

Graphic Imprints

The Influence of Representation and Ideation Tools in Architecture



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Carlos L. Marcos Editor

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Contents

Part I Drawing and Project

HUNCH 1972: A Second Experiment in Sketch Recognition or:'I Know the Concept of Your Concept of Interpolation'Liss C. Werner	3
The Representation of a Built Setting Sun	12
Poetics of Code/Code of Poetics. Generative Design Applied to 'Arte Concreta' Masterpieces	23
The Constructive Drawings of the Architect Juan Antonio García Solera Justo Oliva Meyer and Juan Calduch Cervera	38
The University of Sussex by Basil Spence: Graphical Insight of the First 'Plateglass University' Laura Lizondo Sevilla and Débora Domingo Calabuig	53
Between Antinomy and Symmetry. Architectural Drawings of Presentation and Comparison in the XVI Century Fabio Colonnese and Marco Carpiceci	66
Drawings in Colour. The Royal Bullring of El Puerto de Santa María (Cadiz) José Carlos Galán Jiménez	79
Charlotte Perriand's Drawings. The Graphical Representation of a Modern Life	92

Interpreting Art Nouveau in Drawings by Gino Coppedé Laura Carnevali, Marco Fasolo, and Fabio Lanfranchi	105
Colourimetry as Strategy for Geometry Conversion: Computing Evo-Devo Patterns Diego Navarro-Mateu and Ana Cocho-Bermeio	118
Javier Carvajal or the Architect's Special Affinity with Drawing Fátima Sarasola Rubio	131
Hassan Fathy, Aldo van Eyck and Bernard Rudofsky Drawing Architecture	142
Twenty Century Design Drawings in Italy: The Case of AldoMorbelli and Carlo MollinoRoberta Spallone	156
Images and Learning in Architectural Ideation	169
Parametric Architecture and Representation, the Experiments of Luigi Moretti Caterina Palestini and Alessandro Basso	183
'To Understand and to Make Understood'. Annotations on Two Competitions by Enric Miralles Isabel Zaragoza and Jesús Esquinas Dessy	199
Some Facets of Visual Thinking in Architecture	211
The Drawings of Horacio Baliero, Between Architecture and Landscape Maria Soledad Bustamante	222
Ruled Surfaces and Parametric Design María Isabel Gómez Sánchez, Ana González Uriel, and Ismael García Ríos	231
The Fifties Graphic Expression in the Architectural Project.A Parallel Between Europe and AmericaPasquale Tunzi	242
Training the Inspiration to Ideate Architecture Concepción Rodriguez Moreno	252
Information Design: Communication-Design-Record Belén Butragueño Díaz-Guerra, Mariasun Salgado de la Rosa, and Javier Francisco Raposo Grau	264

Contents

Drawing a New Architectural Paradigm	274
Sequential Tectographs: A Graphic Resource for the Constructive Interpretation of Architectural Works Pedro Barrero Ortega and Luis Riesco Leal	285
Analysis and Representation of Standardization Processes in Historic Buildings by HBIAM Maria Laura Rossi	299
Competition for the Film Theatre and Library of Catalonia an Overview of the City Derived from the Process of Architectural Design Maite Aguado Roca	313
Comments on 20 Drawings by Current Architects. Would It Be Possible Today? Alberto Grijalba Bengoetxea	324
Augmented Graphic Thinking Augmented Graphic Thinking Mauro Chiarella, Underléa Miotto Bruscato, Gonçalo Castro Henriques, and Carla Beatriz Tortul	335
Imaginaries Triggers of the Ronchamp Project	347
Analog and Digital Drawing: Complementation Drawing and Hybrid Drawing Mónica Gómez Zepeda	359
The Sketch: An Ageless Drawing	373
Graphic Languages as Complementary Systems for Knowledge: Snapshots and Relationships from the History of Representation Giuseppa Novello and Maurizio Marco Bocconcino	383
Manual Drawing as Means of Reflexion, in the Graphic Ideation	394
Part II Architecture and Re-presentation	
Multidimensional Space: From Perspective to Big Data	407
Surveying and 3D Modelling of the Andrea Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. First Studies on Geometric Analysis and	407
Giuseppe Amoruso, Alberto Sdegno, and Andrea Manti	427

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YYY	1	1
AAA		

Geometric Analysis of Two Brick Ribbed Vaults from the 14th Century in Aragón Miguel Sancho Mir, Beatriz Martín Domínguez, and Carlos Salas Ballestín	439
Representation and Construction of Skewed Masonry Arch Bridges in England Between 18th and 19th Century Stefano Chiarenza	451
The Architecture of the Altes Museum in Schinkel's Drawings Víctor Hugo Velásquez Hernández	466
"The Hand, Sister of Eye". Architectural Models in Atelier Le Corbusier	479
The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna: Archaeoastronomy, Numbers, Geometry and Communication	492
The Graphic Evolution of Architectural Competitions	506
Modelling and Visualization Issues in the Architectural Heritage BIM Pamela Maiezza and Alessandra Tata	521
The Scale Model as a Paradigm of Information Systems.The Large-Scale Model of PompeiAdriana Rossi and Pedro M. Cabezos Bernal	532
Digital Scenarios and Virtual Environments for the Representation of Middle Eastern Architecture Francesca Picchio, Monica Bercigli, and Raffaella De Marco	541
Graphic Representation and Geometric Analysis of the Springers of the Star Vault of the Chapter House of Santa María Monastery in Simat de Valldigna (Valencia, Spain) Esther Capilla Tamborero	557
A research tool for energy efficiency, the drawing Ernesto Echeverría Valiente, Flavio Celis D'Amico, and Fernando da Casa Martin	573
10 Years of Urban Sketching Imprint	587
The Averinga's Edicola and the Cult of Water in Palermo. From Knowledge to Valorisation Francesco Di Paola, Giovanni Fatta, and Calogero Vinci	594

Urban Space and Places of Memory: The Survey as a Tool for Investigating the Process of Transformation	610
Heritage Dissemination Through the Virtual and Augmented Realities Eduardo Baviera Llópez, Jorge Llopis Verdú, Jorge Martínez Piqueras, and José Luís Denia Ríos	623
Data, Models and Visualization: Connected Tools to Enhance the Fruition of the Architectural Heritage in the City of Padova Cristina Cecchini, Maria Rosaria Cundari, Valerio Palma, and Federico Panarotto	633
Tectonic Contradictions in Soft-Architecture	647
Editorial Policies and Politics of Design in the Pre-case Study House Program Decade: The Visual Construction of <i>California Arts & Architecture</i> (193X–194X) José Parra-Martínez and John Crosse	657
Digital Instruments of Knowledge and Dissemination. The Re-presentation of Baroque Architecture in Sicily Rita Valenti and Emanuela Paternò	672
The Role of Drawing and Master <i>Alarifes</i> in the Study of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries Sevillian Housing from Graphical and Literary Documents María Núñez-González	685
Futurism and Parametricism: Two Sides of the Same Coin? Juan María Sarrió García	699
The Artist David Roberts' Architectural Design for the Scott Monument, Edinburgh	710
From Worksite Tracing Drawings to Integrated Digital Models for Reconstructing and Preserving Cultural Heritage Carlo Bianchini, Alfonso Ippolito, Carlo Inglese, Martina Attenni, Valeria Caniglia, and Marika Griffo	723
The Avant-Garde in the Work of Fernando García Mercadal Noelia Cervero Sánchez, Aurelio Vallespín Muniesa, and Ignacio Cabodevilla-Artieda	739
Comics as a Means of Architecture Representation	752

Old Drawings to Project the New Royal Palace of Madrid	'64
The Drawing of the Cultori-di-Architettura for the Sea of Rome. Ostia Marittima 1916–2016 7 Antonella Salucci 7	'77
Movement and Immobility: The Two Faces of Representation	'89
The Architectural Imprint of Ideas 8 Amparo Bernal López-Sanvicente 8	303
The Symbolism of Figurative Expression8Pablo Jeremías Juan Gutiérrez and Ricardo Irles Parreño8	314
The Invention and the 'Rule'. The San Carlo Alle Quattro Fontane Complex 8 Giuseppe Antuono 8	326
BIM Methodology in Heritage Management	35
Graphic Narration of Places: The Vomero Through the Illustrated Magazines Between '800 and' 900	344
Makers of Atmospheres. The Image Beyond the Architecture 8 Marta Alonso Rodríguez, Noelia Galván Desvaux, 8 and Antonio Álvaro-Tordesillas 8	\$57
Industrial Palace, Stretching What Graphic Narratives Can Do for Architecture 8 Oscar Rubio, Ester Gisbert, and Carlos L. Marcos	367
Digital Information Archives for an Integrated Documentationof Eremitical Settlements on Amalfi Coast8Pierpaolo D'Agostino and Barbara Messina	81
The 1740 Neapolitan Festivities Drawings 8 Vincenzo Cirillo 8	394
Sant'Elmo in Naples. A Castle to Be Rediscovered	07
Enric Miralles, Narration and Creation Through Drawing and Compositions 9 Salvador Gilabert Sanz and Hugo Antonio Barros da Rocha e Costa)15

Project the World by Drawing. The Four Books of Francisco de Asís Cabrero José de Coca Leicher	927
Parametric Processes in Implementing H-BIM on Historical Architecture	940
Ma Concepción López González and Jorge García-Valldecabres	
The Hybrid Project: Graphic Strategies for Projects on the Architectural Heritage Álvaro Moral García, Enrique Jerez Abajo, and Eduardo Carazo Lefort	951
Based on the Drawing of Vega Y Verdugo, the Reproduction of the Western Facade of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela	963
From the Architecture Treatises to the Portfolio: The Etchings of Piranesi Carlos L. Marcos and Andrés Martínez-Medina	975
Light Architectures. The Architectural Representation Between Holography and Reality Increased Giovanni Mongiello, Riccardo Tavolare, Cesare Verdoscia, and Alessia Salomone	991
Proposal of Graphic Restitution of Linear Landscape Josefa Ros Torres, Gemma Vázquez Arenas, and Josefina García León	1000
A Graphic Vision of the Headquarters of the Religious Communities of Zamora Daniel López Bragado and Víctor Antonio Lafuente Sánchez	1010
The Roman Circus of the City of Tarragona. 10 Years of Collaboration Between Architects and Archaeologists Pau Solà-Morales, J. M. Macias, J. M. Puche, J. M. Toldrà, and I. Fernàndez	1020
The Cultural, Geometric, Virtual Models for the Representation of a Survey Emma Mandelli and Alessandro Merlo	1030
Lugo Cathedral's Cloister: Context and Graphic Description Luis Hermida González	1038
The Graphic Fonts for the Restoration of the Puerta de Marchena, Moved in 1913 from the Duque de Arcos' Palace, in Marchena, to the Real Alcázar of Seville Antonio J. Albardonedo Freire, María Dolores Robador González, and Carmen De Tena Ramírez	1047

Part III Representation Materiality and Digital Fabrication	
Augmented Graphic Thinking in Geometry. DevelopableArchitectural Surfaces in Experimental PavilionsAndrés Martín-Pastor	1065
Little Big Models. The Tools of Japanese Architect Studios	1076
Digital Tools for Architectural Conception	1087
Geo-Solar Geometry: A Teaching Tool for Understanding the Sun Orbits Around Any Point on Earth: A Global Three-Dimensional Solar Chart Ramón Maestre López-Salazar	1098
Self-assembling Architecture. User Graphic Manuals	1108
Kerf-Bending Tests: Design for Manufacturing Doubly Ruled Surfaces Emanuela Lanzara and Mara Capone	1117
The Geometric Cast-Shadows for the Motivation Retrieval Antonio Álvaro-Tordesillas, Marta Alonso-Rodríguez, and Noelia Galván Desvaux	1131
Chair_ludus: Re-drawing the Gerrit Rietveld Chairs	1141
The Physical Modeling in Architectural Design—The Serial Plans Amélia de Farias Panet Barros and Aluizia Márcia Fonseca de Lima	1150
The Digital Model as a Nexus Between the Drawnand the Constructed. The Basilica of Santa Mariaof Elche as an ExampleSantiago Vilella Bas	1161
Part IV Cartographies, Mappings, City and Territory	
Views of Seville Environs Until 1800 Tomás Díaz Zamudio and Antonio Gámiz Gordo	1177
Tecnological Gaze: Digital Techniques of LandscapeRepresentationGabriella Liva	1189
Digital Representation of Urban Changes: Fragments of the Medieval Palermo Vincenza Garofalo	1198

The Survey Plan of Madrid Conducted by Carlos Maríade CastroLuis de Sobrón Martínez	1212
Visual Connections as a Palimpsest of the Coastal Landscape: The System of Coastal Towers of Sardinia Vincenzo Bagnolo and Andrea Pirinu	1227
The Importance of Historical Cartography: Its Use in PatrimonialResearch. The Case of the Conventual SevilleM. Mercedes Molina-Liñán	1241
Drawing Cities and Villages in the Landscape	1248
Hydraulic Infrastructures and Territory: The Cartography of Mythical and Projected Canals in the Lower Guadalquivir and Jerez de La Frontera (1581–1778) José Peral-López and José-Manuel Aladro-Prieto	1259
Cartographies and Graphic Models for the Representation of the Mediterranean Space and Its Human Flows Manuela Bassetta	1271
Part V Projections and Architectural Space	
New Graphic Tools for Hospital's Spatial Analysis and Design Pilar Chías Navarro, Tomás Abad, and Gonzalo García-Rosales	1283
Anamorphic Perspective and Architectural Space. Two Works byFelice Varini and Georges RousseGiovanni Caffio	1293
Inside the Geometry, that Is Inside the Architecture	1303
The Music of Sent Fructués' Measures	1311
Francisco Javier González Pérez and Antonio Millán-Gómez	
Francisco Javier González Pérez and Antonio Millán-Gómez Part VI Architecture, Phenomenology, Perception and Interaction	
Francisco Javier González Pérez and Antonio Millán-Gómez Part VI Architecture, Phenomenology, Perception and Interaction Virtual Tours for the Dissemination of Architectural Heritage. The Almudín of Valencia Martín Cipoletta, Pedro M. Cabezos Bernal, and Daniel Martín Fuentes	1325

Architecture and <i>déjà vus</i>	1350
Movements by Drawing: Avant-Garde Set-Design and Sound Landscapes Starlight Vattano	1360
Synchronized Artificial Natures: <i>The Secret Life of Trees</i> Connecting York, Delft and Alicante José Carrasco Hortal, Francesc Morales Menárguez, Salvador Serrano Salazar, Mark-David Hosale, and Friso Gouwetor	1372
A New App to Assess the Visual Impact of Buildings in Historical City Centers Called LandArch Juan Serra Lluch, Susana Iñarra Abad, Pedro M. Cabezos Bernal, and Javier Cortina Maruenda	1387
Wayfinding Systems and Color to Increase Well-Being in Healthcare Facilities Spaces	1399
Thinking and Intelligence in the Architectural Design.A Review from Language, Graphuage and ManuageMauricio Arnoldo Cárcamo Pino	1411
Drawing on Architectural Skin. Mud Dihedral in "Paso Doble" of Miquel Barceló and Josef Nadj: Canvas of a Tragedy for Empirical Knowledge Through the Body and Senses Taciana Laredo Torres and Ricardo Santonja Jiménez	1424
Street Art in Naples in the Territory of the 8th Municipality Ornella Zerlenga, Fabiana Forte, and Luciano Lauda	1433
A New Approach to Architectural Representation According to the Principles of Gestalt Perception Víctor Antonio Lafuente Sánchez and Daniel López Bragado	1449
Influence of Light and the Geometry of Architectural Envelope Through 'Experience of an Induced Way' José Ángel Ruiz-Cáceres, Diego Tovar Monge, and Yuriy Vatrala	1461
Drawings and Images for an Inclusive Use of Cultural Heritage Cristina Càndito	1478
Design of Residential Centres for the Elderly and the Perception in Their Spaces Ana Torres Barchino, Jorge Llopis Verdú, Juan Serra Lluch, and Anna Delcampo Carda	1492

Contents

Phenomenology of Minimalist Perception Applied to Can Lis(Porto Petro, Mallorca, Spain, 1971–1973)Juan Carlos Salas Ballestín	1503
Relationships Between Photography and Cinema and the Construction of the Architect's Gaze Francisco Granero Martín	1517
Morphographies: The New Graphic Category	1527
The Presence of the Visible. Multisensory Experience in Art and Architecture Luis Navarro Jover	1533
Part VII Teaching Innovation and Research	
Impact of BIM on Tools, Resources and Teaching Environments Iñigo Leon Cascante and José Javier Pérez Martínez	1543
Origami as a Tool for Three-Dimensional Architectonic Thought Carmen Escoda Pastor	1554
Graphic Classes in the Worldwide Classroom: A Comparison of Two MOOC Experiences Ester Pujadas-Gispert, Ernest Redondo Domínguez, and María Rosa Estela-Carbonell	1566
Algorithm Design for Ruled Surfaces. Case Study	
of Felix Candela	1577
Oriented Approaches. Graphic Operations of Architectural Thinking Javier Fco. Raposo Grau, Mariasun Salgado de la Rosa, and Belén Butragueño Díaz-Guerra	1586
Learning Creative Processes from a Constructivist Perspective Fernando Lancho Alvarado	1599
Graphic Survey Using Automated Photogrammetry and Its Application to the Teaching Programs Linked to the Architectural Graphic Expression Area José Javier Pérez Martínez and Iñigo Leon Cascante	1609
Modular Components as a Generative Design Project Resource for Beginner Architecture Students Amelia de Farias Panet Barros and Juliana M. S. Costa Morais	1618

Actuality of Art Education at the Beginning of XX Century	
in East Europe. Graphic Constructions Through Gestaltung	
and <i>Formenlehre</i> in Figurative Creativities Teaching Pathways	1630
Alessandro Luigini and Starlight Vattano	
A Drawing Methodology Based on Graphic Experiences	
in the Alhambra	1641
Antonio García Bueno and Karina Medina Granados	



The Cultural, Geometric, Virtual Models for the Representation of a Survey

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Abstract. In the field of documentation of cultural heritage, the employment of surveying instruments and methods and graphic representation that use digital technology has become a consolidated praxis in the past decades. The literature of such issues tends to show, with few exceptions, the potential (often not fully expressed) of the latest hardware and software, throughout surveying experiences, some more intriguing than others (from a figurative point of view), without really indulging on the true problems behind their overall usage: from the very first data-acquisition to the final graphic panels. In truth, the procedures for digital survey are relatively new and not unanimously shared by the scientific community, and the central role taken by 3D digital models in such a processes is often mystified. Maguettes with apparent-colour textures, achieved throughout the integrated use of image-based techniques (digital photogrammetry) and range-based tools (laser scanner), do not always lead to a correct understanding and interpretation of the architectural artefacts, hence impedes to proficiently describe them throughout the codes of representation. The contribution aims to provide, with the chosen examples, some indications in this apparent paradox, with special emphasis on the limitations of nowadays technologies and the complications that could arise due to a-critical construction of digital models.

Keywords: Architectural survey · 3D model · Integrated representation Cultural model · Digital survey

1 The Model and the Representation in Surveying

The scientific value of a surveying campaign can be fully conveyed only via a rigorous and verified representation, which primarily consists in determining a valid 'geometric model' as a record of all the measured reference elements. By narrowing the context to just the figurative field of surveying design, the meaning is complex and differs according to the operator's ability, and does not depend on the used systems, so to display his interpretation of the standing reality in a both comprehensible and visible form.

Over time, the model/representation has gone through a formal and conceptual evolution: from a set of scientific and geometric references, to a physical object (*maquette*) and lately to current virtual reality on computers. In these steps, inevitably, the adopted tool has highlighted, from time to time, the geometrical, structural or simply formal features of the analysed artefacts. The link between the real object and its

representation has so far been the complex scheme of measures, expressed by linear lengths associated to a given understanding and constructing architecture according to the historical period (model from the Latin *modulus*, diminutive of *modus* i.e. measure).

In a general sense, a complex system of information exchange strictly depends on the level of culture and achieved specific knowledge. Theories about communication have recently clarified that the mechanism of the transmission of practical and academic knowledge as a part of the 'cultural models' defined by the specific society.

When surveying, the code of a "system of illustration" has for centuries narrowed the field of expression in an exquisitely technical ground of communication, controlled by the surveyor in a rigorous application of geometric knowledge and formalized symbols. The current situation is definitely oriented towards a 'digital cultural model' with many aspects and possibilities. In this model, each measuring operation leads to representations revealing different methodologies. By doing so it is often hard to overlap all different methods of representation, which are the result of an evolution following the development of indirect methods, from photography to topographic/digital elaborations or even laser scanners. The results, however, need to be compared, corrected and fit together in order to develop into the scientific "representation" of a particular architecture, its context, its environment or its landscape; only by these means can we speak of a fully integrated communication.

2 Reality Based Models

The introduction of digital technologies has for the first time in human history allowed to transfer some physical features of the real environment into a virtual one, in which the user, in a more or less interactive form, in a 3-dimensional space (Guidi 2007). Excluding any sort of physical contact with the real artefact, these technologies are able to create a virtual "copy" of it. This innovation is not the real revolution; to an architectonic scale (for small-sized objects this discourse cannot be applied *tout court*) the real innovation is given by new automated methods, in which such process takes place, questioning the principle of 'discretization', which has for centuries set the base for both the theory and *praxis* of surveying disciplines. Determining the shape of an artefact is no longer achieved by assigning it to a Cartesian space of 'identified points', picked a priori by the surveyor on the basis of geometric characteristics of the piece of heritage, but by a far greater number of points belonging to the surface of the 'object on which the surveyor has no control except for the definition, once again a priori, of a number of limited parameters including the average distance between one point and another. And if in the first case the description of the architecture is entrusted essentially to the cross-section (known points defined by measurement belong to secant planes), whose trend is also defined a priori, in the second case, such description it is associated with a three-dimensional model (initially discontinuous) so to acquire information, in a second stage, regarding the object's morphometric characteristics. It is therefore appropriate to question whether a 3D model, which is the result of an automatic acquisition of the position in a space of millions of points, can to be considered a survey (result of a metric and geometric analysis of the object) or rather a mere operation of 'transposition' from reality to virtual (as above defined) leading the

operator, to reach conclusions basing his analysis on the digital model and no longer on the real object, thus considering only the data he needs.

The question may very well seem like a futile argument, but in reality its consequences on a academic level have already been noticed for quite some time (Bianchini 2014), referring, for example, to the training in Architecture and Engineering Schools. In fact, in the last decades, the increasing interest towards the technical aspects relating to the acquisition of morphometric and chromatic data of an artefact has relegated those concerning the decoding of data to the background.

There is no doubt that the matters issued by ICT have long entered the sphere of interests of the surveyor (Gaiani et al. 2011, p. 36); however, sometimes there is a risk of misunderstanding the true scope of a survey, by classifying as primary the accurate management of a 3D model's databases (the points that contribute to defining a 3D model are just one of the many databases associated with it), while in reality, this should only be one of the needed means for a correct survey.

3 The Role of Computer Graphics

The shift from the analogical to digital era has brought many daily operations to be mediated by computers; the latter uses a language that, rare exceptions made, belongs to trained programmers, whereas the average operator needs the mediation of predefined filters (commands). In the field of computer graphics, the creating *reality-based* 3D digital models (acquisition of data relating to the morphology and colour of an object, surface modelling and Marquette management) implies even more specialized computer knowledge (or at least the main problem-solving techniques related to this branch of computer science) that goes well beyond the practice, even virtuous, that neither a graduate in Architecture or Building Engineering-Architecture today posses (Scateni et al. 2005). The absence, moreover, of *software* platforms dedicated to surveying architecture (never forget that the possible operations are always and however bound to the ability of the programs to execute them), of tested and working *procedures* and, finally, of shared protocols of result's verification, sometimes makes it difficult to guarantee optimal results (Ippolito 2007).

How many times the results of a digital survey are not in fact useful? In some cases it depends on the inability of the client to manage the data, in others, the inadequacy of the graphic materials, often unable to communicate the artefact's geometric and dimensional features, often due to the misuse codified graphic rules. It has long been believed that the 3D model alone could fulfil the final purpose of a survey. Although faithful to the starting data based on predetermined parameters, thus assigning erroneously other subjects the task to interpret the data and then to produce the two-dimensional graphic drawings that still today constitute an essential work base in this professional field.

4 Exemplifications

The three images that completing this contribution, each followed by an extensive description, aim to explain by examples the assertions in the previous paragraphs. Each paper highlights one of the composite issues that those who deal with digital survey must face daily and, for this reason, will probably be known to most.

Regarding the process of reducing the amount of data to create 3D polygonal models, reference was taken from the work done at the *iglesia de la Compania de Jesus in Antigua Guatemala*: the drawing shows how, when the polygons describing the surface of the building are different, elements' shape that make up the architecture change drastically (Fig. 1). An adequate historical-architectonic knowledge of the



Fig. 1. Il The process of data decimation (*iglesia de la Compañia de Jesus*, Antigua Guatemala). 3D models are '*simulacra*' of reality and as such a version that always gives back partial information; this statement is also valid for morphometric data. According to the purpose for which a 3D model is realised, the amount of initial data is decimated, both because it is in fact unmanageable with today's *hardware*, and second because it is generally not necessary to describe with such attention an architectural artefact (depending on the exported scale—see Senatore 2011, pp. 47). The more the operator acts on the initial data, the more the final 3D model will shift from the real object's geometry; the data related to the morphometric deviation between the 3D 'point cloud' model (the raw starting data) and the models that can be deduced from this, make it possible to verify the reliability of the latter

morphological and structural elements was essential, and lead to a correct semantic analysis of the numerous components of the structure. Without that knowledge one could have risked building an incorrect model, whose geometry would not match the truth.

Mixing different techniques must however imply an intelligent use of IT tools in order to avoid errors, such as those nesting in the alignment of models and their different geometric definition (Russo et al. 2011).

Being able to choose between different methods to create a 3D reality-based model enables to work with the most suitable tools, based both on the purpose of the survey and the quality and quantity of data available; the outcomes however are not generally the same and the choice of one procedure rather than another could nullify the end result. The proposed example refers to the creation of an integrated model of the Capuchin garden in Pistoia (Fig. 2), in which the trees were modeled using software *Geomagic* from dense point clouds.



Fig. 2. *Mesh* modelling and NURBS modelling (Capuchin garden, Pistoia). The surfaces of reality-based 3D models can be defined by a network of flat surfaces (mesh surfaces) or by parametric equations determining their trend (NURBS surfaces). The choice to operate with one system or the other substantially depends on the geometric complexity of the artefact and on the degree of detail required: a mesh surface follows the point's progression from the 3D model being generated itself from those same points (three non-aligned points generate one surface), while a NURBS surface, having to describe the course of those same points from the mathematical point of view, and not being able in practice to pass through every point of the cloud, tends to 'approximate'. Furthermore, in order to model a complex surface using NURBS surfaces, *n* surfaces must be connected to each other (Furiani et al. 2013)

The role played by two-dimensional documents produced through the Mongian system of orthogonal projections, is evident in the church of San Giovanni Battista (Fig. 3) in Campi Bisenzio. The complex articulations of surfaces and volumes that characterize the monument have made it necessary to work for 'sections' in order to understand the real conformation of its space.

Finally, the possibility of freeing the chromatic data from the geometric one, delegating to a surface the definition of the morphometric and textural aspects those relating to the apparent color can lead to a partial and therefore incomplete interpretation of an artefact.



Fig. 3. The importance of the two-dimensional data (church of *San Giovanni Battista*, Campi Bisenzio—Florence). The 3D model realised from the point clouds enabled the extraction of horizontal and vertical sections required to describe the artefact with due detail. Since this is a well articulated artefact from a formal point of view, the section proved (as it often happens in this kind of operations) that the most congenial representation to understand the geometric characteristics of architecture is the possibility of obtaining a sequence of secant planes at a regular distance allowed to determine the progress of each element, thus evaluating the generating shape present in each section and its director vector (the software can generate polylines directly from the points belonging to the secant plane chosen). The operator on the basis of the sections, interpreting all the data available, can then developed the CAD drawings (Vernizzi 2006)

5 For a Cultural Model

The numerous data, the different technical languages, the difficulties of integrated representation are sometimes, even in when technological correct, a source of final ambiguity when trying to understand qualities of an object. In order to translate it into 2D and 3D images providing a correct and meaningful information, it is therefore necessary to operate in a critical way, examining the different cases and intervening with specific methods that respect the architectural characteristics.

In order to achieve the desired cultural goal it is necessary to clearly distinguish the two phases in the development of the virtual model: taking and returning data. In both, performed according to integrated criteria, even sophisticated, the IT operations are followed by a technician-surveyor. This 'order' in the survey process is now only possible with the direct participation of a culturally and disciplined expert surveyor.

Data and surveying process, duly documented, verified and adherent to the scientific protocols, can thus accomplish a final representation identifying with an appropriate 'cultural model'.

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Author Index

A

Abad, Tomás, 1283 Aguado Roca, Maite, 313 Aladro-Prieto, José-Manuel, 1259 Albardonedo Freire, Antonio J., 1047 Allepuz Pedreño, Ángel, 1335 Alonso Rodríguez, Marta, 857, 1131 Álvaro-Tordesillas, Antonio, 857, 1131 Amado Lorenzo, Antonio, 1350 Amoruso, Giuseppe, 427 Antuono, Giuseppe, 826 Attenni, Martina, 723

B

Báez Mezquita, Juan Manuel, 1248 Bagnolo, Vincenzo, 752, 1227 Balzani, Marcello, 610, 1141 Barrero Ortega, Pedro, 285 Barros Costa, Hugo, 587 Barros da Rocha e Costa, Hugo Antonio, 915 Bassetta, Manuela, 1271 Basso, Alessandro, 183 Baviera Llópez, Eduardo, 623 Bercigli, Monica, 541 Bernal López-Sanvicente, Amparo, 803 Bianchini, Carlo, 723 Bocconcino, Maurizio Marco, 383 Bustamante, Maria Soledad, 222 Butragueño Díaz-Guerra, Belén, 264, 1586

С

Cabezos Bernal, Pedro M., 532, 1325, 1387 Cabodevilla-Artieda, Ignacio, 739 Caffio, Giovanni, 1293 Calduch Cervera, Juan, 38 Campos Uribe, Alejandro, 142 Càndito, Cristina, 1478 Caniglia, Valeria, 723 Capdevila Castellanos, Iván, 12, 274 Capilla Tamborero, Esther, 557 Capone, Mara, 1117 Carazo Lefort, Eduardo, 951 Carbonell Segarra, Mercedes, 506 Cárcamo Pino, Mauricio Arnoldo, 1411 Carlevaris, Laura, 789 Carnevali, Laura, 105 Carpiceci, Marco, 66 Carrasco Hortal, José, 1372 Castaño Perea, Enrique, 1399 Castro Henriques, Gonçalo, 335 Cecchini, Cristina, 633 Celis D'Amico, Flavio, 573 Cervero Sánchez, Noelia, 739 Chiarella, Mauro, 335 Chiarenza, Stefano, 451 Chías Navarro, Pilar, 1283, 1399 Cipoletta, Martín, 1325 Cirillo, Vincenzo, 894 Climent Mondéjar, María José, 92 Cocho-Bermejo, Ana, 118 Colonnese, Fabio, 66 Cortina Maruenda, Javier, 1387 Costa Morais, Juliana M.S., 1618 Crosse, John, 657 Cundari, Cesare, 907 Cundari, Maria Rosaria, 633

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Author Index

1656

D

da Casa Martin, Fernando, 573 D'Agostino, Pierpaolo, 881 D'Amico, Sara, 492 de Coca Leicher, José, 927 de Farias Panet Barros, Amelia, 1150, 1618 de la Cova Morillo-Velarde, Miguel Ángel, 479 del Blanco García, Federico Luis, 1577 Delcampo Carda, Anna, 1492 del Río Muñoz, Mónica, 963 De Marco, Raffaella, 541 Denia Ríos, José Luís, 623 de Sobrón Martínez, Luis, 1212 De Tena Ramírez, Carmen, 1047 Díaz García, Asunción, 506 Díaz Zamudio, Tomás, 1177 Di Paola, Francesco, 594 Domingo Calabuig, Débora, 53 Domingo-Gresa, Jorge, 975

Е

Echeverría Valiente, Ernesto, 573 Escoda Pastor, Carmen, 1554 Esquinas Dessy, Jesús, 199 Estela-Carbonell, María Rosa, 1566 Estévez, Alberto T., 1087

F

Fasolo, Marco, 105 Fatta, Giovanni, 594 Fernàndez, I., 1020 Fonseca de Lima, Aluizia Márcia, 1150 Forte, Fabiana, 1433

G

Galán Jiménez, José Carlos, 79 Galván Desvaux, Noelia, 857, 1131 Gámiz Gordo, Antonio, 1177 García Bueno, Antonio, 1641 García García, Jorge Agustín, 394 García León, Josefina, 1000 García Ríos, Ismael, 231, 1577 García-Rosales, Gonzalo, 1283, 1399 García-Valldecabres, Jorge, 940 Garofalo, Vincenza, 1198 Giannetti, Stefano, 492 Gilabert Sanz, Salvador, 587, 915 Giordano, Andrea, 23 Gisbert, Ester, 867 Goitia Cruz, Aitor, 647 Gómez-Blanco Pontes, Antonio, 835

Gómez Sánchez, María Isabel, 231 Gómez Zepeda, Mónica, 359 González Pérez, Francisco Javier, 1311 González Uriel, Ana, 231 Gouwetor, Friso, 1372 Granero Martín, Francisco, 1517 Griffo, Marika, 723 Grijalba Bengoetxea, Alberto, 324

H

Hermida González, Luis, 1038 Hosale, Mark-David, 1372

I

Iborra Pallarés, Vicente, 12, 274 Iñarra Abad, Susana, 1387 Incerti, Manuela, 492 Inglese, Carlo, 723 Ippolito, Alfonso, 723 Irles Parreño, Ricardo, 814 Izquierdo Esteban, Sonia, 1108

J

Jerez Abajo, Enrique, 951 Jiménez-Vicario, Pedro M., 23 Juan Gutiérrez, Pablo Jeremías, 814

L

Lacomba Montes, Paula, 142 Lafuente Sánchez, Víctor Antonio, 1010, 1449 Lancho Alvarado, Fernando, 1599 Lanfranchi, Fabio, 105 Lanzara, Emanuela, 1117 Laredo Torres, Taciana, 1424 Lauda, Luciano, 1433 Lavoratti, Gaia, 492 Leon Cascante, Iñigo, 1543, 1609 Liva, Gabriella, 1189 Lizondo Sevilla, Laura, 53 Llopis Verdú, Jorge, 623, 1492 López Bragado, Daniel, 1010, 1449 López González, Ma Concepción, 940 López Sánchez, Jessica, 394 Lorenzo-Eiroa, Pablo, 407 Luigini, Alessandro, 1630 Lusso, Laura, 752

M

Macias, J. M., 1020 Maestre Galindo, Clara, 373 Maestre López-Salazar, Ramón, 1098 Maietti, Federica, 610 Maiezza, Pamela, 521 Mandelli, Emma, 1030 Manti, Andrea, 427 Marcos, Carlos L., 867, 975 Marotta, Anna, 211 Martín Domínguez, Beatriz, 439 Martínez Aguado, Antonio, 169 Martínez Díaz, Ángel, 764 Martínez-Medina, Andrés, 975 Martínez Piqueras, Jorge, 623 Martín Fuentes, Daniel, 1325 Martín-Pastor, Andrés, 1065 Martone, Maria, 844 Medina Granados, Karina, 1641 Merino Sáenz, José Antonio, 347 Merlo, Alessandro, 1030 Messina, Barbara, 881 Millán-Gómez, Antonio, 1311 Miotto Bruscato, Underléa, 335 Molina-Liñán, M. Mercedes, 1241 Molina-Siles, Pedro, 587 Molinero Sánchez, Jorge Gabriel, 835 Mollicon, Antonio, 1303 Mongiello, Giovanni, 991 Morales Menárguez, Francesc, 1372 Moral García, Álvaro, 951 Moreno Moreno, María Pura, 92

Ν

Navarro Jover, Luis, 1533 Navarro-Mateu, Diego, 118 Novello, Giuseppa, 383 Núñez-González, María, 685

0

Oliva Meyer, Justo, 38 Oliver Ramírez, José Luís, 12 Ortiz Tabarez, Juan Carlos, 1527

Р

Palestini, Caterina, 183 Palma, Valerio, 633 Panarotto, Federico, 633 Parra-Martínez, José, 657 Paternò, Emanuela, 672 Pavignano, Martino, 211 Peral-López, José, 1259 Pérez Barreiro, Sara, 1076 Pérez Martínez, José Javier, 1543, 1609 Picchio, Francesca, 541 Pirinu, Andrea, 1227 Puche, J. M., 1020 Pujadas-Gispert, Ester, 1566

R

Raposo Grau, Javier Francisco, 264, 1586 Redondo Domínguez, Ernest, 1566 Riesco Leal, Luis, 285 Rivas López, Esteban José, 835 Robador González, María Dolores, 1047 Ródenas-López, Manuel A., 23 Rodríguez Moreno, Concepción, 252 Rossato, Luca, 1141 Rossi, Adriana, 532 Rossi, Maria Laura, 299 Ros Torres, Josefa, 1000 Rubio, Oscar, 867 Ruiz-Cáceres, José Ángel, 1461

S

Salas Ballestín, Carlos, 439 Salas Ballestín, Juan Carlos, 1503 Salgado de la Rosa, Mariasun, 264, 1586 Salomone, Alessia, 991 Salucci, Antonella, 777 Sancho Mir, Miguel, 439 Santonja Jiménez, Ricardo, 1424 Sarasola Rubio, Fátima, 131 Sarrió García, Juan María, 699 Sdegno, Alberto, 427 Serra Lluch, Juan, 1387, 1492 Serrano Salazar, Salvador, 1372 Solà-Morales, Pau, 1020 Sorowka, Martin, 710 Spallone, Roberta, 156

Т

Tata, Alessandra, 521 Tavolare, Riccardo, 991 Toldrà, J. M., 1020 Torres Barchino, Ana, 1492 Tortul, Carla Beatriz, 335 Tovar Monge, Diego, 1461 Trachana, Angelique, 169 Tunzi, Pasquale, 242

U

Úbeda Blanco, Marta, 1076

V

Valenti, Rita, 672 Vallespín Muniesa, Aurelio, 739 Vatrala, Yuriy, 1461 Vattano, Starlight, 1360, 1630 Vázquez Arenas, Gemma, 1000 Velásquez Hernández, Víctor Hugo, 466 Verdoscia, Cesare, 991 Vilella Bas, Santiago, 1161 Villalobos Alonso, Daniel, 1076 Vinci, Calogero, 594 Viroli, Francesco, 1141 W Werner, Liss C., 3

Z

Zaragoza, Isabel, 199 Zerlenga, Ornella, 1433