

Current research - Transversal research themes

Figurative Explorations. New Readings of the Project
The temporalist vocabulary of architectural and urban design

Figurative Explorations. New Readings of the Project

The creation of this transversal research theme is a response to the need to investigate rapid change in representations and the proliferation of experimental approaches in the practices involved in the contemporary project. Mindful of the shifting, unstable character of the new forms of representation, our research system – itself exploratory – explores the relationship between the production of images and the processes of design and communication.

Often at odds with the figurative tradition, these emergent practices call into question the role and status of representation in the classical analysis-project sequence. They express a profound change in our perception of the physical and social place of architecture and betray our uncertainties as to the meaning we should attribute to this change. Our transversal research theme seeks in particular to give an account of the dialogue – or absence of dialogue – between reality, its figurative representation and its transformation in the field of the architectural project, when this project is considered in terms of the dynamics of its various levels of observation, planning and intervention, from the building itself to territory and landscape.

The work of the research group will take place in two phases. In the first of these (2014–2015) priority will go to the shaping of a corpus of contemporary practices. The exploratory principle consists not in resorting to an a priori grid of selection and analysis criteria, but rather in a firm commitment to a heuristic process in which the drawing-up of a method will hinge on our progress through this corpus. The second phase (2015–2016) will be that of analysis of the corpus from the point of view of the changing situation it is part of and the possibilities it opens up for the practice of the project, for research and for the teaching of architecture. Over these two years a series of seminars and study days will be organised and will look into figurative practices via the following six themes:

1. Representation and the design process
2. Objects, scales and representational models
3. Representation and the role of the citizen
4. Representation and physical and corporal practices
5. Representation and objectivity
6. Looking ahead: what representations for the future?

As digital representations are now an everyday matter, the time is ripe for this initiative. The challenge facing this research venture is to turn a handicap – studying a highly mobile phenomenon for which we inevitably lack complete objectivity – into an asset: in other words, to capture the very dynamic of its movement. The proposed work phases meet this need for an innovative, ongoing approach based on today's representational tools and practices and in some cases taking issue with the values and significations of our visual culture. Its ultimate goal is seen as the creation of an authoritative tool, in the form not of a theoretical synthesis, but of a yardstick made up of the knowledge and skills emerging from project situations and concrete design practices.

Lastly, this transversal venture is intended as a complement to the Joint Research Unit's research themes,

receptive to processes of reciprocal exchange and enrichment with the themes the Unit is working on.

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The temporalist vocabulary of architectural and urban design

Description of the research theme

This transversal theme at the Joint Research Unit is a recent creation that will come into operation in the course of the 2014–2015 academic year. Our objective is an analysis of the designing and evolution of architectural and urban forms, based on a study of the relationships with time which construction professionals create through their practice of the project. There will be particular emphasis on how temporalities that differ from one professional to another – the short term of the developer and the long term of the investor, for example – and from one culture to another, manage to coexist and find expression in the actual materiality of what is built.

We shall try to document the evolution of these relationships with time by studying the way the different temporalities are stated: language, through its vocabulary, syntax and grammar, stabilises and divides up situations, while expressing the flows, rhythms, shifts and tweakings taken up by a given era, social group or culture. In the context of construction or preservation projects the terms used by these professionals – obsolescence, life cycle, sustainability, energy transfer, etc. – more or less explicitly express a classification, an ordering, a division between past, present and future.

The evolution of project terminology towards more overtly 'temporalist' forms seems to be going hand in hand with the rise of heritage and environmental policies. Using concrete cases, we shall try to understand how, at the level of discourse, terms like 'heritage', 'sustainability', 'life cycle', 'slow architecture', 'generic [history free] city' and others gain access and spread; who are the actors currently possessing the power to make these temporal choices for the built environment; and how these artefacts ultimately produce what François Hartog calls a new 'regime of historicity', more orientated towards presentism, not to say towards the immediateness of globalised time.

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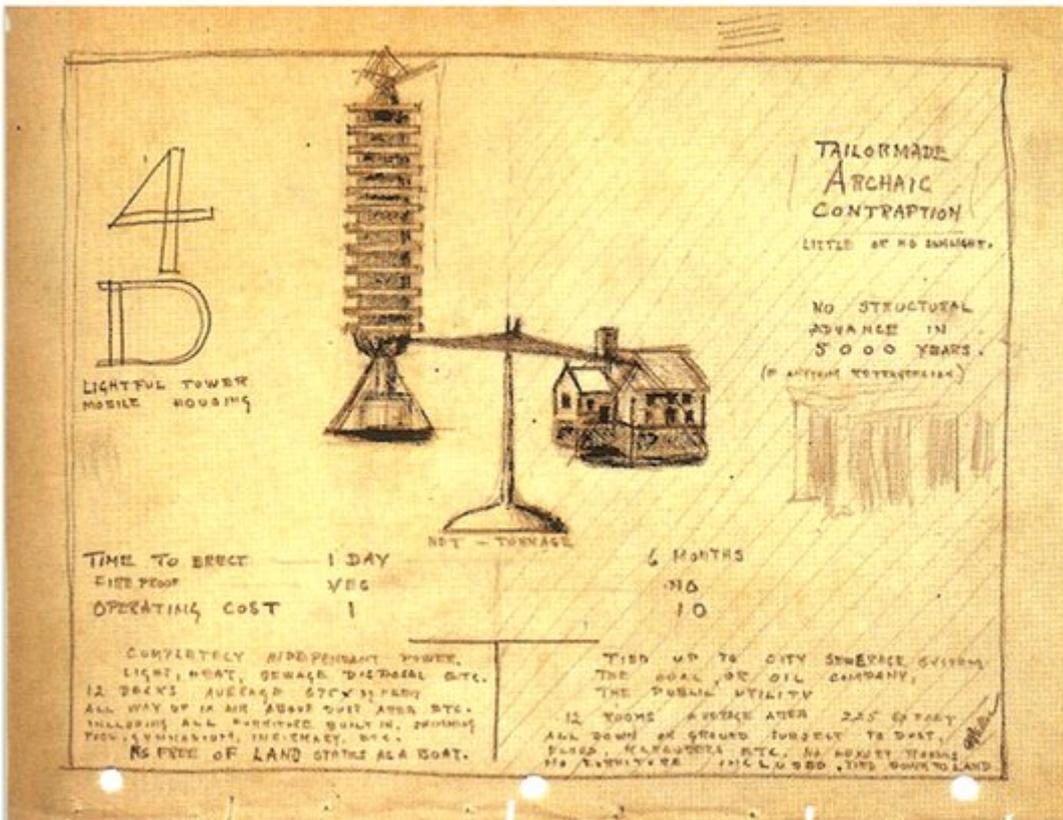
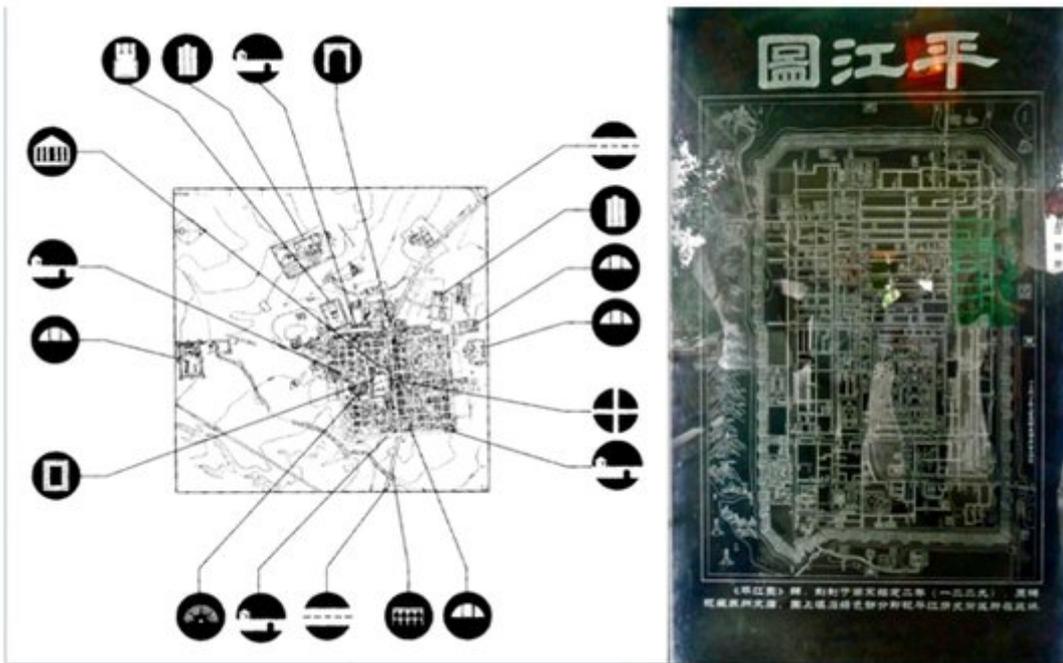
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Buckminster Fuller, 'Comparison of Lightful Houses and Traditional Homes', 1928. Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries. Image courtesy the Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller.

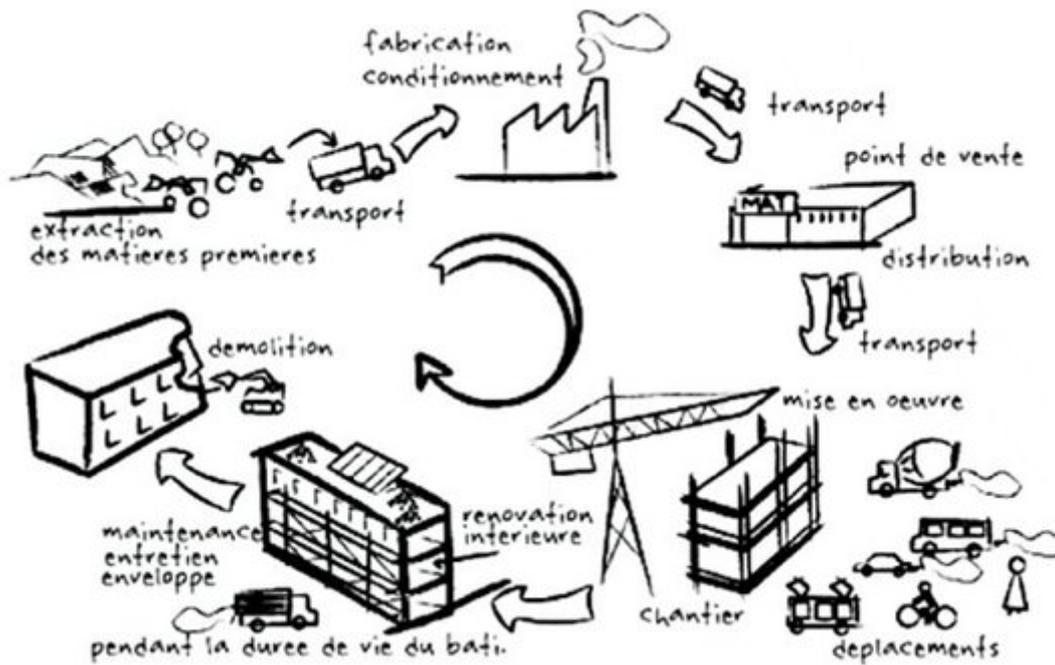


Diagram of the life cycle of a building - Source GT ICEB

extraction des matières premières: extraction of raw materials

transport: transport

fabrication conditionnement: manufacture packaging

transport: transport

point de vente: point of sale

distribution: distribution

mise en œuvre: implementation

déplacements: travel

chantier: site

rénovation intérieure: Interior renovation

pendant la durée de vie du bâtiment: during the building's lifetime

maintenance entretien enveloppe: envelope maintenance

démolition: demolition

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