CITIES IN A CHANGING WORLD: QUESTIONS OF CULTURE, CLIMATE AND DESIGN

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Realism and Spectacle. The Paradox of Architecture Engaging Reality

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• Abstract (300 words):
The dominant academic narrative to debate how buildings engage with their societal and political reality—the old and convoluted debate on criticality—has systematically disempowered architecture from being an active transformative force. As a discipline, it could only be fully detached from reality to maintain its autonomy, or, if engaged with it, it had to remain uncritically submissive. Such positions have favored designs conceived using either formal abstraction or strategic conformity but rarely real actions.

In an attempt to overcome that separation, this paper reframes architecture’s critical toolbox by proposing a double-step critique, which reconciles a realist emphasis on performative episodes of everyday life—such as intimate domestic scenes or informal social encounters—, with the unavoidable spectacular quality that these actions hold in contemporary capitalist societies. On the one hand, a Brechtian realist attitude (1938)—built through physical and mimetic actions instead of abstract and systematic ideas unlocks critical alternatives to instrumental rationality (Adorno, 1979). On the other, any attempt to reproduce reality crashes into a simulation in which echoes of premodern storytelling reverberate (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1986), but whose current embodiment inevitably sinks us into Debord’s society of spectacular images (1967). If architecture wants to get closer to real life, to engage it and improve it, it needs to reproduce it as a fictional image.
To explore this contradiction’s critical effectiveness, I will examine several projects from the modern residential canon: starting with the Marxist classicism of the Red Vienna, continuing with the vernacular scenography of Rome’s Quartiere Tiburtino and finishing with the fabricated social utopia of Erskine’s Byker Wall in Newcastle. Finally, I will compare the transformative qualities—both socially and politically—of these large housing projects with contemporary proposals tactical urbanism, which share the paradoxical negotiation between the performative reality of everyday physical life and the construction of fictional images and actions to make that reality believable.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

- David Franco holds a PhD and a MArch from the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. He is currently an Assistant professor at Clemson University School of Architecture. He has previously been Associate Professor on Architectural Design at the Escuela Politécnica Superior Universidad San Pablo CEU Madrid, and Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Idaho. His work has been awarded more than 16 prizes on International Architecture competitions such as Europan 6 and 7. He has been nominated for the prestigious Iakov Chernikov prize of contemporary architecture from the ICIF Foundation in Moscow. He has published his work in international magazines, books and peer-reviewed journals, such as A10, A+T, VLC, Arquitectos, Europan Generations, Arkitektur or Bauwelt, among other. His work has been displayed on exhibitions, such as the 10th Venice Biennale, or the 2nd Architecture, Art & Landscape Biennial of the Canary Islands.