

Building the Image

BY JASPER CAMPSHURE

Capital initiates an ontological guilt and dept becomes a political construction

We all remember the first time we saw one of those grainy images, each one a single-point perspective, whose horizon line and vanishing point formed a great floating cross dividing the edge of the building, mullion, light fixture, trellis, or column. When the grid was not explicitly part of the image, its formal qualities made the gridding of space implicit, legible. At the same time the seriousness of all this was miraculously offset by a dab of *pop*. And symbolic domesticity too: a Thonet chair in the corner, a vase, the rack of cooking utensils, sophisticated yet humble *life*. The images took Mies's most heroic elements and borrowed in broad strokes from David Hockney and Richard Hamilton. They tapped specifically and diversely from Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women* (certainly), Giorgio Morandi's *Natura Morta* series (likely), and Balthus's *Le Passage du Commerce Saint André* (maybe), producing in any one image a powerful alchemy that established disciplinary legitimacy from architecture canons and cultural cache from artistic ones. Yet the *feeling* each image conveyed was paramount. The architecture represented—as if it mattered—looked like Aldo Rossi's work before he was able to build much. All the better. It frequently orbited in the realm of camp,¹ but was too self aware and anyway, not committed enough to the aesthetic to actually go camping. Other drawings played supporting roles: the maniacally elaborate plans, the axonometrics, so labored, and yet sterile, delicately suspended in a place that either captured the chaos of the capitalist city or the solemnity characteristic of its alternative. The perspectives, though, carried the day. Always, the image was located in a square frame, the most elemental, the beginning of architectural form.

Whatever this alchemy was, it was exactly what we needed. It went against everything

disdainful in architectural representation: the solar flares, the photorealism, the flock of birds, children running tethered by colored balloons. The repugnant *happiness*. It pointed a way out of the building as mere program diagram to which we had been shackled for too long. And it took the effort to provide a whole new body of powerful writing to supplant the former. We felt immediately that the written work supporting the images went against “capitalism” explicitly and unapologetically, and for that we were grateful, though more than anything probably relieved. It was, in a word, dogmatic.

Upon investigation one discovered the website with a .name domain; a single aspect almost too unreal to believe. Who does that? Turns out the images originated in the appropriately nondescript city of Brussels. Their production was a great equalizer: anyone with Photoshop, a Xerox machine, access to the internet, and a decent education in the twentieth century avant-garde could represent this vision.

So you did what everybody else did, diving headfirst into its theory by night and techniques of representation by day. Once you drew your own projects like this you sent a strong signal that you had read the books. You were in the know, and above all you were righteous; fighting the good fight while the rest of the architecture-world pigs ran off the rails making obscene buildings. You were in deep.

It wasn't long after you took the plunge though that you noticed other people doing the same thing. Like a slow-moving storm, the books multiplied on every desk. Everyone around you was doing it—reading the books, making the images. But no mind—after all, everyone here was an elite academic, and this thing was ours, it was us. Maybe this time against all odds, it would change business as usual.

With as much clarity we all remember the decline—the first time you saw someone do it wrong: an image that was a bit too polished, perhaps as a competition entry for MoMA PS1, that you began to grow weary. Those kept coming, more watered down with each instance. Then came the coup de grâce: the firm of the same architect that called for architects to “ride the shockwave of the new economy” was using it. And for a big steel and glass office tower in midtown Manhattan. FUCK. That hurt. It had all looked so good and had meant so much—it was the only thing we had so we held it tight. These things happen. Postmodernism strutted through the schools backed by all of this intellectual rigor and then in a flash the only thing left was Michael Graves’s tea kettle for Target. Only when it stares back at you from your stovetop does the full gravity of its degradation hit you—stylized, commodified, and suddenly, irretrievably conventional.

So what happened? You could lazily explain this away by blaming capitalism for taking its natural course, co-opting novelty to feed rabid cycles of consumption. Upon consideration of the facts though, you, dear reader, will likely conclude alongside me that a far more sinister activity has been at work, orchestrated with one goal in mind: to produce a regime of building *sans* thinking. Building without end.

Let that sink in.

Criticism used to be the one impediment to this total takeover; building without thinking could not be achieved as long as architectural criticism was still tethered to building production in the academy. No matter how feeble this wavering, quibbling, flimsy-folding, withering, stalk ever was—criticism was a voice of thought in the conversation about building, and it mattered. An intermediate but altogether necessary step, therefore, on the path to total unthinking construction, was to collapse visual representation and architectural criticism into one. To make architecture criticism *visual*. As we firmly know by now, all that which is visual is also co-optable. In order to achieve

1. ◀ See, of course, Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” chap. 5 in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009).

2. ▶ Could the use of the image itself have been the red herring? Can the deployment of images and salacious ones at that only be used in a manner that accelerates capitalist development by the simple fact that they are speculations on an as of yet unbuilt future? Was this all able to evade our scrutiny for so long due the fact that it presented itself so convincingly as the exact opposite?

3. ▶ Elia Zenghelis.

this magnificent debilitation of criticism, its greatest author would need to become ubiquitous. All of this is almost too much to believe, I know, but entirely true.

It was the writing and the images together,² the whole bit pitched as the most radical form of criticism of neoliberal building production. What we didn't know what that it was brought to us by a mole—one man picked for his genius at a young age, trained first at the most appropriate school in Venice, and who would subsequently enter into the hearts and minds of architecture students and practitioners by beginning with the last great anti-capitalist figure in architecture as a point of departure. In accordance with the plan, he was then brought into academia to spread the new gospel elsewhere, taking great yet impressionable minds from the best architecture schools in Europe and America because they were the ones it was believed who were most likely to build in the future. He would feed them texts that challenged the lull in architectural criticism, and feed them images that would be treated as an analog to the texts. The images were a new form of advertising.

Dripping with historical and intellectual might, they had the ability to conjure desire from very little. But their sale was not for a product, nor even the desire to make a building, just to represent one. In order to expedite the process, it was packaged in a formula for reproduction so easy that it needs not repeating, for I began here with its description.

What would happen when the pinnacle of architectural representation, understood itself as a form of criticism, was no longer was able to critique?

When it became pure convention it would leave no room for representational critique and importantly, *nowhere else to turn*.

Let that sink in.

Reader: this happened, and now we are now at the edge of the precipice—the plan has entered its final stage.

I need you to know something. If you believed your project was a theoretical

archipelago doing its part to fight the formidable forces of capitalist development, you were wrong. Your project isn't against anything. It is, we'll soon learn decisively, only *for it*—and you unwittingly did your part to inch it along. Now there's no turning back. Style is on its last gasp, and will no longer matter, nor either will content nor intention. And it will all be built. But how could this be? All the publishing, the conferences, the lectures, the years of domain registration and hosting? Who paid for it? Cemex, Holcim, Lafarge, and God.³