Enigmatic Assemblage folly, insomuch as Benjamin writes, "the image becomes the architecture."

28   Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

29   Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 98–99.

30   Cynthia Davidson, in "Introduction Images of *Anymore*," in *Anymore*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson, Thomas Weaver, and Anymore Conference (Paris, France, 1999), 8.

31   Stanek, Łukasz, "Architecture as Space, Again? Notes on the 'Spatial Turn,'" *Spéciale'Z* 4 (2012): 48–53.

32   Davidson, Weaver, and Anymore Conference, eds., *Anymore*, 8.

Author

Annabel Pretty is Discipline Leader for the Master of Architecture (Professional) programme and a Senior Lecturer at the School of Architecture, Unitec New Zealand, whose research investigations are located at the intersections between architecture, photographic representation of architecture, and visual representation. The research trajectory includes supervising thesis students on the Master's programme, whose projects lie within social architecture, art and architecture, and live studio projects. Current research has sought to investigate 'sublime follies': the hyperreal representations of buildings. She has been a Cumulus Fellow since 2016 and Professional Member of DINZ (PDINZ) since 2012. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6786-301X

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