Viana, V., Nagy, D., Xavier, J., Neiva, A., Ginoulhiac, M., Mateus, L. & Varela, P. (Eds.). (2022). Symmetry: Art and Science | 12th SIS-Symmetry Congress [Special Issue]. *Symmetry: Art and Science*. International Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Symmetry. 124-131. https://doi.org/10.24840/1447-607X/2022/12-15-124

FRONTALLY FRAMED COMPOSITIONS ITERATIONS THROUGH A RECOGNIZABLE TROPE

ANA LUISA SOARES

Name: Ana Luisa Soares (b. Porto, 1988)
Profession: PhD researcher, Architect, Teacher
Fields of interest: Representation in Architecture, Architecture Photography,
Affiliation: Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, fala atelier, HEAD-Genève
E-mail: analuisasoares88@gmail.com
Homepage: www.falaatelier.com
Major publications: 2G #80 - fala (2019), by Walther Konig publishers.

Abstract: *Frontally framed points of view have been a constant medium of representation of architecture, but also a tool to help developed the projects themselves, or to emphasise specific aspects of it's concept. The use of symmetry and all its variations as compositional technics can be used in the development of many project ideas: axis, proportions, alignments, and creation of hierarchies are themes developed with greater precision in technical drawings. The analysis of this selection of different projects from the second half of the 20th century, built all around the world, we can help to understand how simple technical tools continue to have an important role in how architecture is produced, in a world where the three-dimensional representations and constant moving images are becoming more and more imposed are becoming more and more imposed.*

Keywords: Framing; Dynamism; Frontal; Composition.

INTRODUCTION

Frontally framed points of view have been a constant medium of representation of architecture, but also a tool to help developed the projects themselves, or to emphasise specific aspects of it's concept. "The images, the figurations of the drawing should show what the word can theorize as a concept, as a confirmation of what has been acquired, as knowledge, as an operative capacity and always to communicate." (Carneiro, 1995, p.18). The production of these rigid two-dimensional tools can also be methods of developing the project and the intended ideas. The use of symmetry and all its variations as compositional technics can be used in the development of many project ideas: axis, proportions, alignments, and creation of hierarchies are themes developed with greater precision in technical drawings. From specific decisions done during development of projects, to how they assume an important role on the built project, or how they were later depicted (from final drawings to chosen photographs), it's clear the interest of the discipline on this topic. This direct relation between a tool of design and the world, is probably the justification for the possible fascination mention above.

In the decades of the 60s/70s/80s, that were marked by the death of many important Masters of Architecture[1], with Charles Jencks affirming the death of the modern movement in 1972[2], and the world living many turbulent moments[3], in a pre-digital era, many architects started to rethink architecture and move past the "machine for living". It is in the duality between the operative side of the technical drawing and the dynamics of symmetry perceived in frontal framings, that the chosen examples become relevant case studies, but not unique cases.

PROTOCOLS

> *Almost all our communication is based on signs, signals, symbols and allegories which structure not only most aspects of our daily routine but also most often carriers of religious and metaphysical systems. (...) While signs point to something that they represent, as words are artificial signs for ideas and thoughts, symbols are a penetration of mind and image characterized by mystery, depth and inexhaustible interpretation.* (Ungers, 2011, p.13)

An architectural drawing behaves as an image based on codes and two-dimensional representation systems that establish a legible space between old and new forms. We can link protocols to the temporality of the discipline as plans, sections and elevations are the most rigorous form of representation of a future object: they present facts as abstract representations of a possible real world. The plan is the most abstract of all: a horizontal section of an object looking from the top. With the exception of site plans, which resemble an aerial view of some place, it is not possible to perceive this representation in the reality. But this is the clearest way to understand the spatial organization and respective connections of a building and where the symmetry reveals an important role in its composition. Both in the case of sections but mainly through the elevations, since the representation is vertical, coinciding with the way we see the world, we placed at infinity to be completely parallel to the element of the representation.

In a frontal view, in which the observer is at a certain distance from the object, it is possible to perceive, in the real world, the 'drawing' of an elevation. It is possible to use this two-dimensional tool to bring independence to the facade from the rest of the building, emphasizing the role of barrier between interior and exterior, public/private, or even to change the observer's perception of depth in relation to the object in front of him. The creation of ambiguity between the three-dimensionality inherent in a constructed building and the two-dimensionality produced by its frontality can be developed through optical devices, such as shadows, distorted perspectives, element proportions, lack of scale reference, or specific points of view, through the exact definition of the moment when the

building appears or the imposition of approximation routes to the building. Together with the plans, it is where symmetry is vastly developed in architecture.

> *Even if the better part of early-nineteenth-century architects would not be taking this triad as their own, the notion of symmetry had for a long time been an inviolable "value" for anyone striving for architectural quality, no matter how imperfect, as Blondel noted in his Cours d'architecture: "Symmetry should be seen as one of the principal beauties of Architecture. It should be seen as the enemy of contrast, or at least that which forces, so to speak, the facing sides of contrasting forms to be regular when their presence is required on the outside. Symmetry compensates not only the necessary simplicity in a private building's structure, but it also helps bring out the richness of the facade of an important edifice."* (Blonded, 1771, cited in Lucan, 2012, p.51).

STATIC AND DYNAMIC SYMMETRY

In the 20th century, a similar feeling towards symmetry emerged: respecting it while denying it via the overlay of contradictions. In 1964, Robert Venturi finished his mother's house *(*Figure 1*)* and published the book Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture in 1966 (after a two-year trip around Europe). Both developed at the same time, they became a platform of experimentation. In this house symmetry is created to provide monumentality to the building, and to be contradicted at the same time. In a first approach to the building, without scale referential elements, the idea of an archetype of house emerges: a house with a gable roof and a chimney. The two create an axis of symmetry, where centrality and verticality mark the entrance. But the access is made by a path off centred and the door is actually on the side of the that void. The cut of the volume on the central axis of the facade emphasizes the ambiguity of union/separation of the various proposed elements. Rules and symmetry are created and immediately contradicted. When entering, the promises of a symmetrical plan are not fulfilled. These contradictory games with symmetry give a constant dynamic to the frontal framing, where the movement of the viewer is as important as the static image.

> *Inflection in architecture is the way in which the whole is implied by exploiting the nature of the individual parts, rather their position or number. By inflecting toward something outside themselves, the parts contain their own linkage (...). Inflection is a means of distinguishing diverse parts while implying continuity.* (Venturi, 1966, p.88).

The choice of a photograph for the representation of the elevation of the house by Robert Venturi is not so naive.

Figure 1 Frontal facade of *Vanna Venturi House*, project and drawing by from Robert Venturi (1966), Philadelphia, USA. (Author's photograph, 2019).

In 1966, in Europe, and after studying a few years in Illinois, USA, Hans Hollein got the commission to design a Candle shop for Retti in Vienna. Its small scale could had meant a shy project, but for his first project, the architect waived to monumentality (Figure 2). By using symmetry, the over-dimensioned entrance door, with two symmetrical normal sized shop windows, associated with polished and reflective materials, the actual space is visually multiplied. In the jury report of 1966 B.S. Reynolds Memorial Award, it's stated:

> *Psychological reactions, such as curiosity, were put to use. The outside space was to continue into the inside in one spatial flow with no change of the main material. The great spatial differentiations narrow passages, enclosing spaces, openings into the indefinite, etc. and the somewhat processional concept create a feeling of size and movement, a sensation of "pulsation" of space which overcomes the limited size.* (Reynolds Memorial Award Jury's report, 1966)[4]

The interior space is also focused on symmetry axis and frontal framing in every direction, with the usage of mirrors to maximise and extend the physical space. Without a counter dividing the space, narrow passages that affect the perception of scale from the user, and no less important point of view, it emphasises the dynamism that is created in an almost static place . In this project, only the objects for sale break the symmetry.

Figure 2 Frontal facade of Retti Candle Shop by Hans Hollein (1966), Vienna, Austria. (Author's photograph, 2015).

In the two single-family houses designed by Peter Märkli in 1982, in Switzerland, symmetry takes an extremely important role, also with a dynamic approach in the interior path but with a more static one regarding the external view. The main facade of the biggest house (Figure 3) is actually facing the back plot and not the street access. The *villa like* facade's composition is fully symmetric, monumental. But to actually see it, in this frontal perspective that the architect wanted to depict, one has to further away from it, into a non-natural position, turn back, and then be able to appreciate it. This is the only red facade (the others are white and not symmetrical), and it emphasizes its independence and the importance of the viewer static position. In the interior, the floor is almost symmetrical, but the rooms are not. The interior staircase might feel symmetrical on the drawing, but its different positions reveal a non-symmetrical space. On the top floor, each window corresponds to a bedroom, being the ones on each end smaller to match the facade. The architect affirmed he wanted to place the windows on the outside closer to the edges "to give tension to the facade. At the time [he] thought that windows had to be in the middle of a room – [he] didn't considered positioning them asymmetrically" (Mostafavi, 2002, p.63). The composition and balance of the exterior facade, prevails over the symmetry of the interior spaces.

Figure 3 Back facade of two single-family houses
in Trubbach-Azmoos by Peter Märkli (1982).
Photograph by Leonid Slonimskiy (2020).

Aldo Rossi's hotel in Fukuoka, Japan, from 1987-88, is an example of monofocal symmetry. There the importance of the symmetry is completely static. The frontal facade is fully design respecting all the symmetry rules, emphasising it's monumentality. But not only it is only possible to see the full facade from the other side of the river (Figure 4), as the entire facade is blind, with only the access for the lobby in it. The access is made through a narrow street, going up one of the symmetrical but non-central stairs, to enter the hotel only then. "The architecture, as in ancient times, is the reference point for citizens and tourists who come to admire and observe the beauty of the building."[5] (Missing in-text citation) The monumentality and axis is designed to be perceived only from far, since the proximity to the object upon arrival, does not allow for a clear perception of all these intensions. The bedroom windows are facing the sides. The depth of the building is irrelevant for its concept or proportions. The hotel floor plan might be symmetrical too for practical reasons (it is), but its symmetry has no impact on the focus decisions on the main opaque facade.

*Figure 4. R*iver view of frontal and side facade of *Il Palazzo Hotel* by Aldo Rossi, with M. Adjmi, T. Horiguchi and S. Uchida (1987-88), Fukuoka, Japan. Author's photograph (2014).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of this selection of different projects from the second half of the 20th century, built all around the world, we can help to understand how simple technical tools continue to have an important role in how architecture is produced, in a world where the three-dimensional representations and constant moving images are becoming more and more imposed are becoming more and more imposed, even if some might defend its death.[6]

> *Three-dimensionality does not necessarily create space.*
> *Three-dimensionality not necessarily is space.*
> *A single point, line and plane can determine space.*
> *A single point line and plane (two-dimensional theoretical) can determine space.*
> *A phenomenon of the third dimension.* (Hollein, 1960)

REFERENCES

Carneiro, A. (1995). *Campo, Sujeito e Representação no Ensino e na Prática do Desenho/Projecto*. FAUP Publicações.

Hollein, H. (1960). Plastic Space. Retrieved from architect's official website < https://www.hollein.com/eng/Writings/Texte/Plastic-Space>.

Jencks, C. (1977). *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture. The Sixth Editio*n (1991), Academy Editions. P.23.

Johnston, P. (2017). *Peter Märkli: Everything One Invents is True*. Quart Architektur.

Blondel, J-F. (1771). Cours d'architecture, Volume I, Paris, First Book, Part I: "Traité de la decoration extérieure des bâtiments", Chapter IV: "Analyse de l'art, 'De la nécessité de la symétrie dans l'architecture'", p. 408, In Lucan, J. (2012). Composition, Non-Composition – Architecture and Theory in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. EPFL Press.

Montaner, J. (2002). *As formas do século XX*. Editorial Gustavo Gili, AS.

Mostafavi, M. (2002). *Approximations: The Architecture of Peter Märkli.* The MIT Press.

Ungers, O. M. (2011). *Morphologie City Metaphors* (2nd ed.). Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig.

Venturi, R. (1966). *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (2nd ed.1977). The Museum of Modern Art.

[1] Frank Lloyd Wright – d. 1959; Le Corbusier – d. 1965; Mies van der Rohe – d. 1969; Louis Kahn – d. 1974.

[2] "Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3.32 p.m. (or thereabouts), when the infamous Pruitt Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grace by dynamite." Jencks, Charles (1977). The Language of Post-Modern Architecture. The Sixth Edition (1991), Academy Editions. P.23.

[3] The cold war, the Vietnam war, protests of May 68, just to mention a few.

[4] Jury Report 1966 B.S. Renolds Memorial Award on Retti Candle shop from Hans Hollain (1966). Retrieved from architects official website < https://www.hollein.com/eng/Architecture/Chronology/early-projects/Retti>.

[5] Presentation text on Il Palazzo Hotel by Aldo Rossi, with M. Adjmi, T. Horiguchi and S. Uchida (1987-88), Fukuoka, Japan. ©Fondazione Aldo Rossi, retrieved from Fondazione Aldo Rossi official website <https://www.fondazionealdorossi.org/opere/1980-1989/complesso-alberghiero-e-ristorante-il-palazzo/>

[6] "In the 20th century, there was a drastic change in the way of facing the architectural form. An aesthetic and compositional system was dissolved (the classic one, which despite its varieties and evolution had some unitary and timeless criteria based on order, symmetry, harmony, hierarchy and representation) and a new period in which universal compositional laws disappeared." Montaner, Josep Maria (2002). *As formas do século XX*. Editorial Gustavo Gili, AS. P.8.

Ana Luisa SOARES

Ana Luisa Soares is a Portuguese architect, founding partner of fala atelier in Oporto. She graduated from FAUP, did an exchange program at Tokyo University and was a collaborator at Harry Gugger Studio in Basel and Toyo Ito & Associates in Tokyo. She is a visitor professor at HEAD Geneva, and before at University of Toronto FA, TU Munich and Munster FA, Bratislava's FA. Currently she developing her PhD research at FAUP. Since 2013, as part of fala, she has been lecturing all around the world. The atelier's work has been exhibited at the architecture biennials in Venice and Chicago, Serralves Foundation and Pavillon de l'Arsenal in Paris, in single exhibitions in Panama, Italy, Macedonia, France and Portugal, and widely published in international media platforms. The atelier published '01'; the AVproyectos#098 and magazine 2G#80 is dedicated to its work. fala was awarded the spotlight award by the Rice University and selected as one of the 50 most relevant young offices in the world by DOMUS magazine in 2020.