

Vor-textu(r)al Translations from Building to Drawing

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Abstract

This essay looks at a tentative drawing procedure that explores drawing's experimental potential for producing 'surplus-value' by superseding conventional and representational paradigms and germinating affect. It endeavours to do so by reappropriating the question of 'translation from drawing to building' as postulated by Robin Evans and engaging its dialectics in a vortical movement of continuity, intertwining drawing and building in a mutual exchange, to blur their interval and inflect thought. The author proposes that through such experimental processes drawing and architecture might come together and infold their differentials in order to generate novel insights and approaches and open up potential paths for their relation to evolve.

Keywords

drawing; architecture; translation; experimental process; affect; differential

1. Introduction

Drawing has maintained an intricate and long-established relationship with building since the very foundation of the discipline of Architecture, instilling graphic conventions and formal techniques in processes of design. But the advent of digital technologies has, in the last few decades, ironically helped "heighten sensitivity to the artifactual and material conditions of drawing" itself and to modalities and processes of inquiry. (Kenniff & Lévesque, 2024, p. 8) It has brought into question the very nature and role of drawing and of occularcentric modes of perception such as perspective representation in design practices. Robin Evans postulated that for drawing to become an "agent" of design and inquiry it must be "liberated from the constraints of exact representation" which continues to constitute a decisive part of design methodologies. (Evans, 1997, p. 19) Liberating drawing, however, does not necessarily mean doing away with representation altogether, but rather dismantling or exceeding its pre-ordered reality, its organization and fixed significations, and drawing out a surplus-value¹ by intensifying what lies muted within it and the world it represents, potentializing their relation. And this, for the most part, involves discovering, connecting to, and reconjugating operative internal relations,

amplifying underlying (relational-qualitative) attributes; it implies activating and making visible (yet veiled) and felt invisible internal forces, material, temporal, spatial. Many contemporary drawing practices consequently broach drawing as reasearch, performance, or speculation to reflect on, and perhaps inflect the conditions and ways in which we experience, perceive, and inhabit the world. (Kenniff & Lévesque, 2024) The agency of various drawing instruments, conventional and invented, and the plasticity of drawing surfaces are explored for their capacity to generate new insights from the drawing processes they engender or transform. The activity of drawing as *process* is thereby privileged over product (and representation), or rather, product is but a singular extrapolation in an open-ended process. And processes' creative efficacy is contingent on the development of processual techniques and enabling constraints capable of catalyzing events of *emergence* and on the deployment of conditions conducive to their self-actualization. (Manning, 2016) The project presented in this essay situates itself within this processual field of inquiry where creation and research mutually inform each other to potentialize the relation of drawing and building.

1 - For an extensive elucidation of the concept of "surplus-value" in relation to perspective representation see Masumi, 2011.

“Architecture” emerges somewhere in the interval between the first mark of drawing and building; it is from this interstitial space that potential stirs, waiting to be swept up in bouts of differential combustion. In this sense, architecture is neither drawing nor building but something that exceeds both while transforming their mutual relation as well as their individual nature in the process. It is no revelation that their co-operative relation has been the topic of much speculation, but for professional purposes the issue has inclined more heavily in the direction of drawing to building since built form is more often an end in itself. This short essay presents experimental work that attempted not so much to reverse this directionality per se, as it was established by Evans (1997) in his seminal work “Translations from Drawing to Building”, but to foreground the possibility of thrusting the relation into pathic refrains, eternal returns that generate new qualitative-relational tonalities at every (re)turn and which might in-form architecture different(ia)lly.

This implied finding ways to activate *differentials* embedded in the interval of drawing and architecture, as well as of drawing (practice) and thinking, for them to generate surplus-value and conjure alternate ways of understanding their heuristic relation. The differential generates novelty from an excess that stems – conjointly and disjointly – from one and the other and both together, and somewhere in-between or in the overlap of their coming-together into singular “events”. In other words, the tension inherent in the *difference* of heterogeneous modes or manners of activities coming together becomes a force of impetus that provides the impulse for the event to occur differently. But the differences do not fuse into harmonious unity (in which case there would be no novelty), they *co-compose* a singular effect while maintaining their respective differences: it is this “relation of nonrelation” that self-combusts into novelty. (Massumi, 2011) Creating conditions for discovering and activating differentials and generating pathic refrains from lived experience, dynamic bodily and worldly rhythms, which sow potential for future discoveries may be key to sustaining vitality and infusing affect into processes of both drawing and design. The differential, Erin Manning states,

that brings making to thinking and thinking to making, ensures that [...] the ecology's incipient heterogeneity becomes operational. When this happens, something has begun to take form that exceeds the registers of making on the one end and thinking on the other. [...] This new register is neither art per se nor philosophy: it is study, it is practice, it is speculation. (2016, p.13)

It is from such surplus-value that knowledge can be created and where valuation begins to revolve around qualities of life and their affective resonance. But from a speculative and processual perspective, the *potentiality* of knowledge, its capacity to prompt further thinking and generate new questions, remains more important than any *content* of knowledge and this potentiality is generated by experience and in the lived immediacy of practice. “Pure experience”, William James postulates, is the “immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories”. (James, 2003, p. 49) It is from thinking-doing's mutually induced potentiality that new processes germinate apt to inf(lect) pre-established conceptions and patterns, to destabilize hegemonies and normative structures.

The initial overarching question which prompted this endeavour was how drawing might develop and augment its capacity to be continually and differentially in-formed by diverse experimental practices that make felt the elasticity of worldly rhythms and their affective atmospheres in the making and experience of spacetimes. But although it began by asking how the interval between drawing and architecture could be activated differently, the question that later ensued and resonated from within the process itself was how drawing itself might become an active interval or differential between vital life-forces and architecture to conjure dynamic affective forms.

Hence, practically speaking, the project was part of this broader endeavour to propose various experimental drawing techniques, instruments, material conditions, and explore *processes* as internal operative force capable of generating vitality affect from the interplay of corporeal and worldly rhythms and perhaps of inf(lecting) design processes. Its objective was to take a momentary step back from digital drawing technologies, representational

and signifying practices, and to re-experience the lived immediacy of a molecular-cosmic relation through which atmospheric qualities might emerge experientially. In the end, how might the modern conception of space be transformed from that of a lifeless Cartesian “vacuum” to a place charged with affective absence, palpable silence, and vibratile stillness capable of generating and sustaining vital tensions, engendering chora?

2. Evans' Reversed Directionality

One may be familiar with Pliny the Elder's story of Diboutades, which traces the origin of drawing back to the outline of a departing lover's shadow on a wall. In “Translations from Drawing to Building”, Robin Evans elucidates his comparative interpretation of two representations depicting this story. He compares the paintings of artist David Allan and architect Karl Schinkel, both entitled “The Origin of Painting”, to illustrate the foundational difference between the (classical) role of drawing for the painter and respectively for the architect. His argument rests on the pictorial disparity between the architectural (interior) context of the former and the pastoral (exterior) context of the latter. In Allan's painting *Diboutades* traces the outline of her lover's shadow, projected from a lamp's point-source illumination, on the wall of a room. In Schinkel's rendition the shadow of the lover's profile, traced by a shepherd on the face of an inclined rock, depicts the projection of the sun's parallel rays.

What Evans endeavors to demonstrate in his comparative analysis is the “reversed directionality” of drawing, of representation to its object, which he claims establishes the fundamental difference between the artist's and the architect's vision. In one scenario, the artist (Allan) chooses an architectural surface as support on which to inscribe the first mark of drawing and an interior built setting to illustrate its origin, thereby foregrounding the precedence of architecture over drawing. Architecture is here prior to representation. In a second scenario, the architect (Schinkel) selects raw matter (the face of a rock) as surface of inscription, thereby tracing the initial mark directly on “nature” and emphasizing the precedence of drawing, as a prior act of thought, over building. Architecture

is here consequent to representation. The artist's drawing, accordingly, depicts the reflection of a reality that exists outside of the drawing itself, whereas the architect's reflects a reality that exists only within the drawing until it is projected outside of itself and concretized in built form. In either case, drawing is a function of projection and both renditions in Evans' view, involve all the required elements of drawing: a source of light, an object or subject of representation, a surface of projection and a means of tracing. (Evans, 1997)

2.1 Vor-textu(r)al Translations

Vor-textu(r)al Translations from Building to Drawing sought to inflect the reversed directionality Evans has put in play between drawing and architecture simply by changing the nature of its source of projection and tracing, and the role of architecture in the dialectic. The source of unidirectional light was replaced by a source of vortical airflow and the hand or means of tracing, by the blades of a mechanical propeller. The project first experimented with improvised architectural models (maquettes) of two simple inverted interior spaces mirroring each other back-to-back across the same floor plane. In other words, one space was upside-down directly beneath the other so that the common floor surface between them became a sort of reflective plane or horizon that ruptured any gravitational specificity. A basin of China ink in an alcohol compound was alternately placed on the floor of either space and a small propeller set in motion and lowered onto its surface. The ink was pulverized and propelled across the space leaving negative shadows of interior elements and streaks of centrifugal airflows on its walls. (figures 1a) The model was then turned upside down and the action repeated in the second space. The maquette's interior elements were subsequently removed and perimeter walls unfolded and deployed into a continuous linear panel constituting a pictorial surface with the trace or inscription of the *space* generated by its removed internal elements – i.e. the projected shadow was no longer that of its object but of the space it activated.

Detail from experimental model.
Ink on foamcore 2021

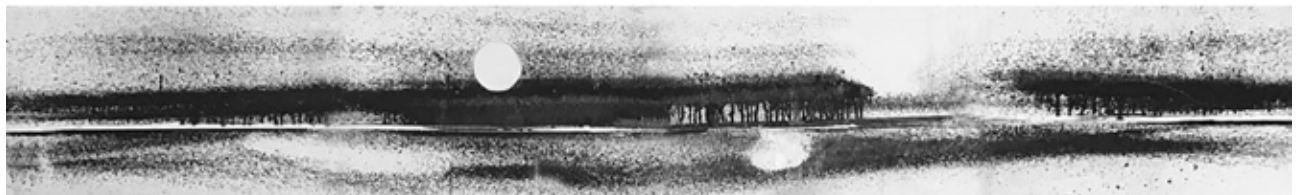


Figure 1(a)

What ensued was a gently curbed longitudinal “archiscape” that evoked an atmospheric “landscape”, embodying the vortical energy of the event of drawing-with architecture. (figure1b) One might even argue that the floor-line become-horizon reflected a reversible gravitational field around its axis that echoed a cosmic reality and imaginary. Regardless, Evans’ drawing-building, interior (architecture)-exterior (nature) dialectics seemed to dissolve and combust, blurring and activating the interstice that had set them apart. The visions respectively attributed to the artist and architect were reconciled in the production of (atmospheric) surplus-value. The activated space of architecture had been projected into drawing and simultaneously onto its own architectural surfaces. It both

produced (and was the pictorial product of) a drawing which pointed to an outside (archiscape) while virtually bringing outside-in and onto its surfaces in a new relationscape. An atmospheric aura of dissolution thereby became the binding medium coagulating building and drawing, “walls” became porous interfaces between exterior and interior, drawing and architecture, reality and virtuality.

What had been transduced from “building” to drawing was not the architectonic geometry of the room but a dynamic spatio-temporal quality of flow, an atmospheric space of affect. The erasure or dissolution of objects and content of architecture, leaving but a trace of their absence



Archiscape, experimental model, deployed
Ink on foamcore 2021

Figure 1b

on the walls, referred back to their presence perhaps more intensely and affectively than would the contour of a departed object. Before the walls were deployed into picture planes the room itself had taken on the virtual presence of its own drawing, which transformed my perception of its spatial relations even at the scale of a model. And the remaining traces continued to activate echoes of these qualitative relations after the event had perished and the room had been deployed. The walls become self-referential-drawing drew me into an uncanny impersonal space of affect and imaginary perceptually and mnemonically related to the actual space, imbuing it with a renewed sense of meaning.

The occurrence of form's dissolution into a relational-qualitative timbre was experientially amplified and made felt by the working conditions of the process itself. In order to prevent a general mess from the overflowing splatters of ink, the models had been placed in a small white tent and the tent's surfaces became a second membrane doubling the maquettes' wall surfaces. In the process of pulverization it operated as an echo chamber, expanding the model's activated space and situating me within the space of the event. The ethereal plasticity of the "architectural" space traversed the body as the body inhabited its extended space and affected the image of projection onto the second membrane². The miniature space of the model had thereby experientially shifted to an intermediate sensuous scale somewhere between that of the represented (maquette and its image) and the actual. The thickness of space condensed into lived sensation and the body turned porous with/in the event's collective assemblage.

2.2 Erasing the Barcelona Pavilion

Erasing the Barcelona Pavilion (a play on Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning" painting) was a continuity on this event of doing-feeling-thinking drawing. It similarly explored the familiar space of Mies van der Rohe's "Barcelona Pavilion" using models. Maquettes of the project were constructed and basins of ink inserted into their interiors. The ink, propelled by the vortex, marked the absence of elements, columns, walls, furniture, and statues, on perimeter surfaces. What surfaced on the unfolded pictorial walls was a spatial

feeling that recalled and reconjugated the pavilion's push and pull on the body. The peripheral rhythmic patterns of light appearing and withdrawing, intermittently eclipsed by its objects, were sensuously echoed in the bare spaces between ink particles as they speckled the body and marked the walls. Form's emanation, its edges' dissolution evoked the lived movement-experience of the actual project, of matter appearing and fading in passing. (figure 2a) The vortical movement of air seemed to compress spatial depth into intensive matter and liberate its image in the fossilized traces of its passage, evoking the timelessness of kinaesthetic memory, of what *survives* experience in the mobilization of place. In this sense, it was the *topological* nature of space, the arc of movement-experience and peripheral sensation which the walls seemed to expose. Rather than producing the spatialized objective reality or the ordered regularity one might experience in viewing a perspective or orthogonal projection of the space, *Erasing the Barcelona Pavilion* conveyed a experiential potential or surplus, a dynamic atmospheric timbre or tonality that superseded any representation and/or its actual reality. It generated a singular visual expression of kinaesthetic-proprioceptive "semblance" or "aesthetic quality" of the event. Semblance, Massumi (2011) postulates, is the manner in which the virtual appears or is experienced; the virtual echo of sensuous rhythmic patterns, or the virtual "image" that lifts off the actual/sensuous and appears abstractly as felt relationships: harmonies, polyphonies, counterpoints, or tensions. Despite an effect of convergence, the center of the vortex of projection (illuminating the dismantled floor plane in plan view – figure 2b) was less akin to the vanishing point of perspective that draws one into the infinity of vectorial space than to the silent eye of the hurricane that carries one into the infinite expansion of resounding spacetimes.

3. Vortextuality

One may wonder why the propeller had been adopted as a mobilizing force and what it imparted on the project. When the whirling blades were lowered onto the liquid, they created a vortex or suction that *pulled* up the ink, pulverized it, *pushed* and dispersed it across the space in a rotary

2 - Unfortunately, no images of the tent were collected.



Erasing the Barcelona Pavilion, deployed.
Ink on foamcore 2021

Figure 2(a)



discarded floor plane
Ink on foamcore 2021

Figure 2(b)

motion. Vortices account for many “natural” phenomena from weather systems to heartbeats, or to simple actions such as stirring one’s coffee. They constitute the motor force of all fluid motion including the invisible flow of air and the rhythm of all life-form and growth. (Schwenk, 1965) The vortex is in essence a *process* that is always in the act of constituting itself, it cannot exist without movement, without the heterogeneous forces it coagulates. The spiral is its generative axis. Roland Barthes conveyed the operative nature of the the spiral when he stated that “on the spiral, things recur, but *at another level*: there is a return in difference, not a repetition in identity [...] The spiral governs the dialectic of the old and new [...]” (Barthes, 1985, p. 219) Many artists have endeavored to depict the swirling movements of both visible and invisible vortical forces throughout the ages. One has only to recall the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, Van Gogh’s starry nights, or Etienne-Jules Marmrey’s and Claudio Parmiggiani’s experimentations with smoke and airflows, to name but a few.

But the vortex is as much a force of life as it is a force of destruction. It has the capacity to pulverize matter into space(lessness) and permeate the collective memory, specially in our age of the Anthropocene. The vortex deforms and reforms everything it comes into contact with, sculpts its own absence, and molds its fossilized trace into every fold and crevice it encounters and in-forms. But it is by definition a gaseous or liquid medium that brings together, conjunctively and disjunctively, and carries in its fluid living matter, all that crosses its path while disseminating it recomposed, over distances, infusing it into spaces, molecular to cosmic; it carries the past into the future, heterogeneity and multiplicities into singularities. Drawing, when it generates *difference*, likewise conjures and brings together a complex ecology of forces, micro-movements, micro-relations, and micro-perceptions of experience, scrambles and re-conjugates them – it intervenes on any pre-given (optical) organization and imbues it with a new order of a different nature, which then emerges in surplus

or novelty. (Deleuze, 2002) It is both the vortex's symbolic power of transformation and its internal operative force and potency that first in-spired the project.

In thinking about the interval in-between drawing and architecture, and simultaneously about the activity of drawing itself, what mostly stirred interest was the *operative process* that the concept of vortex foregrounded and the questions it opened up. Not unlike natural processes, it has often been suggested that drawing is a process of pulling (dragging) and pushing, in its multiple senses: memory, thought, gesture, feeling, pushes the line across the paper and simultaneously draws from line its formative force – i.e. the formative form³ of drawing resounds with thought and in sensation as a immanent force. There is therefore already an inherent vortical force of sorts at play between drawing and drawer. One might likewise suggest that there is a vortical flow of potentiality across drawing and building that can continue to expand the qualitative-relational field of “architecture” and *Erasing the Barcelona Pavillion* was a play on that potential. The vortex in-spired an ecology actual and virtual forces, activated a micro-sensuous and micro-perceptive memory of place, a feeling of movement-experience, and toggled doing into thinking, sensation into virtual realms that were arrested and released in the ink splatters on the walls. It thrust the relation of drawing and building (and body) into movement, activated space (actual and virtual, sensuous and conceptual, objective and affective) and brought the relation to another level. In so doing, its movement engaged the interval while coalescing their differentials in the trace of its spiraling passage. Hopefully, this is what will continue to resonate with potential and sense when engaging the relation of drawing to building.

4. Conclusion

In fact, what was “reversed” or set in motion in this experimental and experiential process was not only the relation of drawing to building but also the very conditions of visibility: visible matter was rendered invisible and invisible space made visible and haptic. It was perhaps the sensuous synaesthetic capacity to move in-between the visible and invisible, to inhabit and activate their formative overlap, that enabled the elastic spatiality of the void-cum-plenum to be felt and space to come to life and engender an aesthetic-affective sense of place in the interval of drawing and building. Multiple incidental differentials –pictorial- “objective”, artistic-architectural, mechanical-“natural”, representation-lived abstraction...– were galvanized in the process to generate new insights and outlooks, to bring drawing to building and building to drawing, thinking to making and making to thinking, and to vitalize the question and practice of drawing.

If drawing is to make a difference for architecture and maintain its vital pertinence, its capacity to challenge, test, and inf(lect) design processes, it must continue to question itself and probe its limits and its relation with architecture. This endeavor sought to exemplify drawing's capacity to supersede representation, to draw out surplus-value, by extrapolating from an impersonal “natural” phenomenon – the force of wind, breath, the potency of the vortex – its (virtual) power to activate space. Techniques and conditions were invented to catalyze sensuous bodily and worldly awareness, to engender the thinking in the doing, to bring architecture to drawing and sow potential for future inquiries. And this, I believe, may be key to re-generating forms of vitality and infusing affect and existential values into processes of both drawing and design, ensuring that their relation continue to evolve with/in a life-ecology to sustain an ethico-aesthetic imperative in the discipline of architecture.

3 - For more on the concept of “formative form” in drawing, see Nancy (2013).

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