



# ALWAYS THE REAL THING?

## AUTHENTICITY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REPRODUCTION

LARA SCHRIJVER

In his celebrated 1935 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin argues that: 'The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the

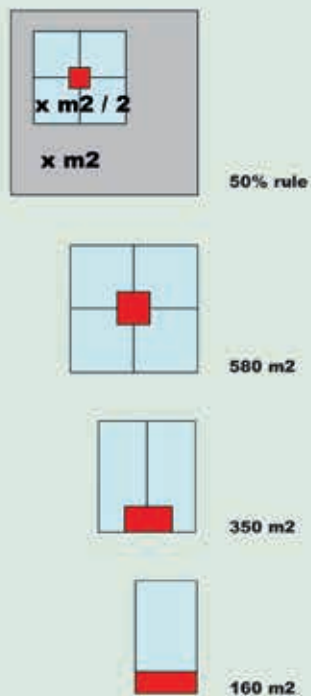
history which it has experienced.'<sup>1</sup> He is in effect interpreting authenticity as a concept that transcends the technical and material criteria of genuineness. In other words: he expands it in order to be able to include the 'life of things' in the debate about new techniques in art. This broader notion is used here to explore how we might respond to the demand for authenticity in the age of digital reproducibility.

▲ 1. KCAP, aerial photo and urban planning strategy Wijnhaveneiland, Rotterdam, 1995 (photo Ossip van Duivenbode, diagrams KCAP)

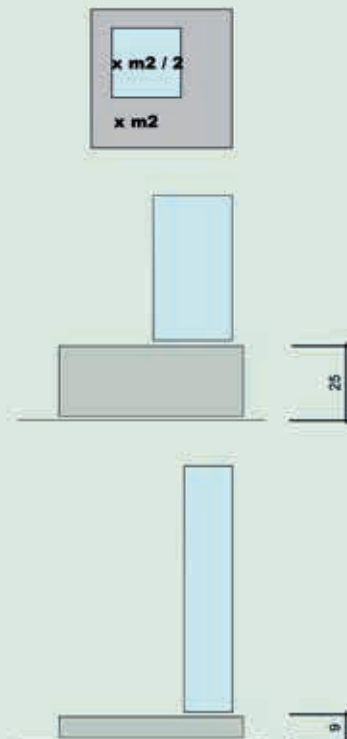
## SETBACKS



## MAX AREA



## HEIGHTS



## AUTHENTICITY AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE

The various interpretations of the concept of authenticity, ranging from the technical assessment of genuineness in the narrow sense to a broader notion of origins and context, are all relevant to architectural history. They can help in determining which elements belong to the original design and how a work relates to a particular time, context and culture. In architecture, the authenticity of an artefact or a building can be used to date something or to denote changes over the course of its life. However, the concept of authenticity is not always used unambiguously: sometimes it is indicative of an underlying evaluation rather than the condition of the object. Wim Denslagen once suggested that these implicit, additional meanings sow confusion and give rise to an ideological discussion.<sup>2</sup> Even with these limitations of the concept of authenticity – in the twentieth century also closely related to

the debates about originality – there is reason enough to repeatedly interrogate the different viewpoints on authenticity, especially in the context of contemporary architectural practice.

Back in the 1930s Benjamin had already pointed to changes in the production, character and experience of the artwork as a result of the rise of technical reproduction methods.<sup>3</sup> His essay remains a touchstone for us today, in particular as a reflection on the properties of photography and film. Although his arguments are mainly concerned with the effects of technical reproduction in these two domains in relation to the allied areas of painting and theatre, his essay has been extremely influential in architectural practice. One important element, especially in the postmodern period, is his acute analysis of the potential of technical reproduction methods, in which there is still scope for the quality of an ‘original’ as a time- and place-specific artistic realization: ‘The presence of the



original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s and '90s this acquired new relevance with the development of digital reproduction methods, which fuelled an ever-expanding understanding of copy, original and simulation.<sup>5</sup>

The digital age adds a new layer to the debate because digital techniques create a new condition. What is the authenticity value of a product or design if a perfect reproduction – in some cases even a new *production* – of an idea can be made based on a program, a scan or even an algorithm? This can lead to a further transformation of the role of the designer and of the elaboration and materialization of the design. Some aspects of digital production were already implicit in Benjamin's argument, which pointed out that technical reproduction effects a change in the authority of the original.<sup>6</sup> Mechanical reproduction, such as printing negatives, is less dependent on the original than manual reproduction. In this context, the architect Stan Allen refers to the distinction drawn by the philosopher Nelson Goodman between 'autographic' and 'allographic' arts: 'In music, poetry, or theater ... the work exists in many copies and can be produced without the direct intervention of the author.'<sup>7</sup> Moreover, such a reproduction can transcend the time and context of the original, as in the showing of a film in cinemas worldwide or individual performances of a piece of music.

#### DIGITAL DESIGNING WITHOUT A BLUEPRINT

Digital reproducibility adds to the complexity of the debate because there is less direct transfer between designer and outcome and greater 'mediation' on the part of new media. In architecture, where the realization of the architect's vision has always involved multiple contributors (draughtspeople, structural engineers, contractors), nowadays software programs also contribute to the elaboration. Some sketches by modern architects like Tadao Ando or Le Corbusier have achieved iconic status as essentialist expressions of an idea. But the effort and vision of the architect is no longer articulated by a few pencil strokes. Nowadays a sketch is just as likely to be an algorithmic abstraction of the architect's 'hand'. The software may also contain the underlying construction details, while standard solutions are already pre-programmed in AutoCAD, BIM or Revit. The transfer of information in these models gives more attention to details but they are pre-sorted based on programmed preferences.

Of particular interest in this respect is the research carried out by the architect Kees Christiaanse, who harnesses the logic of software programs in his quest for a dynamic form of urban planning. An early example was realized on Wijnhaveniland in Rotterdam in 1995. Instead of determining the building envelope of

a plot statically in line with traditional regulations, an inter-dependence was created on and in-between the plots. For example, if the structure on plot A was tall and narrow, then the building on plot B could be wider (fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> In 1999, together with ETH Zurich and the university of Kaiserslautern, Christiaanse presented the project 'Follow the church', which demonstrated the potential of a dynamic town planning strategy. This was pursued in the Kaisersrot project, a collaboration at ETH Zurich with Ludger Hoverstadt.<sup>9</sup> These early examples of an urban design strategy modelled on the mechanisms of computer programs (the 'if... then...' basis of programming language) were further developed in the research supervised by Christiaanse at ETH Zurich, the best-known example of which is probably Alex Lehnerer's PhD study.<sup>10</sup> In *Grand Urban Rules* (2009) Lehnerer analysed the rules and regulations that had contributed to the creation of widely admired modern cities, thereby laying the basis for a 'programming code' that can be used for the design of cities in the future.

What these projects have in common is that they lack the kind of predetermined outcome one finds in baroque urban planning or the long straight sight lines of Haussmann's Parisian boulevards. Instead they have a mechanism, an algorithm that formulates a process based on preferences and requirements. On Wijnhaveniland this is still a limited intervention but in later projects the subdivision rules cover a wider variety of aspects, such as location, size, proximity to the village square and situation on the periphery or in the middle of the urban fabric. This kind of urban planning is comparable to a concert in which the individual performance follows the notes set down by the composer but is in essence a personal production.<sup>11</sup>

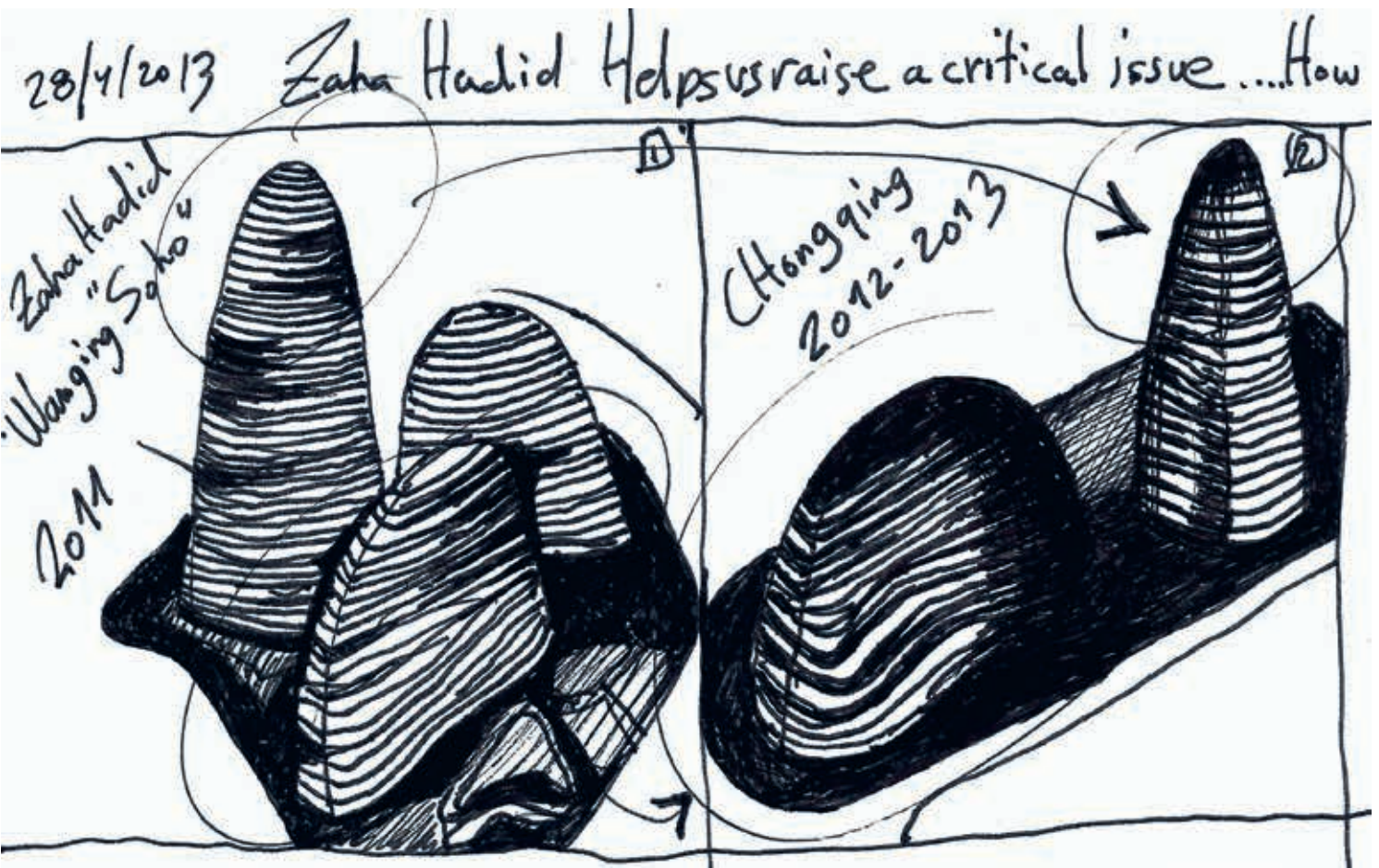
#### DESIGN AND REALITY

Although these kinds of projects have undeniable potential for urban planning, digital reproduction also creates difficulties, especially in relation to the improved visual quality and the ease of digital dissemination. Websites and magazines publish renderings of yet-to-be-built buildings that can scarcely be distinguished from photographs of the finished article. And so the age-old problem of 'falsification' and plagiarism returns, albeit in a different guise, as in 2012 with Zaha Hadid's design for the Wangjing SOHO complex in Beijing (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> Even before the complex was finished a developer had started to erect a copy of the building in a different Chinese city, Chongqing (fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> A long article on this and other copycat projects quoted Rem Koolhaas, writing in that same year in *Mutations*: 'Design today becomes as easy as Photoshop, even on the scale of a city.'<sup>14</sup> Although her firm raised this issue

2. Zaha Hadid Architects, Beijing Wangjing SOHO Complex, 2014 (Wei Cao/Alamy Stock Photo)







3. Eli Inbar, sketch of Wangjing Soho Complex and Chongqing Meiquan, 2013 (<https://archdialog.com/2013/04/30/zaha-hadid-helps-us-raise-a-critical-issue-that-should-concern-us-all-how-to-get-inspired-from-existing-buildings-consciously/>)

and publicly claimed copyright, Zaha Hadid herself revealed in interview an attitude reminiscent of the thinking behind Christiaan's urban design models. She suggested that these cloned buildings also possess a unique potential: if they were to reveal new and innovative mutations, they could in turn contribute to innovation. If the architect herself sees an interesting twist in the potential of copies, this also gives rise to new conditions in which the distinction between copy and original might be less important. If the copy were to be finished first, for example, one could then ask which should be regarded as the 'original': the design or the first realization?

Hadid's project demonstrates that it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep control of copies in the digital age. The public debate reveals just how strongly traditional assumptions about copies hold sway: to be able to claim the aura of the 'original', Hadid's building needed to be finished ahead of the copy. At the same time, this example, together with the work of Kees Christiaanse, confront us with new issues: if elements of a building or an urban plan are determined by processes and algorithms, how can we still talk

about an 'original'? Should architects protect their design mechanism rather than the eventual building? Where does the Benjaminian 'aura' of the building then reside?

#### ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AS TEAMWORK

Despite the important role ascribed to the inspiration and vision of the (often male) architect since the Renaissance, it is worth exploring the more fluid forms of collaboration spawned by digital culture. Open-source software like Linux and the crowded world of Minecraft are examples of domains where individual authorship is less important than continuing to build on the work of others. Applied to architecture, the digital culture example could create scope for the continuous adaptation of (semi-anonymous) models – genuine teamwork in other words – which would alter the very concept of authenticity. How a model performed would be more important than who made, drew or programmed it, or how it originated.

At the moment, design practice still struggles to reconcile itself to the potential of digital techniques; they are utilized, but the role of the architect is still

pretty much what it has been for the last few hundred years. Open-source design continues to be relatively marginal in architecture, despite attempts to give it greater prominence. Yet the integration of digital approaches into a broader and more collaborative design process has a lot of potential for the future,

especially if this better reflects the many hands and perspectives that contribute to a building, and if architecture really is conceived as a team effort. In this context ‘authenticity’ would acquire a new meaning, one that was primarily concerned with the building itself and the culture in which it comes about.

#### NOTES

- 1 W. Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in: W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. H. Ahrendt, trans. H. Zohn, New York 1968, 217-251, 221 (trans. of ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’, 1935).
- 2 W. Denslagen, ‘Authenticiteit en spiritualiteit’, *Bulletin KNOB* 109 (2010) 4, 135-140.
- 3 Benjamin 1968 (note 1), 220.
- 4 Benjamin 1968 (note 1), 220.
- 5 J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser, Ann Arbor 1995 (trans. of *Simulacres et simulations*, Paris 1981).
- 6 Benjamin 1968 (note 1), 220.
- 7 S. Allen, *Practice. Architecture, Technique and Representation*, New York 2000, 33.
- 8 On KCAP’s website the project is presented as a ‘flexible masterplan’, or ‘not a design but a strategy with no predictable outcome’. <https://www.kcap.eu/en/projects/v/wijnhaveneiland/>
- 9 The ‘Follow the church’ project ran from 1999 to 2001. The principle behind it was followed up in Kaisersrot, introduced on the website as ‘solutions you cannot draw’. <http://www.kaisersrot.com/kaisersrot-02/Welcome.html>
- 10 A commercial edition of the dissertation was published as: A. Lehnerer, *Grand Urban Rules*, Rotterdam 2009.
- 11 Allen 2000 (note 7), 31-45. He observes that architecture operates somewhere between the ‘autographic’ and the ‘allographic’.
- 12 M. Fairs, ‘Zaha Hadid Building Pirated in China’, *dezeen.com*, 2 January 2013, [www.dezeen.com/2013/01/02/zaha-hadid-building-pirated-in-china/](http://www.dezeen.com/2013/01/02/zaha-hadid-building-pirated-in-china/).
- 13 ‘Hadid said in an interview, she is now being forced to race these pirates to complete her original project first.’ K. Holden Platt, ‘Copycat Architects in China Take Aim at the Stars’, *Der Spiegel* online, 28 December 2012, [www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/pirated-copy-of-design-by-star-architect-hadid-being-built-in-china-a-874390.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/pirated-copy-of-design-by-star-architect-hadid-being-built-in-china-a-874390.html).
- 14 Quoted in Holden Platt 2012 (note 13).

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Walter Benjamin’s famous 1935 essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ addresses the authenticity of a work of art as something beyond the merely material and technical. Benjamin constructs a broader notion of authenticity that includes ‘the life of things’ and is related to new techniques in artistic production. This broader sense of authenticity is used here to explore how it may help us to understand architecture in the age of digital reproduction.

Two aspects of authenticity in Benjamin’s article are discussed: process reproduction and image reproduction. In process reproduction, authenticity is transformed through the mediation of technical procedures. Benjamin’s analysis of photography and

film is a seminal version of how the digital age raises new questions through tools and techniques such as programs, coding and algorithms. The work of Kees Christiaanse in collaboration with Ludger Hovestadt provides an example of an increasingly algorithmic approach to urban planning. In image reproduction, the question of authenticity revolves around the increasing proliferation of images. In this context, the Wangjing SOHO complex by Zaha Hadid and its apparent imitation by a Chinese developer proves illuminating. These projects show aspects of the changing conditions of the digital age, in which new techniques of realization may transform current notions of authenticity.