

Durand vs. Pinterest

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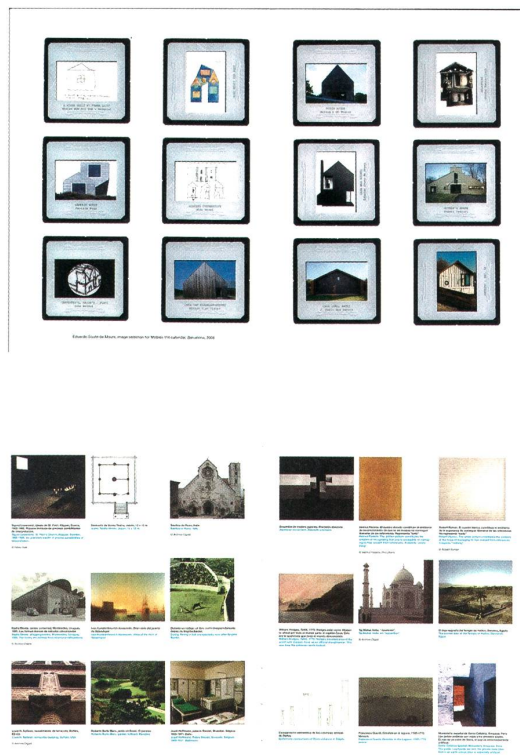
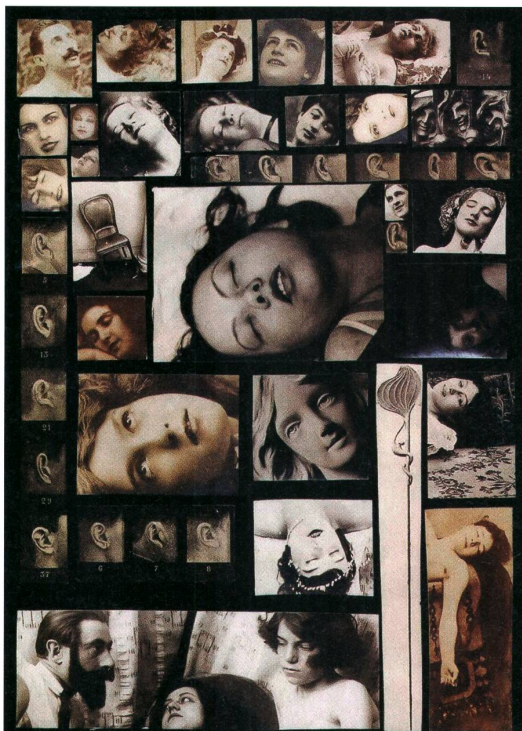
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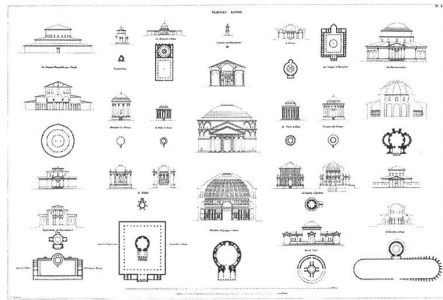
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DURAND VS. PINTEREST

Tanguy Auffret-Postel

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From left to right:

fig.a
Salvador Dalí, 'Le phénomène de l'extase',
photomontage in *Minotaure*, n° 3-4, 1933.

fig.b
Eduardo Souto de Moura, 'Atlas de Parede. Imagens de Método',
Dafne Editora, Porto, 2011.

fig.c
Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand,
'Recueil et parallèle', Paris, 1801.

fig.d
Anonymous Pinterest Board.
www.pinterest.com

fig.e
Valerio Olgiati, 2G n°37,
Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2010.

fig.f
Gerhard Richter, 'Atlas',
Zeitungs- & Albumfotos, Planche 5, 1962.

Mental collisions can produce wonders, yet blind faith can trick into mistaking resemblance and parentage. A web browser and a large book, opened side by side, triggers an intriguing thought: could Pinterest be a contemporary version of Jean-Louis Durand's 'Recueil'? Of course, everything seems to set these two editorial projects apart, and trying to uncover relationships between them is a thorny path. So rather than focusing on the actual content of these collections, it seems important to explore some of the shifts that are occurring in the way that architects collect references.

DURAND

Jean Nicolas Louis Durand (1760-1834) was a prominent French architect, acclaimed to posterity for publishing what is now known as 'Le Grand Durand': a collection of plans, sections and elevations of buildings ranging from ancient Rome to the Renaissance and classified by typologies. Durand entitled it 'Recueil Et Parallèle Des Édifices En Tout Genre, Anciens Et Modernes, Remarquables Par Leur Beauté, Par Leur Grandeur Ou Par Leur Singularité Et Dessinés Sur Une Même Échelle'. A title that says it all. Those buildings, all selected for their singularity, were presented side by side, on beautifully drawn plates and organized in typological sections all using a common scale. With his students at the École Polytechnique in Paris in mind, where he was a renowned teacher, Durand summarised his task: «Un tableau qu'ils pourraient parcourir en peu de temps, examiner sans peine, étudier avec fruit, surtout, si l'on classait les édifices et les monuments par genres, si on les rapprochait selon leur degré d'analogie, si on les assujettissait de plus à une même échelle; et c'est ce que nous avons entrepris de faire»¹. The book is aimed at his students as a manual that should allow them to «établir des principes universellement valable à partir de la comparaison d'une multitude d'objets divers»².

Durand's herculean task can be seen as a part of the «collection and classification of data that took place in different disciplines, especially in the natural sciences»³ during the 18th century. His point of view and his position towards his readership is clearly one of a professor who has a thesis and needs to effectively convey his message.⁴ In his book 'Composition, Non Composition', Jacques Lucan offers to see Durand's work as a means to explain architecture as a language. Durand's ambition is to reveal the vocabulary and the grammar of architecture by analysing meaningful objects. His intent goes beyond that of a historical survey to offer a theoretical contribution to the discipline: architecture is based on a limited set of elements, which are assem-

- 1 «A picture they could quickly cover, easily examine, fruitfully study, especially, if we were to classify buildings and monuments by genre, if we brought them together based on their level of analogy, if we were to bind them through a mutual scale, and this is what we set out to do» in: Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, 'Recueil Et Parallèle Des Édifices De Tout Genre, Anciens Et Modernes, Remarquables Par Leur Beauté, Par Leur Grandeur Ou Par Leur Singularité, Et Dessinés Sur Une Même Échelle', Paris: Chez L'auteur, 1801.
- 2 «...establish universally valuable concepts based on the comparison of a multitude of diverse objects.» in: Jacques Lucan, 'Composition, Non-composition: Architecture Et Théories, XIXe-XXe Siècles. Architecture', Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques Et Universitaires Romandes, 2009.
- 3 Leandro Madrazo, 'Durand and the science of Architecture', in: Journal of Architectural Education vol. 48, Taylor & Francis, 1994, p. 12.
- 4 In the early 1800, France was in need of many new buildings and qualified architects were a scarce resource outside of Paris. Most of the buildings would have to be designed by Engineers sent to the 'province' to imagine the landmarks of tomorrow. Durand seized this urge for a rapid training to craft a method that would effectively transmit a set of basic rules.

bled following certain rules. By examining outstanding buildings throughout history, one can deduce those rules and apply them to their own project.

Koolhaas undoubtedly noticed this when he chose to put the Biennial under the banner of Elements. The exhibition officializes a new reading grid in architecture that brings us back to Durand. Just like him, Koolhaas exhibits the vocabulary of all architectures. But by doing so he underlines the utmost importance of grammar, in other words the rules or principles (be they as intuitive as the ones used on Pinterest) to assemble those elements.

In the «Annonce publicitaire» of Durand's work, he opens his text by erasing borders, both geographical or chronological: «Une chose qui importe [...] à tout ceux qui doivent construire ou représenter des édifices et des monuments, c'est d'étudier et de connaître tout ce qu'on a fait de plus intéressant en architecture, dans tous les pays et dans tous les siècles»⁵. And he continues, as if he was speaking about Pinterest and the mix of junk imagery it contains: «Mais les édifices qui méritent quelque considération se trouvent confondus avec une foule d'autres qui ne sont remarquables en rien»⁶. Among many others, Gerhard Richter, also refers to the duality ir/relevance, and states about his lifetime artwork «Atlas»: «In the beginning I tried to accommodate everything there that was somewhere between art and garbage and that somehow seemed important to me and a pity to throw away»⁷. Since the 70s, Richter keeps collecting and assembling images, composing sheets to feed his never ending work of art. Searching for the unexpected, he anticipated the pinterest methodology.

Learning from Durand and his didactic project, we could cast a challenging look upon Pinterest and try to overcome it's consumerist nature to see it as another place to witness the rise of new kind of taxonomy within architecture.

PINTEREST

The constant progression of reproducibility, as famously underlined by Walter Benjamin⁸, has laid the groundwork for the creation of pinterest. The online service centres around the idea of collecting images while you browse the web. Inside Pinterest, the images you virtually «pin» are replicated onto «boards», which are webpages that display your collection in the form of an endless grid of images. The service, far from being an isolated experience, takes part in a global trend initi-

- 5 «Something that matters [...] to all the ones who need to build or represent buildings and monuments, is to study and to know all that has been most interestingly done in architecture, in every country and throughout the centuries.» in: Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, «Recueil Et Parallèle Des Édifices De Tout Genre, Anciens Et Modernes, Remarquables Par Leur Beauté, Par Leur Grandeur Ou Par Leur Singularité, Et Dessinés Sur Une Même Échelle», Paris: Chez L'auteur 1801.
- 6 «But the buildings that most deserve consideration find themselves confused with a series of other that have nothing remarkable», *ibid.*
- 7 Gerhard Richter, Dietmar Elger and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, «Writings, Interviews and Letters, 1961-2007», Thames & Hudson 2009, p.332.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, «L'oeuvre d'art à l'époque de reproductibilité technique» (1955), Paris: Editions Allia 2014, p.15.

ated by platforms such as Tumblr. All these similar websites adopt the idea of collecting images and reposting them to create a unique feed, that conveys a message or more basically reflects your tastes. In the age of online identity, Pinterest and services alike rely on their users to <curate> (ouch!) collections. In this way they differ from products like Google Image, which applies algorithms to index and classify multiple sources. Even though the word curation can be seen as a profound misuse or even an abuse in such a case, it has largely been used by commentators and users to describe their online activity. Curation is understood as the act of publicly displaying a collection of various sources that, once put together, can resonate in multiple ways. This ease to create new collections is reinforced by the openness to all kind of contributors. The democratic access to <content curation> implies a deep shift in the relationship to knowledge. Indeed, academic achievements or even experience in a certain field doesn't provide you with any authority among the community. Even though these online collections can produce interesting results, profound differences remain to Durand's work. If at the time, collections were produced in order to relay a particular message, to prove a theory or to transmit a strong statement, contemporary form of online <curation> seems to push collection for the sake of collection. Just like financial capital, cultural capital needs to flow as quickly as possible to create value. The more images circulate the more they need to be classified and organised. But a paradoxical consequence is that the faster culture flows, the less time it has to root itself, becoming increasingly meaningless.

By enabling instant and large-scale collections of images, Pinterest revives a surrealist dream. Rational logic and Cartesian thinking can be left aside and open the door to potential poetic associations. For example, under a generic title such as <architecture> you might find a collection of work that shares a very specific relationship to natural light. It is hard to know if the author collected the images with this in mind or if he instinctively pinned images that resonated with him, regardless of their origin. Either way, the result is the same. To the observer, these kinds of boards can generate fertile parallels. Architects have long investigated these mental encounters as a means to create their own iceberg of references. A set of images that invisibly nourishes and influence their work. From iconographic autobiographies to atlases, from phonebooks to bibles, the need for architects to exhibit their substratum takes various forms.⁹

- 9 To list a few examples: Valerio Olgiati, <Iconographic Autobiography>, in: 2G, No. 37 (2006), 2006; Bandeira, Pedro and Tavares, André (ed.). <Floating Images: Eduardo Souto De Moura's Wall Atlas>, Zürich: Lars Müller, 2012; Baumeister <Kuratier Von Christ & Gantemberein>, august 2013; San Rocco's Book of Copies; Olgiati, Valerio, <The Images of Architects: 44 Collections by Unique Architects>, Luzern: Quart Verlag, 2013.
- 10 The word <cookbook> refers to the way Antonio Hernandez described the work of Durand and alikes in J.N.L. Durand's Architectural Theory: A Study in the History of Rational Building Design, Perspecta, vol. 12 (1969), pp.153-160.

(all translation by the authors)

Those 'cookbooks'¹⁰ might be the closest descendants of Durand. They share with him their erudition and precision and are quite exclusively destined for architects. On the contrary the serendipity, brute force method within Pinterest reaches a paroxysm, a breaking point, at which the retina burns out.

Aside from creating unexpected encounters, Pinterest also forces us to update our idea of what a category in architecture can be. Typologies and program have been the dominant sorting criteria for centuries but the rules that define the structure of Pinterest lead to the creation of a new way of classifying and describing architecture. Plans, elevations and text are (almost) absent from the site, further increasing the prevalence of photography and three-dimensional representations in the way we relate to existing objects. Scale and geometry are left aside to enable the rise of features: 'Sculptural staircases', 'black houses', 'wooden interiors' or 'round windows' are the kind of collections that populate the architecture or lifestyle section of the site. Beyond revealing the 'flavour of the month' or the 'zeitgeist' in architecture, these titles demonstrate a profound shift in the way users mentally organise their references.

In the end, both Durand and Pinterest share a common assumption. When creating a collection of references (in this case with an architectural purpose), the importance does not lie solely in the individual objects that are collected, but in the features they share. Durand's intuition was that one cautiously curated collection could teach his students the inherent rules of architecture. Pinterest and services alike grew upon the idea that a continuous, large scale sorting effort can produce fertile encounters and define new categories. In both cases, 'curation' is the primary method which reveal the relationships that make a series of unrelated objects an 'Ensemble'. By doing so, both tend to minor the use of references as sacred models to follow but rather encourage the search for a stream of clues that shape the way we perceive (and therefore act upon) the world.

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