



Architects fall into one of two categories when it comes to acquiring projects: on the one hand, you have those who are connected to a certain circle of clients and who use this network to obtain projects, and on the other hand are those who operate through media to target the public at large. Of course neither category exists in a pure state, but generally the first group operates through cocktails, dinners, golf, sailing, and so on, and is most likely to offer well-tested models and services catering to a certain type of demand. This first acquisition protocol tends to produce a more subservient and conservative architectural practice, because the architect does not have much room to manoeuvre around the client. The hierarchy of power couldn't be clearer. The client has a very strong personality and desires, and the architect is constrained to a strategy of personal seduction and a well-tested portfolio. The second group's strategies, in contrast, are molar rather than

being ingrained within a given structure: they are linked not to a social network but to a mass audience. Their connection lines are less structural and more mediated. They are more likely to use competitions, conferences, academic networks, exhibitions and publications as acquisition tools. Prototypes or ideas are broadcast and eventually crystallise in commissions, where the client usually operates as the administrator of a more collective will. This mode of project acquisition usually enables the architect to be more experimental because it retains the project's initiative, even if it is a vague one, and the architect can use his public clout to twist the clients' arms – to a certain degree – in pursuit of a more daring architectural agenda. Statistically, most innovative projects (and, certainly, some of the worst catastrophes) are procured via this protocol. When following this model, it is vital for the architect to maintain a public discourse, to

L'ONADA DE HOKUSAI : Alejandro

77
ABRIL 2005

245 : Q 5.0

float constantly new ideas and strategies, to release publications, and to appear seductive not by sporting cocktail attire but by spilling broadsheet ink.

As we are – by both chance and choice – not part of the cocktail set, one of our crucial duties is to keep broadcasting a new interpretation of reality with consistent frequency. In doing so, we guarantee a certain initiative in our relation with whoever is invested with the authority to commission and administer projects, and we are empowered to pursue certain goals beyond the mere provision of architectural services. By constructing arguments that exceed a specific project and conveying them to a broader public, we produce a more ambiguous regime of power in our client relationships. The crucial matter here, rarely discussed within the architectural debate, is the relationship between the acquisition protocols and their architectural output or, in more general terms, between power and control. This is the relationship addressed by Peter Eisenman in his deliberate disinterest in power in order to maintain architectural

control or by Rem Koolhaas in his fascination with pure power at play, freed from any architectural control. These two extreme positions frame the discussion and the attempt to construct a binding relationship between them through a very specifically architectural subject: representation.

Representation has been a contested subject for a whole generation of architects, including ourselves, which has focused on experimenting with material organisations and factual data as an escape from the discursive predominance of representation, meaning, identity and language that characterised earlier generations. In doing so, most of this research has resorted to a sort of naturalisation of architecture, focused on the processes of material organisation and intentionally avoiding any discussion of representation. Ecologies, natural or artificial, have become a common reference for many of us as processes of material organisation, transformation and exchange not mediated by representation. But from this nearly idealist ecological perspective, the regimes of power at play in the practice of architecture are

not a matter of concern, as their processes are not regulated by such consideration. But if we are to become fully engaged with the discussion of power regimes and their potential transformation, representation is a crucial subject to address: for example, in a democracy individuals are represented as ‘equal’ while this may not be necessarily true from every perspective. How architecture engages in regimes of representation, and how architects represent themselves within these relationships is a domain in which we need to engage if we are to tamper with the regimes of power within which we need to practise.

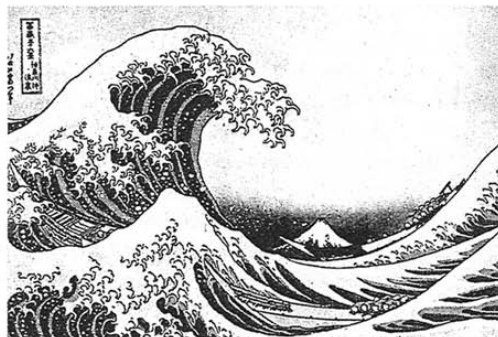
The tale of the Hokusai Wave is the history of how engagement with clients and public media (in other words, the sources of power) originated an evolution in our projective method towards an incorporation of iconography and meaning. Having grown out of a more or less speculative and academic environment, we spent a long time theorising about building technologies and crafts, a most pressing endeavour for a young practice. As our practice has

Quaderns : THE HOKUSAI WAVE : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

APRIL 2005
245 : Q 5.0

evolved towards a more professional output, our role has become paradoxically less involved with crafting and more engaged in acquiring and explaining projects, theorising and communicating the practice to a variety of agents, in order to make the practice sustainable. As the most interesting speculation generally happens out of necessity, our subject of research has moved consistently with the new requirements of our role in the office.

This process has not been a radical change but a slow and progressive shift wherein the old speculations became intertwined with the newer ones, both on a conceptual and an operative level. It started, actually, ten years ago in one of those episodes that radically change one's perception of reality. Faced with a full press conference in the Yokohama City Hall, in February 1995, we had to explain what it was we were trying to do in our newly awarded Yokohama Competition project. Faithful to our doctrine, fine-tuned through years of academic practice, we proceeded to explain the circulation diagrams, the geometric



transformations and the construction technologies that were involved in the project, hoping that the audience would have enough patience to wait for the emergence of the project. Halfway through the presentation, we started to notice the blank expression of the public in the room – a clear indicator that the message was not coming across (this was to become a very common experience during our evolution...). After a few minutes of cold sweat, an image that was carefully edited from the project's discourse but still floating somewhere in the back of our minds came suddenly to our rescue. It was the Hokusai Wave, a drawing by a local painter that we had been toying with while we indulged in geometric manipulations and construction hypotheses during the design phase of the competition entry. In a sudden – and risky – burst of inspiration, we terminated the



factual process narrative to conclude that what really inspired us was the image of Hokusai's Wave. The room exploded in an exclamation of sincere relief: 'Aaaahhh...!' and we left the room, still sweating and grateful for that moment of lucidity, and with the clear realisation that something wasn't quite working in our carefully crafted discourse.

As a strategy, the Hokusai Wave has, since that moment, been slowly gaining momentum in our office, in a manner that has never been rendered entirely explicit in our public statements but that over time has nevertheless come to hit our practice with the force of a Tsunami.

The Hokusai Wave resurfaced barely a year after the Yokohama press conference incident: the ferry terminal project had been put on the backburner and we were engaged

Quaderns : L'ONADA DE HOKUSAI : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

79
ABRIL 2005

245 : Q 5.0

in a brutally commercial commission: the worldwide expansion of the Belgo restaurant chain. We did have second thoughts as to whether we should accept this commission: a theme restaurant, the Belgo chain was a project dangerously opposed to our core disciplinary beliefs. Belgo restaurants depended on Belgian branding and facile iconography: Breughel, beer barrels, mussels and vaults. But with the Yokohama project on hold, we had no option. Our strategy of survival was to turn these images into excuses for architectural experimentation: out of them we were able to produce shell structures, wooden vaults and sausage-like ramps. After years of waging war against the populist claims of architecture as a tool of communication, we were realising that without the *excuse* of the iconography there was little to justify our experiments with bent surfaces and shell structures. Paradoxically, the most banal Disneyesque iconography became the justification, both conceptual and financial, for formal experimentation.

The same approach happened on an entirely different project that we submitted

to a failed competition in Tehran for the reconstruction into a multiplex of the Azadi Cinema, a former local symbol of international urban culture and, subsequently, of its brutal repression. Unlike the Belgo projects, here the iconography was not imposed but was instead deliberately deployed to ensure communication with a remote environment: we used the image of an unfolding film band to render our explanation of the project more effective. Simultaneously, the band became the organisational system for the cinemas, piled on top of each other and connected via a battery of escalators with a consistent geometry. For the first time, we had deliberately coupled an image and an organisational system into a consistent entity as a projective strategy.

The Azadi project revealed whole new potentials for the Hokusai Wave approach, and despite the fact that this coupling of iconography and organisation remained largely peripheral to our office's public discourse, it had become by then a standard *foa* procedure for competition design, non-professional media strategy and client

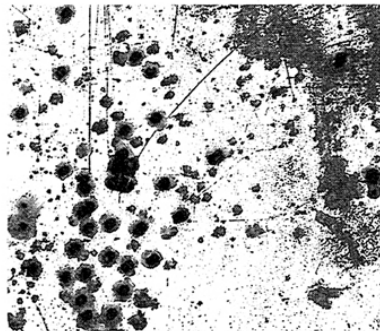
interface. This was 1997 and parametric design and datascape research were in full swing, even within our own office, so we determined that this iconographic research remained unfit for cultural consumption and we kept it on the backburner.

Different variations of the Hokusai Wave were subsequently undertaken in order to generate several of the new projects in the office. Paradoxically, this strategy, originally devised to respond to commercial demands, became the foundation of a series of commissions for local authorities, most of them in Spain. Short-circuiting our conventional arsenal of diagrams and constructive solutions with locally resonant iconographies became a very effective technique to territorialize our constructed foreignness and connect with local agents. Local iconographies became a perfect excuse to naturalise materials and geometries that would have been otherwise vulnerable to budget cuts or political uncertainty. Moreover, iconography helped us accelerate the identification of traits from our usually hypertrophied site and program analysis in

Quaderns : THE HOKUSAI WAVE : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

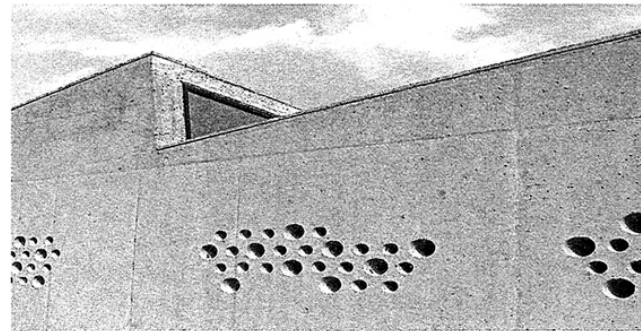
APRIL 2005
245 : Q 5.0

order to provide a formal argument for the projects. Iconographies did not precede the material investigation but rather emerged as viable figures from our immersion in each project's analysis. We would collect general material about local customs and iconographies, and keep that information on the table while we did site analysis and programmatic diagrams. We knew that a project was structured when a formal correlation started resonating between them. The Villajoyosa Police Station pentagonal plan was automatically derived from the site's geometry and turned into Villajoyosa's Pentagon (a reference with great popular appeal for the municipal police headquarters) and the lattices that fortify its windows were built as if they resulted from a *film noir* machinegun shoot-out. Torrevieja Theatre was modelled on the local sandstone quarries and boasts a faceted white acoustic finish modelled like a salt crystal (sandstone quarries and salt lakes were the basis of the local economy before tourism brought its radical transformations of the local landscape, so we were resurrecting a



lost arcadia). La Rioja Centre of Technology Transfer in Logroño became a building that dissolved into a vineyard: a transparent volume covered with wires and vine leaves. The Canary Island Government Multiples III proposal in Santa Cruz de Tenerife grew into a palm-tree trunk by applying triangular *brise-soleils*, shifting gradually to maximise their sun-shading effect, to a high-rise tower with a triangulated exoskeleton.

In post-Guggenheim Spain, this experimentation with local public commissions was directed towards finding a viable exit from the conventional recipe of deploying a more or less cool shape, usually one bearing a signature, to draw attention to the local and to boost public confidence that modernisation was taking place. We could avoid becoming either service providers or gurus, constructing obscure arguments

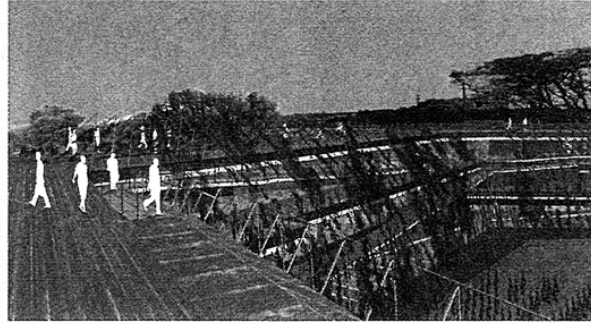


and wacky shapes to maintain a hollow mystery with no meaning. We were fitting just right and the feedback produced by the introduction of forms external to the intrinsic construction of the project was actually helping to expand our formal repertoire.

But the most bizarre developments of this coupling between material organisation and iconography happened in the media-intensive Anglo-Saxon context, where the density of reporting per square foot of construction is tenfold that of the Spanish standard, often interfering even during the project's development. In this particular milieu, our turn to iconography became especially productive.

Max Protetch's invitation for reconstruction ideas for the WTC site in Manhattan became the start of an interesting case study exploring the relationship

Quaderns : L'ONADA DE HOKUSAI : Alejandro
Zaera-Polo ⁸¹
 ABRIL 2005
 245 : Q 5.0



between organisation and iconography. As a theoretical exercise, our take on the WTC project was originally grounded in a deep distaste for public sentimentality and a concern that the project ran the risk of becoming a shrine devoted solely to remembrance. Our exploration set out to rid the project of any symbolic and representational content – a conventional foa target – and to explore a prototype for the next generation of high-rise buildings by designing the world's tallest building on the site. The resulting project was a circular cluster of bending, sinusoidal towers leaning onto each other to increase their structural stability and produce redundancy in the vertical circulation system through a distributed system of sky-lobbies. The project was generated purely by technical considerations, such as structural behaviour,

fire escape and vertical circulation systems, average Manhattan office lease size, and so on. We opened our submission with a polemical sentence, carefully edited out by Protetch in the exhibition's catalogue, *A New World Trade Center*, but captured by Dejan Sudjic, *The Observer's* architecture critic, in his report of 27 January 2002:

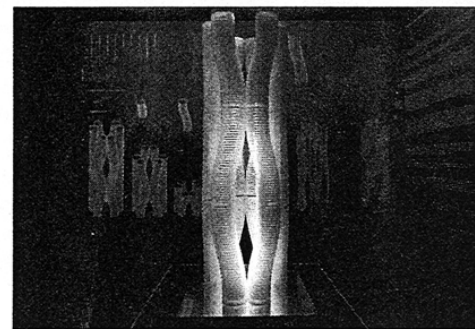
“Let's not even consider remembering. What for?” claim the architects in their provocatively heartless introduction, a sentiment that is likely to be misunderstood in the context of a New York still decked with flags and paper shrines.’

Being certain that we had found an important idea in what we branded ‘The Bundle Tower,’ we revisited the project when asked by Zaha Hadid and Patrick Schumacher to participate in their ‘Latent Utopias’ show in Graz, in autumn 2002.

By then, the reconstruction process had started under the motto ‘United we Stand’. In a paradoxical twist, the structure of the project had become a perfect match for the campaign slogan, as our slender towers were able to stand only because of their mutual support. Suddenly, images of collective effort of high-rise construction – the *castellers* being one of our favourites – became part of the project, resounding with the bundled towers. We decided to use the reconstruction motto to name our ‘Latent Utopias’ entry. The theme of the interlinked towers was to be incorporated later into our collective entry to the competition as part of the United Architects team, under yet another label: ‘the city of the social capital’, and was to appear also in some of the other entries. A project that started as an attempt to avoid representation and identity ended

Quaderns : THE HOKUSAI WAVE : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

82
APRIL 2005
245 : Q 5.0



up becoming the most effective recipient and generator of meaning.

The exact reversal of this process of appropriation of a typological organisation occurred in another media-heavy project. Our winning competition entry for the BBC Music Centre was actually published in the *Evening Standard*, *El Croquis* and *Icon Magazine*, in some cases by mistake and in others by deliberate negligence, in the middle of a torturous competition process that involved several workshops with the user groups. In this project, a 'tape loop' (a deliberate reincarnation of the Azadi 'film roll') was used to represent the musical content of the building, even though, unlike its precedent, the tape loop had no functional or constructive resonance with the brief's technical analysis. Instead, it was deliberately deployed as a pure metaphorical

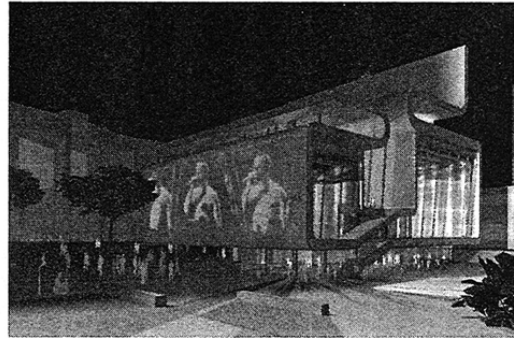
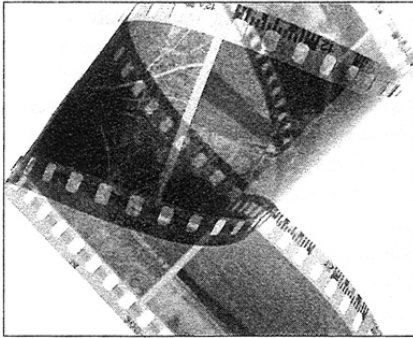
dressings aimed to qualify a very compact and efficient but otherwise unintelligible studio box assembly. Because of the formal qualities of this particular iconographic reference – a band can only wrap four sides of a parallelepiped – the loop automatically introduced the possibility of visually opening the studios to the public along one of their sides, a functionally questionable decision that despite initial resistance was enthusiastically embraced by the users as the main advantage of the scheme. The resulting transparency between the public space and the studios became not only an environmental advantage for life in the studios but also an ideal demonstration of transparency at a time of deep crisis in public perception of the Corporation, as the competition coincided exactly with the demise of the Chairman and the Director General over improper reporting

of the Kelly affair. This transparency in turn required an innovative approach to ensure that the walls could become simultaneously visually transparent and non-reflective as well as totally soundproof and acoustically diffusing. The architectural invention of this project ultimately lies in the construction of the triple glass wall, with particular internal and external geometries, as well as the design of a loop surface made of holographic film and colour-shifting LED, which would broadcast graphic image quality on the studio's blank faces. Ultimately, what was initiated as a branding strategy became productive in the technical domain.

In the most recent and most entertaining example of interplay between iconography and material organisation, we became part of the consortium that won – against all odds – the commission to

Quaderns : L'ONADA DE HOKUSAI : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

83
ABRIL 2005
245 : Q.5.0



produce the master plan for the London 2012 Olympic Bid and the Lea Valley Master Plan. We won the project by combining down-to-earth experienced sports architecture expertise and land management and planning with a careful dose of 'emergent design flair'. We promised to grow the project from the local grassroots in an integrated urban plan that was aimed at regenerating the whole of the Lea Valley, with no big architectural gestures. The team, which included Allies & Morrison, EDAW, HOK Sports and many other engineering and management consultants, worked diligently taking into account every road, every business, every canal, even every bird. No big visions, no big ideas. We had to incorporate commands from the engineers, the conservationists, the real-estate experts, the sports architects, the biologists and the local residents. After six

months of hard work we delivered a master plan that not only answered all those requests but also looked good and was consistent with the fluvial geometries of the Lea Valley: the project used the water, the landforms and the green to make a large urban park. Afraid that a more architectural output would make the plan threatening to the public, we presented this thoroughly constructed master plan via the usual set of vague and popular imagery, aimed more to convey to the general public the festive atmosphere and the regenerative values of the prospective London 2012 Olympic Games than potentials of not-yet-designed architectural proposals. Consequently, Sudjic wrote in *The Observer*:

'But despite the glitz with which the Prime Minister launched London's bid, it turns out that all those toe-curlingly kitsch computer renderings of Olympic flames,

rivers of happy people and Stratford by night do not show London's Olympic stadium at all: it hasn't been designed yet.'

The alarms sounded the minute this critique hit the newsstands; everybody began asking for Architecture. Of all the members of the consortium we were identified as the ones who could deliver in a short period of time a sufficiently exciting architectural image of the Games, and were subsequently commissioned with a workstream called 'Look and Feel of the Games'. Looking at the meandering, bifurcating lenticular geometry of our Olympic Park, we knew by now that the real question here was to deliver an image able to spark broadsheet headlines if we were to quell the rumours of our boring and bureaucratic approach to urbanism, and our incapacity to deliver exciting architecture (which, for the record, had not yet been

Quaderns : THE HOKUSAI WAVE : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

84
APRIL 2005
245 : Q 5.0



commissioned). After some subsequent spectacular failures in the London 2012 boardroom, the Hokusai Wave came back to the rescue: the venues became muscles, lenticular organs, within the anatomy of a park structured by a bifurcating striation – like muscular tissue – of meandering waterways, traffic arteries and rolling dunes. Not only did the muscle analogy produce an immediately consumable image, it further suggested a range of consistent structural and land-stabilising strategies that would produce the muscular forms to populate the park. Everybody immediately understood the geometry of the project and we even made some headlines: ‘London puts muscle into its bid’, reported the broadsheets. Best of all, this approach enabled a strategy by which the venues would not be floating on a sanitised, separated platform but would become,

formally and structurally, part of the striated and meandering landscape of the Lea Valley.

Today, the Hokusai Wave is no longer exclusively ours: projects like the Chinese basket-like, bird’s nest-like H&DM 2008 Olympic Stadium, Foster’s Gherkin, or the branding exercise of UNStudio’s trefoil/wheel Mercedes Benz Museum in Stuttgart, to name just some of the most accomplished, are also crossbreeding very obvious iconographies with processes of material organisation, be it typological, organisational or constructive. At this point in the game we have not completed a full theory of this phenomenon but we could venture into a few conclusions. After several decades of neo-mod boxes, abstract blobs and incessant indexicality we believe that one of the most promising paths for disciplinary research is the expansion of architecture’s material palette into semiotics.

But here we want to underscore that the semiotics that we are invoking are not that of linguistic theory, but rather architectural immediacy: architecture’s engagement with a reading audience, both within the discipline and among the public at large. In order to accomplish this intersection of semiotics and materiality, it is necessary for architecture to incorporate languages, identities and protocols of communication within the complex meshwork of geological and biological matters that constitute the discipline’s core.

In order to produce this disciplinary expansion we need to revisit representation with the same fluid perspective with which we have dealt with material organisations, without falling back into the trap of the analogy to the written language, as happened with the previous incarnation of semiotic

Quaderns : L’ONADA DE HOKUSAI : Alejandro
 85
 Zaera-Polo ABRIL 2005
 245 : Q 5.0

models in architecture. The semiotics that inspired architects in the past belonged fundamentally to the field of linguistics, from Saussure to Barthes. Our hypothesis here is that the consistency between the material and the significant will have a brighter future when mediated through form (that which mediates matter and substance) rather than through signs, indices or other modalities of coded transfer. Rather than embracing the contingent, ambiguous nature of shape as an alternative to the hermeticism of indexicality, we forecast the development of a discipline of form with a double agenda, operating simultaneously as an organisational device and as a communicative device. This direction could be explored to sustain the future growth of the discipline, to expand architecture's audience to include a public component, which the form argument has traditionally avoided by locating itself exclusively on a disciplinary plane. By

opening form into the reprocessing of identity and iconography we can perhaps sustain a re-empowerment of the architect as a relevant expert with a public dimension, rather than a hermetic – even if seductive – practitioner.

Our decision to resort to iconography as an alternative to a coded or indexical language is a kind of primitive choice – a protocol of communication that comes bound up with form and can therefore be directly coupled to material organisation. Rather than deploying rhetorical modes of existing systems of signs, as in classical architecture, or signs in a calligraphic mode, as in post-modernism, the potential of extracting forms out of well-established formal identities in order to destabilise material assemblages and *vice versa* seems to be a viable escape from the arbitrary deployment of shapes with neither binding relationships nor deliberate effects on the typological, organisational or constructive nature of a building, to which a

large part of 'signature architecture' has been reduced.

Paradoxically, while aiming to provide a sufficient level of engagement with the general public and delivering effective excuses for disciplinary experimentation, the double agenda's full depth remains reserved for the expert, who is able to understand that the object of practice is not exhausted in either area of performance (either as iconography or material organisation) but in a constant and iterative feedback between both realms – a process of mutual destabilisation.

Despite superficial similarities, Venturi's populist manipulation of identities is the complete opposite of this approach, as the two sides of the equation remain aseptically detached at the façade line in both the duck and the decorated shed. Consequently, neither the reader nor the critic can discern anything about the series of thresholds, ratios, techniques and

Quaderns : THE HOKUSAI WAVE : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

86
APRIL 2005
245 : Q.5.0

systems that constitute at least some part of architecture's expertise. In the Hokusai Wave mode, the deployment of a particular image becomes responsible for typological or constructive reconfigurations that have to be discussed in terms other than those of mere visual semantics in order to understand their full depth. A similar erosion of identity through semantic and constructive operations can be seen in the case of Villajoyosa Police Station which both represents, through formal similarity, the United States' Pentagon and echoes a ballistic impact through the perforations of the window system. Neither reading dominates; instead, the two representational echoes play off each other, forming a resonant chamber of possibilities. Along the same lines, the deployment of a tape loop as a brand image for the BBC and its effect on studio technology and organisation, or the use of the image of a palm-tree trunk as an excuse for a nearly

extinct *brise-soleil* façade typology for a high-rise building in a semitropical climate are just some of the effects of the coupling that transcend either a purely cultural or a purely material perspective. A critical perspective along these lines demands that we break down the divisions and hierarchies that have consistently been maintained along architecture's façade line.

Despite superficial similarities, the double agenda proposition also differs from Philip Johnson's professional cynicism. It is targeted at avoiding the perpetuation of the architect as a seducer, permanently dependent on a client's desire, by connecting the discipline to a broader pool of power, both by grounding the practice within a more extended cultural background and by claiming a body of technical expertise rather than a place in the whimsical realm of cultural production. It is precisely the deliberateness in the simultaneous pursuit

of a double agenda that provides an alibi for reciprocal subversion in each domain and appears like a win-win alternative to the painful career of the hermetic and uncompromising misfit architect, condemned to endure twenty years of public incomprehension, like some of our most distinguished colleagues from earlier generations. Perhaps the Hokusai Wave epiphany will save us from the trap of having to be devoted either to power or to control, and lift us past that phase altogether. Let us delve with the eddies and the vortexes of matter while simultaneously producing constantly evolving and yet recognisable identities.

Quaderns : L'ONADA DE HOKUSAI : Alejandro Zaera-Polo

87
ABRIL 2005
245 : Q 5.0