

In defense of the poor text

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IN DEFENSE OF THE POOR TEXT⁽¹⁾

Marija Marić

Describing the visual world of low-resolution copies, thumbnails and previews that emerged with the proliferation of the Internet, artist and theorist Hito Steyerl introduced the concept of a «poor image». Compressed and pixelated free versions of the original, «poor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images», she writes.⁽²⁾ They tend towards abstraction, not only in terms of their ephemeral existence, anonymous production and fragmented distribution. Nevertheless, curated, edited and maintained by various online communities, these pieces of «digital folk art» are successfully destabilising traditional understandings of authorship and property. In this light, Steyerl calls for new ways of defining the value of an image; value that goes beyond resolutions and art markets, and is instead based on spread, speed and distribution capacity. «Poor image» reminds us that digital information is no longer about authenticity and originality; instead, «it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities [...] In short: it is about reality.»⁽³⁾

Starting from «poor images», I move towards «poor texts», in an attempt to understand real estate advertisements as forms of infrastructure that circulate architecture as an information and value. Real estate ads, perhaps more than any other writings on buildings and cities, are about their own conditions of existence — fast circulation, far-reaching dispersion, and universal language. In short: about architectural reality.

I Fiction as Infrastructure

Real estate advertisements probably constitute the majority of the existing body of texts written on architecture and cities. Still, the ways in which real estate agents and developers describe their products are often neglected by architects as «trash talk» or generic patter, and are therefore systematically excluded from architectural discussions.

In her book *Extrastatecraft*, architect and theorist Keller Easterling studies how repeatable «spatial formulas» constituting what she describes as the global «infrastructure space» play a role in shaping new forms of power and governance beyond the state. «More than grids of pipes and wires [...] infrastructure is now the overt point of contact and access between us all—the rules governing the space of everyday life», she writes.⁽⁴⁾

Within this broad definition of global infrastructure space, real estate advertisements appear as a set of fluid multipliers able to productively employ seemingly disconnected scales and ideas. Merging progress with nostalgia, regional myths with smart-city parameters, English with non-English speaking localities, real estate fictions zoom in and zoom out, scale up and scale down, efficiently engaging local fears with global dreams, and the other way around.

The language of real estate is, therefore, performative on multiple levels. Such language operates on a discursive technology, described by the anthropologist Anna Tsing as «the economy of appearances», referring to the «self-conscious making of a spectacle [...] necessary for gathering investment funds.»⁽⁵⁾ Profit must be imagined before it is to be obtained. The same goes for property. And while architecture makes real estate real, real estate often makes architecture fictional, opening ways for an economically productive confusion between its reality and speculative potential.

Still, Easterling writes: «the things that make infrastructure space powerful—its multipliers, its irrational fictions, or its undeclared consequential activities—are perhaps the very things that make it immune to righteous declaration and prescription.»⁽⁶⁾ Infrastructure, therefore, is able to generate tools for both its own expansion and shrinkage. Only by «becoming its own medium—by becoming infrastructural,»⁽⁷⁾ architecture could escape the limitations of a singular, isolated intervention. This leads to the question: Using only the very tools of real estate, could we learn to understand its mechanisms more productively? Can fiction itself be a means of accessing the fictional materialities of real estate? Could we, through the act of decontextualisation, achieve the opposite, namely contextualise real estate fictions within architectural discussions?

II New Literary Genre

Could texts on architecture and cities, written to sell, be considered a new and unexpected source of fiction and poetry? *Real Estate Fiction* is an outline for a new literary genre; one that is solely based on real estate advertisements. Ads, seen as ephemeral texts soon to be obsolete after the product is sold, are collected and transcribed, displaced as ready-mades and reread as literary works of fiction.

Instead of writing—displacing texts. Instead of hiding, deleting and skipping—reframing, curating and publishing again. Managing the existing. Moving texts around. Unciting. Rewriting. Renaming. Transcribing. Appropriating by exhibiting. Reclaiming by reading.

The American poet Kenneth Goldsmith, whose work draws from the practices of plagiarism, copying and appropriation, argues that the distribution of information and knowledge on the Web makes traditional understandings of authorship and originality outdated. «While the author won't die, we might begin to view authorship in a more conceptual way», he writes. «Perhaps the best authors of the future will be the ones who can write the best programs with which to manipulate, parse and distribute language-based practices.»⁽⁸⁾ To appropriate texts is to recognize the vastness of the digital information and its free flows, as well as copying and pasting as basics of any digital reading or writing. To retype, however, is to appropriate in detail; not just to take over the text, but to take over every word of it. Retyping real estate advertisements means writing them again, only this time as real estate fictions.

Architecture moves around as real estate. Its modes of distribution, dispersion, travel and inhabitation constitute the invisible «Other» of architecture as a profession. And while the reality of buildings—after the design work is done—is mostly shaped by developers and agents as well as by the institutions of property, profit and speculation, the question remains open: What role do these «other stories» play in our histories of architecture? How about those histories of anonymous production and speculative distribution that are at the very base of not only professional reality, but also everyday life?

Real Estate Fiction is a proposal for a new literary genre. This, obviously, is a paradoxical task. It revolves around the question: Could we talk about architecture, drawing from its disciplinary trash bins? Where does displaced knowledge, such as *Real Estate Fiction(s)*, belong? What would its archive look like? And finally, who would claim to be its authority—real estate agents or real estate poets?