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# critic|all

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on Architecture Design & Criticism

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**DIGITAL PROCEEDINGS**  
Delft 10-11 October

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# 01 Presentation

This 5th edition of Critic|all Conference consolidates the initiative that the Architectural Design Department of the Madrid School of Architecture at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (ETSAM-UPM) started ten years ago to provide an international forum for architectural criticism.

The Conference enhances its scope as a place for knowledge production from which to convene relevant voices around the proposed topic at each edition. This time, with a joint event co-organized with the Department of Architecture of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at the Delft University of Technology (BK-TU Delft).

We would like to thank all participants for their work and trust, as well as the members of the Scientific Committee for their effort and commitment.

We want to reinforce the idea contained in the conference's name. Critic|all is a *call on criticism*, and also a *call for all*. An appointment that, beyond the scope of each edition, we hope will be able to reinforce a more general debate on the role of architecture in the present context.

**Silvia Colmenares**  
Director of Critic|all

# 02

## Call for Papers

### *e(time)ologies* or the changing meaning of architectural words

The study of the origin and history of words has played a central role in the recurrent search for a deep, allegedly forgotten, meaning of architecture. The strikingly persistent and often problematic influence of Martin Heidegger's *Bauen Wohnen Denken* proves the fascination of architects with the ancestral power of words. The same fascination explains the equally recurrent urge to explore new meanings and invent new terms in architecture, in order to alleviate the weight of old cultural prejudices and connotations. Hence, etymological lines extend in two opposite time directions: one pointing to roots and sources, the other to future visions and transformations. Architectural thought oscillates between the illusory stability of conventional, present meanings, the mystery of remote, often obscure, connotations, and the poetic, creative drive of language invention. Choosing between communication (order) and noise (entropy), the opposite terms used by Umberto Eco, becomes a typically architectural problem, one which relates both to words and forms, terms and materials.

The heavy architecture-is-a-language fever of the 1960s is long overcome. Robin Evans' "all things with conceptual dimension are like language, as all grey things are like elephants" might suffice to prevent its return. However, the multiplication and transformation of architectural words has probably accelerated since then, pushed by the development of competitive research production. In fact, every research problem is, at its core, a problem of language, of word use and word definition. Research on the contemporary urban and architectural condition can be no exception.

Meaningful arguments about the changing meaning of architectural words need to address the role of language in the description of current matters and realities as well as its potential to unchain innovative perspectives and actions. New situations call for new terms as much as new terms provoke new situations. Today's interface of architecture with other disciplines is exemplary in this sense. The growing need to establish meaningful communication between experts from different fields fosters both codification and distortion of language, the homologation of terms and its expansion through translation and borrowing. In the first case, the descriptive precision is favoured to produce an objective (codified) system, whereas misunderstandings, metaphors and inaccuracies can lead to the generation of new knowledge and actions in the second. Such complexities are especially evident in the terminology emerging from practice-based or design-based research. In fact, the translation between visual and verbal signs, which is at the core of architectural practice, tends to obscure the distinction between descriptions and actions.

While the transdisciplinary context might certainly lead to an intensified look, in the last decades architecture has engaged in a process of expansion and adjustment led, in part, by new combinations of old keywords (ecology, landscape, urbanism, infrastructure, logistics...). Beyond disciplinary discourses, contemporary debates addressing the social, ecological and political connotations of architecture are providing a new set of critical words. Adjectives ("post-anthropocentric", "non-human", "inclusive", "transcultural") names ("decolonization", "decarbonization") and phrases ("climate change", "race and gender identity"...), have gained increasing visibility over the last two decades, both to inform and transform architecture's critical thinking. The proliferation of prefixes in many of them (post-, de-, trans-), denotes the urge to build new words and concepts from existing materials, pushed by the speed of contemporary culture. The problem of meaning persistence and change, but also of the tacit positions inscribed in words, can be exemplified by the crucial differences between "post-colonization" and "decolonization".

These and other terms are generated by a sequence of adjustments and oppositions, distortions and borrowings. The study of such processes, not in strict etymological terms but in a broader sense including the complex relations between words, practices, disciplines, is key to unveil the cultural and ideological positions behind current architectural debates. We propose to carry out this critique as a tool to explore today's emerging terminologies, and the ones to come.

The 5th edition of Critic|all Conference welcomes contributions that critically address the uses and misuses, the creation and wearing, the transformation and timeliness of the words with which architecture is – or has been – described, historized or updated through time. We expect interpretive work that draws new relations between words, concepts, things and practices, not strict etymological studies.

The most basic structure should present the expression or word under scrutiny, explain the reasons that justify the choice, formulate new interpretations or perspectives stemming from it, support these with arguments in the main body and bring the paper to a conclusion.

## 03

Conference  
Program

## TUESDAY 10-10-2023

All schedule indicates local time in Delft, NL (UTC/GMT +2 hours)

	09:15 - 09:30	Welcome and Presentation
<b>panel #1</b> <b>Revisited Terms</b>	09:30 - 11:00	Faculteit Bouwkunde TU Delft Berlagezaal 1
<b>Elisa Monaci</b> Università Iuav di Venezia, Italy	09:35	Kitsch. Learning from Ordinary Dreams of Architecture Critical Spatial Practices
<b>Francesca Gotti</b> Politecnico di Milano, Italy	09:50	Inhabiting an Ever-changing Term
<b>Jana Culek</b> Delft University of Technology, Netherlands University of Rijeka, Croatia	10:05	(Re)Defining Utopia. The Changing Concept of an Ideal World
<b>Carla Molinari (1) and Marco Spada (2)</b> (1) Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom (2) University of Suffolk, United Kingdom	10:20	Past and Future of Townscape. For a Humane Urbanism (*)
<b>Session Chair: Marcos Pantaleón</b> Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain	10:35 - 11:00	Discussion
<b>Welcome by BK Dean</b> <b>Dick van Gameren</b>	11:00	Berlagezaal 2
<b>Coffee Break</b>	11:00 - 11:30	Berlagezaal 2
<b>panel #2</b> <b>Modern Genealogies</b>	11:30 - 13:00	Berlagezaal 1
<b>J. Igor Fardin and Richard Lee Peragine</b> Politecnico di Torino, Italy	11:35	The promise(s) of sustainability
<b>Cássio Carvalho and Alexandra Alegre</b> Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal	11:50	Visions on Democratic Architecture
<b>Federico Costa</b> Universidade Estadual de Campinas & Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo, Brazil	12:05	Nostalgia for Backwardness. Investigating the Persistent Influence of Modernity on Brazilian Contemporary Architecture
<b>Öykü Şimşek</b> Istanbul Technical University, Turkey	12:20	Vulnerable architecture as a/n (im)material assemblage
<b>Session Chair: Heidi Sohn</b> Delft University of Technology, Netherlands	12:35 - 13:00	Discussion
<b>Lunch Break</b>	13:00 - 14:00	Berlagezaal 2
<b>panel #3</b> <b>Situated Terms</b>	14:00 - 16:00	Berlagezaal 1
<b>Mohammad Sayed Ahmad (1) &amp; Munia Hweidi (2)</b> (1) Tohoku University, Japan (2) Sophia University, Japan	14:05	Space, Makan, Kūkan. Phenomenology of Space through Etymology
<b>Khevna Modi</b> CEPT University, India Carnegie Mellon University, USA	14:20	Word, Associations, and Worldviews. A case of pol Architecture of Ahmedabad (*)
<b>Marine Zorea</b> Kyoto Institute of Technology, Japan Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Israel	14:35	Speaking of Collective Dining. The Spatial, Social and Semiotic Realities of the Kibbutz Dining Room
<b>Lola Lozano</b> Architectural Association, UK	14:50	Redistribution: Domestic space and Land Sharing in Mexico City's urban centre
<b>Hanxi Wang</b> Cornell University, USA University College London, UK	15:05	HOME-steading. Subversions, Reversions, and Divisions of the Moral Right to Space

<b>Session Chair: Janina Gosseye</b> Delft University of Technology, Netherlands	<b>15:20 - 16:00</b>	Discussion
Coffee Break	<b>16:00 - 16:30</b>	Berlagezaal 2
<b>panel #4</b> <b>Expanded Meanings</b>	<b>16:30 - 18:30</b>	Berlagezaal 1
<b>Clarissa Duarte and Mariana Magalhães Costa</b> Université Jean Jaurès (UT2J), France	<b>16:35</b>	From sustainable development to sustainable (urban) engagement: The evolution of a concept
<b>Haitam Daoudi</b> Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain	<b>16:50</b>	A relational approach to performance. Composition of meaning through Price and Ábalos
<b>Grayson Bailey</b> Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany Association for the Promotion of Cultural Practice in Berlin, Germany	<b>17:05</b>	Architecture / architectural
<b>Zeynep Soysal</b> Atılım University, Turkey	<b>17:20</b>	Platform: as an Architectural Ecotone Transtemporal
<b>Maria Kouvari and Regine Hess</b> ETH Zurich, Switzerland	<b>17:35</b>	Unlocking Time in the Architectural Discourse
<b>Session Chair: Alejandro Campos</b> Delft University of Technology, Netherlands	<b>17:50 - 18:30</b>	Discussion
Dinner	<b>19:00 - 21:30</b>	Huszár, Delft

(\*) presenting remotely

(\*\*) by express desire of the author the full article is not included in these digital minutes

## WEDNESDAY 11·10·2023

All schedule indicates local time in Delft, NL (UTC/GMT +2 hours)

<b>panel #5</b> <b>Projective Language</b>	<b>09:00 - 11:00</b>	Berlagezaal 1
<b>Cathelijne Nuijsink</b> Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA	<b>09:05</b>	Redefining Architecture from an Undecidable 'Anybody'. The Anybody Conference in Buenos Aires, 1996 (**)
<b>Caterina Padoa Schioppa</b> Sapienza University of Rome, Italy	<b>09:20</b>	Composting Death. Towards a Body Sublimation
<b>Federico Broggin and Annalisa Metta</b> University of RomaTre, Italy	<b>09:35</b>	Mundus. Designing landscape as wholeness, thickness, and fertility
<b>Silvia Calderoni</b> CIRSDe, Interdisciplinary Centre for Research and Studies on Women and Gender, Italy	<b>09:50</b>	Architecture, transfeminism, queerness: reimagining the urban space
<b>Marco Spada (1) and Carla Molinari (2)</b> (1) University of Suffolk, United Kingdom (2) Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom	<b>10:05</b>	Industrial Pastoralism. Post-productive arcadias in machine-modified landscapes
<b>Session Chair: Mariana Wilderom</b> Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil	<b>10:20 - 11:00</b>	Discussion
Coffee Break	<b>11:00 - 11:30</b>	Berlagezaal 2
<b>Keynote Lecture</b> <b>Albena Yaneva</b>	<b>11:30 - 12:30</b>	<b>Berlagezaal 1</b> <b>Don't Fly, Don't Jump:</b> <b>Critical Proximity in Architectural Research</b>
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<b>panel #6</b> <b>Translated Terms</b>	<b>13:30 - 15:30</b>	Berlagezaal 1
<b>Xuerui Wang</b> Tongji University, China	<b>13:35</b>	The Term "Architectural Art" in the 1950s Chinese Architectural Theory. A Semantic Transplantation (*)
<b>Miho Nakagawa</b> University of East London, United Kingdom	<b>13:50</b>	Analysing English translation of ma interpretations between the 1960s and 80s (**)
<b>Mustapha El Moussaoui</b> Free University of Bolzano, Italy	<b>14:05</b>	Going Back Home/House. Unravelling Linguistic and Existential Differences
<b>Marcela Aragüez</b> IE University, Spain	<b>14:20</b>	From Kankyō to Environment to Enbairamento. A Mutating Concept Between Intermedia Art and Architecture in Post-War Japan
<b>Ye Chen</b> Nagoya Institute of Technology, Japan	<b>14:35</b>	Comparison of Jiàngòu and Kekkō. Differences in Terminology Translations of Tectonic Between China and Japan in <i>Studies in Tectonic Culture</i>
<b>Session Chair: Marcos L. Rosa</b> Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil	<b>14:50 - 15:30</b>	Discussion
Coffee Break	<b>15:30 - 16:00</b>	Berlagezaal 2
<b>Round Table</b>	<b>16:00 - 17:15</b>	Berlagezaal 1
Break	<b>17:15 - 17:45</b>	
<b>Keynote Lecture</b> <b>Adrian Forty</b>	<b>17:45 - 18:45</b>	<b>Oostserre</b> <b>Words and Buildings Revisited</b>
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## 05

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Wolfe, Ivor de [Hugh de Cronin Hastings]. "Townscape: A Plea for an English Visual Philosophy Founded on the True Rock of Sir Uvedale Price." *The Architectural Review* 106, no. 636 (1949): 355-62.

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#### Biography

**Carla Molinari** is Senior Lecturer in Architecture and BA Course Leader at the Anglia Ruskin University. She teaches architectural history and theory, and Design Studio. Carla has a PhD in Theory and Criticism of Architecture, and has published on cinema and architecture, on the conception of architectural space, and on cultural regeneration. Before joining ARU in 2022, she taught at Leeds Beckett University, University of Gloucestershire, University of Liverpool, and University Sapienza of Rome. In 2020 she has been awarded a Paul Mellon Research Grant for her archival research on Gordon Cullen and in 2016, she was awarded a British Academy Fellowship by the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei for her research on Peter Greenaway and Sergei Eisenstein. Carla's research engages with architecture and media, innovative interpretations of montage and cinematic design methods, theory and history of space, and urban narrative strategies.

**Marco Spada** is an Architect (PhD, ARB, SFHEA) and Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Suffolk. He earned his PhD in 2016 from Sapienza University of Rome with a thesis on the relationship between memory and design in the rehabilitation of industrial plants. Marco specializes in urban narrative and complex sustainability, having studied at Roma Tre University, the University of Liverpool, and the Gdańsk University of Technology.

He carried out research activities in Rome, Tuscany, Poland, Kenya and the UK. Specialized in urban narrativity, sustainability and circular economy, he worked in Milan as Project Manager and Design Consultant. Last year, Marco has also obtained an EU Horizon Grant to study the impact of steel mills on local communities. Thanks to this funding, he was able to conduct field research, exploring how the steel industry has influenced the urban development of some cities in the UK and analysing the relationship between industrial plants and the local communities.

## Kitsch

### Learning from Ordinary Dreams of Architecture

#### Monaci, Elisa

Università Iuav di Venezia, Dipartimento di Culture del progetto, Venice, Italy, [emonaci@iuav.it](mailto:emonaci@iuav.it)

#### Abstract

Kitsch eludes definition, it is often associated with a negative meaning, confused as a synonym for "bad taste". Looking at the state of the art, the concept is traversed by a dual condition; on the one hand, it appears largely outdated, belonging to social and cultural conditions long gone; on the other hand, it seems to have recently returned inside the contemporary debate, which, overturning its meanings, proposes kitsch as an attitude that permeates many spheres of life: running secretly behind the dominant design culture, it now draws many of our spaces undisturbed (Belpoliti, Marrone 2020).

From the perspective of architecture, declinations of the word emerge that are still operative today: kitsch can be synonymous with "waste" and with "overuse" (Eco 1964); in the seduction of the invisible, of what remains hidden in the private, it promotes the power of the already known, of the "essentially conciliatory" (Mellini 1979), to design "restful and moderate spaces" (*ibidem*); it pursues the desire to build *Splendid Houses* (Superstudio 1971) for "immediate identification" (Greenberg 1938); but in kitsch there is also the simulation and copying of elements that determine authentically false operations, there is the power of the irritating and the traumatic as a form of design and the need to narrate new stories, even looking at the *Unbelievable* (Hirst 2017).

Through a methodology that will intersect the analysis of the many etymological outcomes of the word kitsch with some contemporary design experiences (such as Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu or the 2023 news about the construction of *Eternal City* a copy city of Samarkand), the contribution aims to define the legacy of kitsch and its possible design trajectories for the future, to retrace some commonplaces on architecture.

**Key words:** Kitsch, Architecture, Desire, Commonplaces, Narration.

## 1. Introduction

Kitsch eludes definition, it is often associated with a negative meaning, confused as a synonym for “bad taste”. Looking at the state of the art, the concept is traversed by a dual condition; on the one hand, it appears largely outdated, belonging to social and cultural conditions long gone; on the other hand, it seems to have recently returned inside the contemporary debate, which, overturning its meanings, proposes kitsch as an attitude that permeates many spheres of life: running secretly behind the dominant design culture, it now draws many of our spaces undisturbed<sup>1</sup>. From the perspective of architecture, declinations of the word emerge that are still operative today: kitsch can be synonymous with “waste”<sup>2</sup> and with “overuse”<sup>3</sup>; “simulation and copying of elements”<sup>4</sup>, “alteration of context”<sup>5</sup>, it is a synonym for “authentically false”<sup>6</sup>, in the seduction of the invisible, of what remains hidden in the private, it promotes the power of the already known, of the “essentially conciliatory”<sup>7</sup>, to design “restful and moderate spaces”<sup>8</sup>; it pursues the desire to build *Splendid Houses*<sup>9</sup> for “immediate identification”<sup>10</sup>; but in kitsch there is also the simulation and copying of elements that determine authentically false operations, there is the power of the irritating and the traumatic as a form of design and the need to narrate new stories<sup>11</sup>, even looking at the *Unbelievable*<sup>12</sup>. In these terms it becomes a parameter through which to systematise certain contemporary design dynamics and a possible tool through which to read the reality where we are immersed<sup>13</sup>.

Apart from art and literature, it has been in 20th century architecture, that kitsch was most widely deployed through Postmodernist design and criticism (i.e., Charles Moore, Alessandro Mendini, Michael Graves, Ettore Sottsass). More recently, it seems to have become an exclusively negative term leading contemporary architects to make it their theoretical banner rarely ever. In fact, there is a kitsch, which we may call “traditional”, that today has been appropriated by society, as a result, it is not recognised as kitsch anymore and it no longer has the deliberate and irritating effect that it had from the 19th century to the end of the 20th century. For example, garden gnomes or front-lawn pink flamingos – popular domestic kitsch embellishments – are emblems of the American class struggle and are objects that have become fashionable today and attracted a cult-like appreciation. The garden gnomes (or dwarf) have been reified as evidenced by Philippe Starck’s design for Kartell, a process by which the object has now been cleared through customs of approved consumer tastes. Moreover, kitsch was linked to the concept of middle class, which seems to have been lost in recent decades, thanks to class struggles and the loss of rigid subdivisions of social classes. Consequently, we now have multiple cultures, which means that kitsch is defined differently depending on the point of view of that particular social condition<sup>14</sup>.

However, some characteristics of kitsch from the last century endure in the contemporary world. Today, kitsch is used as an adjective to describe a gap between the initial intention and the reality of something, no matter if we are talking about objects, space, culture, or politics. It follows that kitsch has an effect that depends on several factors: it depends on viewpoint; it differs according to the historical period; and geographical and cultural context. Moreover, kitsch does not have an absolute effect but rather results from the differentiation between reality and expectations that is registered by those who look at it. Recently, there has been a revival of certain design and urban operations that have characterised “traditional” kitsch – and which see in *Learning from Las Vegas* their theoretical cornerstone<sup>15</sup>. Three cases are worth mentioning: the recent copy in seventeen hectares of land of the city of Samarkand near the original, which bears the eloquent name of Eternal City and functions as a tourist and trade attraction without affecting the city’s historic centre. Constructed by imitating the image of the iconic city, the copy preserves historical sites from too many tourists. Along these lines, the second case is the recent copy of the Roman Trevi fountain in Serra Nera near Sao Paolo in Brazil. The monument is built to pay homage to the country’s Italian emigrants and to attract visitors who experience an “Italian holiday” just close to their home, in a play of decontextualization, unreality and irony. The third example concerns the recent work of disguising many representative buildings in the city of Skopje in order to transform them into a classical language and thus give them greater monumentality. Copying, disguise, decontextualization are some of the mechanisms that kitsch enacts in the project and that still pose a series of questions for architecture. These are the main actions used by Ludwig II in Baviera, who is known to be the first father of the term kitsch and of kitsch architecture: the use of non-authentic materials or materials used differently from the usual conventions, the predominance of intermingling of styles and architectural forms, the copying of castles and palaces from other countries (such as the castle of Herrenchiemsee imitating that of Versailles), the decontextualization of its architecture in relation to the surrounding landscape, the concealment of artificial elements mimicking nature (such as the grotto of Venus in Linderhof Castle, a copy of the Grotta Azzurra in Capri). But above all, the narration of stories was the main tool with which Ludwig’s castles were built, not surprisingly he used to work with scenographers designers. Although the design actions implemented for the castles in Bavaria are not exclusive to kitsch, they help to better understand the sum of design actions that define such a multifaceted term.

My research on kitsch architecture starts than with an analysis of the major contributions written about kitsch, mainly in the artistic and literary fields. I have done this in order to extrapolate the terms and

the actions that could compose the design categories that kitsch establishes in contemporary architecture. In this essay, I focus on three etymologies, that deals with three corresponding design condition of the contemporary, and that allow me to identify theoretical and project trajectories for architecture. The aim is therefore not to re-cast the term within a new definition – moving the word from “bad taste” to something else – but rather to record the facets of this complex system of design actions and relationships within the contemporary contest, in which kitsch seems to be increasingly pervasive.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology is defined by a first phase of analysis and study of the definitions and etymological categories of the words, delving into its possible moments of birth, with the main aim of demolishing the negative meaning that the term has had to date. This operation has entailed extrapolating words and extracts from the bibliographic selection that broaden the spectrum of kitsch and allow a wider reading of it in the light of its role in architectural design.

From the process of extrapolating and selecting the extracts, three main categories were established that define three areas of design investigation. The categories have been synthesised to return three contemporary design issues that kitsch brings to light and make it operative again on the architectural project: the first category investigates the design of the ordinary, always looking inward, and is thus defined by a focus on the domestic (it is inside the private space, away from social conventions, that kitsch has more power: in the house the personal desire can have more space of action); the second category concentrates on the theme of falsification and reproduction of architecture, observing contradictions and drifts of the operation of simulation and copying (kitsch is confronted, in its very original meaning, with a copy of a drawing – a sketch – that aims at reproducing an “original” one); finally, the third category summarises the role and relationship of the project with its context, and is thus defined by a dual movement that in confronting what is outside tends to define its own inner identity (as ready-made art has thought us: what is relevant is the context in which the art work is placed that powers its meaning, making the difference between a common object or a piece of art).

The contribution aims to define the design legacy of kitsch and its possible design trajectories for the future, to retrace some commonplaces on architecture.

## 3. Inside the Term: Short Excursus on Kitsch

Before exploring the contemporary design legacy of kitsch, a brief journey into the origin of the word and its uncertain etymology is necessary. Various authors (such as Clement Greenberg, Ernst Broch, Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco) have been confronted with the arduous task of defining the term kitsch, which has no single rigid definition or etymological origin. To summarise the definitions and meanings, Matei Calinescu partly encompasses the many meanings of the word: “The German word derives from the English ‘sketch’, mispronounced by artists in Munich and applied derogatorily to those cheap images bought as souvenirs by tourists” but also “Its possible origin should be looked for in the German verb *verkitschen*, meaning [...] ‘to make cheap’. [...] The hypothesis links kitsch to the German verb *kitschen*, in the sense of ‘collecting rubbish from the street’”<sup>16</sup>.

Kitsch then originally appears as a way to escape from the conventions and from what was considered the high culture and art. One of the first analysis of kitsch in relation to art was developed by Clement Greenberg in his essay, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. In it, he develops the idea of looking at what is behind an avant-garde, i.e., kitsch, the cultural phenomenon that give voice to the popular and the commercial: “Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits”<sup>17</sup>.

From this moment, therefore, art, in its various forms, enters everyone’s daily life and allows a continuous mixing of spaces and messages between artistic objects and everyday objects: “Leonardo’s Mona Lisa is not kitsch, but so are the endless reproductions of it sold by the stationer. The same goes for Gropius’ terraced houses or mass-produced furniture: quantity does not escape the banal. [...] The first conscious symptom that a theory of the ‘authentically false’ may rightfully exist”<sup>18</sup>. This declination of kitsch thus assumes a dual relationship with the theme of necessity: kitsch is an element added outside the strictly necessary, it is often added a posteriori but, at the same time, it is always an element with a defined use and the result of an everyday and banal need: originally, kitsch objects are lighters, key rings, ashtrays, kitchen aprons, plates, cups. The addition of convenience, extra space and functions beyond the strictly necessary, are actions that contribute to an increase in the degree of comfort. This allows the individual, on the one hand, to conceive their private space as a place tailored to their personal needs and, on the other hand, to give voice to a desire for redemption and revenge against a predetermined, standardised space. The “easy catharsis”<sup>19</sup> that emerges within the definitions of kitsch implies an easy understanding of the message that the project carries, this aspect will be detailed further on in the etymological analyse.

Having articulated what kitsch is and does, I next investigate kitsch as a tool for architecture, the next three paragraphs will go deeper inside three etymologies outcomes of the world kitsch that



concentrates on three design actions of our present. The three case studies differ in having three different scales and ranging from the most private to the most public: a private house, a shop and a public space of a shopping centre.

#### 4. Etymology Outcome I: Ordinary

An issue that repeatedly emerges from the definitions of kitsch defines a very close relationship with the private sphere and the small scale of the project. The flat, the garden, the backyard are the places within which personal needs reign without mediation, deprived of a relationship with an external context, more demanding in terms of regulation of behaviour and appearances. The sphere of the domestic, in accordance with some of the definitions of kitsch, is “essentially conciliatory”<sup>20</sup> because it holds together the practical needs of everyday life and the desires for luxury and appropriation of a place by the individual who uses it. Private space puts one at ease and welcomes, this aspect implies an “immediate identification”<sup>21</sup> with the place that conforms to one’s personal needs and connotes one’s way of living. As Alessandro Mendini states: “Kitsch (understood as a way of life tending to satisfy every new need) is described as essentially conciliatory; its preferences go to mediocrity, to what can be accepted without effort [...]; the spatial sphere of the man-kitsch is the flat”<sup>22</sup>.

Kitsch in this case corresponds to what Moles calls the “not too much progress”<sup>23</sup>, i.e. the need not to innovate too much through design, therefore to design moderate conditions. It thus concerns the design of those places of everyday life often left on the margins, such as the courtyards of apartment buildings, cellars, small gardens, wasted urban spaces. The operations of miniaturization within the scales of the domestic, of accumulation of references and of souvenirs, come together to delineate spaces that, chasing the desire of those who realise them, escape disciplinary codification, evade the rules, determine appropriations based on the imaginary and no longer on the real datum.

Among many projects that deal with the sphere of the domestic desire, detailed analysis should be made of the A12 home project in Madrid by Lucas y Hernández-Gil architects<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1

The project involves conversion of a commercial space into a residential and office space on two floors covering 380 square metres. The two floors are complementary and opposing, especially in the choice of colours, reminiscent of Rothko as the architects stated, and are interconnected by a series of double

volumes and skylights and windows which increase the passage of light and the spatial relationship. The courtyard-garden, which “functions as an urban oasis”<sup>25</sup>, is located in the basement and takes light from the atrium of the house through metal gratings. The garden is configured as an artificial landscape in which the plants are immersed in an orange pavement reminiscent of a desert or of a beach whose overly bright colour immediately reveals its artificiality and declares itself in the desire to alter space and context. The plants stretch out towards the grille and light and they contrast with the metal and the artificial lighting. The oasis, as the architects define it, is the metaphysical, surreal space to which the whole house turns to, and from which connections are made with the sleeping space. This aspect defines the comings and goings between the foreign and exotic place of the courtyard garden and the aseptic space of the bedroom, conceived as separate artificial landscapes which look at each other and contaminate each other in their uses and colours. This is also evident from the architects’ words: “A landscaped interior English courtyard that receives light from the street filtered by a latticework creating a kind of oasis, a tropical garden of surreal character is connected to the lower level of the house”<sup>26</sup>.

Kitsch in this project is conceived as a design tool capable of enhancing unused or unimportant spaces, such as the courtyard below the atrium facing the entrance on the street, almost a gully, which become a place in which to discuss the imagery of the home and increase resonance, thus enhancing spatiality instead of mortifying it. The mix of the artificial and the natural, contaminating plants and vegetation from different places, as contrasting materials defines a new interior landscape that can rethink the space of the domestic. The oasis of orange carpet, plants and metal directly overlooks the room, making it possible to sleep in an artificial desert, and contaminating a technical space, solving problems of humidity and lighting, with a classic domestic space in which the two looks at each other and define a new interior landscape: a controlled but at the same time imaginative domestic nature.

#### 5. Etymology Outcome II: Simulation

Multiple definitions and etymological derivations link kitsch to the concept of the false and falsification of reality. The work that kitsch accomplishes through the negation of the authentic or through the reproduction of the original is thus emphasised. In some definitions, kitsch is exposed as an operation of disguise and masking of the original appearance of the artefact or operations of mimesis. Originally, the expression “selling something else instead of what was expressly requested”<sup>27</sup> implied an act of deception aimed at confusing reality. In the contemporary, on the contrary, kitsch no longer takes on the meaning of cheating, but is deliberately sought after inside design. Its character is voluntary and determines the triggering of new spatial conditions, in this sense it can be defined as “authentically fake”<sup>28</sup>. In Moles words: “Kitsch thus appears extraordinarily democratic: acceptable art, that which does not shock our spirit with a transcendence outside everyday life, with an effort that surpasses us. When art is out of measure, kitsch dilutes originality to a degree sufficient for everyone to accept it”<sup>29</sup>. The simulation aims at mimesis with the found environment to leave the status quo of the found condition unchanged, avoiding any form of disturbance, as we read again from Moles. However, the disguise enacted is never fully completed and resolved, it leaves margins of error or inaccuracy, suggesting the mismatch of the new elements in their new environment. The spatial dynamics of the simulations, through the “substitution of original materials”, are aimed at constructing situations that give rise to “unnatural, inauthentic behaviour”<sup>30</sup>. Corresponding to this spectrum of definitions of kitsch is the investigation into the artificialization of elements, the copying and reproduction of spaces from elsewhere and the camouflage and disguise of architectural appearances. Its methodology of action constantly oscillates between the ambiguous and the overtly false, between the efficient reproduction that surpasses the original and the copy without origin. Kitsch falsifies and reproduces architecture and its elements to increase its ambiguity and makes use of the promiscuity between true and false, between authentic and reproduced.

The Twiggy shop by Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu, realised in Gent in 2011, is particularly noteworthy concerning these aspects of kitsch (Fig. 2). The project involves the conversion of a 19th-century office building into a shop and apartment building. The pre-existence is kept apparently unchanged, a new building body housing the staircase juts out to occupy part of the courtyard space. This addition of volume is an opportunity for the architects to stage a sort of *trompe l’œil*: the new body appears to be a cut-out of the existing wall, an extrusion that does not take into account windows, cornices and other elements of the façade, that are reproduced by precisely following the “cut” of the projecting volume require<sup>31</sup>. The same procedure is repeated in the interior spaces where windows take the place of doors, removed ceilings float fireplaces and skirting boards that are now useless, old doors that are no longer needed are flanked by new openings in the walls, determining a choice to be made in order to cross the room, windows interrupt cornices and open up unexpected glimpses of double volumes. Everything seems to possibly change meaning and use, undergoing transformation, ready to question its own certainties and appearance: it is a place that question our commonplaces on architecture.

In the intervention, the boundary between the pre-existing and the new is continually challenged and redesigned, the mismatch between what was already there and what has been added is a sensation



that the architects intentionally construct in the visitor: simulation is pervasive. As the designers themselves state, it is desire that drives the transformation of space: "It is the ambition of the store that requires more, a store from top to bottom. This is a desire as well as a matter of practical objections. [...] The old staircase connects the floors but also separates them. No single floor is visible from the other. It is desired that the house feels as a unity with a better visibility"<sup>32</sup>.

From the simulation of what was already present, and the consequent triggering of a mutual mirroring between original and copy, the architects stage a reflection on possible design actions when operating in a historical context characterised by many previous histories. Operating on the borderline between the "unusual" / "uncanny" and the "recognisable" / "already known", the new intervention is hidden and at the same time perfectly evident: it is up to the eye of the observer to decide which narrative to follow.



Fig. 2

### 6. Etymology Outcome III: Decontextualise

Kitsch emerges in many of the definitions analysed as a term with a relationship of opposition and decontextualization from its context. The actions are for instance: temporal and spatial manipulation, the dimensional variation of its components and of the scale of the context, and the use of materials with chromatic and formal relationship with pre-existences. The definitions are full of operations such as: "anachronistic alteration of the context (chronological or ideological)"<sup>33</sup>, "decontextualization"<sup>34</sup>, "inability to blend the quotation into the new context"<sup>35</sup>, "overpowering the context"<sup>36</sup> which constitute a reference to the relationship that kitsch establishes with its environment. Dorfles explains the approach of kitsch to its surrounding: "Decontextualization of a sign as a means of enhancing the effectiveness of an artistic message: poetry, music, painting, often make use of this artifice of removing a work of art or part of it from its normal context and placing it elsewhere, thus alienating the message and increasing its informative power"<sup>37</sup>.

Decontextualization allows the project's narrative to be enhanced over the real datum of the space, reality is thus made interpretable, the place is open to interpretation in different senses, and so what matters is the imagery that the kitsch action superimposes on it, the metaphor that overcomes the vicissitudes of the place. These overlapping metaphors are used in the recent Tainan Spring project

completed in 2020 by MVRDV, with The Urbanists Collaborative and Progressive Environmental Inc. in the city of Taiwan (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3

The intervention transfigures the 54,600 square metres of a former shopping centre built in the 1980s into an urban lagoon, a rewriting of the many copies of Venice with the absence, in this case, of its architectural symbols in favour of the reproduction of some of its spatial dynamics. The lagoon is connoted by a fabric of sand dunes that articulate the large pool of water, the project makes use of the introversion of the courtyard space that is created inside the shopping centre as an external place, but one that is separated from the urban context.

The image that is created is that of an abandoned space in which the lagoon has re-emerged from underground by chance due to natural events and to the course of time. The artificiality of the project is total: apart from the vegetation installed in a few well-defined spots, the dunes are artificially constructed and equipped with a vaporiser and a system for raising and lowering the water – which is also artificially clear in colour – to simulate a natural trend of the tide, responding to the seasons and weather forecasts.

The project plays on a double field of interpretation. The characteristic of unexpectedness and estrangement created by the internal conformation of the intervention makes the behaviour of the people modify, who therefore move and enjoy the space as if in a place by the sea, on holiday. The place seems to be very far from the urban one they have just left when they crossed the door of the building, triggering a desire for elsewhere. The unexpected change in the conformation of the space, mainly due to the raising and lowering of the pool's water level, determines a degree of adventure and uncertainty that defines a verisimilitude with a natural environment, a form of *mimesis* and reproduction that recalls 19th-century landscape practices or, more recently, the great American theme parks. On the one hand, therefore, reality is imitated to the point of reproducing even its degrees of uncertainty and danger; on the other hand, the obviously circumscribed and artificial context tends to make the space resemble a playground, defining an inseparable duality between adventure and reassurance, between hyper-reality and dream.

The translation to the East of the concept of reuse and connection with history that is typical of the European continent is one of the elements on which the Dutch architects' project plays, defining a decontextualization and a geographical vector that imprints a design mode on another continent<sup>38</sup>. The project thus works on the forcing, even ironic, re-emergence of traces from Tainan's history, such as the relationship with water and with the natural landscape just outside the city, which is re-proposed through vegetation and a tamed water. At the same time, this European-style design approach is contaminated and enriched by the imagery of a playground and artificial nature, which has been widespread on the Asian continent. The collision of the two design approaches defines a new

trajectory in which reality and imagery add up and blur, defining an impossibility of separation between intentionality and involuntariness in the design process.

## 7. Conclusion: design/desire

The journey inside this untranslatable and contradictory term shows a constellation of possible declinations rich in meanings and tools for the contemporary. Questioning kitsch and its design actions allows us to also question certain dynamics that run through our private and public spaces in order to redesign them accordingly. At the end of this short journey, we are certainly far from the reductive meaning of “bad taste” that the word has had for a long time, and we begin to re-evaluate it as a useful term to reinsert within the architectural vocabulary.

It is from the collision of different metaphors that kitsch comes to redesign the spaces of individual and collective desire, to stage ambitions and imaginaries, conflicts and tensions, as well as dreams and fantasies: actually, it is an irritating term precisely because it is generous. Through “restful and moderate” actions, apparently naive and of *loisir*, it brings out the substratum of the hidden desires of all of us and puts them in the form of a constructed space, visible to all. In these terms, then, the narration of space is what enhances the desire and the imaginary one has of that same place. There is always a choice to be made, either to believe the story told, to let the imaginary prevail over reality, or to use the space in a functional way, as a use value. It is a choice that is made in a double phase: the first is the moment of designing the story and the space, the second phase is that made by each inhabitant in deciding whether to follow the narration or the use value of the space. After all, this is what happens with every kitsch object: the Eiffel Tower keyring is a souvenir that allows its owner to make a daily trip to somewhere else, it is a symbol, otherwise, on the contrary, it is the tool that allows him to easily retrieve his house keys, it is a simple element of use. As is the case with A12 house, where the underground space can serve only for the ventilation of the bedroom or it can become a place within which to make a journey to an elsewhere, the same principle applies to the artificial lagoon of Tainan Spring and the inner courtyard of Twiggy Shop.

This is the mechanism enacted also in the exhibition of the wreck of the *Unbelievable* by Damien Hirst – which let us return to the beginning of our discourse – where the visitor makes a choice between believing what is displayed in the museum or registering the gap between the fictitious narrative and reality. At the same time, it defines the need to design new stories that are the trigger of the architectural project and that allow for the construction of new imaginaries for the space. Kitsch is the tool that can “tell stories”, as we have seen from some definitions of the word, and in doing so it overcomes the factual condition of space, designing desires.

The kitsch narrative of the project introduces the disjointed montage of different places and times, reinforcing this intrinsic characteristic of each space to become a world in itself and to impose its own narrative. By blurring the boundaries between reality and imaginary, and between authentic and reproduced, the narrative constructs *new landscapes* that are the result of both close-up glances at the places to be redesigned and long-perspective glances at impossible or unattainable spaces, which converge to define new configurations of architecture. Now that the contemporary increasingly seems to show how “the ‘all true’ is identified with the ‘all false’”<sup>39</sup>, kitsch reveals itself as one of the possible strategies of action on reality. Kitsch is therefore about added volumes that mimic the context, desert oasis inside the bedroom, lagoon in the neighbourhood: it is architecture about *desires*.

## Notes

- 1 Marco Belpoliti, Gianfranco Marrone, eds., *Kitsch* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020).
- 2 Matei Calinescu, *Five faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 234-235.
- 3 Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati* (Milano: Bompiani, 1964), 100.
- 4 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in Idem, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 22. The essay first appeared in “Partisan review”, no. 6, 1939; Yves-Alen Bois, “Kitsch” in Idem, Rosalind Kraus, *Formless. A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 114-122.
- 5 Gillo Dorfles, *Il Kitsch. Antologia del cattivo gusto* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1968), 19.
- 6 Alessandro Mendini, “Introduzione. Per un'architettura banale” in Abraham Moles, *Il Kitsch. L'arte della felicità* (Roma: Officina, 1979).
- 7 *Ibidem*.
- 8 *Ibidem*.
- 9 *Superstudio. Opere 1966-1978*, ed. Gabriele Mastrigli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016).
- 10 Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 26.
- 11 Belpoliti and Marrone, eds., *Kitsch*.
- 12 Damien Hirst, *Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, ed. Elena Guena (Venezia: Marsilio, 2017).
- 13 Kitsch was the subject of the PhD thesis discussed in April 2022 at Sapienza University of Rome entitled *Kitsch Landscapes. Artifices and Nature In Contemporary Design*.
- 14 On the complex relationship between kitsch and society, see at least: Dorfles, *Il Kitsch*; Belpoliti and Gianfranco, eds., *Kitsch*.
- 15 Venturi Robert, Scott Brown Denise, Izenour Steven, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1972).
- 16 Calinescu, *Five faces of Modernity*, 234-235.
- 17 Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 9-10.
- 18 Mendini, “Introduzione. Per un'architettura banale”.
- 19 Calinescu, *Five faces of Modernity*, 227.
- 20 Mendini, “Introduzione. Per un'architettura banale”.
- 21 Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 26.
- 22 Mendini, “Introduzione. Per un'architettura banale”.
- 23 “As a universal, well-known and widespread concept, the term Kitsch corresponds to a style that was present at the moment of its aesthetic genesis, to a style that makes one feel the absence of any style; it corresponds to a function of comfort that has been added unnecessarily to the traditional functions of the object; it corresponds to a ‘but not too much’ in progress.” Moles, *Il Kitsch*, 27.
- 24 Among the domestic space projects nominated for the 2021 Mies van der Rohe award, see <https://www.miesarch.com>, accessed May 6, 2021.
- 25 See project's description in <https://eumiesaward.com/work/4674>, accessed May 6, 2021.
- 26 *Ibidem*.
- 27 Moles, *Il Kitsch*, 27.
- 28 Mendini, “Introduzione. Per un'architettura banale”.
- 29 Moles, *Il Kitsch*, 46.
- 30 “In attributive or predicative function (and usually with a lower case initial): *k. taste, k. furnishings, k. objects*; extensively, referring to a person, *being k.* (and analogously *attitude, behaviour k.*), not to be oneself, to assume unnatural, inauthentic attitudes or behaviour, to dress in a conspicuously eccentric manner of dubious taste, to follow a fashion.” Treccani Online Dictionary accessed February 20, 2022.
- 31 It is precisely the staircase that provides the opportunity to design an addition of space between surrealism and the play of irony with history. See in particular: Francesca Belloni, “Ceci n'est pas un escalier. Twiggy e il surrealismo di Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu | Ceci n'est pas un escalier. Twiggy and the Surrealism of Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu,” *Vesper. Rivista di architettura, arti e teoria | Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory*, no. 8 (Spring-Summer 2023): 52-61.
- 32 See <https://divisare.com/projects/237926-de-vylder-vinck-taillieu-jo-taillieu-jan-de-vylder-inge-vinck-filip-dujardin-twiggy>, accessed April 30, 2023.
- 33 *Kitsch* in Treccani Online Dictionary.
- 34 Dorfles, *Il Kitsch*, 19.
- 35 Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, 110.
- 36 *Ibidem*.
- 37 Dorfles, *Il Kitsch*, 19.
- 38 One registers this design intention especially from the words of Winy Maas: “In Tainan Spring, people can bathe in the overgrown remains of a shopping mall. Children will soon be swimming in the ruins of the past.” [www.mvrdv.nl/projects/272/tainan-spring](http://www.mvrdv.nl/projects/272/tainan-spring), accessed December 10, 2022.
- 39 Umberto Eco, *Nel cuore dell'impero. Viaggio nell'iperrealtà* in Idem, *Dalla periferia dell'impero. Cronache di un nuovo medioevo* (Milano: Bompiani, 1977), 17.

## Figures

- Fig. 1. Lucas y Hernández Gil, A12 House, Madrid 2019. Ph. José Hevia.  
 Fig. 2. Jan De Vylder, Inge Vinck, Jo Taillieu, Twiggy Shop, Gent 2011. Ph. Filip Dujardin.  
 Fig. 3. MVRDV, Tainan Spring, Tainan 2020. Ph. Daria Scagliola.

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### Biography

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## Going Back Home/House Unravelling Linguistic and Existential Differences

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### Abstract

The concept of "inhabiting" a space or a "dwelling" has proven contentious in architectural theory and practice. Although the existential significance of dwelling in a space has been innate in humans since the beginning of time, only in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century it was highlighted philosophically by Martin Heidegger. The conference paper "Building dwelling thinking" by Heidegger is an important philosophical work that inspired architects. The philosopher looked up the word's etymology to get at its core meaning and use. As an etymological archaeologist, Heidegger worked back and forth in the core meaning of the word until he connected it to, Being-in-this-world and Being-towards-death. Through an analysis of the Arabic parables "Maskan" and "Manzel," this study aims to provide a more nuanced explanation of the word "dwelling" by drawing connections between the word's etymological finding in Heidegger's philosophy and the term's meaning in the Arabic language and culture. In this paper, I examine architectural typologies that corresponded to both existential meanings according to inhabitants of a certain region.

**Key words:** Dwelling, Manzel, Arabic, Heidegger, Being-towards-Deaths.