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12.13.2013

REVIEW> RENDER-O-RAMA

Philip Berger explores the Art Institute of Chicago's new exhibition, *New Views: The Rendered Image in Architecture*.

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THE NEW EXHIBITION HOLDS UP RENDERINGS AS ART.
COURTESY ERIC DE BROCHE DES COMBES / LUXIGON

New Views: The Rendered Image in Architecture
The Art Institute of Chicago
111 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago
Through January 5, 2014

The concept behind *New Views: The Rendered Image in Architecture*, an exhibition of contemporary architectural renderings, grew out of an issue of the New York–based, print-only journal *CLOG*, which describes its mission as exploring "a single subject, relevant to architecture now. Succinctly, on paper, away from the distractions and imperatives of the screen."

The journal's admonition against "the screen" is paradoxical in the exhibition, because its primary content—four loops of digital images projected onto large framed surfaces—clearly read as pictures on screens. And while the digital nature of the images themselves is rather prosaic compared to the kind of material we are used to seeing in museums—paintings, sculpture, and the like, it is nevertheless exceptionally thought provoking. It raises basic questions about the field of architecture—both as a design discipline and as a commercial venture—as well as a consideration of the eternal question, "what is art?"

Architectural renderings have served a mostly commercial purpose throughout the history of the architectural profession, although the art world has deemed certain of them in a more elevated category: the lushly embellished prints of Frank Lloyd Wright's work as published by Wasmuth in pre-WWI Germany, or the dramatic, atmospheric drawings of streamlined skyscrapers by Hugh Ferriss. By the 1980s, however, surging interest in architectural drawings by, among others, Rem Koolhaas, John Hejduk, Michael Graves, and the Memphis group, had created a new niche among serious collectors.
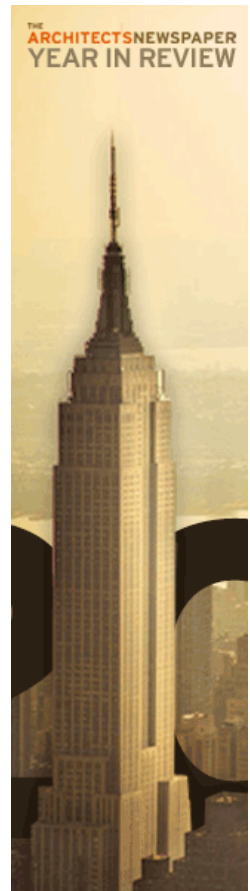
By the second decade of the 21st century, of course, computer aided design resources have revolutionized the realm of architectural renderings. The range of styles presented in the *New Views* show illustrates, however, that the movement away from unique, hand-drawn images to digital ones hasn't reduced their importance or appeal. Computer aided design has opened up the range of artistic expression substantially.

It has also raised a whole series of questions that *CLOG*'s show does a good job of addressing, both with the images displayed and the very helpful didactic materials.

Among the issues the organizers highlight are those of authorship and ownership, particularly in light of displaying these works in a museum setting. If architectural renderings are works of art, despite the fact that they are usually commercially commissioned, who owns them? Is it the architectural renderer? The architect? The building owner, who presumably paid for it in the first place? And who gets credit? Here, some of the images are credited to designers: Zaha Hadid and Greg Lynn among them, but more often to the out-sourced design studios like Luxigon and Labtop, where many people collaborate to produce a finished product. This reinforces the notion that the making of architectural renderings is similar to the making of much contemporary art. The concept of the lone painter or architect in a garret studio is obsolete. There's very little difference between the process of creating computer-generated renderings and fabricating the work of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst.

Another salient issue the show raises is what, really, is a rendering? Is it a photo-realistic depiction of how the finished project will look? Or is it an expressionistic image suggesting something else entirely? It is possible to look at many of the works and wonder whether they are renderings or actual photographs of the constructed building; others are clearly fanciful products of the designer's or renderer's imagination.

Probably the most interesting item in the show is the single piece created especially for it: an image created by Eric De Broche Des Combes, a founder of the "visualization company" Luxigon, illustrating a view of the Art Institute gallery where the exhibition is installed. The view shows multiple reflections of the digitized images in the exhibition in what is really an "impossible" view. It is simultaneously a commentary on the infinite creativity and innovation that digital rendering can produce, but also an allusion to the history of art: tiny depictions of a man and woman at the focal point of the view are clearly renditions of the husband and wife in van Eyck's famous Arnolfini portrait, considered by some art historians as the first painting to depict ordinary people in scenes of everyday life. Unlike the rest of the materials in the exhibition, this one will remain in the Art Institute's permanent collection.

Philip Berger

Philip Berger is a frequent contributor to *AN*.