**FROM ROME TO
YAMOUSSOUKRO:
CASPAR STRACKE'S
VISUAL
RE-CONSTRUCTIONS
OF DUPLITECTURE
IN GENERIC
NEOBAROQUE
CITYSCAPES**

Peter Krieger

The reproduction of architectural monuments on an authentic scale and in design, or modified as an allusion to the original, is a production of a fake. The global presence of “duplitecture” raises the question—a key concern in this first tba issue—whether a fake bears truth, and how this paradox can be explained. This short article, based on my long-term research on the Neobaroque, partially conducted at UWO,¹ analyzes the principles of contemporary architectural fake (re)production, made visible in the photographic and video work Doppel of the German artist, Caspar Stracke. Doppel, “duplicates” in English, is a series produced in three phases, beginning in 2004, continuing in 2009, and concluding in 2019 (at an exhibition in the Künstlerhaus Frise in Hamburg).² It thematizes a cultural practice known in many epochs and cultures of the world, coined with the critical term of “duplitecture” which refers to both the production and representation of architectural spaces. The artist exposes the cultural and social potential of architectural reproductions, and its implicit political impact in the different urban settings. In this article, I’ll focus on just one panel, entitled “Rome to Yamoussoukro.” [III.1]

One of the important conceptual references for the selected objects from Africa, America, and China, is the cultural and commercial ideology of the Disney Corporation. In 1958 Walt Disney visited West Germany³ and considered buying, dismantling, and rebuilding the romantic nineteenth century castle of Neuschwanstein, an outstanding architectural manifestation of the Bavarian “fairy tale” king, Ludwig II. Translocating architectural monuments was not a new idea; in the US, it was already established with The Cloisters, a branch of the New York Metropolitan Museum, founded by George Grey Barnard in 1926, and designed by Charles Tollens in 1934, who integrated architectural spoils from French medieval monasteries, shipped to NYC. This principle of cultural appropriation even appeared in the famous Disney comic narrations: in one of the stories, Uncle Scrooge pretends to buy Mount Everest, the Taj Mahal, and the city of Hong Kong, in order to rebuild them as scenery for his entertainment center in Duckburg⁴—clear evidence of the colonial and global capitalist spirit which characterizes both the virtual figure of Scrooge and his business patron, Walt Disney.

However, in the real world of southern Germany, at the end of the 1950s, Neuschwanstein castle was not for sale, and thus Disney decided to commission his own design for the Cinderella castle, built after his death in the Magic Kingdom theme park of Disney World in Florida.⁵ By recreating Neuschwanstein, applying stylistic fusions with the French Fontainebleau castle, Disney opted for a functional, and even more economical solution. A new building could functionally be designed for the needs of a theme park, while an original building, translocated to the US, would have been a challenge for complex interior re-adaptation, generating high cost. And the selected style fusion even created a synergy of emotional values, a higher intensity of kitsch.

Both the “original” and its fake adaptation constitute visual realities and define cultural concepts. While the “authentic” Neuschwanstein castle itself was a fusion of imagined medieval monarchic design settings, producing a Romantic fake eclecticism, Cinderella castle brought this to an extreme: fake architecture that re-defines the uses of history, visually re-creates memory reduced to clichés, and, generates aesthetic impressions for tourist masses. This Disney creation even counts with the virtual support from the fictional movies and comic strips which massively reproduce these visual clichés. But as Klaus Herding had pointed out in an article on Toontown in Disneyland nearby Los Angeles, the architectural substance and spatial experience of walking through a theme park produces even deeper neuronal impacts than reading a comic strip or watching a movie. The production of material authenticity encodes fake designs as cultural realities, they are symptomatic expressions of what the Disney Company calls “imagineering”—the functional and economically determined fusion of image and engineering. Herein lies the truth of the fake: the ideological efficiency of images in the so-called society of consumer-idiots.⁶ Stracke’s “duplitecture” series implicitly recalls this conceptual framework: the commercial availability of decontextualized cultural goods.

Such collective clichés of visual consumption, of pseudo-historical collages, had also defined the

design strategies of shopping malls and entertainment centers since the 1990s. “Theming” architectural interiors for shopping, compressing expressions of cultural time and space was the basic idea of Jon Jerdes’s designs for Las Vegas, and other American malls. Rem Koolhaas coined this design habitus the “Jerde effect,”⁷ a cultural strategy which conquered all global commercial settings. Yet a maximum intensity of this concept is still maintained on the Las Vegas Strip, where fake takes command,⁸ generating characteristic architectural and urban expressions of the Neobaroque.

Transdisciplinary research on the revived principles of the historical Baroque in the twenty-first century has highlighted two different ideological determinations: especially in Latin America, Neobaroque cultural products, such as the Cuban literature of José Lezama Lima and even the lowrider events of Chicanos in California, foster specific cultural identities beyond any hegemonic determination. This is already the case when Spanish monarchic and Catholic Baroque architecture was imported to New Spain in the sixteenth century, and there it was converted into hybrid designs by indigenous artists and craftsmen.⁹

But contrary to this definition, Neobaroque is also, and predominantly, a critical expression of a vulgar, commercialized, and standardized formula, as materialized in Las Vegas entertainment circles. The re-production of Venetian canals [ill. 2], iconic Paris monuments, Egyptian pyramids, and New York skyscrapers on the Strip reveals how fake takes command. Global overviews show the global success story of this cultural model; not only in classic entertainment resorts such as Macao, but also, as I have explained in my recent book, in traditional cultural settings such as Mexico City, where the commercial Las Vegas code of urbanism, architecture, and even gardening is spreading like “visual epidemics.” The Neobaroque, in this sense, is a phenomenon of crisis, but at the same time, it defines a social and cultural reality which generates different modes of identity.

Thus, even a fake cultural statement contains a core of truth; concretely, Neobaroque fake architecture apparently satisfies collective emotional demands for being rooted in historical settings. Even fake set designs with reproductions of authentic monuments may enable emerging social relations and cultural orientation in generic cityscapes and standardized consumer societies.

Neobaroque form follows fiction, revealing information about the construction of cultural values. The following example of Neobaroque architecture and urbanism, photographed by Caspar Stracke, display a colonizing effect of architectural reproductions. It shows, how topographic transfers and semantic transitions of iconic architectural monuments work even in remote areas of the world with low levels of global tourism, such as the Ivory Coast.

II

The migration of an outstanding architectural motive from the Vatican to the capital of the Ivory Coast opens Stracke’s series Doppel, a simple, but efficient way of presenting “duplitectures” and their original substance. As an artist, not as a documentary photographer, Stracke recognizes the strategies and limits of representation in photography, as well as its potential to reveal meaning via contextual montage. He constructs panels divided into two parts on the same scale; [ill. 1] on the left side a photograph of the original monument, in this case, St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome, and its copy, here Notre-Dame-de-la Paix in Yamoussoukro, designed by Lebanese architect Pierre Fakhoury, built from 1985 to 1988 at an approximate cost of 200 million Euros.

The first of four panels combine a panorama of Rome, showing half of the dome of St. Peter’s conjoined with a street view of Yamoussoukro with informal street vendors, improvised stands, and completing the other half dome with Notre-Dame. The African dome, constructed in concrete, is slightly lower than St. Peter’s, but a monumental cross on the top raises the height to 158 meters, thus 26 meters higher than the Roman model. In a direct comparison (of the models on the same scale, as shown in a documentary photograph available in the Wikimedia Commons collection), Notre-Dame’s dome is bigger and simpler compared to that of St. Peter’s. In spite of these differences, Stracke assembles both domes on the same

level, in all four panels—a visual effect which underlines the complementary relationship of original and copy.

The second panel juxtaposes a focused view of Bernini's colonnades, visually interrupted by a car and a crowd barrier, with an impression of the deserted central place of the African copy, structured by Neobaroque concrete columns, veneered with Italian marble. A lonely bicycle rider enters the desolate stage of the Catholic faith, devoid of devout pilgrims. In fact, Notre-Dame covers an area of 30,000 square meters, which is double the size of the St. Peter's, and provides an interior space for 18,000 visitors (with 7,000 seats and standing room for 11,000; i.e., less than the 20,000 who could attend mass in St. Peter's). But since its blessing by Pope John Paul II in 1990, on only two occasions was this sacred space completely occupied: in February 1992 with a tribute to pop musician Michael Jackson and in 1993 with the funeral of the president of the country and sponsor of the church building, Félix Houphouët.

Stracke's photograph exposes the emptiness in contrast to the packed, informal Sunday markets on the outskirts of the capital, located between smoldering garbage dumps. The gaping void of Notre-Dame in the capital of the Ivory Coast is also due to the fact that Catholicism is a minority religion in this West African country, which has a growing number of Muslim population.

The third panel as well reveals the impressing monumental emptiness of this duplitecture, compared to its original source, the ever crowded Piazza San Pietro in Rome. In both photographs, the columns structure the view. Whereas the oval Vatican colonnades frame the vibrant social intercourse in front of the church's entrance, its African counterpart (in fact, it is not even a cathedral, but a minor basilica, for the Ivory Coast's cathedral is St. Augustine) serves as the stage for two black men dwarfed in the oversized space. Stracke chose two different angles and modes of focus to point out the structural reality, that Notre-Dame's colonnade is almost twice the height of Bernini's scenographic design—a Baroque formula oversized as a Neobaroque design tool.

The fourth and last panel is a provocative contrast of an intentionally chaotic composition of two persons portrayed by chance, amidst a fragmented view of façades, floating cables, and ornamental streetlight, visually questioning the monumental presence of St. Peter's dome, and, on the right, an ironic depiction of Notre-Dame cathedral's almost bucolic context, with a cow placidly grazing on the abundant vegetation beside the empty paved street and the huge, awkward lamppost. This detail in Stracke's photography confirms what a German news magazine had already described in 1997: that algae covered the steps to the entrance of the Basilica, the pedestals of the concrete columns are broken, the rainwater remains in a puddle in the central forecourt, and overgrown weeds crack the marble slabs. Even in the ribs of the dome, rubber trees are springing up, and the lawn, turf imported from Europe, designed in Neobaroque patterns recalling Versailles, rots in an atmosphere of 99 percent humidity.¹⁰ To sum up, it is a "nature's revenge"¹¹ against the Neobaroque cultural alteration of the local ecosystem. Although a high annual budget (from a Foundation at the Vatican) is spent to maintain the church, vegetation grows wild, covering this building and many parts of the capital. Yamoussoukro was conceived in the mid-1960s as an ideal urban body for 400,000 inhabitants, but it attracted only a small number of the Ivory Coast's population;¹² the majority lives in the crowded metropolis Abidjan, 250 kilometers away.

At night, thousands of huge lampposts—partially shown on the right side of the Stracke's last panel—illuminate the empty eight-lane-avenues (2 meters wider than Paris's famed Champs-Élysées). Abandoned, but still air-conditioned government offices, the president's palace (on a site sprawling over 4 square kilometers), protected by a moat where crocodiles swim around, a high-rise hotel with a mirror curtain wall, alongside collapsing housing units, and other indicators of decline generate an image of tropical Neobaroque melancholy.

Stracke does not cast blame for this condition in the sense of photography as a social (and environmental) critique, instead he focuses on a characteristic Neobaroque topos: that monumental architectural splendor overshadows decay—a motif already known from the historical seventeenth-century Baroque, especially in Rome, where hunger and social misery, caused by the mismanagement of popes, contrasted with spectacular new church buildings, fountains, and stage-like street axis for the wealthy inhabi-

tants.¹³ A dystopian spirit is even palpable in the contemporary city of Rome, where many zones of social and spatial decay, closed down subway stations, plagues of rat, and mountains of rubbish in the streets contrast sharply with the architectural splendor of the "eternal city."

In his panel "Rome to Yamoussoukro," Stracke uncovers the strategies of Neobaroque impression management and reveals how duplicated fake architecture in remote urban and landscape settings—for instance in an African capital in the jungle—is not only dysfunctional, but it also generates unexpected, absurd effects. In particular, an adapted, reinterpreted copy of an iconic church building serves as a medium for Neobaroque "trance-mission."¹⁴ The power of illusion inherent in every sacred building and space is a cultural pattern considerably based on Baroque Counter-Reformation ideology,¹⁵ and it is also determined by Neo-Romantic thought. Poets and philosophers of German Romanticism, such as Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, and especially Friedrich Schleiermacher, had converted religion into aesthetics, in other words that a religious sense requires sensorial perception and emotional encoding¹⁶—a transmission via architectural spectacle stimulating a collective trance, even in the most absurd and decomposed settings.

The complimentary relationship between the outstanding European "original" and its less known African "copy," as depicted in Stracke's photographic installation, raises questions of complex identity building under colonial circumstances. What is the reason behind St. Peter's Duplitecture adaptation in Yamoussoukro? What contradictory cultural potential does this fake product unfold? And would anarchic perception and alternative uses recodify this oversized, neo-colonial basilica? Stracke raises these questions and brings to the attention (of a Western public) that such architectural fake impacts have their own logic, visualizing the role of the replica as a neo-colonial tool in globally standardized neo-baroque cultural settings.

Other parts of the Doppel series display how the Athens Parthenon reappears in Nashville, Tennessee, how Ronchamp was copied to perfection in the Chinese city of Zhengzhou (and then demolished for legal reasons, raised by the Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris), and how the Washington, D.C. Capitol dome was cloned in the northern Chinese city of Pinghu. He also produced videos on Disneyland fake urbanism on the outskirts of Paris / Marne-la-Vallée,¹⁷ and Paris simulacra in Chinese gated communities¹⁸—examples which encode the implementation of retrograde fake architecture in foreign settings as an act of sovereign appropriation in a context of globalized and hybrid aesthetic taste, especially the powerful "simulacrum movement" in China¹⁹ with "copy and paste" architecture.

III

[ill. 3] Finally, the panels of the Doppel series conclude in an installation shown in 2012 at the Tom Bradley International Terminal of the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), called Cities out of Cities. The passengers at the airport as a non-place (Marc Augé), who changed flights between world cities at high frequencies, and thus easily fell into the mental trap of defining specific city cultures by fragmented visual clichés, were confronted with a curved belt of monitors displaying a "27 channel video in which city images are reconstructed out of video mosaic tiles. Different tile sizes of moving images construct a city scene from a corresponding city with a geopolitical or colonial connection. . . . Los Angeles is built of Mexico City, Hong Kong of London, London out of New Delhi, New Delhi out of Istanbul and Istanbul out of Los Angeles."²⁰

Such ars combinatoria reveals the ongoing cultural amnesia, ending up in the generic city, when complex cityscapes are reduced to mere containers of fragmented monuments and their fake reproductions—a process for which I coin "playful self-destruction" of cultural and environmental values in the so-called "democracy of consumers' idiots,"²¹ where the selection between products substitutes the debates on political, economic, social, and cultural concepts. The global success story of fake "duplitecture," as portrayed by Stracke and others,²² confirms the unfriendly takeover of kitsch as a dominating cultural model for urban development, in the African jungle as well as in vast Chinese mega cityscapes

and U.S. suburbs. New configurations of the generic city arise, beyond the well-known boring accumulation of junk space (Rem Koolhaas) in downtown Atlanta.²³ At present, there is a different “Learning from Las Vegas” (Robert Venturi), which may explain the “visual epidemics” of duplitecture. Fake definitively took command,²⁴ but contemporary architectural theory and aesthetic research have not yet taken this into account.

The migration of architectural clichés, as exposed by Caspar Stracke, and exemplified by the visual transfer of Roman Baroque to the Ivory Coast’s Neobaroque, produces hybrid aesthetic settings which question any ethical critique of fake reproduction as constructed lies. They are constructed truth and undenied reality of contemporary neocolonial placemaking, uncovered and analyzed by Stracke’s contemporary artistic photography and installation.

[III. 1] Caspar Stracke. DOPPEL. Rome to Yamoussoukro; 2004

[III. 2] Peter Krieger. Venetian, Las Vegas; 2010

[III. 3] Caspar Stracke. Cities out of Cities (video installation at Tom Bradley International Terminal of the Los Angeles International Airport / LAX); 2012

- 1 An overview on the research on The Hispanic Baroque: Neo-Baroques: From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster, Walter Moser, Angela Ndalians and Peter Krieger, eds., Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017.
- 2 <https://www.frise.de/cms/3-0-Aktuell.html%3cbr%20/331-0-Caspar+Stracke.html>
- 3 Patrick Bahners. Entenhausen. Die ganze Wahrheit. Munich: Beck, 2013, p. 163.
- 4 Quoted by the German edition "SS Plutonia: Wunder der Tiefsee", Mickey Maus # 14-16/65, Die Tollsten Geschichten von Donald Duck # 72, and Uncle Scrooge # 46 (by Carl Barks), see Bahners, Patrick Bahners. Entenhausen. Die ganze Wahrheit. Munich: Beck, 2013, pp.163-164.
- 5 Information on the Disney design ideology: Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance, ed. Karal Ann Marling. Paris, New York, Montreal: Flammarion/Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2002, and Beth Dunlop, Building a Dream: The Art of Disney Architecture, New York: Harry Abrams, 1996.
- 6 Peter Krieger. Epidemias visuales: El Neobarroco de Las Vegas en la Ciudad de México; Visual Epidemics. Las Vegas Neo-Baroque in Mexico City. México: Escotto editores, 2017.
- 7 The "Jerde effect", explained in The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping / Harvard Design School Project on the City 2, ed. by Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, Chuihua Judy Chung, Cologne: Taschen, 2001.
- 8 An allusion to Sigfried Gideon's famous hypothesis of the late 1940s, stating that "Mechanization takes command," thus criticizing the rational industrial principles of modern architecture which he had promoted decades before. "Fake takes command" refers to the increasing commercial uses of virtuality, formerly called "phantasy" and "imagination," a creative act of visual thinking.
- 9 Lois Parkinson Zamora / Monika Kaup, eds. Baroque New Worlds. Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest. Durham, London: Duke UP 2010.
- 10 Der Spiegel # 14/1997, pp. 164-167.
- 11 "Revenge of nature" is a Horatian topic; see Joachim Radkau, Die Ära der Ökologie. Eine Weltgeschichte, Munich: Beck, 2011.
- 12 Der Spiegel # 14/1997, pp. 164-167.
- 13 Volker Reinhard. Im Schatten von Sankt Peter. Die Geschichte des barocken Rom. Darmstadt: Primus 2011.
- 14 Peter Krieger. Epidemias visuales: El Neobarroco de Las Vegas en la Ciudad de México; Visual Epidemics. Las Vegas Neo-Baroque in Mexico City. México: Escotto editores, 2017. Peter Krieger. "Arquitectura contemporánea para el culto católico en México. Estrategias de investigación e interpretación", in Sacralización, culto y religiosidad en la nueva arquitectura latinoamericana: 1960–2010. Mexico City: UNAM, 2009, 12–25 (edited in collaboration with Iván San Martín).
- 15 Monika Kaup. Neobaroque in the Americas. Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film. Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press 2012 (New World Series, ed. J. Michael Dash). Jens Baumgarten. Konfession, Bild und Macht. Visualisierung als katholisches Herrschafts- und Disziplinierungskonzept in Rom und im habsburgischen Schlesien (1560-1740). Hamburg, München: Dölling und Galitz, 2004.
- 16 Rüdiger Safranski,. Romantik. Eine deutsche Affäre. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 2010 (first edition Munich, Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag 2007), p. 145.
- 17 Hacène Belmessous. „Ein Außenposten von Disneyland" in Stadtbauwelt # 156 „Dirty

Urbanism", pp.32-36.

18 Caspar Stracke, Tianducheng (video installation, 2019).

19 Bianca Bosker. Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, p. 4

20 Explication of the artist Caspar Stracke.

21 Peter Krieger. Epidemias visuales: El Neobarroco de Las Vegas en la Ciudad de México; Visual Epidemics. Las Vegas Neo-Baroque in Mexico City. México: Escotto editores, 2017.

22 For example Onnis Luque, photographer of the book Epidemias visuales: El Neobarroco de Las Vegas en la Ciudad de México; Visual Epidemics. Las Vegas Neo-Baroque in Mexico City.

23 <http://www.cavvia.net/junkspace/>

24 Peter Krieger. "Fake Takes Command: Der Las-Vegas-Neobarock als neokoloniales Instrument der Megastadt-Gestaltung," in Friedrich Weltzien and Hans-Jörg Kapp, eds., Wider-spenstiges Design: Gestalterische Praxis und gesellschaftliche Verantwortung. Berlin: Reimer, 2017, 20–33. Joseph Imorde. "Imitation als Entwurfsproblem. Der italienische Platz im Norden," in Bruno Klein and Paul Sigel, eds., Konstruktionen urbaner Identität. Zitat und Rekonstruktion in Architektur und Städtebau der Gegenwart. Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2006, 99–109.