

Architectural illustration in cross-domain collaboration: the storytelling ovens case

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Abstract

This article explores the role of architectural illustration in interdisciplinary and cross-domain collaborations by focusing on a single-case study, The Storytelling Ovens, a project created by Cuptorul Moldovencei, Iași.travel and Atelier Spre. Through a qualitative, practice-based methodology, the article documents and analyzes the project, reflecting on the contributions of architectural illustrations to the collaborative scenario and on the specific contexts and creative processes that produced them. By employing an illustrative approach rooted in imaginative exploration, Atelier Spre shows how architectural illustration can initiate cross-disciplinary collaborations, spark community dialogue, foster emotional connections, support tourism and local economies, archive cultural change, and transform everyday urban spaces into accessible and meaningful narratives. The study demonstrates that architectural illustration carries significance beyond architectural design, emerging as a catalyst for collaboration and a vehicle for civic and cultural engagement. Embracing architectural illustration as a versatile, participatory practice can foster new modes of urban storytelling and reshape how cities are experienced, narrated, and remembered.

Keywords: Architecture, Illustration, Architectural Illustration, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Urban Storytelling

Introduction

While the merits of architectural illustrations within the process of designing a built artefact are well understood, their practical applications outside their native domain are seldom systematically investigated and documented. Illustrations are often dismissed as collateral, their value beyond architectural design largely overlooked.

The article aims to bring back the focus on architectural illustration, investigating its role in cross-domain collaborations by documenting and analyzing a recent project created by the Atelier Spre, a visual storytelling studio specializing in architectural illustration.

The analysis holds relevance for both architects and illustrators, offering insights into the cross-domain use of architectural illustrations. Furthermore, it may be of particular interest to those exploring how architecture can shape the lived environment in ways that extend beyond the production of built artefacts, situating architectural illustration as a cultural, experiential, and narrative force.

Background

Architecture, like all design-oriented disciplines that interface with the lived world, has invariably involved a plethora of collaborative efforts regardless of the time period. This collaboration often involves understanding and speaking a common language and the use of various tools for productive communication.

Architectural visualizations are representations of architectural ideas, designs, and spaces. In their many forms, they are essential for enabling communication and sustaining collaboration while pursuing creative purposes within the project development team. They also serve as a visual bridge between the team and beneficiaries such as clients or the general public.

Architectural illustrations are graphical depictions of buildings, spaces, and places generally used as a visual form of communication, to explain or clarify a concept, story, or idea. They are frequently used for conceptual presentations, competitions, marketing, publications and exhibitions (Jarvis, 2018), but are often subordinated to a greater project where they play a part in the process for designing a built artefact. In the context of collaboration, architectural illustration plays a pivotal role in communicating the intentions behind designs, facilitating discussions, and aligning stakeholders' expectations.

Among the variety of visualizations that contribute to the development of architectural projects, like 3D renders, technical drawings or diagrams and infographics, architectural illustrations distinguish themselves through their ability to transcend their native domain, playing a pivotal role in cross-domain collaborations. This is partly due to their accessibility. Architectural literacy refers to the ability to understand and interpret the visual language of architecture, much like reading literacy allows us to understand written words. It encompasses the skills to analyze architectural forms, spaces, and designs, as well as to communicate and engage in discourse about them effectively. (Schaefferbeke & Aarts, 2021). Unlike architectural plans or technical drawings that depend on the architectural literacy of the viewer to be read and understood, architectural illustrations promote a more facile communication and remain relevant for other domains, external entities, or the broader public.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research approach, grounded in the observation, analysis, and interpretation of creative practice. The research is structured around the examination of *The Storytelling Ovens* project. The single case is analyzed regarding the

contributions made by architectural illustrations within the cross-disciplinary collaborative project while also reflecting on the specific contexts and creative processes that produced them. This dual lens allows for a nuanced exploration and richer understanding of how architectural illustrations function not only as final artefacts but as active forces in shaping collaborative work across fields. The goal of the present work is to reassert the value of architectural illustration within contemporary architecture discourse and to demonstrate its potential as a self-standing artefact and a catalyst for new forms of knowledge and interaction across domains.

Results

The analysis outlines the contextual framework—examining its objectives, stakeholders, and collaborators—and explores *Atelier Spre*'s philosophical and stylistic approach to illustration and its impact.

The Storytelling Ovens exemplifies the convergence of architectural illustration, culinary tradition, and urban exploration. The project is the result of the collaboration of three entities: *Cuptorul Moldovencei*, a pastry shop chain, *Iasi.travel*, a tourism NGO and *Atelier Spre*. *Cuptorul Moldovencei* is a start-up business owning a pastry laboratory and seven pastry shops in the city of Iasi, each located in a different neighborhood, *Iasi. Travel* is an NGO that operates in the tourism sector. Its primary objective is to promote Iasi and Moldavia as tourist destinations. *Atelier Spre* is a visual storytelling studio specializing in architectural illustration, founded in 2016 to explore and appropriate the city of Iasi through illustration. Its practice positions architectural illustration not merely as a representational tool but as a bridge between people and place, serendipity and design. The studio operates along a spectrum: at one end, precise, technically grounded

renderings document the built environment and preserve ephemeral architectural elements, lending permanence to the transient. At the other, poetic, playful and expressive illustrations embrace abstraction, emotion, and atmosphere, crafting story-rich, immersive visual worlds that capture a place's spirit. These two modes of illustrating are not mutually exclusive, suggesting rather a dynamic interplay between functional and poetic approaches (Meisenheimer, 1987).



Fig. 1 The illustrations and the illustration reveal event

The project title encapsulates both the project's conceptual logic and its collaborative distribution of roles, underscoring the co-creative nature of the endeavor. *Cuptorul Moldovencei* initiated the project as a strategy to promote its neighborhood shops, symbolized by the "ovens". *Iași.travel* acted as narrative curator, assembling a "story" of the place from historical sources and local memory. *Atelier Spre* completes the triad by visually "telling" about the narratives and the pastries through accessible and evocative illustrations. Together, the partners enact a model of collaborative authorship in which business, cultural heritage, and visual storytelling intersect to produce new forms of urban meaning.

The collaboration involved seven events and seven illustrations, one for each pastry shop. In a series of sequenced events, happening every few months, the multidisciplinary team organized guided tours around each shop, bringing together tourist landmarks and lesser-known

locales to build meaningful connections between the cultural and commercial sectors and foster a sense of community and local identity. The event hosted 50 participants of all ages interested in exploring select neighborhoods and experiencing place-based stories. The tour began actively with a four-hour hike and concluded passively with a catered event, unveiling the new artwork. (fig.1) The event concluded with a hand-out of postcards with the illustration to all attendees. In a digital-dominated world, printed materials serve not only as souvenirs but also as tangible reminders of the shared experience. Their physicality evokes nostalgia and intimacy.

Attendance at the events was roughly divided between long-term participants and neighborhood residents seeking to learn more about their immediate environment. Since the event postcards acted as collectables, they incentivized repeated participation. As such, they became a visual statement of shared experience and gained relevance as a roadside marker that says: „We were here, you were here. We were here together”. (Lynam, 2022) Beyond archiving and commemoration, the postcards also retained their function as communication tools; mailing or giving them to loved ones allows them to share in the experience.

In an age dominated by visual communication, projects such as *The Storytelling Ovens* generate visibility for local businesses by mobilizing illustration as both cultural and commercial strategy. Beyond contributing to brand identity, illustrations foster the emergence of a brand culture—an affective sphere in which individuals connect with businesses on emotional and symbolic levels (Holt, 2004).

In this project, *Atelier Spre* adopts an illustrative approach that departs from conventional photorealism, favoring ludic, expressive and emotionally compelling visual storytelling. The illustrations feature story-like compositions, incorporating a collection of graphic elements

into dream-like collages that distill the essence of a place. In this way, they function as creative memory, a ludic or imaginative reconstruction of known realities through a subjective lens. (Costea, 2016)

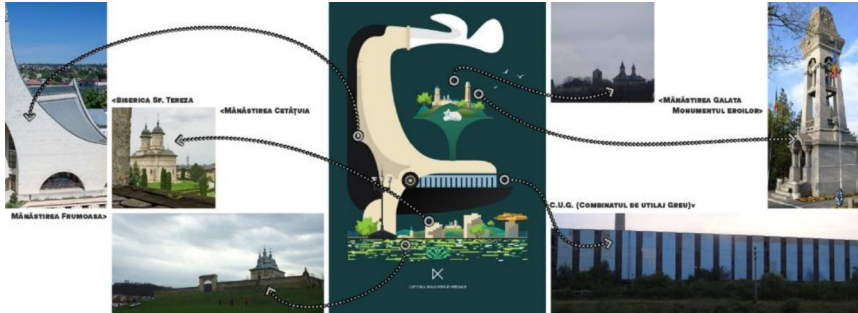
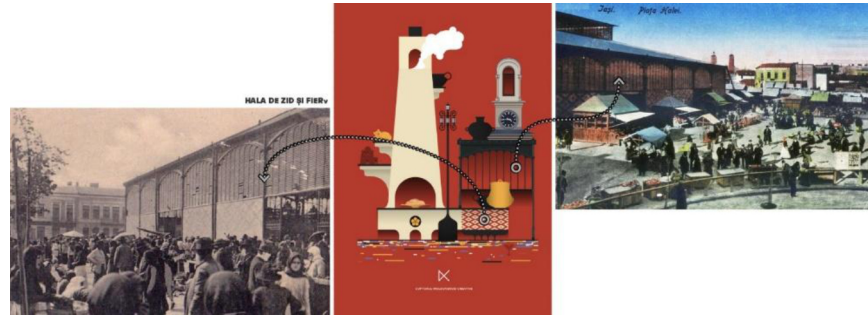


Fig. 2
Reinterpretation of
Nicolina's urban space
through illustration

Through illustration, meaning emerges from analyzing and deconstructing lived space, producing an experience distinct from direct encounters with architecture (de la Fuente Suárez, 2016). *Atelier Spre* reconfigures the fabric of the neighborhoods into condensed visual narratives that direct attention and foster nuanced understandings of urban space (fig.2). Viewers draw parallels between real and imagined, while recognizable elements inscribe neighborhood landscapes into memory. The illustrations act as temporal snapshots, sometimes incorporating vanished structures such as the *Warehouse of Brick and Iron* (fig.3), thus functioning as instruments of documentation and visual archiving. Echoing the *Moments, Places, and Architecture of Iași, The Storytelling Ovens* operates as an illustrated archive, cataloguing vulnerable architectural elements and preserving fragments of the city's visual identity.

Fig.3 Archiving
architectural change -
Warehouse of Brick and
Iron



The color scheme for each illustration draws from the surroundings and from the pastry shop itself, imbuing the representation with local flavor. (fig. 4) Elements of the neighborhood's nature, architecture and narratives form an illustrated microcosm ready to be experienced.

Illustrations include recurring motifs that distinguish them while connecting them as a series (fig. 5). A woven band in unique thread colors grounds each composition, embedding a brand symbol from *Cuptorul Moldovencei*. Compositions invariably include functional aspects of an oven like the imaginative hearth, the ash pan with a streetlight handle or the chimney and its pareidolic illusions out of smoke. The company's logo cat finds warmth atop these fantastical ovens, which appear alive and mobile, reminiscent of *Howl's Moving Castle* in *Studio Ghibli's* film. The resulting visual amalgamation invokes the neighborhood's *genius loci*, embodied in a fantastic oven symbolizing the pastry shop. Through their ludic and expressive character, these collages invite evocative engagement, fostering emotional connections with place and an appreciation of the community's subtleties and nuances.



Fig. 4 Borrowing colors from the local pastry shop in the Păcurari neighborhood

The consistent visual language and recurring motifs position the illustrations not merely as individual artifacts, but as components of a coherent collection. When apprehended collectively, they generate a curatorial layer of meaning that exceeds the sum of their parts. Much like museological displays, where the arrangement and repetition of objects establish new interpretative frameworks (Pearce, 1992), the illustrations function as a visual archive in which patterns, variations, and thematic continuities become legible.

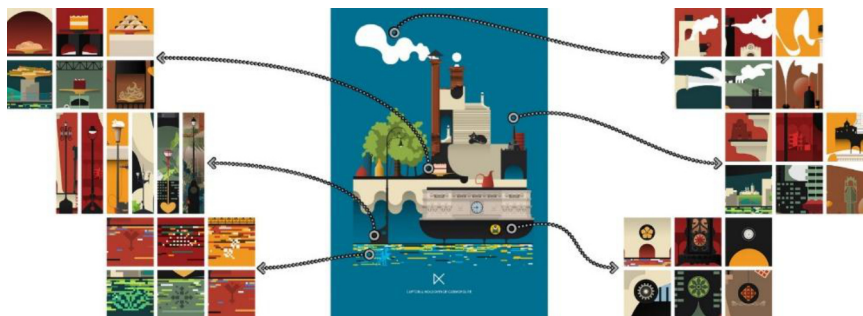


Fig. 5 Recurring motifs in the series of illustration

Discussion

The Storytelling Ovens project emphasizes narrative immersion and sensory experience, blending neighborhood walking tours with emotionally resonant collages and culinary arts. The illustrations

featured in the project transcend mere representation, reshaping how cities are experienced, narrated, and remembered.

The act of illustrating—along with the choices of medium, composition, and narrative—becomes a way to engage with place critically and expressively, turning overlooked architectural details and urban micro-histories into meaningful shared artefacts. Through careful stylization, distilling complexity into accessible forms without oversimplifying, illustration enables audiences of all ages and backgrounds to emotionally connect with urban spaces, even without prior historical or architectural knowledge. Illustrated elements become condensed narratives—visual cues prompting discovery, reflection, or dialogue. This positions architectural illustration as an inherently inclusive tool, capable of making heritage legible, everyday spaces remarkable, and civic identity more tangible.

Whether reimagining local identity through pastry and folklore, encouraging urban exploration in combination with guided tours, or stimulating participants' imagination through whimsical visual narratives, the illustrations demonstrate their capacity to promote civic trust, emotional resonance, and cross-sector engagement. By blending shared narratives, site-specific aesthetics, reinterpreted heritage, and urban storytelling, they foster connections to place, reinforce neighborhood identity, enhance visibility for local businesses, support tourism and facilitate community building.

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Storytelling Ovens* project demonstrates the adaptability and utility of architectural illustration. It highlights how illustrations become impactful creative artefacts able to mediate interdisciplinary collaborations, spark community dialogue, prompt

reflection, support tourism and local economies, document heritage and archive cultural and architectural change.

The project showcases how architectural illustration, when interpreted broadly and approached experimentally, can generate new knowledge, connect stakeholders and foster innovation across sectors,

Architectural illustrations can be seen as an inclusive public engagement tool, capable of making heritage legible, everyday spaces remarkable. Architectural illustrations can encourage urban exploration, sustain place attachment and reinforce civic identity. In this way, it functions as a catalyst for community building, cultural engagement, trust-building and placemaking,

The results of this examination suggest that architectural illustration should not be seen as merely an accessory to architectural practice but as a powerful interdisciplinary enabler—a form of visual thinking and cultural production that invites playful interaction and makes space for new forms of public engagement. This illustrates a paradigm shift: from architectural illustration as mere documentation and representation to a dynamic form of cultural production capable of reshaping how cities are experienced, narrated, and remembered.

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Ilustrația arhitecturală în colaborarea interdisciplinară: tur ghidat în dulcele târg

(rezumat)

Acest articol explorează rolul ilustrației arhitecturale în colaborările interdisciplinare și inter-domenii, concentrându-se pe un studiu de caz unic, Tur ghidat în dulcele târg, un proiect realizat de Cuptorul Moldovencei, Iași.travel și Atelier Spre. Printr-o metodologie calitativă, bazată pe practică, articolul documentează și analizează proiectul, reflectând asupra contribuțiilor ilustrațiilor arhitecturale la scenariul colaborativ și asupra contextelor specifice și proceselor creative care le-au produs. Adoptând o abordare ilustrativă înrădăcinată în explorarea imaginativă, Atelier Spre arată cum ilustrația arhitecturală poate iniția colaborări interdisciplinare, stimula dialogul comunitar, promova conexiuni emoționale, susține turismul și economiile locale, arhiva schimbările culturale și transforma spațiile urbane cotidiene în narațiuni accesibile și semnificative. Studiul demonstrează că ilustrația arhitecturală are o semnificație dincolo de designul arhitectural, manifestându-se ca un catalizator pentru colaborare și un vehicul pentru implicare civică și culturală. Adoptarea ilustrației arhitecturale ca o practică versatilă și participativă poate promova noi moduri de povestire urbană și poate redefini modul în care orașele sunt trăite, narate și amintite.