

2017 Saarinen Swanson Essay Competition

The Burden of the Thing: Notes on CMYK Obsessions

The CMYK Gallery at Taubman College is a field of dreams, a garden of visual delights. When filled with a body of work, it becomes a curious collection of multiple worlds. Without work, the void between the whitewashed walls echo a kind of silence in anticipation of the next flurry of inhabitation.

This nervous anticipation is the situation that has conditioned the architecture student, the keen participant of the open space, to be sharply attuned to the visuals on the walls of the space. We have developed a reflex condition, more likely responding to visually arresting work that catches the eye and that makes the best first impression against the whitewashed walls. I am talking about an architecture for a selfie generation. The work on the wall not only has to look good, it has to look best in the physical space and in the virtual space of the internet and social media accounts. Still, it has to look perfect with the self because pinning up is akin to hanging a piece of yourself - a package of ambition, values, and thoughts on one plane. The self becomes hungry for visually arresting work that looks good.

But if looking good becomes both means and ends to the architectural project, the work becomes mere object. Here, I propose to revisit the architectural work – the pieces of ourselves we so proudly showcase – as *things* instead of objects. The thing is different from the object in that it gathers. It is, in Heidegger's words, a *presencing*¹. The presence of the architectural work is not in its visuals, but like Heidegger's conception of the jug, in the voids of information it might hold, that are in turn poured out to the recipient. The jug gathers itself for the task of containing². Similarly, the

¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Thing" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971.) 171.

² Ibid.

power of the architectural work lies in its containment of worlds bigger than itself. The architectural work narrates a story, and this story cannot be told in mere image. The veneration for the object is chasing a reduced image. In contrast, a desire for the thing is a respect for the criticality and the broader relationships that the object gathers.

The object as object-in-itself stands in isolation, satisfied with its own representation as an end. The object exists for its own representation, the representation of the object is the object. Do not get me wrong, the world of the object is pleasurable. It produces affects, provokes imagination, drawing the eye into a delightful blend of pastels, gradients, intricate linework, and more. But this imagination is limited and framed in the flatness to which the object has been reduced and thus rendered complete. While completeness in the architectural work is praised, it is the unfinished qualities of the object that carves space for the imagination and room for rumination.

In reality the work on the wall should be complete but never finished – it is merely a beginning, a springboard for conversations about things larger than itself. While its representation might never be as visually arresting as that of the object, the language it speaks operates on a complexity that goes deeper beneath the image surface. Knowing this, the architecture student struggles. If architecture is about built form, yet its real presencing takes the form of the unbuilt, how can one communicate and articulate this language coherently through work projected on the planes of the white walls?

It is then essential that visual image does not become the main fixation of our time. Neither should the technologies used to produce these graphics become the central obsession as means and ends in our design trajectories. In a 1986 lecture in Vienna, architect Raimund Abraham lamented the fragility of technology and the loss of theoretical positions in architecture. Because building has become the main compulsion for architects, it has become architecture's only justification³. If neither the act of building nor its visual representation speaks fluently the language of architecture,

³ Raimund Abraham, Norbert Miller, and Brigitte Groihofer. *(Un)built*. (Wien: SpringerWienNewYork, 2011.) 111.

then there needs to be a *third landscape*⁴ through which we navigate the meanings of our discipline. The third landscape, according to French gardener Gilles Clément, is an interstitial space, a space left for nature to take its own course, a space that registers temporality without the architectural intervention. It is perhaps this attitude toward the landscape that offers methods to understand the unfinished architectural work. In what ways can architecture be present in the third landscape, how does it converse in an unfinished space?

Going back to the *thingliness* of the architectural work, one can start to imagine that it is a gathering of relationships sited in a space-time continuum with capacities too wide to be flattened into mere image. The repertoire of the architectural work should thus be expanded from representation to dimension, from object in isolation to object in space-time: a *thing*. When confronted with an architectural project, the architectural question of time and place emerges prior to the building question. Time and place has established ground for the architectural project – the conditions hidden beneath the context await excavation. It is time to break out of the spatiotemporal vacuum and bring materiality, hapticity, phenomena, language – everything *unsexy* back into the unfinished architectural work.

In a history of American architecture class at the Taubman College, the professor named the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright as a tragedy in the history of American space. Not just because of the tragedies that Wright himself had personally been through, but because Wright never managed to impart his architectural thoughts competently to any learner. We marvel at his ideas, but as much as they compel us, Wright's work remains a distanced artifact from the architectural work today. Why does no architectural work in schools today articulate the same grammar on which the Usonian and Prairie houses were built? The fact is that we have, inevitably, been conditioned to create images distancing ourselves from the ontological conditions of the ground on which we design. The power

⁴ Gilles Clément, "The Third Landscape," The Third Landscape, accessed April 01, 2017, <http://www.gillesclement.com/art-454-tit-The-Third-Landscape>.

of the media in the digital turn has swung us to the opposite side, forcing us to look at the works of the old masters in an attitude of *otherness*. The craft, materiality, organic-ness, and temporality of Wright's work simply do not belong on the flat white walls of the CMYK. They belong to the ground on which they were built – specific to the spatiotemporal dimension of the work. Such work cannot be digitized, for they carried burdens heavier than the image can bear. They can only be understood through an inhabitation by the body in real time.

The burdened architectural work is the thing in question. The object is easy to represent, the thing is a burden difficult to master. By definition they are in close proximity, but they stand for such radically different attitudes differentiating architecture and mere building. Thinking about the *thingly* character of the architectural work goes beyond the object and beyond the beautiful. It involves the messy and the *unsexy*, it requires not design excellence, but a design burden.

Hence, the beauty of the CMYK is in its void. They are not in the works that stike most visually, but those that silently labor away and express the struggles of architectural thought. These are the moments of silence that speak to the tremendous potential of things that might fill it the next day, or in time to come. Let us continue to fill it with things of desire, but let us not forget to meditate upon the greater worlds that the things want to be.