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Displacement: Architectural Collage

Investigating Atmospheres in a Design Studio

Jennifer A. E. SHIELDS¹

Abstract. During the construction of Hearst Castle in CA, W. R. Hearst purchased architectural antiquities from throughout Europe. His motivation was to create an atmosphere providing both rich multi-sensory perceptions and meaning through the cultural values embedded in the European spolia. In 1929, Hearst purchased a 14th century English tithe barn that was disassembled and shipped to CA, but never used. The current owner asked an architectural design studio to investigate how atmospheres might arise through the introduction of fragments of this ancient structure into public spaces in Cal Poly's Brutalist library. This paper will present the methodology and outcomes of the design studio that investigated how an architectural collage could prompt multiple modes of engagement.

Keywords. Atmosphere, Architecture, History, Collage, Bricolage

Displacement: Architectural Collage

During the construction of Hearst Castle in San Simeon, CA, William Randolph Hearst purchased art, architecture, and antiquities from throughout Europe to incorporate into his properties. Philosopher Umberto Eco describes William Randolph Hearst's acquisition of architectural fragments, saying: "The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something, and hence the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by *horror vacui*, that is here achieved" (Eco, 1986, 23). Eco suggests that Hearst's obsession stems from the lack of history (from a European point of view) in California. The architectural collages thus created were the result of architect Julia Morgan's creativity and adaptability to the whims of Hearst. Architectural collage can be a vehicle to foster atmosphere, utilizing architectural fragments in an ambiguous and incomplete composition which demands greater attention from the perceiver. This is true for both an embodied experience as well as the perception of an image.

Our individual experience of the built environment is bound by our perceptual capacities, including the intertwining of multi-sensory perception and meaning. These viewer-dependent aspects conspire with objective characteristics of architecture including physical context, style, age, dimensions, proportions, and materiality to produce atmosphere. In *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods*, Sumartojo and Pink argue: "... atmosphere must be thought of as pulling together affect with sensation, materiality, memory and meaning, and call for close attention to what comprises such combinations and what they make possible or draw into being"

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(30). Sumartojo and Pink identify two perspectives by which atmospheres have been studied - in theory and in design - yet suggest that there has been little dialogue between the two (48). This paper seeks to parse out the role(s) of the architectural fragment in facilitating atmospheric experience in the application of theory to design.

Multi-Sensory Perception and Meaning

Our experience of a space is a result of our multi-sensory perceptions and meaning, which can't be studied in isolation. Sensory perception and meaning are bound by memory. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, perception is defined as: "physical sensation interpreted in the light of experience" (perception, 2011). Individual memories as well as cultural factors shape our experience. As a semiotician, Eco emphasizes the meaning found in architecture as an "oscillation between primary function (the conventional use of the object, or its most direct or elemental meaning) and secondary functions (its related meanings, based on cultural conventions, and mental and semantic associations)..." (Eco, 1997, 203). Appropriated architectural fragments (*spolia*) have been utilized over millennia for both their potential to engage the senses as well as the multiple meanings they carry with them. "For *spolia* to succeed as evidence of the swing between two sites, the original source cannot be fully obscured if the newly combined elements are to have meaningful saliency in the present..." (Brilliant, 2011, 158). The displacement and reconfiguration of architectural fragments adds an additional layer of complexity to the oscillation of meaning described by Eco.

Graphic Representation: Suggesting Atmosphere

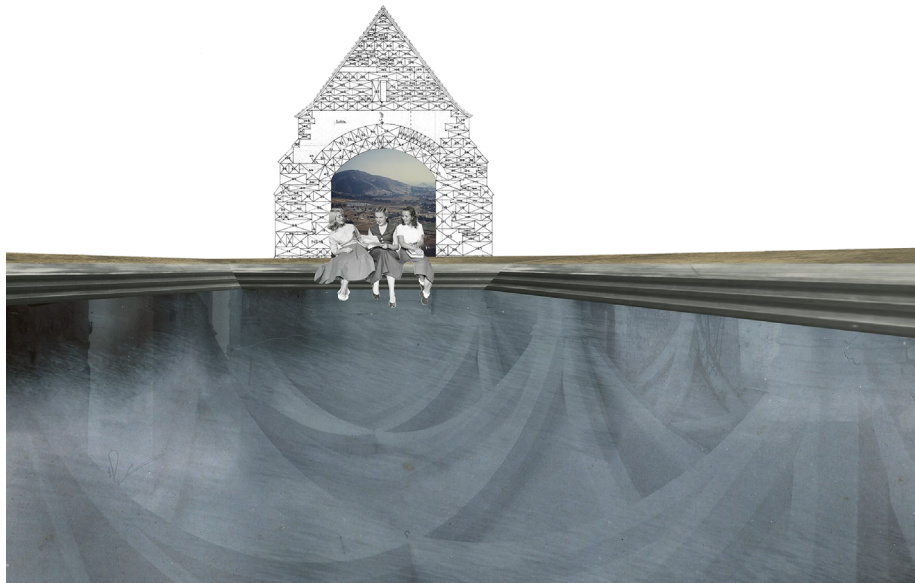


Figure 1. Concept Collage, Pacific Austin, 2020

Architects have a variety of representational tools at their disposal with which to communicate their design ideas. Drawings that speak to the experiential qualities anticipated in a design are imaginative drawings (drawing-as-provocation), in contrast with notational drawings (drawing-as-instruction), as defined by architectural theorist Sonit Bafna (2008). The imaginative drawing is intended to explore form, space,

materiality, scale, light, and/or use - which together can suggest atmosphere. Architects may choose either rendering or collage as media to convey atmosphere, though the veracity of the rendering can't be validated until the building is constructed. "There is always a gap between representation and reality... Sometimes architecture practices turn to digital collages either as a counteraction to hyper-realistic renderings, or simply because it can represent intention in design without formulating a specific image..." (Cutieru, 2020). In the absence of some of the previously stated characteristics, the collage, in its ambiguity, allows for multiple readings by the viewer. Collage as a tool for graphic representation provides a media through which architectural atmospheres can be suggested, if not comprehensively visualized. Juhani Pallasmaa claims: "Collage combines pictorial motifs and fragments from disconnected origins into a new synthetic entity which casts new roles and meanings to the parts. It suggests new narratives, dialogues, juxtapositions and temporal durations. Its elements lead double-lives; the collaged ingredients are suspended between their originary essences and the new role assigned to them by the poetic ensemble" (Shields, 2014, ix). With this parallel to the use of *spolia*, collage was the media through which students ideated and communicated their designs.

William Randolph Hearst's Spoliation of Bradenstoke Abbey

Bradenstoke Abbey, founded in 1142 in Bradenstoke, Wiltshire, England, emerged from its hilltop site over centuries. Limestone from nearby quarries and locally harvested English White Oak were used to construct the prior's hall, the priory church, the tithe barn, houses, cottages, and farm buildings through the 15th century. The tithe barn served to store tithes to the parish, as farmers were required to give one-tenth of their produce to the church. Upon the dissolution of the monasteries ordered by King Henry VIII in 1536, the buildings began to fall into disrepair. The abbey was privately owned by numerous English families over the following centuries, until a sales brochure caught the eye of William Randolph Hearst in 1928. In 1929, Hearst purchased the abbey, deconstructing the priory and rebuilding it at his castle in Wales. The 14th century stone and timber tithe barn was meticulously documented by employees of architect Julia Morgan, disassembled, and shipped to San Simeon from England.



Figure 2. Bradenstoke Tithe Barn interior photomontage, office of Julia Morgan, 1929 (image courtesy of Madonna Family Archive / Robert E. Kennedy Library Project)

"Hearst bought, in bits or whole, palaces, abbeys, and convents in Europe, had them dismantled brick by numbered brick, packaged and shipped across the ocean, to be reconstructed on the enchanted hill, in the midst of free-ranging wild animals" (Eco, 1986, 22). Hearst's motivation was to create an atmosphere providing both rich multi-sensory perceptions and meaning through the cultural values embedded in the European *spolia* (or their imitations). The Bradenstoke Tithe Barn was never reconstructed and was acquired in 1960 by a San Luis Obispo entrepreneur, still stored in

the original Hearst crates. To this day, the original stones and timbers of the barn sit crated and unassembled on a ranch in San Luis Obispo.

Architectural Design Studio: Methodology

The current owner of the tithe barn, whose father acquired it from Hearst in the 1950s, wants to give new life to the stone and timber fragments. He asked a fourth-year architectural design studio to investigate how atmospheres might arise through the introduction of fragments of the 14th century tithe barn into public spaces in Cal Poly's Brutalist library. The following sections present the methodology and outcomes of the design studio that investigated how an architectural collage could prompt multiple modes of engagement by intertwining multi-sensory perception and meaning. Considering a design intervention from artist Olafur Eliasson's perspective offers potential. "... we are often numb to the atmospheres that surround us. Here, architectural detail and artistic intervention can make people more aware of an already existing atmosphere. That is, materiality can actually make atmospheres explicit - it can draw your attention and amplify your sensitivity to a particular atmosphere" (Gernot Böhme et al., 2014, 95).

The methodology for this design studio prioritized research and analysis as critical precursors to a thoughtful design proposal. A deep understanding of the existing site and program, and the tithe barn itself, was crucial to envisioning atmosphere. Students completed a site/program analysis. Since we were intervening in an existing building, our site and program could not be viewed in isolation. This analysis asked students to thoroughly investigate the physical, functional, and experiential contexts in which they would intervene. Students were assigned to one of three sites for analysis and design: Entry Plaza, Courtyard (future Atrium), or Fourth Floor Terrace (future Reading Room).

Next, students studied Heart's *spolia*, the 14th century Bradenstoke Tithe Barn. Julia Morgan's documentation, coordinated with numbers stamped on stones, timbers, and crates, was to facilitate its reconstruction after being dismantled and shipped from England to San Simeon, CA. Students worked off of the original photographs and drawings to digitally reconstruct the barn for use in the design phase. In addition to the digital reconstruction, this phase included a historical and diagrammatic analysis, and a study of the material properties of the limestone quoin stones and oak timbers that were transported to California.

The schematic design phase asked students to conceptualize the role of the tithe barn in the library's public spaces. They were expected to develop a clear conceptual framework and narrative as well as a defined spatial and material strategy for integrating fragments of the barn with new construction and the existing structure of the library. Collage, as the broader theme for the studio, anticipated that disparate elements would be combined into a new, synthetic, composition. Students initiated their design process through collage: the drawings and photographs of the library and the barn that they had collected were used to create collages, which would suggest ways of integrating fragments of the barn into new public spaces for the Library. They created three digital collages ranging from the most minimal yet impactful intervention to a Hearst-inspired *horror vacui* collage. After the collage charette, students translated the results of their analyses and collage interpretations into an architectural proposal. Design development and graphic representation for presentation invoked collage, 3D modeling, and orthographic.

Architectural Design Studio: Outcomes

Multiple stakeholders were involved throughout the quarter, advising and guiding students in the design process. Contributors included library faculty and staff, the owner of the tithe barn, the Director of Hearst Castle, and architects and landscape architects from around the country. Understanding that “Atmospheres cannot make people feel particular things...anticipation, foreknowledge and pre-existing views of different material and immaterial elements play a crucial role in how atmospheres are co-constituted and perceived (Sumartojo 2016),” it was valuable to have the input of a range of stakeholders (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019, 5).



Figure 3. Design Proposal for Library Reading Room, Anja Wimmer, 2020

In order to assess the design proposals, each student evaluated every other proposal. The four data sets collected were:

1. Multi-sensory experience;
2. Communication of meaning - in graphic representation;
3. Multi-sensory experience
4. Communication of meaning - as imagined if the project were built.

The data showed that some projects had consistency between the graphics and the anticipated experience, while some were poorly represented, and others may have oversold the experience graphically (at least in the imagination of the viewer). From the perspective of communicating meaning, students rated more highly those projects that retained the integrity of the barn fragments and often their spatial relationships, as well as those projects that minimized the introduction of new construction (Fig.3). We did not receive quantitative feedback from the stakeholders, but their responses in the final review were consistent with the student evaluations.

Conclusions

Pallasmaa observes that ambiguity - in representation and in architecture - provides space for the imagination of the viewer or occupant. This is validated by neurologist Semir Zeki's research on “the neural ground of artistic image and effect” in which he points to the power of Michelangelo's unfinished slave sculptures (Pallasmaa, 2015, 66). This suggests that the incomplete collage-like nature of the proposed interventions could be experientially powerful. Like Hearst's appropriated fragments, “With its voracious vitality, history robs architecture of its meaning and endows it with new meaning” (Eco, 1997, 203). Engaging fragments of a 14th century barn with a Brutalist library could create new narratives with new potentials for individuated sensory experience and meaning.

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