Floating Images

EDUARDO SOUTO DE MOURA’S WALL ATLAS

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Everything Is Architecture

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We begin with a contradiction; we write words in a book that should contain only images, a book meant to be an atlas in the overarching ambition of an infinite imagined collection. We thought of Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* and André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire*, or Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*,¹ we thought of the *Albums* of Hans-Peter Feldmann, of the 3,000-odd photos from the *Visible World* of Peter Fischli and David Weiss,² or the *History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* by James Fergusson, a history that reminds us of that brief nineteenth-century illusion where possession of all images corresponds to possession of all comprehension of the world.³

In Greek mythology, the colossal divine force signified by the word *atlas* is also associated with a savage nature linked to chaos and disorder, punished by Zeus with the task of supporting the burden of heaven and earth. Inherent to the totalitarian ambition of any such atlas is an entropy we might call inhuman because it results from an excess of information that can't be assimilated. The immeasurable amount of information available on the Internet is quite likely the best illustration of this utopia, or rather, dystopia, because the intrinsic gain from such environment

punishes us with an awareness of impossibility—impossibility of absorption, control, limit, and content.

It is due especially to this excess of information and images that constantly assails us that we do not stop trying to build a filter, which henceforth reveals a personalized understanding of reality—even when "personalized" still means the result of the individual's acculturation before a society that is nowadays indifferently close by or foreign. What interests us is that the vastness of the world and the represented world make it impossible to build an atlas that is not legitimated by a condition or specific condition that mirrors a reality inevitably broken down into microromances. The question immediately arises as to whether we can continue calling Atlas a vision collected from a world shattered in the illusion of the individual's possible viewpoint.

But in the same way that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world. And in that respect, I limit the world, I decide the boundaries," it should therefore be possible to say that what I consciously or even inadvertently abdicate and ignore will also help define the world, with the supposed specificity of some "I," from another world, another atlas, emerging in the incomunicability or silence, so insidious "since ... since ... since I can't bear myself away from the objectivity that crushes me or the subjectivity that exiles me."5

In a television interview with Eduardo Souto de Moura, a diverse group of images could be seen in the background on his office walls: drawings of recent projects; a photo of the view from a La Tourette window; the water towers of Bernhard and Hilla Becher; an oil platform, perhaps in the North Sea; two women wearing burqas and snapping pictures on their cell phones; a section of the Tower of Pisa as if it had been designed to lean; the Murça sow statue, in which the roughly sculpted granite fades into the pattern on newsprint paper; a photo of Herberto Hélder, among other faces and other drawings.

On the wall, with no recognizable hierarchy, images deriving from the studio’s own production (sketches and faxes about ongoing projects) mysteriously engage with images cut out from newspapers or magazines.

When we first approached Eduardo Souto de Moura, we were only sure about what we didn’t want to do: a monograph. It would be hard and most likely redundant to compete with the 447-page volume by Electa,6 with El Croquis issue no. 146, or the editions by Werner Blaser, Francesc Zamora Mola or (and) Aurora Cuito,7 among so many other publications that have accompanied the career of one of the most widely publicized Portuguese architects and now winner of the Pritzker Prize. Yet those small generic cuttings on the office wall draw our attention due to the strangeness of the direct confrontation with images of architectural plans. When we proposed doing an atlas conditioned by a specific area, we knew it would have to contain those other images on the rapidly proven hunch that, given knowledge's complexity, they could also be used for the architectural plan. In the end, as Hans Hollein defended more than forty years ago: “Everything is architecture,”8 two burqas and two cell phones are architecture.

We know that architecture, as opposed to the so-called "exact" sciences, does not result from a merely deductive and "intelligent" process,9 rationally demonstrating based on the sum of different parts. Rather the contrary, as Mark Wigley asserts: “There is no sane, reasonable, credible explanation for what happens in an architecture firm, but the firm is certainly a work of architectural intelligence.”10 Architecture as creative expression, along with other arts, will always be the result of complex, transdisciplinary, intuitive processes that imply in their authorial11 and
poetic expression the healthy confrontation of objectivity and subjectivity, science and art, rule and exception. And while architecture essentially persists as a “specialist in generalities,” the mixing of images should come as no surprise—rescued from different origins and sharing the same place (the wall), to build something new and necessarily beautiful … and false.

Various questions immediately arise: Do the images have an isolated value of their own or does that value derive from their association? Do they remain linked to their origin, do they keep a reference, or are they legitimately decontextualized? Do the images exist on this support due to their content or their superficial form? Are they sought with specific intent or casually found? Do they have an ephemeral meaning or do they express a desire to be forever? Are they a means, a vehicle, or an end? Do they comprise a whole, comprise an archive? Can they be appropriated? Are they worth more than a thousand words? Are they reality or representation? Do they simulate or replace the object? And above all: how do they relate to the planning and thinking of architecture?

As unbelievers in a contrasted black-and-white reality (images can be all and none of this), we imagine that background wall as a vestige of an ambiguous mental map between determinism and chance, denouncing the same distance we’ll find in the space that wavers between the architectural plan and the work or between the built work and its later appropriation or perception. There will always be an observer who legitimizes the relativism, but under the title Floating Images: Eduardo Souto de Moura’s Wall Atlas, we aim to stratify in an illusorily objective manner the images taken as methodology for thinking out the architecture project.

At a time when architecture seems to be giving way to new paradigms (in which the discipline seems to lose its autonomy, in which regulations seem meant for mindless architects, in which only specialization seems to legitimize architectural production, and in which low-cost competition results in a shortage of time and quality), these Floating Images assert themselves as a vestige of a time and method that will not stop representing a certain sense of resistance and will consequently also not stop justifying the exceptional nature of an architect and a work that can be copied only naively and superficially. This architecture, as Álvaro Siza says, needs time that’s not there today. However, there is no nostalgia in this sense of loss. Eduardo Souto de Moura always knew how to stand against every expectation. He is, when least expected, unpredictable.

By focusing our attention on images on a wall in order to use them to legitimize a method, we are consciously withdrawing from another field of references linked to the word. This risk (which we hope will be lessened by the written contributions) is evident in the precept that “generally, the philosophers since Plato have always seen in the image an inferior form of representation, that is, an obstacle to thought. Traditional philosophy is dualist: image is on the side of the material, authentic thought is immaterial. To think, one has to go beyond images.” We can go even farther by stating that thought is “previous” to images, “previous” to the word itself. Even so, maybe what most appeals to us in the risk of focusing almost solely on images is precisely the abdication from “authentic thought” (which in Plato’s Republic was attributed solely to God) in favor of thought that does not necessarily live from the antonym “authentic” but which lets itself be corrupted by subjectivity, superficiality, or even falseness. It is not by chance that we find cuttings on the wall of Eduardo Souto de Moura’s office that read: “To make the truth more probable, we must necessarily add the false” (Fyodor Dostoyevsky); “What
has been believed by everyone, always, everywhere, is in all likelihood false” (Paul Valéry); or “We have art in order not to die of truth” (Friedrich Nietzsche).

False can’t be at the beginning and truth can’t be at the end. In the words of Eduardo Souto de Moura: “There are two levels: one is the process of realization, in which the false ab initio is shocking. But after the process is consolidated I have to have the ambition to be a poet and do art because I believe that art has to be false ... if it is true ... well, the ethic is boring, so the aesthetic must be false! Artists have to work on the razor’s edge, between true and false. What’s false is not the support point for saying ‘I’m going to lie’; falseness is the maximum point of autonomy, in which I’m dealing with things only for pure enjoyment, only so that Kant can reach the sublime. I know that with the truth I won’t get there.”

As can be easily understood, to return to our initial contradiction, it is hard to get around the word even when we want to stress the contribution of image in the scope of an architectural project method. But this special attention to image is legitimized in our opinion in the major revolution of architectural project methodologies: the invention of drawing and perspective. While architectural knowledge and production were until that point essentially linked to the oral or written word transmitted in the professional guilds, the invention of rigorous drafting (plans, sections, elevations, perspective) gave the architectural plan an authorial aura, linking it to a sense of foresight, assuring an ideal of perfection, regardless of when the work was completed or even its materialization. The drawn representation, the image, became what was closest to the idea and the thought.

The images that nowadays seek to communicate architecture tend to do so in an all-encompassing manner, decoded from the technical standpoint. Architecture as public art has the obligation to reach different publics. The most recent representation technologies have sharply increased the plausibility rates of images, leaving the observer to permanently question what is called reality. But this doubt, contrary to worry or anguish, seems to feed fascination about the fiction, not in its utopian or distant meaning, but something closer, something presented as possibility or alternative to a world increasingly more imprisoned in rules and regulations. And if somewhat paradoxically no (political, social, economic) stability whatsoever is assured, it will not be unusual to affirm that we are nowadays more prepared to live with uncertainty. Images and their inherent subjectivity will not stop being associated with the best of uncertainty, that is, desire and fear: that which we recognize even though, for us, it doesn’t exist.

It is precisely in this space of the images’ subjectivity, in what remains open, that appropriation is permitted, the personalization of its meaning. The images replicate what is also the architecture: a device that shelters or intermediates some action or expectation. In their condition as “means,” the images along with the architecture should not be taken as an “end” in themselves.

Even so, perhaps the images lend themselves more to subjectivity than the buildings do. Images are light, they are surface (easily confused with superficiality), they are more permissive because they are more exposed to circulation and reproduction without the “aura” of the Benjamin stigma. They nowadays propagate as easily as a virus, ignoring borders (political, social, cultural), provoking seduction or rejection in observers and, necessarily, disdain. We live surrounded by images: the (past) century of images and their mass consumption; and the (future) century of images and their mass production. Images are thus democratized along with their production. As a result, the codes and
their specificity in the scope of mass communication have fallen. There will surely be some residual resistance, but even pure scientific illegibility or artistic abstraction will at the very least find room in the universities, museums, or shopping centers. And if architects often use top-of-the-line automobiles in photomontages to enhance their projects’ credibility, the auto industry also uses landmark buildings as backdrops for its advertising. Both images end up resembling each other. “Everything is architecture,” Everything is image.

As everything is potentially circulating information, it becomes evident that not everything can be assimilated; there is a clear disproportion between what is made available and what is received. “Information” doesn’t necessarily mean “communication,” for information excess can even lead to incommunicability, a common entropy of our times, which refers to the human “incapacity” to process so much data. But we should recognize that the supposed “incapacity” derives from a complex system of filters that for our protection and pragmatism implies an extremely selective albeit not necessarily rational memory. In our brain we neither store nor stop storing information derived from a merely logical or deductive process. There is an intuition, occasionally irresponsible, that constantly leads us to ignore or choose images subconsciously—images that sink in and emerge unexpectedly to reveal a seeming absence of meaning—like the recollection of Rosebud in Citizen Kane.14

We aim to defend the view that this (deductive/intuitive) complexity is inherent not only to the specificity of each person’s knowledge but also inherent to the specificity of the method and processes of conceiving and planning architecture. Beyond seeking the specific meaning of each of the images on Eduardo Souto de Moura’s wall, we seek the inherent meaning of their selection and combination. We seek their legitimizing sense for the project without ignoring the risks we’re taking, among them the risk of “simulacrum and simulation,” in a direct reference to Jean Baudrillard. But as Souto de Moura asserts: “Perhaps the first state is simulation: things are lighter nowadays, they’re not as thick—by living the image, we dispense with the object, we live its represen-
a narrative. An archivist or historian here would try to work out a timeline, separating subjects, assigning categories. In our condition as architects, almost always more seduced by form than by content, we make no hierarchies. Everything is placed on a horizontal table plan that, unlike a “board,” tends, in Georges Didi-Huberman’s words, to stabilize content: it is the “crystallized beauty of the board, its found centripetal beauty, proudly steady, exhibited as a trophy” that stands against the working table as a “fractured beauty, a surface of transient encounters and gatherings, always allowing to correct or modify, or receive without hierarchy.” These Floating Images, as a vertical device, will still be a “table” although it now presents itself crystallized in book format.

The flattened pack of Camels with the pyramids of Egypt, a Romanian one-leu bill with a suspect palace, the almost pornographic eroticism of the Corinth Canal (or Braga Stadium), four bottles of wine floating in the cloudy sky of the Grão Vasco Museum; an inexpert plan, probably a house surveyed by a trainee or a project proposal ineptly drawn by a client; sketches made on vomit bags on one trip or another; a restaurant napkin and a project perspective ironically next to the phrase “Like it? Come back another time.”

These Floating Images, the “table” crystallized in its book form, were accompanied by Eduardo Souto de Moura, who had abdicated the last word in the final selection of images (in their order and association), expecting to be surprised by a new narrative built on images he knows so well. As is easily noticeable, this was not the only possible organization. It could have been from A to Z or from Z to A. Maybe it would be more consistent to publish this atlas as loose-leaf pages like a game of cards, the way Charles and Ray Eames did, but then it would hardly be a book. Within the rigid structure of glued and sewn binding, an option was chosen, but there was no desire to explain it, so as to avoid the risk of conditioning stimulation about other reading possibilities. This subjective presentation of images certainly does not invalidate the attempt to objectively analyze their specific meaning in the process of conceiving architecture (in an overall manner) or in the project methodology (in the particular case).

We can (transversally) recognize four major groups framing these images: images that emerge in the area of project “conception” and to a certain degree precede it; images that emerge during project “production” and work with it; images that emerge in project “communication,” almost always subsequent images; and finally images that emerge with the materialization of the work, its “reception,” images that assert their appropriation by others. In professional practice these groups interrelate to such an extent that this distinction doesn’t always make sense, but to radically abstain from this layered reading would be like believing in the (unreachable but ever pursued) perennial utopia whereby the same image can depict the “conception,” “production,” “com-

Grão Vasco Museum, Viseu, advertising for Dido wines
Un Leu bill, Romania

Herzog & de Meuron, VitraHaus, Wolf am Rhein, 2006-09
communication,” and “reception” phase of the architectural work, closing a perfect cycle. Contemporary architecture actually seems to be moving in this direction, for all arguments defending the new technologies used to represent and digitally and algorithmically conceive buildings seem based on closing the distance between the conception and materialization of buildings: more foresight and control; more control and relationship with production; greater accuracy of project images; and, no less important, more aesthetic and formal resemblance of the architectural object to its own digital image. Reality is apparently trying to imitate simulation, and in this regard we can say that form no longer follows function—form follows representation.19

Bearing in mind that images in the context of the “production,” “communication,” and “reception” of Eduardo Souto de Moura’s work have been widely disseminated in monograph form, in this first text we focus our attention on those that contribute to the broader field of his visual culture, in the belief that directly or indirectly, consciously or subconsciously,20 some of these images concern (stimulate and condition) the thinking of architecture. It is in the relationship between a prior selection of diverse images and the aforementioned “conception” phase that we risk the following categories, which may eventually be useful in understanding the operative scope of these Floating Images:

Arbitrary Images

These are images found by chance. Not that chance may not result from something premeditated, from the habits of buying newspapers, magazines, or postcards. But the arbitrary images emerge occasionally; they are almost always images unexpected in their content, isolated images; they do not build a collection, nor a narrative beyond themselves. Yet they are still expectant images, for they are cut out and kept because of a feeling that they may one day be useful, as if illustrating a more lasting thought (two Japanese sumo wrestlers face off, to later depict the architect/client relationship—the first uses the second’s rash move to knock him over). They are almost always beautiful on the surface and easily survive being taken out of their original context. Sometimes they’re kept with no destination. They’re tucked away in a drawer (a kneeling child reads a book to an attentive kneeling elephant and we’ll never know why, though we can imagine).

Affective Images

These are images that are pursued. They are images with which we identify, almost as if we could have been the ones who made them. We are their fictional authors. They say what we’d like to have said. But they’re better, they say better, and they said it first, and that’s why we respect them, for what they fill out of our incapacity. They are images to take home, to eat and sleep with, and are shown there only shyly though they’re always representative; we want them to be representative and at the same time are afraid that the somewhat public aspect might erode the personal affection we feel for them. We want and don’t want to share them. The affection for these images almost always reverts to affection for their authors. These images must have a history; they have an associated memory but are unlikely to have a future because they can’t be more than what they already are. They are images we believe to be stable—eternal (Ángelo de Sousa will surely know what we’re talking about).
Latent Images

These are images that exist transversally to everything that's done. They are technical images in the sense that they enable a direct relationship with the project. They are images of architecture, classic images (not necessarily of classical architecture) that are at the base of the architectural culture of almost everyone (Athens 1:36 color slides printed on Kodak film). They can arise at any moment; it's inevitable. They result from a visible legacy, from a relationship with a specific context; they are imposed from the outside. Their exceptional nature makes them ordinary because of their redundant appearance, their universality helps communicate ideas. Sometimes their uncomfortable omnipresence, their uncomfortable perfection, inhibits action. Love, hate. Sometimes they have to be contested, to find supposed contradictions in them (Mies van der Rohe in the Greek amphitheater of Epidaurus; a Barcelona Pavilion sketchbook with the cover of a donkey pulling a cart). We build ourselves with these images but it is in their distance that we gain the autonomy needed for the authorial creative sense. They are reminiscent images because no matter how much they try to overcome or forget, they will always exist as ghosts.

Analogue Images

These are images resulting from a provocative strategy—images that try to explain the unexplainable. They are images that help stimulate the project when it doesn't seem to find an intrinsic and disciplinary reason for its own program. In this regard they are images imported from other contexts that in a freely comparative relationship resolve or synthesize the project's essence. These analogue images can have a formal expression, approaching Rossi's methodology (the pillars of an oil platform in the North Sea transformed into a structure of the Trindade subway station); or a conceptual expression (the two women in burqas with cell-phone cameras, alluding to the paradox between modesty that hides and technology that allows things to be seen—image for a Middle Eastern project?). But there are also analogue images that arise after the project phase; such images can eventually help provide an other-explanation. They are the expression of coincidence, increasingly recurrent coincidences in a world increasingly full of images (compare the Quinta do Lago House with the sixteenth-century Nossa Senhora da Luz Church in Tavira—we know the house appeared before the image, even though the church appeared before the house).

Recurrent Images

These images seemingly acquire strength in a larger group of similar images. They have no inherent value alone but a meaning derived from their synergetic association. They do not necessarily derive from "types" (in the formal sense) but almost always derive from "themes" in an abstract sense (a pile of wood next to a pile of granite or a pile of bread). Their recurrence ends up arousing a sometimes exhaustive and almost always informal sense of collection. Recognition of the collection is almost always associated with a more lasting theme than with the specific time of a single project; they are themes that accompany Souto de Moura's work in a broader sense (the module, the repetition, the eternal game between rule and exception). But there are other kinds of recurring images that comprise collections structured formally in essentially geometric abstractions that almost make one forget

21. Eduardo Souto de Moura was educated amidst collections. His father, an ornithologist, was a collector, among other things, of "stamps of men with glasses."
their figurative link. In this regard the elevation of the Microsoft System Center, a closed zoom of a Latin America slum, an aerial view of São Paulo, or a satellite image of Bam (Iran) are no more than a collection of patterns, textures, or repetitions that emphasize the sense of recurrence in the openly superficial reading of the image. They are not political images.

Utopian Images

These images overlap the sense of utility; they are the pure expression of architectural art. They are images not subject to any compromise; they result from no commission. They are always self-proposed and have no agenda. They are or try to be the closest expression of authorial thought, and of architectural thought in its broadest disciplinary autonomy, removed even from their “own acts” of professional practice. They are images not conceived to be consequent; rather, they try hard to escape the need to be consequent; they escape the sense of rule and productivity. They are economic in the sense that they are content to be only images, only thought. This group is made up of sketches, collages, or other objects (work objects whose decontextualization in the gallery pursues the sense of “ready-made”). Sketches on the language of architecture, about history’s legacy, about mirrored and inverted representativeness, about irony and perversity (fascism as a cover-up).

Eduardo Souto de Moura, sketchbooks

EVERYTHING IS ARCHITECTURE

The proposed categorization cannot be separated from some concepts that Eduardo Souto de Moura has used based on different readings. The question of analogy evidently derives from Aldo Rossi and the sense that “no one begins from nothing.” But in The Architecture of the City, Rossi also legitimizes a view of function not responsible for form. It is the form symbolic in itself, in its geometry, in its lasting abstraction and image able to be copied and recontextualized that interests Souto de Moura.

Based on Rafael Moneo, Eduardo Souto de Moura defends that architecture begins by being arbitrary; there’s always something unexplainable behind any project—a “flash” in current informal parlance. But then: “The project becomes more cohesive or stronger the more we find means to justify the initial arbitrariness, until it seems obvious. The project is the search for reasons for chance. The concept’s arbitrariness will have to be validated throughout the process or course.” That course takes its time. Souto de Moura is aware that architecture is nowadays done with images (based on images, to be image), yet still and at the same time laments the lack of processes legitimizing arbitrariness in most contemporary architectural production: “The course has been transformed into something fleeting and frivolous.”

It is to counter this ephemeral time that Souto de Moura joined up with Álvaro Siza to defend project time and, with Távora, the historic time. For Souto de Moura, architecture still has a perennial sense, the expectation of continuity beyond the specific time we vaguely call “contemporaneity.” To that end we can state that there is no contemporaneity without history nor without future expectation, otherwise everything is just contemporaneity. Overall, this atlas of images reflects the time of the course and processes associated with the architectural plan. And the plan, any plan, shows the relationship between acquired wisdom and openness to the foresight inherent to experimentation. The architect thereby presumes to be a mediator of images, between past and future, reserving the possible contemporaneity for the project. If all goes well, the rest will make history.

As can be seen in its form, Floating Images is not linked to this comfortably categorized reading because it is structured at a
between the individual and society, between past and present, erudite and common, and, no less important, between science and art. We believe that these Floating Images of Souto de Moura express that complexity and will help counter any simplistic reading whose unfortunate result is the apparent “Souto-de-Mourazation” of Portuguese architecture.

Eduardo Souto de Moura must to a certain degree be inadvertently responsible for this extended “counterfeiting” phenomenon. With the humbleness that characterizes great architects, Souto de Moura has always publicly expressed the importance of the “copy” in his training and career (in the teaching tradition inherited from the Beaux-Arts). But while the good student knows how to make his own what pertained to others, the bad student will be condemned to the “shame of someone who steals and then can’t carry the load,” to quote an old saying.

As an eventual “victim” of counterfeiting (at the same time synonymous with recognition and renown), Eduardo Souto de Moura’s architecture is quickly circulated and publicized, and itself becomes an image in the atlases of other architects, thereby closing a cycle in the vast field of architectural culture. The way Souto de Moura’s architecture finds “reception” is not absent from these Floating Images: when it’s finished, the work is appropriated and often registered, revealing interpretations that surprise the architect himself. This is inevitable because architecture can only be an “end” in itself for architects; for everyone else

27 “The other day I was reading Igor Strawinsky’s Poetics of Music, which seemed like an architect’s book...”

28 This is surely the expression most often used to describe Eduardo Souto de Moura’s architecture outside the more academicismo scope yet it is not necessarily an expression with which he would identify himself.

it will always be a "means" subject to eventuality. Luís Ferreira Alves—architecture photographer and friend of Eduardo Souto de Moura—recently visited the house of one of Souto de Moura’s clients so that he could photograph it. The client was already living there, but before the visit he moved almost all his belongings outside into the garden. This was not for reasons of modesty or privacy, but because he thought the empty house would be more photogenic and more to the liking of the architect and photographer. Maybe he was successful, but Souto de Moura’s somewhat ironic smile when he told us the story hinted that he would have preferred to photograph the surreal outside pile of furniture instead of the empty house. These Floating Images are basically about that discreet desire for complexity and contradiction.