

RAIMUND FEIN*

GAMES OF ILLUSIONS

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Abstract

Visual illusion and optical deception are essential and admissible means in the creation of architectural quality. The users and beholders of architecture expect to be enchanted by the friendly ruses of illusion. The true masters of architecture have always been masters in the game of visual lies and deception. Architectural illusions are used to show us an idealised reality.

Keywords: Illusion – magic – enchantment – idealised reality

Streszczenie

Iluzje wzrokowe oraz oszustwa optyczne są podstawowymi i dopuszczalnymi środkami podczas tworzenia jakości architektonicznej. Użytkownicy i obserwujący architekturę oczekują tego, że zostaną oczarowani przez przyjazne złudzenie iluzji. Prawdziwi mistrzowie architektury zawsze byli mistrzami gry kłamstw i złudzeń wizualnych. Iluzje architektoniczne są wykorzystywane w celu ukazania rzeczywistości idealnej.

Słowa kluczowe: Iluzja – magia – oczarowanie – rzeczywistość idealna

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1. In the creation of architectural quality, honesty is not always paramount

In some of the past editions of this conference, we have occasionally underlined that creating architectural quality is a skilful game that can be compared to the game of chess. You think ahead and make careful moves to reach your goal: The highest possible standard in architectural quality. In order to play successfully though, you have to know not only the rules, but also the tricks and the tactics of the game. Moreover, you will find that you cannot always afford to play honestly and with an open visor. Sometimes, it seems appropriate to not let the others know what you are up to. In certain cases, we feel that it is unavoidable to deceive and mislead in order to achieve that specific architectural quality that is our final goal.

By saying this, I am not talking about all those ruses and deceptions that happen so often in the world of building and planning when someone lies and deceives in order to achieve an economic advantage over somebody else, thus creating victims that have been misled to their own disadvantage. I am not saying that this is in any way justifiable; in fact, I would like to condemn from the heart any form of materialistic fraud and speculation in architecture that is based on intentional misinformation, just in order to gain some economic advantage for oneself.

2. In the creation of architectural quality, it is admissible to mislead through optical illusions

But I strongly believe that there is a permissible form of deception and misleading in art, and thus in architecture: That which is applied as part of the creative process, for advantage and for the enjoyment of the future user and beholder. I am convinced that it is admissible to use illusion to construct a supposed reality. Something that seems to be there is really there as long as the illusion is not unmasked. In this case, an illusionary reality can be enjoyed as if it was really there, and if this reality is enjoyable, I have to praise the artist for misleading me to the enjoyment of a reality that would not be possible without his wise deception. Picasso said that art is a lie that makes us see a truth. We all know that fairytales are lies in in so far as they do not tell us things that really happened. Still, are they not telling us some truth? Illusion is at the base of art. Art is not only a means to tell the truth; it is also a means to go beyond truth, to offer the effect of an ideal truth that could be, if only reality allowed it.

The use of illusion, in art and particularly in architecture, is not only admissible but essentially necessary. People will never be enchanted just through the plain truth; they will always be enchanted by illusion. People want to be enchanted. They ask for it. They simply wait for it. After all, this is why people go to the movies; this is why they read novels. They want to imagine, to imagine a reality as if it was really there. And they want to go beyond reality. This is what they expect from art: To be carried beyond reality into a world full of space for the imagination. Little does it matter whether this happens through illusion or optical and acoustical deception. This is not only accepted; it is expected. As long as people only care what they see and feel, and not about what is really there, illusion will be all too willingly accepted and enjoyed as a reality. After all, a hypothetical reality is a reality as well.

3. The use of optical illusion and deception has a long tradition in architecture

In architecture, the optical manipulation and the illusionary element have a long tradition and a deep meaning. I would go as far as saying that optical illusion and deception is really the game that the architect has at his hands to play. Architecture can only be magical if it has some element of magic introduced into it. It is the architect's first and foremost task and noblest duty to add magic to his/her work, and the magic mostly consists in playing with illusion, in the construction of a supposed reality that goes beyond what is possible as a reality, to an idealised reality so to say.

4. In architecture, the optical illusion is one of the fields of mastery and excellence

The history of architecture is full of examples of optical manipulations and illusions. One could say that the masters of architecture have always been masters in the game of illusions. The greatest works of architecture in history have always been rich in optical manipulation: From the Greek columns that, through careful shaping, were made to seem taller than they really were (by the way, a trick that Mies van der Rohe loved to use, too), to the manipulation of perspectives in Palladio's work (best seen in the Teatro Olimpico stage), to the subtle illusion of a false separation between "old" and "new" in Gunnar Asplund's facade of Gothenburg's Law Court Building, and many other examples from all periods of time: Playing around with illusion, optical deception leading to a supposed reality, has always been the game, the field of excellence that divides the masters from the epigones.

So, the game of architectural creation is really one of friendly deception. As such, it is not selfish but deeply altruistic, idealistic, and humanistic. True artists are liars, but they lie in order to create enjoyment and happiness in others.