

Working (with) Images

In the August 2009 issue of *Blueprint*, Penny Lewis comments on the recent “*idea that the [architectural] profession is being seduced into producing images rather than buildings by the architectural press*”,¹ and calls those claims “*ridiculous*”. For her, the hierarchy of causation goes from architecture to criticism, and not in the opposite direction. Thus, the glossy prints in question do not threaten the production of architecture, but remain materialisations of the profession’s imagination. I posit them here as tools to work *with* to visualise a possible architectural future. However, once this future becomes present and a structure has been inserted into the city, the surrounding building fabric can no longer be removed at the click of a button. When architecture is put to work in the realised project, the architectural design image loses power as the prime medium for analysis and photography enters as a possible mode for visualisation, producing images of a very different kind.

The photograph shown here was taken inside Florence’s Santa Maria Novella (S.M.N.) railway station (Giovanni Michelucci and Gruppo Toscano, 1933-1935). If the visualisation of unrealised architecture references a possibility of the future, is this image of “architecture at work” merely one of a moment in the past? I argue that the ontologies and relationship of these two types of images (the one preceding, the other following architectural production) can be explained in terms of the work they do or are used for, respectively. While the design image is an abstraction, the photograph documents an encounter – it is specific in the positioning of the camera and in its own position in time. The former needs to be relatively uncontaminated to function as a tool to work *with*, to serve as a vessel for an imagination of the future, whereas the latter comes to life only through an encounter between used (here: populated) architecture and the photographer’s gaze (with the viewfinder as the cropping frame) and between what is past and what is present, making it more than a “tool to work with”.

In her book *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, Jane Rendell opens her chapter on *The “What-has-been” and the Now* with a fragment by Benjamin: “[i]t’s not that what is past [das Vergangene] casts its light on what is present [das Gegenwärtige], or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been [das Gewesene] comes together in a flash with the now [dem Jetzt] to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present [der Gegenwart] to the past [zur Vergangenheit] is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.”² Rendell uses this to introduce a discussion of works of art and architecture that employ non-sequential renegotiations of past and present, and thus “*critique the construction of the past in the present*”³. The images of an architectural future, as considered in Penny Lewis’ comment, however, merely document the design process, smoothly moving along the axis of a continuous temporality. In it, “*what has been [does not come] together in a flash with the now to form a constellation*”. This constellation, however, is precisely what the photographic image does exhibit. It shows architecture *at work*; it *works* architecture, it is a *working image*: in it, the fusion of the what-has-been and the now, of architectural form and human activity, is achieved.

In the present photograph the relationship between the original scene and its image is brought to the surface in the fact that movement is blurred, the capture of which the camera is privileged to produce. To the eye the recording of movement is impossible in a stable and fixed image. Here, trajectories are inscribed, directionality and even relative speed can be recapitulated. The photograph also encapsulates a further layer of representational relationships in that movement is not only captured as such, but also through its reflection in the flooring material. These two modes are brought together, fused, and presented to the viewer as a glimpse of the camera’s perspective that would have otherwise been inaccessible. The image becomes a device *for* and captures a reflection *on* reflection of the built form. More than us working *with* the photographic image to *imagine* the future, the image works *for* us, exposing those mechanisms in the use of architecture that can never be visualised as rendered versions of possibilities, but only as *dialectics at a standstill*. And what is dialectically fused in there can stimulate the design process through aiding in the construction of even richer architectural potentials. The photograph provides a glimpse at the spatial structuring at work on S.M.N.’s main concourse, *working* the constellation, or gathering, of architectural form and human activity.

The architectural profession, I argue, should thus let itself be seduced even more into producing images – not instead of, but *after* producing buildings. For photography as a method is capable of producing *working images* with a performative potential that help scrutinise architecture not just in sequentially temporal terms, but through the inherently dialectic way in which it is put



Santa Maria Novella, Florence,
October 2008, photograph by author

to work. Penny Lewis notes: “Beautiful images demonstrate what might be possible not what will happen and most of us understand them as such. When architects stop using images to aid them in imagining what might be possible we are in trouble.”¹ I could not agree more. However, we can not only reduce the risk of getting into trouble, but also enhance critical design reflection by making use of different modes of visualisation. Working *with* images is crucial, but it can also be rewarding to lean back and let them do the work *for* us.

¹ Penny Lewis, “Comment” in *Blueprint 281* (London: Progressive Media Publishing, 2009), 54.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 462.

³ Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London and New York: I. B.Tauris, 2006), 121.

⁴ Lewis, op. cit.

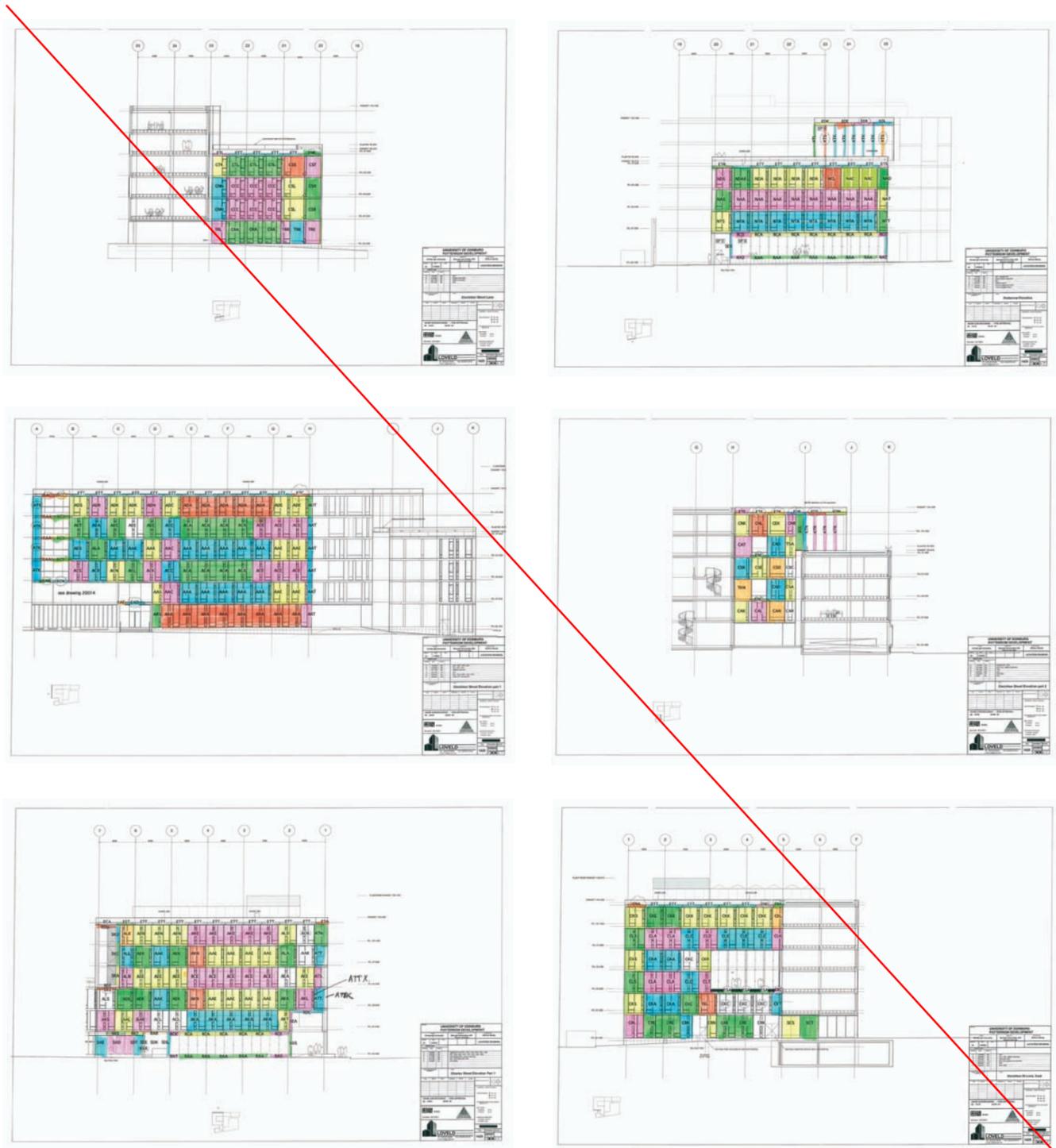


Fig 1: University of Edinburgh, Potterrow Development: Bennetts Associates with Reich and Hall. Lovelock pre-cast concrete panel location drawings (mark-up by Bennetts Associates).