The human act of eating as the birth of the digital architecture

A conversation between the Editorial Committee members

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MATTER MATTERS

LN The time and space in which this conversation is taking place speaks to the space of architecture in the contemporary society. 'Post-catastrophes', 'post-human', 'post-pandemic', are some of the words used by researchers and commentators in the architecture field. The notion of post is referring to the present of a past and a future, and it is mainly directed towards a definition of a space that is not considered to be present at the moment. Placing us as human beings in the post-contemporary society we are dealing with a potential gradual dissolution of the everyday space, and the act of occupying this space that has been the most pertinent topic in architecture together with the notion of matter.

JA What it is relevant in Architecture and Art? Talking about objects is the matter. Matter as a physical substance that creates atmospheres, relations and light.

MD Matter surrounds us – a picnic in the countryside, surrounded by vegetation: barbecue at the beach, surrounded by water; and dinner at home surrounded by friends. All evoke and provoke. Architecture does that. Matter matters.

JA To understand the presence of matter in our projects we must refer to the writing of Toyo Ito about "Vortex" . Architecture creates matter as a human act of meeting and eating. An atmosphere as an immaterial envelope for the cherry blossom tree festival. 'Vortex' in currents of air, light and sound, being carried away by the current. This natural scenario for a lunch is a dynamic atmosphere that represent the birth of the Japanese architecture.

LN Is this still possible in a post-contemporary condition where matter and space can be dissolved and transformed by technology? What if we would be asked to re-write 'Vortex' in the current digital era?

MD The Japanese tea ceremony brings tradition, rituality and atmosphere to the place of drinking. Without the tea what would the room be? A void? I argue that the act of eating, and in this case drinking, makes the space a place. But can we replicate this experience? Do we need to be in Japan, in a purposefully designed room? Can we be far away? Does replicating the ceremony bring the place to us. We create heterotopias as we eat and drink. The 'French' restaurant in New York, the 'Spanish' restaurant in Berlin, the Italian restaurant on a cruise ship that moves across time and space as diners 'enjoy' the meal. And, even trying to recreate a holiday meal at home.

JA In this piece of writing, I want to discuss the future of the dynamic envelope by talking about SUSTAINABILITY AND DIGITALIZATION. Sustainable spaces as a physical and digital substance that create new environments, relations and horizons. Nowadays the new layer of the digitalization reformulates the design, adding virtual information to environmental conditions.

BEYOND THE EXPERIENCE

MD Architecture has been creating these physical (material) spaces for eating for a long time, but now there is a challenge. In the world of digitisation and virtual reality do we need to take ourselves to such places? Is the atmosphere, the experience, the occasion the same?

JA Last year, we start working in University of Universities UOU with Intelligence Artificial and Metaverse as new scenarios for the experience of eating. The reflection about the human act and its natural dynamic envelope was transferred to the internet. Zoom meals all over the world, virtual food, learning engines for future meetings, windows of windows as contemporary space for dinners. The projects start our thinking about the new environment produced in virtual relationships and the design of this digital dynamic act.

LN We are working in parallel paths researching possible conditions and contributing to the open debate in architecture as a way for integrating our teaching with these findings. In order to make sure that we can talk about artificial intelligence and metaverse we need to go beyond the common definition of this terms and go more in deep, and in order to do that we, as architects, need to learn from other disciplines and formulate a research question that can bring us to a next step where we would be able to use these words and reflect on them it. I feel the need as a researcher to have the time to elaborate and translate this subject into the notion of space and matter. The Dutch Pavilion curated by the Het Nieuwe Instituut in the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale presented the research "Work, Body and Leisure" as a journey through a series of architectures in the Netherlands and beyond in which bodies are categorized and transformed: offices, playgrounds, farms, factories and virtual spaces, windows, beds, and doors. Starting from this contribution, the Institute has opened a transnational research program focusing on how the field of architecture can be influenced and react to the emerging technologies of automation and how the notion of built environment and space can be reconsidered. And, this is just an example on how we can imagine architecture dealing with a non-physical experience. But can this really be considered as the future of our discipline?

MD And this is where I struggle to see how the architecture of the physical (material) space can be truly replaced. Until we genuinely share the whole experience we are only bit-players. Sharing online means we miss out on everything intangible associated with the occasion: shared smell, shared texture, feelings only to be replaced with an ersatz, and for now at least, poorer substitute. Eating needs a shared architectural space. So the challenge for the digital future is how to design such. Convince me it can be done!

JA Flavour, smell, texture as well as social relationships, boundaries and digital biotopes must be redesigned to establish this future scenario.

LN Are we really sure that we have the tools to redesign the future scenario?

JA Along the design journey, we used irony as a particular process of thinking. There was a strategy about the subject to change and the contingency and fragility of the final vocabulary to describe the change. In the book "Contingency, irony, and solidarity" (Rorty, 1989) Rorty defines an "ironist" as someone who fulfills three conditions:

"He/She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses... he/she realizes that argument phrased in his/her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts ... he/she does not think that his/her vocabulary is closer to reality than others...". The opposite of irony is common sense. During the year, we were not trying to dissolve doubts; we were trying to think about a new reality and to find ways to describe the vocabulary of a fiction. Architecture and gastronomy, in this fictional scenario, reinforces the natural presence of the human act as the birth of the contemporary architecture.

MD Would you prefer to drink tea with Toyo Ito on zoom, or in person? I know my answer.

LN I know my answer too. But is it just about converting the experience using a digital platform for communication or is this conceived as a totally different experience? I still don´t know the answer.

REFLECTIONS

SA On this idea of discussing the human act of eating, in the space of architecture, as the birth of Digital Architecture in the contemporary society, I argue that the ironic image below (Fig.1) encapsulates the representation of what we were sixty years ago and what we still are today: constraining food-for-thoughts within architects' blue boundaries, or a blue box where the representation of food makes claims for order within the real world boundaries that surround us. And, breakfast remains the same today.

Fig. 1 - Breakfast Kit by Javier Sánchez Merina, based on *False Food Selection, 1965,* Claes Oldenburg. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] ITO, Toyo. Escritos. COAT MURCIA. 2000 - pp.256 pages.
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