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SPECTACULARISM OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE LATE 20th – EARLY 21st CENTURY VISUAL CULTURE

Abstract. The article examines the development of spectacularism in contemporary architecture (1990s–2020s) in the context of the visual orientation of culture of the late 20th – early 21st century. Spectacularism manifests in three major visually-orientated trends in contemporary architecture: 1) the presentation of architecture as entertainment; 2) the superficial reproduction of current visual design trends; 3) the prioritisation of perception via the medium of photography or rendering over a direct and engaged real life interaction between a human and the built environment. These trends impact digital architectural visualization, graphic design of architecture theory works, the creation of iconic landmark buildings and photogenic spaces (the so-called “Instagrammable space”, “AirSpace”, and others), development projects for generic residential and administrative buildings. The study of the spectacularism phenomenon through the lens of Guy Debord’s and J. Baudrillard’s philosophy allowed to conclude that the visually-oriented trends in contemporary architecture are the result of the decline in the direct and active interactions between humans and the physical world.

Keywords: contemporary architecture, visually-oriented culture, spectacularism, architectural visualization, graphic design, digitalization, information society

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ЗРЕЛИЩНОСТЬ В НОВЕЙШЕЙ АРХИТЕКТУРЕ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ВИЗУАЛЬНОЙ ОРИЕНТАЦИИ КУЛЬТУРЫ КОНЦА XX – НАЧАЛА XXI в.

Аннотация. Рассматривается феномен зрелищности в новейшей архитектуре (1990–2020-е гг.) в контексте визуальной направленности культуры конца XX – начала XXI в. Зрелищность проявляется в трех ключевых визуально-направленных тенденциях новейшей архитектуры: 1) превращении архитектуры в вид развлечения; 2) поверхностном повторении актуальных выразительных приемов формообразования; 3) проектировании из расчета восприятия объекта не непосредственно, а через медиум фотографии или рендера. Выявленные тенденции проявляются в компьютерной визуализации проектов, графическом оформлении работ по теории архитектуры, выразительном решении зданий-аттракторов и фотогеничных пространств (такие явления, как «инстаграмматичность», «AirSpace» и др.), проектировании рядовой жилой и общественной застройки. Рассмотрение данного феномена в оптике философских концепций Ги Дебора и Ж. Бодрийяра позволило заключить, что визуально-направленные тенденции новейшей архитектуры обусловлены упадком непосредственного и активного взаимодействия человека с материальным миром.

Ключевые слова: новейшая архитектура, визуальная направленность культуры, зрелищность, архитектурная визуализация, графический дизайн, цифровизация, информационное общество

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Introduction. The visual orientation of culture from the 1990s to the 2020s was driven by the development of digital technology, the Internet in particular. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of Internet users increased by one billion, surpassing 5,5 billion, which accounts for 69 percent of the global population [1]. As the number of users grows, so does the volume of data shared by the global network and the speed at which it is updated. This expansion in data volume and transmission speed leads to a rapid acceleration in the turnover of images in the human mind, rendering them obsolete almost instantly. Never before have images been so numerous and changed with such staggering speed.

While vision is the primary sense of perception of the physical world, it is usually balanced by touch, hearing and smell. However, information humans encounter online (as well as in films and on television) is perceived predominantly through visual channels. As a result, in an era shaped by the virtual communication, the cultural significance of physical, material objects – those that require multisensory perception through tactile properties or scent – has drastically diminished. Products of contemporary mass culture and mass design are primarily aimed at stimulating visual neurons.

This global trend, affecting all areas of human activity, inevitably manifests in architecture. The context of a visuality dominant and digitally oriented culture inevitably transforms the scenarios of human interaction with the surrounding built environment. Categories such as mass, air density, thickness, texture, pressure, and smell play an ever-diminishing role in how a building is perceived by the observer. Leading architects who design iconic buildings are compelled to adapt to these new conditions of their work getting reduced to the fleeting glimmers in the fast-moving stream of images on phone and computer screens. In these circumstances, *spectacularism* becomes the most successive strategy in a highly competitive global architecture market.

Architecture adaptation to an increasingly digital perception with a subsequent transformation of the physical environment leads to negative psychological and societal consequences for the people who inhabit it. Therefore, the impact of the visual orientation of culture on contemporary architecture requires study within the frameworks of architectural theory, art history and other social sciences.

The article aims to outline the key trends of architecture development within the spectacularism phenomenon under the influence of visual culture from the late 20th to the early 21st century. This task requires clarifying the three main objectives:

1. The formulation of a multidisciplinary methodological framework to studying the phenomenon of spectacularism in architecture within the visual orientation of culture that utilizes the approaches developed within philosophy, psychology, culture and art studies, architecture theory and other social sciences and humanities.

2. The distinguishing of the most prominent spectacularism manifestations within the visually oriented fields of contemporary architecture (iconic architecture or “starchitecture”, digitally-oriented spatial design, architectural visualization, graphic design of contemporary architecture theory works) as well as a field of generic architecture and spatial design, where the visual orientation is more subtle.

3. The systematization of the major spectacularism manifestations in the architecture of the 1990s–2020s.

The first objective will be covered in Section 1, which is dedicated to the study historiography and methodology. The second objective will be covered Section 2 in case studies of Belarusian and global examples, where each subsection covers one of the defined architecture fields. The third objective will be addressed in the article Conclusion.

Section 1. Historiography and methodology of spectacularism research in contemporary architecture

The problematization of spectacularism in art and architecture in the mid-20th to the early 21st century social sciences and humanities. The visual orientation of culture from the mid-20th to early 21st century has been a significant focus in philosophical, architectural, and art criticism. The negative societal impact of an overabundance of rapidly changing visual information was recognized

in humanities as early as the 1960s, long before the widespread adoption of the Internet, which, though developed in 1969, was initially used exclusively in scientific work.

French philosopher Guy Debord was among the first to highlight the problem of the visual orientation and the virtualization of modern culture. In his highly impactful political-philosophical treatise “The Society of the Spectacle” (1967) [2], he argues that the chaotic image flow, driven by the influence of mass media, leads to the substitution of the real world with an illusory one, accessible only to passive observation: “The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished... Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation” [2]. The philosopher uses the term “*spectacle*” to define this image-centric and visually-oriented reality. According to Debord, spectacle causes alienation, the weakening of live connections with others and between humans and their physical surroundings: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” [2]. This loss of ability to actively perceive the world leads to a loss of individual agency and the inability to engage in meaningful activity and make conscious decisions for oneself: “the spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living” [2]. The philosopher noted that the dominance of imagery has elevated “vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs” [2]. In Debord’s view, the very nature of virtuality conditions the passive consumption of images and the disconnection from reality, in contrast to active and conscious existence in the real world. The incomprehensible flow of images hinders the experience of reality and prevents people from engaged interactions with the surrounding space. Guy Debord’s observations laid the groundwork for the problematization of “spectacle” and spectacularism in both art criticism and art and architecture studies.

The concept of “spectacle” was reinterpreted in 1981 as “simulacrum” by a renowned French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in a highly impactful treatise “Simulacra and Simulation” [3]. To Baudrillard, simulacrum (a convincing image of a phenomenon that does not exist in reality; a sign without a referent; a copy that depicts a thing that either no longer has an original or had never had one) is both the product and the process of replacement of a real, authentic and true experience, which is both multisensory and unmediated, with the illusory and predominantly visual “virtual” reality. Drawing from Baudrillard, in his essay “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” [4] impactful Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes that “in late-capitalist consumerist society, ‘real social life’ itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in ‘real’ life like stage actors and extras” [4, p. 8]. Thus, philosophers point to the negative consequences of this process: alienation from the “real” world and the replacement of a genuine, authentic existence with a false imitation of life.

The observations of Baudrillard and Debord regarding the objectification of experiences and their transformation into commodities also resonate with the ideas of a Frankfurt School psychologist Erich Fromm, presented in his fundamental work “To Have or To Be?” [5]. Fromm argued that throughout the 20th century, the engaged and proactive interaction with the world (“being”) was increasingly replaced by an alienated and objectified possession (“having”). Possession and consumption extend not only to material objects but also to emotions, memories, and experiences, including visual glimpses of memory. Moreover, images and other forms of recording serve as tools of alienation, as they allow memories to be transferred to an external medium. Fromm primarily focused on the impact of photography on human interaction with the surrounding world, but his observations are equally applicable to modern architectural visualization, which serves as a tool for the commodification of images of buildings that were never constructed. Thus, Fromm described the impact of spectacularism and a visually-oriented culture on the human psychology.

The interest in the *the phenomena of spectacularism and visually oriented design in the architecture studies of the late the 20th – early 21st century* can be tracked to the 1990s, which saw a publication of a breakthrough collection of conference papers “Architecture between Spectacle and Use” [6] with entries and contributions from the most renowned architecture scholars, such as Hal Foster, Antony Vidler or Mario Carpo. As the name suggests, the baseline for the conference was to apply Guy Debord’s perspective to the critical study of the 1980s–1990s architecture trends.

The renewed interest in Debord’s theory of the “spectacle” was ignited by a renowned art and architecture scholar Hal Foster, who employed the perspectives of Debord and Baudrillard to critique

the commercialized iconic architecture of the late 20th century, which was designed for visual consumption. Foster highlighted the conceptual disconnect between the exorbitant appearance of iconic buildings and their primitive construction, using the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (1997, Spain, architect Frank Gehry, *Fig. 1*) as an example. He described the Bilbao Museum as a “computer-driven version of a Potemkin architecture of conjured surfaces” [7, p. 38]. A similar disconnect between the exterior form and the inner construction was first exposed in the early 1960s in the seminal postmodern architecture study “Learning from Las Vegas” [8], which defined buildings with such disconnect as “decorated sheds”. However, as Foster pointed out, it was the iconic architecture of the 1990s, created with computer aid for the first time in architecture history, that fully merged the trends toward visuality, spectacularism, digitalization, and virtualization in its forms.

Foster notes that the alienating effect of architecture, such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, goes beyond the mere interaction between individuals and their environment: “these museums trump this art: they use its great scale, which was first posed to challenge the modern museum, as a pretext to inflate the contemporary museum into a gigantic spectacle-space that can swallow any art, let alone any viewer, whole” [7, p. 37]. In his manifesto *Against the Spectacle* [9], the prominent architect and architectural theorist Peter Eisenman also uses the example of the Bilbao Museum and Debord’s methodology to discuss the proliferation of architecture designed for passive and unengaged viewing. Eisenman observes that “the distracted viewing of the surface has replaced the reading of depth” and the “increasing need for the spectacular in the form of ever more precious forms of novelty” [9] arise with the support of media, which create the conditions for the transformation of reality into spectacle, and from the public’s demand for “the continual production of new imagery for consumption” [9]. Following Debord’s philosophical line, Eisenman emphasizes the growing passivity of the audience. According to the scholar, the intensification of spectacularism in architectural imagery is driven by the need to evoke a reaction from viewers who suffer from emotional burnout due to information overload. Similar to a person with a drug addiction, they require increasingly stronger stimuli to achieve the same level of response as before.

Following Foster’s and Eisenman’s highly influential publications, Debord’s framework became widely applied to the problems in contemporary architecture caused by commercialization and neoliberalism: from the urban development of Buenos Aires (Guano, 2002) [10], the interconnection of urban policies and ‘starchitecture’ (Ruggiero, 2010) [11], to the ‘Disneyfication’ of the UAE space production (Thani, Heenan, 2016) [12]. However, most articles concentrate on the societal and political dimensions of the 1990s–2010s architecture and urban development: policies, council decisions, etc., while the visual component is studied only as a secondary element of the production of space. The application of the ‘spectacle’ concept in architecture remains fragmented and as of 2024 the full-fledged framework has not been fully generated. The psychological aspects of spectacularism and visual orientation remain downplayed in architecture studies.

In conclusion, *the multidisciplinary methodological framework* to studying the phenomenon of spectacularism in architecture within the visual orientation of culture should be based on the concepts of ‘spectacle’ and ‘simulacrum’, developed by Debord and Baudrillard, but also incorporate the psychological juxtaposition of the ‘having’ and ‘being’ modus envisioned by Fromm.

Section 2. The manifestations of spectacularism in contemporary architecture

Spectacularism trend in the graphic design of architectural publications is evident in the theoretical publications authored by renowned architects and design studios that strive for a ‘starchitect’ status. Such books are characterized by excessive color saturation, unjustified bulkiness, and inflated volume, reaching an average of 1,000 pages. The ratio of text to graphic material approaches that of a picture album, but the publications themselves resemble oversized glossy magazines: a disconnected collection of manifestos, categorical assertions, and fragmented observations, set in enlarged type over drawings and photographs. As Hal Foster aptly observes, these books transition from being coffee-table books to becoming coffee tables themselves [7, p. 22].

Foster associates the emergence of this type of quasi-theoretical literature with the approach of a Canadian graphic designer Bruce Mau, who made up “S, M, L, XL” (1995), a highly impactful

collection of experimental projects and essays by architect Rem Koolhaas. The deliberately commercialized design of the volume served as a vivid illustration of Koolhaas's critical observations on the influence of capitalism on architectural trends of the 1980s and 1990s. The design of the collection *Content* (2004), which featured Koolhaas's programmatic essay "Junkspace" (1999), was intentionally created to be completely indistinguishable from a cheap store catalog or a glossy magazine. If the design of Koolhaas's publications was a deliberate commentary on the state of modern culture (and a visual reference to the work of one of Guy Debord's followers, the artist Constant), its numerous imitators copied only the superficial aspects of the Koolhaas's books design, ignoring both the ironic undertone of their artistic concept and the fact that the kitschy graphics existed not as an end in themselves, but as accompaniments to high quality research papers.

From the 1990s to the 2020s, most major Western architectural firms (MVRDV, BIG, NL Architects and others) published their own multi-page albums with collages of project photographs, renderings and fragmentary reflections on architecture. Such magazine-manifestos became a means to enhance the prestige and recognition of design studios, asserting their ambitions not only in applied architecture but also in claiming a role as architectural theorists and visionaries.

The popularity of the spectacular architectural book did not lead to the full decline in the tradition of reservedly designed monographs and article collections by distinguished architects, such as Peter Zumthor, Pier Vittorio Aureli, Mario Carpo or Juhani Pallasmaa. The competing approaches to the graphic design and content of architectural publications were juxtaposed in a review by an architectural critic Hugh Pearman in the *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal* (RIBAJ) [13]. Pearman contrasts the manifesto-album "Humanize!" (2023) by a popular British architect Thomas Heatherwick with the analytical autobiography *First Quarter* (2023) by an Irish modernist architect John Tuomey. Pearman methodically lists the differences between the books: Heatherwick's 500 pages of deliberately 'naïve' slogans, printed in an enlarged type with wide line spacing over black-and-white photographs of projects, versus Tuomey's 174 pages of densely packed text featuring refined and witty observations interspersed with occasional hand-drawn sketches [13]. For Pearman, the first publication is an example of a visually-oriented and overtly commercialized promotional material that merely imitates an analytical text in form without contributing anything original to architectural thought [13], making it a simulacrum of architectural research.

The Turn to Visual Culture in Architectural Design is closely linked to the development of postmodern architecture, which encompasses buildings constructed in various stylistic approaches:

1970s–1980s Postmodernism: Characterized by an ironic reimagining of pre-modern styles, a return to decoration and ornamentation, often executed with a deliberate disregard for scale and historical accuracy (notable architects include Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks, Michael Graves, Philip Johnson, Charles Moore).

1990s 'Spectacular' Deconstructivism: Marked by fractured, distorted forms that break with traditional design conventions (notable architects include Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, Peter Cook, Coop & Himmelblau, Eric Owen Moss, Frank Gehry).

Late 1990s – Early 2000s 'Iconic' Public Architecture: Focused on creating visually striking buildings designed to amaze observers and ensure instant recognizability (notable architects include Rem Koolhaas, MVRDV, Zaha Hadid Architects, Herzog & de Meuron, later Frank Gehry's works).

Despite the stylistic differences among these movements, they are united by an emphasis on spectacle, the aim to astonish the viewer, and the creation of "iconic" instantly-recognizable structures. The construction of such landmark buildings was primarily driven by economic considerations, as spectacular architecture boosts tourism, enhances the image of a city, and contributes to what is known as the "Bilbao Effect", after the branch of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in Spain (1997, architect Frank Gehry, *Fig. 1*) – the first globally recognized example of a landmark building constructed with the sole aim of increasing a location's tourist appeal.

As platforms for publishing images evolved, these landmark buildings transitioned from being attractions that people visit to see and photograph for their personal photo albums, to serving as Instagram photo backdrops. According to art critic V. Jennings [14], in this new type of spectacular architecture, exemplified in the works of architects like Bjarke Ingels (BIG) and Thomas Heatherwick (Heatherwick Studio), iconic buildings are no longer designed primarily to construct a city skyline or a city brand,



Fig. 1. Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, 1997, Spain, architect Frank Gehry

as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao did. Instead, they are intended to look impressive in photographs. The format of landmark photography has shifted from showing a person standing next to a building to focusing on the person, with the landmark as a background.

Project briefs now explicitly request the creation of photogenic or “instagrammable” spaces [15]. The principle of “instagrammability” in design guidelines [15] is geared towards the making of capturing images that stand out on a screen amidst the fast scrolling of image feeds. These guidelines emphasize maintaining rich tones and striking forms without an overpowering originality or expressiveness. Even a cohesive composition is broken down into a series of eye-catching backgrounds for a photograph with a prominently positioned person. The design must “combine seemingly incompatible qualities: to look original and authentic while also referencing other, previously seen places, and to be easily reproducible” [16, p. 252]. Thus, buildings and interiors are expected to captivate and hold the attention of Instagram users through bold color schemes, unexpected combinations of simple geometric shapes, expressive patterns, wall murals, and furnishings with extravagant contours. This trend explains the development of neo-postmodernism and maximalism (as opposed to minimalism) in interior design and the simultaneous popularity of interiors with simple color schemes, filled with sculptural, non-functional, and easily recognizable furniture pieces. Those designs seamlessly combine mid-century modern, postmodern, or Memphis school elements in a single space. Prominent representatives of the sculpturalist trend include designers and architects such as Adam Nathaniel Furman, Point Supreme, Space Popular, and Harry Nuriev.

At the same time, uniform and clichéd designs eliminate the element of surprise and the desire for exploration from architectural environments. They replace the local and unpredictable with the global and predictable, reinforcing socially approved behavior patterns necessary for Instagram popularity [15]. Iconic architecture, once a primary attraction, has become merely a backdrop in the life of an Instagram blogger, a setting for ‘selfies’ (self-portraits taken with a mobile phone).

The difference between the earlier and the newer types of spectacular buildings is vividly illustrated by two small-scale projects by the Dutch firm MVRDV, created in the early 2000s and the mid-2010s, respectively: the two-story office building Studio Thonic (2001, Amsterdam, *Fig. 2*) and the installation (W)ego house (2017, Amsterdam, *Fig. 2*). The design approach to of these iconic, instantly recognizable objects was developed with the intention of generating high media response and widespread public attention.

Studio Thonic – a small, two-story building, shaped like a lying prism with an offset window pattern and vibrant tangerine-colored walls – was conceived by its creators as a replication of the Bilbao Effect with minimal financial investment and in minimal scale [17, pp. 565–566]. Indeed, it initiated a global trend of orange exterior finishes and irregular window patterns, including two residential houses in Minsk (Bykhauskaya st., 10, *Fig. 3*; Napoleon Orda st., 9). However, the building completely lacks “instagrammability”: the window proportions are too large, and the exterior wall volume is too compact to produce a striking photo of a person against it. The studio house looks impressive in photographs when it is the compositional center, with people present only as part of the scenery. In contrast, the (W)ego house installation breaks down into a series of small interior scenes, each offering the visitor several posing scenarios for close-up photographs: stairs, ropes, and ladders to climb on, striking furniture to sit on, etc. In a frontal photograph taken from a distance of a dozen meters, the installation transforms into a two-dimensional abstract painting composed of rich color spots, creating a striking backdrop for a full-body photo of a person.

The influence of Instagram (and mobile phone photography in general) on architectural environments is particularly evident in the use of museum spaces. From the late 2000s to the mid-2010s, museum visitors primarily used mobile phones to photograph exhibits they liked, often viewing the artworks through the phone screens. This behavior aligns with Erich Fromm’s description of the objectifying and alienating role of photography in “To Have or to Be?” [5]: engaging with art through a screen replaced direct, meaningful contemplation (a ‘to look but not to see’ scenario). Thus, the experience of encountering art became a commodity – not just an objectified memory, but a product, a component of conspicuous consumption of ‘cultural goods’.

Since the mid-2010s, visitor behavior has begun to shift: people started taking photos of themselves in front of artworks to post on Instagram, often without looking at the piece itself. Now, it is not the museum space turned selfie space or the artwork turned selfie background that is the commodity, but the visitors themselves, who seek to increase their social significance by showcasing a fake cultural capital on social media. It is worth noting that the management of art museums views selfies primarily as an opportunity to popularize art and increase ticket sales. Museums host selfie days and selfie contests, sell tickets with an option of conducting photo sessions. It is unclear whether the increase in visitor numbers leads to a greater interest in the exhibitions, but the visitor’s aims lose relevance when museums are turning from educational institutions into commercial entertainment.

Another striking example of the Internet’s influence on the visual orientation of architectural environments is the interior design of short-term rental housing offered through the online platform Airbnb, where owners list their properties without relying on traditional intermediaries. To gain popularity on the Airbnb platform, spaces are designed using a standard set of design techniques, sometimes referred to as ‘AirSpace’ [18]: minimalist interiors with white or light gray walls and neutral furniture in the ‘Scandinavian style’. These techniques help a listing rise higher in the site’s search results (the so-



Fig. 2. A comparison of Studio Thonic (2001, Amsterdam) and the (W)ego house installation (2017, Amsterdam), architects MVRDV

called ‘search ranking’) because they align with the criteria of Airbnb’s algorithms and the preferences of its users.

While Instagram clichés combine the predictability of expressive solutions with staged spectacle and iconic ‘uniqueness’, ensuring instant recognition of a location, Airbnb’s design strategies emphasize anonymity and a disregard for the local context. The uniform characterless apartments, indistinguishable from standardized hotel chain rooms, clash with the character of the tourist locations. However, despite their differences in design approaches, expressive instagrammable spaces follow equalizing algorithms just as much as the bland AirSpace environments.

Visual Culture and Architectural Visualization. In the late 1990s, manual drafting as a tool for architectural design was overtaken by computer-based visualization. The abstraction of hand drawings seemed outdated amidst the widespread fascination with special effects that swept through the film industry, animation, and game design during the 1990s and 2000s. Following the entertainment industry, architects were drawn to hyper-realistic and unnaturally vibrant computer animations.

This shift means that the evolution of architectural visualization cannot be simply interpreted as a move toward pure photorealism, i. e., the imitation of artistic or technical photography that accurately represents reality. Commercial renderings resemble retouched images from fashion magazines, featuring glossy and shiny filters, unnaturally intense and saturated colors, and unrealistically sharp distant elements. Just as flawlessly smooth photoshopped skin differs from the natural, the perfect surfaces of walls in these renderings appear too polished, devoid of natural wear, with exaggerated reflective properties. For instance, plaster might gleam like matte glass. In comparison, the real world looks dull and desaturated: “color in the real world looks increasingly unreal, drained” [19, p. 171], while “color in virtual space is luminous, therefore irresistible” [19, p. 171]. Another subtype of promotional visualizations applies overly saturated color filters (most often purple and blue) to the entire image. Atmospheric perspective is exaggerated, and the setting is often lost in a haze, pierced by the pinkish light of a setting sun.

The difference between project visualizations and the buildings constructed from these projects is often so stark that comparing them has become a popular method of architecture criticism. Discussing the differences between the visualization of the Valley administrative-residential complex in Amsterdam (Netherlands, 2021, designed by MVRDV) and the constructed building, Dutch architectural critic Mark Minkjan points out that the facade glazing and balcony greenery in the rendering are fundamentally impossible to realize in reality: the trees would die, and the mirrors simply cannot reflect light as depicted in the image [20]. The rendering deceives the viewer, replacing reality with an illusory copy – an image of a non-existent object. According to Minkjan, glossy visualizations associate contemporary architecture with exclusivity and luxury, sidelining the issues of social responsibility in architecture and its role in addressing the societal problems [20].

By the early 2010s, photorealistic renderings had largely displaced other forms of architectural visualization, and the consumption of architectural images – whether through photographs or glossy, “photorealistic” renderings – began to substitute the direct and multisensory experiences of architecture. When architecture shifts into the virtual realm, the discussions about a project’s merits and its ability to integrate into the urban environment rely on a comparative analysis of two-dimensional images: renderings and photographs. Mass, tactile qualities, and the relationship between buildings and their surroundings lose their importance as criteria for assessing artistic expressiveness, since they cannot be effectively conveyed through photography. Peter Eisenman argues that “Seductive renderings of impossible buildings are their own graphic reality, fuelled by a voracious need for publicity” [9]. He compares these images to “the narcissistic death rattle of a discipline lost in the tidal wave of image-dependent media” [9]. The alienation from reality deepens as the boundary between the physical and virtual worlds becomes increasingly blurred. Consequentially, both photorealistic renderings and photographs effectively become simulacra in the sense described by Jean Baudrillard – copies of originals that do not exist in reality.

At the same time, the very need to create an illusion of the real world limits the expressive tools available to architects and visualizers working within mainstream architecture. As rendering technologies have advanced, the use of hand-drawn graphics has been limited not only as a means of project presentation but also as a tool for sketching, which is fundamental to an architect’s conceptual thinking [21]. The act of drawing – once a key creative and imagination-stimulating activity at the core of architecture

[21] – has been reduced to a mere method for visualizing a project, meaning visualization has become a practice entirely separate from the act of ‘inventing’ or designing the object itself.

This transformation of architectural drawing from a tool for conceptualization to a method of illustration has altered the very principles of architectural thinking. Hand-drawn graphics allow more room for spontaneous, intuitive, and accidental moves, leading to unexpected artistic discoveries. Thus, as visualizations have approached the ideals of photorealism, their variability has diminished. The process of inventing form has itself become deterministic, as the options for spatial solutions and the methods of achieving them are based on a system of algorithms and computer operations that are not fully controllable by humans. Architects engaged in the production of images are as alienated from them as those who consume them.

The Impact of Spectacular Architectural Visualization on the Generic Urban Development.

When published on architectural websites such as Archdaily.com, Dezeen.com, and Designboom.com, visualizations of unique, iconic projects gain public exposure and serve as indirect advertisements, boosting the recognition of both the projects themselves and the architectural studios that designed them. Glossy visualizations of sunlit buildings, often draped in a romantic pink haze and featuring unnaturally gleaming facades, dazzle not only the prospective buyers but also the developers who commission these visualizations. The lesser-known architectural firms are thus incentivized to adopt the successful innovations of their competitors. However, this effect is mostly limited to specific areas, primarily influencing the architecture websites visitors and the potential clients. It can be argued that the renderings of generic residential and administrative buildings created for real estate development companies play a far more significant role in the production of space. This issue is as evident globally as it is in Belarus.

The responsibility for constructing neighborhoods with inhumanely scaled and hostile urban planning developments lies primarily with real estate companies. However, many questionable architectural and urban planning decisions are made by architects who develop these design proposals. In their work, they often get inspired by contemporary photographs and visualizations of iconic projects without understanding their internal logic. As a result, problematic solutions are copied, and effective ad hoc approaches, developed for a particular type of climate, ways of life, and housing types, are incorrectly adapted to fundamentally different conditions. For instance, the layout of the ‘Minsk-Mir’ district in Minsk (2017–present, developed by ‘Dana Holdings’) was inspired by the high-rise residential skyscrapers of the late 2000s–2010s in major metropolises like New York and Dubai. The smooth, glass-covered towers look impressive in visualizations and photographs, but in reality, the facades of both foreign and Belarusian residential skyscrapers often appear dull and cumbersome. There is no need for such dense, high-rise development with standalone towers in Minsk; a more sensible approach would have been to opt for block development with buildings of 5–7 stories, which could create a more human-friendly environment while maintaining high density.

An example of an incorrect adaptation of design solutions that were originally developed for some specific conditions and tasks can be seen in the previously mentioned orange facade of the residential building at 10 Bykhauskaya street in Minsk (architects Bureau 35 and April, 2020, *Fig. 3*), the winner of the Belarusian architectural competition ‘Leonardo’ in 2014. The color of the facade was inspired by the tangerine plaster of Studio Thonic (2001, Amsterdam, architects MVRDV, *Fig. 2*). The original concept design of the Minsk residential building replicated the expressive, irregular window pattern of the original. However, while Studio Thonic is a two-story building with a vibrantly-colored facade broken up by large window openings, the residential building constructed in Minsk consists of two towers, 13 and 17 stories high, with large, blank wall sections. The facades of Studio Thonic were initially intended to be temporary; they were supposed to be repainted after the building had garnered media attention. This bold decision was transferred to the facade of the Minsk building without considering the original scale, the author’s intent, and the goals of the project. For this reason, the orange of the house on Bykhauskaya, 10 was replaced with a calmer terracotta during the construction process. The apartment layout in the housing complex also serves as an example of poorly thought-out copying of foreign designs. The architects used a rational ‘European’ layout of studio apartments, intended for temporary accommodation of a single person, as the basis for one-bedroom apartments with an area of 45–55 square meters instead of the original 20–30 meters. The mechanical increase in area without



Fig. 3. Residential house, Bykhauskaya street, 10, in Minsk, architects Bureau 35 and April: the original concept (2014), the realized building (2020)

adapting the layout solutions and the room proportions resulted in the difficult to furnish spaces and inadequately lit areas located deep within the apartment.

A similar issue of scale can be observed in the facades of a new residential quarter within the borders of Sergei Yesenin, Rafieva, and Marshal Losik Streets in Minsk (2022–present, developer ‘Strominvest’). The facade pattern follows the framework of ‘digital architecture’, one of the visually oriented stylistic trends of the late 1990s–2000s. A characteristic feature of digitalism is the use of a ‘skin’ – a digital pattern that wraps around the building’s walls like a piece of fabric. The skin of the new quarter is a pattern of vertical stripes, excessively large and heavy, adding to the already massive exterior volume. This pattern would have been appropriate on a building of 5–7 stories, but this quarter has variable heights ranging from 12 to 23 stories.

In both Minsk developments, the imagery looks more attractive than the realized buildings. The imitation of some superficial features of some highly-publicized residential designs without any understanding of their underlying principles can be compared to the cargo cult phenomenon, though it is equally fitting to characterize it as another example of simulacra.

Conclusion. The spectacularism arising from the late 20th to the first third of the 21st century, amidst the increasing digitalization and the visual orientation of culture, is one of the key factors shaping the development of contemporary architecture. The spectacularism trend is evident in the graphic design of quasi-theoretical works published by renowned architectural studios (Thomas Heatherwick, MVRDV, BIG, NL Architects). These works often take the form of excessively colorful, multi-page albums with fragmented texts, set in oversized fonts over drawings and photographs.

In architectural computer visualization, spectacularism manifests in glossy commercial renderings with unnaturally saturated palettes, exaggerated atmospheric perspectives, and overemphasized textures. As a result, mass, tactile properties, and contextuality have ceased to be the criteria for assessing artistic expressiveness.

In architectural design from the 1990s to the 2020s, visual orientation has been realized in two forms: 1) iconic attractor-buildings from the late 1990s to early 2000s (works by Rem Koolhaas, MVRDV, Zaha Hadid Architects, Herzog & de Meuron, Frank Gehry), which create a city’s brand, attract tourists, and serve as objects for photography; 2) iconic buildings that look striking on camera and serve as backdrops for portrait and selfie photographs (BIG, Thomas Heatherwick, and the later works of MVRDV).

There is a growing demand for Instagrammable spaces with bold color schemes, expressive forms and patterns, elaborate interior items, and fragmented compositions – essentially, backdrops for Instagram

photos. Stylistically, this demand aligns with movements such as neo-postmodernism (neo-Memphis), maximalism, and sculptural minimalism (Point Supreme, Space Popular, Harry Nuriev). Design dialects specific to certain web-platforms are also emerging ('AirSpace' style on Airbnb).

The design of generic urban developments is shaped by the superficial adaptation of controversial or out-of-context design solutions and the architectural strategies developed for different natural and socio-cultural conditions.

A common feature of these trends is their focus on the superficial features of design trends, the mechanical repetition of current artistic techniques, and the emphasis on the perception of architecture not directly within physical space, but through the medium of the screen, in the virtual universe of renders or photographs.

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