

THE 'BOTH-AND' SITE

Representation of ambiguous site conditions through architectural drawing

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Genoa is born and grew powerful through conflict. The Genovese had to conquer the city territory from nature, and the harsh conditions made the initial rise of Genoa unlikely to succeed, but eventually the relation between man and nature proved to be beneficial and forged “La Superba”: a proud and powerful merchant-pirate city state. Nowadays, Genoa's love-hate relation with nature is still ongoing and this tension becomes apparent through a complex accumulation of traces and systems. The palimpsestuous urban fabric of Genoa -a multiplicity of architectures, infrastructures, programs and social constructs, accumulated over time into an extremely complex matrix of

forces- requires an expanded notion of site. Trying to understand the site as one comprised element, constrained by its physical boundaries, would result in a too limited perspective. Furthermore, the interpretation of these constructs is affected by one's personal position within discourse. Site becomes therefore highly subjective and ambiguous. However, to communicate these ambiguous site conditions they need to be conveyed through drawing. This paper will explore how to grasp the ambiguity that emerges from interpreting site multiplicities and investigate how the architectural drawing in itself can create allegory, metaphor and ambiguity which can uncover a deeper layer of site understanding.

An expanded notion of site

Site: (non)straightforward?

Within architectural practice the site is often perceived as a given set of rules and constraints. This one-dimensional approach often results in a similar way of creating the architectural object which then is to 'inhabit the site' and often the site is seen *through* the architectural object instead of the other way around. This way of thinking can be traced back to modernism, when space was perceived as a sterile, undefined 'ether' which was to conceive the architectural object. This, together with the more general idea that science was the answer for achieving objective reason, resulted in a distanced approach to site and architecture. The end goal was an architecture free of 'distractions' while serving its function. However, this sterile scientific approach proved to be inherently bereft of a relatable aspect of *meaning*. During postmodernism, architecture becomes more interested in other fields of discourse, which also contaminates the way architects view environmental qualities. The modernist approach is discarded and the argument is made that reality cannot be objectively understood and that instead it is heavily dependent on one's personal position within the array of discourses.

For instance, the phenomenologist approach arose to counteract the clinical approach of modernity to architecture and its context. Phenomenology focused heavily on non-concrete aspects of perception, intended to find a more inclusive way of understanding the ambiguous aspects of architecture as a 'return to things'. Space was now conceived of as a living, breathing thing which architecture inhabited. This was based on Martin Heidegger's idea of 'dwelling', where one can only be fulfilled when connected or 'grounded' to one's environment through cultural and relatable elements which evoke emotion¹. Christian Norberg-Schulz implemented the ideas of Heidegger into his theory on the spirit of place, derived from the ancient Roman concept of *Genius Loci*².

In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi makes an argument against what he calls oversimplification and 'clarity' of architectural design that was advocated in modernity. This simplicity rarely works, he says, as

1. Heidegger, M. (1951). *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. Darmstad. Heidegger, as one of the first phenomenological thinker after Husserl, explores his idea of how man can belong on this earth, a concept he calls dwelling. Furthermore, he explores the etymological background of 'building' and connects it to dwelling, which means building is dwelling. Man builds to dwell on earth

2. Norberg-Schulz, C. (1976). The Phenomenon of Place. *Architectural Association Quarterly* 8, pp. 3-10. Norberg-Schulz explains how he used the phenomenological ideas of Heidegger's Building, Dwelling, Thinking to arrive at his rediscovery of Genius Loci. He says that architecture is made by humans to dwell on earth and should be used to 'gather the properties of place' and bring them close to man. To do this, the totality of an environment should be made visible.

the world is ambiguous and 'nonstraightforward' and failing to recognize this will almost always result in simpleness of design. 'Rather 'both-and' than 'either-or'³. Venturi's pledge for open-ended architecture can be compared to Carol Burns' statement that the site itself should be recognized as an architectural object, an open, unfinished product which is constantly changing⁴. Venturi and Burns have in common that they don't see the site as limited, neither in space nor time, but rather as continuum in which the architecture just plays a minor part. This notion of site is also adopted by Vittorio Gregotti, but used differently. Space, he says, is to be conceived of many layers of both visible and invisible traces of history which are supported through architecture. Architecture shouldn't dissolve into this environment of traces but the environment

3. Venturi, R. (1966). *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Venturi takes the stance that complexity and contradiction should be embraced within architectural design and extends it to the site, as the site is architecture and architecture is site. He opposes this idea to the modernist movement, which aimed for simple and clear communication of design, in form as well as in function. This does rarely work, because aiming for a clear design often results in oversimplification. He then proceeds to give number of examples of mostly classical, European architecture in which contradiction, ambiguity or an overall nonstraightforwardness play a role.

4. Burns, C. J. (1991). *On Site: Architectural Preoccupations. Drawing Building Text*.

Explains the site as an architectural construct and ongoing, unfinished product of human work, in time. This paper is used as an argument that the architectural object is merely a small part of the complex multiplicity of the site. Therefore, Venturi's argument never only applies to the building but always to the building-site duality.

should be thought of as a material for architecture. He calls it 'modification', in which the object is aware of being part of a preexisting whole⁵. Finally, Stan Allen notes that architecture is one of the few arts that can structurally change the city because of its capacity to actualize social and cultural concepts but that the modernist approach has stripped architecture of this quality⁶.

Ambiguity in architectural representation

The phenomenological approach seems to expand the notion of site spectacularly by calling attention to the elusive, 'non-straightforward' and poetical aspects of space. Even though it provides a perspective of the world seemingly more comprehensive, it also demands a certain inclusiveness which is hard, if not impossible to achieve through architectural representation. Drawing as the 'language of architecture' doesn't seem to have expanded its vocabulary to account for

5. Gregotti, V. (1985). *Territory and Architecture*. Architectural Design Profile 59, pp. 28-34.

Gregotti explains the site as a series of historical traces which are to be used in creating architecture. Geographic landscape is a solidification of history and architecture should draw attention to these traces and show the essence of the site.

6. Allen, S. (2012). *Infrastructural Urbanism-Points + Lines-Diagrams and Projects for the city*. New York: Princeton Architects Press.

Architecture creates the site but the site also creates architecture. Allen explains the purely semiotic stance of postmodern architecture as a reaction to the 'form follows function' and explains why this has resulted in a downwards spiral within the recognition of the importance of architectural/urban design as an instrument for social change.

the gained insights since the dawn of postmodernity. The phenomenological qualities of space do not seem to be fit to be experienced through architectural drawing conventions. Section, plan, façade and -in the case of site- the map, are all standardized ways of projecting three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional medium but are at the same time limited in what they can portray and how they constitute meaning. Moreover, phenomenology speaks of qualities which are highly subjective. Heidegger's 'emotional qualities of the environment' are in no way made out and objective, yet architectural representation seems to predominantly convey objective and descriptive information. In the end, to expand on the notion of site, architectural drawing conventions too need to be expanded upon.

Meaning in drawing is achieved through its conventions, which inherently also means that these conventions dictate how meaning is created. In other words, the signified is interpreted by the observer through its sign. In philosophy, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argues that meaning is never fixed but always fluid. We perceive the world only through concept in our mind, which are themselves created through language and culture. This naturally is different for every culture but is also changes through history. Hegel calls it collective consciousness, or the spirit of society⁷. Jacques Derrida applies this to text and says that this spirit is reflected in language, which therefore shapes our notion of text and our interpretation of it. Thus, text is ambiguous and open

to interpretation for the tool used to attach meaning to it is used differently by everyone⁸. Consequently, in architectural drawing this idea has been explored by Libeskind in his *Chamber Works* and *Micromegas*, which were created without a predefined meaning in mind⁹. This subsequently questions the idea of architectural drawing conventions and the idea that there is a predefined, fixed form of meaning attached to drawing through 'the language of architecture'.

This question of meaning within drawing is explored by Alberto Perez-Gomez, who identifies two alternatives which seem, he says, the only way of making architecture: On the one hand traditional abstraction after Durand: a straightforward depiction of the subject at hand with no room for ambiguities, suggesting objectivity and which is still the most common in everyday practice, emphasized because of the technological world view of society. On the other hand a poetic, elusive way of drawing to interpret, criticize and speculate. Subsequently he argues that neither of these two extremes is sufficient on their own. Traditional abstraction cannot cover the complexity and ambiguity of

7. Hegel, G. W. (1807). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel argues that we don't perceive the world directly, but access it only through ideas. These ideas are social and are shaped by others around us, the language we speak and the culture we are a part of. He calls this the spirit of a given society, which shapes the consciousness of each member. This state of being is arrived at by first trying to grasp the world through basic sensory inputs and moves on to more sophisticated ways until spirit is achieved.

8. Derrida, J. (1966). *Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University press.

reality. Furthermore, abstraction depends too much on context, as it is pictorial and descriptive in its primary role. The poetic or maybe romantic drawing on the other hand, risks being too disconnected from the real, becoming a meaningless abstraction, losing its meaning when grounded in a real site¹⁰. In the coming paragraphs a selection of drawings will be discussed which all serve different roles in relation to site. These will be placed in perspective to Perez-Gomez' text to explore to what extent poetic aspects or abstraction is used. Important to clarify in this matter is the apparent difference between design representation and site representation. They both can be seen as either a visualization of a given (design or site) or as visualization of an interpretation or process of thought. Also, site is often negotiated *through* design so both are therefore equally relevant to serve as an exploration for extending the limits of architectural drawing.

9. Evans, R. (1984, May). *In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind*. AA Files 6.

Evans uses Libeskind's Chamber Works to explain a different way of assigning meaning to drawing. Usually, the author of a drawing gives meaning to a work while making it: meaning is behind the drawing. With Libeskind's drawings it is different as these works are made without meaning in mind; the observer assigns meaning only after it has been assimilated. This, applied to architecture, means that the only thing that remains is an architecture as index of relationships.

10. Perez-Gomez, A. (1982). *Architecture as Drawing*. JAE, pp. 2-7. *Perez-Gomez makes the argument that there are two extremes when it comes to representing architectural reality: the reductionist way of drawing, which is cold and precise. And the poetic way, which can depict the ambiguous and personal. The technological world view has pushed architectural representation into the road of reduction. A middle road must be found between these extremes, referring to the theoretical projects of Boullée, Piranesi and Ledoux.*

Different levels of ambiguity in practice

Although the drawing in architecture at first glance seems to just have a descriptive role, nothing could be further from the truth. As discussed before, the conventions of drawing decide in a great amount how the drawing conveys meaning. With this, the drawing creates a world on its own through allegory and metaphor, even in the least obvious examples. Many drawings intend to convey purely literal information but even in these instances they create a new, more symbolical level of meaning within the act of compression of information, which is inevitable¹¹. When real objects become abstracted into signs on paper, these become different from their original counterpart, the signified. In this translation already lies a form of ambiguity.

An example of it emerges in Guarino Guarini's drawing of the *Cappella della Sacra Sindone* in Turin (fig 1). In the drawing, a triangle is visible, connecting three recesses in the wall of the circular cupola. With the function of the building in mind, quickly the symbolical connection is made with a spiritual

11. Stuckardt, A. (2013). *Orthogonal Allegory: the reality of architectural plan drawing*. Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 13.

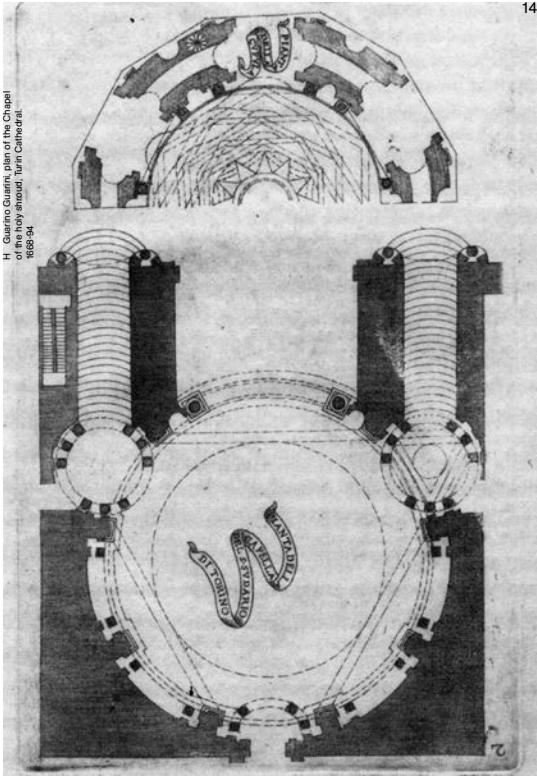


fig 1.

trinity, yet this is not the case. The triangle visible is merely the projection of the structural elements and does not dictate the circular dome in any formal way. It is purely a projection of a structural device. This proves, on a small scale, that interpretation plays a part in reading a drawing and that, whether intentional or not, this can lead to the discovery of a deeper meaning.

In *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*, James Corner collaborated with aerial photographer Alex MacLean to try and capture

12. Corner, J., & MacLean, A. S. (1996). *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*. London: Yale University Press.

the vast diverseness of the American landscape. It is essentially a descriptive survey of the landscape, but at the same time tries to extend the possibilities of the representation by wanting to find out how these landscapes have been forged over time. Although using photography as primary means of survey, Corner admits that this medium is unable to “convey the temporal experiences of passage, emerging and withdrawing of phenomena, and the stage ways events unfold”¹². At the same time, a good photograph can begin to live a life of its own and can become more than mere representation. Nevertheless, the photographic medium proved to be insufficient and the map emerged as a new tool to represent the features of the land not directly explicit or visible. The drawings and photographs end up complementing each other but at the same time keep being independent. They are both areal



fig 2.

and synoptic and both, in very different ways, seem to bridge the gap between the very exact and objective practice of and measurement and reveal its more poetic and creative aspects. This drawing (fig 2), which is directly combined with a photograph in the downright corner, shows the Jeffersonian grid, overlaid onto the natural landscape. These two show an immediate difference: in the photograph, the grid is the dominant factor in the landscape, with crop fields filling in each rectangular plot, resulting in a very distinct, manmade appearance. However, in the drawing the grid disappears into the background and the irregular lines representing the natural landscape take over. A third layer, superimposed on both the drawing as the photo, shows the soil types(?). The relation between these different elements is crucial in the meaning the drawing creates: the way they are measured, what they represent and how that then forms and acts in the landscape is all inseparable. The measures of the land have a threefold nature: “they are at once the guide, the outcome and the gauge of cultural activity and meaning”¹³. Corner’s goal with this was to represent the landscape in its full metaphoricity, forging new relations between

13. Corner, J., & MacLean, A. S. (1996). *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*. London: Yale University Press, 19.

14. Malmquist, E. B. (2012, May 30). *Dimension, Death & Identity: About John Hejduk and Sverre Fehn*. Accessed on December 29, 2018, from architecture norway: <http://www.architecturenorway.no/stories/other-stories/malmquist-on-hejduk-2009/>

people and the land.

John Hejduk blurs the lines between art and architecture and can be seen as both an architect as as an artist. He deliberately uses allegory in his work, finding a way to convey interpretation and critique of certain aspects of reality. Hejduk saw the limits of architecture and its representation as merely imaginary constructs, being highly flexible and temporary. His work, being influenced by the Avant-garde movement, would be considered highly unorthodox by many and his drawings many find peculiar. He uses a wide array of different means to convey his ideas apart from architectural form including poetry, writing, drawing and painting. The results are abstract and highly metaphorical. His work distances itself as far as possible from a possible objective conclusion or solution. Stories, materials and geometrical themes are used and juxtaposed in the same drawings and in the intertextuality of these works, the real meaning of his work arises¹⁴. Libeskind calls his work “*transcending the totality of human existence - this attitude underlies the dilemma of bringing together terms which only the human heart in the poetic moment is capable of reconciling. The well-knit polarization (inside-outside, private-public), identified with the abstract character of architecture, can give no resolution to the content of reason nor to the regret of sensuality both of which submit to moments of vengeance, exacting retribution for their depersonalization*”¹⁵. Hejduk visualizes his inspirations in *The Architects Wheel*

(fig 3) which contains his vocabulary, as a model for his narrative of architecture, rather than a concrete building¹⁶. Trying to search for architecture's 'Other', he combines in his drawings poetry and sketches through which he explores the "fluid spaces between fiction and reality"¹⁷. A prime example of Hejduk methods of dealing with site is his *Victims* project (fig 4, 5). This project was part of his idea of *Masques*: architectural structures which embody character through the construction of relationships

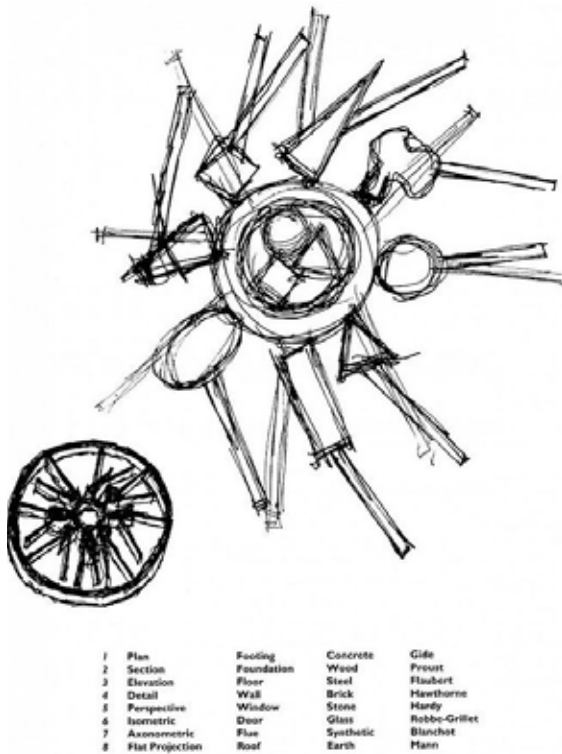


fig 3.

15. Hejduk, J. (1985). *Mask of Medusa, Works 1947-1983*. (Shkapiich, Red.) New York: Rizolli, 29.

16. Stuckardt, A. (2013). *Orthogonal Allegory: the reality of architectural plan drawing*. Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 22.

17. Ruff, A. (2015). *Sounding Lines. Mas Context*, 330-343, 335.

with other elements. *Victims* is situated adjoining the Berlin wall, on a former Gestapo headquarters which contained a torture chamber during WWII and is described by the architect as 'construction of time'¹⁸. The project is an enclosed site, occupied by a collection of structures and surrounded by young saplings, which are supposed to grow over time until they become higher than the structures. The project seems to be extremely introspective,

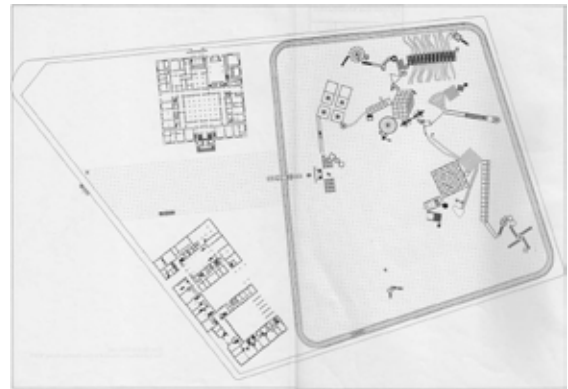


fig 4.



fig 5.

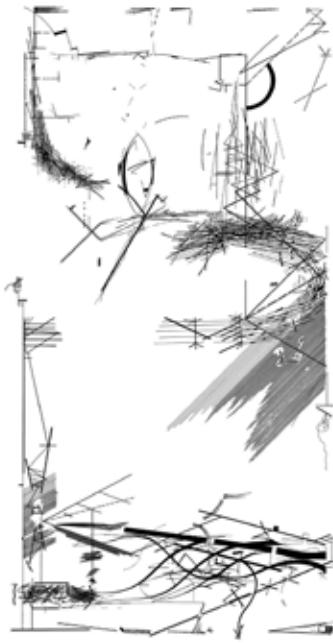


fig 6.

ignoring any context, becoming completely self-referential. Though, at the same time, the dreamlike quality of the drawings makes them look like direct representations of a subconscious association with the site. This is precisely Catherine Ingraham's explanation, as she says that Hejduk's architectural imagery is actually comparable to dreams and, as dreams 'hallucinate' and "construct a situation out of images". Hejduk's drawings therefore become a condensed, cryptic interpretation of reality¹⁹.

Daniel Libeskind takes the subject of subjectivist drawing the furthest. He has a history of exploring the limits of architectural representation through his drawings, the aforementioned *Micromegas* and *Chamber Works* (fig. 6, 7) are examples of this. Libeskind's drawings are of extreme

abstraction and abandon all architectural drawing conventions, therefore the meaning of the drawings becomes subjective and in need of interpretation. Robin Evans sees this as the shift of meaning from *behind* the drawing to *in front of* the drawing.

If one would apply this principle to site, namely not representing it through achieving a balance between reduction and the poetic, like Perez-Gomez suggests, but utilizing the semiotic qualities of drawing to such effect, that meaning becomes partially oblique, an aspect of subjectivity would be introduced. Comparing the city to text, Derrida's theory of meaning becomes also relevant to site, as meaning becomes essentially fluid and non-predefined: Libeskind's work can clearly be interpreted in many different ways, depending on the person looking at them. Bringing a subjective aspect to drawing often results in more than just description of the ambiguous aspects of the site will at the same time interpret them. This implies that ambiguity is not to be represented in an objective manner.

Where Libeskind's exploration may be just an experiment taken too far to be practical, its conclusion can be applied to the whole act of

18. Fabrizi, M. (2015, november 1). *A Growing, Incremental Place – Incremental Time: "Victims", a Project by John Hejduk (1984)*. Accessed on December 12, 2018, from Socks: <http://socks-studio.com/2015/11/01/a-growing-incremental-place-incremental-time-victims-a-project-by-john-hejduk-1984/>.

19. Ingraham, C. (1996). *Errand, Detour, and the Wilderness Urbanism of John Hejduk*. In M. K. Hays, *Hejduk's Chronotope* (p. 135). New York: Princeton Architectural Press, New York.

abstraction in drawing. Whether this act intentionally serves as a tool to conceive ambiguity (Hejduk, Corner) or unintentionally creates a multiplicity of interpretation and meaning (Guarinis), in all cases it shows that being aware of the fact that meaning is never directly translated is crucial. Stan Allen and Diana Agrest formulate the following: “*The techniques of representation are never neutral and architecture’s abstract means of imagining and realizing form leave their traces on the work. To understand representation as technique (in Foucault’s broader sense of techne) is therefore to pay attention to the paradoxical character of a discipline that operates to organize and transform material reality, but must do so at a distance, and through highly abstract means.*”²⁰



fig 7.

20. Allen, S., & Agrest, D. (2003). *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*. London: Routledge, 21.

Conclusion

Naturally, drawing always ends up being a translation of something in the real world, whether this is something concrete or something ambiguous. Every aspect of site is potentially important for understanding (part of) its essence. However, what one makes of these qualities and which of them one chooses to work with, is entirely subjective and changes per person. Architectural drawing seems to convey some sort of objective qualities or close-endedness and the semiotic vocabulary seems too limited to offer a rich enough spectrum of possibilities to convey the ambiguous, interpretive qualities of a site. This objective quality of the drawing seems to have been celebrated and encouraged in the modernist era, during which science was seen as the way to a universal, objective view of reality. Ideally, design itself must therefore be equally clear, free from distractions, understandable and straightforward in communication and execution. As a reaction, postmodernism introduced phenomenology in architecture which acted as countermovement to the modernist ideals and sought to recognize the emotional qualities of architecture. Meticulously trying to translate these qualities in a drawing can

be overwhelming and result in oversaturation of information and sometimes even results in suggesting a misleading impression of comprehensiveness. Instead, one should look into the meaning that arises within the act of abstraction and subsequently be aware of and embrace the subjective aspect that will inevitably arise in this act. Only a certain amount of site can be objectively described through architectural drawing conventions. The other aspects, which are more elusive, need to be interpreted and therefore carry an unavoidable aspect of subjectivity with them. To make this into a productive mode of inquiry, the subjectivity has to be obvious and directional. The examples given each show a certain level of subjectivity, reached through different modes of inquiry, all repositioning the boundaries of representation in varying degrees. When looking back to Perez-Gomez' problematisation of drawing (either abstraction or poetics) and his subsequent critique of both, it becomes clear that this polarizing dichotomy is putting it too simple. Gomez' rejection of poetic drawing is based on his notion of it being too detached from reality, and therefore inapplicable in real architectural design. However, it shows that when poetics is used in a narrative, which itself is based on certain aspects of site, it becomes more usable and opens up a richer understanding. A conscious abstraction and/or codifying is necessary, as productive meaning, still applicable in reality, emerges from precisely that act.

Images

fig 1. Stuckardt, A. (2013). *Orthogonal Allegory: the reality of architectural plan drawing*. Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 14.

fig 2. <http://socks-studio.com/2012/10/29/taking-measures-across-the-american-landscape-by-james-corner-and-alex-mclean/>

fig 3. Stuckardt, A. (2013). *Orthogonal Allegory: the reality of architectural plan drawing*. Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 21.

fig 4. <http://socks-studio.com/2015/11/01/a-growing-incremental-place-incremental-time-victims-a-project-by-john-hejduk-1984/>

fig 5. <http://socks-studio.com/2015/11/01/a-growing-incremental-place-incremental-time-victims-a-project-by-john-hejduk-1984/>

fig 6. <https://libeskind.com/work/chamber-works/>

fig 7. <https://libeskind.com/work/micromegas/>