

Expert Culture, Representation, and Public Choice

Architectural Renderings as the Editing of Reality

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1 Introduction

The problem examined in this chapter is found in the relationship between technological experts and the societies they serve. We have narrowed this overly broad topic to consider how some expert designers – architects in this case – influence public perceptions of reality. Architects necessarily edit reality when making drawings that represent the completed condition of building projects. Were they to include all of the information required for decision makers to be fully informed they would have to present their proposals at a scale of 1:1. Technologies of representation, then, necessarily edit out of the picture some information so as to emphasize other information deemed more salient by the picture maker, the architect.¹ This normative practice of architectural representation influences public choices about city making. Simply put, even well educated decision makers in a highly technological society can choose only from those possibilities that are known to them. Our purpose here is to understand better the material and political consequences of normative decision making in architecture.

2 Architecture and Linear Perspective

2.1 *Linear Perspective as a Development Tool*

It is helpful to take a historical view of the question at the outset because the ability to represent our intentions for the future depends upon the tools available. Drawing on the ground with a stick can communicate rough intentions to build in a particular place in a particular way but sticks are certainly less articulate tools than modern drafting tools or a computer. Philosophers of technology have long established that

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¹Leatherbarrow (1998).

each tool brings with it very different kinds of knowledge and practices that already have social values embedded in them.² It would, then, be unfair to judge the user of the stick by the norms employed by the user of the computer. Following this logic we begin by arguing that the politics of representation are situational – they depend upon the social and technological context of their use.

Many historians have argued that the discipline of architecture in Europe rests upon the appropriation of linear perspective from the Arabian Peninsula in the 14th century. This technology of representation was subsequently popularized by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and his colleagues when they found use for it more than a century later. Use of linear perspective enabled master masons like Brunelleschi to envision large scale projects at a single moment in time and from a single viewpoint – that of the Renaissance merchant-prince. Others have argued that linear perspective did not become a particularly useful tool until the capital accumulated by a new class of Renaissance merchant princes was available to realize building projects in a radically compressed time period. Whereas medieval projects were funded and constructed over generations of shifting sponsors – none of whom could envision the final outcome – the changed social and economic conditions of Renaissance life made it conceivable for a single sponsor to envision and control architectural production through the services of the proto-architect who had learned the rules and methods of linear perspective. It is fair to say, then, that the very existence of architecture as a distinct discipline is historically linked to serving elite interests through this technology of representation.³

2.2 *The Emergence of Professionalism*

If we fast-forward this history four hundred years to the 19th century, we would have first to recognize that cities in contemporary liberal democracies are physically shaped by a complex mix of public and private interests that did not exist, or existed in other forms, during the Renaissance. It is, however, still mostly elites who seek out the help of architects to envision and realize their projects and these architects still rely upon the same technology of linear perspective to do so. One of many differences between architectural production during the Renaissance and the 19th century is that during the intervening centuries ordinary citizens gained the right to be protected by the state from some of the consequences of development sponsored by latter day merchant princes. By the 19th century, for example, it was no longer socially acceptable to build using highly flammable materials like thatch which could endanger a whole city. In Britain, and later in North America, the utilitarian

² See, for example; Heidegger (1977), Winner (1977), and Feenberg (1991).

³ There is not a monolithic interpretation of the history of linear perspective, but Edgerton (1975), Panofsky (1991), and Damisch (1994) generally agree that this technology was “constructed” not “discovered”.