How Buildings Got Bullied: Claiming the Rights of the Buildings

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Abstract
Images of buildings as architectural projects could be established through public perception and judgment. The ease of access to their online publications encourages public discourse on urban architecture and allows people to experience architecture without direct interaction. Eventually, the way the buildings are perceived, experienced, and judged might be shifted. Problems may arise when people only scroll through the pages without knowing exactly the real story behind the buildings. The buildings get bullied due to partial misinterpretation or misleading narratives.

This paper intends to claim the buildings’ rights to be accepted by people. Let people become the co-author of the building’s narrative. We address the issues by observing the different ways bullying occurred on worldwide-known as well as local projects. The different forms of bullying may represent the manners in which buildings could be represented, through the use of texts, images, and symbols to identify different elements that could distort the perceived narratives of the buildings. In the end, we suggest that architects should not fear or become too defensive when facing such bullies. Bullying is another kind of acknowledgement; a form of celebrating every single element of the building that, despite mocked, still sticks in the people’s memory.

Keywords: Bully; Representation; Narrative; Perception; Media

1. Invasion of Online Architecture Projects Publication

Take a look on your screen. Go to browser, type “architecture project” and then press that search button. Less than a minute, you can easily access those articles and learn new things on architecture, no matter where you are. Websites like Archdaily, Dezeen, Designboom, and others indeed are the media to deliver the latest architecture news and trends into our palm. Media is an active metaphor to translate human experience to form (McLuhan, 1994). The problem arises when one reads these publications, scrolling the pages, and then think that they already “experienced” the architecture.

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(The publisher will insert here: received, accepted)
The embedded capability to discuss projects on online architecture publications allows readers to give their opinions freely. This feature promotes diverse and rich view on architectural project, but sometimes the perception could bring negative impacts to architecture. While this feature is intended to give the readers the space for discussion, it is also used to ridicule the building. People not only could add their perspective and espouse the media’s view on the project, but also criticise and present their opinion against it. According to Berger (1990), the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. Hence, the architectural elements of the buildings are sometimes attacked for their similarities with something else, mocked as symbols that are irrelevant to the original idea of the building, or even judged by the scepticism toward particular architect. Along with nostalgia, memory, and the narratives of the buildings, this symbolism influence the way the identity of the building is created. Cynical voices of the readers are confronted against the ideal narrative of the building. We assume this as a form of bullying a building. In this paper, we are trying to claim the rights of the buildings to be accepted by public perception. To do so, we collect several case studies on worldwide-known as well as local projects from online architectural publications, then analyse the different ways the buildings perceived and bullied.

2. How the Buildings Got Bullied

In this online context, architecture is represented through images and texts. As we look for completed projects, the images mostly are the photographs of the actual building. It is true that photography seems to have the ability to explore and represent architectural space and form, and even to express architectural ideas and concepts. But, “Only some of the qualities of architecture can be communicated in the photograph: the properties of space, materiality and the day-to-day inhabitation of buildings are notoriously difficult to represent photographically” (Higgott & Wray, 2014, p.2). It means that the photos of a building could tell you a totally different narrative compared to its “real” story. Since “film (or digital sensor) ...enriching our conception of architecture and our emotional relationship to it” (Wray, 2014, p.121), while the viewers cannot see the physical building at particular moment, they perceive the reality of the architecture through the partial perspective of the photograph.

Texts that we could found in online architecture media are mostly articles which present the explanations or stories behind the building and the captions which support the images. Architecture writings considered cannot represent physical experience, architectural meaning through written words is risk to disappear since words are abstract (Holl, 2006).

In order to find out why and how the buildings got bullied in online publications, we conducted a case study involving eleven architectural projects, both local and starchitect’s. For each building, we look into several online publications about the building, ranging from 5 to 10 websites, then we analyse the shown images, the texts constructed, and the comments section. Due to the limitation of space in this paper, only selected projects that represent the idea of bullying are discussed. The followings are some findings on how the buildings got bullied, through the creation of meme, through verbal comments, and through the myth spread out among public.

3. Meme, Meme Everywhere

Memes are the way cultural information spreads, originally coined by Dawkins (1976). It was derived from Greek’s Mimeme, mean it something imitated. The use of internet meme, usually refers to a humorous image embedded with the caption that spread rapidly through the internet. Buildings could be bullied through meme as we found several images on the building or building-related appeared as meme and mocked because of its similarity to other shape or object that is completely unrelated with the building. This suggest how people tend to translate the building form metaphorically by the way of seeing the buildings (Berger, 1990).
Figure 1 illustrates how the Sydney Opera House and The Shard got bullied through the use of memes. This kind of bully needs visual comparison to show how the building is associated with a particular object. It also can be associated with another object because of the specific perspective of the photo that represents the building. As in the case of Sydney Opera House, in one photo it is perceived as Son Goku’s hair or three mating turtles, while in another it could be perceived as a woman wearing head scarf. These forms of bullying create particular image of the building which is completely irrelevant.

4. Put Your Comments Below

Online architecture publications serve as a discussion forum for architecture and design enthusiasts. Beside the actual purpose, we found that online architecture publication website became the tools for people to bully some buildings. Comments section in the forum opens possibilities for people to give their opinion. We went through this section in some architecture publication websites to collect and compare images and comments conveyed by the public.

Figure 2 suggests that people are likely to bully the building through their comments on its appearance; they judged the shape of Markthal and Serpentine Pavilion by how they look from the article images. It happens because the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled (Berger, 1990, p.7). The given articles which supposed to deliver the narrative of the buildings fail to give complete experience to
its readers. It occurs that most of the experiences and qualities have the possibility to deprive when image is translated into written form (McLuhan, 1994). The supporting photographs neither can deliver the complete experience, since photographs maintain and control the interaction with the subject, it defines and produce the perception on two-dimensional surface (Eisenman, 1992). Photography is a mechanical reproduction, it embodies something new and lack of presence in time and space (Benjamin, 1936). The attached caption should become the explanation to its photograph (Higgott & Wray, 2014), but somehow it still cannot provide the complete experience. In this case, the incompleteness opens possibilities for people to bully the buildings. Readers give their own perspective from what they see and read.

If architecture can be said to have a poetic meaning we must recognize that what it says is not independent from what it is. Architecture is not an experience that words translate later (Metzger & Spillmann, 2006). After all, experiencing architecture is not a mere looking at a plan or other two-dimensional drawings, it should involve spatial experience. Viewer’s perception should remain distant from architecture narrative, in contrast viewer participation could re-create new meaning in architecture (Gomez, 2006). In this case, readers’ comments become a new narrative and construct a new meaning to its architecture. The new narrative could emerge as meta-narrative, a second narrative which contents is related to the original narrative, or as a completely new narrative.

5. Once Upon a Time, A Building Becomes a Myth

Besides the bullying of well-known architecture project publications, we looked at how local projects could be bullied as well, as found in Indonesian publication. We found that a form of bully that is quite significant in Indonesia is done through the distribution of urban myths. Mixing the belief in supernatural and recent technology, these myths can be found spreading across the internet. One that is so popular is about Menara Saidah (Saidah Tower), a building that had been constructed in the early 2000’s and then vacated after only seven years of usage (Octa, 2012).

There are a lot of articles on the internet which tell different stories about Menara Saidah. Some said that ghosts are haunting Menara Saidah after this building got abandoned and some also said that this building was built upon a graveyard. The horror image of Menara Saidah is also gained from articles’ forum where people sugar coating the stories. In this case, the bullying of Menara Saidah happened as a myth. First it came as a text that tells the stories then there are images popping up to support the stories. Figure 3 presents the collection of words which often appear on different online articles about Menara Saidah which we then compared with images that support the text from those articles.

Fig.3. Most Used Words and Images on Articles of Menara Saidah
Sources: wikipedia.com, kaskus.co.id, hipwee.com
In the case of Menara Saidah, the images as visual representation come from texts to support the narrative. “The photograph is not ‘taken’, as in common parlance, but made from the camera’s subject, viewpoint and framing” (Higgott & Wray, 2014, p.3). Most of images which appear on the article only show the condition after this building get abandoned. Few images even do not have any relations to Menara Saidah as a building, such as the image of graveyard, but appear only to strengthen the horror and mystical image from the texts. Furthermore, digital manipulation was used in photographs of Menara Saidah to make it more convincing as representation of reality. Higgott (2014, p.4) suggests that photography could demonstrate how its architecture would be occupied and used. “Visual representation contains value and idea” (Eisenman, 1992), it makes people unable to distinguish images from reality. Digital paradigm indeed defines the reality in terms of media and simulation, then it gives powerful challenge in architecture (Eisenman, 1992). The readers somehow are trapped in this perception of the empty building as a haunted place, accepting this hyperreality.

6. Conclusion

Do the buildings and their designer really deserve all the bullies? It is a fact that the bullying of a building offends it as an architectural entity as well as its architect. But on the other hand, words of bully help the building itself to gain great amount of exposures. It is spread on the web, and people commented on it, and bashed it, but eventually many will visit and occupy the building in real life, anyway. Apart from the criticism, the 2016’s Serpentine Pavilion by BIG is still among 2016’s most popular exhibition by genre and city with the total of 263,918 visitors (The Art Newspaper, 2017). However, in some circumstances, the building could also live a new life, with a different purpose to stay tall. As an example, Menara Saidah is now usually used as a place to test guts against paranormal activity while also being a home for dozens of homeless people.

As the representations create its own meaning, this new meaning is not purely the architect’s vision of the building. The story is knitted by many authors. Architectural representation in online publications is the product of the relationship among architects, editors, photographers, writers and also new architecture. So why don’t we, the so-called architects, let the audience—or readers in this case—to become another co-author of our building’s narrative? It has the rights to be absorbed completely in the society, where all these readers live and perceive the buildings differently. So, then the existence of the building could be celebrated, as Bal & Boheemen (2009, p.59) argues, the point of the narrative is, precisely, the creative power of story-telling itself, as a life-giving act.

We may conclude that architectural projects which are exposed by the media are prone to any kind of bullies. But, it also indicates that the project is well-known and discussed within the society. The impact could be various; the building may be visited by more people, used for another purpose, or it also may get neglected and fading both from the environment and from public memories. In the end, we suggest that architects should not fear or become too defensive when facing such bullies. It is fine to let the society judge and co-author the building’s identity, inserting a meta-narrative to it or even a completely new narrative. The readers’ act of co-authoring can be perceived as a way to conform the existence of the building—both its narrative and physical presence—in the society. Let’s claim the rights of the building! So, it can be fully accepted by its architect and the public who will inhabit it, including its rights to get bullied and exposed. Bullying is a form of celebrating every single element of the building that, despite mocked, still sticks in the people’s memory.
References


Do not use two-byte characters such as Chinese, Korean and Korean fonts.

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