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Farshid Moussavi: Drawings are presentations, not representations

Interview by Nicolás Stutzin

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Farshid Moussavi is principal of Farshid Moussavi Architecture (FMA) and Professor in Practice of Architecture at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. She was co-founder of the London-based Foreign Office Architects (FOA), recognised as one of the world's most creative design firms. Educated at Harvard's GSD, University College London and Dundee University, Moussavi is a trustee of the Whitechapel Gallery and the London Architecture Foundation, and is a member of the Steering Committee of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. She is also a columnist for *The Architectural Review* magazine and has published two books, *The Function of Ornament* and *The Function of Form*, based on her research and teaching at Harvard. Her third book titled *The Function of Style* will be released in early 2015.

The notion of representation (a figure, image or idea that portrays something other than itself) is at least two-fold in the realm of architecture. In the one hand, the word "representation" is linked to discussions on architecture and "symbolism" or the communicative capacities that architects (or the general public) attribute to buildings in relation to their form, spatial qualities, context, etc. On the other, the word "representation" refers to the means through which architects have always developed, analyzed and understood buildings (drawings, diagrams, models, etc.).

I would like to ask you about these two ideas since your work is connected to both in different ways. For instance, in The Function of Ornament *(2006), you confront postmodern ideas of representation and forms of "architectural language". In the book you present a systematized analysis of a series of "ornamental elements" which are depicted in a particular way to show their affect and the technical/constructive way in which the affect is achieved. Basically, you explicitly decide to use a particular set of drawings (representations of architecture) to research and present and argument against symbolism (representational architecture), in a way making clear that both ideas of representation are completely independent.*

What do you think of this duality and the notion of representation in architecture today?

I would not advocate for using representation either as a way to "think" about architectural ideas or as a way to think of architectural drawings. Thinking of drawings as representations would suggest that architects have developed architectural ideas in their minds and they then use drawings to communicate them. Given how complex and multi-layered buildings are, this is impossible. If we were to design buildings in our head, they would be very simple buildings. Drawings construct ideas for the assembly of the myriad of elements that buildings are comprised of. They are constructions of what has not existed before. They are therefore presentations, not representations.

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ON MEANS OF REPRESENTATION

Architectural images/drawings have always been used as a tool for envisioning possible scenarios, as a form of architectural research and as a way of expanding the limits of the discipline. Within your work, do you see drawings/diagrams as an epistemological site?

In the office, we use drawings and diagrams to investigate and develop ideas. I don't think there is anything unique in the drawings we do, except that we do many of them in any one project.

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The Function research series, investigated through Moussaví´s teaching at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, focuses predominantly on how architecture involves the intellectual assembly of matter, providing each built form with inherent affects and sensations. The premise of this research series is that it is not what built forms represent, but how they function affectively that makes architecture a critical cultural practice. Source: functionlab.net

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The Function series include *The Function of Ornament* (Actar, Harvard University GSD, 2006) and *The Function of Form* (Actar, 2009), both of which investigate the role of affect in contemporary architecture. A third book in the series titled *The Function of Style* will be released in early 2015.

In the case of my teaching, particularly the Function research, drawings are used to dissociate past projects from their original motives so that they become ahistorical and applicable to contemporary problems. The Function books analyze architectural projects, not as the product of their originary cause – a particular author or motive or context –, but in relation to their actual material content and how that may be relevant to a certain contemporary discussion. When built forms or their parts are presented in drawings, the idea of an origin is replaced with a range of actual and possible subject positions from which new built forms can be made. Anyone can interpret them or transform them or adopt them in order to address new architectural scenarios.

Your work is often referred to as an example of the introduction of new forms of media into architecture since it played an active role in the transition from analog to digital means of representation and design processes in the mid-nineties. What do you think of this transition today?

Embracing computers to draw and visualize information and digital tools to make physical models has had an enormous impact on the way we approach projects. The use of computers within the process of design has made us conscious of the steps taken during the design process and the creative potentials within them. Instead of treating the process as a slave to a predefined originating idea or end goal, we can react to the dynamics of architectural projects. We can also work in an iterative manner and explore the impact of variations of each step. Changes brought along can then be used as potentials for creating more intelligent and complex architectural forms. Instead of representing what we already know, we can create the unknown. This implies abandoning the idea that any one drawing or image is precious or finite or ideal, but simply the holder of information at any one time.

Historically, the introduction of new forms of representation (the perspective, the Nolli plan, the axonometric view, etc.) have helped in the definition of new understanding of the discipline itself. What are the means of representation that you consider most valuable today? With what sort of means could/should we rethink our discipline through today?

The discipline today faces many different kinds of opportunities and concerns of varying scale and nature. Its tools, notions, concepts and conventions are not all affected at once and frequently need to be rethought, for example it continues to be rethought in response to opportunities such as digital technologies as well as ongoing concerns regarding environmental and social issues. Environmental concerns may prompt us to develop new ways of sourcing energy or new ways of protecting buildings against losing energy; migration may prompt us to look for new ways that migrant population can interact with one another; digital fabrication may prompt us to explore mass customization, etc. I think the level of complexity architecture deals with, and

the extent that we now know it is intertwined with other fields, makes it hard to imagine any kind of single "rethink" or overhaul of the discipline.

It seems today that the phenomena that architecture is concern with are more un-representable than ever (economic, political, environmental, etc.). Are the canonical systems of architectural representation (images, models, plans, section/elevations, perspective o even diagrams) appropriate or enough?

These phenomena you refer to have always informed architectural projects. However, we are now more aware of their impact on architecture. We have new software to analyse light, temperature gradients and even economic factors which are very useful as they can model dynamic behaviour and they are also interactive. However, I don't think traditional modes of presenting architectural ideas are made redundant as a result. It is not that a plan is unable to show the environmental aspects of a project, but it will need to be coloured to show air or temperature gradients in it, or, a section is not inadequate to show the economics of a project, but we would probably need to draw a series of sections to show changes one is considering so that the differences in costs could be evaluated in conjunction with variations in design elements. Therefore, it is not that the tools are redundant. We need to use them in a way that identifies physical elements not as autonomous and fixed but as relational elements that work with other parameters of a project, which can be often non-visual in nature.

You have described the Yokohama International Passenger Terminal as an "extreme diagrammatic process"; it is considered to be an icon of the promise of how architectural design could expand its limits achieving higher levels of complexity. What do you think about this promise today? Can means of representation like diagrams still help in expanding the limits of the discipline? How?

As I said earlier, I think we should approach drawings as presentations or constructions, not representations. Yokohama did not use any unconventional type of drawing. It used plans and sections. It is "the way" those were used that implied a different way of thinking. Instead of generating the building form through plans, we used sections, and many of them, to rethink the traditional post and beam construction that reinforces a Cartesian space. The sectional approach to the building form allowed us to develop continuities between levels and a diagonal rather than orthogonal orientation. Also, instead of thinking of the sections as fixed and finite, we continuously redrew them and modified them to incorporate changes that were required or those that we felt were necessary as our own ideas developed. We could say, the drawings incorporate time into the form by being treated as a kind of virtual model that was able to change shape over time, until it became actual and built.

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Yokohama International Passenger Terminal is the current name of Ōsanbashi Pier, the oldest and main international pier at the Japanese Port of Yokohama. Originally built between 1889 and 1896, it was reconstructed between 1995 and 2002 by Foreign Office Architects (Alejandro Zaera-Polo and Farshid Moussavi) after an international design competition attracting over 300 entries. Source: en.wikipedia.org

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ON NON-REPRESENTATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

In your book The Function of Form *(2009) you argue for non-representational forms in architecture, describing affect (over symbolism) as a driving force in architectural design. To what extent is this argument against the way in which architects communicate their ideas to the public or against the ambition of thinking of buildings themselves as forms/systems of communication?*

The discussion of affect is against thinking of architecture as constructing meanings or symbols but it does not deny the presence of either of those. It is about looking at the space between buildings and meanings or symbols and situating the architect's role and domain of control up until the construction of affects, and proposing that meanings or symbols emerge as a consequence of the ways that different individuals perceive those. An architect, as a consequence of the way he or she assembles each building, generates affects – a cluster of them each time. Each individual will perceive them differently owing to their state of mind at the time, their biographies and previous experiences, and will generate individual meanings, or thoughts. The construction of meanings is the result of an act between individuals and buildings. The architect is part of that process but does not determine or make those meanings.

On your question of architects and their way of communicating, architects of course need to explain the value of their proposals. You could call that communicate. It is important that architects discuss their proposals through the buildings themselves though – what they do – rather than through external references such as through already existing imagery, symbols or words. This does not mean that an architect should not use those as inspiration but it becomes problematic when architects attempt to equate buildings with external objects or imagery. It would be more precise to focus on the affects that may be of interest in a certain external reference and then be quite clear how that is being explored through a piece of architecture, that most likely has a different scale, texture, structures and organization. When external references are used, the differences are as interesting or significant as the similarities. It is those differences that are architecture.

In The Function of Ornament *(2006) you argue that symbolic definitions of ornament are not possible today since the contemporary plural society lacks the homogeneity to understand things the same way. Does the idea of affect by definition incorporate individuality and subjectivity?*

When symbols or other vehicles are used as communication devices, it is assumed that buildings can signify facts or meanings, which in turn suggests that individual users are "passive recipients" of those facts or meanings and understand them in the same way. I think buildings don't signify a specific meaning, but transmit specific clusters of affects, owing to their shape,

materials, size, systems used, lighting, acoustics, etc. Affects do not signify a specific meaning. They are open and are therefore perceived by different people in different ways. Despite their openness, they do make one building – say a school – into a particular kind of platform for learning, as opposed to another school designed with a different set of affects. The encounter between each individual and a cluster of affects in each daily life context defines his or her perception, for example of the learning environment in the case of a school, which in turn influences the different meanings he or she attributes to that school. Recognizing the openness of buildings through their affects, allows us to dispense with the effort of generating consensual modes of relating people to buildings, for example through producing specific meanings. Approaching architecture through affects rather than meanings or symbols allows architects to embrace both the specificity of buildings as well as the role of the individual in the construction of subjectivity.

How does the idea of affect relate to phenomenology?

In architectural terms, one aspect which distinguishes them is their usefulness as ideas. Where phenomenology (Heidegger) believes that everything in the world is contextual, the discussion of affect sees the world as composed of affects resulting from a range of forces which are not contextually specific and therefore can be abstracted and applied in many different ways in many different contexts. For architecture, the phenomenological idea that every context is unique makes it difficult to draw connections between contexts in a way which allows ideas to be carried from one context to another. It makes it impossible to develop disciplinary knowledge, which means that the discipline of architecture, without its own body of transferrable knowledge, becomes driven entirely by outside forces and issues, like the economy, urban sprawl, environmental concerns, etc. Understanding the ways in which buildings affect people, on the other hand, allows knowledge learnt in one context to have an ongoing relevance. If, for instance, you discover that there is a positive consequence to using transparency in a department store in one city, but believe that its effect is entirely context-specific, then you are limiting architects from exploiting that knowledge. If, on the other hand, you think that this impact is potentially true for other department stores in other countries, then the affect of transparency in department stores can become a tool which other architects can use elsewhere, in many different ways, at different scales, thicknesses, shapes, etc.

Lately we have seen an enormous interest in the development of new forms of architectural representation that are making our discipline more and more graphic and flashy. Nonetheless, this is accompanied by the idea of buildings themselves being non-representational objects. How do you see this dichotomy?

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Phenomenology is a theory of phenomena or what appears. As a philosophical movement, founded in the early years of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, it calls to solve all philosophical problems by appealing to intuitive or obvious experience. Source: RAE Dictionary; wikipedia.org

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Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a German philosopher, author of *Being and Time* (1927). He is associated with the fields of existential phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics. Source: en.wikipedia.org

Affects do not signify a specific meaning. They are open and are therefore perceived by different people in different ways.

Non-representational architecture does not mean we no longer have images or drawings. It means recognizing that architecture, unless it is explicitly designed otherwise – as in the case of postmodernism which chose to reference architectural forms to specific symbolic references –, is always polysemic. It generates many different associations, interpretations, readings. When architects present their work, they are obliged to explain their intentions. I don't think there is anything wrong with that. Given that architecture is always in the context of some use or activity, it is necessary to explain its intentions. However, it becomes problematic when architects think that they can determine precisely how people will feel, think or develop meanings out of those.

Many discussions on representation today (especially after Koolhaas' Venice Biennale) deal with issues related to national identity and local versus global ideas in architectural design. How does this relate to your ideas on non-representational architecture forms/systems?

This is a topic which I have elaborated on in my new book *The Function of Style*. I believe that categorizing architecture nationally or regionally fails to recognize the strands of ideas that migrate from place to place. It inhibits innovation for the sake of insisting on geographical or ethnical representation. We live in a world where architectural ideas migrate.

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