# Section Cut: an Allegorical Construct of the World

Nader Tehrani

Allegorical interpretation takes place within the gap between the image and the word. Michel Foucault's poignant account of René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (also known as *Ceci n'est pas une Pipe*) addresses the illusive relationship between word and image as meanings ricochet between the cultural assumptions of pictures and the unruly weight of the text that underlies them. At stake is the value of truth and representation, those elements that tie the pictorial to textual, whether as caption for or negation of the other. Magritte's defiance of a form of painting that claims mimetic realism might be timely to recollect in the current political moment, when the environmental crisis requires an interest in strategies that reflect both received cultural constructs and projected technological scripts, at the threshold between reason and a monstrous allegorical.

The current historical moment might also alert us to the complexities of reception, weeding out real information from the fake, balancing out facts from artistic acts, and effectively expanding framework through which we might construe the idea of allegory. In the medieval church, the function of the allegory was didactic; the frescoes embedded within the surfaces of sacred walls, or commissioned paintings and sculptures all embody the narratives of the scripture. Accordingly, its appeal to the apocalypse was sublime, cautionary, and beyond human reach. Such allegorical forms of representation instructed morality from above. However, they also advanced new forms of architectural thinking through images—of a tectonic understanding of the earth, the constructed ground, and the domain above. Dated 1635, Franz Francken the Younger's "Mankind's Eternal Dilemma: The Choice Between Vice and Virtue" depicts the war between heaven and hell, in a description, which, akin to a sectional cut, divides the world and the underworld: the landscape image tells two stories, which, like a diptych, are organized above and below a constructed geological horizon line. Other allegorical paintings, such as Jacob Van Swanenburg's, "Sybil and Aeneas In the Underworld" or Hieronymus Bosch's "The Temptation of St. Anthony," appealed to geologic form and aesthetics, illustrating grotesque grotto-esque cavernous depictions of spaces, under and within the earth.

Does the allegorical drawing kill architecture, as the book the edifice? For Victor Hugo, the invention of the printing press was a major shift in technologies of the word from scriptures that are carved out of reliefs in the church to the book whose content emerges from the printed word. Hugo's technological determinism and disbelief in the primacy of architecture as the narrator of the story of the world might, however, be

unwarranted. The agency of architecture thrived even if through different means and the printed word gave intellectual access, beyond the captive mysticism of the church, to an audience whose engagement with image, text, and the pleasure of interpretation rendered a new form of subjectivity.

The work of Design Earth places itself in this curious tension between text and image, albeit at a scale that reaches beyond architecture to challenge the discipline; it draws from externalities to redefine its core. The expansive intellectual work of Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy borrows from geography to identify an expanded field that is often left out of textbook narratives of architecture and urbanism: the spaces of geology, the hydrosphere, and outer space. In the age of the Anthropocene, such spaces have come to define the potential of human demise—through fracking, distribution of trash, or depletion of the ozone layer. Such scales and issues of the environment have rarely, however, been absorbed into the architectural drawing, in part because they escape the human eye, the locus of perspective—whether understood literally or as metaphor for a human-centered world. Against this backdrop, Design Earth offers a visual and textual alternative that transcends the imminence of apocalypse, inviting the reader to participate in the imagination of different possible futures. Composed of "unfinished" fragments, these drawings stage different attributes of reality and require the engagement of the reader to complete them as a total narrative.

To make legible the dimensions of the earth, the drawings of Design Earth engage the architectural space of the planet through allegorical sectional cuts that are at once physical and conceptual. Such portraits of the world are projected in a distorted X, Y, Z axes, which allows for the amplification of depths of the oceans, height of volcanoes, and the immediacy of neighborhoods that would otherwise be called continents, capturing the domains of earth, water, and air. Within this reconfiguration of metrics, we discover the omnipresence of the architectural figure. Large in scale, such deceptively familiar platonic solids oscillate between the familiar world of monuments and a fantastic world of projected futures. They offer the promise of an enigmatic new reality, in a synthetic weaving of scientific research, aesthetic speculation, and inter-textual play.

Why would Design Earth deploy such visual tropes in an age when data visualization, informational technologies and the sciences have identified a toolkit of media to see the world, and with high accuracy?



Geography and other (social) sciences might have gathered the empirical evidence—satellite imagery and an expanded arsenal of forensic data—that the Earth's climate is changing, these facts often usher in an ideology, and aesthetic, of crisis. New emerging methods of environmental research have aspired to produce new forms of knowledge, which make the world visible and sensible to the audience. Such tools build a world where science, aesthetics, and reception play into each other's instrumentalities.

The answer to Design Earth's representational approach might also be lodged in the idea of the allegory itself: that images—much like stories or buildings—call on their audiences to construct meaning within a larger ideological, ethical, or political sphere. An autonomous view of the discipline had argued for the agency of architecture to emerge from the formal spatial and material practices that have given rise to its own analytical protocols; and yet, the politics of this position have marginalized architecture from the methods and concerns of other relevant disciplines. Worldliness can be said to take on another meaning in the work of Design Earth, as the politics of geography becomes internalized into the inner workings of architectural practices. Here, in the scenography of each pictorial representation, every element matters, much like how in theater every prop contributes to the play. For Design Earth, the stage is at the scale of the world, replete with depictions of interconnected systems that operate to support it. The real is suspended, if only momentarily, to reveal a truth that lurks beneath the surface of the earth. In a fashion that is as articulate as the evocative language of Ghosn and Jazairy's writing, the drawings tell the story of the world's residue and surplus, a story that adopts the visual lexicon of architecture as its political platform.

**Nader Tehrani**

Nader Tehrani is Design Principal of NADAAA, an award-winning practice with offices in Boston and New York. He is currently Dean of The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture at Cooper Union and former Head of the Department of Architecture at MIT School of Architecture and Planning.