

**Wondrous darkness
mediating the real and the imaginative in rendering**

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Atelier KANAL is a consortium of three architectural practices – EM2N from Zurich, noAarchitecten from Brussels and Sergison Bates architects from London – created to undertake the transformation of the Citroën Yser car factory into a 49,000m2 art and cultural centre in Brussels. Atelier KANAL is a unique co-design model, in which the boundaries between authors are diffused and co-authorship recognised as the norm. The spirit of exchange and collaboration extends to a wide range of voices and opinions we invited from the arts and communities. The well-known landmark building, a 21-metre-high glass palace at Square Sainctelette, will be one of the largest cultural venues in Europe when it is completed in 2024, home to all forms of cultural creativity: the visual arts and architecture, but also dance, drama, film, literature and music.

KANAL: A TRIPTYCH IS A PUBLICATION IN THREE PARTS PUBLISHED OVER TIME. BOOK #1: THINKING IS ABOUT THE IDEAS OF THE PROJECT FROM THE COMPETITION TO THE BUILDING PERMIT AND INCLUDES WRITTEN TEXTS, VISUAL ESSAYS, DRAWINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS. BOOK #2: MAKING IS ABOUT THE MAKING AND MATERIALITY OF THE PROJECT, ABOUT THE TECHNICAL DRAWINGS AND MATERIAL SAMPLING, ABOUT THE COLOUR STRATEGY AND A SENSE OF UNFINISHEDNESS AND ABOUT THE CONSTRUCTION AND PHOTOGRAPHED FINISHED SPACES. BOOK #3: SHARING IS ABOUT THE SPACES FOLLOWING HANDOVER TO THE CURATORS, USERS AND PUBLIC. IT RECORDS THE OCCUPIED AND WORKING PUBLIC SPACES, REVEALING THE SPONTANEITY AND CREATIVITY OF USE.

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/ # 1

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WONDROUS DARKNESS: MEDIATING THE REAL AND THE IMAGINATIVE IN RENDERING

Elsbeth Ronner

04 / 2021

I.

Atelier KANAL offers us an intriguing image of the future, revealed in four renders¹ of the public interiors of the building. The images show the new life of the Citroën car factory. The roof with its delicate steel trusses is the dominant feature, with floors teeming with people and artworks below. The zigzagging lines of the roofs give the images a sense of movement. The materiality is sumptuous: the texture of rendered bricks, craquelé surfaces, shiny polished aluminium, gantries covered in greasy paint. The reflection of the light is varied: harsh, bright, diffuse, opaque, soft.

The floor lines and roof lines draw the viewer's eye into the distance. The selected single-point perspective is monumental. The horizon set at around one-third of the image and the central vanishing point are reminiscent of landscape painting. The space within the images is otherwise not very accessible. The main figures are placed at a distance from the viewer. They do not engage with the viewer, but focus rather on a work of art, a performance, their group or their own activities.

Renders often produce a sense of unease. The realistic depiction of the project leaves little room for imagination. The composition, light, people and materiality seem so real that there is no scope for thoughts to wander beyond the image itself. Concept design is reduced to a hermetic image of a virtual world without variation or contradiction. In their optimism images often present an idealised reality: the drama of life is glossed over.

A striking feature of the depictions of KANAL is their

darkness. Interiors are captured in shadowy planes. In this subdued light, the undocumented person pauses next to the student. And is there a homeless person in the library among the students reading the newspaper? In the distance, can we spot Anuna De Wever and her fellow protesters stepping into KANAL, sheltering from the rain in the central nave? The shades of crimson and cobalt evoke the changing trends in car colours through the twentieth century, from pastels to bright colours, to the drab tones of the 1970s. One can imagine mechanics in overalls deliberately making their way through the building. And suddenly, in the image, a maintenance worker stands among the art lovers to give a damaged handrail a lick of paint. The occasional orange-yellow of a work of art or garment may belong to a hip city dweller, but perhaps also to the headscarf of a mother from Molenbeek on her way home from work.

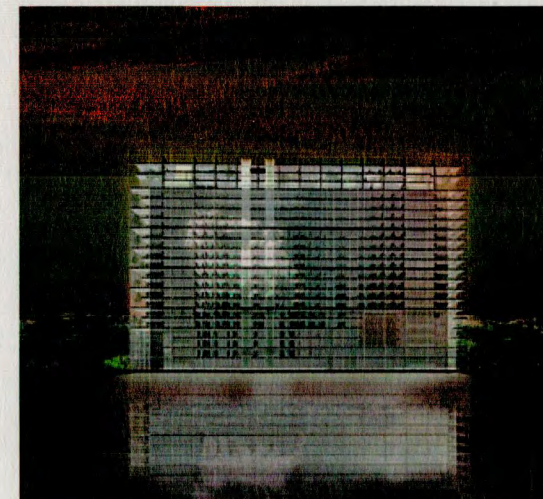
The portraits of the new KANAL are somewhat wistful. It is as if the designers are saying farewell to the old building. The images capture the desire expressed by Atelier KANAL to preserve the traces of use of the garage. However, during construction, toxic Chromium VI and other obsolete materials will be removed. It remains to be seen whether oil marks will find their way back onto the polished concrete floor. In this sense, the images also have a practical significance. The new elements in the design are hardly visible, mostly concealed within walls. Lighting fixtures, sprinklers, ventilation ducts are very inconspicuous. In fact, the building almost creates its own semi-autonomous climate.

II.

The render has no recognised place in architectural discourse.² Architectural drawing is under increased scrutiny, as an object and as a tool in the design process. Practices that distance themselves from commercial projects or faith in technology have returned to hand drawing or photo montage. The ease with which renders are created makes the images casualties of the visual maelstrom on architecture websites. The render has found its niche in commercial architectural production. The production of these images has moved from the architect's studio to professional visualisation agencies. This is the main criticism of these images: the visual image is no longer part of the architectural project. This was not always the case.

The use of renders in architecture has a short history. Zaha Hadid was a trailblazer with her competition design, *The Peak*, in 1983. In terms of graphic expression, practices such as Atelier Jean Nouvel and OMA followed her lead. OMA worked with visual artists to convey their agenda of dematerialisation through abstract images. Atelier Jean Nouvel used the render to explore virtuality. The render made it possible to visualise reflection and transparency. Notoriously, these renders presented images of architecture in synthetic colours against a dark background. The renders have nothing to do with realism but are rather part of the design process through which a new visual culture of architecture is developed.

The introduction of the render in architecture coincided with the moment when software developers and researchers in the field of graphics made significant breakthroughs in the rendering of light,



Competition image for the Redevelopment of the ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) company headquarters in Rome, Italy.

reflection and shadows, among other things. In the following decades, increasing processing power and the evolution of rendering software – with iconic names such as FormZ, V-Ray, Mental Ray – reinforced realistic rendering. This made it an attractive tool to work with in architecture.

We have now reached a point where representation is more realistic than reality. This means great freedom in the representation of architectural projects – a freedom that, however, despite the experimental beginnings of the medium, is insufficiently used.

III.

The visual arts are widely quoted in the representation of architecture. Today's renders can be compared to late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century realism in painting, which coincided with the moment when photography took over the task of recording reality. Most painting moved in the direction of abstraction. This shift emphasised radicalism and progress. Realism, on the other hand, continued to be based on the figurative.

This school of thought is recognisable and accessible, but it also exudes a certain charm. Look at one of the masterpieces of Dutch realistic painting: *The Zeppelin* by Carel Willink, 1933. On a street corner in Amsterdam, four men in raincoats are waving at a Zeppelin. We are looking at their backs. The composition is classical, the colours muted. The stormy weather and the airship evoke wonder. The style draws heavily on tradition, quoting Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Vermeer. Realism thus deviates from what was, at the time, the prevailing art doctrine.

The new art movement was beset by more difficulties. Apart from relations with unsavoury regimes and ideologies, this art form is mainly favoured by people who are not educated in the arts. The understandable images of mysticism combined with mundanity, or with representations of the classical world are a convenient reference for the educated woman or man. Their authors are therefore often dismissed as 'society painters'. There are not many significant painters whose work has an impact outside their own genre. Much of the work is a repetition of ideas already tested by the old masters. Ignoring this art movement, however, is an omission in the debate.³

Appreciation by an uneducated clientele of an unparalleled world also seems to be at the root of scepticism towards the render. The association with money and an idealised future is next in line. The perceived lack of radicalism and even compliance account for the reluctance to use the tool among

authoritative practices. There is also little recognition except for a few internationally operating rendering agencies. In the case of architecture, this means the loss of a practice's distinctive signature.



Carel Willink, *The Zeppelin*, 1933, Collection Museum MORE, Gorssel.

IV.

Anyone who takes a quick look at the renders of KANAL in the newspaper or elsewhere will recognise the original Citroën car factory building. It will be evident that, despite the requisite architectural work, the history of the place remains palpable, that new architectural interventions are restrained and intended to make the building a place for the development of urban life in Brussels rather than a spectacular showpiece. The untrained viewer can see what the building will be like.

But the architects were not interested in making promotional images. The images do not adhere to the conventions of optimism and seduction that usually apply to this medium. A closer look at the renders shows that – despite the superb graphic technique – they are not real. There is something wondrous about the darkness and stillness of the spaces, a kind of silence before the storm, that builds tension into the images.

The tension is reminiscent of what is known in computer graphics as the 'uncanny valley', a concept that associates human emotional reactions to humanoid objects: attraction to a 3D-animated character increases in parallel with its similarity to a human. Just before the maximum level of attraction is reached, however, there is a moment when the character is almost entirely similar to a human except in a few aspects. This creates a sense of estrangement. An example of this is a realistic animation with a synthetic voice. The term 'uncanny valley' refers to the representation of the concept as a graph, where a rising line is interrupted by a valley

that indicates the moment of estrangement.

The renders of KANAL fall in the middle of the valley. Although the 'uncanny valley' is generally avoided in computer animations, in architecture it can be used as an artistic tool to give images an emotional charge. The estrangement that occurs in the images of KANAL creates an opportunity to imagine an architecture beyond reality that makes one dream about the future of the building. A form of creativity that benefits both the viewer and the designer.

The renders tap into what architectural historian Robin Evans would call the necessary 'suspension of critical disbelief'. Rather than mirroring reality in the representation of the project, Evans calls for widening the gap between the two and using it as a creative design tool.⁴

V.

These renders were made during the project's tender phase. The three architectural practices that form Atelier KANAL – noAarchitecten, Sergison Bates and EM2N – commissioned Studio Secchi Smith to create images for the wider public. While earlier images from the competition phase and building application were photomontages, they now chose a more realistic approach. "With such a public project you want to allow people's imagination to be engaged", says Stephen Bates.

There was another reason for outsourcing the representation of the project. By handing it over to Secchi Smith, the team could develop a representational language that did not follow the preference of one or another of the team members, but the logic of the project. Nor are the images a simple expression of Secchi Smith's visual culture, through the use, for example, of the single-point perspective. At a time when practices are more likely to collaborate and the authorship of the lone genius is less credible, it is an interesting point of departure to search for a common signature.

The relationship with Secchi Smith provides the opportunity to allow the project's advisors access to the design process. In addition to the architects, there are some twenty other sources who have informed the project. During the development of the images, the associate curator thought about the objects exhibited in the renders and their use value, and possible ways of staging the exhibition spaces.

Moreover, this distancing of the architecture practices from the renders creates the space to look at the project afresh. Accurate depiction forces design ideas to be refined further. "How many visible traces of use

can the converted garage bear? Where do we take action against nostalgia?" is how An Fonteyne puts it. The images invited the architects to think more carefully about how to approach the building's various layers of history. The extensive exchange between the visualisers and the designers led to new insights about the colour scheme of the trusses, the openness of certain passages, materiality and, for example, the dimensions of the facade panels. "The opportunity to test things with proper light makes a difference," according to Francesca Martellono of Atelier KANAL.

These renders are therefore not the end point of a linear process between the architects and the visualisers, but the result of many iterations. In this way, the imagination is brought back into the design process.

VI.

The making of a render seems to make architecture directly political. Its apparent authenticity solidifies a project both for the general public and for its makers. Mixed messages, which are acceptable in a collage, are quickly judged inaccurate. Abstraction or blurring are useless as stylistic devices. In an already politicised project, KANAL's envisaged future is carefully examined, as if weighing gold on a scale. Figures in the image, activities represented and art on display convey messages about who is allowed to enter and who is not. Art that is too elitist or figures that are too hip invite criticism about the project's intentions. A render is not without risks.

Anyone familiar with the work of the three practices in question knows that commercial projects are not the prime focus in their portfolios. An understanding of tradition and appreciation for what already exists informs their architectural language. The use of renders is not a typical choice. However, the peculiar quality of the images prevents any usual association with the medium. Instead, these realistic renders build on a long-established tradition in painting that references colour palette and composition. The image therefore presents the complexities of design beyond realistic rendering. The unease of the render is turned into creative freedom.

¹ Although the whole series consists of nine images, this article describes the four renders that most strongly form a series. These are 'Interior Street on a Friday afternoon in March', 'Nave on a Friday at noon in April', 'Belvedere on an early Friday afternoon in July' and 'Reading Room on an early Friday morning in June'.

² One of the few reflections on the render is by architect and critic Sam Jacob. See also 'Rendering: The Cave of the Digital' on <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/representation/167503/rendering-the-cave-of-the-digital/>, retrieved from website on December 20th, 2020. Mark Minkjan also won the Geert Bekaert Prize with the article 'The newest building on the Amsterdam Zuidas is a picture - and not much more than that' <https://www.archined.nl/content/uploads/2016/12/BEK-pub-digitaal.pdf>, retrieved from website on January 14th, 2021.

³ The observations on realism are based on various articles by Koen Kleijn in the magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* published between 2017 and 2020.

⁴ Robin Evans, 'Translations from Drawing to Building', in: Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and other Essays*, (London: AA Publications, 1997), 153-194:154.