

# The Projective Credibility of Fictions: Robin Evans' Methodological Excursions

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**ABSTRACT:** Although central to Robin Evans' studies of history, his use of "fictions" is as novel as it is unexplored. Expanding from intensive studies of traditional architectural forms of representation (plan, elevation, perspective, photography) Evans includes paintings of human figures, novels, and plays. Rather than marginalizing these depictions for their fictional basis, he places them alongside, on equal footing, with their architectural counterparts.

As Evans examined the past, he used these fictional devices to project vitality into space. In so doing, Evans imbues these fictions with a type of credibility not similar, but complementary, to types of credibility at work in traditional architectural representations. He leverages the architect's ability to read circulation, depth, and enclosure into the plan to anchor the reader while allowing fictions (narratives, paintings, conversations) to speculate about the character of social life. The overt and explicit artifice of fictions, in effect, facilitates and legitimates their use.

This paper examines Evan's use of fables, novels, courtesy books, plays, paintings, and advertisements through a selection of his most canonical articles. Although varied from article to article, Evans explicitly defines each fiction's use in relation to other more conventional source materials. Each of these uses expands upon their deployment as a *projective*, rather than simply documentary, device. The product of this study is a grounded, yet provisional, methodology of research as a form of architectural speculation.

**KEYWORDS:** Robin Evans, methodology, fiction, projection

## INTRODUCTION

Given the depth and extensiveness of knowledge displayed in Robin Evan's writings, his use of fiction might appear to be a simple eccentricity. It would seem to be either an idle affectation or a demonstration of his worldliness and literariness. However, given the centrality and continuity of these deployments, they might suggest something else, a provisional methodology: one that enlists fictional scenarios, bound explicitly to concrete situations, to attenuate the effects of architectural decisions.

In order to retroactively construct this methodology, this paper documents the active use of fiction within a selection of Evans' writings. This analysis is ordered chronologically for two reasons. One, it describes an expanded development of fiction as source material. Early writings make explicit reference to works of fiction as fictional scenarios while later writings build upon tacit correlations between historical and fictional documents. Two, it counters the assumption that Evans' writings moved from concerns of social and political efficacy (the impact architecture has on social and cultural norms) to more professionally introverted questions of architectural representation and form. Specifically, this paper argues that the qualification of the *projective* within Evans' studies of representations is meant to reframe questions of architectural representation and their relation to human affairs. Fictions, in this way, play a critical role.

Projection, as an operation, is readily tied to forms of architectural thought and production by way of representation. Orthographic and perspectival projections establish potential relationships between what is drawn on a page (as a representation) and what happens in the world (as a consequence). Evans uses the projective to describe this as an operation, as a form of speculation rather than a form of documentation.

In a chapter of *The Projective Cast* titled "Seeing through Paper," Evans describes Palladio's San Petronio as "a layering of thin parallel planes... The effects were obtained by drawing lines on a flat sheet that looked as if they represented something with considerable depth, then building it with limited depth." As long as the piece of paper could resemble the façade, the architect could speculate about the effect of depth through the representation. Furthermore, "Under these conditions, projectors need not extend very far from the

picture to reach the thing pictured, and the imagination of the designer need travel no further than the projectors to envisage what has been designed”(Evans 1995, 117).

In this way, Evans organizes the projective as an image, augmented by the imagination of the designer, to speculate about architectural effects. While such a relationship is not exclusive to Evans, his inclusion of fictions enlarges the types of effects within this realm of speculation. The uses of fiction and their correlation to the visual practice of projection are implicit. Just as Palladio's elevation illustrated a hypothetical perception of depth, Evans use of fictions illustrates a hypothetical occupation of space. Both facilitate the projection of architectural effects, although in categorically different registers, through the ability to visualize potential relationships.

### **1.0 Initiation: *The Rights of Retreat and Rites of Exclusion***

*The Rights of Retreat and the Rites of Exclusion* provides a useful starting point for this analysis. It is one of Evans' earlier writings, born contemporaneously and sympathetically to his first book, *The Fabrication of Virtue*. His agenda is explicit, affording a frame with which to register the deployment of fiction. He begins, “This article will attempt to chronicle, in a rather anecdotal way, some incidents in the environmental history of the war against information.” (Evans 1971, 335) Given this purview, the article provides two parameters. By remaining anecdotal and incidental, the evidence he supplies is assumed to be partial, non-encyclopedic, making the use of fictional examples more manageable. Also, he frames his interests around a conflict between two constituents: the spatial (the environment) and the perceived (information). The confrontation of the real and the perceived produces a useful setting for this analysis.

To wit, he begins the investigations with the fictional character, Des Esseintes in J.K. Huysmans's *Against Nature*, (“a fictional character certainly, but one based on the antics and attitudes of the author's contemporary, the Comte de Montesquiou” (Evans 1971, 335)). In an effort to secure himself from the banalities of the Parisian world, Des Esseintes begins by barricading himself from the outside world and turning the everyday into the ceremonial. Although the practice of seclusion or the embellishment of pedestrian actions are hardly exclusive to fictional characters, their combination and exaggeration in the case of Des Esseintes collapses and heightens the two through his environmental maneuvering. As Evans explains:

But he found that even in his secluded apartments the more quotidian realities of Paris impinged too much on his consciousness, so he decided to move himself to the remote and deserted suburb of Fontenay.

Together with the desire to escape from a hateful period of sordid degradation, the longing to see no more pictures of the human form toiling in Paris between four walls or roaming the streets in search of money had taken an increasing hold on him. Once he had cut himself off from contemporary life, he had resolved to allow nothing to enter his hermitage which might breed repugnance or regret.

Having in this way distanced himself from all that he despised and all that disturbed him Des Esseintes populated his new habitation with jewel-encrusted tortoiseshells, obscure early Christian tracts, and the symbolical drawings of Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau, making a secret enclosure for his own delectation – heavily bedecked with significance for him alone. (Evans 1971, 335-6)

Using a fictional character, rather than describing the real person upon which he is based, benefits Evans in two ways. One, he is not obliged to describe the historical reckoning of Comte de Montesquiou-Fézensac by way of the French Court's gossiping. Two, Evans is able to construct the character to his own necessities, much as J.K. Huysman constructed Des Esseintes. The description of the process, however, is no less real because of its fictional source.

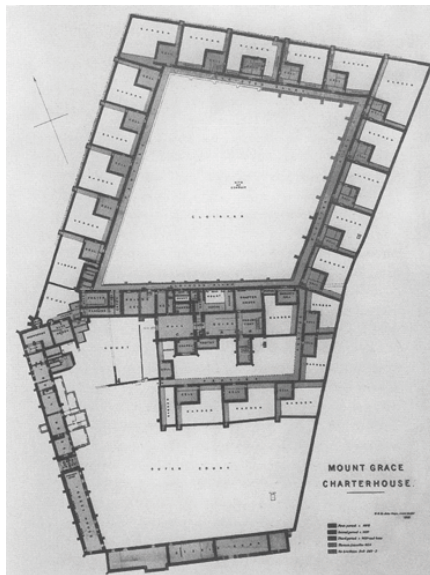
The second deployment of fiction within *The Rights of Retreat the Rites of Exclusion* uses both fictional source material and fictional devices. In describing the reciprocal tendency of the thing excluded to shape the nature of the boundary between included and excluded, Evans references Jorge Luis Borges's *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. In this short story, access to an imagined world is constructed through a fictional encyclopedia entry. As the entry is read, portions of the world to which that fiction belongs begin to slip into reality, as if the epistemological qualification of the encyclopedia were enough to qualify its certainty (Evans 1971).

Evans' use of Borges is foreshadowing. In the next paragraph Evans introduces a conversation written by William Morris, a real person frequently cited in architectural histories, in relation to the fragmentation of experience:

This, for instance, is how William Morris disposes of the possibility of such civic atomization

Said I... 'there is a third possibility – to wit that every man should be quite independent of every other, and that thus the tyranny of society should be abolished'. He looked hard at me for a second or two, and then burst out laughing very heartily; and I confess that I joined him. (Evans 1971, 337)

The quote, given by a real person, a real architect and credible historian, is taken from the novel *News from Nowhere: or an Epoch of Rest*. And just as quickly as Evans introduced the possibility of fictions informing the real has Evans made a fictional conversation real. The endnoting certainly qualifies the source as a fiction, but just as the authority of the encyclopedia gives Uqbar inroads to reality, so does Evans' conscription of Morris.



**Figure 1:** Plan of Mount Grace Charterhouse. Source: (Evans 1971)

Were fictions deployed without a material or spatial referent, Evans would certainly lose credibility. However, connecting these fictional components are plans of monasteries, the Bicêtre (an orphanage, prison, lunatic asylum, and hospital), and a set of experimental wall sections developed by Michael Faraday for Millbank Penitentiary. In *The Rights of Retreat and Rites of Exclusion*, these links between the fictional and architectural remain suggestive and implicit. Their explicit development as complementary domains emerges in later work.

## 2.0 Evidence: *Figures, Doors and Passages*

Evans' most noted work, *Figures, Doors and Passages*, is also the work that most heavily relies on fiction and is most explicit in its methodological intentions.

If anything is described by an architectural plan, it is the nature of human relationships, since the elements whose trace it records – walls, doors, windows and stairs – are employed first to divide and then selectively to re-unite space. But what is generally absent in even the most elaborately illustrated building is the way human figures will occupy it... Take the portrayal of human figures and take house plans for a given time and place: look at them together as evidence of a way of life, and the coupling between everyday conduct and architectural organization may become more lucid. (Evans 1978, 267)

By pairing architectural plans with fictional portrayals of figures, Evans hopes to examine how architecture provides "a format for social life"(Evans 1978, 278). What is telling about this introduction is the declaration that he considers their pairing to constitute evidence. In an anachronistic twist, the combination of existing architectural spaces (represented by plan) and fictional social events (represented by paintings, courtesy books and novels) allows the reader to project into them so as make more clear relationships that never, actually, occurred.

The first such pairing illustrates the organizational relationship of circulation to privacy and convenience. Quoting Alberti's *The Ten Books on Architecture* and including a plan of Palladio's Palazzo Antonini, Evans argues that a matrix of interconnected rooms normalizes types of seclusion and intrusion. This, in turn, affords particular ways of constructing privacy in relation to the movements and activities of others. In order to demonstrate how the matrix of interconnected rooms forms a particular social milieu, Evans cites the courtesy book, *The Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione. (Evans 1978)

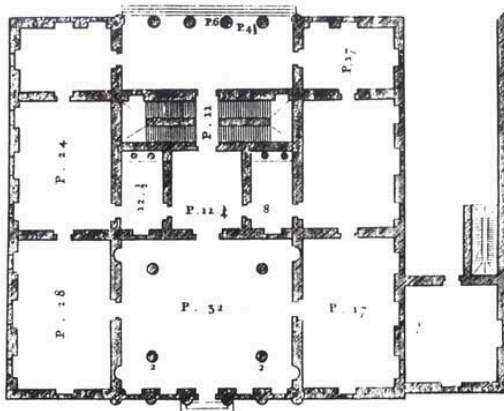
The first such reference describes the romantic liaison between a fictional courtier and his maidservant:

...as was only fitting at the age of twenty-nine, I had taken a charming and very beautiful young girl as my maidservant... Because of this I had my room at quite a distance from where the workmen slept, and also some way from the shop. I kept the young girl in a tiny ramshackle bedroom adjoining mine. (Evans 1978, 270)

In this instance privacy is established syntactically, a calculus of distances and adjacencies correlating to the interconnected matrices of rooms.

The second reference to *The Courtier* describes an attempt to engineer a chance encounter with a patron:

I had myself carried to the Medici Palace, up to where the little terrace is: they left me resting there, waiting for the Duke to come past. A good few friends of mine from the court came up and chatted with me. (Evans 1978, 270)



**Figure 2:** Plan of Palazzo Antonini, Palladio. Source: (Evans 1978)<sup>2</sup>

In this scenario, one of the courtiers opportunistically locates himself within a space of high connectivity, improving his chance of the Duke happening upon him, and allowing him to be visited incidentally by a group of friends. Both of these types of encounter are informal, afforded by the configuration of rooms and circulation.

Before finishing the section of doors, dedicated mostly to this constellation of Italian renaissance buildings and fictions, Evans brackets the types of conclusions one might draw from this evidence:

The examples given above, though hardly furnishing a proof, serve to indicate that the fondness for company, proximity and incident in sixteenth-century Italy corresponded nicely enough with the formation of architectural plans. (Evans 1978, 271)

Evans specifically identifies the two sorts of information, the architectural plan and the social scenarios of their contemporary fictions to indicate their affinity. That is, given the audience's ability to understand hierarchy, sequence, and circulation in plan they can project the potential for informal and incidental situations through them. Though not providing proof, these suggestive affiliations allow us to speculate about the collusions of space and social life.

To elaborate this connection, Evans juxtaposes the informal and interconnected Renaissance literature and villas with Victorian-era English literature and houses. Evans argues that the organizational shift of circulation, from interconnected rooms to discrete spaces reconnected by the passageway, heightened the spatial priority of privacy, particularly in concerns to the body. To emphasize this transition, particularly the aversion to physical proximity and contact, Evans quotes Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*:

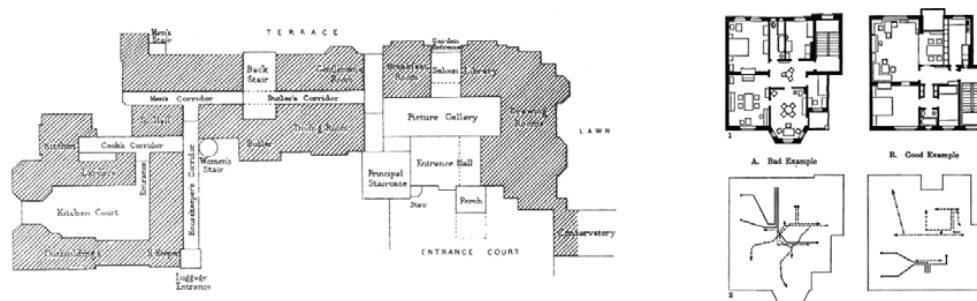
'My dearest boy', began his mother, taking hold of his hand and placing it within her own, 'promise me never to be afraid either of your dear papa or me; promise me this, my dear, as you love me, promise it to me', and she kissed him again and again and stroked his hair. But with her other hand she still kept hold of his; she had got him and she meant to keep him... The boy winced at this. It made him feel hot and uncomfortable all over... His mother saw that he winced and enjoyed the scratch she had given him.

The thing to notice is that when flesh touched flesh a subtle style of torture was taking place. (Evans 1978, 275-6)



**Figure 3:** "Family Prayers," Samuel Butler (1864). Source: (Evans 1978, 275)

This excerpt (written in 1903) is bounded by two sets of plans: Bearwood by Robert Kerr (1864) and the Functional House for Frictionless Living by Alexander Klein. Again, the plans evidence an intentional disentanglement of bodies and movements. Evans also notes this is the same passage that Edward Hall uses in studying proxemics in *The Hidden Dimension*.



**Figure 4:** Bearwood (1864) and The Functional House for Frictionless Living (1935). Source: (Evans 1978, 273, 276)

Again, Evans uses fiction to illustrate the efficacy of spatial conditions by binding it to two credible sources: the architectural plans of Kerr and Klein and the anthropological research of Edward Hall. Although Butler

references neither, his fictional family becomes symptomatic of these spaces. That is, the fiction evidences a potential manifestation of the architectural configuration.

However, Evans cautions against certain uses of literature and architecture:

In reaching these conclusions architectural plans have been compared with paintings and various sorts of literature. There is a lot to be said for making architecture once more into art... This is sometimes done in a rather guileless way, by equating architecture with literature or painting so that it becomes an echo of words and shapes; sometimes in a more sophisticated way, by adopting the vocabulary and procedures of the literary critic or art historian and applying them to architecture... A different kind of link has been sought: plans have been scrutinized for characteristics that could provide the preconditions for the way people occupy space, on the assumption that buildings accommodate what pictures illustrate and what words describe in the field of human relationships. (Evans 1978, 277-8)

By bracketing his motives as such, Evans makes clear that his use of fiction is not metaphorical or analogical, but projective. These studies are meant to analyze the "preconditions" of space so that we might speculate about their respective social tendencies. This agenda is borne out in his concluding paragraph:

The cumulative effect of architecture during the last two centuries has been like that of a general lobotomy performed on society at large, obliterating vast areas of social experience. (Evans 1978, 278)

### 3.0 Projective: *Translations for Drawing to Building and The Developed Surface*

Although central to his studies on the social consequences of architecture, the projective use of fictions also emerges in Evans' studies of architectural representation and geometry. In fact, his use of fiction in *Translations from Drawing to Building* is the most overt argument for the projective. In this article, Evans uses two versions of a painting titled "The Origin of Painting," based upon a story by Pliny the Elder on the origin of drawing. He examines the difference between Karl Schinkel's version (an architect) and David Allan's version (a painter).

Both paintings, true to the original story, show drawing as a function of projection, and both show quite clearly the combination of elements required: a source of light, a surface behind the subject, and something to trace with. (Evans 1978, 278)



**Figure 5:** "The Origin of Painting," Left: Schinkel, Right: Allan. Source: (Evans 1986, 6)

In Schinkel's version, the light source is the sun, distant and parallel. In Allan's the light source a lamp, approximate and intimate. In the former, the drawing surface of the rock precedes building, in the latter, the wall of the apartment precedes drawing. From this difference, Evans draws a conclusion about the projective drawing of architecture.

Drawing in architecture is not done after nature, but prior to construction; it is not so much produced by reflection on the reality outside the drawing, as productive of a reality that will end up outside the drawing. (Evans 1986, 7)

This ability to envision, to speculate, to project "a reality that will end up outside the drawing" is the crux of Evans development of the projective. Focusing on forms of representation gives Evans the opportunity to leverage architectural techniques. However, this focus on drawing and representation does not abandon his

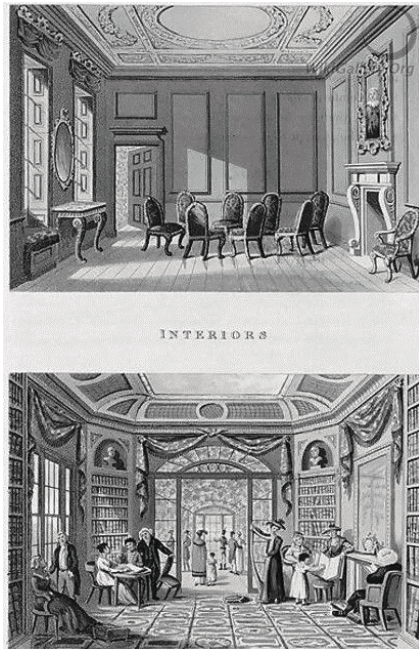
previous questions of social efficacy. In fact, he argues specifically it gives him the opportunity to credibility to do so without moving outside the discipline.

In *The Developed Surface: An Enquiry into the Brief Life of an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Technique* Evans writes:

English interiors of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century, although not within the compass of what is usually regarded as properly serious or significant in architecture, are, I believe, capable of providing what a good deal of material within that orbit has not been able to provide: evidence of strong interactions between things visual and things social...

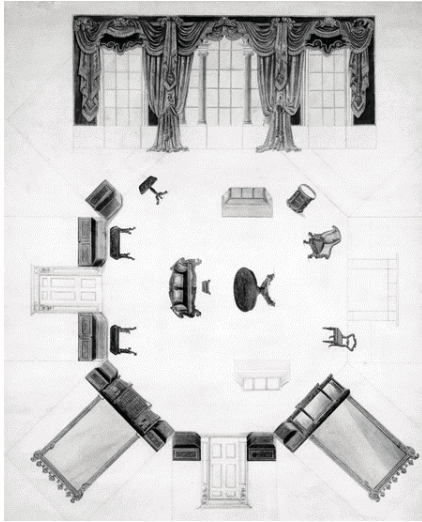
I have attempted, then, to displace the customary foci of interest, considering the interiors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries neither as object of connoisseurship, nor as adumbrations of architectural theory, nor as moral counters for or against an ingratiating profession, but as visible entities within a particular area of human affairs. And within this area of human affairs they are meant to retain their visibility, not lose it. This evasive tactic of mine, trying to write a piece that was neither this, nor that, nor the other, in an effort to conserve a property so easily lost in passage from buildings to words, would have floundered completely were it not for the substitution of an alternative focus: the drawing technique. (Evans 1989, 120-21)

The drawing technique in question is what Evans refers to as the developed surface interior, a set of interior elevations folded from a plan. The drawing technique, Evans argues, produces a heightened sense of interiority and prioritization of the wall as surface. In an effort by designers to elaborate these surfaces, furniture became integrated, if not materially then graphically, into the surface of the wall. This annular distribution of furniture, he suggests, abets the parlor's custom of matrimonial scrutiny. As evidence, Evans cites landscape designer Humphrey Repton's painting "The Old Cedar Parlour and the Modern Living Room."



**Figure 6:** Left: "The Old Cedar Parlour and the Modern Living Room." Source: (Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening 1816),

The image shows an abandoned ring of chairs juxtaposed by a vibrant set of minor constellations of furniture. Again, Evans uses a fictional representation, the imagined rendering of the modern living room, paired with self-consciously architectural drawings, to constitute a type of evidence reminiscent of *Figures, Doors and Passages*. The methodological evolution, however, binds fictions more intricately to the architectural representations.



**Figure 7:** Developed surface drawing by Gillows and Co., Design for the furniture and interior decoration of an octagonal room (1806-1831). Source: (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

In the following pages, rather than exclusively pairing fictions with their contemporary architectural plans, Evans uses advertisements and furniture catalogs from the Victoria and Albert Museum. Having implicated the matriarchal hierarchy to the ring of chairs, Evans returns to the drawing technique. This collapse, of fiction/architectural representation and social/geometrical is intentional. By focusing on the drawing technique, as described at the outset of the article, Evans holds all the elements as part of the representation and projects their reality outside the page, regardless of their fictional or factual foundations.

## CONCLUSION

Just as Evans intentionally substitutes the drawing technique as the focus to avoid questions of relevancy and significance, the use of the projective avoids the false dichotomy of fact and fiction. Alongside this analysis of the intentionally fictional could easily be paired actually false in Evans writings (the false reconstruction plan of Raphael's Villa Madama by Percier and Fontaine, or de l'Orme's own false account of his design of the Anet chapel). This, however, obscures the point. Fiction's use as a speculative device should not be marginalized because it is not actual. No projective illustration is (yet) actual. As Evans demonstrates, fiction should be opportuned for its capacity to project architecture's potentials.

Given Evans' conclusion to *Figures, Doors and Passages* and introduction to *The Developed Surface*, it is clear that these potentials should address architecture's social consequence. Although these studies are limited to domestic spaces, and are addressed as historical research, the overt suggestion is to develop forms of representation that project the social life of space. By binding situations and scenarios portrayed in fictions to architectural drawings, Evans argues that although space does not have a causal relationship to human affairs, it is unmistakably contingent.

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