once upon a place

Architecture & Fiction

EDITORS
Pedro Gadanho + Susana Oliveira

calei
d o sc
ópio

once upon a place

Architecture & Fiction &

EDITORS
Pedro Gadanho + Susana Oliveira

calei
d o s c
ó p i o

once upon **a** place
Architecture **&** Fiction

The Struggle for Representation.
An Architect inside Mark Z. Danielewski's
House of Leaves

Stylianos Giamarelos
MPhil/PhD Architectural History & Theory doctoral Programme
Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL

This paper intends to focus on the relationship between spatial experience and its textual representation. It is an attempt to explore certain kinds of interrelations that can possibly be established between the domains of architecture and literature, as well as the way in which such a procedure could reach a point of informing the design process.[1]

The book selected for this study is the *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski (2000). At the core of the book lies an impossible space, that suddenly appears, initially in the form of a metric anomaly of the house of Pulitzer-award-winning photographer, Will Navidson. Will takes advantage of his technical expertise to produce a documentary film entitled the *Navidson Record*. There, he collects the totality of video recordings of his constant attempts to explain, explore and accurately represent an impossibly vast and constantly-mutating labyrinth that seems to be born out of this anomaly within the walls of his very house. Some years later, a blind old man named Zampanò spends an enormous amount of time and effort to write a dissertation on the film, but dies before he can edit it for publication. Upon retrieving Zampanò's scattered notes and drafts, Johnny Truant, a 25-year-old man working in a tattoo shop, decides to edit them for publication, adding his own layer of annotation upon the original text in the process.

The book the reader finally holds in his hands seems to be the fruit of Johnny's

labour, then. However, yet another process of "post-production" soon becomes evident. Some mysterious editors also provide hefty additional appendices that include random testimonies or representations of the labyrinthine space, as well as further information, concerning the background of Johnny Truant; (mainly through a collection of the letters Pelafina, his mother, has been sending to her son from the Whalestoe psychiatric clinic over the past decade).

The whole book can be regarded as a textual documentation of constant efforts to represent a space that undoubtedly exists, yet – by its very nature – is non-representable; an abyss that incessantly transforms and mutates, forcing not only written words, but also the languages of cinema and architecture to confront their own limits.[2] Even the theoretical tractate of quasi-academic nature that Zampanò attempts, mainly serves as to illustrate the inadequacy of any independent theoretical model – from "hardcore" science to psychology, philosophy and theories of architecture – in the desperate attempt to provide a full and accurate explanation of the house and the events that take place within it.[3] However, the insistence on the use of those languages (the ones currently available, that is) in order to produce an accurate description, record or representation[4] of this space finally forces the languages themselves to – almost reflexively – create meeting points or even – adaptively – lean towards convergence.

Of equal importance is the fact that each narrator not only recontextualises the one before him, but also defies his credibility.[5] Katherine N. Hayles puts forth the intriguing remarks that it is exactly through processes of remediation[6] (i.e. reinterpretations and annotations upon previously produced material) that complexity appears in any of the book's original moments (Hayles 783). In the end, not only the original moments, but in turn the original settings, the original film and even the original characters can never be reached by the readers again – leaving them with the book itself as the only multi-remediated testimony of the space and the events that took place there.

Thus, this labyrinth of a real space is approachable only through the labyrinth of its remediated records – from Navidson's original video recordings, to the video of the *Navidson Record*, edited and directed by Navidson himself, to Zampanò's tractate on the film, then to Johnny Truant's recollection and annotation of the old man's drafts and closing with the editors' final elaboration. Each layer of narration is in fact an interpretation upon the material, records and documents provided by the previous interpreter –each layer of narration is a further distancing from the real of the space. There is no way one can visit the space again (the house has collapsed) or contact Navidson[7] (he is presumed alive on an exotic island with his wife, Karen) or even Zampanò, who remains the only one that has really watched the

Navidson Record (Johnny Truant informs us of Zampanò's death in the first pages of the book) and Johnny Truant who not only destroys Zampanò's drafts, but also exits the book leaving no trace of his current whereabouts (presumably having already lost his mind or still wandering around America as a contemporary vagabond). Thus, the real of this impossible space finally reaches the reader only through its textual reduction.

The above mentioned reading of the book shapes the basic hypothesis of the architectural experiment that follows. By acknowledging the ontological primacy of this impossible space, and thus rejecting notions of fiction versus reality in *House of Leaves*,[8] the architect-readers can instead reach the point of considering that this impossible space *really existed*. However, they can regain the sense of its experience only through a sum of records that the book has managed to collect in a written form that in turn constantly attempts to overcome its own boundaries through severe textual deformations. This process leads to a kind of "aestheticisation" of the page and a treatment of the text as an image that invokes spatial schemata. In his struggle of representing this space, the reader can never get outside every -fictional or real- frame of narration, in order to gain an objective point of view.

Not coincidentally, the chapter that suffers the greatest losses from Zampanò's drafts is chapter XVI which he intended to entitle "Science", and contained all the "objective" scientifically-analysed data about the space.[9] Stable –in the sense that everybody experiences them- elements of this space remain the Vast Corridor, the Hall and the Spiral Staircase, even though their size or even their layout can change, while other divisions of the labyrinth never seem to produce a common spatial formation. Therefore, there can only be a wide array of competing multiple levels of interpretations-upon-interpretations, none of which is able to emerge as the definitive. This, in turn, means that one is only capable of constructing interpretations upon the available material of the book, when trying to retrieve an experience of that space. Quite possibly, these are interpretations that the book somehow already anticipates, too.

The main subject of this case study lies in one of the latter parts of the book, Chapter XX (Danielewski 423-490), where the reader witnesses Will Navidson entering the labyrinth of the house all alone. It's Will's final exploration that results in a strictly personal experience of this impossible space, while profiting on the experience gained from previous investigations, which have aided him in forming a coherent opinion about the place; a single exploration completed in a single chapter, during which a single person, Navidson on his bicycle, manages to cover the longest distance inside the labyrinth. Of equal importance is the fact that this is also a chapter where –considering the standards of this book- remediation is kept
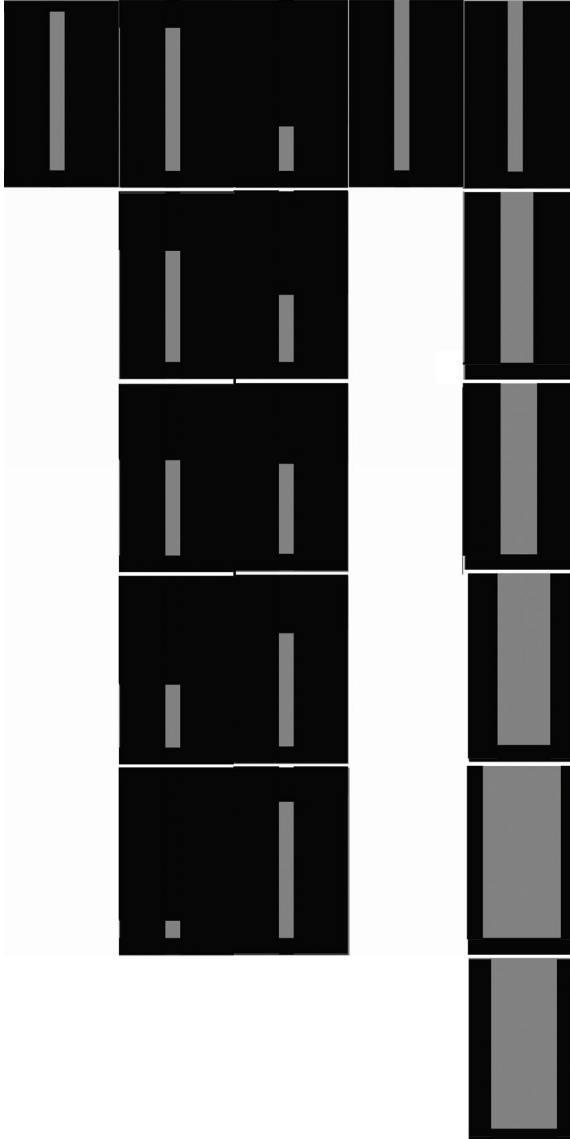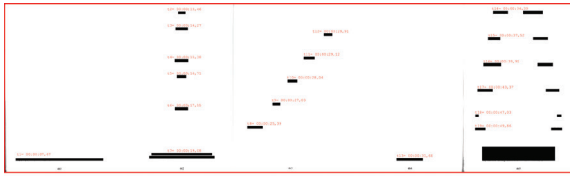
Fig.1 scene 1 (Danielewski 2000: 426-431): the corridor
Process: book pages > text-as-image > text-timing > ceiling-walls > key-frames
The book on the drawing board

at a bare minimum; one of the scarce occasions throughout the whole book that the reader experiences such a sense of uninterrupted continuity in the flow of action; a unique sense of being so "close" to Navidson and the video footage he is simultaneously recording, as he proceeds deeper and deeper into the labyrinth. Severe textual deformation is called upon to fulfill the task of transmitting the experience of the place, while Johnny Truant is – surprisingly – mute and even Zampanò is almost absent in a chapter that spans over 75 pages.

The architectural experiment revolves around sequences consisting of sound – produced by the recitation of the text – and image – produced by the typographic deformations of text – as they both unfold in time to finally form a platform (of undoubtedly cinematic roots) upon which architecture could meet literature. Thus, the book itself, page-after-page of Chapter XX, is used as a kind of storyboard that associates the spatial schemata each page invokes with the results of a parallel procedure that keeps track of the time length of the very activity of reading the page. More importantly, though, **it is Chapter XX that manages to collect the most common** ways the textual deformations are used throughout the whole book to invoke spatial experiences. They are categorised according to the relationships that are formed between text (-as-meaning) and text-as-image.[10]

The first scene describes movement in a mutating corridor (Danielewski 426-431). Here, text-as-image closely follows the meanings the text carries – reaching the point of an almost direct illustration that provides the reader with accurate metric analogies of the space the text describes. The textual constitutions of the pages of scene 1 form a set of rules, a general layout, a manual for designing that essentially invites the architect-reader to put the book directly on the drawing board..

In one of the early chapters of the book, Zampanò draws attention to the important role echo plays in the procedures of acquaintance and experience of this dark labyrinth. Through the direct impact the dimensions of surrounding space inflict upon the production, reflection, distortion of any given sound data, that is the echo, he concludes that "speaking can result in a form of 'seeing'". To paraphrase Zampanò, here *reading* is a form of seeing an impossible object through a sequence of textual echoes of the experiences it has produced. The text whose typography is deformed or stretched over the pages provides spatial measurements and analogies that in turn "physicalise" the text itself -quite like the phenomenon of the echo physicalises sound by directly relating it to metric analogies. Thus, in this scene, the aural experience of the space is directly associated with the actual dimensions of the space experienced.

The second scene describes Navidson's movement in a narrow tunnel (**Danielews**-ki 443-461). Here, text-as-image relates not only to the description of Navidson's surrounding space. It also hints towards spatial conceptions of his actions – for

example, the room his body occupies as he is crawling on his belly. The sequential art of reading Scene 2 produces a sense of motion through an illustrative text-as-image that seems to directly reproduce key-frames of Navidson's film. The reader constructs spatial schemata unfolding in time through the after-image each page inscribes in his memory. In other words, the page acts as a projection screen.

The third scene essentially describes a fall into nothingness (Danielewski 469-483). Deeper than ever into the labyrinth, Navidson experiences a complete lack of orientation, as even the plane he once considered to be the floor seems to have disappeared. Here, text-as-image undertakes the task of providing a spatial experience of complete disorientation in a space that seems to be devoid of coordinates or any stable reference point, while the text describes only Navidson and his thoughts. This time, it is the very act of reading that transmits an experience of space.

The logic that governs the experiment rejects any kind of hierarchical order that stereotypically governs the relationship of space and text, through the usually prevailing notions of projection and analogy, pointing instead to an emerging relation of concurrence. In her article, Katherine Hayles cites Richard Lanham's perspectives of "looking through a page and looking at a page" (Hayles 794) simply to point out that such a dichotomy could not possibly apply at the case of this *House of Leaves*. The readers are neither only "immersed in a fictional world... scarcely conscious of the page as a material object" nor only focusing on the physical properties of each page. They are rather simultaneously participating in both activities that happen in concurrence.

Fig. 2 scene 2 (Danielewski 2000 : 443-461):
the tunnel
Process: book pages > text-as-image > text-timing >
image correspondence 1:1 > keyframes

The video footage produced by this architectural experiment on the *House of Leaves* undoubtedly forms another kind of "copy with a difference" of that space; another personal mediation, that attempts to seek the spatial models the text supplies with the added dimension of time length. Maybe the construction of new video footage of that space according to the book is yet another addition to its "Contrary Evidence" appendix –bringing forth another field of the book that an architect-reader may find extremely useful to continue complementing.

The end-products of the architectural experiment described here are some kind of time-based spatial diagrams. Peter Eisenman's diagrammatic approach to the
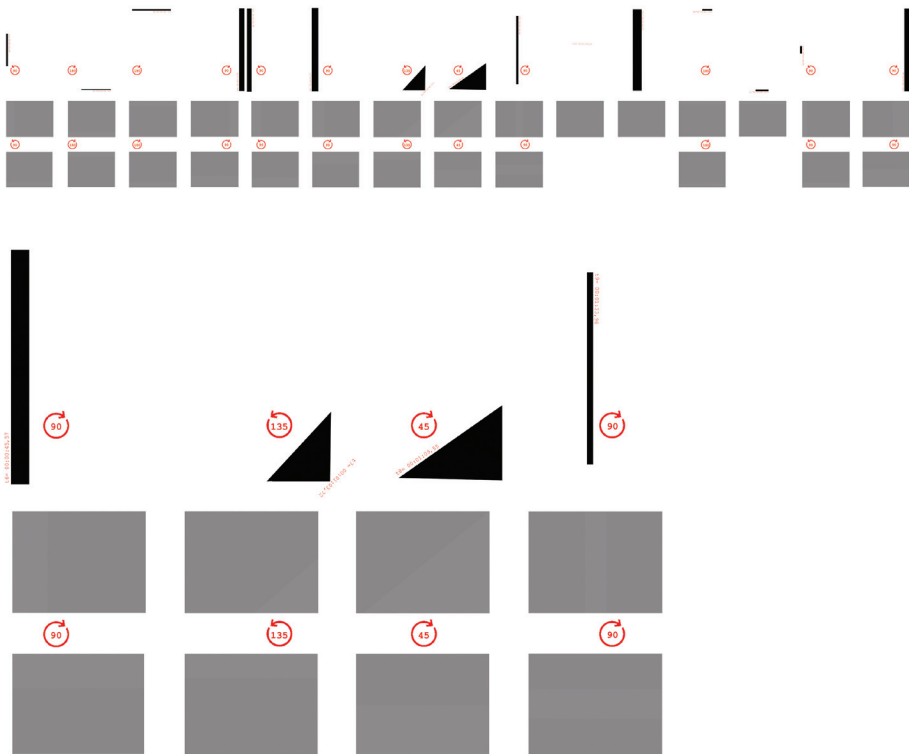

Fig. 3 scene 3 (Danielewski 2000: 469-483): the fall
Process: book pages > text-as-image > text-timing > book rotation > start key-frames > end key-frames
The act of reading reproduces a sense of spatial experience –disorientation

design process, as it is summarised in his book *Diagram Diaries,* that by its very title seems to suggest a desire of a spatial diagram to become time-based, as well as Bernard Tschumi's experimentations with montage, cinema and literature in *Architecture and Disjunction,* are only two of the most prominent examples of architectural discourse that can be brought in a dialogue with a discourse constructed upon this experiment. At this point, the text can serve as a virtually inexhaustible source that can produce a variety of such diagrammatic conceptions of space that additionally incorporate the temporal dimension. By bringing forth the text as the only material upon which one can found an attempt to reproduce this space, *House of Leaves* seems in fact to be promoting text to a structure that can give birth to multiple versions –a kind of DNA code that can generate a multiplicity of singular conceptual experiences of space. The textual deformations that enable the text to be perceived as image constitute a book that acts as a structure in itself, a relentless generator of time-based spatial diagrams.

The video produced by this architectural experiment on the House of Leaves can be watched on-line at http://vimeo.com47922238

NOTES

[1] The idea of conducting this architectural experiment in the *House of Leaves* stemmed from an inspiring long discussion I had with Vassilis Ganiatsas. I am also indebted to Nikos Laskaris, Yiannis Grigoriadis and Yorgos Gyparakis for their insightful feedback after watching the videos I had produced. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the "Architexture. Exploring textual and architectural spaces" conference at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow (15th-17th April 2008). I would like to thank the participants for their thoughtful comments and remarks.

[2] It is precisely the various textual deformations being used in the book in order to produce spatial experience that initially draw the attention of the architect-reader to the *House of Leaves.* Suffice to note, for the time being, that the textual deformations are used in at least 4 different ways throughout Danielewski's book, generating different kinds of interrelations between space and textual representation, which will be examined in more detail later on.

[3] Such a situation could be reminiscent of the similarly vain attempts of some other fictional figures that once desired to grasp the totality of human knowledge, Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet.*

[4] The way the broader term "representationalism" is used in this paper - suggesting notions of a 1:1 correspondence between the human theoretical constructions and the real world - enables a convenient incorporation of the term "orthography" Hansen (2004) often uses in

his own approach to the book, in the sense of a definitively accurate and stable recording of past events.

5 Martin Brick (2004), in an article that is primarily concerned with the formal elements of the book that enrich its meaning, goes as far as to interpret the variety of fonts used as different levels of authority upon the text – drawing an analogy from the medieval rubrics where text colour was a sign of (the power of) authenticity upon it.

6 Remediation in the *House of Leaves* is the prevailing subject of Katherine N. Hayles' approach to the book. Suffice to note here that remediation is defined as a "re-presentation of material that has already been represented in another medium" (Hayles 781).

7 Not only is any possibility of contact with the protagonists of the story lost, but also their crucial comments on the final result that is the film of the *Navidson Record* can never be recovered (the alleged "Last Interview" does not appear in the appendix the editors provide at the end of the book).

8 In his approach, Mark B.N. Hansen seems to deal with the way in which Danielewski re-defines the book as a medium through the use of its complicated relationship with other media, taking advantage of the privilege the reader's body enjoys in its relationship with the book as a physical object – this kind of "embodi-ment" is regarded as a process that restores the sense of the real upon the mediated. Considering this embodied relationship as the only way of involving the reader with a physical object that is impossible to exist (i.e. to acquaint him with this object's reality), Hansen goes on to investigate the relationship between fiction and reality in *House of Leaves*, going as far as to suppose that Zampanò literally *is* the character from Fellini's *La Strada a*nd considering the whole book an "assault on orthography" (Hansen 597-606).

9 The chapter spans 13 pages, of which 4 are practically destroyed, 3 are devoted to Truant's ramblings and another 17 are lost.

10 The idea of investigating in order to clearly define the relationship between text(-as-meaning) and text-as-image stemmed from reading chapter 7. "Images" (Markus and Cameron 149-173). Here, text (-as-meaning) and text-as-image "carry meanings which are closely related" and the fact that they "occupy the same space rather than different/adjacent spaces" means that the text (-as-meaning) "cannot be taken as merely a label for or comment on" the text-as-image, while the text-as-image is not necessarily a direct depiction of "what is said in the text".

SOURCES CITED

BRICK, Martin. "Blueprint(s): Rubric for a Deconstructed Age in *House of Leaves*." *Philament* 2 (January 2004). On-line journal of arts and culture. www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue2_Critique_Brick.htm (last access: May 1st, 2011).

BRICK, Martin. "Reading the book of someone's reading: spatial allegories of reading experience in Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Gascoigne's *Master F.J.*"McNeese Review 47 (2009): 1/17

DANIELEWSKI, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.

EISENMAN, Peter. *Diagram Diaries*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.

HAMILTON, Natalie. "The a-mazing house: the labyrinth as theme and form in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*". *Critique: Studies in congemporary fiction* 50:1 (2008): 3-15.

HANSEN, B.N. Mark. "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*." *Contemporary Literature* XLV (April 2004): 597-636.

HAYLES, N. Katherine. "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*". *American Literature* 74 (2002): 779-806.

MARKUS, A. Thomas and Deborah Cameron. *The Words between the Spaces. Buildings and Language.* London: Routledge, 2002.

McCAFFERY, Larry and Sinda Gregory. "Haunted House---An Interview with Mark Danielewski (Take Two)." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44, no.2 (Winter 2003): 99-135.

SLOCOMBE, Will. "'This is not for you': Nihilism and the house that Jacques built." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 51, number 1, (Spring 2005): 88-106.

TSCHUMI, Bernard. *Architecture and Disjunction*. London: MIT Press, 1996.