

[RE]VISIBILITIES

Defamiliarizing with context, image, and object
Exploring the domains of media practices in architecture

THEORIES . REFLECTIONS . INTERVENTIONS



THESIS REPORT

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ABSTRACT

In the era of migrations, cities constantly experience an oscillation between cultures, space, and power. A change in social and cultural patterns between the precedented societies and newcomers has become highly controversial in the political climate.¹ On the one hand, the pivotal concept of integration as a homogenizing practice seems no longer to function, as the host/guest dichotomy has failed to realize the racial structures of power and the inequalities in society.² On the other hand, the rise of right-wing populism is increasingly framing migration as a threat to dominant cultures, leading to policies that racialize human rights values such as freedom of movement. Here, the question is no longer about who is accepting who, but about where control has stabilized certain regimes of visibility³. When different regimes of control tend to exclude some identities while including others through 'structures of sensibilities', possible modes of perception become limited through a codified society.

Given the transformative nature of the digital realm, new domains for interaction with societies have allowed new visibilities to emerge. If demonstration through streets was one day the most provocative act of gaining visibility, nowadays appearance on social media and open-source apps come with a much stronger influence on societies which indeed, is a profound shift in power structures mediated by the digital realm. In this context, the role of architecture as an agent that is controlled by and at the same time controls the different regimes of visibility in urban space, is a question of the tools and the mediums that architects work with.

Defining my role as a design activist, I attempt to challenge the conventional tools of architecture through different visual and digital disruptive interventions in the digital sphere to investigate the domains of influence of an architect in socio-political space. Through different visual techniques, I investigate the concept of defamiliarization to invent a new aesthetic regime that challenges territorialization by redistributing fragments of reality and ultimately, questioning the presence of diversity in the artefacts of today's urban imaginaries.

¹ Abazov, Rafis. Globalization of Migration: What the Modern World Can Learn from Nomadic Cultures. UN, n.d. [accessed 12 04 2022.]

² Saharso, S, "Who needs integration? Debating a central, yet increasingly contested concept in migration studies.". in Comparative Migration Studies, 7, 2019.

³ Winkel, Cvan, The regime of Visibility. in , Rotterdam, NAi, 2005.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world that is highly embedded in material practices representing identities, cultures, power, and hierarchies. Architecture as a form of materialization of such practices has always been a tool for aesthetic and political control. Whether manifesting itself in border conditions as a wall to protect nation-states or as building codes to reach an aesthetically coherent city, Architecture inscribes cultural practices into technologies and mediums to maintain cultural consistency across time. In this process of embedding practice into material objects to maintain past experiences, aesthetics and regimes of sensibility are maintained to set the division between familiar and unfamiliar, and they determine what belongs to 'us' and 'others' by stabilizing symbolic orders in everyday life.

Relatedly, media plays an important role in reproducing the sensibility regimes. As James Hay described it in 2001 as "mattering", media is created to simultaneously make material artefacts and the symbolic meaning. Hence, mattering is about both bringing concepts into physicality and making them matter to us.⁴ Media can potentially disseminate the importance of things in relation to groups and shape relational materiality. Consequently, it affects the social order and determines the boundaries in relation to what is visible and acknowledged.⁵

Contemporary technological advancements however have expanded the ways we identify each other and experience spaces of culture and identity. They indeed have opened new domains for perception and control through digital media. Given the accessibility that the digital sphere provides, we are moving towards a new power dynamic where the invisible can be visible, borders can be transgressed, and aesthetic regimes can be deviated and interchangeably experienced by users once alienated from each other.

In this condition, architecture and the experience of space are no longer bound to materials and locations, but images that represent those materials and media that communicate those images. This new mediated world allows new aesthetics to emerge and enables digital techniques to go beyond the consensus view on architecture as a practice responsible for the sustainability of existing social and cultural patterns.

- While new tools of media are progressively constructing our perception of the world, what forms of dialogue and contributions can architecture make in response?
- Can we redefine the role that image plays in architecture to become an active tool in challenging aesthetic regimes?
- Through which mediums and modes of practice can new aesthetic experiences find their way into everyday life?

⁴ K. Grant, "Actor-network theory: Translation as material culture.", 2009

⁵ Rancière, Jacques and Slavoj Žižek. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible.*, 2004.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- I. Re-distribution of the Sensible
- II. Architecture and Image
- III. Actor-Network Theory
- IV. Defamiliarization
- V. Design Activism



Figure 1. A collage of nine contexts

I. Re-distribution of the sensible

What is sensible? Who is visible? What is possible?

The distribution of the sensible, proposed by Jacques Rancière, describes the ways we make contributions to our societies through different regimes of sensibility. In his proposal, political consciousness of the mankind is driven by aesthetics and the sensory, which determines the boundaries of what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible, possible and impossible.⁶ Through this conception, power becomes a thing of senses which fixes a social order that sustains itself through a non-political space, reinforced by police order. In this way, the existing patterns of inclusions and exclusions tend to be maintained by the status quo through an anti-democratic and anti-political order.⁷

Following the conception of politics of aesthetics by Rancière, one should examine the ways in which architectural sensory experience distributes the sensible. Although the concepts provided by Rancière mostly inform aesthetic politics in relation to artistic practices, Theodor W. Adorno's reflections on architecture and his critique of functionalism can help us rethink the role of architectural imagination in relation to spatial production and aesthetic experiences.

In his essay "Functionalism Today" Adorno addresses the paradoxes within the question of architecture as a purposeful or purpose-free form of art. Arguing that purpose-free arts often have a socio-political function, he claimed that there is no absolute purposefulness. Thus, functionalism in architecture, in the way it dismisses ornaments and symbols, at the same time attracts a form of symbolism by becoming a style itself, concludes that there is no pure form of functionalism.⁸

In functionalism, the form of architecture delimits space through materials to satisfy a particular purpose. However, Adorno suggests that "great architecture" should go beyond the realm of purposefulness, surpassing the social dimension by producing a particular sense of space.⁹

⁶ Rancière, Jacques and Slavoj Žižek. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible.*, 2004.

⁷ Tolia-Kelly, Divya P. "Rancière and the Re-Distribution of the Sensible: The Artist Rosanna Raymond, Dissensus and Postcolonial Sensibilities within the Spaces of the Museum.", 2019

⁸ Leach, N, *Rethinking architecture a reader in cultural theory.* in , London, NY, Routledge, 1997.

⁹ Grabar, N, "Architecture and the Distribution of the Sensible.". in *Filozofski vestnik*, 42, 2021, 259-280.

“The aesthetic regime, finally, is a regime in which architectural works are recognized as part of a specific form of sensory experience, different from the one presupposed by the order of domination. In this regime, sensory experience is situated in the aesthetic experience of the individual, but at the same time it inherently entails a comment on social space. Identified within this regime, works of architecture create an experience that establishes a distance from the social, and at the same time – through the modes of sensory experience and the forms of space they design – opens for reflection the construction of the contemporary world.”¹⁰

/ REFLECTIONS

Investigating the aesthetic regime through visual practices of architecture, one should ask about the autonomy of visual practices in relation to circumstances that social space implicates, and at the same time, how one can alter the social space by making spaces for new aesthetics enabled by autonomous visual practices. In other words, how can a new sensorial display through visual practices enable a new socio-political condition?

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 277

II. Architecture and Image

A contemporary condition mediated by images

Technology is entangled within our contemporary condition more than ever. The fact that society is nowadays more about media and mediation indicates that the role of technology is more about the development of information and the construction of the world as a set of images.¹¹ A world in which the experience of urbanity is twinned with the flickering of images on social media and finding Pokémons on streets. In this condition, different images co-exist, augmented into cities and our cultural concepts. At the same time, a generalized form of aestheticization has indeed taken place, conveyed by the mass media. Same as the aestheticization of sex in TV advertisements, today's culture-and of course, most of architecture today is now estheticized.¹²

*"The media appetite for the consumption of architectural images is enormous. And one consequence of the shift of attention toward the surface has been that much of architectural history has become the printed image, the printed word (and their dissemination), and not the actual building. Inevitably, architecture and its perception will become like another object of contemporary reality."*¹³

/ REFLECTIONS

If we acknowledge that the consensus view of reality is not intact, given the already manipulated image of the world by the mass media, one should ask if the truth is the product of an objective view or if it lies in subjective interpretations?

¹¹ Tschumi, Bernard. Architecture and Disjunction. p. 245

¹² *ibid.*, p.235

¹³ *ibid.*

A negotiation between object & context

Will a door, remain the same door once it sits on
the borderline?

Will a vehicle, remain the same vehicle once it is
in the middle of an uprising?

Will a building, remain the same building when a
brick drops from it?



Figure 2. Richard Lou, "Border Door," 1988, mixed media Jim Elliott / Vincent Price Art Museum

III. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) A Dynamic Ontology

An ontology in which objects, whether human or non-human, are of the same value in a network of actors. In this flat ontology, every actant is constantly altering due to its ever-changing relationships with other actors in its network. As soon as the connection between two actants is lost, it's not only their relationships that change, but also their essence undergoes transformations, given their displacement into a new network of actants.¹⁴

I borrow this idea from a reading by Yaser Mousapour of Bruno Latour's anti-essentialist ontological lens that looks at the world as a set of objects that don't possess a stabilized essence, but instead, co-exist in a non-fixated relationship within their fields.



Figure 3. Gay-Lussac Street on the morning of May 11, 1968. © Franceinfo.

The photo shows a demonstration of French students alongside workers in May 1968, who flipped the cars to use them as shields, followed by civil unrest. In this landscape, human and non-human actants (objects) are placed in a new relationship with each other, resulting in a new assemblage that redefines vehicles as a new phenomenon.

¹⁴ A reading of Actant Network Theory of Bruno Latour by Mohammad Yaser Mousapour, Online Video, Digital Futures world, 21 Jan 2022, <https://youtu.be/Mvj7QOEdWIE?t=3177>, 6 April 2022.

/ REFLECTIONS

The question of the cultural identity in relation to architectural aesthetics, in my reading of ANT, can be addressed by the conceptualization of fragments of the built environment as co-related actants that create a certain network of familiarity with certain objects in proximity to other objects. If true, a network can be transformed if one attempts to replace one actant (object) with another from a completely different network.

Can we conclude that a visual intervention in the digital sphere is an attempt of reassembling the relationships of actants, expanding the scale of a network?



A diagram indicating the relationship between actants in networks

IV. Defamiliarization with contexts, images, and space

“The goal of defamiliarization is to prompt others to actually perceive for the first time something that has perhaps already been seen on countless occasions—to grasp the extraordinary in something that has, until now, been routine.”

—Andrea Simitch and Val Warke

The term “Defamiliarization” was first used in the book “Art as device” by Viktor Shklovsky, a literary theorist, who refers to the way that language is used, as a literary device, to make ordinary and familiar objects look different. Affecting our perceptions, language can assert its power to differentiate the ordinary from poetic.¹⁵

Bringing it into architecture, defamiliarization can be understood as an essential technique of challenging the sense of comfort by contemplating and reevaluating the habitual. Through creative and unfamiliar techniques of observation and conceptualization of what is observed, an architect can go beyond the reiteration of previous processes and cultivate a set of enhanced sensibilities. The spaces that defamiliarization processes can provide are able to fundamentally expand our ways of understanding the world.

“While we may feel close to the familiar, such closeness may obscure the genuine object. Defamiliarization distances the object from its observer, opening a space of cognition that requires thoughtful navigation. But there is more than poetry in this gap. If there is a comfortable stability to what is familiar, defamiliarization ultimately discloses the instability lurking within—the variability of observations across times and cultures and from individual to individual—as well as exposing the opaque veil that “familiarity” often constructs around a subject, preventing one from seeing its deeper significance.”¹⁶

/ REFLECTIONS

Within the contemporary condition of media and mediation, new technologies of communication show us how defamiliarization in the social space has opened new angles for expressions of multiplicity and has communicated the views of once invisible bodies of society. Given the dialectic capacities that defamiliarization processes have, one can trigger new connections by relocating a form or a system into a different context. In this regard, aesthetic sensibilities can be challenged through creative displacements.

The question regarding the context of this research will be, through which techniques of defamiliarization one can explore and subvert the dominant systems of aesthetics?

¹⁵ N. Mambrol, “Defamiliarization”, in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2016, <<https://literariness.org/2016/03/17/defamiliarization>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

¹⁶ Simitch ; Warke, *The language of architecture: 26 principles every architect should know*, 2014, p. 146



Figure 4. Ghafouri, Navid. A Ukrainian ambulance and a Russian tank

V. Design Activism

New grounds for activism through designing the media

The question of designers' role in today's everchanging socio-political climate and the way they can bring about change through destabilizing notions of power is a fundamental one in this practice. Respectively, the construction of a conceptual framework for the assessment of different artistic approaches and processes of conceptualization is necessary. Though the main goal of this section is to call for a definition of the design act with regard to communication tools that can trigger socio-political transformation.

Design acts should not be simplified into protests, demonstrations, party politics, or other conventional political acts; Instead, intervening in people's lives and perceptions should be at the heart of a *designerly* way of resisting the dominant social orders.¹⁷

To realize the potentials of a design act in challenging the dominant socio-political climates through aesthetics, Thomas Markussen shares:

*"On the one hand, design activism has a political potential to disrupt or subvert existing systems of power and authority, thereby raising critical awareness of ways of living, working, and consuming. On the other hand, design activism shares an aesthetic potential with art activism in its ability to open up the relation between people's behavior and emotions—between what they do and what they feel about this doing. In creating this opening, design activism makes the relationship between people's doing and feelings malleable for renegotiation. Understanding how the micro-political and aesthetic aspects come together in design activism (as compared to political activism and art activism) defines the crux of the problem."*¹⁸

¹⁷ Thomas Markussen, "The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics", Design Issues, Vol. 29, no. 1, 2013, pp. 39.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.40

Concerning the framework that Markussen calls 'disruptive aesthetic practice', he points out that we need to first understand the distinction between "politics" and "the political". In political terms, the first one is about structures such as laws and procedures of decision making, while the latter relates to a societal condition that constitutes ongoing oppositions and contests.¹⁹ Acts of interruption, disturbance, and resistance in public space shape the experience of "the political" which potentially exposes existing power relations and systems of authority.

/ REFLECTIONS

Following the framework that disruptive aesthetics suggest, design activism can be defined as a way of participating in the common public environment as an individual. What relates to the first theoretical framework in this research, the distribution of the sensible, is the way that the social field of perception can be challenged through what is characterized as the aesthetic act. The aesthetic act can affect people's experiences in different ways of reorientation of perceptual space. Therefore, by intervening in the long-established socio-cultural forms of belonging and inhabitation, we can disrupt the social order and renegotiate our identities and relations in the everyday world.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.42



IN-BETWEEN DIGITAL & PHYSICAL

Physical contexts for digital interventions

Disrupting the consensus image of reality comes foremost in this practice. As a media interventionist whose agenda is to defamiliarize people with spaces, I use the open-source data from google street view to investigate the boundaries of intervention in the digital sphere

/ INTERVENTIONS

— [RE]VISIBILITIES

Interventions in < google maps >

Reflections in < materials >

Projections in < spaces >

/ INTENTION

The project **(RE)Visibilities** employs several investigative attempts in visual arts, media and architectural practice to question agency and objectivity concerning the contemporary digitalized mediated world. Understanding the digital sphere as a space that potentially distributes the sensible, my intervention in the virtual databases is a form of design activism to manifest the agency of an architect as an interventionalist in an insecure contemporary reality.

By destabilizing familiarity with urban space through visual interventions, I offer new frames of the world that project a confusing image by stealing fragments from different images. As a counter-intuitive product, the project tries to identify and reappropriate urban and architectural spaces that represent different places of the world through visual processes of collaging, hybridizing and defamiliarization. The outcome of these interventions is reflected in open databases and social media platforms to further seek interactions and dialogues with users.



Figure 6. Ghafouri, Navid. The two entrances

/ CONTEXT

My curiosity for distorting images came from an observation of participants who uploaded their 360 photos on google maps to contribute to the database. Often imperfect because of faulty photography or poor image processing, those photos lacked some information or were distorted in various ways.

This observation intrigued me to think about my contribution as an architectural media practitioner to explore the boundaries of the distortion that is acceptable (sensible) by an institution. As an open-source space, google allows participants to upload geo-located images with descriptions of any location. However, some policies are asked not to be violated.²⁰ One of which is appropriateness which prohibits computer-generated spaces. I argue that all the image data in google maps and street view are computer-generated. Therefore, I attempt to use that data and collage it into different locations that I select randomly. The places that I select to intervene on google maps do not follow certain rationality, though I mostly attempt to intervene in the imagery data in cities around Sweden since I can communicate them with the locals here.



Figure 7. Google maps. 360 photo of A man in Izmir walking in a Bazar

²⁰ Google Maps Street View. 2022. *Google-Contributed Street View Imagery Policy*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.google.com/streetview/policy/>> [Accessed 13 April 2022].

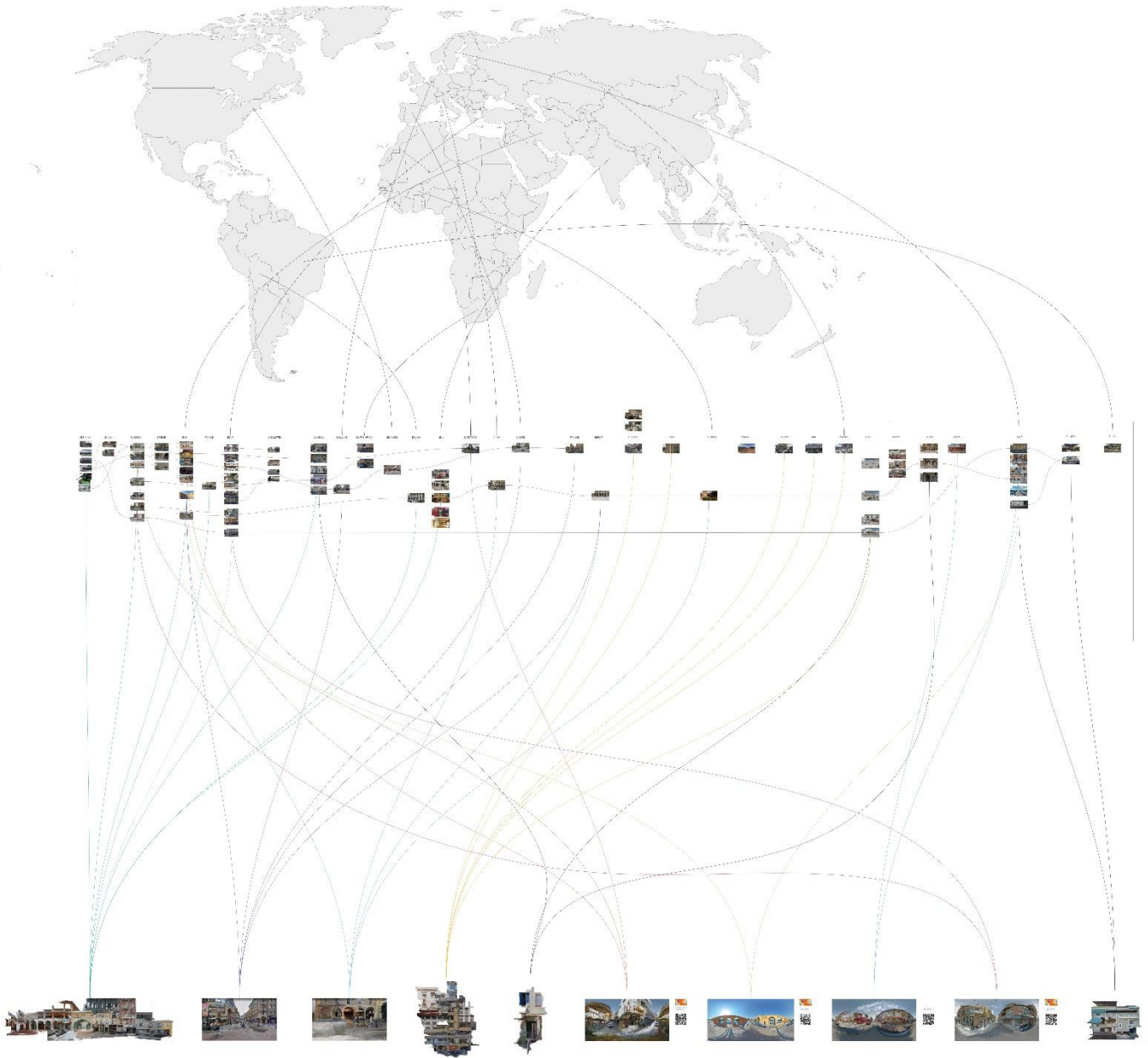


Figure 8. Ghafour, Navid. The map of collected images linked with the collages

/ METHODOLOGY

[A spatial apparatus]

By detecting similarities in different images on google maps, I collect photos from random places and place them on different layers in photoshop. By detecting and displacing different patterns and objects that I observe in photos, such as windows, doors, materials, humans, and non-humans, I exchange and replace them with the objects of the other image and in this way, create a hybrid effect that maintain some levels of aesthetics from both images.

After the intervention in the photo, I upload them to google maps, using the same location they came from in the beginning.



A diagram showing the process fragmentation of images

/ INTERVENTIONS

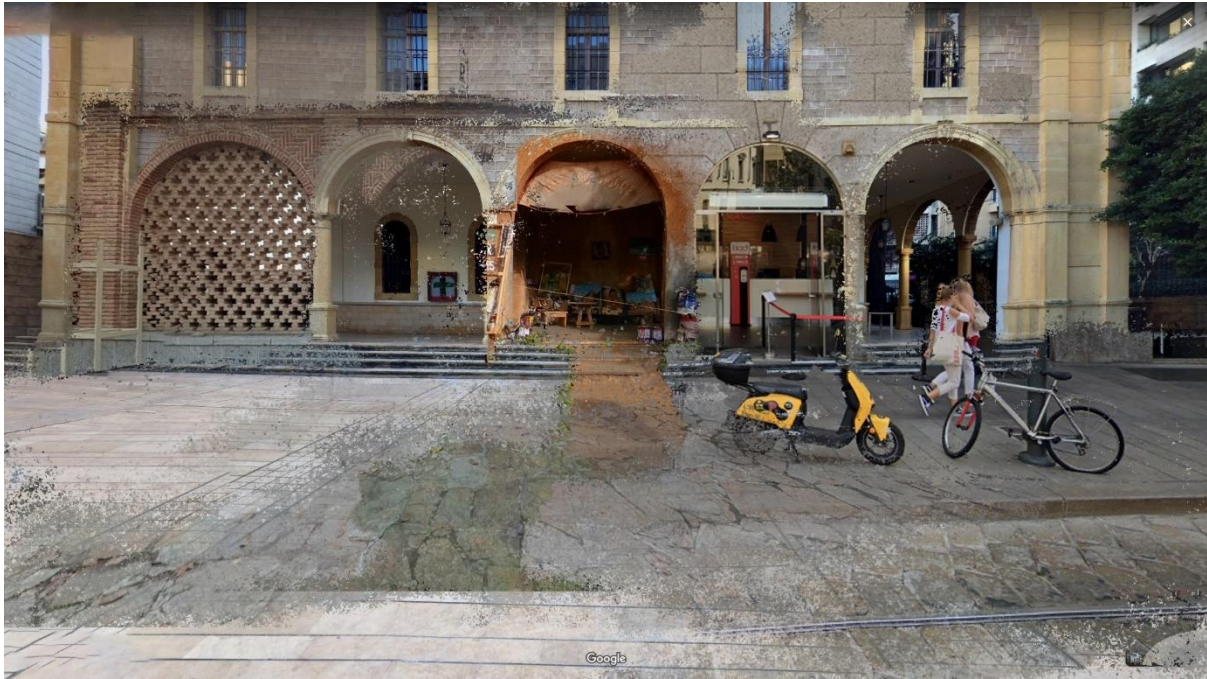


Figure 9. Ghafouri, Navid. Five arches



Figure 10. Ghafouri, Navid. Collage of different locations

A speculative space to experience the unfamiliar



Illustration

DE-CONTEXTUALIZED URBANITIES



Figure 11. QR code to De-Contextualized Urbanities online exhibition

/ REFLECTIONS

Today, with the expansion of digital media and the accessibility of open-source data, we are moving towards a world highly dependent on images and narratives whose reality is increasingly shaped by subjective entities. As previously explored in theories, the autonomy of practices addressing aesthetics in architecture can allow designers to go beyond the social responsibilities of functionalism, and at the same time reflect it to societies. In fact, through this distancing, architecture can explore modes of formal and sensory experiences that deviate from regimes of sensibility to construct new dynamics and realities in our contemporary world.

This condition has allowed me to explore a mode of practice whose credibility is not on the solutions it provides to a contextual situation but relies on the avenues it opens for reformulation of the context itself. Within a design activism agenda, I have tried to conceptualize contemporary societies as actants within a highly interconnected network whose identities can be disrupted, using a defamiliarizing aesthetic language. As an extension of this practice, I suggest that architecture should develop new tools for rethinking, recommunicating, and destabilizing the dominant orders that it performs within.

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