

Architectural Image and Realism in Contemporary Visual Culture

Subjects: [Architecture And Design](#)

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The rise of visual culture and the role of images in shaping contemporary thought and global society has been a constant since the end of the last century. Called “Iconic turn” in the field of philosophy of perception and image theory, this process has captured increasing attention in diverse academic fields, even in disciplines such as architecture where the role of images has not always been well considered. There is no doubt, however, that the visual nature of architecture makes the image essential in its conception, representation or perception. Within this relationship between architecture and image can be noted a recent change: a progressive attention toward realism as an alternative to an arbitrariness of form whose main consequence has been an uncritical use of images by architects and their consumption by society. The visual nature of some of the most influential works of the British architects Sergison Bates and Tony Fretton are exemplary for this purpose, aware of the importance of images in the shaping of everyday life and in the architectural narratives of the real. These works, in turn, allow researchers to explore the reciprocal strengthening that this realism as an attitude in being (architecture) and in looking (photography) has for an architectural practice that feeds on images and engenders them.

visual culture

image

realism

1. Introduction

Architectural works evoke an associative and emotional response that should not be ignored. Some of them transport researchers to times and places to which researchers cannot return, offer their emotionally charged experiences, or trigger memories from different layers of the memory. Sometimes, they even become monuments of the collective memory, or simply signs of a certain cultural value. Architectural works, as with other aesthetic expressions, set off an individual and collective imaginary ([Bruno 2002](#), [2007](#)).

The search for meanings for historical constructions has always prevailed in the approach of Art History to architectural works. Topics such as the visual experience of observers in their encounters with works do not receive the same degree of attention. However, researchers can appreciate a growing number of studies focusing on what cannot be rationalized, arguing that something in the materiality of works goes beyond the meanings ascribed to them. The re-evaluation of the relationship between the work and the observer is connected to the new materialism in humanities, to phenomenological discourse, and to various academic currents focusing on ways of seeing and on the active role of works in the production of subjectivities.

Renewed attention to the visual, to how artistic works or aesthetic objects capture the attention and, more generally, to the role of images in contemporary society has been called in theoretical terms “Iconic turn” in German academia, or “Pictorial turn” in Anglo-American one. Paying attention to something that cannot be read—that goes beyond a semiotic interpretation—reformulates the approaches that have prioritized the study of verbal language as the basis of knowledge.¹ This “turn”, first used by W.J.T. Mitchell, formulates a diagnosis of the state of the culture; an environment of communication and thought increasingly based on images.²

The transition from a “culture of words” to a “culture of images” is due to their interest as sources of knowledge and as representations of the ways of thinking ([García Varas 2015](#)). Gottfried Boehm, another exponent of the “Iconic turn”, states that “the ‘image’ is not simply some new topic, but relates much more to a different mode of thinking, one that has shown itself capable of clarifying and availing itself of the long-neglected cognitive possibilities that lie in non-verbal representation”.³ Nicholas Mirzoeff, for his part, has insisted on the predominance of the visual in the configuration of the culture: “human experience is more visual and visualized ever before”. He adds that “the gap between the wealth of visual experience in postmodern culture and the ability to analyze that observation marks both the opportunity and the need for visual culture as a field of study”.⁴ “Iconic turn”, therefore, re-evaluates the meaning of the visual in contemporary culture.⁵

Other theorists linked to “Iconic turn” have demanded more attention to the performative status of the work of art or, in other words, to what it does rather than to what it produces: “you cannot read affects, you can only experience them” ([O’Sullivan 2006, p. 43](#)). Authors from the phenomenological tradition such as Michael Fried, Hubert Damisch, David Freedberg and Rosalind Krauss give precedence to the active role of visual objects compared to the reconstruction of their production conditions or their interpretation based on established models.

This debate around the “Iconic turn” has not had the same impact on architectural theory and criticism. Furthermore, the idea of image itself still retains negative connotations in certain areas of architectural discourse. This is connected to the widespread idea of thinking of an image as two dimensional and static in contrast to the spatial and temporal nature of architecture. The same could be said of iconic architecture, a notion usually associated with works containing little formal reflection or critical profundity, those based on gimmicky impact, or those conceived as simple analogies from other cultural areas.⁶ Nevertheless, the visual nature of architecture takes on an active and constitutive role in the very experience of observation. This concept invites researchers to think of architecture not as a system of symbols or as a language that can be read, but as a visual system that produces an associative and perceptual response.

One of the architects who has recently shown more attention to the visual nature of architecture and the role of images in his work is Peter Zumthor. At times, Zumthor’s architecture seems to propose an iconic logic based on a calm, analytical and experiential gaze. As Zumthor points out: “Memories...are the reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect” ([Zumthor 1999, p. 10](#)).⁷ In many of his drawings, Zumthor tries to capture the atmosphere and those images that his work then tries to transmit, or in other words, to offer a spatial expression to the images that he has in his mind. Researchers should mention, in this regard, the role of photography (think about the role of Hans Danuser’s photographs in the interpretation of

Zumthor's architecture), as it has promoted a visual construction of architecture based on the interpretation of its iconic logic.⁸

2. Image and Realism in Sergison Bates

"In our view, the experience of everyday life is highly influenced by personal and collective association relating to the images of buildings. By images, we can mean the aspect of an object that relates to appearance and character and which stimulates an architectural and emotional response. While it may be argued that most architectural acts produce images of things, we believe that only few architects consciously work with images".

([Sergison and Bates \[1999\] 2001](#), p. 47)

How does architecture capture the temporary appearance and the transitory feelings that constitute the perceptual experience? Researchers can find a fruitful answer to this question—related to the debate on images—in the approach of realism to the everyday; it is based on the handling of the richness of the associations that the perception makes from its encounter with the world. In this respect, the historian James Elkins⁹ states that they must go beyond the images legitimated by high culture in order to analyze those that favour the analysis of reality. Therefore, in a world influenced by fiction and virtual reality and dominated by the commercialized image ([Gadanhó 2019](#)), one of the responsibilities of the critical architect could be precisely defending the meaning of the real and the idea of experience in the social and cultural interactions ([Vassallo 2016](#)).

In this sense, the evolution of the discourse of film and photography has been essential in the development of realism regarding its focus on the everyday ([Certeau 2000](#)). The revision of the iconic, favouring a visual construction of the social sphere based on the real has stimulated a more open look at culture.¹⁰ It is worth re-examining the idea of aura by Walter Benjamin in terms of perception, understood as the moment when the collective and personal experience coincide, where an object triggers an involuntary memory in order to establish a specific web of space and time.¹¹ This interpretation is relevant to assess the encounter with the architectural work and stimulate an experience of reality that fosters a more associative and emotional response.

The British architects Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates have followed this path opened by realism and have acknowledged the relevant role that images play in their architectural practice. Their approach to images represents an original look interested not only in the idea of the monument or in the symbolic content of a work, but also in the idea of the architectural moment. The iconic, in this sense, takes on a meaning that differs from that associated with works imbued with a strong visual impact. The research by Sergison Bates is not about the permanence and stability of the work, it is about presentation and transition, by constructing an affinity that is closer to everyday life than to the heroic act ([Ursprung 2016](#), pp. 17–27).

Some of the latest works by Sergison Bates, such as the Arts and Wellbeing Centre (London, 2018) and the Mansion Block (Hampstead, 2017) are related to the former Studio House (Bethnal Green, London, 2004) or End-of-terrace Housing (Hackney, London, 2002) concerning what researchers could call a "revision of the urban

image". The first project was an extension to the St. Margaret's House charitable community to develop a new space including a theatre, studios for artists, spaces for social enterprises, start-ups and offices. They proposed grouping the entire programme within a sophisticated organized volume using a large ground-floor hall that opens and is directly connected to an external space that articulates the other buildings of the community and becomes the heart of the ensemble community life.

One of the main focuses of the proposal is the development of this external space for the community, which, as well as connecting the ensemble with the city, expresses the character of the proposal. The definition of this articulating space shows an interest in bordering spaces or transition areas, both linked to a basic concept of realism, namely the revealing of connections between different parts. Some 19th-century realism artists such as Gustave Courbet or Adolph Menzel were especially interested in pictorially representing the functioning and joints between things, as is the case with social realism and documentary photographers. The proposal also highlights other aspects of realism such as the everyday, history, theatricality and the peculiar chromatic spectrum of greyish browns that dominate the ensemble.

The image that Sergison Bates presented also links the proposal with realism and brings to mind the painting by Johannes Vermeer *The Little Street*, c. 1658 (**Figure 1**). The visual culture historian Martin Jay states that 17th- and 18th-century painting in the Netherlands should be more strongly connected to the empirical experience of observation and less to the Cartesian look, in other words, to a reproduction of the vision rather than to an expression of prior knowledge.¹² In Vermeer's painting, the point of view is one of many, a specific scene, far removed from a privileged point of view and without any centrality whatsoever. Neither the little street nor the hallway extends to any depth and the image appears to be more a reaction to something that has aroused the interest than the precise organization of a representation space. Sergison Bates' way of seeing the image not only develops a specific urban concept, but it also triggers a very precise cultural association.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. (a) Arts and Wellbeing Centre, London, Sergison Bates, c. 2018. © Sergison Bates. **(b)** The Little Street, Johannes Vermeer, 1658. Oil on canvas. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, NL. (Image in the public domain).

This principle of “no centrality” that is reminiscent of painters such as Witte or Saenredam can also be observed in the images developed for the housing project in Hampstead. The way in which the ensemble appears to be present and absent at the same time is striking; it seems to dissolve into the setting and yet it stays in the memory. It contains the common and the exceptional; it raises difficulties in being distinguished from its location while offering an alternative look that makes it possible to see it in a different way. The importance given to transition spaces (patios, stairways, thresholds, etc.) shows, once again, an interest in joints and transitory elements, in everyday life far removed from the heroic act (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Mansion Block, Hampstead, Sergison Bates, 2017. © Sergison Bates.

Access to the dwellings is through a sequence of spaces conceived as a sum of scenarios that represent the moment of arriving home. The emphasis on this transition between the public and private sphere can be seen at the moment when the domination of the street ends and the home's power is yet to begin. The idea of comfort conveyed by homes is related to this sum of layers; protective layers such as the sum of successive thresholds between the street and the dwelling—which are required in order to feel at home. Sometimes, the danger of comfort lies in an excessive isolation that leads to loss of feeling. To deal with this, Sergison Bates adds elements connected to the known in each transition area: “familiar” doors, windows and handles that trigger and heighten the visual associations. The idea of comfort, therefore, is not only based on a warm, safe setting, but also on the reproduction of the known and the familiar; a comfort that is neither purely physical nor totally psychological.

The idea of rooms and their grouping represents a reflection on the image of the domestic. Besides tries to not make evident the organization of the space and connect different spaces through the diverse openings and perspectives that allow fixing the inhabitant gaze and its presence. In this regard, Irina Davidovici describes the interest of Sergison Bates in architecture as a “backdrop to everyday life”; an architecture that implies “something two-dimensional, something against which the act of inhabitation is projected” ([Davidovici 2001, p. 48](#)). Researchers can take this idea further and understand that the project has an air of neorealist film in the sense of arranging various scenarios, passages or images in sequence to reflect the acts of everyday life.

The Prototype for Suburban Housing (Stevenage, 2000) also exemplifies the search for an associative and emotional response closely connected to everyday life. With this model, Sergison Bates put the focus on a marginal phenomenon to return an image to the residential architecture genre. The aim was to leave behind the notion of suburban housing (the image of an isolated house) to construct an association: the image of two joined

houses. The image is, therefore, halfway between urban density and urban sprawl; an image that combines in a unique way closeness and distance to the neighbourhood (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3. (a) Suburban Housing, Stevenage, 2000, Sergison Bates. © Sergison Bates. (b) Homes for America, Dan Graham, 1966. © Dan Graham.

This revision of the image of the British suburb is in tune with the look presented by the American artist Dan Graham in his famous *Homes for America*. Graham photographed a series of dwellings in the suburbs of New Jersey on different dates emphasizing the sequenced and automated nature of this extensive urban planning (Moure 2009). The influence of realism is obvious, while Graham also shows a clear artistic intent. These images are closely connected to conceptual and minimalist art through the emphasis on sequenced repetitions, simplicity, the use of industrial materials in construction and the precise geometry of the forms. The reference to Sol LeWitt is accentuated in the design of dwellings as a series of cubes, as works that seem to come from one single mould and emphasize one single formal approach.¹³

The more recent suburban housing in Aldershot (2016) by Sergison Bates also leaves the image of an isolated dwelling behind to assert itself as a group of seven pairs of houses. The ensemble continues the picturesque rural image of the garden city and it is characterized by an internal communal area that articulates all dwellings. Again, the architects show their interest in articulating spaces for community life, linked to the sensibility of realism. The small variations, both in the style and orientation, provide a visual richness and reinforce the picturesque character of the ensemble.

In both projects, the definition of the architectural details revisits the collective suburban imaginary, as is the case with the openings and window frames, the gable roof and its finishes (gutters, drainpipes, etc.). Again, Sergison Bates talks about joints and transition elements, seduced by the communicative nature of social realism

photography. The way they used everyday objects also shows an interest in pop art, an interpretation not too far away from what researchers can find in Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg and Richard Hamilton; a reflection on the visualization of these objects, their everyday appearance, and their nature when they are not subject to the economy of the spectacle. This is about overcoming the dichotomy between images and things, the division of reality and the alienation of ordinary objects.

The critical look of the architects in these projects is close to that shown by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo in “The End of Modernity”, where he argues in favour of a “weak” or “fragile” architecture or, in the case, an architecture of weak images and structures. In contrast to seduction using a spectacular image and a vigorous articulation of the form, architecture with a weak image is more interested in associative and sensory interaction than in an idealized expression ([Vattimo 1987](#)). These works also echo the debate between the concepts of exteriority and interiority arising from the “Iconic turn”. The dialogue between these two aspects allows for a more intimate and emotional condition of the visual, by adding texture and complexity to the understanding of iconicity in architecture.

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