

**THE COMBINATION OF SURREALIST MOVEMENT AND
THEORETICAL ARCHITECTURAL IDEAS IN MODERN ARENA OF
CONSTRUCTION**

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Abstract

This paper is exploring the philosophy of surrealism and how to translate these fundamental ideas into an inhabitable surrealist space; a place where the imagination is liberated, where the mind can reach a new awareness of consciousness, and where reality and fantasy are perceived as one 'surreality'. This paper is challenging the idea that architecture might be perhaps the most useful medium of all to achieve the surrealist's goals; that is, to forget associations, structures, and customs you already know in order to experience a new world that your imagination creates and inhabits. In this way, surrealists have been known for their irrational juxtapositions, and compositions based on automatism, which is allowing your impulses to take over conscious decisions. This paper examines the complex relationship between Surrealism and architectural theory and practice. While architecture did not apparently play an extensive role in Surrealist concerns, this paper argues that it could offer, nevertheless, a crucial arena for a Surrealist articulation of space as psychically charged.

Key words: Philosophy of surrealism, Modern Architecture, surrealism, surrealist articulation.

Introduction

Architecture, as materialized desires achieved through subjective imagination and thoughtful cultural production, polymorphously draws from sources outside its own discrete disciplinary boundaries. Much of the premodern history of architectural theory can be read as the search to identify exactly that which distinguishes architecture from mere construction, and the shifting answers always lie outside utilitarian making. Architecture, even modern architecture, as an incomplete discipline incapable of autonomy or completion, is open to these associations, and it is doubtful if the sacrificial tropes on classical temples, or the original impulse to make these temples, were entirely rational or discipline-specific.

The science of geometry and musical harmony, and the artistic practices of painting and sculpture, in particular, became fetishes in the design and construction of classical and neo-classical architecture, as if the desires informing architecture necessarily precede and exceed

their material boundaries. These “supplements” to premodern architectural construction are in effect an expression of a necessary fundamental lack in architecture, masking the incompleteness of mere building with aesthetically instrumentalized materialization of desires.

Premodern architectural theory seeks to describe and rationalize these “others” of building. It is often the case that for architecture to exist, it must paradoxically stage the reemergence of its own excluded desires. In each work of architecture, the utilitarian needs can be satisfied, but the desire cannot: the “blind spot” of desire is the longing for a lost origin. Hence the obsession over the history of architecture in premodern architectural theory – in this view, architectural history cannot be the history of style, but the history of lacks, desires, supplements, and new desires.

The prevalent assumption that modern architecture’s dehistoricized formations were overtly political statements, positing instrumental reason over bourgeoisie desires reconfigured as ideology, appears to suppress the excesses of architectural desire in favor of austere constructions under the guise of rationalism. Modern architecture, erupting from the challenge of industrialization to the neo-classical order, is therefore often read as an instrumental language of technologically described voids.

Yet even in its extreme ascetic manifestations, works of modern architecture could not overcome the tendency to draw upon the fetish of art and technology, specifically the contemporaneous movements of modern art. Expressionism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Cubism (Purism) resonate within modern architecture, and are now inseparable from the historiography of the modern. The least-examined artistic practice informing modern architecture is surrealism: architecture as the “blind spot” in surrealist theory and practice, and surrealist thought is the “dark secret” of much modernist architecture – they are mutually understated or absent in most scholarship. To address the status of desire in modern architecture, much can be learned from a critical examination of architecture’s haunting presence in surrealist thought, surrealist tendencies in the theories and projects of modern architecture, and the theoretical and methodological concerns of surrealism informing past and future urban architecture.

As the early part of the Twentieth century proclaimed a move from Cubism and Dadaism to Surrealism, it likewise spoke to a period when architecture was starting to grasp new ideas and structures. As surrealism became entrenched in prevalent American culture the art critic Matthew Josephson announced that "the development is bound to incredible fortune in America", and went ahead to say that he anticipated surrealist furniture, newsreel theaters and skyscrapers, supplanting 'modern art'.

As is valid for some rising fine arts, both architecture and surrealism were focused on the thought of avant-gardism, and every school had its own ways to deal with how their work ought to be seen by people in general. Andre Breton, in his second show of surrealism, expressed, "the endorsement of people, in general, is to be avoided like the plague", and he urged artists to trust that "a avant-garde movement ought to be seen as characteristically unstable, threatening the very sense of community that it fosters". Similarly, the architect Hiroshi Hara recommended that architects "regain control of the post-modern spatial order that is against the encompassing homogenous space outside". And even the prominent architect Le Corbusier said, "Dissonance has dependably been an aesthetic technique", demonstrating that buildings ought to present an image in spite of populist culture.

Surrealism had its first forays into the art world in the form of poetry, which quickly lead to painting and works of collage. For many surrealists, the combination of a variety of materials and forms from a variety of sources defined the sense of pastiche that was central to surrealist thinking.

The intentions of the surrealist movement are at the forefront of many sources, which starts off the biggest mouth of minds in a clear way. One explains to all hungry perceptions that the vision of surrealism as a way of thinking and viewing the world. Other points out that the Delphic Oracles of art believed “in the future resolution of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, of surreality, so to speak.” By using of this idea, believers deduce that surrealists believed in a “new myth”, which is the surreality that involved the “whole of human existence.” This surreality is the “imaginary-real world of certain primitives, stripped of all supernatural implication and meanings.”

Also in subject of Architectural Design, they add that surrealism is a “state of mind, a form of knowledge”, as opposed to just an art movement, that was able to revolutionize the “dream world into a palpable reality.” pioneers of Surrealism and Cinema notes that surrealism is a convergence of the “different realms of existence” and “a meeting point between the opposites of light and dark, presence and absence, and actuality and imagination.” Richardson claims surrealism is also a collaborative effort that is still a “living thing.” Similarly, Elliot H. King, author of *Dali, Surrealism and Cinema*, states that surrealism aims to activate the subconscious mind, and that cinema is the perfect medium for this.

Lastly, we refer to the ideas of surrealism in the Introduction of Surrealism as “enabling the mind to leap the barrier set up for it by the antinomies of reason and dreaming, reason and madness, feeling and representation.” The sources seemingly all agree on the definition of surrealism; that surrealism is when the mind can converge both fantasy and reality into one existence. This paper understands and agrees with that definition, and will work towards designing an architecture that embodies that very idea.

These data all generally concur about the definition of surrealism; however, not all agree on the definition and presence of surrealism in Architecture. A part of them states that architecture was not of interest to the surrealists, due to the surrealists’ aspirations mainly focusing in art, sculpture, and objects.

Knight writes about the obvious contempt Breton had for Le Corbusier’s rational “modern style”, as Breton says modernism is “the most unhappy dream of the collective unconscious.” Knight analyzes the superficial nature of Le Corbusier’s attempts at using surrealist devices, such as the dreamlike quality Villa Savoye has sitting in the landscape, or the drifting quality of the ramps throughout the house. Knight also mentions Le Corbusier’s “four walls, the lawn and the sky” with a “useless fireplace” at the Beistegui Apartment in Paris as a rudimentary attempt at surrealism.

However, it can be one issue for argument that surrealism was, in fact, “the most modernist of the modernisms” due to the fact that surrealists tried to unveil the repressed aspects of modernism; surrealism was a negation of modernism. Also we can open this speak that architecture is actually the best medium in which to portray surrealism. This is due to the physical aspects of architecture that feel like a home, the symbolism that occurs in the home, such as stairs or a cellar, and the spatial freedom with which the user can move – creating a site for the “uncanny” to manifest.

Uncanny is neither a property of space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation, but that it is an aesthetic dimension that erases the boundaries between the real and the unreal. Finally, all the sources can agree on the aspirations of the only architect to attempt surrealist architecture: Frederick Kiesler. According to Bernard Tschumi, author of the article “Architecture and Its Double”, which appeared in the 1978 volume of *Architectural Design*, Kiesler’s first surrealist space was the “space-stage” in 1923 for the production of *RUR* in Berlin. Kiesler designed a funnel shaped auditorium space where the walls and ceilings could open up during the show.

Tschumi describes Kiesler’s second surrealist project, ‘The Endless Theater’ in Vienna, which had an unfolding double shell of cast-glass, as well as ramps, elevators, and platforms to create a continuous space that did not separate functions.¹⁸ Tschumi comments that Kiesler turned to unbuilt architectural research, dealing with how spaces were inherently connected to a person’s deep unconscious. Tschumi argues that Kiesler’s attempt at surrealist architecture have been ignored by architectural historians in favor of the 1920s movement towards Modernism.

Dalibor Veseley acknowledges that Kiesler worked on his ‘Endless House’ for 40 years, arguably the most well known surrealist architectural design, creating “a continuous space very much like a cave in the shape of an egg, with great freedom of movement inside, great flexibility for dividing the space.” However, Veseley points out the fact that the Endless House was never actually built, challenging the limits of “genuine surrealist architecture.” Anthony Vidler questions whether Kiesler’s egg-shaped design is surrealist; as Kiesler himself has said that it is more “Correalist”, meaning it had a “continual interaction between man and his natural and technological environments.”

Stephen Philips, author of “Introjection and Projection: Frederick Kiesler and his create an organic architecture that “stimulates an idealized paradisiacal life inside an ergonomically designed illusionary cinematic spatial experience that can expand and contract to engage one’s every motion and desire.” dream machine”, which appears in Thomas Mical’s *Surrealism and Architecture*, agrees with Vidler, stating that Kiesler’s aim was to Thus, Philips concludes that Kiesler’s Endless House “finds its home between illusion and reality, continuity and individuality, vision and fact.” It seems that Kiesler is the pioneer of surrealist architecture, but that his investigation, which started out as built work, turned into paper architecture. This paper will attempt to create more than just theoretical architectural ideas, but actual spatial experiences that convey this idea of a new way to perceive reality.

At the same time the architectural industry began to address multi-valent approaches and dual coding, embedding two or more meanings or systems into a building design. From the period of 1870 to 1910 there were roughly fifteen different styles of architecture being employed, whereas the period from 1920 onward brought with it the notion of Radical Eclecticism, a mish mash approach, taking from 400 design systems.

If surrealism was a form of intellectual bricolage, then architecture was certainly experiencing a similar commitment to mixing a variety of influences, metaphors, styles and systems. There were a number of new styles emerging in architecture to reflect this thinking, among them the “schizo” style, which used popular clichés and neologism, responding to changes in art, technology and the avante garde. When architects went too far and created hideous looking structures from an abundance of contrasting styles, their buildings were often ascribed the term “brutalism”.

But, despite some failed attempts to create dramatic new buildings, there were a number of exiting new architectural forms emerging in buildings around the world. Initially, we began to see popular culture influencing architecture in a variety of ways, with metaphors used in buildings that looked like egg cartons, beehives and all manner of icon symbols. At the same time we had an abundance of organic forms showing up in the architectural world, and soon we had “pneumatic buildings” which were described in terms of being, squishy, pudgy, cuddly, sexual, etc...

The architectural forms of Gaudi, Le Corbusier (with his Chapel at Ronchamp) and Frank Gehry all reflected a biomorphic influence, taking cues from a variety of organic forms found in nature. It’s likely these architects were responding to works by artists like Dali, De Chirico, Ernst, as well as many others in the surrealist movement. The most noted, and widely promoted, of the surrealist painters was Salvador Dali, whose images were often laden with distorted human and organic forms, and most likely had an impact on a generation of architects.

As can happen with any new and energetic movement, the world of architecture may have been a little too enthusiastic about drawing from the world of modern art in building designs. Robert Venturi, a noted architect, acknowledged the influence of the art world by stating that “postmodern classicism is a free, eclectic manner to be used where it is appropriate on public buildings”, but also warned that we seemed to be entering an era of “fast food architecture”. The danger of embracing modern art when designing building was perhaps most aptly expressed by Harry Weese, a Chicago architect, who claimed ‘we have neglected the ground, the sky, and most of all, the user’.

Regardless of the outcome of some of our modern art and architectural pursuits, the idealism has always reflected an ambitious and positive approach, and many artists and architects have great hopes for the continually evolving worlds of art and architecture.

One of the more interesting and forward-thinking concepts that emerged in the twentieth century is the definition of 4d (four dimensional) art and imagery. 4d space is defined as a highly imaginative treatment of forms that gives a sense of intervals of time or motion. One surrealist painter, James Guy, supported this notion by stating that “surrealist imagery offered a way to express various times and various spaces in a single canvas”.

An example of artwork that addresses this concept is the Duchamp painting entitled, “Nude descending a staircase” as the super-imposition of form connotes a sense of time, movement and gesture in the image. And while there are a number of architectural examples that might support this notion, the “Dancing Building” by Frank Gehry, perhaps best connotes the concept of movement in the sense of gesture it describes though the imitation of the human form as a dancing figure.

Perhaps the most important aspect of modern art and architecture is the willingness to experiment, and this type of thinking is evident in the following quote from a surrealist painter by the name of Arshile Gorky, who would often attempt to urge both himself and his fellow painters on to greater things; “Try to allow your mind to think in terms of constant motion or flux instead of paralysis. Replace stillness with movement. I am breaching the static barrier, penetrating rigidity. I am destroying the confinement of the inert wall to achieve fluidity, motion and warmth in expressing feelingness, the pulsation of nature as it throbs”.

The noted photographer Man Ray was quoted as saying, “Surrealism is an image whose strangeness and reality stirs our subconscious to its inmost depths”. It’s clear that twentieth

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century architecture has attempted to embrace this sentiment, as we have a number of examples in the buildings and structures that now adorn the skylines of major cities around the world.

Conclusion

For surrealism, and by extension surrealist architecture, reason shrivels in the representation of all that is irrational that tugs upon the desiring subject. Surrealist thought offers a repeatable process of experiencing and representing space that is other than rational, yet grounded in individual subjectivity. Surrealism does not intend to disfigure the subject, but to substantiate perception, often through a marvelous faculty of attaining two widely separate realities without departing from the realm of our experience, of bringing them together and drawing a spark from their contact; of gathering within reach of our senses abstract figures endowed with the same intensity, the same relief as other figures; and of disorienting us in our own memory.

Surrealist space has the possibility of overcoming rationalism to bring the oneiric “underworld” to the surface of perception. As this issue is argued correctly that individuals, by virtue of their complex and multiple historical and cultural affiliations, always exceed the subjectivities constructed by architecture. The subject of surrealism is defined by the coordinates of a space of multiplicity troping the interiority of the self and the interiority of (architectural) space. Events are located in spaces colored by perception; even the pristine instrumental voids of modern architecture, when occupied, are the territories of overlaps and slippages, condensations and displacements that challenge the rational-mechanical model of subjectivity. If the design of a transparently rational and optimal architecture begs the eruption of that which it has excluded, then the promise and lessons of surrealist architecture in our late modern world is an urgent concern.

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