

The Primacy of Collage: The Crisis of Representation and the Truth of Hermeneutics in 1970s Architecture Culture

Abstract

Usually, architects such as Robert Venturi and Rem Koolhaas are seen as opposites—as belonging to entirely different camps in the architecture of the 1970s. This idea was popularized by Charles Jencks, who regarded Venturi and Scott Brown as “historicists”, whereas Koolhaas and OMA were placed in the category of “ad hoc urbanism”.

This paper argues that if we stick to stylistic categories only, or to narrow ideological assessments, we will fail to understand the crisis of representation that prompted these architects to think anew—with collage. Thus, this paper instead proposes to examine the phenomenon of collage in a much broader sense, arguing that collage was not merely a random aesthetic tool available to architects in the 1970s; its popularity in this period was rather the culmination of the changing status of ‘truth’ in aesthetic representation.

In Thomas P. Brockelman’s book on collage, *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and Postmodernism* (2001), Rowe and Koolhaas have been included in the book’s search for ‘collage’ as an active principle in many media. What Brockelman aims to show is that the emergence of collage techniques testifies to a crisis of representation, and that collage aesthetics mean combining representational and non-representational (fragments of reality) dimension into one work of art, architecture, or urbanism.

If we accept Brockelman’s notion that collage is not only a formal strategy but rather an epistemological response to the problem of representation brought about by the experience of (post)modernity, we are able to see the radical developments of the 1970s in a new light—as projects depending on a *hermeneutics* for their qualities to come forth. In continuation of this line of thought, this article argues that Odo Marquard’s formulation of a skeptical hermeneutics aligns with these developments.

It concludes that Venturis' strategy of *appliqué*, Ungers's archipelago model, Rowe and Koetter's project of aesthetic negotiation, and Koolhaas's Surrealist montages share a common ground, and this ground is an acceptance of the need for a new, two-way, split, double-coded, or open-ended representation. However, such double coding is far removed from Jencks's stylistic concepts. Thus, by exploring key projects of this period, by these architects, this paper sets out to explore the deeper impact of collage on forms of representation in 1970s architecture and urbanism.

Keywords

Postmodernism, Collage, Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Rem Koolhaas; Oswald Mathias Ungers; Colin Rowe; Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown