



Digital Unrealities. Photo(Un)Realism and Alienation in Contemporary Postdigital Architecture

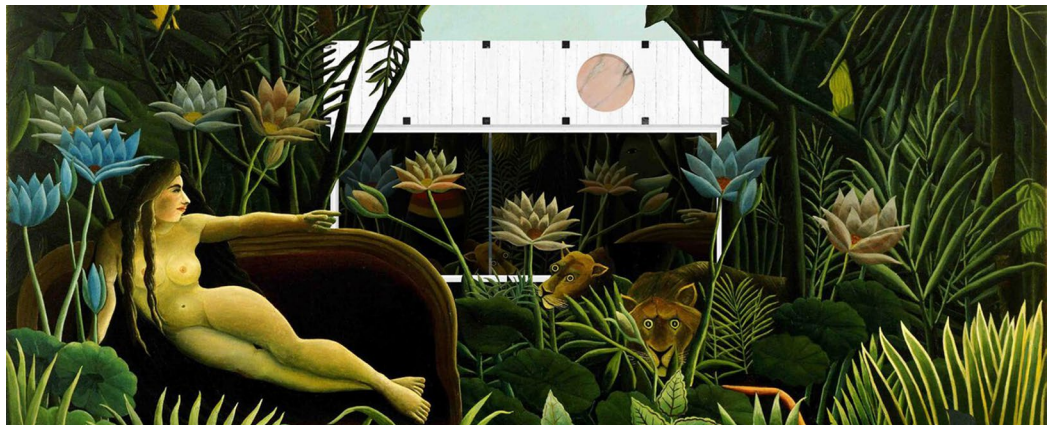
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Abstract

In contemporary architecture, photorealistic renderings are one of the most widespread representation techniques. They are sometimes assumed to be the key to a successful project. Recently, however, architects have been investigating quite different possibilities. More and more often, architects communicate their projects through images that do not pretend to look realistic. On the contrary, they are deliberately non-realistic, although they are produced with tools that could allow the realization of photorealistic images. Increasingly, non-realism is understood as a strategy to give images back an aura of mystery, an openness to interpretation. This approach, which could be called photo(un)realism, responds to the post-digital paradigm, which in architecture as in other arts calls for the hybridization of analog and digital methods. Photo(un)realism is post-digital as it draws inspiration from analog artworks in terms of composition and chromatic patterns. This approach is not intended to replace realistic renderings, which are and will remain useful tools. Rather, it aims to free architects from a naïve reliance on realistic images, which can reduce the design process to a matter of producing pretty pictures. Photo(un)realism tries to convey a different truth about architecture: not its visual appearance, but a sense of its narrative potential.

Keywords

Architectural Drawing, Digital Narrative, Photo(un)realism, Postdigital, Graphic Communication



Very Tiny Palace House,
2012. Courtesy of fala
atelier.

No one knows exactly when or where architecture was born. We know as a fact, however, that some forms of architectural representation accompanied the human construction of the territory from the very beginning. We have models dating back more than 6,500 years ago [Mindrup 2019]; at Çatalhöyük, an ancient city in present-day Turkey, a painting from over 8,000 years ago is possibly the oldest known urban landscape [Schmitt et al. 2014]. There is sufficient evidence to suspect that architectural representation may indeed be as old as architecture itself. In a sense, this should come as no surprise. Historically, the various forms of representation have done more than passively reproduce the reality of a building. They have always had the task to communicate some partial, but relevant, truth about it [Christenson 2019]. The dimensional truth of a building, for instance, is usually well-communicated by plans, sections, and elevations; its volumetric truth, by a model. And so on. In the last decades, the digital revolution has brought about the biggest revolution in architectural representation in a long time [Negroponte 1995; Mitchell 1999]. Some of the oldest techniques, such as plans, went from being hand-drawn to computer-aided. At the same time, entirely new ones emerged, such as 3D digital models, or photorealistic renderings. At the dawn of the digital era, the production of photorealistic images had some degree of difficulty and was thus a skill to be learned. Nowadays, thanks to fast and intuitive software, such as Lumion, Twinmotion, or such, it is within everyone's reach. Realistic renderings have had such a profound impact on the world of architecture, that they have changed not only architects' communication, but also their way of designing and thinking [Carpo 2012, Lynn 2013]. For its impact and diffusion, photorealism is sometimes assumed to say the final truth about a building. However, this is hardly so. A detailed rendering may provide useful information about the visual appearance of a building, its materiality, its scale. But it says little to nothing about other, equally important, aspects. It says nothing, for instance, about its temporal dimension. Buildings exist in time; and it is in time that they forge complex relationships with a community, a context, or other buildings. These interactions may end up producing changes in the very body of the building, to adapt it to new functions and inhabitants. The debate on the uses and purposes of digital tools, in architecture as in other arts, dates back to the last decade of the previous century. In a paper about contemporary tendencies in computer music, Kim Cascone [2000] coined the term 'postdigital'. The paper re-elaborated some ideas previously proposed by Nicholas Negroponte [1998]. In his paper, Cascone explained how the limitations of digital music led many composers to rediscover the potential of analog instruments. Over the years, the postdigital has consolidated as a paradigm that, in architecture as in other arts, calls for the hybridization of analog and digital methods. Post-digital does not imply a denial of digital tools, nor does it claim the superiority of analog ones [Taffel 2015]. Rather, it aims to unite the best of both worlds and to respond to some of the limitations of digitality. For instance, according to Stan Allen [Allen 1998, p. 75], traditional drawing techniques have "a particular power of conceptualization", due to the "distance interposed between the thing and its representation." Such quality is difficult to reproduce in realistic representations, precisely because of their realism, which reduces the distance between object and representation. Today, some of the most widespread drawing techniques are intrinsically postdigital [Jacob 2017]. Any collage made with Photoshop is so since it adapts an analog communication technique -the collage- to the possibilities of digital software (fig. 1). Recently, postdigital drawing has taken an interesting turn. Increasingly, architects, especially emerging firms, communicate their projects through images that do not pretend to look realistic. On the contrary, they are deliberately non-realistic, although they are produced with tools that could allow the realization of photorealistic images. Increasingly, non-realism is understood as a strategy to give images back an aura of mystery and an openness to interpretation. This approach, which may be called photo(un)realism, is post-digital as it draws inspiration from analog artworks in terms of composition and chromatic patterns. Photo(un)realism tries to convey a different truth about architecture: not its visual appearance, but a sense of its narrative potential (fig. 2). Photo(un)realism does not replace more traditional approaches to digital drawing but complements them. It can be useful in speculative or competition projects or be an alternative to realistic renderings early in the design process. In speculative projects, photo(un)realism



Fig. 1. Yongjia Road Youth Shared Space Design, 2021. Courtesy of Greyspace Architecture Design Studio.

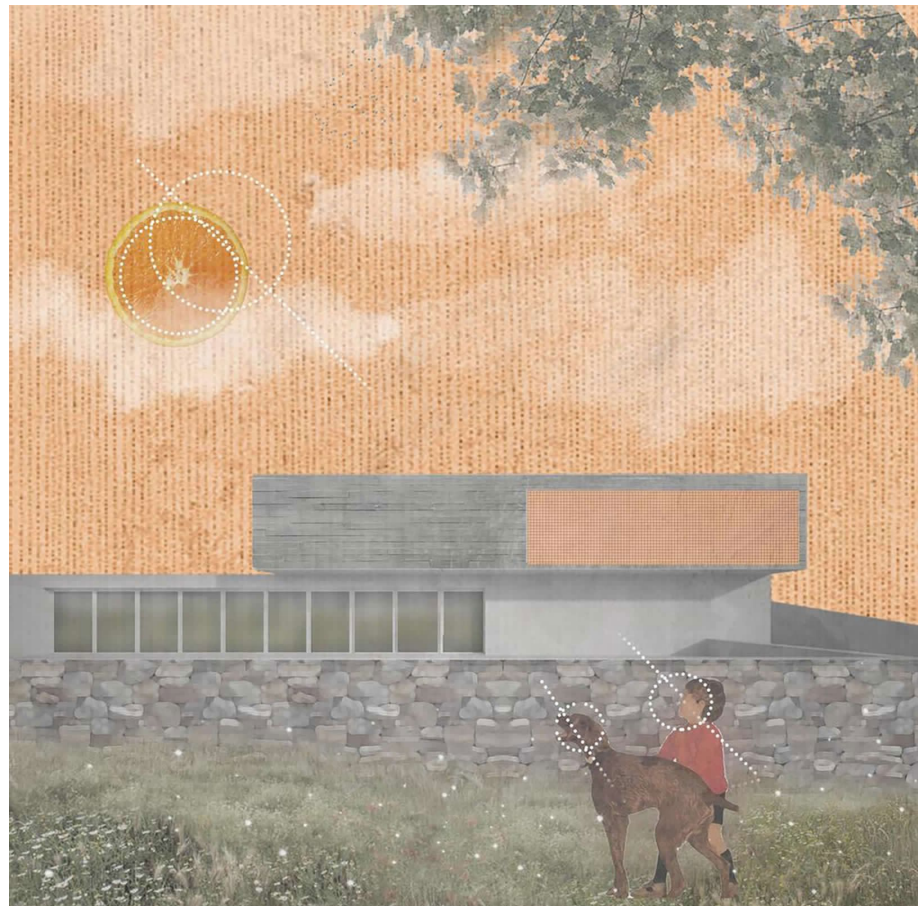


Fig. 2. Orange house, 2020. Courtesy of Studio Guilherme Torres.

helps to enhance the narrative power of images. Every image has an inherent capacity to suggest possibilities, to open up other worlds. However, in non-realistic images, this capacity can be especially strong. By not having to respect the visual codes of reality, they can be elaborated to suggest a specific atmosphere or set of values. They can tell exactly what the narrative of a story needs. It is the case, for example, of *This Used to be our Home*, by LuftSchloss Collective [LuftSchloss Collective 2019]. *This Used to be our Home* is a grim fairy tale about the progressive, seemingly unstoppable, devastation of the environment, at the expense of humans and nonhumans alike. The story is all too real and yet is better communicated through a set of surrealistic images, evoking a sense of loss and alienation (fig. 3). Similarly, Julien Nolin's *Amazonia Pier* is an ironic but sour reflection on the consequences of Free Trade Zones in lower economic countries [Nolin 2017]. The project, which imagines an 'architecture of pleasure' in the city of Manaus, Brazil, in the heart of the Amazon, may recall Cedric Price's Fun Palace, or a dystopian version of Archigram's more futuristic visions (fig. 4). Its drawings, executed in a cartoonish but detailed style, convey a sinister sense of amusement and anguish at the same time.

The role of non-realistic representation in competitions is similar, but not the same. Speculative projects may or may not propose an intervention; sometimes they only offer a point of view on a given subject. Competitions, on the other hand, tend to focus on specific interventions, in specific places, with specific guidelines. Not surprisingly, competitions are often the ideal place for photorealistic renderings. However, even in competitions there is more and more room for other forms of representation: non-realistic images are often used to suggest what kind of individual and social life the project promotes. They convey an atmosphere, a mood. In *Needle and Thread*, m²ft's [m²ft 2022] proposal for a garden city in La Porte du Hainaut, in the context of European I6, images do not try to be realistic. They rather build a story: through the crafted mix of chromatic patterns and evocative elements, they transmit a sense of peace and balance between nature and the city (fig. 5).

Sometimes photo(un)realistic images act as enigmas: they pose questions to the viewer that do not necessarily have answers. This is the case of an illustration for Andrés Jaque's Reggio School [Jaque 2022]. The illustration shows an exploded axonometric view of the school (fig. 6). Its peculiarity is that the school is placed on what could be a tiny asteroid, floating in a dark space dotted with myriads of stars. What does this image mean? Does it intend to portray the school as an autonomous microcosm, as distant from other buildings as a rock in space would be from other planets? Maybe it does, or maybe it means anything. Possibly, it just pretends to arouse the viewer's curiosity, by creating a sense of distance and alienation. Something similar happens with a collage for Fala's *Very Tiny Palazzo* [Fala 2021]. In it, Fala's house stands in the background of a famous Henry Rousseau painting, *The Dream*. There is a lush forest, with wild animals and, on the right, a woman on a sofa (fig. 7). In this painting, the house fits as a strange but somehow familiar figure. It does not matter what this image means. What matters is that it conveys a sense of calm and stillness of which the house, as the image clearly suggests, would be a part.

By raising questions about their meaning, images become powerful attention-getters. They encourage people to focus on them and, consequently, on the project itself. It is a well-repeated refrain that images play a fundamental role in contemporary architecture [Leach 1999]. For an architectural firm, the problem is how to make a project stand out on a web daily saturated by thousands and thousands of pictures. A well-crafted, enigmatic illustration may be the answer, and help a project find its place in the overcrowded territory of contemporary architecture.

There is a widespread belief among architects today that photorealistic views are valid tools, but only if used wisely. A few years ago, Mexican architect Tatiana Bilbao declared that she had banned renderings from her studio's design process. Photorealistic views, she explained, give too accurate an idea of what a proposal would look like. They are useful in the final stages of a project but can be detrimental in earlier phases. Precisely because they are realistic, they can close the door to exploring other possibilities. In their place, her studio relies on collages, for their collaborative and open-ended nature [Frearson 2019] (fig. 8).

The role of photorealism in architectural communication has long been a debated topic



Fig. 3. *This used to be our home*, 2019. Courtesy of Luftschloss Collective - Bojana Papić and Yann Junod.

Fig. 4. *Amazonia Pier*, 2017. Courtesy of Julien Nolin.

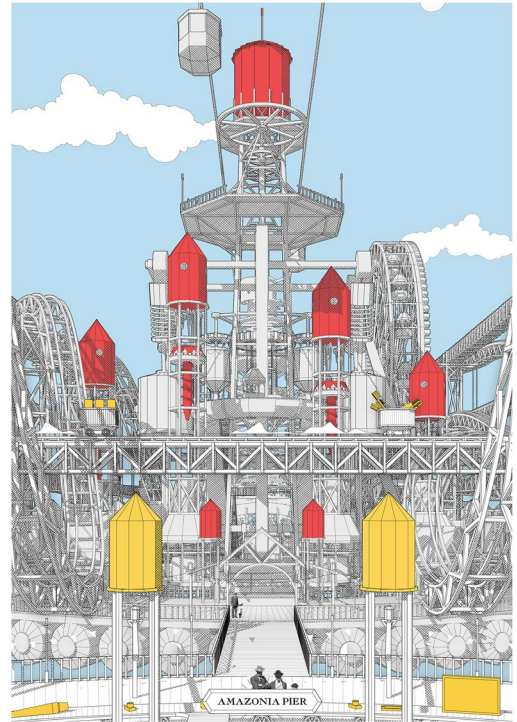


Fig. 5. *Needle and thread*, 2022. Courtesy of m²ft.

[Quirk 2013; Wainwright 2013]. At best, realistic renderings help visualize a proposal, but give no clue as to its potential socio-environmental impact or its interaction with a community of human and non-human agents. At worst, renderings may be pure propaganda, trying to mask pointless projects with the gloss of perfectly crafted images. Underlying the over-diffusion of renderings in architectural culture are two misconceptions: a beautiful image does not necessarily make for a beautiful building, and a beautiful building is not necessarily a good project. Beauty, in a building, is a very important aspect, which, however, does not accomplish the whole task of architecture.

The recent shift towards deliberately non-realistic images seems to respond to a diffuse concern about the methods and functions of representation. Drawing, whatever the tech-

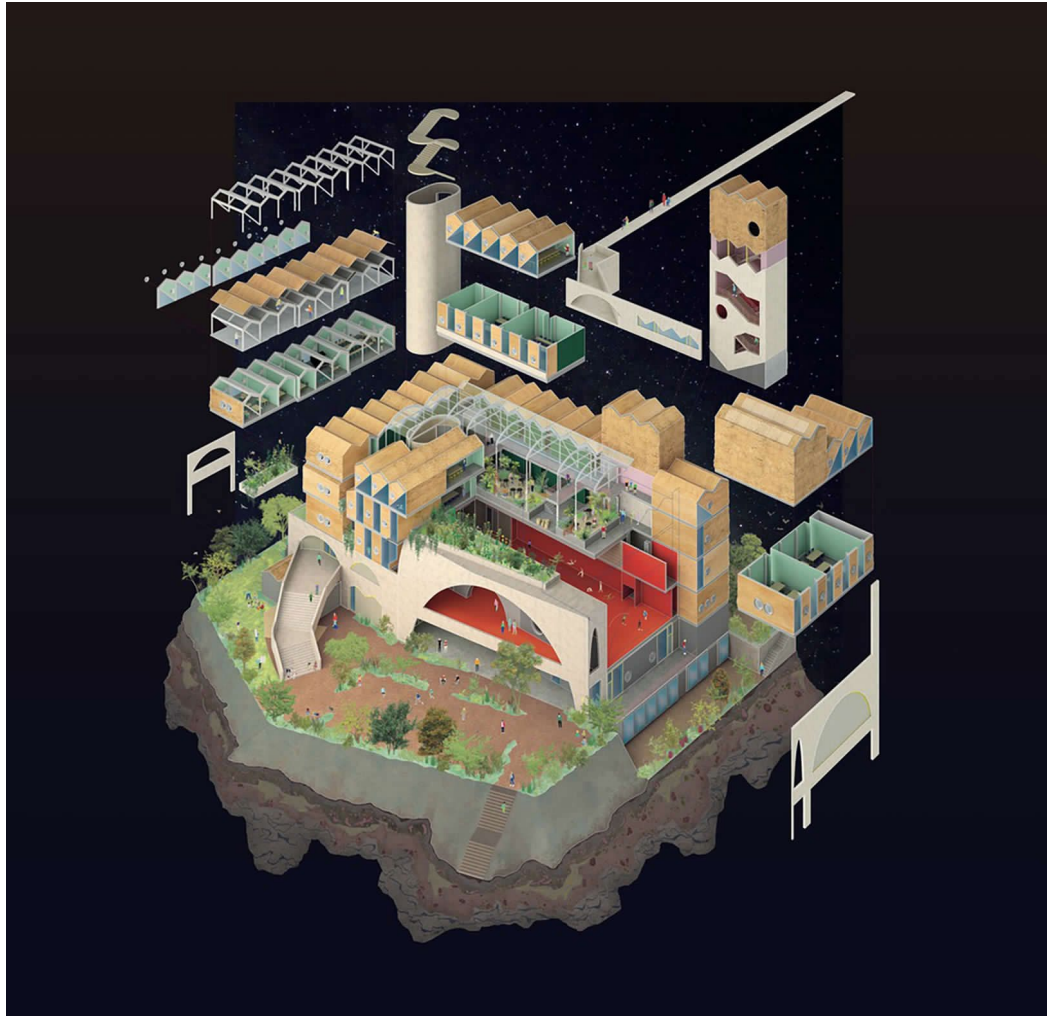


Fig. 6. Reggio School, 2022. Courtesy of Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation.

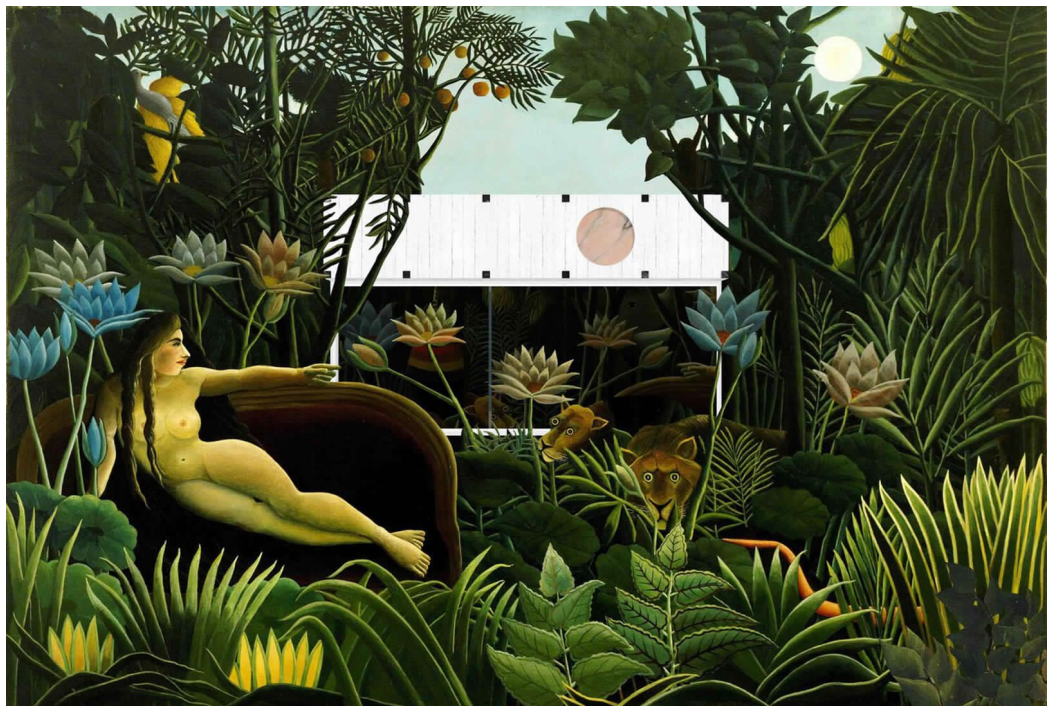


Fig. 7. Very Tiny Palace House, 2012. Courtesy of fala atelier.



Fig. 8. *Ways of Life*
conceptual collage.
Courtesy of Tatiana
Bilbao ESTUDIO.

nique, has the capacity to establish meaningful interactions with viewers, by suggesting to them a world of stories and possibilities. On occasions, this capacity can be lost in a photorealistic representation. Realism and narrative potential do not always go hand in hand. Non-realistic images pretend to involve the viewer in a more active way. Faced with a detailed rendering, the viewers are asked to become passively aware of the project as it is. Faced with a non-realistic post-digital image, viewers are invited to actively participate in the production of meaning. They have to fill in the gaps left by a deliberately open-ended representation, reflecting on messages and ideas hiding behind the image. Being open-ended, photo(un)realistic images can help in the early design stages, suggesting ever new directions; or when the project is finished, helping tell its story in all its narrative value. This approach is not intended to replace realistic renderings, which are and will remain useful tools. Rather, it aims to free architects from a naïve reliance on realistic images, which can reduce the design process to a matter of producing pretty pictures. There is more to architecture. Buildings tell stories; they have an emotional truth, as well as a visual one, that can best be communicated through images not constrained by a self-imposed resemblance to reality.

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