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# **An architect's eye Looking, an essential act in a design process**

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## **Abstract.**

This paper focuses on an essential action present in every current architecture practise, which is looking. Instead of reflecting from a global point of view, this mechanism is situated by taking my own situation as a researcher and architect as a starting point. Four themes are looked at: environment, multitude, fragmentation and perspective.

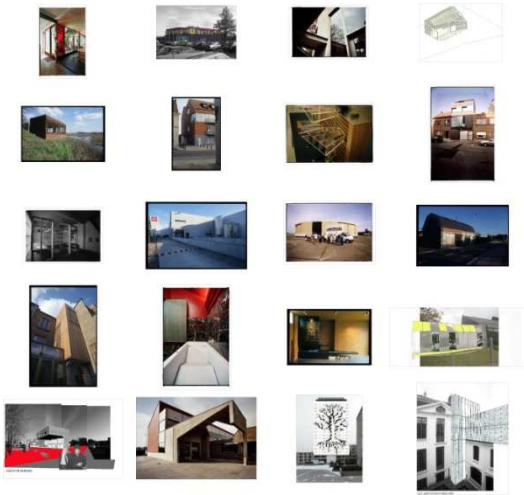
## **Paper.**

A central action in the daily work of an architect is looking. There is a very pragmatic way of looking, such as inspecting the work of a contractor, interpreting technical drawings, observing and persuading a client. There is also the architect who is looking to a design, a drawing, the environment, not from a technical, administrative or economical point of view but from another, an absolutely different perspective. One may put it as, *looking with the eye of an architect*. Of course, it is the same architect with the same eyes; however a different mental path is followed.

This paper describes the latter, not by focusing on a general architect, but by concentrating and hopefully elucidating my own situation as an architect. In brief my architectural experience can be summarized as 15 years of architectural practice within my own office and 10 years of teaching at Ghent University and Sint-Lucas, School of Architecture, Ghent-Brussels. Three years ago the opportunity to start a Ph D project at Sint-Lucas with my architectural work as a main theme offered the possibility of a more in-depth background to my designing and teaching experience. This allowed for a more complex and interesting combination of a pragmatic professional context with an academic context. The research project<sup>1</sup> is formulated in a research question and a research methodology. The question is the following: can one identify and represent the purportedly “ineffable” qualities of experiential knowledge in design practice? The research methodology comprises a series of actions (strategies) expressive of a designerly way of thinking.

The starting point was three collections of material. A first collection comprises own architectural work, *W*, over a period of 15 years for which twenty so-called key works were selected. A second collection consists of images, *I*, (ca. 5000), mainly own photography. This to represent 15 years of looking to the world in a very conscious way. Finally there is a series of keywords, *K*, (ca. 16; sculpture, strategy, subversion ...). These keywords emerged during the 15 years of designing, not always explicit, sometimes latent and implicit and became a vocabulary for me.

These three sources fit in three matrices (#*W*, #*I* and #*K*) and are the beginning of a series of actions. Selecting elements from these matrices, reinterpreting them, creating new photos, videos and texts helps to explain and interpret the research question. Afterwards a phase of evaluation is followed involving the active participation of a public and students.



#W, matrix with key works



#I, matrix with collection of images

sculpture	strategy	subversion	intensity
indistinctness	materiality	texture	image
commonplace	typology	layering	x
facts	puzzles	splinters	old masters

#K, matrix with keywords

The mechanism of looking, the functioning of the architect's eye, is present in a number of ways in the theoretical and mental construction set up in the Ph D project. As pointed out earlier the architect may look in two distinct different ways. However in the context of the present research project the act of looking becomes even more layered, more explicit, more intense, more conscious. It is indeed an important action in the perspective of the research question. As it involves the exploration and analysis of that look. With respect to the main theme of this conference the focus on this paper is on the specific act of looking of me as an architect, between research and practice, between photographer and designer.

This process of looking is characterized by some specific elements which may be summarized as follows. There is always a strong relationship with the environment. The look is a look to the exterior; it is not a dream world, neither a psychological portrait. The look is the look

of eyes towards the world, the environment; it is a physical action. The technical aspect of this type of looking may be generated by a camera, as is the case for my own situation. This results without any doubt in fragmentation. Years of doing so leads to an enormous quantity of photographs. The eye and the camera are related by the perspective. In both cases the perspective is omnipresent as a metric and metaphorical paradigm. Therefore the focus is put on the four themes, environment, fragmentation, multitude and perspective.

The environment is not only looked at, it is also photographed. Indeed, by photographing I become conscious about certain elements in my environment. Moreover, the process of photographing gives me a second chance to look to that environment. This is a second look, a different look, but it includes certain elements of the first physical look. Similar to a moment of interpreting during the physical look there is a moment of interpreting during the second phase. This leads to a second interpretation of an experience and thus to a more layered experience. Between these two interpretations there is a big difference. The first one is based on an ephemeral act, with the architect looking at his environment. The second interpretation is based on the photograph that possesses a fragment of the environment in a very direct and restrictive way. Sontag says, "The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene". This makes sense in real action time, as she illustrates in her example on journalism and photography. Indeed this is a situation where action is essential at the very moment of recording. My own situation is however different. I register and record to intervene at a later stage as an architect. The photographs stocked in my matrices, and slumbering present in my mind, influences my creative process.

This allows the photograph to become a mindful extension of the look, an extension of the eye. The millisecond of environment captured by photographing is for me as an architect material for a reflection during an endless time span. As Walter Benjamin puts it with respect to the photographer, "photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals this posture to him. He learns of this optical unconscious through photography, just as he learns of the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Details of structure, cellular tissue,

with which technology and medicine are normally concerned—all this is, in its origins, more closely related to the camera than is the emotionally evocative landscape or the soulful portrait.” It is clear that the origin of the consciousness can be found in the tension between short and longtime experience, coming forward by photographing. In both experiences the same architectural story is embedded. But even more important the consciousness refers to the environment. Both, environment and architecture can be positioned in timeframes, shorter and longer. This is an enigmatic thought that leads to essential aspects of the reality of our environment and the architecture.

For me as an architect the design process is without any doubt interweaved with the environment. If the mechanical act of taking a photograph can help in the process of looking and thus evoke new insights and design actions, then it is evident that I photograph. An important reference for me in making these collections of photographs is the work of Atget. Atget’s *Seven Albums* are inspiring examples of intriguing combinations of intuition and systematization, of how to analyze vigorously an environment, in his case Paris. In a similar way I photograph my own environment, both the daily routine as well as special occasions. As such the environment can be regarded as a rebuilt constellation. It may become an intuitive continuous source of potential elements, solutions, challenges in design processes. It may even condemn architects to look in a specific, more or less obsessed way to the environment because of this compelling mechanism.

Another consequence of this action is the deconstructing effect of a photographic act. Taking a photograph is an action that generates a discontinuity. This means that a chain of actions results in a fragmented registration of the environment. This differs fundamentally from the regular look to the environment. Sontag says “reality as such is redefined as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance. The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing”. But like she mentioned in another essays, there is a certain danger, “... the presence and proliferation of all photographs contributes to the erosion of the very

notion of meaning, to that parceling out of the truth into relative truths which is taken for granted by the modern liberal consciousness.” By deconstructing consciously the environment with photographs, the eye of the architect becomes a passionate observer. In this perspective, I am not an architect that watches, designs and constructs. But rather an architect that intensifies the look by initiating that fundamental mechanism of capturing the images of the observed environment. From that very moment onwards a trajectory starts beyond the first look. So the first look, crucial for generating the material, is only partly essential in the process of reflection and designing. The look from the architect’s eye goes beyond these first milliseconds. The look is constructed in time and it is not in a time fragment constructed.

Looking and working with photographs creates another remembrance of the environment. The construction of a matrix comprising all these photographs was only possible through to an intense process of looking and analyzing. This activity generates a new space, an analogous space. This analogous space functions as an, although fragmented, extreme intensified version of the real environment. This space can be visited, thanks to the archiving of the photographs. But it can only really be experienced once someone, in particular myself but this does not exclude anybody else, looks very carefully to the whole constellation. As such this space becomes analogue. In this space details are omnipresent and unexpected sequences of images are emerging. This is a crucial step to generate creative insight.

As to illustrate the above described mechanism of capturing an example is given. My own collection of thousands of photographs and images is put in a layered and structured system, a so-called matrix. Other words that touch the possible content are fiché, map structure etc. The recording of photographs is a continuous action to constitute the photography collection and is performed in an intuitive and spontaneous way. The second phase covers the selecting, sometimes duplicating of images and finally placing images on several places in the matrix. As mentioned before, this matrix is divided in levels. The first level combines all photographs as rough unstructured material. The upper levels are used to structure the material by the division in themes through so-called keywords. Each keyword is connected to a map, consisting of both a



rough selection of photographs as well as a series of refined selections. These series of selections can be seen as variations on the theme. They are crucial for my mental anticipation on how I look to the environment. It may be regarded similar to variations on a theme in jazz music, where a musician first listens to his environment and then anticipates by playing. Likewise I first listen to the photographs before they are used in a design. This attitude of listening generates a second world, the so-called analogous space. It creates a kind of duplication of the mind. This fragmentation in series is crucial. It enlarges effects, isolates elements. It makes certain qualities more explicit in a fundamental way. This is an intense way of looking.

Another important aspect is the effect of quantity. Indeed it is not the fixation on one image that leads to creative insight. The possible small differences between images, the possible variations in composition, in content of images stimulate a way of thinking.



Series of photographs of a *fence*, refined selection, positioned in the map commonplace



Series of photographs of *non places*, refined selection, positioned in the map commonplace

In a second stage this way of analyzing leads to video work. The quantity of photographs, the analytical look to specific elements in the environment forced me to go back to certain places and restart looking, this time with a camcorder in hand. This was an even more intense way of looking based on the prior experiences. The output, a series of video material is used in a comparable way. Instead of selecting photographs video material is edited, which results in sequences. As if the photo material that has cut the environment in pieces is recombined in a new space.<sup>2</sup>

By looking I create a perspective. As an important reference Albrecht Dürer's *The Painter's Manual* is to be mentioned. In these engravings originating already from 1525 he illustrates a kind of device to explicit and construct the perspective. This perspective is unique, just like mine, because of its one to one relation between the one who looks and the context. This perspective is also layered. It is fulfilled with a series of meanings and notions. This perspective is physical, psychological and historical linked with past and future. That's why it is only partially understandable by any individual. Moreover, the element of time makes every perspective almost impossible to exist as it changes with time.



Engraving of Albrecht Dürer

As it is the aim to better understand my own environment, several actions are needed. My answer may be simple and complex at the same time. Creating images of the environment through photography freezes the perspective and the time component is excluded. The repetitive action leads to a series of isolated perspectives. This results in the representation of a complex and *meaningful* constellation. It may be regarded similar to what Dürer did with his device 500 years ago. The device of Dürer seems a wireframe that deconstructs the whole perspective in a series of smaller elements as to better understand and reproduce the model. Dürer deconstructed the environment in elements one next to the other whereas I try to capture the environment by repetitive photographs one after the other. However, the goal is comparable. Dürer wanted to construct the perspective as a geometrical abstract construction. I, like some other photographers, want to construct that perspective, as a specific symptomatic analogous space.

With these thoughts I tried to situate my look as an architect and a photographer. In the near future, more photographs will be added to matrices, more detailed selections will be made allowing for the look to become sharper and sharper.

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<sup>1</sup> Sint-Lucas is organizing since a couple of years so-called Research Training Sessions with tutors of institutes in Europe and Australia. These three days during sessions, four in a year, help candidates to sharpen their ideas and research proposals.

<sup>2</sup> An intriguing artist who is fully exploring this kind of spaces is David Claerbout. His video work, a kind of manipulated photos, introduces another space. In a work such as *Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg 1910* we see an old photograph. In this photo the leaves of the old tree are moving smoothly, very gentle.

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