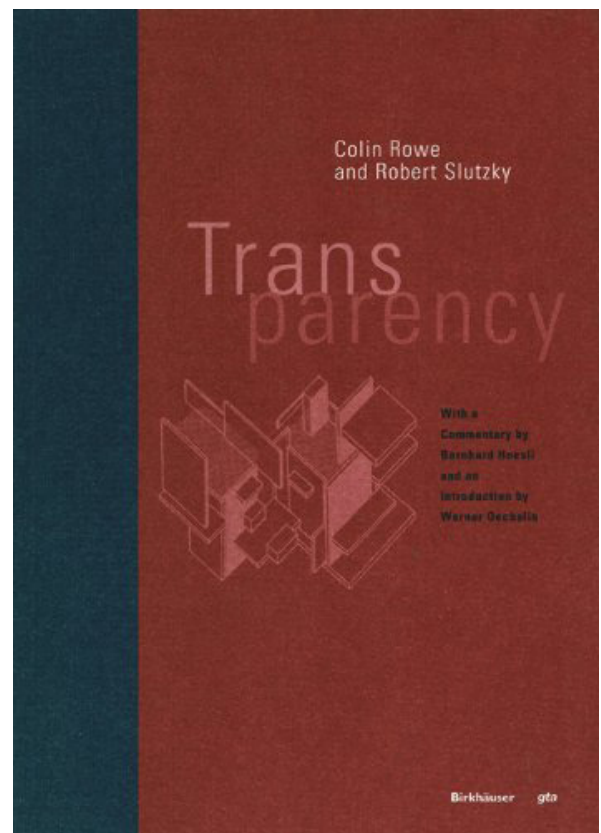# Book Review

Transparency

Rowe, C. & Slutzky, R. (1997).
Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser
119 pp.

Originally written in the spring of 1955 by Colin Rowe, an architect and Robert Slutzky, a painter as the two members of Texas Rangers considered the avant-garde movement in 1950s American architecture at the University of Texas, Austin, the fully named article *"Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal"* was finally published in ''Perspecta 8'', the Yale Architectural Journal in 1964 after a long delay. As mentioned in Preface by professor Bernhard Hoesli of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, one of the three significant contributions of Rowe and Slutzky's essay is an abstract of insights and methods that can be concluded as a new transferable knowledge or a theory from the studies of existing empirical works.

The essay started from the identification of transparency in two parts. Literal transparency, firstly, refers to the physically light and airy quality or state of materials like a glass curtain wall assembled to show the machine aesthetic in a deep naturalistic space. Secondly, phenomenal transparency can be a distinctive result from an intellectual activity and the quality of organisation of all elements in a shallow, abstracted space (p. 32). Based on Kepes' book Language of Vision (1944), transparency is an approach to solve a contradiction of spatial dimensions when two objects are overlap, one object have to be transparent. Such object can then be penetrated without being an optical destruction. At the same time, a new fluctuate spatial quality with equivocal meaning is also created from this complex condition.

The authors then used the interpretation of art by cubism artists to elaborate the concept of transparency. Cézanne and his *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1904-06) was the example to show the uses of transparent quality of materials and organisation. Moreover, the comparison between Picasso's *The Clarinet Player* (1911-1912) and Braque's *The*

Portuguese (1911) and between the other two contemporary artists: Delaunay's Simultaneous Windows (1911) and Gris's *Still Life* (1912) were introduced to present the complex natures of literal and phenomenal transparency. Two postcubist paintings, Moholy-Nagy's *La Sarraz* (1930) and Leger's The Three Faces (1926), were used to further explain the role of machine aesthetic that underlies literal transparency.

In the field of architecture, the authors suggested that since the third unambiguous dimension and the use of transparent materials are so obvious, literal transparency tends to be more successfully created than phenomenal transparency. The validity of such statement was confirmed by the comparison of architecture masterpieces. Critical analyses revealed that only in distinctive cases such as Le Corbusier's Villa at Garches (1927) that interior and exterior phenomenal transparency can be effectively created. The execution of exterior elements and interior space of the Villa provide users an opportunity to explore and interpret the ambiguity that is rather uncommon compared to contemporary architecture like Walter Gropius's Bauhaus (1925-26). The analysis of Le Corbusier's the League of Nation project (1927) that was comparable in size and function to Bauhaus also emphasize Corbusier's unique capability to combine various elements to introduce phenomenal transparency.

As mentioned in the Introduction by Oechslin (p. 11), subsequent incorporation of Commentary (1968) and Addendum (1982) to the original essay by professor Hoesli while preparing to publish a German edition brought a new level of significance in terms of relevance and applications to the text. In Commentary, Hoesli suggested that transparency arises where the classification of locations in space is *"...undefined and the choice between one classification possibility or another remains open"*. Therefore, a method that classify building form and function and the formal relationship between the two can be a

precise tool for the study of architecture because it makes understanding and evaluation possible (p. 60-61). A number of architectural design and urban planning cases: from the early renaissance Alberti's Sant' Andrea in Mantua from the 15th century to Le Corbusier's the High Court building in Chandigarh, India (1952) and the study of Collage City (1978) by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter were read and analysed to establish a generalisation of phenomenal transparency.

The first part of Hoesli's Addendum dealt with the organisation of transparent form to create space. It started with a discussion of the relationship between form and function. Form is, as concluded by Hoesli, neither an end in itself argued by people with rational belief nor as a result of design as seen by functionalists. It is an instrument of design to designate building space using elements and inform users the areas that can be used and experienced (p.87). Solid volume of mass and void of space in a number of cases were then used to explain the concept of continuous space. It was the latter part of the Addendum that directly introduced transparency as an instrument of design to create intelligible order. As a result, *clarity* can be properly created as literal transparency alongside *ambiguity and ambivalence* as part of phenomenal transparency. Spectators are also invited to become participants. Their interpretations of space with multiple meanings are always welcome. Once again, numerous experimental projects from small building designs to substantial urban planning schemes in European historic towns like Basel or Venice under professor Hoesli's supervision at the ETH Zurich were used as examples.

It can be seen from Hoesli's works that extensive explorations based on critical research of an existing idea are one of the keys to finally fulfill the task. In this case it was to create a fully functional design method to establish the complementary literal and phenomenal transparency. Even though both the authors of the original essay themselves have long

since ventured into different academic directions, Hoesli's persistent spirit to create a design tool that can be used in other contexts with comparable effects is always welcomed as a fine model to achieve a long lasting sustainable development.

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Archan Boonyanan, Ph.D.

Faculty of Architecture and Planning,

Thammasat University

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