

## Visual echoes: contextual representation of imaginary architecture

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### Abstract

This paper asks what happens when readers try to picture architecture described only through words. It considers how people imagine fictional spaces in an age flooded with ready-made images. The act of visualizing imagined architecture draws not just on the text itself but also on each reader's cultural, educational, and professional background and their exposure to other media. This will help develop methods that can be used in transdisciplinary workshops for improving public engagement. In order to explore this, participants were asked to read two descriptive passages and then draw the two citadels depicted: Minas Tirith (J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*) and Elantris (from Brandon Sanderson's eponymous novel). Minas Tirith benefits from widely circulated imagery from Peter Jackson's film adaptation, while Elantris does not yet have a screen version. By comparing these drawings, this paper examines how existing iconic images can shape or constrain individual mental imagery. Thus, the author aims to investigate the interrelationships between text, image, and audience in an era of intensifying visual culture (Rose, 2014, p. 21). This also connects to Jenkins' concept of convergence culture, of the blurring lines between content creators and content consumers and the complex new relations between top-down media and bottom-up participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008).

**Keywords:** Visual Imagery, Fictional Architecture, Literary Description

## Introduction

Readers' mental images of fictional architecture can provide a way of understanding how people view built spaces that are free from real-world constraints. This paper examines how architectural descriptions in fantasy literature are visualized by readers, using drawings to reveal symbolic and aspirational aspects that are not easy to discern otherwise. Mental images are shaped by cultural environments but also by shared visual references pervasive in popular media. Adaptations and fan content feed back into these frameworks, creating anticipatory images that shape how people picture imaginary spaces.

This study focuses on two examples: Minas Tirith from *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2002), visually represented in Peter Jackson's films, and Elantris from Brandon Sanderson's novel (Sanderson, 2007), which lacks a screen version. By analysing participant drawings, the paper delves into how iconic images can anchor, limit, or enrich mental representations. The study blends visual research methods with cognitive theory and spatial semiotics to see how imagined architecture can become a starting point for critical, interdisciplinary reflection about what people see as meaningful or desirable in built space.

## Literature Review

Participant-generated drawings are relatively rare in architectural research outside professional training contexts. In the social sciences, however, they have been used to explore how people symbolically represent mental illness (Rosa & Wagner, 1987), intelligence (Räty et al., 2012), racism (Howarth, 2007), teachership (Martikainen & Hakoköngäs, 2023), or urban spaces like Paris (Milgram & Jodelet, 1976). These studies play on how drawings function as visual thinking

(Martikainen & Hakoköngäs, 2023) and symbolic translation (Piaget, 2013) that make tacit meanings visible. Piaget's concepts of schemata and anticipatory images help explain how individuals organize spatial knowledge and project what they expect to see. Choremes (Reimer, 2011) add a spatial semiotic layer: these act as building blocks for mapping architectural forms. Rose (2014) shows how visual research methods are embedded in contemporary visual culture and underlines the importance of reflexivity when working with image elicitation. Her work on practical approaches to collecting and analysing visual material had a significant impact on shaping the methodology of this study, particularly in treating participant drawings as situated cultural artifacts rather than neutral illustrations. Jenkins (2008), talks about convergence as the overlap of various media forms and participatory practices. This concept is applied here to show how shared media imagery can shape imagined spaces, extending his concepts into the visualization of fictional architecture.

By combining the concepts briefly introduced above, the study aims to add to critical, interdisciplinary debates about how fiction, imagination, and participatory methods can expand our understanding of architecture.

## **Methodology**

This study had three main stages, using qualitative and intuitive visual analysis overlaid by a structured visual coding framework. First, the pertinent fragments of text were selected for Minas Tirith (The Lord of the Rings) and Elantris (Brandon Sanderson). Rich architectural detail and narrative clarity were the most important criteria for that choice.

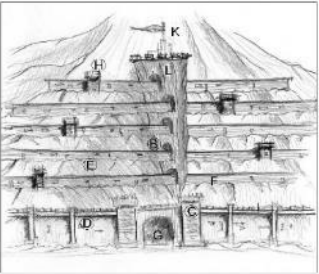
Next, the participants were asked to read each passage and draw quick sketches of the two citadels using 2B pencils on plain white paper. A 10-minute limit was set for each drawing to encourage

intuitive visual thinking and reduction to key elements in the images produced. The same time frame was applied to all participants in order to maintain consistent conditions for analysis. Follow-up interviews were deliberately excluded to keep the focus on what the drawings reveal on their own; combining verbal commentary can sometimes anchor meanings too strongly and interfere with the projective power of images (Barthes & Heath, 1977; Croghan et al., 2008).

After collection, architectural elements explicitly described in each text were extracted as baseline codes. New elements that emerged in the sketches were added, resulting in a hybrid coding scheme combining deductive and inductive approaches. The final framework used *micro-choremes* (small semantic-spatial units) to capture recurring signifiers like towers, terraces, or ramparts, along with other stylistic cues, shapes, and cultural motifs. The main elements can also be found in the charts presented in the next chapter.

Fig. 1 Codes

|                                                    |                       |      |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| Per art                                            |                       | 2    |
| Initials                                           |                       | AV   |
| Drawing characteristic                             | Drawing composition   | H.S  |
|                                                    | Point of view         | 8    |
|                                                    | Style                 | GM   |
| Stylistic reference                                | Consistency of style  | 5    |
|                                                    | Shape of enclosure    | N/A  |
|                                                    | Roads/streets/avenues | A.   |
| Architectural elements derived from text - General | Gates                 | 1 B. |
|                                                    | Tower(s)              | 1 C. |
|                                                    | Wall/Curtain wall     | 1 D. |
|                                                    | Windows               | 1 E. |
|                                                    | Tiers/Levels          | 1 F. |
| Architectural elements from text - Specific        | Tunnel                | 1 G. |
|                                                    | Bastion               | 1 H. |
|                                                    | Battlement            | 1 I. |
|                                                    | Fountain              | J.   |
|                                                    | Flag                  | 1 K. |
|                                                    | Rock pier             | 1 L. |



A total of 150 drawings were analysed in four categories. The main groups were A: 5 visually trained professionals, 26 architecture students; and B: B1 -24 teenagers and B2 -15 adults with no formal visual training (age 40-55, 3rd level education). For Minas Tirith, 95% of the respondents were familiar with the movie, 15% with the text, as for Elantris: none of them had read the book. These participants were recruited through convenience sampling (for example, student

participants were drawn from courses taught by the author). This approach and the sample size were considered adequate for the exploratory, proof-of-concept nature of this study, while broader recruitment strategies might be needed for future research.

Two additional layers add broader context: C (fanart pulled from DeviantArt.com) – eight drawings for each citadel, and D (AI-generated images by the six most proficient image generating LLMs, as noted on the montages shown in the next chapter). While the latter could be included, the fanart could not, due to copyright concerns. The fanart aspect was viewed more as a comparison base referring to the training of the aforementioned LLMs, as the most "popular" fanart creations were selected.

## Results

A few clear patterns emerged. Minas Tirith sketches tend to include the same key elements: terraces, towers, curtain walls, and the iconic rock pier appearing in most drawings, thus hinting at the influence of the film adaptation. Elantris drawings reveal more variation and new singular elements, showing how people rely more on cultural frameworks when no single canonical image exists (Fig. 2).

Point-of-view choices (Fig. 3) show Minas Tirith drawings strongly favour panoramic frontal or eye-level views, echoing the cinematic version, while for Elantris even if aerial points of view were clearly favoured, there is a little more variation of view-points, again confirming that visual anchoring influences diversity of representation.

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Fig. 2 Micro-choremes (elements) distribution

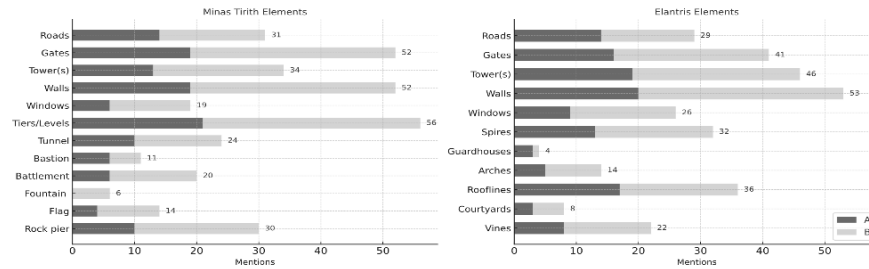
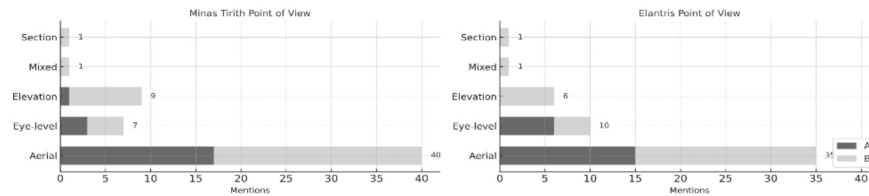


Fig. 3 Point of View



Stylistic references (Fig. 4) confirm this bias: most participants drew on a generic medieval defensive style for Minas Tirith, as the movie interpretation is widely recognized as drawing on Mont-Saint-Michel, a fortified medieval complex in northern France. In contrast, Elantris drawings show more mixed cues (Gothic, Byzantine, even Art Nouveau) suggesting that in the absence of a dominant image, people fall back on diverse cultural schemata and personal visual associations. Category A showed much more anchored and consistent stylistic elements, reflecting their familiarity with the styles depicted.

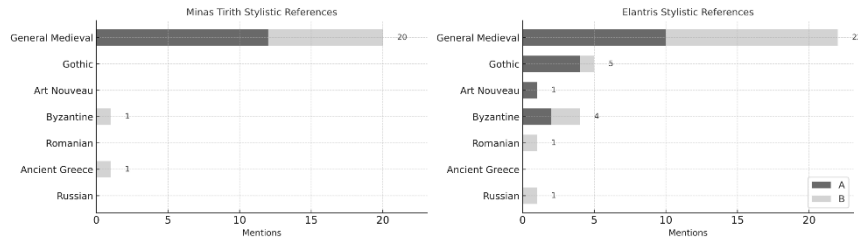


Fig. 4 Stylistic Choice

Nearly 80% of Minas Tirith sketches show circular, tiered enclosures — classic, recognizable fortress archetypes. Group A (professionals) use these forms but occasionally tweaked with innovative elements like irregular terrain or added urban layers. Nonetheless, even with this flexibility, these sketches display remarkable visual uniformity. Group B (non-professionals) tend to simplify more and sometimes add unexpected details (windmills, stairs, altars, churches).



Fig. 5 Minas Tirith: Selected sketches montage – category A



Fig. 6 Minas Tirith: Selected sketches montage – category B

The Elantris representations tend toward more polygonal or fragmented layouts and less toward circular enclosures. The participants with no formal visual training (B1/B2) usually mix stylistic layers, showing less restraint, hinting toward more imprecise mental visualizations.



Fig. 7 Elantris: Selected sketches montage – category A

*Fig. 8 Elantris: Selected sketches montage – category B*



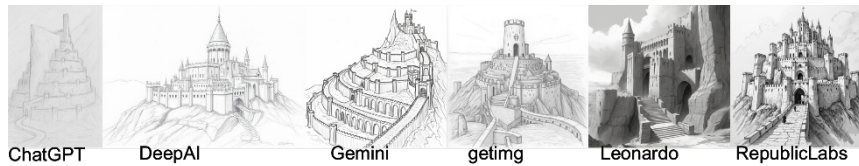
Overall, these patterns show how group background shapes consistency: professionals tend to reuse familiar shapes and archetypes with some changes, while non-professionals are less constrained by ingrained forms.

The collages illustrate these contrasts: professional drawings (Fig. 5) rely on elements described in the text fragments provided (like towers, terraces, and battlements) with small personal touches. Non-professionals' sketches (Fig. 6) show more variety, often adding features not in the text.

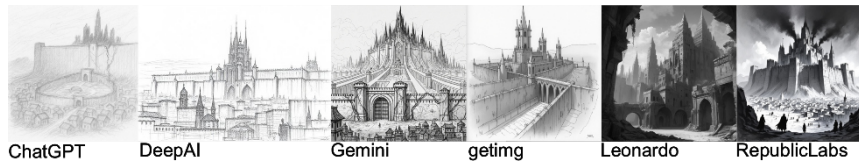
The differences are more notable for Elantris (Figures 7 & 8): without a pre-existing visual anchor, participants combine styles and shapes more freely, producing open, irregular layouts. This reflects how, when no dominant image exists, imagined architecture depends more on personal and cultural translation.

To place the study and the participant sketches within a broader cultural landscape, selected fanart and AI-generated images were also examined. This examination aimed to see how wider audiences shape, share, and remix imagery related to fictional architecture. AI-generated images (Category D) contain the iconic elements the other groups have drawn, but often exaggerate them, highlighting dominant elements to the detriment of finer details and nuances.





*Fig. 9 Minas Tirith:  
Selected sketches  
montage – AI  
generated (Category D)*



*Fig. 10 Elantris:  
Selected sketches  
montage – AI  
generated (Category D)*

Together, these examples show how top-down visuals (like film imagery) and bottom-up reinterpretations (fanart and AI trained on fan content) mesh to shape what mental imagery of meaningful or ideal architecture.

## Discussion

The results show that internal images of fictional architecture are the result of the intersection between the literary text itself, visual culture, and personal schemata. When pre-existing imagery exists, as is the case for Minas Tirith's popular film version, it strongly anchors mental representations, creating convergence around familiar forms such as tiered fortresses and circular enclosures. But even in this case, there are apparent variations: professionals tend to follow the text and film imagery more closely, with subtle adaptations, while non-professionals tend to simplify more and to add or omit features more freely. In the case of Elantris, the lack of a widespread visual reference leaves way for more interpretive freedom. Participants seem to refer to diverse cultural frames and more personal associations, producing a broader mix of forms, spatial layouts and stylistic references. These differences suggest that imagined architecture reflects a duality: it sits between convergence (shared symbolic imagery) and projection

(based on personal experience). These findings also highlight how trust in shared visual archetypes (such as Minas Tirith) structures collective imagination, while their absence (as with Elantris) fosters diverse, more tentative interpretations.

## Conclusion

By using a combination of research methods, both visual and conceptual; quantitative, qualitative and intuitive, this study shows how participant created drawings can be used to discern the way people derive architectural meaning from a literary text. These imagined spaces and buildings can help create a foundation or a framework for exploring what humans value in terms of architectural forms.

Beyond these observations, the proof-of-concept study has shown this method has potential for integration in more complex research pertaining to education, on one hand, and to collaborative design, on the other hand. It can be applied to architectural education, primarily for students in the fields of architecture and urban planning, but not only. Another valid direction, as evidenced by how well the middle- and high-school subjects responded to the task, would be to insert similar techniques into workshops integrated into the optional curriculum for second level education. Such programmes already exist, for instance *De-a Arhitectura* (ongoing in Romanian schools and kindergartens under the aegis of Built Environment Education – BEE). This would engender a wider understanding of architecture and a more involved perception of it in tomorrow's public.

As for the public of today, the use of popular literary texts as a catalyst to open discussion on more concrete building practices could work to reach people who would otherwise perhaps see architecture as something foreign, cold, or too complicated to fruitfully discuss thus

improving public engagement. Future research could build on this by resorting to larger and more varied samples, by adding other architectural archetypes, by also incorporating interviews and reflexive writing exercises or resorting to more varied media as the means of visual self expression (collages, models, photo elicitation, montages). The use of participatory drawing, in which groups of respondents collaborate might be another intriguing direction to follow. Ultimately, these insights might lead to conclude that even when architecture is purely fictional, its visual transpositions reveal what we collectively imagine. This could become a starting point for a new perspective on how we think about the spaces we create or inhabit. Both for the architects and the end-users of all ages.

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## Ecouri vizuale: reprezentarea contextuală a arhitecturii imaginare

(rezumat)

Acest articol explorează ce se întâmplă atunci când cititorii încearcă să își imagineze arhitectura descrisă doar prin cuvinte. De asemenea, cercetarea analizează modul în care oamenii își imaginează spații ficționale într-o eră inundată de imagini prefabricate. Actul de vizualizare a arhitecturii imaginate se bazează nu doar pe textul în sine, ci și pe bagajul cultural, educațional și profesional al fiecărui cititor, precum și pe expunerea lor la alte medii. Aceasta va contribui la dezvoltarea unor metode care pot fi utilizate în ateliere transdisciplinare pentru îmbunătățirea implicării publicului. Pentru a explora acest aspect, participanților li s-a cerut să citească două pasaje descriptive și apoi să deseneze cele două cetăți descrise: Minas Tirith (din „Stăpânul Inelelor” de J.R.R. Tolkien) și Elantris (din romanul omonim al lui Brandon Sanderson). Minas Tirith beneficiază de imagini larg circulate din adaptarea cinematografică a lui Peter Jackson, în timp ce Elantris nu are încă o versiune ecranizată. Prin compararea acestor desene, articolul examinează modul în care imaginile iconice existente pot modela sau limita imagistica mentală individuală. Astfel, autorul își propune să investigheze interrelațiile dintre text, imagine și public într-o eră a intensificării culturii vizuale (Rose, 2014, p. 21). Aceasta se conectează, de asemenea, la conceptul de cultură a convergenței al lui Jenkins, referitor la estomparea liniilor dintre creatorii de conținut și consumatorii de conținut și la noile relații complexe dintre media de sus în jos și cultura participativă de jos în sus (Jenkins, 2008).