



COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

eug

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of broad, expressive brushstrokes in various shades of teal and dark blue. A prominent, dark, textured square, resembling a piece of fabric or a different material, is positioned in the center-right area, overlapping the brushstrokes.

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TOMO I

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a la era digital

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(EDS.)

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del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

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From Physical to Digital: The Impact of Twenty Years of Web 2.0 on Architecture

De físico a digital: el impacto de veinte años de Web 2.0 en la Arquitectura

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Abstract

Han pasado dos décadas desde la irrupción de la Web 2.0, una revolución participativa que ha reconfigurado la comunicación y la forma en que se difunde la arquitectura. Sin embargo, esta transformación no está exenta de desafíos significativos: las reglas algorítmicas de la Web 2.0 enfatizan la viralidad y el sensacionalismo, desviando el discurso arquitectónico de los dibujos técnicos hacia la imagen. En este nuevo paisaje comunicativo, los arquitectos deben cautivar a la audiencia, estar al tanto de las tendencias y redefinir el propósito del diseño. Ejemplos como Casa Brutale, diseñada “para romper internet”, y Steven Chilton, que ganó reconocimiento y encargos en línea, ejemplifican esta realidad cambiante. Además, surgen nuevas figuras: los Diseñadores Muy Importantes, celebridades que incursionan en la arquitectura. Paralelamente, las firmas arquitectónicas se convierten en marcas, compitiendo en un entorno cada vez más orientado al marketing.

Twenty years have passed since the advent of Web 2.0, a participatory revolution that has transformed communication, giving rise to fresh approaches to how architecture is conveyed. This paradigm shift is not without its significant caveat: the algorithmic rules governing web 2.0 emphasize virality and sensationalism. This phenomenon has steered architectural discourse away from technical drawings in favour of imagery. In this altered communication landscape, architects must now possess the ability to engage audiences, attention to prevailing trends, and even redefine design purposes. Evidenced by examples such as Casa Brutale, designed “to break the internet”, and Steven Chilton, which garnered recognition and commissions through online exposure. Moreover, this evolving landscape has given rise to new figures, Very Important Designers: celebrities who conceptualize products for fashion and design brands and are now venturing into the world of architecture. Similarly, architectural firms have transformed into brands, competing in an increasingly marketing-oriented environment.

Keywords

Comunicación arquitectónica, redes sociales, web 2.0, diseño arquitectónico, arquitectura digital

Architectural communication, social media, web 2.0, architectural design, digital architecture

Communication, Web 2.0 and Architecture

One topic that distinguishes digital contemporaneity, and which architecture must face, is that of communication. The impalpable digital infrastructures are contributing to the liquefaction of society, pushing towards the indeterminacy of space, dissociating the cultural and personal dimensions, even affective¹, within which we structure our identity. This is visible on a personal level to anyone who owns a smartphone, a tool that makes us connected and constantly available to the world and has become one of the main ways we interface with society. Just as is evident in larger groups: companies, institutions and governments, which communicate, internally and externally, through exclusively digital media. The digital dimension guarantees not only the accuracy of information, and instantaneous communication but also, above all, it allows control over processes and operations otherwise impossible analogically. All utilities of sure interest for any company that, driven by the market and by legislative activity, is today, many times, obliged to communicate via digital means². It is, therefore, possible to distinguish at least two levels of external communication: a first private and corporate level, describable as a network of partners and institutions with which the company communicates to carry out activities linked to corporate purposes, and a second level, the public one. A distinction increasingly blurred today, as observable in digital communication practices, which with the 2.0 paradigm have allowed every web user to interact, and instantly share any type of content, taking part in the collective evolution of the internet. Today, each individual has an infinite number of platforms and stages available on which to structure an image of himself: a digital twin, made up of profiles where he builds his representation, similar to what was already done before digital, by public figures and organisations. In this sense, each of us has become a public figure, whose identity can be reconstructed starting from the information available on the internet, like any celebrity, company or institution. Furthermore, if in the pre-digital era reputation was the sum of values deriving from the structures of society, today these values have dissolved in digital participation. This condition has favoured the emergence of new voices, characters and companies, which, strengthened by recognition by the digital public, acquire a liquid, sometimes inconsistent authority, even superior to that of reliable sources. How, then, do these new communication paradigms influence the complex and stratified world of architecture? First of all, it should be remembered that the architectural project is imbued with communication. The productive contribution required of the architect by society is in fact that of carrying out architectural projects, capable of technically communicating meanings that others will make material. Various authors assimilate architecture into a language, investigable according to the tools and methods of semiotics, such as Umberto Eco who even defines architecture as a form of mass communication, an “operation that addresses

¹ Edward William Soja, “The Spatiality of Social Life: Towards a Transformative Retheorisation”, in *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, ed. Derek Gregory and John Urry (London: Macmillan, 1985), 90-127.

² Giuseppe Gallo, “Digital and Quarantine”, in *Urban Corporis Unexpected*, ed. by Miekeal Milocco Borlini and Andrea Califano (Conegliano: Antefirma edizioni, 2021), 284-290.

groups humans, to satisfy some of their needs and persuade them to live in a certain way”³. Of different opinion are other theorists, such as Brandi, who declares himself sceptical of the parallelism between architecture and language⁴. Regardless of the conflicting opinions of celebrated scholars, it is immediately visible how the subject of communication is present in the contemporary architectural debate. If as an example Schumacher⁵ in defining his parametricism refers to the thought of Niklas Luhmann, creator of a theory of systems who reads society as the summation of communications between entities, Gregotti warns us of the drifts that contemporary communication risks insinuating within the architectural project, bringing it dangerously close to fashion and marketing⁶.

New possibilities, new skills, new dynamics

By directing our gaze to the contemporary design process and the organisation of the architectural studio, it is possible to read how the new communication paradigms have changed the interaction within ever richer design groups. While software engineering theorists such as Brooks already identify communication between collaborators as a generator of viscosity and problems within processes⁷, this condition is re-proposed today in architecture. The architectural project travels more and more frequently on digital paths, so much so that architects translate almost any analogical document into files that can be shared, checked and modified anywhere on the planet. Further changes in the communication of the architectural project concern the relationship with the client, to whom the architect must be able to communicate the complexity and values of the project. As Harry Ibbs testifies, the designer must possess knowledge that allows him to translate the architectural project into a language understandable by non-experts⁸. This effort of translating the values of the architectural project into even simplified forms goes beyond the relationship with the client and reappears in firms’ contemporary digital communication. The interviewee mentions storytelling, or the ability to narrate, among the essential skills for the architect, which according to Ibbs plays a central role in defining the success of the architectural firm. Of the same opinion is Andreas Klok Pedersen, who underlines the need to have within the studio, architects who know how to communicate, and explain clearly, so that the media and the public can understand project values and digest them. Online communication is therefore vital today for the prosperity of an architectural studio, so much so that in all the major contemporary studios there are groups of architects and specialists who collaborate in the management of the communication processes of the architectural project and dissemination activities of each

³ Umberto Eco, *La struttura assente: La ricerca semiotica e il metodo strutturale* (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 1968), 23.

⁴ Cesare Brandi, *Struttura e Architettura* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1967), 33.

⁵ Patrik Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture, Volume I: A New Framework for Architecture* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 136-141.

⁶ Vittorio Gregotti, *Architettura, tecnica, finalità* (Bari: Laterza, 2002), 43.

⁷ Frederick Phillips Brooks, *The Mythical Man-Month* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 27.

⁸ Giuseppe Gallo, “Architettura e second digital turn, l’evoluzione degli strumenti informatici e il progetto” (doctoral thesis, University of Palermo, 2021), 470-475.

type. Among the architecture studios that in recent years have managed to build an image starting from a different way of narrating architecture, the BIG Bjarke Ingels Group stands out. The firm simplifies the design process of each building in graphic schemes, telling the succession of choices starting from the requirements of the single project. Testifying the BIG studio's desire to get closer to a wider public is also the creation of a new slogan “Yes is more”, which by recovering the famous phrase by Mies, intends to describe a different pragmatic and inclusive approach to architectural design. The slogan has also become the title of a comic book, signed by the main partner of the group, Bjarke Ingels⁹.

If on the one hand, therefore, the approach to communication of architecture by the studios has changed, the media that architects use to communicate the project has also changed, reconstructing the alternation of digital possibilities for the project. Andreas Klok Pedersen testifies how the 2000s were the phase in which the production of rendered images spread in the world of architecture. In the following ten years, digital instruments made possible the animation of images on video, certainly more captivating and involving than images static, and which his studio has been adopting for years for public communication and with clients. Renders are helping to move architectural design from the real world to the virtual one. If any architectural firm wanted to implement communication and marketing activities in a pre-digital era, it would have had to first design the architecture, and then follow its construction, after which it could have documented the real building through photographs. Today building is no longer necessary, rendered virtual images have reached a level of fidelity that borders on photography. The only operations necessary for the communication of an architecture are the design of a 3D model and then the rendering of the same model¹⁰. Thus was born a new generation of architects who have built their architectural concepts exclusively on virtual dimensions, where there are no physical constraints nor economic limits, and the formal possibilities do not have to face the inconsistencies they would find in the physicality of architecture, implementing research which is aimed more at the image than at the architecture.

Architecture and Web 2.0: New digital spaces, new competing voices

There is no doubt the contribution of the digital paradigm in the development of what many authors define as the society of the image, a global panorama oriented towards the consumption of images that animate individual desire and constantly push it towards new aspirations¹¹. This has an important influence on the way architecture is communicated globally: a digital translation of the places that represent the contemporary architectural debate and therefore in the public that architecture manages to reach is evident. While recognised architecture magazines and publishers such as *Domus* have combined digitally with the

⁹ Bjarke Ingels, *Yes is More: An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution* (Berlin: Taschen, 2009).

¹⁰ Sigrid Adriaenssens and Laurent Ney, “Shaping forces”, in *Shell Structures for Architecture*, ed. by Sigrid Adriaenssens, Philippe Block, Diederik Veenendaal, and Chris Williams (London: Routledge, 2014), 22-34.

¹¹ John, Sinclair, *La società dell'immagine. La pubblicità come industria e ideologia*, trans. by Mauro Formaggio (Milan: Franco Angeli Editore, 1991), 84.

physical production of paper editions, reproducing them online or creating ad hoc platforms, the web has favoured the birth of numerous new publishing initiatives, groups which, thanks to the innovation of, have built exclusively digital editorial platforms, establishing themselves as leaders in the communication and dissemination of architecture. Among the most successful we point out *ArchDaily*, a platform born in 2008 and which today is one of the most influential editorial groups specialised in architecture, a point of reference for the 13 million architects and enthusiasts from all over the world who use the site every month¹². Starting from *ArchDaily*, it is possible to enumerate an indefinite and increasingly vast number of blogs that deal with architecture and design. Among these are *Dezeen* and *Designboom*: platforms born in the early 2000s, which have developed into a range of initiatives and services. These websites are stages of great value for architects, who, over the years, have developed an increasingly close relationship with these realities¹³. While it is evident that these platforms have become new points of reference for the architectural community, transposing the functions previously performed by paper magazines to digital, there are substantial differences between the previous analogue ones and the new digital alternatives. This above all because an analogue magazine until the 90s was the result of a complex activity, which also from a production point of view required a considerable investment of time and money. Today, on the contrary, a single person with even a limited number of digital skills is enough to start a blog. Anyone can, ideally, offer their opinion and structure it behind a website and therefore a brand, which in the eyes of a non-specialist is as reliable a vector of information as a well-known magazine. A key difference from the past that concerns both web 2.0 micro-publishers and large digital architectural platforms is the relationship with the image of architecture. Leafing through a specialist magazine, an architect has the opportunity to see images of the built architectural product, texts, sketches, but also and above all, technical drawings. Plans, sections, elevations, construction details, and imaginative supports¹⁴ allow us to understand architectural complexity, according to a language that is typical of our discipline. On the contrary, the platforms on which the architectural debate comes alive are the realm of the image: photographs, renderings and architectural concepts are presented mainly through photos and videos, technical drawings are present in a reduced way on some websites, or even absent in most cases. Leaving aside the profound repercussions that this phenomenon brings to the architectural debate, and also to the training of developing architects, it is possible to identify the causes in the diffusion of Web 2.0. If, as we have seen, each user can communicate actively, the amount of information that reaches him has increased exponentially, this has triggered a mechanism of competition between contents, which to be successful must exceed thousands of views and interactions of competitors or perish into oblivion. In the alternative between popularity and oblivion, whoever manages these platforms will choose popularity and, will therefore

¹² David Basulto, "Tools, inspiration, and knowledge to help create better cities", in *Archdaily.com* (website), 20 January 2020, visited 10 June 2023, <https://www.archdaily.com/content/about>.

¹³ Jan Knikker, *How to Win Work: The Architect's Guide to Business Development and Marketing* (London: Routledge, 2021), 47.

¹⁴ Bruno Munari, *Fantasia* (Bari: Laterza, 1977), 56.

publish the most captivating images among those useful for describing the project, leaving out technical drawings and sketches, which have neither the communicative richness of an image, nor the engaging potential of a video, but are still necessary to understand an architecture. The phenomenon of architecture as an image is then amplified by social media, the virtual places where, since the second half of the 2000s, we tell a more or less truthful account of our lives. Just as social profiles today represent us and contribute to the definition of our identity, they represent the stratified world of architecture and shape the identities of designers and architects. Few contemporary architecture studios have not yet developed a presence on social networks. On the contrary, each of the major international groups has profiles on different platforms, starting from *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, and others. If for a digital publishing platform, the success of content is one of the objectives of communication, the same is true within social media, where the amount of information with which the content has to compete is exponentially greater. Because of this incredible quantity, and to provide users with content in line with their interests, the main social networks have created automatic means to judge content quality. Algorithms based on quantitative metrics, such as the number of likes a post gets in the first few minutes of publication, or the time users spend watching a post: numbers that influence content visibility, favouring novelty and sensation, which in architecture are more easily achieved through images and videos, rather than technical drawings and sketches. We also observe how social networks have allowed the emergence of additional actors participating in architectural communication: users who are passionate about architecture, as well as informal groups, present exclusively on social networks. It is no longer necessary to have a website to communicate, social media offer anyone the opportunity to participate in the global debate in the same way as companies, designers or structured editorial groups do. A further democratization of digital practices, which has favoured the rise of super-users, also defined as influencers: famous because they have a particularly large audience, even in the order of millions of users. The phenomenon is not limited to clothing and entertainment, each field has its influencers, who offer advice and themed entertainment. Architecture is no different, several of the most celebrated contemporary architects are influencers, designers such as Bjarke Ingels, or the much more mature Norman Foster (fig. 1), praised for the attention dedicated to the care of his Instagram profile¹⁵.

The spread of image and fashion: from brutalism to Very Important Architects

Widening our gaze beyond individual users who have managed to conquer an audience through social media, it is possible to observe how the bottom-up approach has favoured the rebirth of an architectural current that has little ties to contemporary digital architecture: brutalism. Just searching the keyword “brutalism” on generalist social networks such as *Facebook* will take us to find dozens of thematic groups (fig. 2), where users from all over the world share images of architectures more or less adherent to the current.

¹⁵ Trudie Carter, “10 architects you need to follow on Instagram”, in *Dezeen.com (website)*, 16 March 2017, visited 12 June 2023, <https://www.dezeen.com/2017/03/16/10-architects-follow-instagram-norman-foster-john-pawson-david-adjaye/>.

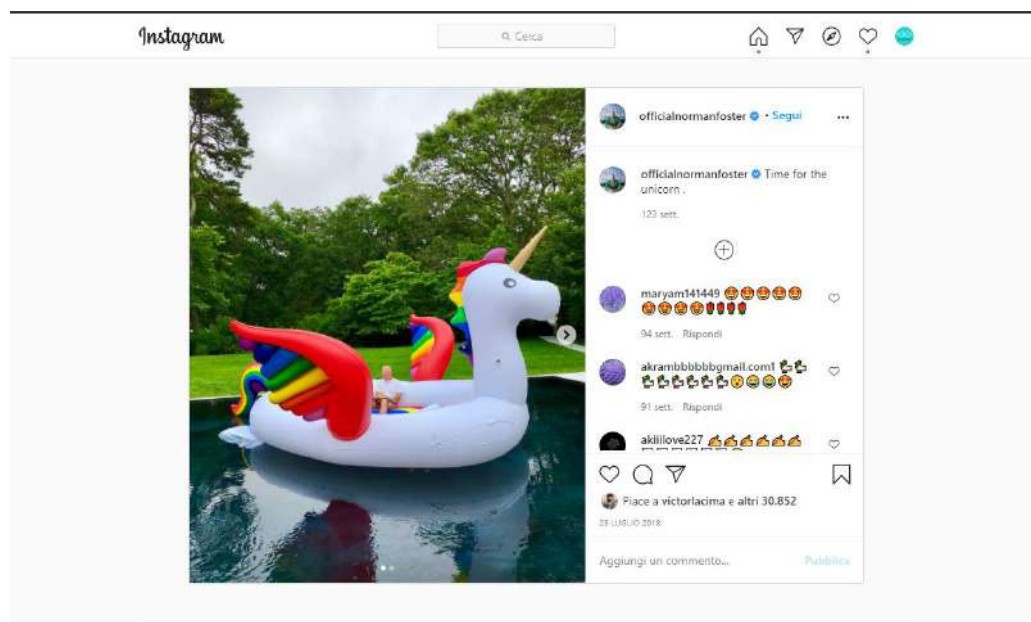


Figure 1. A post for Norman Foster's *Instagram* profile, image Giuseppe Gallo.

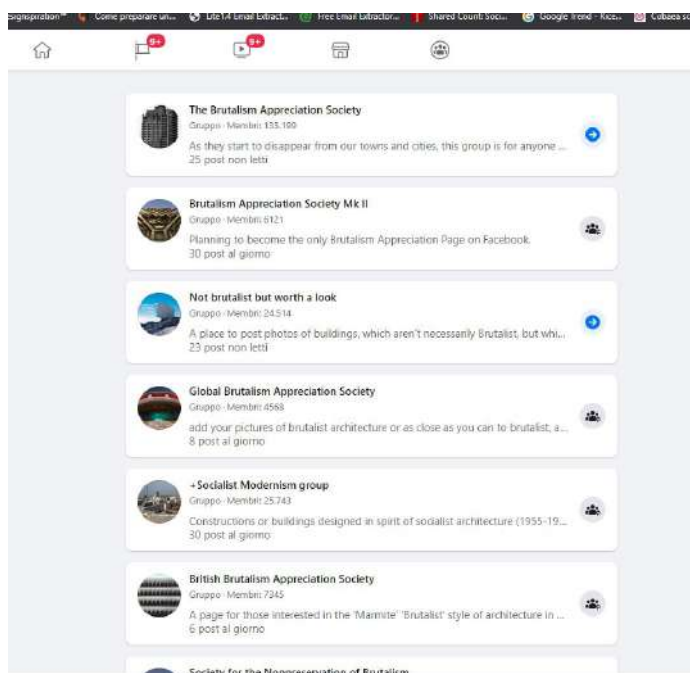


Figure 2. A list of *Facebook* groups dedicated to Brutalism, image Giuseppe Gallo.

Even Virginia McLeod, the author of a new atlas of brutalist architecture, testified how crucial social media have been in reawakening the interest of the public and the architectural community towards the current¹⁶. Today, musicians and directors use brutalist buildings for music videos and films, designers create furniture and concrete objects advertising them as brutalists, tourist companies organise brutalist tours and trips through the European capitals of the current. The renewed fame of brutalism has also favoured the rise of new professional studios, which have gone from anonymity to fame even with a single project. This is the case of OPA, a studio formed by two young Greek designers, who in 2015 published the architectural concept Casa Brutale on social media platforms and their website. Casa Brutale is a luxury residence set on a rock face overlooking the sea, in a typically Mediterranean landscape (fig. 3). A swimming pool made entirely of glass and steel surmounts the architecture: the only element that reveals its presence. Next to the pool, a staircase oriented towards the sea allows access to a double-height room, lit from above through the glass base of the pool, and from the front, through a single large glass wall overlooking the sea. The house is designed according to a rectilinear composition, highlighting the physical nature of the materials: steel, worn wood and in particular concrete, used both for the walls and for the fixed furnishings, elements that clearly show the signs of the wooden formwork virtually adopted for their construction¹⁷.



Figure 3. A render of OPA's Casa Brutale, image Open Platform for Architecture.

¹⁶ Virginia McLeod, *Atlas of Brutalist Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2018), 12.

¹⁷ Dario Goodwin, “Live on the Edge with OPA's Casa Brutale”, in *Archdaily.com* (website), 3 July 2015, visited 20 August 2023, <https://www.archdaily.com/769631/live-on-the-edge-with-opas-casa-brutale>.

The project, disclosed through renders and videos, was not born to be built, but with the sole intention of being communicated and going viral: in the words of the authors “to break the internet”. A phrase that in jargon indicates having global success online. The design choices are therefore developed within a communication strategy aimed at an audience of enthusiasts, taking advantage of the renewed popularity of brutalism, from which the house derives its name. Within a few days of the first publication, the major platforms specialised in architecture will chase each other to present the project, and the fame of the house will go beyond architectural communication, amplified by websites and generalist televisions which will talk about the project all over the world, comparing it to the house of a villain from the James Bond films or even at Casa Malaparte. The attention obtained by the project is such as to make it one of the most discussed topics in 2015 on some of the major websites specialising in architecture, and this changed its fate. Thanks to a mysterious and wealthy client interested in owning the architecture that broke the internet, and to the Arup studio, which will take care of its structural design¹⁸. A further example of architects who have found success thanks to the dissemination of their projects on the internet is Steven Chilton. When he started the SCA studio in 2016, he chose to put his skills into play by participating in various international competitions, participations which, do not always translate into real commissions. The architect therefore decided to publish a selection of images to find recognition in the dissemination of projects online. A communication probably less strategic than Casa Brutale’s one, but it will bring even greater results. The project that in particular, among those presented by Chilton, meets the public’s interest is the theatre for the city of Wuxi in China: a circular building characterized by a vault developed according to a structural pattern of irregular triangles populated with sunscreens in gilt metal (fig. 4). Thanks to its strong communicative impact, the project will be first published on Dezeen¹⁹, and then on numerous other international websites, even celebrated by CNN as one of the most awaited projects of 2019.

Chilton himself states how he did not expect such success and how much the publication of the project favoured the flourishing of the studio²⁰. In the same interview, the architect also dwells on the communicative and symbolic value of his project, affirming how this feature of the project is not always a result of the architect’s will, but a requirement placed by the client. Those of Casa Brutale and Steven Chilton are certainly the most emblematic success stories in the digital communication of architecture, however, they are not the only ones. There is an infinite number of virtual designers, who share architectural concepts and projects with the most varied shapes and styles. This is the case of Massimo Colonna,

¹⁸ Patrick Lynch, “Casa Brutale is Getting Built, and Here’s Why (Hint: The Internet)”, in *Archdaily.com* (website), 2 May 2016, visited 16 August 2023, <https://www.archdaily.com/786550/casa-brutale-is-getting-built-and-heres-why-hint-the-internet>.

¹⁹ India Block, “Steven Chilton Architects Designs Wuxi Show Theatre with White Columns and Golden Canopy”, in *Dezeen.com* (website), 4 October 2018, visited 12 June 2023, <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/10/04/steve-chiltern-architects-wuxi-show-theatre-china-architecture/>.

²⁰ Karl Van Es, “Interview with Steven Chilton: On Design, China, & Fortnite” in *Avontuura.com* (website), 6 February 2019, visited 2 July 2023, <https://www.avontuura.com/interview-with-steven-chilton-on-design-china-fortnite/>.

an Italian designer who creates renderings that recall the works of masters such as Luis Barragán or Ricardo Bofill and has built a reputation by creating images for large industrial design groups or technology multinationals²¹. The influence of communication is even deeper in fields such as fashion and product design, where it is now common to discover objects designed by stars: Very Important Designers. Characters such as Kanye West, an American rapper who has designed sneakers made with a new material partially obtained from seaweed²², or Pharrell Williams, a celebrated contemporary musician who began his career as a product designer in 2010, making various chairs, clothing in eco-sustainable materials, bicycles, shoes for the multinational Adidas. Objects available on the market, which make the famous musician a successful designer. Furthermore, since 2019 Pharrell Williams has also become an architect, his debut project is the Untitled complex in Toronto, two residential towers that will host common areas at the base of the building available to residents and commercial spaces. The project was carried out in collaboration with an architectural studio hired to follow the indications of the Very Important Architect, who oversaw several aspects of the building, from the facades to the interior and furniture design²³. We are not aware of the level reached by Williams' contributions, the contemporary architectural project is vast and collaborative, full of actors who define the project. Despite this, the narration of architecture has remained anchored to the genius of individuals: artists, poets of form and living, capable of instantly grasping the salient aspects of a project and solving them. Meanwhile, large architecture firms are becoming brands, as fashion houses, that survive their founders and compete globally, according to increasingly marketing-oriented communication practices.

Conclusions

The web 2.0 phenomenon that has characterised the last 20 years, developing new economic and social communication dynamics, has undoubtedly also left its mark on the world of architecture. Not only has changed how architecture is communicated but also the reasons why we approach the architectural project. While on the one hand visualisation techniques allow the image of architecture to be communicated with photorealistic images regardless of the actual construction, on the other hand, the competition between the thousands of architectural images shared every day on websites and social media has developed a dangerous drift towards the image. This drift is accentuated by the algorithmic automatisms that measure the desirability of content on social media, consequently defining its visibility. A condition that, even on the most famous specialist sites, has already made technical

²¹ Steph Wade, “Ambiguous by Massimo Colonna”, in *Ignant.com (website)*, 14 September 2018, visited 12 August 2023, <https://www.ignant.com/2018/09/14/ambiguous-by-massimo-colonna/>.

²² Keiron Marchese, “Kanye West’s Yeezy Sneaker Will Be Made Using Algae in New ‘Seed to Sole’ Concept”, in *Designboom.com (website)*, 11 August 2019, visited 12 August 2023, <https://www.designboom.com/design/kanye-west-yeezy-clog-algae-seed-to-sole-11-08-2019/>.

²³ Amy Rose Dobson, “Pharrell Williams Announces Residential Design Partnership”, in *Forbes.com (website)*, 6 November 2019, visited 13 August 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amydobson/2019/11/06/pharrell-williams-announces-residential-design-partnership/>.

drawings marginal. The trend towards the image, evident both in the renewed success of brutalism and phenomena such as Casa Brutale, reaches new peaks in the spring of the Very Important Designers. Famous personalities who design industrial products for marketing and commercial purposes. Similarly, the biggest architectural studios are becoming brands, communicated according to a commercial narrative, which pursues the archetype of the brilliant founder, capable of understanding and solving any design issues by himself. These dynamics, together with the technical innovations that are eroding contemporary design practice, anticipate a future in which democratisation goes hand in hand with the loss of architectural quality and the architects' role loses more and more weight in favour of fashion, clients and algorithms.



Figure 4. A render of SCA' Wuxi Theatre, image Steven Chilton Architecture.



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