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Matching Eutopia – On the Roles of Renderings of Architecture

Utopia means nowhere, non-place, not-here. In man-made environments the difference between here and elsewhere is, however, not very absolute; there is a “utopian No-where of Now-here.”¹ *Eutopia* is close to utopia in not really existing, but while utopia is axiologically neutral and can be good or bad, eutopia is always good.²

Architects who regard themselves as creative artists typically want to base their work on serious, general and true world-views: on Pythagorean harmony, organic growth, cybernetic systems thinking or chaos theory.³ Eutopia, always in harmony with the hidden structure of the universe, functions as a regulative idea, lingers over their work, and lets itself be perceived in instances.

Even if the ideal today is conceived more in terms of processual, dynamic and abstract features than in terms of static models⁴, there is still a tendency to situate the ideal above the daily events of social life. Eutopia and political quarrels exist in different spheres.

¹ Olsson 1993, 85.

² Finley 1990, 178

³ In Bonsdorff 1991 I analyzed the contents and roles of architectural conceptions in post-war Finland. It was evident that the practice was legitimized and based more on scientific, “objective” than intersubjective or cultural matters.

⁴ Bloch 1989, 3, Finley 1990, 185.

Through this kind of thinking, architectural forms are kept relatively pure from interests and ideology.

An astonishing feature pertinent to the treatment of renderings of architecture, verbal and pictorial, is the inability of interpretative and explicative discourse to leave the celestial spheres even after God has disappeared. Though it is generally admitted that stylistic features are filled with meaning and “memory,” not very much is gotten out of this, since meaning is usually traced back to an anonymous and distant past. Elements are disarmed by their origin, but only on the surface: it hinders perception of their ways of functioning in contemporary life.

My work on this paper started with a recollection of a picture found in the chapter *Truth and the Stereotype* of Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*. I am thinking of Albrecht Dürer’s not very accurate drawing of a rhinoceros⁵. It might have come to mind because of its grotesque character or because it reminded me of the practice of construction. Dürer’s rhinoceros is not very mammal-like, it is more like a machine or an insect.

The image gave birth to the question of whether the construction of a rhinoceros-picture could have something in common with other forms of construction, in addition to the features pointed out by Gombrich. I am going to concentrate on issues related to renderings of architecture, but will come back to the rhinoceros in the end.

Making, matching, modelling

My points of departure in Gombrich’s thinking are in the notions of making, matching, and modelling.⁶

In making images, Gombrich stresses the importance of style and medium and through these of culture, context and tradition. Accordingly, the artist or maker of images is more like a craftsman than an individual artist. The making of art is a practice that is entered and

⁵ Gombrich 1960, 81.

⁶ Comments on “making and matching” are legion in *Art and Illusion*, and I will therefore not give separate references to page numbers. The case of modelling is different.

learnt, and this goes for both making and seeing, artist and audience. Creative freedom is limited and relative.

Matching is, according to Gombrich, the condition for progress in different styles of art. It is also part of making. When the artist wants to render an object correctly, he matches the picture to the object; he compares the two. To match thus implies a reference to something real in the sense of something existing. It is, for example, supposed that Albrecht Dürer wants to present his audience with the best possible picture of the appearance of a living rhinoceros.

The concept of modelling is not as clearly present in Gombrich's texts as making and matching. But it is implied: the artist does not represent an object as such but works with pictorial approximations. He starts with ideas, concepts or patterns⁷ and the end-product, the image, is "a faithful construction of a relational model"⁸. Models are not abstract ideas but closely connected with images, with the medium and the material they afford the artist. When Dürer, for example, approaches the making of a rhinoceros-picture through his conception of the appearance of a rhinoceros, this conception is influenced by the rhinoceros-pictures he has encountered. The problem here is not so much in the individual artist's ability as in his medium⁹.

The images dealt with in *Art and Illusion* are intended to render reality, however that is understood. They do not render reality as such, however, but reality constructed according to some point of view, purpose or requirement¹⁰. In a way, reality also disturbs the system of representation, since it never fits the models and so makes improvement necessary. Change is brought about by the insufficiency of any and every relational model to fit what there is.

The models inherent in Gombrich's system can be compared to Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign as related to its object in reference to a ground (an aspect, a point of view), the actuality of that relation in turn being dependent on an interpretant or an

⁷ Gombrich 1960, 73.

⁸ Gombrich 1960, 90.

⁹ Cf. Gombrich 1960, 36.

¹⁰ Gombrich 1960, 90.

“equivalent sign,” created in the mind of a person¹¹. Both ground and interpretant make possible a relation between sign and referent other than that of identity.

In respect to the interpretation of either “reality” or pictures, the interpretant acts as the mediating element between the sign, which could be a living rhinoceros or a picture of one, and the perceiver and his position. One sign has the capacity to produce several interpretants, and naturally there are also several grounds on which to base the sign-object relation. We can assume that in the making of the rhinoceros-picture (sign), the rhinoceros-species (object) was mediated by a ground, a starting-point presented by the medium – by what was given, already there – but further by an interpretant, a more individual rhinoceros-idea in Dürer’s mind. That interpretant is very hard to trace, but is it necessary for our understanding?

In both Gombrich’s and Peirce’s thinking, a sign is always an insufficient rendering of reality, but their views on insufficiency differ. Since the world to Peirce is made of signs, there is no particular, problematic subjectivity in ideas and images. In this respect, the problem with Gombrich is that he wants to keep image and reality separate, even though the difficulty of that difference when dealing with concrete pictures is a major theme of his work. It is hard not to ask how that impulse of separation is connected with his devotion to the cognitive aspects of images and stress on the generality and thus accessibility of representational schemes.

The subject of cognition is universal or transcendental: what I know can be known by others. Culture is not universal in this sense, but intersubjective. Gombrich, however, stresses the sharedness of conventions, values, experiences, physical environments, traditions and history. Homogeneity wins over heterogeneity. In approaching art from the standpoints of cognition and culture, the weight is on the universal in man and the similar and culturally accepted in human activities: “The will-to-form is a will to make conform.”¹²

¹¹ Peirce 1932, 135.

¹² Gombrich 1960, 77. That does not mean that there is only one form of conformity: “Different societies assign different purposes to the image and therefore require different

Also the view of the human being as basically a biological being emphasizes the universal in the individual, an aspiring soul in a mute body. “Our twin nature, posed between animality and rationality, finds expression in that twin world of symbolism with its willing suspension of disbelief.”¹³ Referring back to Peirce, there is a missing third element¹⁴ in Gombrich’s model, a missing consideration of those mediating elements whose place is between animality and rationality – and between other polarisations – which makes for those deviations that make life and art interesting. But a third element causes a collapse in that twin world of symbolism where meaning is grounded on how things are.

The scientific enterprise of Gombrich the scholar leads to an exaggeration of the correspondence of picture and reality and to the analogy between science and art in post-medieval Western society¹⁵. When he states, in retrospect, that his “‘study of the psychology of pictorial representation’ /.../ was intended to establish the study of the visual image as a scientific enterprise,”¹⁶ there is a significant ambiguity in the sentence, enabling the reader to refer ‘scientific’ to both image-making and the study of it.

Gombrich’s view on human matters is calm and rational. Even caricature is, in his treatment, not so much about strategies of laughter as about correct rendering; not so much about being right through being funny as about being funny through being right¹⁷. There is plenty of room for beauty in his world but very little for the sublime, the overwhelming, the inscrutable, the ecstatic, the cruel, the stupid, the nauseating or the ridiculous.

The stress on the cognitive function of pictures and their cultural status is important, but not comprehensive. As it stands, his scheme does not allow for a fair treatment of all kinds of pictures or of all there is to pictures. Questions regarding the artist’s intentions, ex-

degrees of accuracy. The wax doll made in the service of sorcery differs from the anatomical model used for teaching.” (Gombrich 1984, 197)

¹³ Gombrich 1960, 102–103.

¹⁴ On thirds and mediation in Peirce, see Merz and Parmentier 1985, esp. Parmentier, and Peirce 1990, 155.

¹⁵ Gombrich 1960, 173, 178, 321.

¹⁶ Gombrich 1984, 198.

¹⁷ Gombrich 1960, 330–358 and 1972.

pression and individuality in the sense of personal expression, are pushed into the background, since Gombrich thinks they have been overstressed. But in suppressing personal expression he overlooks, at the same time, other social dimensions of expression, including influence and manipulation through images.

The Gombrichian framework calls for an exploration of the political, and in light of what he later says about the argument of *Art and Illusion* it is even probable that there is room for it in that framework. “It is an argument, remember, not about art but about images, and it claims that there is such a thing as a faithful portrait or a useful map.”¹⁸ The word useful allows for further thoughts and additional directions: useful for what? And when the author of *Art and Illusion* mentions the “framework of the social situation” and the possibility “to reconstruct some of the motivations, social, historical, and psychological”¹⁹ he almost asks for further thoughts.

Projects and portraits

I now come to the status and roles of renderings of architecture in the practices of constructing and living in man-made environments. Tentatively, a distinction between renderings of projects to be built and renderings of existing buildings can be made. In referring to these two groups, the terms *projects* and *portraits* mark a distinction which is not always nor necessarily evident from a picture in itself. Both projects and portraits are representations of states of affairs and states of mind. But whereas the world of the project is supposed to be virtual, the world of the portrait is deemed to be real – in the sense that historical events are real.

In not referring to an existing world, projects are like many works of art. The context of art is useful in comparing the two kinds of pictures, which does not mean that they should be placed within art’s boundaries. Here, that boundary should function as a wall which sepa-

¹⁸ Gombrich 1984, 196.

¹⁹ Gombrich 1960, 381.

rates, but through separation allows us to perceive likenesses and make connections²⁰. The differences between projects and portraits with respect to the picture's reference, function and expression will be treated in line with this idea.

The question of reference concerns the world of the picture. The project refers to a conception, to a creation or an idea, but is not to be identified with that idea²¹. Further, that idea is not a static entity, but a process in which the singular drawing is an active part. The world of the project is in the future, it is not yet. The portrait, on the other hand, refers to a reality, to something that exists or has existed, that is present or past. There is no necessary difference between projects and portraits in levels of abstraction or use of visual means.

The function of a project-rendering is often practical: to promote the decision to build, or to guide and control the building process. To do this, the picture should be as accurate as possible. Its function is instrumental in a straightforward way, practical or cognitive, often both. Also the portrait can and does work as a piece of information, but not normally as information for specific actions. The appropriate approach is rather contemplative and its primary function can be aesthetic.

To ask what a rendering of a project drawing expresses, seldom seems necessary or natural. Admittedly, the drawing is supposed to bring about the idea of the project correctly, but in the drawing as a picture of its own – not as part of the project – no separate artistic subjectivity is supposed to be involved. Expression is distanced: what there is to perceive and enjoy aesthetically is read through the picture; it is not in it but behind it²². The portrait, on the contrary, no doubt expresses a view on reality. We have “nature,” mute and given reality, “seen through a temperament,” through an expressive subject.

Now the relevance of these distinctions to concrete renderings of architecture as they perform in actual situations can and must be

²⁰ The idea of a wall – the separating element – as synthetic is put forward by Venturi (Venturi 1966). This kind of difference does not defer but brings together.

²¹ Burman and Säätelä argue against understanding an architectural drawing as a representation of an idea in the artist's mind, Burman-Säätelä 1991, esp. 14. The important point is that one cannot treat ideas and drawings as separate.

²² In fact, distancing concerns both reference and expressive content.

questioned²³. I suggest, however, that the differences are typical and relevant in respect to the distinction between projects and portraits, and that this distinction is at work in our ways of relating to renderings of architecture: some of them are seen as future-oriented proposals for constructing the world, others as only pictures. The differences differ, the distinctions reproduce themselves.

The Nikolai church – aesthetics and politics

The planning and building process of the Nikolai church in Helsinki, today Helsinki Cathedral, offers a test case for the distinctions and their presuppositions²⁴. The process was long and the accompanying negotiations complicated, mixing stylistic, aesthetic and political issues, concealing nationalism in arguments of beauty and adopting aesthetic and cultural values for political purposes. The cultural context was one of building a capital of a new Grand Duchy, and in that capital, of forming its central square²⁵.

The external facts of the building process are as follows. The architect, Carl Ludwig Engel, started planning in 1819. Building was begun in 1830 and the exterior was finished in 1839, but interior work had not started when Engel died in the spring of 1840. A second phase of planning and building began in 1842, led by the president of the building committee, Lars Gabriel von Hartmann. In 1852 the church was presented to the public in its final version. The process of the

²³ Examples of mixed images are found in *Art and Illusion*. Most interesting, for my purpose, is the picture of Lackawanna Valley, made as an advertisement for a railroad company. The artist was asked to add some planned but non-existing railroad tracks to the landscape – and hid them behind puffs of smoke. Still, his artistic integrity was used and disturbed by business interests from within the picture. Gombrich 1960, 66–67.

²⁴ For the development of the process, see Pakarinen (1992) and Pöykkö (1990). Pakarinen gives a detailed account of the correspondence around the project, whereas Pöykkö's analysis is a stylistic one.

²⁵ The symbolic importance of the Senate Square has been pointed out by the late professor Gustaf Järnefelt. According to him, all the powers that rule society are present in the square: on the northern side the Church, or Superstition, on the eastern side the Senate, or Vanity, on the southern side the High Court, or Hypocrisy and on the western side the University, or Prejudice.

Nikolai church offers no unusual example of how architectural projects develop and of the agents and interests involved. Technical and aesthetic decisions are strongly influenced by boards, clients and commissioners.

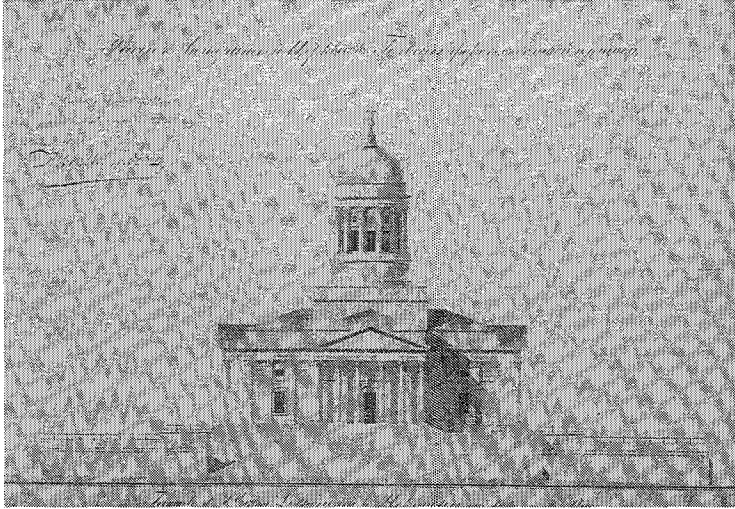


Fig. 1. The Nikolai church in Carl Ludwig Engel's final version, with one light green cupola.

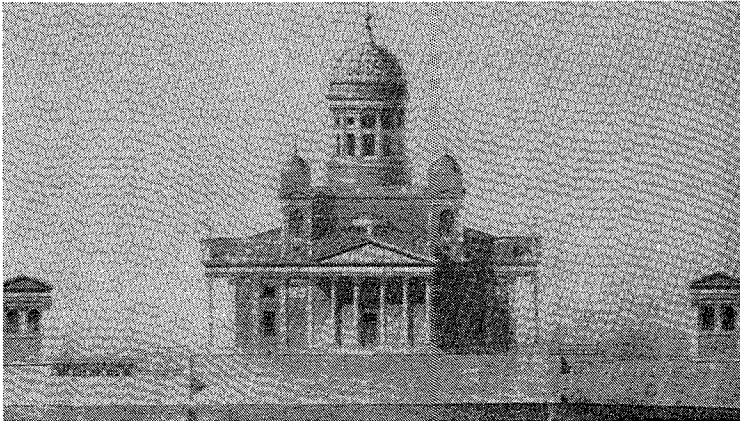


Fig. 2. The "embellished" version was built with one heavy tower and four smaller ones, all light blue with golden stars, plus nonfunctional side towers.

Since cultural norms and traditions are strong and determine what is possible and suitable in architecture, both in artistic choices and in material and technique, the art of building seems to reinforce Gombrich's points. This could at least be true for making, but what about matching? What do project drawings match, and who is matching? To clarify these questions, or at least to point out their complexities, we have to take a closer look at the misfortunes of Engel's masterpiece.

Engel himself was very content with the church in 1839. "It will be hard for anybody to outdo the elegance of its exteriors," he wrote to his nephew Eduard Jacobi in Berlin²⁶. The first version has been considered both more ancient and classical as well as more modern than the second, which is adorned in a way that anticipates the mixed eclecticism of the second half of the nineteenth century. Explanations of the new plans of the 1840s have centered on changes in taste and in aesthetic or stylistic ideals, which is reasonable if documents are read very literally. There is, for instance, a letter from Hartmann to the governor written on behalf of the two-person building committee²⁷, stating that the main tower is not harmonious and pleasing because it is too narrow. Engel himself did not find it "according to the severe laws of architecture," the letter says. For reasons of both harmony and construction the tower should be enlarged. Statues of the apostles around the tower would help to veil its narrowness and add appropriate decoration.²⁸ Another line of complaint focuses on the place of the bell tower, which to Hartmann's eye did not enhance the beauty of the city. It would be better, both functionally and aesthetically, to build the bell tower on the Senate lot. As a consequence, the old wooden wing would have to be torn down and a new one, a platform for the bell tower, be built in stone. It would naturally house other, additional functions as well. Now we do not have to believe that the sole or primary concern of Hartmann, vice president of the Senate's economy department, was urban aesthetics. But the discussion was carried out in aesthetic terms,

²⁶ Engel 1989, 292.

²⁷ The Russian member had been released from membership in April 1843, because the emperor believed that building was soon finished. Pakarinen 1992, 156.

²⁸ Pakarinen 1992, 154.

also from the emperor's side. He did not, however, share Hartmann's taste. A letter of November 1844 declared that the suggestion for a bell tower did not please His Majesty, who instead suggested that four smaller towers, three of which could function as bell towers, should be added around the main tower. In this way aesthetic and practical problems were solved and the unraised issue of enlarging the Senate elegantly dismissed, while the emperor showed empathy for the well-being of his Finnish subjects. And since the aesthetic problems were now solved, the correspondence on the part of the committee was taken care of by the architect Lohrmann.

Finally Engel's church was ameliorated in the following ways: the main tower was broadened; twelve apostles were added, three in each direction; and four side towers and two side pavilions were built, one of which served as a bell tower. Parts, projected for functions which were lost before those parts were built, seem characteristic of the whole project. But then the never actualised bell-tower function of the four small towers was perhaps not their "efficient cause," which more likely was to hinder the enlargement of the Senate. Since politics were hidden no losers were perceivable, only winners, in the name of Beauty, God, the Emperor and similar universal entities.

There is also a specific art historical context of the church. The Isak Cathedral in St Petersburg was completed in 1840. It has a voluminous central tower, four smaller ones, and is decorated with statues. Hartmann might well have been impressed by this building, a cathedral of a true capital – its connection with power probably did not weaken his views on the importance of decoration.

That the development of the Nikolai church was influenced by other than aesthetic interests does not mean that it was non-aesthetic: Hartmann did want a "more beautiful" church. The point is that power and beauty are very hard to separate in this instance, and that they do not exclude each other. This is true not only with respect to the genesis and motivation of forms but also of their understanding.

The four small towers²⁹ made the church more decorated and added weight to the capital, but made it more Russian as well. If Palladianism and imperial style referred to Rome and state power in general, it did so in this case through Russia. Ironically, Engel's architecture of the first version had impressed the emperor. It might have suited universal enlightenment ideals, but the patriot Hartmann found it difficult. He wanted to add weight to his city, but the end of the game between Helsinki and St Petersburg ended with Helsinki as a miniature, a light-weight version, a *play-imperium*.

The Russian character of the cathedral was sensed by contemporary Helsinki citizens. They felt the five blue and golden cupolas to be strongly Byzantine in character. It is easy to agree with Zacharias Topelius when he states that, "the Niko-

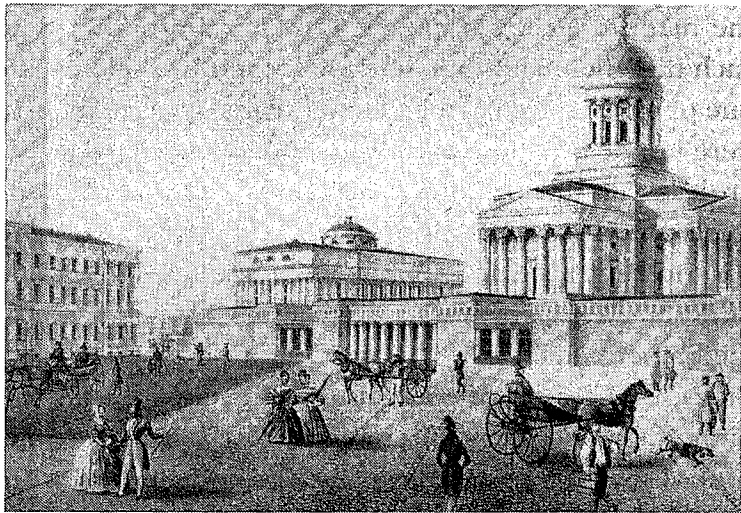


Fig. 3. F. Tengström's etching from 1838 with the university main building (1828), the university library (1840), the church (1839) and the main guard, which was substituted for the monumental stairs in 1839. The square is occupied by the community.

lai church as it is today is the result of combining ideas that do not belong together,"³⁰ but there the ideas are. In building projects, visual material is more definite than words, since it is more difficult to argue against it. Once the game with such concrete entities as towers and statues has started, it is very difficult to get out of it – if it is indeed at all possible.

²⁹ The drawing where they are first presented is anonymous but it has been suggested that they were the emperor's idea.

³⁰ Quoted in Pakarinen 1992, 132.

In renderings of the Nikolai church, power and politics tend always to be strongly present. This has to do with the character of the place. I will end my discussion of the church with two examples of how it was portrayed at the moment when it was about to begin its public life, around 1840. These etchings are portraits and projects, at closer look not so much in relation to physical reality as to frames of mind. They show the place in a future state which was never fully realized. Their subject-matter gives them an official status, like gala portraits of imperial presence in what used to be a fishing village. They are projec-

tive and productive, attaching dreams to a reality and thus transforming it over time, making a future and then making a past of that future.

F. Tengström's etching from 1838 shows the square as it was planned. Still, the build-

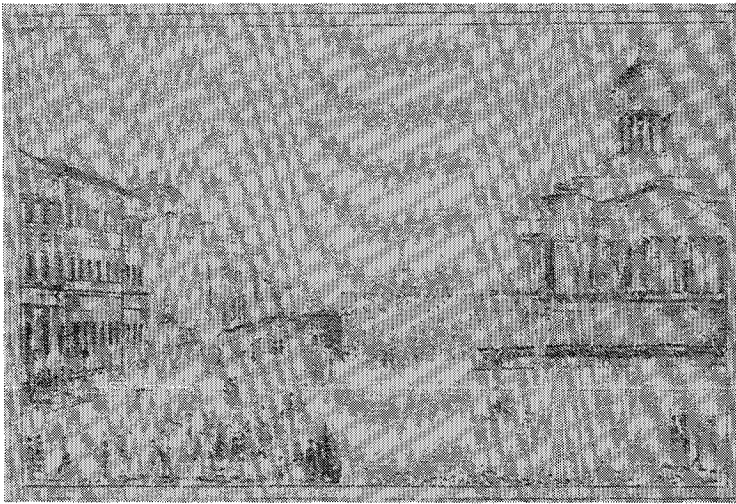


Fig. 4. A. Kusmin's etching from 1841. The atmosphere is more official than in Tengström's picture. Imperial Russia makes itself present through military persons and the onion-shape of the cupola. Citizens have become subjects.

ings shown are hardly contemporaneous: the Main Guard was torn down in 1839, when the exterior of the church was finished, and the library was not built until 1841. More interesting is the serene atmosphere of the picture, present through the citizens who are idealized, happy and calm city dwellers but who are also very ordinary. Knowledge, God and the army do not disturb their life very much. The square is occupied by the community.

In A. Kusmin's etching, made three years later, in 1841, the place and its atmosphere have changed. The stairs did not exist until 1843, but although the Main Guard of Tengström's picture is missing,

the army is present to a higher degree. The city dwellers no longer occupy the place. They have formed a row, and the square is left empty as if it belonged to someone who is not there in person, only present through armed representatives and symbols. A telling detail is the deviation of the church's main tower, which looks like a Russian onion cupola.

There is a normative dimension in portraits of architecture. They show what we will look like, where "will," while innocently suggesting "natural development," conceals or reveals the will of somebody. Social and cultural developments are, needless to say, not mechanical processes. Renderings of buildings and places, especially of politically central ones, are often renderings of power kept by historical subjects, representatives, individuals, groups or nations.

The Helsinki Cathedral and its square have been occupied and adopted for different purposes. The central position and absolute value of the building, originally based on its status as a house of God, have been taken over or borrowed by diverse subjects – by the left on the first of May, university processions in May, Swedish-speaking Finns on December 13th, the city mayor on New Year's Eve – but never is the church so true and present as when *I* occupy its stairs. The error of Kusmin was no error, and though Gombrich might be able to explain it as an incorrec-tion, I would call it a correction. But then one has to admit that the criteria for matching reality sometimes have to be chosen together with reality itself.

Interactions in public space

Coming back to reference, function and expression in projects and portraits, there is reason to stress the interaction of especially the latter two. Naturally, they also influence reference. Now the function of a picture cannot be considered narrowly, as pertaining only to a particular situation of decision-making or building, nor can expression be considered relevant only in a private encounter between picture and spectator.

I suggest that we understand function and expression in a broader sense and consider the architectural drawing in a situation which is not dominated by pre-defined interests. In such a situation, which is to some extent open, expression creates functions. The “how” of the picture offers a ground for behaviour by affecting, enhancing, changing, even creating the individual and communal subject’s self-understanding. This is an aesthetic function of the picture, but within a social, cultural and political setting.

Renderings of a public place render something vital and important, something the citizens – the members of the community which symbolically occupy the place – cannot *not* consider if they want to remain citizens. It is part of their lives and identities, surrounding them even if they never put a foot there. In fact, when people get angry at architecture, it often has to do with not wanting to be *like that*.

Like the place or building itself, its rendering is both real and imaginary. It is imaginary in not being a replica of a real situation nor an objectively correct rendering, but rather based on points of view, on exaggeration and concealment. But it is not purely imaginary, not a mere possibility which could be refuted as having nothing to do with reality. It is situated in the political sphere of modelling present and future with past. It is real in reflecting what some people imagine, what some of them figure we are. Kusmin’s drawing, for example, represents an imperial eye on Finland. It is – was – real since it existed, but it did not exist as *the* reality, only as one possible setting. Realizing the political character of drawings makes room for politics, not as oppression but as discussion.

The status and position of both projects and portraits are not very stable. There is a dimension of intentional influence in both, pushing the state of things in certain directions. In this respect projects are expressive and instrumental, like portraits. They are projective, reflective and productive, but not by themselves, since their functioning is dependent on the willingness and abilities of a perceiver. If renderings of architecture are instruments for constructing physical and mental reality, construction takes place on two levels, that of signifier and that of signified. I make a picture by which I make reality.

The rendering works by making present. The onion in a picture might be a “lie,” compared to physical reality, but it can nevertheless make the smell of onions linger over a place. This is not innocent, but neither is it a mechanical process. In order for the presented ideals to be communicated, the perceiver must at least be conscious of the presence of value. That is why churches are so useful: God is in them.

What, then, is the mediating “relational model,” and where are the interpretants for representations of public space and buildings to be found? To be able to give a hint of an answer to these questions, we have to keep in mind the heterogeneity of lived space and the interrelatedness of its elements. Buildings are not mere physical things. Therefore, their “symbolic experiencing,” including artistic representations, political decisions and everyday behavior, should be given attention³¹.

There is not one model with which to start and neither is there none: there are several. They are all linked to contemporary experience. They are neither determined nor arbitrary. Interpretants are themselves relations to the place and through the place to others, who are not radically different from me but fellow citizens. Lived physical reality is both the ground from which to understand and, in its numerous renderings, instruments with which and through which to understand, construct, and make present faces of the world. Architecture is not only reflecting utopia; the reverse is also true, since “the world created by human hands always models man’s notion of the ideal universe.”³²

Renderings are places of intention, expression and influence. They articulate positions and stand out from a manifold texture of reality. To Gombrich, models are insufficient. That is true, but it is an existential insufficiency, produced by something which is as such always too much.

The themes I have developed exist as seeds in Gombrich. “It is an argument, remember, not about art but about images ...” I wanted to stress the need of a movement from “indefinite to definite” – analogous to the one described by Gombrich in man’s relation to the natural

³¹ Lotman 1987, 10.

³² Lotman 1987, 12.

world³³ – in discussing contents of the social world relevant to meanings and values attached to architecture.

Dürer's rhinoceros is today less of a rhinoceros than he once was. But let him stand in the dawn of modern times, beside his rhinoceral self, as a guardian against too hasty understanding.

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³³ Gombrich 1960, 28, 101. The quote is originally from J.J.Gibson.

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