

Like-Figures vs. Of-Figures

Some figures are one-liners (*criticism often levied at the literal*); others are inside jokes (*criticism often levied at the abstract*). Like-Figures and Of-Figures are inclusionary with respect to their audience as well as their entourage. Often traveling in packs, or what the digital project would call iteration, Like-Figures and Of-Figures let everyone in on the game be it captivated subjects or innocent bystanders.

Figure is back. This comeback is neither a strict rehashing of figure's historical lineage from the late 70's through the late 80's nor does it stand in opposition to it. In most cases history has shown that a figural project tends to choose idiosyncrasy over elegance, legibility over obscurity and humor over sobriety. Precedents, to name just a few of these idiosyncratic, obscure and humorous figures, can be found in John Hejduk's early Masque figures, Aldo Rossi's scientific autobiography sketch characters, and Stanley Tigerman's early houses (i.e. Little House in the Clouds, 1976). However, a quick study of these precedents suggests that the figural is not literal, meaning figures are not exact replicas of original referents nor do they recycle their source material as is the case with much of Postmodernism's figural examples. However, we cannot say these figures are strict abstractions of other architectural moments either, leaving us with the notion that the figural project cannot be categorized as literal nor as abstract. To position Figure in the exact middle of the two doesn't always work either.

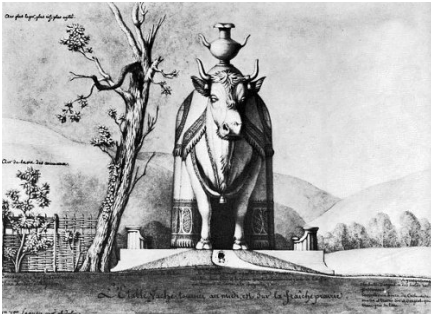
Instead, this paper will consider figures as "like" or "of" their references, occupying the broader spectrum between: from legible to abstract but never resting firmly on either end. One might say that being "like" or "of" something else is a matter of perception. Mark Linder states in his Log essay "Literal: There's no Denying It" that "when we locate that moment of seeming, things get wild". It is in this moment of seeming that a contingent relationship between figure and the perception on the part of the subject emerges. The question is then might the figural project find escape velocity from the autonomous to the contingent by existing between the literal and abstract? Let's first more explicitly define these two figural types that have emerged over a relatively short architectural history: Like-Figures (or towards the literal) and Of-Figures (or towards the abstract).

LIKE-FIGURES : TOWARDS THE LITERAL

Like-Figures are figures that bear an uncanny resemblance to a human, animal or object, and can even be exact replicas. Venturi would say they are more duck than shed and in their likeness to the original they communicate a shared message between subjects. We might say that Like Figures are autonomous given there is little if any interpretation needed on the

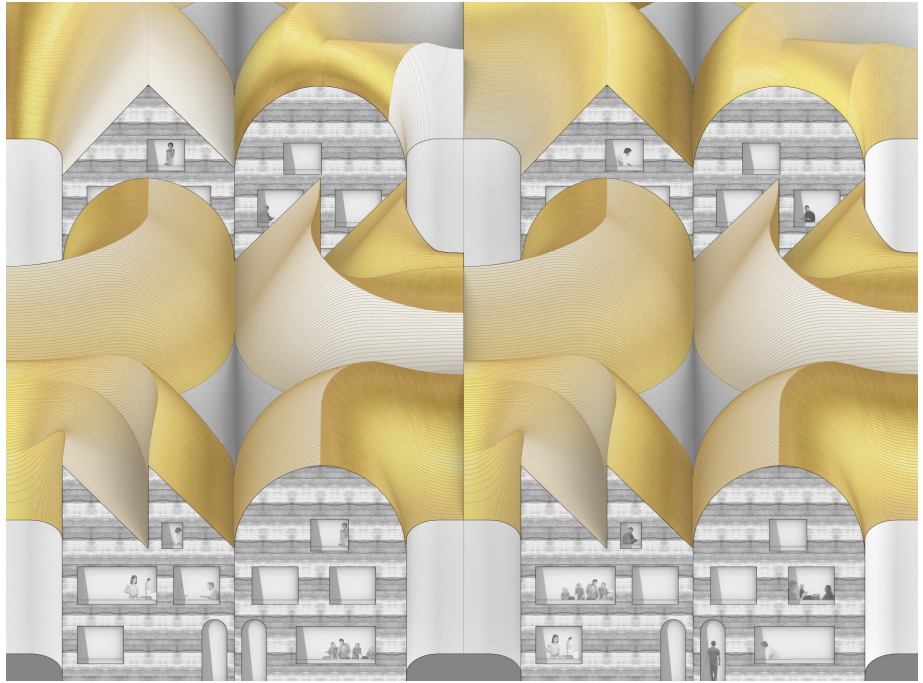
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1

Figure 1: Jean-Jacque Lequeu, *Cow Stable in a Cool Meadow elevation*.



2

Figure 2: Kelly Bair, *Cut/Fill elevation*.

part of the subject--we can all agree on what "Like-Figures" are replicating and attempting to say.

OF-FIGURES: TOWARDS THE ABSTRACT

Of-Figures lean more towards the abstract. Their legibility relies on projection and often uncontrollable environmental phenomenon such as light, shadow, temperature, etc. We might say their existence is contingent on their context and representation relative to their subject's interpretation. They exist in various states and can often be perceived as something different than what they are depending on their context and subject interactions. In fact, they prompt debate.

At the 2014 Fall ACSA Conference in Syracuse, five rather like-minded designers came together to attempt a debate around the nuances of a motion initiated by Stewart Hicks. The motion as stated by Hicks was as follows: "Judging buildings by their appearance will ensure architecture will ensure architecture remains a contingent discipline". In an effort to position this paper relative to both the motion and the topic as originally proposed in the abstract it became apparent that at the risk of watering down the oppositional nature of a debate the motion simply needed a slight revision as opposed to a wholly oppositional view. However it is worth noting that this revision to the motion technically positions the argument "against" the motion and was argued at such at the live debate.

The Revision: Judging buildings by how they are perceived will ensure architecture will remain a contingent discipline. This rethinking of the motion takes a leap of faith on the part of the reader, as it is obviously difficult to separate a discussion about appearance from one of perception. However, I would argue, that perception comes with a set of variables contingent on the human subject from both a physical as well as mental or emotional state, that is to say it is not fixed. Take for example what was once considered sports lore but has recently been documented and studied by psychologists and researchers at the University of Virginia (Proffitt & Dewitt) the idea that baseball players perceive the ball to be larger when they are hitting well and smaller when they are on a losing streak. This hypothesis obviously establishes a case for visual perception relative to performance however might we apply the same logic to the way architecture is perceived by its subjects?

Appearance on the other hand can be fixed. We can agree that certain things look like other things even if occasionally it takes some persuasion on behalf of a fellow observant subject. One example of this is the architectural work of Jean-Jacque Lequeu, specifically his Cow Stable in a Cool Meadow project (Fig.1). Here the graphic representation of the figure, in this case a cow, is scaled up to the size of a building yet remains recognizable as an animal at first appearance. We can all agree that this is in fact a cow regardless of how “building” it may appear on the interior. An obvious precursor to Venturi, Scott, Brown’s Duck, I would argue that the work of French visionary architects like Lequeu prompted a major paradigm shift from early history, namely that of the Baroque and Renaissance, with figure shifting from ornamentation (or figuration) to figure (or the figural). Figures no longer appeared as bodily abstractions submerged into columns, pediments, and cornices but they themselves became the architecture—a move towards figure in the round. In the Lequeu example, appearance trumps perception, a key determining factor in “Like-Figures”.

However I would posit that architecture loses something when we can all agree on what we see. And herein lies the case for figures that I’ll call “Of-Figures”. As an example I’ll use a recent project for the 2015 Chicago Architectural Biennial. As an architectural project it examines gradient transitions between identifiable profiles that we would probably all agree on by virtue of appearances alone (roof types such as single and double pitches or arched profiles)—this is the face of the project and can be perceived in only one way—they are flat facades of shapes—if anything as you move around the perimeter they create they simply get flatter. However, from other more internal vantage points such as the interior courtyards or views between each building mass from the punched windows, there is more interpretation required as to what the formal characteristics of the project are. Some subjects labeled the project as a set of teeth when looking at them in a parts-to-whole relationship; others called them serious “faces” with clown hair, mohawks with bad dye jobs, etc. The project flickers between identifiable formal characteristics and those that do not project the same appearance or traits to subjects viewing the project simultaneously. This project is “Of-Figure” in that it is initially conceived from recognizable objects and/or shapes however as it unfolds experientially it further distances itself from the original source material. Here perception trumps appearance—there is something to argue, something to disagree on, and most importantly many ways of interpreting their appearance, shifting their object status from autonomous to contingent.

ENDNOTES

1. Linder, Mark (Spring/Summer 2005), *Literal: There’s no Denying It. Log, No. 5, Anyone Corporation*. 82-86.
2. Proffitt, D.R., Witt, Jessica K. (2005). See the Ball, Hit the Ball. *Psychological Science*, Volume 16-No.12, 937.