

DESIGN RESEARCH ESSAY

The Drawing is Not the Building: A Cartographer's Gaze on Architectural Drawings

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Abstract

Architectural drawings, like maps, are not neutral representations but social constructions embedded in systems of power-knowledge. This essay brings critical cartography into dialogue with architectural practice to examine how drawings selectively frame urban contexts, foreground certain imaginaries, and render others invisible. While maps have been widely critiqued, the socio-political role of architectural drawings remains underexplored. The essay argues that drawings inherit cartographic silences yet go further by not only interpreting space but also prescribing its transformation, shaping both perception and built form. Drawing upon a case study of the Taipei Performing Arts Centre in Taiwan by the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), informed by the lead author's own insider knowledge and access about that project, the essay analyses how representations operate through silences, projections, and coding systems. Reframing drawings as performative texts, the essay calls for more reflexive representational practices in architecture, urban design and planning.

Keywords:

Architectural representation, Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Taipei Performing Arts Centre, Taiwan, critical cartography, silent cartographies, mapping and visibility, architectural gaze, power-knowledge

Introduction

In political geography and the history of geographical thought the link is increasingly being made between maps and power but the particular role of maps, as images with historically specific codes, remains largely undifferentiated from the wider geographical discourse in which they are often embedded. [1: p. 277]

What John Brian Harley noted in 1988 has since been widely elaborated in the field of critical cartography and remains relevant in recent scholarly debates [2–5], and globally beyond [6]. While the political dimensions of mapping have been widely explored, architectural drawings have not received equivalent scrutiny, despite equally selectively framing urban contexts, foregrounding spectacle, and rendering surrounding areas invisible. Although a broad literature has discussed the politics and economics of architecture, the role of architectural drawings and the politics of (in)visibility in architectural representation within this debate remains under-researched [7–10]. As Edward Robbins has remarked: 'ironically, the literature's silence about the social uses of drawing may reveal more than it hides' [11: p. 9]. Indeed, architectural practices rarely interrogate the rationale behind their own drawings and typically consider them merely technical representations of a building to be. This lack of reflexivity, however, keeps intact the biases associated with social structures and values, which are inevitably embedded in the drawings.



Figure 1 [previous page]: The Taipei Performing Arts Centre after its construction in 2023 [Photograph by Shephotoerd Company, courtesy of OMA].

This essay examines architectural drawings as social constructions with real socio-political consequences. Drawing upon the example of the Taipei Performing Arts Centre, hereafter abbreviated to TPAC (Figures 1, 2), designed by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) – where the lead author of this essay served as an associate architect – the essay explores drawings as social constructs and sites of power-knowledge. In a related study, we juxtaposed the architects' design intentions with users' lived experiences after construction and found significant contrasts [12]. Here however the focus will be on the design process to understand how architectural drawings and the architectural gaze they embody help (re)produce spatial expressions of social power.

Drawing upon critical cartography which, since the 1980s, has given a wealth of insight into the socio-political role of maps, we extend this perspective to architectural drawings, which – like maps – are often seen as technical or artistic representations shaped by conventions and regulations, yet reduce complex realities into simplified representations [13–15]. The Cartesian logic, rooted in scientific positivism, presents spatial representations as objective 'truths' while masking their selective and ideological nature. By presenting a view of space that appears apolitical and universal, the 'cartographic gaze' [15: p. 12] masks the selective nature of representation, neutralizes existing power structures, and legitimizes dominant spatial orders under the guise of neutrality [16–18]. But maps, and by extension architectural drawings, models and digital renderings of buildings, are not 'transparent windows on the world' [19: p. 35]. They show clean streets, blue skies, abstract cities, and beautiful, happy, able-bodied people [20]. By following the rules of geometry and other architectural projection techniques, they 'shut out the city's noise and confusion, its energy and incessant movement, and transform its messy incoherences into a fixed graphic representation' [21: p. 407].

This disconnect between representation and reality has been theorized before. Korzybski for instance argues that 'the map is not the territory' [22: p. 58], as illustrated in Jorge Luis Borges' imaginary tale of a fully detailed and life-sized map that was drawn to cover the entire territory, but was deemed useless in real life [23]. It describes a delirious condition where representation overtakes reality, revealing how depictions can distort rather than clarify. Architectural drawings are similarly treated as authoritative, even when unrealized. To some



Figure 2: TPAC in its urban context, as seen from the night market district in 2021 [Photograph by Chris Stowers, courtesy of OMA].

architects, the act of designing supersedes the act of building, making 'paper architecture' an integral aspect of professional portfolios and career building [24]. Such paper designs have been profoundly influential in shaping architectural discourse and trends, like Ron Herron of Archigram's 'Walking City' and Lebbeus Woods' speculative designs [25]. Some architects such as Peter Eisenman even go as far as to assert that 'real architecture' exists in the drawings rather than in buildings. Such aphorisms reflect and perpetuate the disconnect between architectural ideas and built reality, making almost a virtue out of the dominance of representation over physical construction. Through prioritizing representation, architects retreat into the autonomy of design, denying aspects of space that are beyond the architect's influence [11; 26; 27].

However, as critical cartography theorists have argued, these representations are neither neutral nor innocent. They reflect the biases of their creators and the social contexts in which they are produced. Scholars like Knox [7], Kaika [9; 28] and Dovey [29] have analysed architecture within a framework of critical geography and political economy, relating the profession and its products to

dominant political and economic forces. While there is by now a strong body of literature examining architecture's relation to power, much less attention has been paid to the role of architectural drawings in this process. Hence, rather than asking *why* or *for whom*, in this paper we will focus our inquiry on *how* drawings and the architect's conceived 'imaginary real world' [30: p. 18], grounded in Cartesian logic, actively participate in shaping new or perpetuating existing social relations.

The essay has four parts. Firstly, it outlines the literature from critical cartography and brings it into dialogue with the field of architecture. Secondly, it discusses the authors' methodology. Thirdly, it used OMA's drawings of the TPAC building as a case study to exemplify a theoretical insight, analysing how drawings construct spatial narratives and reproduce social hierarchies. Lastly, it concludes by reflecting upon the implications of treating architectural drawings as cultural and political texts, and on the need for more reflexive drawing practices in architecture and urban design.

Critical cartography: Deconstructing spatial representation in maps and architectural drawings

Western cartography has long framed maps as objective models of reality, where each point corresponds to a geographical location. This scientific approach, shaped by Cartesian logic, formalised in the 20th century, prioritised technical accuracy while excluding broader social and political contexts [13; 31]. Similarly, architectural drawings emerged as precise tools for spatial representation. In the Italian Renaissance, architects distanced themselves from manual labour, severing the architects from the builders, the thinkers from the doers, and elevating drawing to an intellectual practice central to architectural thought [11]. This shift professionalised architecture and deepened the divide between design and lived experience. By the 19th century, the field embraced positivist ideals of universality, homogeneity, and progress, prioritising functionality over existential meaning [32] and sidelining the everyday complexities of urban life [33]. Abstract representations dominated, privileging the architect's gaze over that of ordinary inhabitants [34: p. 272]. Architecture became both a tool of spatial order and a metaphor for social control, materialising modernity's vision of a perfectly ordered world [35].

These ideals were later challenged by the Postmodern and Deconstructivist movements, which rejected modernist reductionism and introduced complexity, symbolism, and formal disruption into architectural discourse. Yet, despite these shifts since the 1960s, architectural representation has continued to privilege abstraction over lived experience, mirroring cartography's struggle with the illusion of neutrality.

Both maps and architectural drawings are thus treated as technical artefacts striving for precision, even when that precision distorted reality [14]. However, this view has been increasingly challenged from the later part of the 20th century, as scholars began to expose the selective and ideological nature of spatial representation in what Pickles [15] referred to as three crises of representation in cartography. Scholars emphasized the inherent distortions and the selective nature of map design, the subjectivity of the cartographer [36], and the political manipulation of spatial information, particularly those in propaganda maps. These critiques revealed maps as cultural productions shaped by embodied perspectives and ideological interests.

During the 1980s and 1990s, critical cartographers such as Harley, Wood, Crampton, Pickles and Edney explored an epistemic break between maps as neutral technical tools and maps as sites of power knowledge, reframing them as a product not only of 'the rules of the order of geometry and reason' but also of the 'norms and values of the order of social tradition.' [37: p. 173]. Harley's seminal paper on 'Deconstructing the map' [13] revealed how maps, like texts, embed political agendas; hence he urged cartographers to 'read between the lines of technical procedures or of the map's topographic content' to uncover the social structures and values embedded in the map [38: p. 5]. Maps, being simultaneously cultural and technical productions, amplify their power. Cartographic 'tricks' such as symbol size, line thickness, height of lettering, and colour [13: p. 7] – along with what is omitted, the 'silences' on the maps – serve to legitimize dominant spatial orders under the guise of neutrality [38].

Drawing heavily upon the work of Michel Foucault, Harley was thus distinguishing between what he called 'external' and 'internal' forms of cartographic power, although this observation was later criticised for being too binary and overly simplified [18; 39; 40]. Maps are often created by privileged knowledge systems and mapping elites, such as the nation state, western map houses,

and academics, which shapes particular worldviews [41: p. 12]. In addition, maps facilitate 'internal' power by embedding authority within knowledge. Through procedures of classifying, categorizing, hierarchizing, normalizing, and disciplining, maps can neutralize political knowledge and discipline the world. These dynamics of embedded power are equally relevant when studying architectural drawings.

While Harley focused on historical maps and described their 'ideological filtering' as a largely unconscious process [1: p. 292], scholars such as Pickles [15], Crampton [42], and Wood [16] questioned the very ontology of mapping. Wood argued that all maps reflect the interests of their makers and are ideologically charged. Expanding upon Harley's critique, Wood and Fels have described maps as arguments or propositions [43]. Responding to Monmonier's notion of maps telling 'white lies' for the sake of legibility, Wood insists that manipulation is not incidental but intrinsic to the act of mapping [16: p. 78]. This kind of perspective highlights the need to move beyond representation and recognize the multivocal and constructed nature of maps [31].

Critical cartography continues to be relevant as maps continue to reinforce power structures [31; 44]. Recent studies have highlighted how formal mapping practices obscure informal urbanities [45]. For instance, Kamalipour and Dovey reveal how informal settlements are rendered invisible, affecting their identity [46]; while Wilmott and Wood [4] demonstrate how base maps privilege property ownership, sidelining those communities with no fixed housing.

Such a debate around invisibility and power relations in architectural representation can likewise be useful to inform architectural practice. Drawings also hide and deny the social dimensions at the same time as they legitimate them. This essay will thus turn now to uncovering the social forces embedded in architectural drawing and examine how power operates within its conventions. A critical approach encourages us to look beyond the surface of the drawing, thus reading between the lines and exploring the 'margins of the text' to uncover its hidden silences and contradictions [13: p. 9].

However, while critical cartographers have demonstrated that maps are selective representations or propositions very much shaped by the mapmaker in question, architectural drawings go one step further: they are explicitly and unapologetically projective, designed to shape future realities [47]. Architectural drawings both construct a reality prior to their intervention as well as project a new reality based on this. This dual nature further amplifies their power as both a means of representation and a means of production. Drawings bridge the conceptual and the material, translating subjective ideas into tangible structures [11; 24; 48]. 'The argument would appear to be that if architectural drawing can successfully *represent* a set of presumed virtues, then surely that same technique can be used to *deliver* those virtues back to the world' [26: p. 110].

To better understand the implications of architectural drawings as instruments of power knowledge, this essay approaches them as socially constructed rather than purely technical products. The central research question asks: how do architectural drawings and the architectural gaze shape new or (re)produce existing social power relations in spatial forms? In analysing this, the essay chooses to focus upon drawings commonly used in practice during the design process and intended to translate a design into a building, rather than 'paper architecture' in itself.

Research methodology

This essay hence adopts a reflexive and qualitative methodology grounded in the lead author's long-term involvement in the TPAC project from soon after its initiation in 2009 through until its eventual completion in 2022. As an associate architect at OMA's Hong Kong office, the lead author was deeply embedded in the design and construction processes, offering rare insider access to architectural production and allowing access to materials and experiences typically unavailable to external researchers. Unlike studies based on external observation [49–51], this research is shaped by direct creative participation and lived experience to examine how drawings are conceived, negotiated, and deployed as instruments of spatial and social representation. Such proximity necessitates careful consideration of positionality. To enhance the dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the research, this essay deliberately triangulates across multiple qualitative sources – for example, OMA's archival data, personal sketchbooks, and interviews with key participants – as well as critically reflecting upon these sources through the lens of cartographic and architectural theory. Reflexive dialogue between the multiple authors of this essay further helped surface and challenge embedded assumptions.

Firstly, with explicit permission and ethics clearance, the lead author accessed OMA's internal archive on the TPAC project. This included looking at design and construction updates that were exchanged in that period between offices in Hong Kong, Rotterdam, and Taipei; exploratory sketches and drawings; meeting records; and presentation materials. These documents were systematically reviewed; visual and textual data were extracted and organized chronologically to trace the evolution of architectural representations. While the full project timeline (2008–22) was acknowledged, it was decided to concentrate the analysis on the design phase (2008–13) and then on the pre-opening phase (2020–22).

Secondly, a series of over 30 personal sketchbooks kept by the first author throughout the project formed a second layer of qualitative data. These contain dated sketches, design studies, textual reflections, and meeting notes, including direct quotes from design leaders and collaborators. As such, these sketchbooks serve as a vital repository of lived experience, capturing not only technical and conceptual developments but also the emotional landscape of the design process.

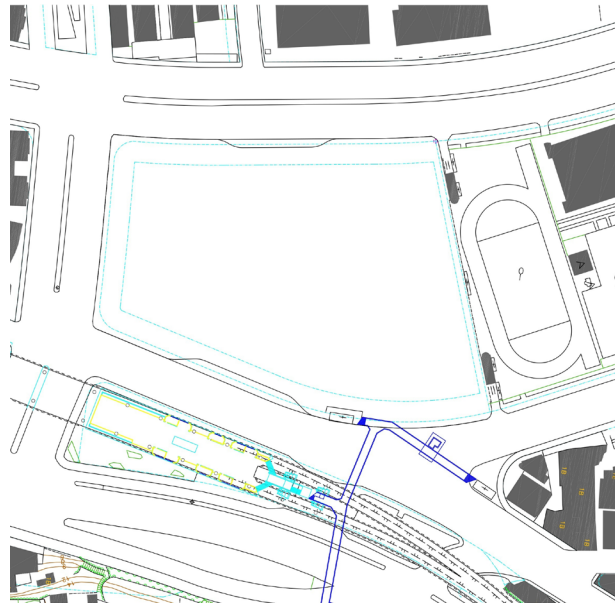
Thirdly, to cross-validate these archival materials, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2023 with ten design team members and three client representatives. These interviews explored participants' recollections, design intentions, and current views about the TPAC project. In 2025, five additional informal interviews were conducted with design team members to reflect more specifically on the representational choices made during the project. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from the first author's professional network, with informed consent and anonymization. Interviews were conducted in English, Dutch and Chinese to reflect the diversity of those involved.

Case study: Deconstructing TPAC's drawings

As mentioned earlier, the TPAC building serves as the empirical focus of this study. It offers a critical case [52] to trace how architectural drawings evolve across time, disciplines, and institutional negotiations. As a high-profile cultural project fully in the public eye, TPAC was subject to intense scrutiny and political discourse, which also helps to highlight the role of architectural drawings in negotiating public meaning, cultural identity and urban transformation. This essay focuses mainly on the representational practices that shaped the project's development: how drawings framed spatial narratives, mediated competing imaginaries, and selectively included or excluded aspects of the urban context. In doing so, the TPAC case allows us to critically interrogate the architectural gaze and its role in (re)producing social hierarchies through representational abstraction.

The analysis carried out for this essay involves three inter-related dimensions: 1) the silences and selective representation of architectural drawings; 2) the importance of architectural projections; and 3) the effect of coding systems embedded in the profession. These aspects resonate with foundational critiques in cartographic theory discussed previously – particularly those which interrogate how maps are used to construct spatial meaning through absence, abstraction and embedded norms.

Figure 3:
The base plan of
TPAC as drawn in
2008, depicting the
site as a blank slate
in an abstraction
which aligns with
standard drawing
conventions
[Courtesy of OMA
Archives].



Architectural Silences: From technical omissions to political invisibilities

Architectural drawings likewise present a highly abstract depiction of space, focusing primarily on elements deemed relevant to architects and their clients, such as buildings and roads. Building plans, and especially masterplans, tend to prioritize permanence, cost-efficiency, and legibility, yet these criteria are inherently subjective: permanence is biased toward built structures rather than everyday life, the most cost-effective means to make maps is through aerial photography, which omits crucial eye-level details that shape lived experience, and the selection of elements for legibility is ultimately dictated by the mapmaker's choices [16: p.81–88]. For example, the CAD base plan used at the start of the project, depicting the site as a *tabula rasa* landscape (Figure 3). Yet site survey of the past and existing situation produced during the detailed design phase, including the recording of built structures, road signage and trees, indicated features which had to be understood as more permanent and measurable (Figure 4). While both these earlier drawings adhered to established representational conventions, they omitted the everyday activities and social

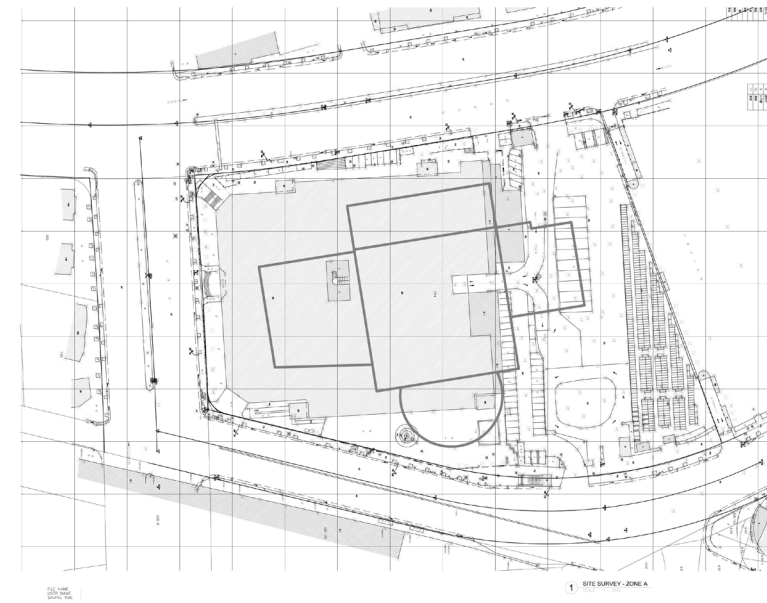


Figure 4:
TPAC site survey
drawing from 2012
[Courtesy of OMA
Archives].

dynamics that constituted the life of that site in Taipei. As photographs more than illustrated, the night market was defined not by permanent structures so much as by dense patterns of formal and informal occupation, exchange and movement (Figure 5). These forms of urban life remained largely invisible in OMA's drawings for the TPAC project, demonstrating how architectural representation systematically filters out the very practices that give this site its social meaning.

These omissions, or silences, are revealing. Naturally, many elements of urban life are not represented in drawings, including those that lie beyond the depicted perspective [21; 53], sensory dimensions beyond the visual [54; 55], or aspects of temporal nature, including its past and future, and daily or seasonal changes [47; 56; 57]. Yet more crucial to this essay's investigation was Harley's direction: 'I am not concerned with those silences which arise from geographical ignorance, lack of data, error, the limitations of scale, deliberate design, or other aspects of specification and technical limitation. I am dealing here with political silences' [58: p. 57].



Figure 5 [previous page]: Photograph from 2008 of the local site prior to the construction of the TPAC, and showing the old Shilin Night Market [Courtesy of OMA Archives].

Christine Boyer has conceptualized such blanks as 'lag spaces', areas that fall outside of the planned areas and appear to be of nobody's concern. 'Disavowed, overlooked, marginalized, left out of our accounts, these in-between spaces, the inexpressible, the incomplete, the unattended, the 'etc' and the '...' are the [city's] truly invisible spaces' [30: p. 118]. Such spaces are disregarded precisely because they don't fit into the carefully planned urban areas that comply with new urban imaginaries. Some are simply ignored due to their peripheral nature or their absence from an architect's spatial awareness. For instance, the Italian architect Renzo Piano when assessing a site for a new project, remarked: 'we explored it in every possible way, flying over it in a helicopter, walking up and down Macquarie Street, sailing across Sydney Bay' [59: p. 42]. Despite Piano's attempts to examine from various vantage points, none of these perspectives really paid any attention to the everyday lived experiences of ordinary individuals in Sydney or the personal significance that the site might have held for them.

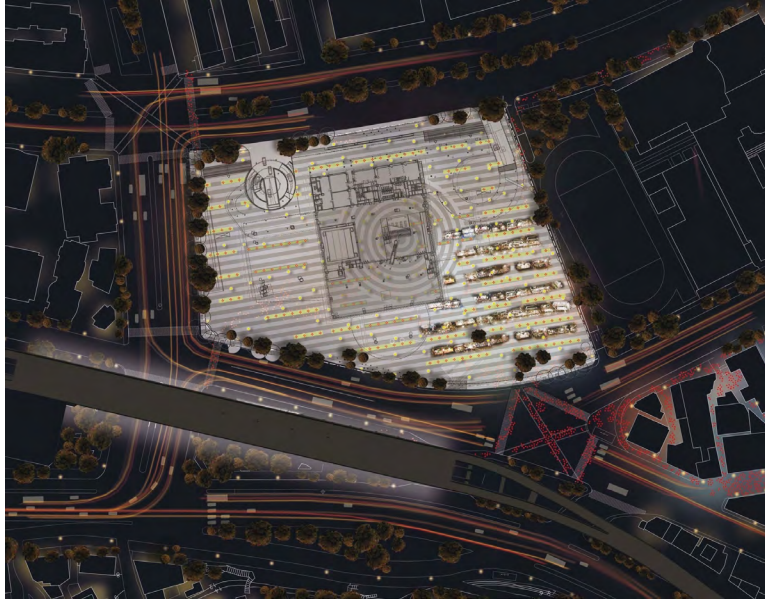
Other kinds of 'lag spaces' are deliberately omitted from the map, as Wilmott and Wood show in their study of unhoused, marginalized communities erased from cartographic base maps [4]. By presenting inhabited and utilized urban spaces as vacant, these maps contribute to a process of 'unbecoming,' a simultaneous invisibilising and reproduction of spatial inequality. This cartographic logic is not merely technical; it is deeply political, reinforcing possessive structures by privileging certain zones while rendering others illegible or invisible. Silences on maps thus have a real effect on people who are silenced out of the map as they 'become the lines in which we live' [4: p. 739]. Thus, the selective representation may create or enhance what we call here the 'architectural gaze' in which a large part of reality is (inevitably) omitted from the drawing and therefore also from the thinking process of the architect/designer and the imagination of the world that architects design upon.

In analysing the TPAC case study through this lens, the ways in which spatial representations construct selective narratives becomes evident, beginning with the competition brief's framing of the site [60]. In its 'site profile' section, and accompanying maps, the project brief foregrounds the Shilin Night Market area as a vibrant, dense, and culturally iconic area, visually represented in rich detail over multiple spreads. This framing also reveals how the brief constructs a spatial imaginary, positioning the site as a 'People's Theatre' which is embedded in

Figure 6:
Site plan for TPAC at
competition stage 1
in 2009 [Courtesy of
OMA Archives].



Figure 7:
Site plan for TPAC at
competition stage 2
in 2009 [Courtesy of
OMA Archives].



the vibrant commercial energy of the night market, but still with the promise of cultivating 'more in-depth cultural experiences' [60: p. 7]. However, cartographic silences shape the brief as well; notably, the residential area that lay west of the site is almost entirely absent, effectively erasing it from the spatial imaginary constructed through these maps and these written descriptions.

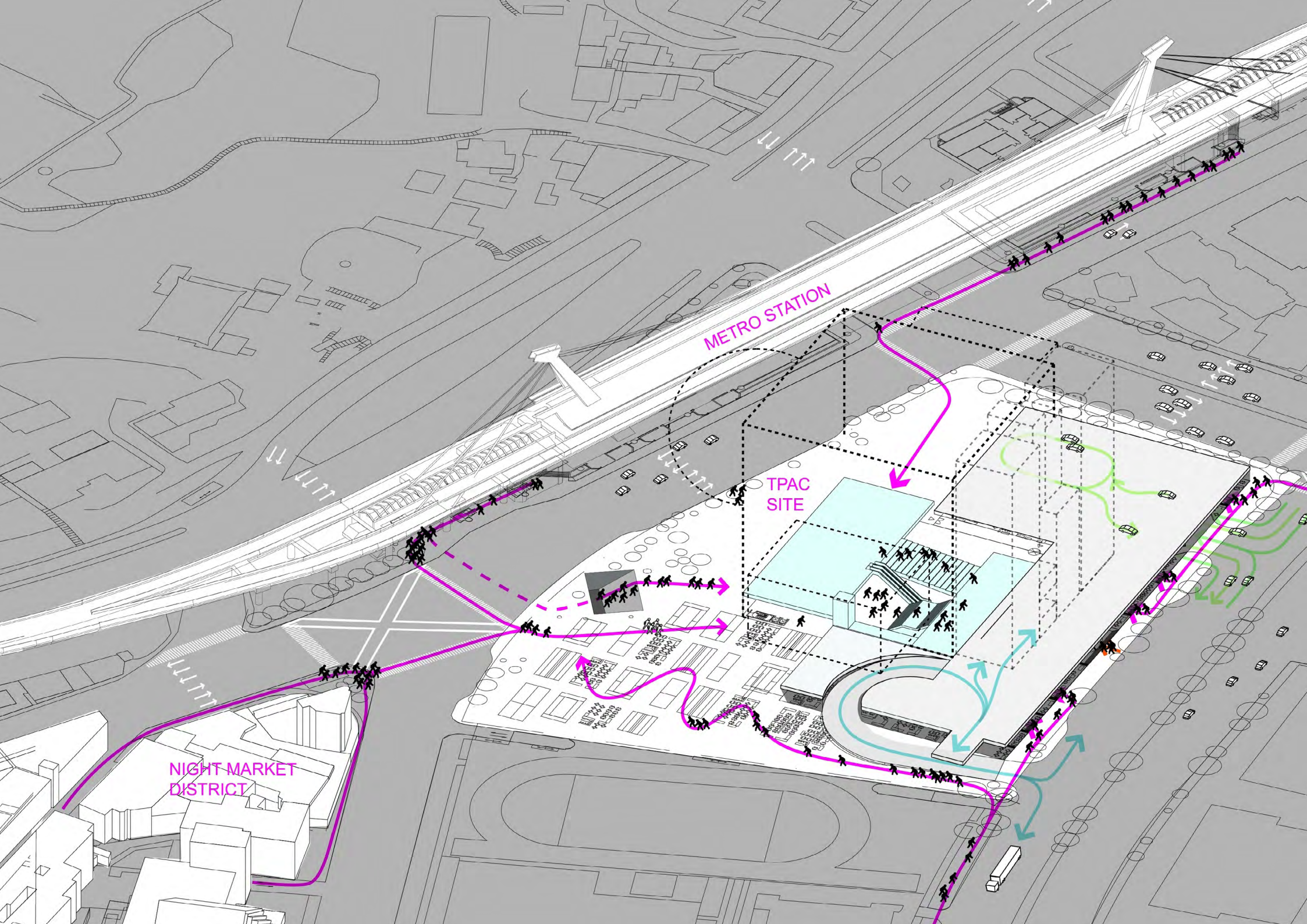
In reviewing the OMA project archive, one can see that this bias was carried over into the architects' proposals. Limited time and budget during the competition stage meant that the designers relied predominantly upon the materials provided in the constructed brief rather than in conducting their own independent, broader urban analyses. Presentation materials repeatedly reference the night market district while largely ignoring other areas, echoing the tone of the competition brief. OMA's site map for the first competition phase focuses only on the TPAC site, while surrounding blocks are collaged and abruptly cut off (Figure 6). The Shilin Night Market is highlighted in bright orange, visually linked to the commercial podium on the site, reinforcing its centrality in the project's narrative. The elevated railway, rendered in darker



Figure 8:
Collaged render
from 2009 of the
TPAC building as
seen from the night
market district, for
competition stage
2 [Courtesy of OMA
Archives].

orange, guides the viewer's gaze in connecting these different zones. The accompanying description states that the design 'extends the texture and vibrancy of the adjacent Shilin night market and embeds the project in its urban context,' thus effectively equating the urban context with the night market while sidelining other parts of the neighbourhood. That same framing was reinforced in subsequent visualisations. A later site render darkens much of the surrounding urban area, isolating the TPAC and the night market as the only illuminated and active zones (Figure 7). Similarly, a collage emphasises the pedestrian flows between the market district and the project, further consolidating this relationship while leaving other spatial and social dynamics unaddressed (Figure 8). Internal sketches and notes from this design phase confirm this bias within the OMA office: the night market remained the primary spatial reference throughout while other dimensions of the urban fabric received only peripheral attention.

Interestingly, in pursuing this line, OMA's proposal diverged from the client's own vision. While the Taiwan government imagined a clean slate for a new cultural landmark, the architects, inspired by the surrounding urban vibrancy, proposed



METRO STATION

TPAC SITE

NIGHT MARKET DISTRICT

Figure 9 [previous page]: Drawing from 2012 of the outdoor and indoor markets on the TPAC site as visually linked to the night market district, the only highlighted area in the local district [Courtesy of OMA Archives; enhanced for legibility by the authors].

retaining the existing night market. In their second-stage competition entry, the market was reimagined as a podium of 'local street culture' that would support the 'high culture' of the new theatre, thus linking the night market district with the activities around the theatre [61]. Drawings were produced to illustrate this integration: in these, the night market district is the only surrounding area rendered in three dimensions, its white tone visually connecting it to TPAC's outdoor food stalls and indoor market, forming a porous threshold between public life and performance space (Figure 9). Flow lines depicted with crowds suggest pedestrian density. Although OMA won the TPAC competition with this proposal, the food market structure was later eliminated from the design by the Taiwanese government. Nevertheless, the architects continued to depict markets in subsequent drawings, reflecting their imaginary of a vibrant local site [61]. As one of OMA's designers told us in an interview: 'We always imagined this space to be really crowded we always drew it full of people'.

While the Shilin Night Market remained central to OMA's vision for the project, the adjacent residential area remained consistently excluded from any drawings and discussions. This silence appears across illustrations: site drawings often depict night views in which only the market is lit and populated, while the rest of the neighbourhood is left dark and empty. Renderings are framed to highlight the colourful shops and vendors in conjunction with the TPAC building. The predisposition extends into OMA's published images of the scheme, where the residential area is visually and conceptually peripheral [62]. As has been pointed out, such abstracted representations allow both client and architect to 'reveal, and even revel in, [their] own biases and notions about perfection, utopia, or any other theme [they] choose to address and represent.' [11: p. 8]. Thus, the architectural drawing becomes not just a design tool of, but a site of ideological projection, limiting the perspective of social reality.

In retrospect, during a course of over 60 site visits, this essay's lead author rarely herself explored the residential areas beyond the night market, except when taking some photographs of the TPAC building under construction. Only later, during the later fieldwork research, did they begin walking those streets and speaking with some local residents. This revealed how her earlier architectural gaze had overlooked not only lived realities, but the politics embedded in them. In subsequent interviews with other OMA design team members in 2025, most

of them did not regard this omission of surrounding areas as intentional but rather described it as part of drawing conventions: in other words, architectural drawings are typically 'cleaned up' for 'legibility'. As one colleague noted: 'our task was to design the theatre, not the neighbourhood'. Including the night market was treated as the only way of addressing the Taipei public, yet this assumption of course overlooks the deeper politics of representation and participation. It shows how architects, even with good intentions, may abstract the very 'public' that they aim to serve [61].

These conceptual biases and silences obviously have real-life effects. In an accompanying published longitudinal study about the integration of the TPAC building into public life, the authors of this essay here conducted mapping, surveys, and interviews in Summer 2023 with those living in the neighbourhood [63]. The findings of that research reveal that residents feel very much excluded from TPAC. Although many pass by or through the site regularly, the interviews suggested that many view it as having been built 'for and by foreigners', and not as a public space for them. This sense of exclusion may be partly related to the official site representations which shaped how the TPAC project imagined the surrounding public realms. When a place is erased from early maps and remains overlooked in subsequent design decisions, it is unsurprising that local residents feel disconnected. This case illustrates how cartographic silences shape not only drawings, but also real urban experiences.

Figure 10:
Sectional drawing
from 2009 as a
technical drawing
and tool for spatial
exploration, to test
building systems
concepts [Courtesy of
OMA Archives].

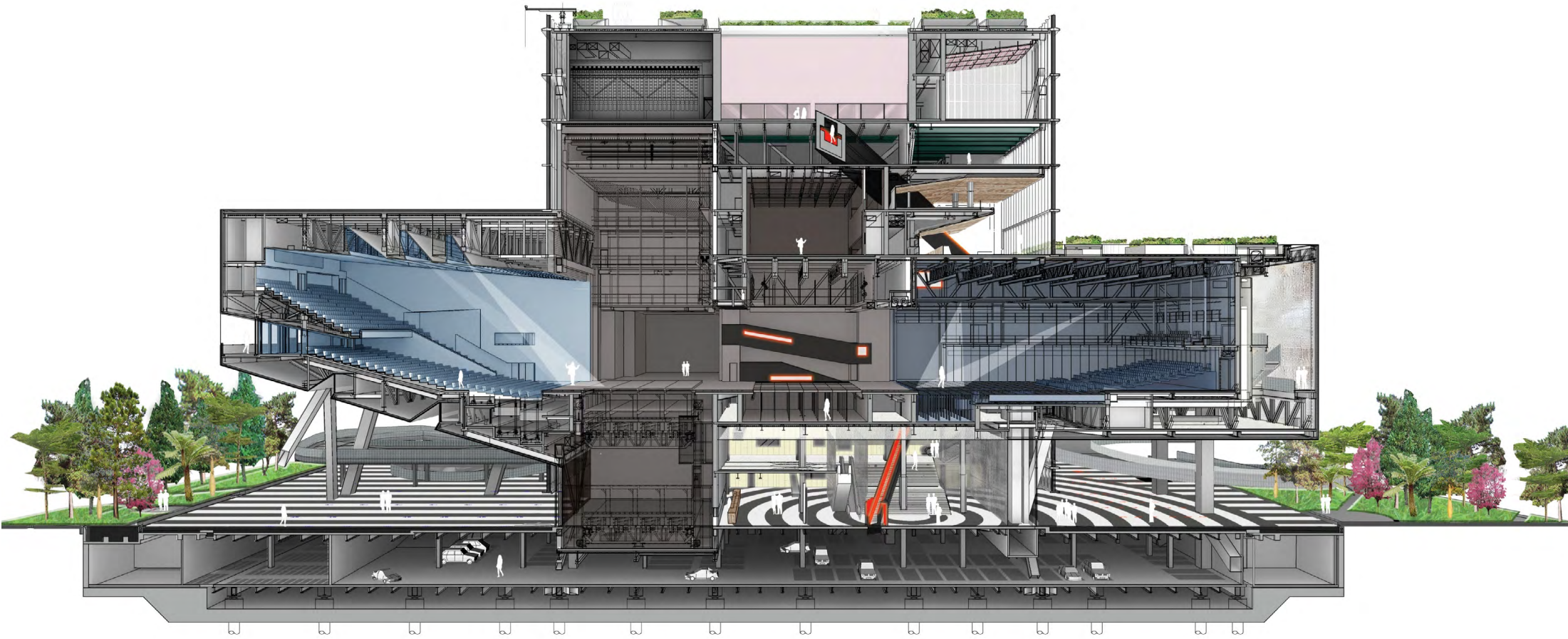


Figure 11 [previous page]: Sectional perspective from 2012 cutting through the 'Super Theater', a connected space between the Grand Theater on the left, and the Multiform Theater on the right [Courtesy of OMA Archives].

Coding systems: From architectural standards to cultural inscriptions

A third aspect for this essay to consider is that architectural drawings, like maps, rely upon coding systems that structure meaning within professional practice [33]. Pickles identifies three core structures in visual images: graphical, mathematical, and linguistic [67]. These elements work together to convey both denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural or symbolic) messages. Unlike photographs, where visual and textual layers are separate, maps and drawings integrate these codes to transform real-world objects into symbolic representations. This duality in coding turns them into cultural constructs shaped by interpretation and context [15: p. 52–54]. Furthermore, coding systems in architectural drawings not only standardize representation but actively delimit what can be imagined, articulated and negotiated within the design process. These systems underpin both the silences and projections discussed earlier, providing the technical language through which omissions are naturalized and futures are rendered legitimate.

Following Pickles, architectural drawings similarly rely upon intertwined graphic, mathematical and linguistic codes. Graphic elements include symbols, lines, shading, hatching and colour to represent spatial relationships and features. Mathematical structures include scales, dimensions, measurements and different types of projections. Linguistic elements on the drawings include titles, labels, notes and legends. Together, these codes make drawings into purposive cultural constructs shaped by both the architect's intent and the viewer's interpretation. Room names, for instance, signal an intended use and behaviour and at the same time erase ambiguity or informality, thus reinforcing spatial hierarchies. This interplay of codes and words allows architectural drawings to serve as both technical tools and expressive representations of design ideas, in which 'the formal representation of reality' becomes indistinguishable from 'the mathematical representation of technical knowledge' [68: p. 18]. A typical ground-floor plan drawn by the OMA team for the TPAC building shows how spatial functions, circulation, and hierarchies are encoded through standardized architectural conventions that render the building legible primarily (if not only) to trained professionals (Figure 12).

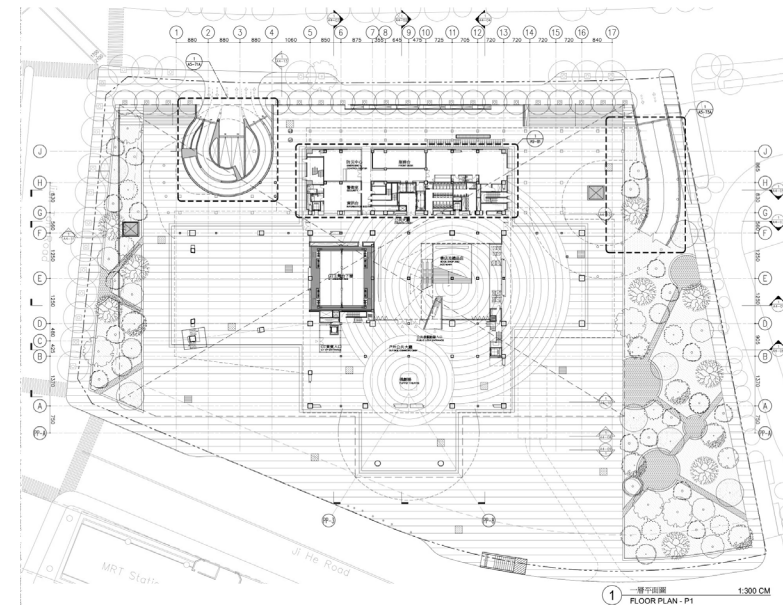


Figure 12: Ground-floor plan, including the surrounding site area, as drawn for the detailed design stage in 2012 [Courtesy of OMA Archives].

These coding systems are deeply embedded in architectural practice, offering standardized ways to represent complex spatial information. They reflect broader frameworks of rules, standards and regulations that guide design and construction, and are rarely questioned by architects [69]. Manuals like Neufert codify these conventions, reinforcing abstraction and normalization as default norms, with limited innovations over time [24]. Such elements lend the drawing a sense of factuality and neutrality, reinforcing professional authority and asserting the architects' purportedly superior knowledge [26; 27]. Unlike most maps, however, architectural drawings historically have somehow included the end user as part of the coding system. During modernism, the humans using a building became increasingly abstracted and standardized as projects grew in scale, conforming to geometric and Cartesian principles by treating the user as a functional entity [70]. The body was reduced to a neutral, idealized form – often male, able-bodied, and devoid of difference [71]. This coding reinforces technical control and spatial hierarchy, further distancing drawings from the social realities they claim to represent.

An examination of TPAC's sectional perspective drawing (Figure 11) exemplifies how coding systems construct layered meaning. The graphic layer depicts visual cues: interior layouts, material textures, and lush vegetation. Abstracted white human figures populate the drawing, subtly indicating patterns of use – but more importantly, as their limited number and their ghostly white outlines suggest, they are only really put into the drawing to convey the immense scale of the theatrical spaces and the grandiosity of the architecture. The accompanying linguistic description, particularly the drawing title of 'Sectional perspective Super Theatre', does more than just describe what is being shown; it also directs meaning [15: p. 52-3]. The term 'Super Theatre' hence denotes the combined performance spaces but also connotes superiority and innovation, subtly positioning OMA's design as being exceptional. The drawing thus operates on both denotative and connotative levels: it communicates technical information while simultaneously constructing symbolic meaning.

In revisiting the archive of sketches, meeting notes, and personal sketchbooks for this essay, the search became for signs of the team's intentions embedded in the representational drawings. More often than not, these drawings had been treated by OMA as routine outputs, so deeply embedded within the profession's language that they were rarely, if ever, questioned as a cultural construct. They simply existed as a matter-of-fact part of how architects need to communicate. Yet, some materials reveal efforts to shape design narratives and persuade audiences, whether to the client, public, or fellow architects. For example, one internal note from a design leader to the rest of their team in October 2010 reads: 'excitement missing > add more surprise; narrative (maybe colour)'. A few months later, in January 2011, the same team were working overtime to enhance the vibrancy of the presentation materials ahead of a meeting with Taipei's Mayor, after a design leader had remarked that OMA's material looked too 'dull' and that 'no one wants a theatre like this'. These comments reveal a deliberate effort to project a sense of liveliness and excitement simply through the visual language of the drawings for the design.

In the later 2025 conversations with design team members, many expressed surprise, even shock, at the suggestion that OMA's drawings might be considered manipulative. Rather, they viewed them simply as typical outputs shaped by established conventions. Although they agreed that the drawings

had been made to 'frame' certain arguments, they had never considered the socio-political implications embedded in their drawings, whether these reflected their own design priorities or those of institutional patrons. In their minds, the act of architectural drawing remains largely technical, shaped by professional norms rather than critical reflection or wider social concerns. Yet if anything, this disconnect between representational intention and its broader effects highlights an urgent need for more reflexive drawing practices that can critically engage with whose realities are shown, and which what is omitted, and why.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that architectural drawings, much like maps, are not neutral or purely technical representations of space, but instead are deeply embedded in systems of power-knowledge that influence not only architectural outcomes but also urban governance, planning, and spatial justice. Extending theoretical insights from critical cartography, it shows that architectural drawings are shaped by social values, disciplinary norms and ideological assumptions that reproduce existing power relations. Through abstraction, projection, and coding, drawings selectively represent space, often omitting or reimagining the 'fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life, including lived realities, temporal dynamics and social complexities [72: p. 711].

The case of the TPAC building illustrates how architectural drawings function not merely as technical tools but as active instruments in the construction of spatial narratives and social meaning. OMA's drawings consistently foregrounded the adjacent night market as a cultural reference point, while rendering the surrounding residential areas largely invisible. This selective framing, originating in the competition brief and reinforced throughout the design process, demonstrates how architectural representations can privilege certain imaginaries while marginalizing others. The sectional perspective drawing for instance combines a technical architectural blueprint with experiential information, operating through a system of graphical, mathematical, and linguistic codes that lends them an aura of objectivity and authority. This essay argues that such codes are deeply connotative, shaping not only how space is represented but also how it is understood, used and inhabited. The building's user is

abstracted into a standardized figure, the city is reduced to a set of measurable parameters, and the drawing becomes a site where social norms are encoded and reproduced. In this way, architectural drawings, compared to maps, possess even greater agency: they do not merely represent spatial conditions but actively and unapologetically project them [47]. This double coding – firstly in the abstraction of existing space and secondly in the projection of future use – turns architectural drawings into powerful tools for defining social relationships and reinforcing normative values. They need to be seen as sites of power-knowledge, contributing to architectural theory by challenging the assumption of technical neutrality, and to cartography by extending critiques of representation into projective design.

Of course, however, the power of architectural drawings, like that of maps, is not absolute [40]. While maps cannot possibly represent the full realities on the ground, architectural drawings cannot determine lived outcomes in any linear or predictable way. The translation from drawing to building is always shaped by contingencies [26; 48]; and the social life of buildings always unfolds in ways that diverge from the architect's projections [12]. Thus by examining the silences, projections and coding systems embedded in architectural drawings, this essay notes how the 'architectural gaze' privileges certain spatial imaginaries while marginalizing others [30]. These omissions are not incidental; they are constitutive of how architecture participates in the contemporary production of space. Complex social situations are simplified, codified, or selectively presented through the 'tricks' of the architectural trade, which become a mechanism 'for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules and strengthening social values' [73]. This essay has analysed this condition not only from a theoretical perspective, but also from the insider's view available to the lead author [74]. This perspective shows how architects, including even the lead author, often operate within established conventions without fully recognizing the socio-political implications of what they are drawing.

This essay therefore points to the need for reflexive practice within architecture, urban planning and design processes more broadly, to critically examine the representational tools which it often takes for granted. When drawing conventions are treated as fixed procedures rather than cultural constructs, they risk reinforcing spatial hierarchies and silencing lived realities. The TPAC building

shows how these conventions can obscure parts of the urban context, even without explicit intent. As critical cartographers have long argued, maps are not passive mirrors of the world but active propositions that shape it. Architectural drawings, similarly, do not merely depict space: they propose and project it. They build upon cartographic silences and selectively framed imaginaries yet go further by prescribing spatial futures. Acknowledging this dual role, as both representational and projective, requires architects, planners, and policymakers to engage more critically with the tools they use and the worlds that they help bring into being. The drawing may not be the building, but it is a powerful act of world-making.

While the TPAC building offers a rich and critical lens through which to examine the politics of architectural representation, the findings discussed here should be understood within the limits of a single, situated case of a high-profile, globally designed cultural project. Rather than claiming universal applicability, this essay positions TPAC as a critical example which reveals how representational practices can operate at their most intensified. Future research might hopefully extend this inquiry across a broader range of architectural practices and contexts to better understand the variability and conditions under which such dynamics emerge.

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Competing Interests

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