

Diagrams

Diagrammatic technique provides a foothold in the fast streams of mediated information. The meaninglessness that repetition and mediation create is overcome by diagrams, which generate new, instrumental meanings and steer architecture away from typological fixation.

What is a diagram? In general, diagrams are best known and understood as visual tools used for the compression of information. A specialist diagram, such as a statistics table or a schematic image, can contain, as much information in a few lines as would fill pages in writing. In architecture, diagrams have in the last few years been introduced as part of a technique that promotes a proliferating, generating and instrumentalising approach to design. The essence of the diagrammatic technique is that it introduces into a work qualities that are unspoken, disconnected from an ideal or an ideology, random, intuitive, subjective, not bound to a linear logic - qualities that can be physical, structural, spatial or technical.

There are three stages to the diagram: selection, application and operation, enabling the imagination to extend to subjects outside it and draw them inside, changing itself in the process.

Diagrams are packed with information on many levels. A diagram is an assemblage of solidified situations, techniques, tactics and functioning's. The arrangement of the eighteenth century Panopticon prison plan is the expression of a number of cultural and political circumstances cumulating in a distinctive manifestation of surveillance. It conveys the spatial organisation of a specific form of State power and discipline. It incorporates several levels of significance and cannot be reduced to a singular reading; like all diagrams, the Panopticon is a manifold. Characteristically, when a diagram breeds new meanings, they are still directly related to its substance - its tangible manifestation. Critical readings of previous interpretations are not diagrammatic. Put in the simplest possible terms, an image is a diagram when it is stronger than its interpretations.

The diagram is not a blueprint. It is not the working drawing of an actual construction, recognisable in all its details and with a proper scale. No situation will let itself be directly translated into a fitting and completely correspondent conceptualisation. There will always be a gap between the two. By the same token concepts can never be directly applied to architecture. There has to be a mediator. The mediating ingredient of the diagram derives not from the strategies that inform the diagram, but from its actual format, its material configuration. The diagram is not a metaphor or paradigm, but an 'abstract machine' that is both content and expression. This distinguishes diagrams from indexes, icons and symbols. The meanings of diagrams are not fixed. The diagrammatic or abstract machine is not representational. It does not represent an existing object or situation, but it is instrumental in the production of new ones. The forward-looking tendency of diagrammatic practice is an indispensable ingredient for understanding its functioning.

Why use diagrams? Diagrammatic practice delays the relentless intrusion of signs, thereby allowing architecture to articulate an alternative to a representational design technique. A representational technique implies that we converge on reality from a conceptual position and in that way fix the relationship between idea and form, between content and structure. When form and content are superimposed in this way, a type emerges. This is the problem with an architecture that is based on a representational concept: it cannot escape existing typologies. In not proceeding from signs, an instrumentalising technique such as the diagram delays typological fixation. Concepts external to architecture are introduced rather than superimposed. Instances of specific interpretation, utilisation, perception, construction and so on unfold and bring forth applications on various levels of abstraction.

How is the diagram chosen and applied? The function of the diagram is to delay typology and advance design by bringing in external concepts in a specific shape: as figure, not as image or sign. But how do we select, insert and interpret diagrams? The selection and application of a diagram involves the insertion of an element that contains within its dense information something that our thoughts can latch onto, something that is suggestive, to distract us from spiralling into cliché. Although the diagram is not selected on the basis of specific representational information, it is not a random image. The finding of the diagram is instigated by specific questions relating to the project at hand: its location, programme and construction.

For us, it becomes interesting to use a diagram from the moment that it starts to relate specifically to organisational effects. Among our collection of diagrams are flow charts, music notations, schematic drawings of industrial buildings, electrical switch diagrams... all maps of worlds yet to be constructed, if only as a detail. To suggest a possible, virtual organisation, we have used ideograms, line diagrams, image diagrams and finally operational diagrams, found in technical manuals, reproductions of paintings or random images that we collect. These diagrams are essentially infrastructural; they can always be read as maps of movements, irrespective of their origins. They are used as proliferators in a process of unfolding.

How do diagrams become operational? The abstract machine of the diagram needs triggering. It has to be set in motion so that the transformative process can begin, but where does this motion originate? How is the machine triggered? What exactly is the principle that effectuates change and transformation? Furthermore, how can we isolate this principle and give it the dimensions that make it possible to grasp and use it at will? The insertion of the diagram into the work ultimately points to the role of time and action in the process of design. Interweaving time and action makes transformation possible, as in novels where long narrative lines coil around black holes within the story. If there were no black holes for the story's protagonist to fall into, the landscape of the narrative would be a smooth and timeless plane, in which the hero, whose character and adventures are formed by this landscape, cannot evolve. The story is an intrinsic combination of character, place, event and duration. The landscape of the story, the black holes and the character become one. Together they trigger the abstract machine. In architecture, it goes something like this: the project is set on its course. Before the work diverts into typology a diagram, rich in meaning, full of potential movement and loaded with structure, which connects to some important aspect of the project, is found. The specific properties of this diagram throw a new light onto the work. As a result, the work becomes un-fixed; new directions and new meanings are triggered. The diagram operates like a black hole, which radically changes the course of the project, transforming and liberating architecture.

Ben van Berkel & Caroline Bos, MOVE, 1998