

From Icon to Diagram: Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2012, Herzog & De Meuron and Ai Weiwei.

Lluís J. Liñán

In one of his most celebrated articles,¹ Robin Evans compares two paintings sharing the same theme to reflect upon the particularities of architecture and architectural drawing in relation to other arts and representation techniques. Both David Allan's *The Origin of Painting* from 1773, and Karl Friedrich Schinkel *The Origin of Painting* from 1830,² depict the legend of Dibutades, a young woman from Corinth who drew the shadow of his departing lover to keep his memory intact. Trapped in the projection plane, the shadow becomes a flat substitute for

the lover, simultaneously relieving and emphasizing his absence. Trapped within the canvas, this scene was depicted by many painters of the eighteenth century in order to characterize painting as a physical mimesis of tangible reality or, put differently, as a two-dimensional depiction of a real fact. Both paintings, however, present significant differences. While Allan's version takes place inside a house, with the sole illumination of a candle, and the sole presence of the lovers, Schinkel's, architect before painter, occurs outside, under the sun, and in an environment that presents no sign of artificial disruption. Moreover, in Schinkel's version the lovers are not alone, and it is not Dibutades who draws the shadow on the surface of a stone but a young peasant following her instructions.

To Evans, all these differences suggest a variation on the theme of the work: rather than with the origin of painting, Schinkel is dealing with the origin of architectural drawing, a technique of representation based on orthogonal projection of parallel rays –like those cast by the sun–, the distinction between the designer –Dibutades– and the maker of the work –the young peasant–, and the inversion of the relative positioning between reality and its representation, because, in Schinkel's version, the drawing precedes any sign of architecture.

An additional aspect adds to this variation. In the two paintings, Dibutades uses her hand to adjust the position of her lover's head, in a way that her own shadow blends with the shadow cast by the young man. Hence, although both artists represent the drawing in process, we can imagine that both Dibutades in Allan's version and the peasant in Schinkel's would ignore the superposition of the shadows, tentatively completing the part of the silhouette indiscernible to the light. As a result, the drawing would not match the shadow perfectly; it would be the product of small adjustments and distortions derived from the ability of the draughtsman, or woman. The drawing would not equate to the shadow; it would not be a physical manifestation of the lover's body or its mimesis. Rather, it would be an abstraction, partially autonomous and open to adjustments according to its own rules and mechanisms in order to produce new bodies.

In the field of architecture, these bodies are, of course, buildings –objects that inevitably depend on the anteriority of their representation. Put differently, in architecture representation does not imitate an existing reality; it anticipates it. The job of architects is to imagine and codify future realities through representation so they can be built by other professionals. Hence Evans' observation on the particular nature of architectural drawing: it is not an end in itself, like painting, but a medium that translates the imagination of the architect into tangible reality.

If that weren't enough, the complex relationship between architecture and representation that stems from such an observation opens to a second level of definitions once drawings are translated into buildings. Firstly, because buildings rapidly become the actual referents for a new set of

representations once they are completed and start to disseminate in the form of drawings, models or photographs – representations that mediate the generation and dissemination of architectural knowledge.³ Secondly, because buildings require in order to be completed of a significant amount of material, regulatory, and economic resources that rarely depend on designers to be mobilized. All these resources normally stem from people and institutions that, in return, expect buildings to symbolize their values and motivations. As the main elements of public space, and as the receivers of important monetary sums, buildings are usually invested with the function of representing a symbolic content, being then transferred to the city's policies, decisions, or events that aspire to shape the collective imaginary. Just like Dibutades' drawing, many buildings are commissioned to preserve the memory of absent people or values.

Thus, in writing about architecture and representation it becomes necessary to acknowledge first the duality of the problem and its potential projection onto two separate conceptual surfaces.⁴ One deals with the symbolic function of buildings, that is, with their mandate to represent a particular system of values, or *weltanschauung*. The other, in turn, deals with the documents of architectural design –plans, sections or visualizations–, all of which are partial representations that anticipate and mediate in the construction of buildings. Simultaneously, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that, although autonomous and discernible, both surfaces are inherently connected through the architectural project, basically because, paraphrasing Evans, architecture 'is brought into existence through drawing.'⁵ This fact invites us to approach the documents of the architectural project as the true custodians of the representative function of buildings.

2. Anti-icon

Since June 2000, the Kensington Gardens in London's Hyde Park host every summer a small, temporary pavilion that is built right in front of the main façade of the Serpentine Gallery. Its primary goal, according to the website of the gallery, is to operate as 'a global platform for experimental projects by some of the world's greatest architects.'⁶ To do so, every year the gallery invites an architect to design the small construction on the basis of their relevance and their lack of built work in the United Kingdom. Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Toyo Ito, Oscar Niemeyer, MVRDV, Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura, Rem Koolhaas and Cecil Balmond, Olafur Eliasson and Kjetil Thorsten, Frank O. Gehry, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, Jean Nouvel, Peter Zumthor, Herzog & de Meuron and Ai Weiwei, Sou Fujimoto, Smiljan Radic, SelgasCano, Bjarke Ingels, Francis Kéré, Frida Escobedo, and Junya Ishigami are the architects and architectural offices that, in that order, have been selected so far to leave their imprint on the British capital.

The parameters given to the designers upon commission are rather limited: firstly, the pavilion must be built within the perimeter of the Kensington Gardens; secondly, it

must host a number of cultural events, such as lectures, projections, and parties, which are programmed once the pavilion has been designed in direct relation to its theme and appearance. There is no specific budget assigned to the commission because, as Marina Otero has exposed, the building is funded through sponsorship by private companies and, also, through its sale at the end of the summer.⁷ As a result, the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion commission lacks a specific content or function; it is a pavilion that is first and foremost intended to exhibit itself and, at the same time, to promote the designers behind it, in a way the building becomes an artistic object explicitly tied to a well-known architect.

Thus, whereas temporary pavilions have historically been built and promoted to mobilize a specific symbolic content belonging to external figures, like a nation –international exhibitions–, an industry –trade fairs–, or a disciplinary area of interest –architecture biennials and triennials–, it could be argued that the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, stemming from a private institution, mobilizes a different type of symbolic function that is inherently linked to a renowned designer. The fame of the designer, in turn, turns the small construction into a piece of art of high symbolic capital in contemporary culture. In this scenario, it comes as no surprise that the vast majority of the pavilions built so far have been re-built in different parts of the world after its trade, showing off their ability to circulate as authored objects in order to keep articulating a sustained flow of events, publications, and press releases.⁸

The lack of functional and monetary constraints that characterizes the commission seems to have been reciprocated by a collection of buildings that, albeit remarkably heterogeneous in their shape and materials, share a will to become highly legible from a visual perspective. Conscious of their grounding on a context as influenced by the Kensington Gardens as it is by the space of media, these buildings could be defined as iconic in the sense offered by Charles Jencks.⁹ That is, buildings that present a significant formal autonomy which makes them easily identifiable once they are translated into a photograph –the main ingredient nourishing their symbolic capital once the building is completed.

An exception seems to confirm this rule. The pavilion built in 2012 by the team formed by Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and Ai Weiwei has been described by the authors as a challenge to the inherent constraints of the commission. In other words, these architects decided to generate a non-iconic building, and they did it by avoiding a formal solution that could be easily linked to their usual vocabulary.¹⁰ To do this, they decided to work on a design that was anonymous and non-objectual, producing a building that would lack a recognizable figure in order to resist an easy absorption and reproduction in the space of media.

Two strategies exploring this resistance to signification were initially deployed. The

first one, addressing a particular type of anonymity based on an excess of legibility, was to use platonic solids and simple volumes as a base for their design – a cube, a sphere, or a pyramid that would be hard to associate with their own vocabulary due to their archetypal nature. The second, addressing the literal disappearance of the building, was to bury the pavilion so it could only be perceived, and captured, from the inside. Therefore, if the former strategy tried to enhance the genericity of the pavilion by intensifying its formal character, then the latter omitted both genericity and formality in order to resist the photographic translation of the object, thereby proposing a design concept rooted on a double negation of both object and identity.

In the end, this double negation left these strategies behind and was preserved by the architects as the main conceptual drive of a design that used architectural drawing as the means to conflate it.

3. Index

In the short period elapsing from September –when the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion is dismantled– to May –when the next Pavilion breaks ground–, the Kensington Gardens recover with ease their continuity with the green turf of Hyde Park, hiding all the traces of previous constructions. In the under-soil, however, some of the elements used in the construction of each pavilion, like foundations and wiring, remain partially stored underground, overlapping like the strata of different geologic eras.

After considering the possibility of burying the pavilion, this is what led Herzog, de Meuron, and Weiwei to do some research on the material remnants of the eleven pavilions that had preceded their commission. That research, mediated mostly through photographs and complementing their second intention of separating the design from their own vocabulary, led them to the idea of using these remnants as the main support for their own project, figuratively turning their design into a paradoxical archeology of cutting-edge contemporary architecture.

The official description of the resulting pavilion, written by the curators of the event Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist, refers to a building that offers on the inside a bas-relief made from the unearthed foundations of all precedent pavilions.¹¹ Coated with cork and enabler of a variety of events and functions, the interior of the pavilion is sprinkled with twelve columns extruded from the remnants of previous commissions in order to support a rounded roof, similar to those used in archeological digs. This is, in short, a building that literally rises from the footprints of the precedent pavilions; an exercise regarding design based on the genealogy of the Serpentine Gallery; an “archeological architecture” that “reminds us that successful architecture is always a question of the utmost sensitivity to the site.”¹²

Even though this last quote could be related with some of the most characteristic

accounts of the work of Herzog & de Meuron, describing the pavilion as a building that stems from the footprints and traces of the previous constructions is a highly effective conceptual tool that explains the loss of objectuality, and the authorial abandonment, intended by the architects. As signifiers, footprints and traces are a type of sign that belong to the category of the index, that is, a sign that, unlike the symbol –which is culturally connected to the referent– and the icon –defined by visual similarity with the referent–, stems from a physical connection with “the signified” element.¹³ In other words, the index is a sign that depends on the material contact between two entities. It is defined, as a consequence, by the anteriority of the referent and the only mediation of the surface where it is captured. Rather than codifying reality, as icons and symbols do, indexes imprint it.

The transparency of this type of representation provides indexes with a particular set of characteristics. According to Rosalind Krauss, indexes signify through their lack of content, for their physical connection to the referent turns them into a sign without identity.¹⁴ As a result, indexes present no autonomy in terms of signification; they just denote something, and any connotation beyond their pure presence has to be done through different means of representation. Footprints and traces, but also shadows and photographs according to Krauss, are signs that inevitably turn their identity into identification. They are unable to detach themselves from the presence of the referent, and their interpretation, as a result, they always refer back to the object, or body, that generated them. Consequently, the presence of the index is permanently linked to the existence of a body which is not replaced, but exposed.

By recovering the traces of a set of buildings designed by other architects, the pavilion designed by Herzog, de Meuron, and Weiwei dissolved its own identity, assuming the formal vocabulary of their predecessors and turning the design process into an act of revelation of the previous pavilions. In doing so, the project resulting from such an act of estrangement could be presented by the curators as the outcome of a complex conflation of different approaches to the same commission, and not as a product of the imagination of the Swiss-Chinese team. A project that inherently referred to the particular history of the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, which could be discovered by the visitors after immersing themselves in the subsoil of the Kensington Gardens.

4. Diagram

Published in two consecutive issues of *October* in 1977, Rosalind Krauss’ notes on the index distill the signifying characteristics of this particular sign in order to relate it to photography. According to the text, photography is the form of representation closest to the index, for it is a physical manifestation of the impact of light on the film that immediately loses any connotative stability and can be ascribed to multiple systems of signification. Just like

indexes, photographs are immune to stable interpretation and signification.¹⁵

Like the majority of her ideas, Krauss’ analogy between photography and the index has been used as a reference in many debates carried out throughout the last three decades, most of them revolving around the essence of photography after the irruption of digital technologies. According to image scholars such as W. J. T. Mitchell or Mark Hansen, digitization disrupted the indexical nature of photography by making it inherently dependent on the mediation of the computer to be captured and distributed.¹⁶ Digital photography is no longer based on the direct impact of light on film, but on the translation of light into a numerical sequence that is first processed by the camera and then transformed into a picture legible to the photographer. This process introduces an essential disruption between referent and image: The latter depends on the interpretative structures of the computer and, as a consequence, it opens up to an infinite array of potential adjustments and modifications. In Joan Fontcuberta’s opinion, digitization ends with the myth of transparency and indexicality that used to support the social consensus on the veracity of photographs, and, in so doing, it multiplies the autonomy and instrumental nature of photography.¹⁷ Arguably, a similar disruption was experienced by the shadow of Dibutade’s lover once it was turned into a drawing: it stopped being an index of his presence to become an autonomous representation that could be modified in order to project new bodies.

Following this same premise, the characterization of the 2012 Serpentine Gallery Pavilion as an index can be questioned, especially if we immerse ourselves in the description of the design process provided by the architects.¹⁸ In the book dedicated to the pavilion by the Serpentine Gallery, Herzog, de Meuron, and Weiwei explain chronologically through photographs, drawings, and short texts the main decisions taken along the process, since their initial meetings until the construction of the pavilion. According to this chronology, once they decided to bury the building, the architects did not try to recover the actual foundations remaining on site, but focused on the foundation plans that had been used to build each of the precedent pavilions. In other words, they didn’t unearth the material remnants of the pavilions, but their representations –abstract, complete, and unaffected by the soil.

Once they had recovered the drawings of all precedent approaches to the commission, Herzog, de Meuron, and Weiwei overlapped them according to their original position, thereby generating a complex conglomerate of lines that was later framed by a circle –a flat perimeter for their particular archeological excavation. Within the circle, the design process turned into an experiment on selection, and the lines were alternatively emphasized, trimmed, or erased to finally define the geometry of their own design. The resulting geometry of the twelfth pavilion emerged not as a replica of precedent designs, but as a synthesis of curves, lines, and figures

emerging from the framed imagination of Herzog & de Meuron and Ai Weiwei.

The particular procedures behind their design become apparent in the configuration of the twelve columns that supported the circular roof of the building. Described by the curators as the clearest manifestation of the remnants of the precedent pavilions,¹⁹ the columns relate to them on a purely symbolic level, for their configuration is too a result of the fortuitous selection and combination of the lines captured by the circle. Their singularity, however, turns them into a very didactic witness of the design process, showing how their geometry derives from the intersection of the drawings of the pavilions by Libeskind and SANAA (Column B), Eliasson, Ito, and Libeskind (Column D), or Eliasson, Gehry, and Ito (Column F). Interestingly, half of the columns (C, G, H, I, K) do not correspond in their final placement with the conglomerate of lines. Rather, they seem to be the result of a synthesis of the typical geometry of the precedent pavilions, later transposed to the twelfth. Thus, the square that defines two columns appears to come from the typical geometry of Niemeyer, Koolhaas, and Gehry's foundation drawings, while the cross, used in one column, appears to be borrowed from the drawings used in the construction of Niemeyer, Nouvel, and Zumthor's pavilions.

Regardless of the symbolic associations that the columns suggest, the specifically-designed points placed with relative freedom enabled Herzog, de Meuron, and Weiwei to unravel the potential of the conglomerate of lines in order to produce their own pavilion. The footprints of the precedent buildings, turned into drawings, were used by the architects as an instrument devoted to the creation of a new spatial reality, and not as a representation of past architectures. In their own words, these drawings allowed them to "generate a complexity that we could not have invented on our own and the possibility to develop a collection of abstract forms in a language that would not normally be used."²⁰ In other words, the collection of indexes represented by the drawings was transformed into a support for the development of innovative solutions that allowed them to separate themselves from their own vocabulary.

In the architects' description of the project, the index is not considered as an instrument to denote the lost pavilions of the Serpentine Gallery, but as a tool to generate innovative spatial configurations. From this perspective, the architects seem to invest the index with the function of a different type of sign, the diagram; a sign devoted to projection rather than reference. That is, a sign that addresses the future performance of a building, instead of its representation.²¹

Four decades ago, architectural design and index were linked in order to defend the ability of buildings to be self-referential, that is, to expose their own design process against the background of a particular theoretical framework.²² Twenty years later, architectural design was related to the diagram in order to underline its projective essence. According to that relationship, buildings do

not respond primarily to a discourse, but to particular effects.²³ Diagrams carry out the inherent mandate of architectural drawing in Schinkel's painting; to invoke a new material reality that replaces the earthly paradise where the scene takes place. In the design of the 2012 Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, this ability to invoke new realities was conflated with the use of existing drawings, thereby suggesting a fusion of these two signs: the index and the diagram. The drawings of the previous pavilions, described as indexes and liberated from signifying bonds, were activated to generate a piece of architecture that transcended the vocabulary of the architects – a building cast onto the future thanks to its conscious dependence on a set of representations that had already been translated into other buildings.

Trying to avoid the inherent media exposure resulting from the commission, Herzog, de Meuron, and Weiwei found in these representations an effective way of deriving the identity of their design into the memory of the precedent pavilions. In so doing, they came across a design tool that links their concerns with a number of contemporary debates relating to creativity in architecture in an era that is ruled by informational excess and where architects are constantly exposed to an endless number of representations.²⁴ Providing one possible answer to these debates, the 2012 Serpentine Gallery Pavilion came to life as the result of a translation of architectural representation into a new field of creative signifiers, according to which originality resides in the unexpected meanings that emerge when existing drawings collide.

extruded columns from the foundations of each past Pavilion, employing them as load-bearers for their roof structure. Eleven columns represent each of the previous Pavilions."

20. Ibid. Note 10, p. 71.

21. Anthony Vidler, "Diagrams of Diagrams: Architectural Abstraction and Modern Representation," *Representations* no. 72 (2000): 1-20.

22. Peter Eisenman, "Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-ino and the Self-Referential Sign," *Oppositions* 15/16, (Winter/Spring 1979): 189-198; "Digital Scrambler: From Index to Codex," *Perspecta* 35 (2004): 40-53.

23. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta*, Vol. 33 (2002): 72-77.

24. On this topic, see, for instance, *Perspecta* 49; Amanda Reeser Lawrence and Ana Miljacki eds., *Terms of Appropriation: Modern Architecture and Global Exchange* (London: Routledge, 2017) and Ana Miljacki ed., *Under the Influence* (Cambridge, MA: SA+P Press, 2014); or Federico Soriano's work on postproduction, published in the issues 16 and 17 of *Fisuras*.

Serpentine Gallery
Herzog & de Meuron
Ai Weiwei
Representation
Appropriation

1. Robin Evans, "Translations from drawing to building," *AA Files* 12, (1986): 3-18.

2. We use here the title of the paintings as presented by Evans in "Translations from Drawing to Building" in *AA Files*. The actual title of Schinkel's painting is *Erfindung der Zeichenkunst*, or "The invention of the art of drawing".

3. On this topic, see: Kester Rattenbury, *This is Not Architecture: Media Constructions* (London: Routledge, 2005).

4. As stated in: Stan Allen, "Constructing with Lines: On Projection," en *Practice: Architecture Technique + Representation* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000), 3-31.

5. Ibid. Note 1.

6. "Exhibitions & Events," Serpentine Galleries, accessed October 1, 2018, <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/pavilion>

7. Marina Otero Verzier, "Arquitecturas de circulación y acumulación: el remontaje de los pabellones de la Serpentine Gallery," *ARQ*, núm. 90 (agosto 2015): 100-109.

8. Ibid. Note 7.

9. Charles Jencks, *The Iconic Building: The Power of Enigma* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2005). For a critique of Jencks' ideas, see Peter Eisenman, "Duck Soup," *Log*, no. 7 (2006): 139-43.

10. Jacques Herzog, Sophie O'Brien, Melissa Larner, Claire Feeley, y Pierre de Meuron, *Herzog & de Meuron Ai Weiwei : Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2012* (London: Serpentine Gallery-Koenig Books, 2012).

11. Julia Payton-Jones y Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Directors' Foreword," in Jacques Herzog, Sophie O'Brien, Melissa Larner, Claire Feeley, y Pierre de Meuron, *Herzog & de Meuron Ai Weiwei : Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2012* (London: Serpentine Gallery-Koenig Books, 2012), 35-40.

12. Ibid. Note 11, p. 35.

13. We refer here to Charles Sanders Peirce's. See: C. S. Peirce, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

14. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October*, Vol. 3 (spring, 1977): 68-81; and "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2," *October*, Vol. 4 (autumn, 1977): 58-67.

15. Ibid. Note 14.

16. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

17. Joan Fontcuberta, *La furia de las imágenes: Notas sobre la postfotografía* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2016), 30.

18. Ibid. Note 10.

19. Ibid. Note 11. "Acknowledging the impressive achievements of the past architects, Herzog & de Meuron and Ai Weiwei have