

# Intermedialities in Architecture: An Introduction

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# Intermedialities in Architecture: An Introduction

## Architecture and Hypermediation

An architectural project, both in its conception and representation, is developed through a series of distinct media that continually refer to one another. An architectural design can only be conceptualized or made intelligible to others through a multiplicity of tools: plans, sections, elevations, but also models, sketches, 3D renderings, axonometrics, and collages. Only through the cross-referencing of these various media can a complete image of the project be mentally put together. The concept of “intermediality”, as developed in media studies to describe forms whose identity is situated between multiple media, strongly resonates with this essential quality of the architectural project.

This “intermedial” nature of architecture is arguably intrinsic to its foundation as a discipline during the Renaissance, when architecture began to be established based on the notion of the project rather than solely on the built object (Simonnet, 2001). Furthermore, this dimension is now becoming increasingly prominent in response to the proliferation of platforms for the dissemination of architecture. Over the last two decades, the means by which architecture is mediated have diversified and multiplied. On one hand, this evolution is the result of the growing institutionalization of architectural culture, which presents architecture through exhibitions, publications, conferences, and award ceremonies. On the other hand, this is a

side-effect of the democratization of websites and the emergence of social networks where architectural work is displayed—ranging from specialized platforms such as Divisare to more informal spaces like Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and YouTube.

This intensification of visual culture in our society is neither new nor unique to architecture. At the end of the 20th century, William J. T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm introduced the terms “Iconic Turn” and “Pictorial Turn”, respectively, to characterize what they saw as a paradigm shift, in which images would take precedence over language (Boehm and Mitchell, 2013). Postmodern architecture has particularly witnessed this shift, assigning a new role to images in the design process, influenced by advertising and marketing. As the production and consumption of images continue to accelerate the critical interpretation of visual culture in architecture remains highly relevant.

The digital proliferation of contemporary images, which circulate and are exchanged to the point of saturation, is undoubtedly linked to their market value—a concept that Szendy describes as “iconomy” (Szendy, 2019). However, we should refrain from hastily condemning architectural images on this basis alone. Today, architectural discourse is increasingly conveyed through images, regardless of their intended purpose or content. It is essential to first acknowledge the discursive value of these images. A closer



**Fig. 1** *Unless Ever People*, Venice, 2018, architecten de vylder vinck taillieu. Photography Filip Dujardin. © Filip Dujardin.

examination reveals that communication is progressively shedding light on the architectural process, which was previously obscured. The voice of architectural firms is now often expressed through competition collages or photographs of construction sites, either completed or in progress. Given the informal status of these messages, they are often published online as enticing teasers, ahead of official publications, showcasing the ongoing process of architectural creation. These snapshots of projects in progress, minimal units of visual discourse, function as the architectural equivalent of “snapchats”. On platforms like Instagram, these micro-announcements contribute to a broader visual discourse that is constantly evolving.

Beyond the digital sphere, and specifically within the realm of architectural culture, various architectural interventions demonstrate a conscious act of referencing one medium through another, which reveals a playful engagement with intermediality. A notable example of this is the presentation

of *advvt*'s Caritas project at the 2018 Venice Biennale, entitled *Unless Ever People* (Fig. 1), which spatially staged a series of large-scale photographs of the building, printed on wall-like panels and mounted on wooden structures. By blurring the traditional distinction between presence and image, the scenography offered visitors an experience akin to visiting the building itself. In such instances, architects situate their projects outside the built environment, placing them within museum and institutional spaces and embedding them within a cultural discourse. This method of presentation appears to be coupled with a deliberate reflection on the medium itself (Wolf, Bantleon, and Thoss, 2009).

This issue of *Clara* explores the various ways in which architects engage with the media condition and iconic dimension of contemporary architecture, and how they question it, at times deliberately, in a reflexive manner. It brings together a series of architectural representations which function as ‘mirrors’, in the sense that they facilitate reflection on the discipline itself. For instance, the article by Victoire Chancel and

Wouter Van Acker discusses projects that literally incorporate mirrors, thereby constructing a meta-reflection on the ontology of the architectural project. In this context, the term ‘reflexivity’, which serves as a secondary theme of this issue, broadly refers to a critical and epistemological stance toward the architectural project, enabled by intermedial situations. From Instagram to exhibitions, intermediality acts as both a design tool and a reflexive engine for the project. By examining situations where content shifts from one medium to another, as well as the blurring of boundaries between media space and advertising space, this issue interrogates the contemporary nature of architecture’s intermedial condition. Given that the historicity of this media regime can be relativized, issue no. 9 of *Clara* aims to analyse the relationships between the spheres of existence of the architectural project in contemporary architecture.

### Revisiting Theories of Intermediality

In the contemporary landscape of visual culture, to which architecture is susceptible, intermediality emerges as a crucial lens for examining its representations. Despite the multifaceted nature of architectural projects and the prevailing regime of mediatization, intermediality has remained relatively underexplored within the field of architecture. In contrast, intermedial analysis is well-established in art history, media studies, and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> An outline of the origins and development of this concept is called for before we can consider its relevance to architecture.

Historically, the notion of intermediality originated from academic inquiries into the interactions between different art forms. During the second half of the 20th century, two significant developments established the significance of the intermedial approach, which allowed for the analysis of what exists between various artistic mediums,

rather than focusing solely on their internal content.

The first development is the emergence of “interart(s) studies”, which focuses on the comparative analysis of literature and the arts, and encompasses objects of study traditionally considered non-artistic, such as popular culture, fashion, and cinema. Methods that are characteristic of this new interdisciplinary area are, for instance, the investigation of cinema through the narrative structures of literature, or the consideration of film and photography as texts rich with signs, each possessing its own rhetoric and style. Concepts such as *intertextuality*, defined by Julia Kristeva as the “transposition of one (or several) system(s) of signs into another” (Kristeva, 1967: 59), and *transtextuality*, defined by Gérard Genette as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette, 1982: 1), allowed for the definition of methods to evaluate intermedial processes from a textual or literary viewpoint. Driven by the rise of semiotics and the study of new popular media, the modernist notion of artistic autonomy was challenged, as it proved insufficient for addressing the interactions between image, music, and text (Barthes, 1977). Out of this interdisciplinary thought emerged interart(s) studies, which explored the relationships between literature and the visual arts, music, theatre, dance, and film. These studies particularly focused on the transformations between text and image, or between music and words, transcending traditional media boundaries.

The second development leading to the specific study of intermediality was the advent of media studies in the latter half of the 20th century. This emerging discipline was characterized by its focus on the history and effects of media, particularly mass media. It combined an investigation of the technological aspects of media with an analysis of their societal and cultural impact. Through this dual lens, media studies sought to explore the broader media ecology by examining the interactions between a wide array of media—including radio, cinema, television, video, and print media—and the relationship with their users (Clüver, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> Evidence of this is the publication of journals such as *Polysèmes. Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiaires* and *Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies*, published respectively since 1989 and 2003.

Marshall McLuhan's interpretation of television exemplifies this trend: he posited that television should be understood as a medium embedded within a long technological and cultural process, rooted in established social practices such as going to the cinema, making telephone calls, and listening to the radio. As discussions of intermediality evolved, they increasingly focused on understanding and reconstructing dynamic historical processes. The goal became to discern how new media emerge by incorporating structures, concepts, and principles from pre-existing media (Müller, 2010). For example, Instagram can be seen as a new medium that integrates the discipline of photography with contemporary social practices, thereby influencing how we perceive and interpret architecture today.

These two intellectual traditions—*interart(s)* studies and media studies—have significantly contributed to a well-established understanding of intermediality. The field of intermedial studies focuses on the “the interaction of similarities and differences between media and the changes that may occur in communicative material when it is transported from one media type to another” (Bruhn and Schirmacher, 2021: 3). As such, the crossing of media boundaries lies at the core of intermediality (Rajewski, 2002). Its primary concern is not merely the representation within a single medium but rather the analysis of what transpires *between different media*.

Paradoxically, analysing the interactions *between media*—which is the central objective of this issue within the field of contemporary architecture—necessitates a delimitation of distinct media, each characterized by its own boundaries and specificities (Rajewski, 2010). As Elleström argues, media “are both different and similar, and intermediality must be understood as a bridge between medial differences that is founded on medial similarities” (Elleström, 2010: 12). In other words, intermediality exists in a state of tension between, on one hand, the recognition of a medium's distinctiveness and, on the other, the assertion that “all media are mixed media” (Mitchell, 1994: 5).

### Intermediality in Architecture

In architecture, the study of intermediality transcends traditional media boundaries, and delves into the media expansion which currently redefines the limits of the architectural discipline. To engage with intermediality in architecture, it is crucial to first understand what constitutes a medium and how architecture itself functions as a medium. Beatriz Colomina asserts that while architecture is manifested through the various media that represent it, it should fundamentally be understood as a medium in its own right. This perspective requires defining architecture beyond its physical built form, encompassing its representations and processes of mediatization. She argues that since the modern movement, the locus of architectural production has shifted from the construction site to more ephemeral media spaces such as photography, cinema, advertising, exhibitions, magazines, and publications. With the advent of these new 20th-century techniques and dissemination platforms, modern architecture evolved into a media field in itself. This transformation occurred for two primary reasons. Firstly, modern architecture was reconstructed around these new spaces of visibility, which architects approach not merely as platforms for mediating an architectural object but as design spaces in their own right. Secondly, the building itself is now perceived as just another image. The building is not only mediated through various forms but also acts as a “medium” in its own right, serving as an autonomous “mechanism of representation” (Colomina, 1996: 13).

If we understand a medium as a vector of representation, then a building can be mediated by its representations just as much as it can function as a constructed representation itself. In this sense, a building can be seen as a host that conveys an image to its viewer through its physical form. According to Hans Belting, an image does not possess a body, but it requires a medium in which it can be embodied in order to appear (Belting, 2011). An image becomes present through a medium, which serves to make an absent object visible. Buildings are often absent from our direct view—whether due





2



3

**Fig. 2**  
*Etterbeek*, Brussels, 2020,  
Baukunst. Video insertion and  
computer rendering by Olivier  
Campagne for Artefactorylab,  
filming Maxime Delvaux.  
© Artefactorylab and Maxime  
Delvaux.

**Fig. 3**  
*Forum UZH*, Zürich,  
2018, Baukunst – Bruther.  
3D Rendering by Olivier  
Campagne for Artefactorylab.  
© Artefactorylab.

**Fig. 4**  
*Frame*, Brussels, 2018,  
Baukunst – Bruther.  
Photographic insertion and  
computer rendering by Olivier  
Campagne for Artefactorylab,  
photography Maxime Delvaux.  
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non-professionals. In architecture, post-production has become a basic creative act, blending copying and recycling to generate new images.

The digital condition once again raises the question of whether architecture's mode of existence lies in the physical realm or the realm of representation. As we embrace the digital and move away from the notion that images are indicators of reality, a critical trend in contemporary architecture has emerged, emphasizing the reality of everyday life in images. Jesús Vassallo (2016) identifies a renewed engagement with reality and a return to material culture—what he terms “dirty realism”—in the manipulation and generation of computer-generated images by Filip Dujardin, Bas Princen, and Philipp Schaerer. Similarly, Bergera and de Esteban observe a new “realism” in the collages of Sergison Bates and Tony Fretton, which, like the techniques of realism in 17th- and 18th-century painting (Bergera and de Esteban, 2022), seek to reconnect with iconological traditions centred on the observation of everyday life.

The question of architecture's mode of existence is relativized when reframed by the theory of the post-media condition, according to which the material singularities of a medium are no longer ontologically decisive for the specificity of an artistic discipline (Krauss, 2000; Manovich, 2001/2014). In the all-encompassing digital “medium”, architecture is absorbed alongside other media into a creative *design* workspace where not only the distinctions based on the material conventions of a medium are dissolved, but the informational and material dimensions of media are viewed as inextricably linked and integrated. Contrary to the notion that it is impossible to discern differentiations within the complexity of this post-digital sphere, this special issue of *Clara* emphasizes the importance of exploring the interrelationships between architecture as a medium and other media.

This issue seeks to interrogate the intensification of the relationship between images and architecture, as well as the impact of this recent evolution on the intermedial nature of architecture. However, it does not

aim to focus so much on post-production or artificial intelligence. Rather, it tests the potential of the intermedial lens to recontextualize architecture and its specific modes of representation within a complex field that is assumed to be both novel and transhistorical.

#### Four Models of Intermediality

The articles in this issue explore intermediality in architecture in various ways. To better understand the variety of interactions and complexity of intersections between media, we propose transposing a set of four intermediality models from the field of intermedial studies to architecture. These models, drawn from the typologies described by Irina O. Rajewski (2010) and Jens Schröter (2012), serve as benchmarks for this issue and, we hope, for navigating architecture's current media landscape.

The first model, generally referred to as *transformational intermediality*, focuses on the medial transformation or representation of one medium within another. In this model, a building depicted in a photograph, or a painting portrayed in a film, ceases to be merely a building or a painting; instead, it becomes a representation and commentary on the original work. Examples include the recreation of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* in Wim Wenders's film *The End of Violence* (1997) and the appearance of a model of the villa in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *The Sacrifice* (1986). In this process of medial transposition—or re-representation—an element specific to one medium is reconfigured within another. The medium being represented becomes an integral part of the medium representing it, but through this refiguration, it can be diverted, filtered, and displaced. Lisa Moffit's article “Architecture's Atmospheric Mediations: From Model to Photograph to World” exemplifies this type of intermediality by examining the translation between two media: architectural models that visualize fluid dynamic processes in buildings, and photographs of these models.

The second model, *transmedia* or *formal intermediality*, is based on transmedia connections between different media. While each medium retains its autonomy,

specific characteristics of different media are transferred or exchanged, independent of their medium of origin. For example, the framing of an image is a technique common to painting, film, photography, and architecture, yet certain framing modes, such as the cross-section in architecture or the tracking shot in film, are specific to their respective mediums. Transmedial intermediality occurs when spatial framing procedures from one medium are transferred to another. The articles by Louis de Mey, Pascal Urbain, and Christina Mouschoul, along with those by Victoire Chancel and Wouter Van Acker, contribute to understanding intermediality as a form of transmedial ambiguity that is inherent to architecture. By focusing on pictorial mirrors in architecture, a specific colour, or the concept of the architectural visit, these articles challenge the presumed dominance of objects over their representations: here, architecture is not confined to the building itself but is found in the forms of metadiscourse enabled by various modes of mediation.

The third model of intermediality, termed *synthetic intermediality*, presents a distinct approach: it concerns not so much the interaction between media but rather the fusion of multiple media into a novel form, including the collisions that occur within such fusion. Rather than a mere amalgamation, the intermediality emerging from this process oscillates between medial forms. In the tradition of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Duchamp's readymades, or the Fluxus art movement, this synthesis engenders a new media identity. In this issue, this model of intermediality is examined through architectural exhibitions. Media objects are not simply arranged within a space; rather, they constitute a complex array of media that coalesce, interact with one another, mutate, and generate hybrid installations. The articles by Lyna Bourouiba and Anne-Laure Iger, as well as the one by Alice Haddad, engage with exhibitions and cultural systems that invoke extensive intermedial connections. Here, architecture is positioned as one cultural form among others, and intermediality becomes a means, a

methodological tool for building a discourse within a cultural system.

Similar to synthetic intermediality, the fourth and final model, known as *ontological intermediality*, also contributes to the creation of an overarching perspective. This model posits that media always exist in relation to other media, forming part of a well-balanced media ecology, which is disrupted when new media emerge and is restabilized through the redefinition of media boundaries. From the standpoint of ontological intermediality, what fundamentally characterizes photography is predicated upon its distinction from painting. Developments which cause a blurring of this distinction contribute in turn to the reconfiguration of these fields. What constitutes the essence of architecture within a culturally defined media ecology is interrogated in this issue through the articles of Maxime Geny and Matthew Mullane. Their respective articles, "Doing Architecture for the Internet" and "Transformers: Intermedial Architecture in Japan", explore the interactions and movements within what they respectively designate as the "system" and the "intermedial constellation" of architecture. They also explore intermediality in architecture through a distinctly contemporary lens: intermediality is presented as characteristic of and intensified by the contemporary world we live in, exemplified by the emergence of a new medium such as Instagram (according to Geny), or of unprecedented conditions of practice in the Japanese real estate sector (according to Mullane).

This overview of the articles suggests that intermediality in this issue is approached in two main ways: as an object of study and as a theory which serves its explanation. As an object of study first, it aims to grasp the mediatization of architecture either by interpreting it as the result of an intensification of visual culture, or as an essential component of architectural disciplinarity (and thus not necessarily as a contemporary phenomenon). Furthermore, intermediality emerges as a research methodology in architecture, facilitating the exploration of how, through intermedial links, spatial objects transition

from the architectural sphere into the cultural or media sphere.

Overall, this summary of articles underscores the diversity of intermedial practices in architecture, for which the four types of intermediality provide some reference points amidst the myriad dynamics observable within the expansive media landscape that architecture inhabits. Drawing on the insights of Félix Guattari (1996) and Peter Weibel (2012), one might interrogate the evolution of architecture within this contemporary context towards a “post-media” condition, where the specificity of architecture as a medium is subsumed in favour of a fusion of media, rendering them indistinguishable. By delving into these entanglements—whether as objects, theories, or methods—intermediality tends to shift, destabilize, and reframe the question of the media boundaries that define architecture. The cover of this issue, featuring *Woman Reading a Letter* (1666) by the Dutch painter Gabriel Metsu, a contemporary of Johannes Vermeer, with its depiction of a mirror and the *mise en abyme* of a painting, aptly evokes an intermedial condition where the definition of the limits of a medium are reflexively interrogated, as are its relations to other media.

#### ISSUE EDITORS

**Victoire Chancel** is a practising architect, PhD candidate at the ULB and studio instructor at the ENSA-Marseille. Her research, funded by FRS-FNRS, investigates the recent shift of the architectural project from the constructive to the cultural sphere, and analyses the interplay between built form and image of recurring representations. She has published in various journals and books (*A+*, *Bruxelles Patrimoine*), including collectively (*Oase*, Les Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles), and participates in cultural and architectural media projects, including scenographies of exhibitions and interviews for the Cultural Institute of Architecture (ICA) of Wallonia-Brussels. In parallel, she works as an architect in Brussels with the collective L'Équipe, and in Marseille with various associations.

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