

Architectures of Display: Abstract

The research project “Architectures of Display” investigates architecture’s image-generating capacity by means of devices of framing and display. These concepts have been important in the history of western painting, and they have received much attention in recent scholarship in art history and visual studies. The project proposes to transfer this methodological approach and to render it productive for the study of architecture. It starts out from the assumption that architecture has served as an apparatus for display throughout history, and that this aspect has indeed been a crucial aspect of architectural thinking and design in various epochs and building typologies. A systematic analysis of this issue constitutes a desideratum for current research for three main reasons: First, it will shed light on the complex relationship between the architectural artifact and its observer/user. Second, it will lay the basis for a better understanding of the relationship between architecture and its topographical setting and place. Third, on an institutional level, it hopes to contribute to an opening of the discipline’s methodologies, thereby working toward a re-integration of architectural history within art history and the humanities.

The guiding questions of the investigation are: What is architectural about the cultural technique of display? What is the architectural language of display, and how has it been developed and adapted under changing historical conditions? Rather than following a traditional methodological trajectory, the project is situated at the interface of architectural iconology and the aesthetics and history of reception. More specifically, the aim of the research project is, on the one hand, to establish a map of architectural elements and motifs of display (such as the window, the threshold, the loggia, or the gallery). On the other hand, and based on an analysis of pertaining written sources, the inquiry seeks to explore historical responses towards architectures of display.

The project consists of four principal fields of investigation, all of which address the question of architectural display from a specific perspective:

1) Window/Frame

Ever since Alberti’s comparison of the painting with a window, this basic architectural element has been at the core of image theory in western thought. This inquiry will take a different approach by investigating the role of the window as a parergonal device for administering the gaze and for framing a vista.

2) Transparency/Opacity

Transparency is both a major device for display and a key category of modern architectural theory. Unlike the window, transparency does not rely on the framing of an ‘other’; rather, it is an instance of architectural self-reflection and self-presentation. This inquiry seeks to investigate the status of the façade as the locus of the conflict between privacy and publicity, interior and exterior, and the role that transparency has taken on as an intermediary device of display.

3) Display/Desire

The display window has been a major topic in modern and contemporary architectural practice. Major foci of recent investigation have been on the fetishization of the commodity through architectural framing, on the ensuing psychological condition of scopophilia or even scopomania, on the figure of the flâneur, as well as on questions of gender with regard to the feminine gaze of the ‘flâneuse’ in the modern urban streetscape. The research project proposes to chart architects’ involvement with experiments in commercial display and will try to answer the question how psychological experiments in connection with space perception, empathy (‘Einfühlung’), and display were adapted into commercial display.

4) Presentation/Representation

Unlike the other fields of investigation with their respective focus on the window, the façade (transparency), and on urbanism, sociology, and the cityscape (display window), this module centers on the display of architecture in the exhibition and on its institutional setting. How do curators of architectural exhibitions cope with the problem that architectural objects have to be *represented* rather than directly presented, and how have different techniques for handling this problem evolved? What alternative strategies have been developed in order to produce an authentic spatial experience rather than one based on simulacra and mediatization?