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MAS CONTEXT

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COMMUNICATION

Content is only as good as the way we communicate it.

Whether to a colleague, a client or the masses, the way we communicate our ideas will more than likely define their ultimate success or failure.

Developing and applying the right tool to reach the full potential of our work is the critical step in a world that does not lack information.

This issue looks into the way new and innovative ideas, proposals, and projects are shared and discussed in successful ways.

Issue statement by
Iker Gil,
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Learning To Communicate

As designers, we are pretty good at understanding the bigger picture of problems and we are able to distill them into their main ideas and necessary actions. It is a fantastic asset that we develop and continuously refine throughout our career. Often, we like to share and discuss those ideas and actions with our peers, all agreeing on the potential of design in addressing the pressing issues that we face.
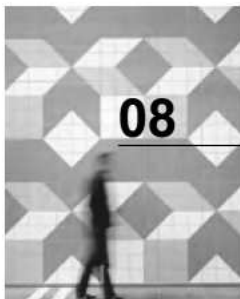
There is one problem however: we are just preaching to the choir. We discuss these ideas with people in our own discipline that already know about the potential of design. They are people who share a similar education and haven been exposed to similar ideas and precedents. At the same time, we use tools specific to our own field to communicate those ideas, instantly limiting the audience and the possibility of incorporating other people from other disciplines.

We have to be smarter at showing the value and potential of design to non-designers. We have to communicate the potential of addressing things in a comprehensive, analytical, ambitious, and optimistic way. The issues we face are complex and multilayered so we need to figure out ways to engage people who must be in the discussion in order to solve things but might have a different backgrounds.

Since the first issue of MAS Context, we have tried to address this communication problem by combining content formats (such as essays, photographs, diagrams, videos just to name a few) and distribution platforms (online, downloadable, physical, events) to not only allow communicating efficiently and clearly the complexity of each topic but also engage with a wider audience. In the end it is about providing critical and analytical thinking to the issues we face and being able to discuss it with others who approach those issues from a different perspective.

In this issue we are including essays, interviews, questionnaires, case studies and illustrations that explore the potential of communication through buildings, exhibitions, manuals, charrettes, urban interventions, drawings and words. They are architects, curators, editors, graphic designers, illustrators, sound designers, academics and instigators who, through their work, communicate ideas, emotions, aspirations, concerns, perceptions, and personalities. Based in cities of Brasil, Canada, Japan, Spain, Switzerland, UK and USA, their work speaks to us all. Now it is our turn to join the conversation.

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Essay and Illustrations by Jake

Modern Talking
[don't you...forget about me]

New trends and new times, new market conditions and newer communicational means are also creating, it seems, new modes of architectural production-consumption and along with them, an allegedly new type of professional with skills suited for an era where communication primes.

News spreads at an increasingly faster rate, generating an exponential inflation in the informational corpus: news and texts are forwarded, commented on, cut/cropped/quoted/linked and disseminated in the blink of an eye, and we, internauts brought up a on a steady diet of continuous feedbacks, updates and comments, have quickly grown dependent upon the continuity of the flux. We require a constant nourishing perpetuating the dynamics of a performative informational experience, which has become the default setting. We, the archinauts, have also grown accustomed to a steady diet of flashy images, renderings and videos that have become the default architectural experience. In this context, the architect renews his vows as a social interlocutor, but this time in the form of a performer who needs to grab the fluctuating attention of a public eye turned into volatile audience. Communicational skills are now, more than ever, a sine qua non for architects who leave behind any past incarnation as either reclusive geniuses or silent craftsmen and become active spokesmen, polemists or even provocateurs. The rise of the contemporary starchitectural system reflects very vividly this situation, where architects stand in the spotlight not only according to the quality of their (classically considered) architectural production, but also corresponding to their qualities as performers, or even due to their ability to keep a network of gossip circulating around them. But in this context, a recurring question keeps emerging, casting a doubt on the legitimacy of architectural discourses that are threatened to be thinned down to nothing by this hypertrophy of the communicational apparatus, which primes production over content. Might it be — I can hear Roger Waters singing — that Architecture is communicating itself to death?

On Digital Knowledge

Even from the most conservative of positions, it is undeniable that the Internet, digital databases, and blog culture have all contributed to boost architectural research, albeit outside of academic parameters. The expanded and accelerated access to information have worked together with the new sharing possibilities to foster the implementation of a researcher mentality, providing a platform where private, individual interests find a plateau and a raison d'être to be developed in varying degrees of formality. The Internet has created a scenario where everyone can become an author by being his own publisher. Blogging platforms have ended with editorial censorship, peer-revisions and the insurmountable endogamy of the publishing world, allowing us —the formerly silent audience — to put our thoughts, words and balloons out there inexpensively and — through the magic of Google search— with a potential audience of millions. This has translated into a centrifugal dissemination of the lines of research, which, through the multiplication of the agents, has also witnessed an exponential increase in the objects of research. The Internet and the blogosphere foster the research of niche interests, located in the periphery of the discipline, which are both blurring its borders and expanding its area of influence by expanding the field of what can be considered architecturally relevant.

And this simultaneous expansion and atomization of research does not limit itself to the informal area. Digital and digital networking tools are also changing the face and mechanics of academic research. Digital texts/books, search engines, and the (earlier) fusion of both in Google books unleash previously unimaginable possibilities for post-modern citacionality, providing us — as an electronic hyperbole of old quote books — with endless possibilities to find classy pearls of wisdom with which to ornate our texts. Digital tools are, in fact, giving birth to a new type: the impatient researcher, who will no longer read books from cover to cover, but rather scan through them via search engines, introducing a priori selected key words and enjoying the discovery of texts he would have never found by pre-digital means. The new tools work to endow us with the capacity to increase our scope, drawing ampler relations and providing us with a bigger big picture, even if at the price of a bigger difficulty to focus. The mediated randomness of these computerized searches, triggered and directed through statistical relational parameters, becomes, in the hands of the curious scholar, a useful tool, difficult to control but fascinating nonetheless, to discover new data and to make unexpected connections, setting the idiosyncrasy of an era of relation-based knowledge, where introspection is substituted for interconnection.

Inevitably, this also fosters a parallel loss of context, of the environmental compound of data and argumentation that comes with the careful dissection of texts, implementing a rather formalist approach towards knowledge that can easily distort meaning by ignoring the accumulated notations that surround the individual pieces of information. The Internet, via search engines, is an enormous quote-book that fosters the dissemination of catchphrases, turning conclusions into attractive straplines at the price of isolating them. Carefully going through entire texts looking for the desired passage has historically been a way to better understand and apprehend the concepts contained in them, but not only that, it has also been an invaluable source for intellectual strategies that shape the inquisitive mind; argumentative

depths that are lost in hyper-reading, where accumulation replaces articulation and (the need for) close-attention. As some apocalyptics are eager to point out, along with the undeniable inflation of the informational mass brought by the digital über-network, also comes an inevitable deflation in the quality of information. Today, news is tweeted, repeated, and forwarded one and a hundred times so that the diversity brought about by the Internet is also paralleled by overwhelming repetition and iterative distortion. The capacity for immediate — and anonymous — publishing has also prompted the preeminence of commentary and opinion over analytic intro-spection and, while this is not necessarily bad in itself, it does multiply some annoy-ing side effects: fast-paced production and anonymity have decreased the need for rigorous citation and contrasting, and while one can certainly appreciate the unex-pected dadaist deconstructions caused by the malicious sabotage of Wikipedia[1], this latitude in the treatment of information certainly entails some perils. On the other hand, constant and thoughtless opinionation more frequently than not substi-tutes logical discussion for a repetition of mantras that allowed Robert Wilensky to enunciate a famous revision/reversion of the infinite monkey theorem that becomes particularly true: "... "We've all heard that a million monkeys banging on a million typewriters will eventually reproduce the entire works of Shakespeare. Now, thanks to the Internet, we know this is not true."

All these asides, along with their obvious lack of academic pedigree, have made those new modes of knowledge production face an increasing and unsurpris-ing suspicion from academia, perfectly portrayed in the two almost simultaneous pieces by Peter Kelly and Patrick Schumacher, whereat they alternatively put into question architectural blogging culture and the new ways in which architectural education is evolving in British schools. (Kelly's The New Establishment[2] mourned nostalgically for "a more realistic and rigorous approach to architectural criticism" that he found had been lost in the tides of the online archiculture better represented by Geoff Manaugh's hegemonic BLDGBLOG, while Schumacher's "slam on British Architectural Education", published in The Architectural Review[3], took issue with the awarding of the RIBA medal to the video installation "Robots of Brixton", by Factory Fifteen's Kibwe Tavares). Both of them posited variants of the same question, that is: to what degree can these expressions be considered part of official architectural knowledge? In the end, the discussion seems rather futile. Whether they are already architecture (or architectural theory) or not seems pretty irrelevant, as long as they are architecturally relevant. Are Robots of Brixton or Jonathan Gales' breathtaking Megalomania architecture architectures-to-be, food for architectural thought? I don't know. Is Zaha Hadid's unbuilt Cardiff Opera House architecture? The plans for Le Corbusier's Ospedale in Venice? A sketch by Alvar Aalto? It's difficult to set the limit. At best, we could discuss in which order they line up, from "pure architec-ture" to its periphery. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Piranesi's drawings are not, stric-to sensu, architecture (some of his architectural fantasies couldn't even be built three-dimensionally), even if they still represent (fictional) architecture. Manfredo

Tafuri's or Reyner Banham's writings clearly aren't. Yet, they are more valuable for architecture than many (most) built works.

The question, however, floats in the air, with voices of the apocalypse ask-ing whether this drifting of research towards the utmost peripheral aspects of the discipline, whether the emphasis on showing (off) are somehow disrupting its very essence, contaminating it, diluting and ultimately turning it into a smokescreen with nothing behind. The hunger for continuous architectural stimuli of our digital lives runs parallel to a radical diminution of the retinal persistence of images. Today, architecture has to be glossy, distinctive, eye-catching, or risk being submerged in the flabbergasting wave of digital imaging. And in this context the architect has to become a performer, a marketing expert, and a fast-packager of discourses that have to be created rapidly and incessantly, almost a matter of automatic writing, or automatic articulation of pre-existent and often unrelated unitas cogitans. Hyperspace, the non-place of dis-location of information, is also the environment for the dislocation of architectural discourse. Thus, the unconditional embrace of digital integrators contrasts with the ominous warnings of our own architectural apocalyptics, worried by the bastardization and subsequent blurring of the disci-pline in its drift towards the periphery and an emphasis on communication that seems to make content irrelevant. Koolhaas's recent complaints about the decreas-ing position of architects in the cultural scale[4] take place in the context of a sense of "this is destroying that" in some segments of the profession, who seem to won-der whether today's scenario as a betrayal of the principles of the heroic period of Modern Movement, and whether today's rather-mediatic-than-productive starchi-tects are not dilapidating the cultural position inherited from the modern masters.

When we were modern
However, once we shake off the short-sighted historical vision endemic to apocalyptic thought, we soon realize none of this is really new. There is an obvious parallelism between the scenario created by blog culture and the 60's phenomenon of the Little Magazines that revisions, such as Beatriz Colomina's itinerating and steadily growing exhibition, are bringing into fashion again. Now that the obligatory 50 years have passed, Archigram or Utopie (publications before/rather than archi-tectural practices) can start being recovered by academia as a pedigreed object of study. But Archigram and their environment, who rejoiced in the same fringe inter-ests that we can find today in the works of BLDGBLOG, Unknown Fields Division or Factory 15, garnered in their time the same kind of outraged reactions from aca-demia[5], even if nowadays there is little contestation of the influence they have had on several generations of architects. And, as it has been pointed out elsewhere, even if their work ultimately came to represent the new sensitivities bred in the countercultural emergence of post-May '68, Archigram's 'popular' tendencies were actually loyal to the foundational traits of hardcore modernism.

MISS COMMUNICATION 2012

The pathos of modern architecture, as portrayed in the works of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Gerrit Rietveld and other "founding fathers" of the first generation, very evidently derived from a high-culture sensitivity imported from the European avant-garde. However, communication and propaganda, and the leaning towards the fabrication of mottos and a thin, collage approach to discourses, full with word-twisting and conceptual prestidigitation, are inalienable from its very ethos. Both Loos and Le Corbusier were active and very vocal polemists, whose architectural persona was developed first and foremost through ardent and opinionated texts. Both of them understood that mass communication represented a fundamental part of modernity and, as such, also a trait of any modern architecture to be developed. Both, at last, sought public attention through their harsh critiques and manifesto-like propositions, and were always eager to use the media. Prolific writers, they founded and edited their own magazines, and hidden behind the wall of the printed page, they multiplied their presence via different pseudonyms that obscured the fact that most of the materials were produced solely by them, creating the illusion of an actual movement: The fiction of Modern Architecture. And this was a fiction that had to take into account all the different aspects of a modern reality defined by the multiplication of focuses of interest and by the progressive meddling of the popular in the exclusive realm of high culture.

Le Corbusier and the moderns, as Alison & Peter Smithson famously put it, were avid collectors of extemporaneous items, from silos to cars, to industrial architectures and airplanes, all of them signifiers of the technological world that pervades the imaginarium of architectural blogging. But L'Esprit Nouveau, Jeanneret's own breviary of obsessions (he touched on every aspect of it, from articles to editorials to illustrations), went much further down the scale of the canonically acceptable obsessions of modernity, showcasing articles on not-yet pedigreed artistic movements such as Surrealism, arts-to-be such as cinema, or even dedicating one of the first academic articles to be found on the still-developing form of comics[6]. An active spokesman, a vedette and a provocateur interested in every corner of reality, from cars to silos and prostitutes, Le Corbusier shows vividly how deeply ingrained the idea of a cultural continuum was in an architectural movement designed for and from the incipient communication era. As in Koolhaas today, Jeanneret's longest and possibly most important project was the design of Le Corbusier himself, a legend that Le Corbusier crafted throughout his life, shown in the continuous rewriting of his own history that we find in the successive editions of his Oeuvre Complete. Self-history rewritten as a means to a message, the very history of modern movement is the recounting of the construction of a myth, sometimes retrospectively, sometimes

in advance, as in Sigfried Giedion's real-time chronicling in Space, Time and Architecture, which can be held responsible for the later evolution of Alvar Aalto.

The Modern ideological apparatus, as Colin Rowe's dissection in his introduction to post-functionalism so aptly explained, was more a system of beliefs than an articulated theoretical corpus; a conundrum of inspiring statements, vague catchphrases akin to popular wisdom that conjugated simplicity with contradiction: The modern ideary was a mishmash of willful mottos, where "Less is more" cohabitated without problem with "God is in the Details," irrationality could go together with standardization and houses could be at once organic entities and machines for living in (of course, Rowe himself couldn't resist the temptation to coin a few highly palatable rhetorical delicatessen[7], only helping underline how deeply rooted marketing was all along the evolution of the movement).

After the post-modern articulatory impasse, which recovered, even if with a deconstructive, skeptical and pessimistic twist, the pre-modern discursive complexity, today's post-critical scene is instead a recovery and reformulation of the expansive impulse of early modernism, and along with it, its tropes. Today's McLuhanites, paradoxically immersed in a desperate search of "cool," retake to the modern tradition of collage discoursing, of guerrilla-thinking and motto production, drastically amplified by the informational overload of the digital age. The age of Wikipedian knowledge and Twitterization of communication is also one of geometrical accumulation, where articulation is replaced by a hyperbolic agglutination, and Eco's maligned cogitus interruptus[8] — taken to new levels of complexity — becomes the default setting for the generation of discourses that develop within relations of contiguity rather than through linear dialectical processes. In the era of blogging and bragging, architects become publicists, performers and comedians, celebrities, video directors and anchormen of their own stations, Méliès(ian) magicians that conjure digital models while speaking to the camera, archaeologists of the future, excavators of the limits of geek culture, micro-bloggers and slogan creators, serpent enchanters, gurus, fashion victims and fashionists, funambulists of the thin rope that separates the suggestive from the irrelevant... producers of "cool," in the end, and dedicated constructors of their own brand image, devoted to keep the flux running.

Today's starchitects may be as focused in construction as in the construction of their own public persona, but while Rem Koolhaas's careful design of the contradictions between his writings/oeuvre/life dwells in a sophisticated and genetically postmodern game of misdirection of his audience, the very effort of the construction belongs in the purest tradition of modern architecture. Today's communication fever and collage thinking may be seen by some as a sign of the unstoppable decline of a discipline doomed by its progressive distancing from the principles of an idyllic (modern) past. But frightful or not, this contradictory, fragmentary, "patchwork" nature is an inalienable condition of that very modernity we mourn.

ENDNOTES

1   Wikipedia has through the years offered truly interesting examples of "creative trolling." Some years ago, while checking dates for another article, I came across the entry for Fritz Lang's Metropolis. The plot summary conveniently described Metropolis as we all know it: a city divided in two levels that corresponded to two different social classes: an upper city, where the wealthy privileged dwelled in a life of luxury, and an underground city, populated by the workers who operated the machines that made the city function and (I quote from memory) "were also obliged to practice anal sex with the members of the upper classes." While I appreciate the deconstructive readings fostered by these inputs, as well as their metaphorical descriptive value, they obviously detract from the original commitment of the project.

2   KELLY, Peter: "The New Establishment" in Blueprint magazine n° 297, December 2010.

3   See SCHUMACHER, Patrick: "Schumacher Slams British Architectural Education" in The Architectural Review online edition, 31 January 2012.

4   "...we also looked at how media in the 60-70s were discovering... these architects [the metabolists et al.] and giving them a significant platform, increasing their aura... And I have to say with a bit of jealousy... that happened at a time without resentment and without caricature. We are now star-architects. It is kind of a horrible condition because it means we get more attention, but [we are] taken less seriously (...)" Rem Koolhaas: "OMA: On Progress". Barbican Art Gallery, October 2011.

5   A good example of the much-less-than-universal enthusiasm faced by Archigram's exotic production can be found in Justus Dahinden's Urban Structures for the Future, a book devoted to the visionary proposals of the 60s and 70s. Even though many of the works presented (such as Dahinden's own Radio City) recovered an imagery that had been mainly developed in pulp publications since the days of the Depression, the entry for Ron Herron's "Walking Cities" read: "We are, of course, bound to ask ourselves whether this utopian conception of a completely mobile town, which at first sight appears to have more in common with science fiction than serious (the emphasis is mine) architecture, could ever be put into practice." DAHINDEN, Justus: Urban Structures for the Future, London: Pall Mall Press, 1972; 114

6   In fact, Le Corbusier's L'Esprit Nouveau was very close to the idiosyncrasy that pervades much of today's architectural blogging culture, exploring different corners of the contemporary visual culture and art that the architect found (architecturally) relevant, regardless of their cultural pedigree. In fact, L'Esprit

Nouveau published one of the earliest articles on graphic narrative that can be found, Le Corbusier's "Toepffer, précurseur du cinema" (L'Esprit Nouveau n° 11-12, 1921; signing as Le Fayet), where he enthusiastically wrote about one of the fathers of modern comics: Swiss pedagogue Rodolphe Töpffer ; (on the influence of Töpffer's figure on Jeanneret, see Stanislaus Von Moos's Le Corbusier, Elemente einer Synthese. Frauenfeld, Stuttgart: Huber, 1968; 13; and "Voyages en Zigzag" in RÜEGG, Arthur; VON MOOS, Stanislaus (eds.): Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting, Photography, 1907-1922. New Haven: Yale University Press, c2002).

7   Jeff Kipnis described Rowe&Slutzky's rhetorical schtick of "phenomenal transparency" as a "catchy bon mot for an interesting formal effect" with "remarkable cachet" (KIPNIS, Jeffrey: "P-Tr's Progress" in DVIDSON, Cynthia: Eleven Authors in Search of a Building: the Aronoff Center for Design and Art at the University of Cincinnati. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1996; 170-181; 172). Kipnis's article also includes a most revealing reflection by Frank Gehry, who is quoted saying that "the best thing about Peter's buildings is the insane spaces he ends up with. That's why he is an important architect. All that other stuff, the philosophy and all, is just bullshit as far as I am concerned." ("Pheromonal Translunacy"; 178)

8   The notion of "cogito interruptus" was explained at length (and coined, as far as I know) by Umberto Eco in the eponymous chapter of Apocalittici e integrati: comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa (Milano: Bompiani, 1964; 383-403), where he picked on Marshall McLuhan's argumentative processes in "Understanding Media". Eco notes how McLuhan often constructs his discourse through simultaneity, putting together different ideas as if they were consequentially linked in a logical succession, but these connections are never explicitated. McLuhan entrusts this linkage to the reader, who, presented with an abundance of examples, extrapolates by Guttenbergian habit, filling the voids in the discourse with inexistent "and therefore"s.