

History as an Operative Device – Confronting the Past through Design*

La historia como dispositivo operativo: enfrentar el pasado por medio del diseño

A história como um dispositivo operacional: confrontando o passado através do design

Recibido: 13 de octubre de 2017; Aprobado: 8 de febrero de 2018; Modificado: 26 de febrero de 2018
Análisis del proyecto

Abstract

Architectural education has relegated history to the non-design role it currently occupies. This, perhaps, initially happened by mere happenstance, but it was surely prolonged by the propagation of feckless pedagogy. However, an epistemological break from the traditional form-making processes of site and program analysis—one that hypothesizes historical events as operative devices—will elevate history to a having a design role. This article examines how history transforms and complements adaptive reuse techniques and is demonstrated by the example of the decommissioned U.S. Embassy to Britain in Grosvenor Square, designed by Eero Saarinen between 1956 and 1960.

Keywords: adaptive re-use, political architecture, heuristic device

Resumen

Actualmente, la educación arquitectónica ha relegado a la historia a un papel marginado de la proyectación. Debido quizás a una prolongada propagación de una pedagogía descuidada. Sin embargo, una ruptura epistemológica que hipotetiza la historia como un dispositivo operativo en diseño, con eventos pasados que actúan como deducciones morfológicas—con razón—, eleva la historia a la plataforma del instrumento de diseño, junto con el análisis crítico del sitio y un examen exhaustivo del programa. Este artículo examina cómo la historia transforma y complementa las técnicas de reutilización adaptativa, como lo demostró la desactivada Embajada de los Estados Unidos en Gran Bretaña, ubicada en Grosvenor Square, diseñada por Eero Saarinen entre 1956 y 1960.

Palabras clave: re-úso adaptativo, arquitectura política, dispositivo heurístico

Resumo

O ensino de arquitetura relegou a história ao papel desassociado do projecto que ocupa atualmente. Isso talvez tenha acontecido inicialmente por casualidade, mas com certeza foi prolongado pela propagação de pedagogia ineficaz. Contudo, um desligamento epistemológico dos processos tradicionais de gerar formas da análise de lugares e programas — que supõe eventos históricos como dispositivos operacionais — elevará a história e lhe outorgará um papel como ferramenta de projeto. Este artigo examina como a história transforma e complementa técnicas adaptáveis de reutilização e é demonstrado com o exemplo da Embaixada desativada dos Estados Unidos na Bretanha, localizada em Grosvenor Square, projetada por Eero Saarinen entre 1956 e 1960.

Palavras chave: reutilização adaptável, arquitetura política, dispositivo heurístico

* This theoretical project was studied in an Advanced Architecture/Preservation Studio at Columbia University, US.

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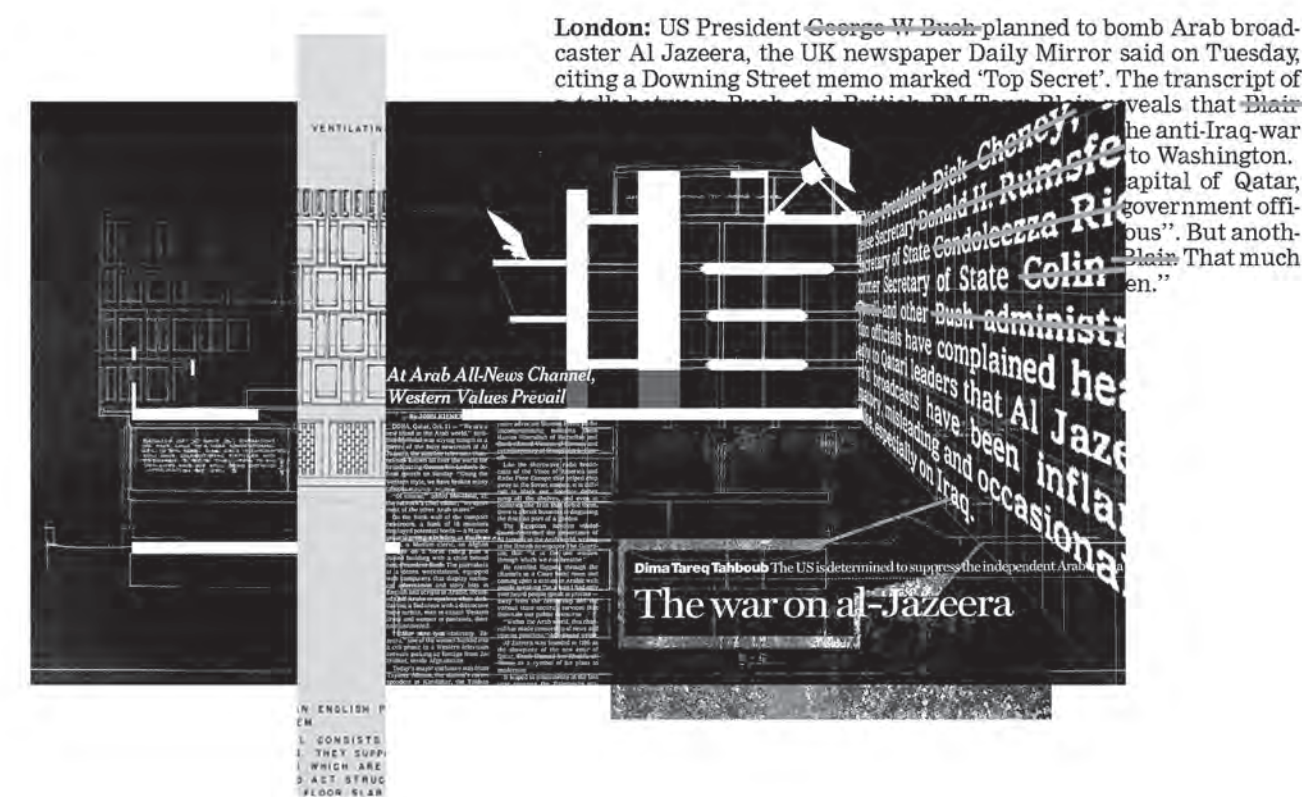


Figura 1. Nicholas Gervasi, "The Architectural Difference between Office and Embassy," 2015, Jorge Otero-Pailos and Mark Rakatansky Advanced IV Studio at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.

Architectural education has relegated history to the non-design role it currently occupies. This, perhaps, initially happened by mere happenstance, but it was surely prolonged by the propagation of feckless pedagogy. However, an epistemological break from the traditional form-making processes of site and program analysis—one that hypothesizes historical events as operative devices—will elevate history to a having a design role. This analysis project examines how history transforms and complements adaptive

reuse techniques and is demonstrated by the example of the decommissioned U.S. Embassy to Britain in Grosvenor Square, designed by Eero Saarinen between 1956 and 1960. The first image is a collage that expresses the complex tripartite relationship between the United States, Great Britain, and Qatar; it culminates within the walls of one concrete structure. Furthermore, the second image provides an insight into the symbolic difference between an office building and an embassy: as illustrated through ornament and history.

Architecture's struggle to adapt correlates with its inability to surmount its own history and consequences. Instead of perceiving history as an elastic idea that extends or retracts depending upon the flexure of the architectural response, history is condemned to being a static block of immovable information that is irrelevant to form-making. Operative devices feed off many different forces, but history is the most important. History extends far beyond the physical boundaries of the site. The United States bombed Al Jazeera's office in Afghanistan in 2001 and subsequently their office in Iraq in 2003. Moreover, in 2005 a covert conversation between George W. Bush and Tony Blair in a leaked document, revealed Bush's aspirations to eliminate the Al Jazeera headquarters in Qatar: an ally country. But Qatar refused. However, as Qatar owned the former U.S. embassy in London, it is easy to see how an act of retaliation or demonstration of vehemence for the betrayal could easily be undertaken.

The first collage shows the structural concrete of Saarinen's hulking architecture as the filter and manipulator of news-based information; this is a relationship that is underscored by the blunt force of a military and egocentric agenda. Envisioning itself to be a source of media, architecture personifies the divergent and contradictory storylines that befuddle the reader. The second image reconciles the symbolic value of the addition of patriotic and nationalistic elements, such as the brazen bald eagle. This is amalgamated with the deployment of ornament—a historical maneuver—in an effort to raise the typological standing of a building. Together, these images seek to foment insurrection on the status of history in design; they aim to produce deeper thinking regarding how we learn about buildings and further expand the realm of where that knowledge is applied.

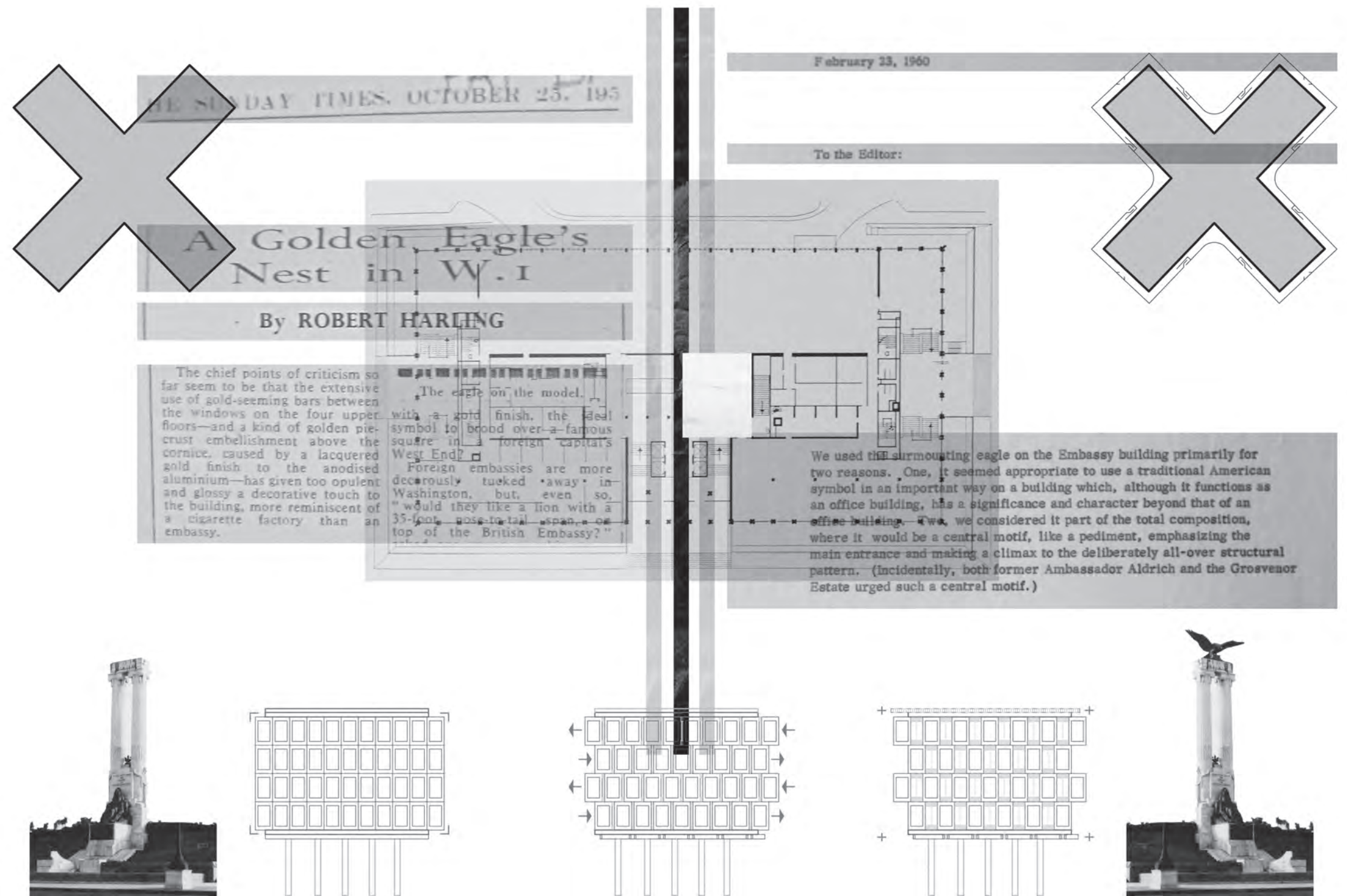


Figura 2. Nicholas Gervasi, "Architecture as Media" 2015, Jorge Otero-Pailos and Mark Rakatansky Advanced IV Studio at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.