The Language of Forms and the City
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The chapter is about the emergence and meaning of architectural shapes. It analyses architecture in the conceptual framework of language philosophies. Following the innovations of post-structuralist language theory, the system of architectural shapes can be observed as they emerge. This study differentiates the linguistic sets of architecture and the architectural "speech", namely the design process. It presents a hierarchy of the linguistic levels of architecture, starting from the form-words through the architecture-sentences until the spatial stories are secured in the space-text. The last part of the study sketches the linguistic-theoretical approach of architectural narratives.

In searching for conspicuous architectural forms most people treat architecture like a language even non-experts. When theorists discuss architecture they are actually talking about a language of forms. Aldo Rossi writes about architecture specifically as a language; Christopher Alexander also regards architecture as a sample language and almost everyone treated it as such by the 1980s (Rossi 1966: 180-197; Alexander 1979). It is easy to understand this trend as it was the height of the structuralist approach that regarded not just language and literary concepts but also society and ethnography as structures. At its centre was the beautiful vision that the language we use can be interpreted as a complete system with its own internal rules that can be easily understood and described. People who theorized architecture at the time took this approach, suspecting that it would work for architecture as well, that architecture is also a language. They realized that the formal system of architecture is a coherent whole, a world complete in itself, thus it can be viewed as an autonomous phenomenon, with grammatical rules and typologies. However, we must also see that because their thinking was founded on structuralist principles, the language of architecture they discussed was a closed system where the meaning of forms was created through internal correlations. Since then, linguistics and the philosophy of language have moved on towards post-structuralist linguistics, which views language differently. In theory, we can examine the creation of architectural forms as an emerging language. Theorists, however, have not taken this step yet. While the terms language-event, discourse or narrative have been trending for decades in human studies, they have yet to become interpretable in architecture (Ekler 2013).

The difference between structuralism and post-structuralism lies in how the latter can handle the particular relation between language and speech. For structuralism, language was viewed as a fixed set with permanent meanings. The problem was that this cannot easily be linked to speech. Speech is constantly changing: it babbles, puts words together, creating something that eventually floats away. Design is similar, if you will: daydreaming, poetry, unique events. Post-structuralist linguistics puts these sets into a common system with speech, linking the former to linguistic structures, and the latter to language-events. There is structure and there is speech, language and telling. Architecture can be interpreted
very well in this way, it also has a set of forms that are used in creating buildings. The language-event here is design itself that can be viewed as the “telling of architecture”, in the course of which the set of forms is constantly changing along with its meanings. Architectural language is alive only throughout the design process, but this “speech” is preserved in the more permanent form-words and the shapes (houses) created from those - like the spoken speech in written texts.

With the help of Paul Ricoeur you can describe this particular relationship in the interdependence of word and sentence; this can be applied to architecture as well. A window word is valueless in itself, it only says something in a facade sentence. Just like a facade cannot exist in itself, it can only be built from form-words. The set and the telling are dependent on each other. We design architectural sentences and spatial stories from form-words, thus creating language-events, from which the forms return to the “thesaurus”, albeit with slightly modified meaning.

This is how architectural language continuously changes and adapts. The dialectic relationship of
structures and speech, i.e., of the set of architectural forms and the design process, is of fundamental importance. The post-structuralist approach can help describe this (Ricoeur 2010).

The window, the door, the column, the ledge are all form-words. The case of the architectural sentence is even more interesting. The architectural sentence is that which can be drawn. The facade, the cross-section or the blueprint are exactly the amount that we formulate as a sensible unit, therefore it cannot be a coincidence that we depict them on separate drawings. We then create spatial texts and various spatial stories from the architectural sentences. This is how language levels are built upon each other. The house itself is a text developing into a spatial story, and the city is an extremely complex story with intertwined narratives.

Who would deny that the meaning of a form element is determined by its creation? A Doric or Corinthian column does not say much as a picture. You need its etymology as well. To understand the meaning it is essential to know the creation, who created it and when, and how it influences the practice of architecture. Vitruvius writes that Callimachus, the Greek sculptor found an acanthus plant over the grave of a virgin from Corinth, where the wet-nurse of the girl put her basket on a stone atop the acanthus’s root: the weight forced the acanthus to bend into volutes, which delighted Callimachus so much that he sculpted the lovely sight into a column head (Vitruvius 1988: 110-112). And because it was thus created, architects have drawn Corinthian column heads for two thousand years.

This is why it is useful to research historically where new meanings are created: at the beginning of ancient Christianity or at the start of the Renaissance, or in the Roman eras? You only understand Greek temples if you know their origin.

Let us take an example from spoken language. Take the word király (king) for instance. We know that it means a ruler, a leader, someone extraordinary. But the people in the ill-reputed eighth district of Budapest suddenly begin to use it to mean cool, neat, awesome: apparently király is very suitable to express these things for example in rap music. And since in theory every word can have multiple meanings (called polysemic capacity), this does not harm the original meaning of the word király. But we must also recognize that the word király is in competition for the meanings of cool, neat, awesome etc. with other words as well, for example with sirály (seagull), which can also bear multiple meanings used as a metaphor. Although the word sirály is slightly behind, it may still compete for the new meaning of király because of its similar sound, and if I say sirály to you today you will probably suspect that I am not talking about the bird. These are of course metaphors, when we associate a word with a remote and unusual meaning. Like if I look out the window, I see a hot air balloon and I say “There flies a pear”. I project the shape of a small fruit to the idea of that huge flying object in an unexpected, unusual, original way. This is how király and sirály take on new meanings like awesome.

Try this when you design a facade with vertical or horizontal rectangular windows, or even circular ones, and they compete for meanings to be gained from these new positions. You can experience how many different meanings they can take on, and you can see how they appreciate the position they come to have. Linguists call this organized polysemy. Because when the király sound returns to everyday language use, because it has been used for six months in the eighth district, and it is becoming known in the ninth, the word király must decide that, even though it could take on newer meanings, it will remain satisfied with this one new meaning. And the thesaurus will show that the word király means ruler, royalty, and also cool, awesome, i.e. very good in the eighth district slang originated in the 1990s.

Linguists say that almost all basic words are of metaphoric origin. At one point, a given set of sounds, a given form was associated with a meaning, like király with cool in our example.
Deconstructive language philosophy and architecture did nothing but try to reveal this kind of relativism of language, the random association of a form and a meaning. Architecture works the same way. New architectural meanings are ultimately created through the formulation of metaphors, and this regularly means magnification. Wherever we see magnification, there is something new developing.

The headline in Népszabadság about Herzog & de Meuron’s Olympic stadium in Beijing was the following: “The world in the Bird’s Nest” – a strongly exaggerating metaphor. It turned out to be so powerful that it was repeated all over the world, thus adding new meaning to the language of architecture.

A similar exaggerating metaphor in Beijing is the aquatics centre magnifying soap bubbles, which is also spreading. Or the metaphor of the tree structure on Toyo Ito’s TOD’s mall, where magnification also permeates throughout the structure. We could list examples all day. But why do people magnify and why are metaphors even created? Magnification is simpler: if I attach a new form to an architectural situation, it is rarely on scale with buildings so I have to magnify it to scale.

Let me give an example. A female architect student is working at night, she is struck by inspiration and draws a structure made of diamond shapes, which is very similar to the pattern of her stockings. She makes a sketch and a model, and in the morning she goes to the university and shows it to her professors. The whole department rushes together (it is a language-event), it has new words, new language statements. One of them asks, “Is it maybe a bus stop?” No. “It is a dancehall”, tries the second. No. “Market hall, that would work”, says the third, but no. They begin to discuss that the girl said something but what is it about? And the girl replies, “This is a locker room in a dairy factory.” These are the paths from one bathroom to another, etc.
This imaginary example shows that a language-event only says something if it can be identified as meaning, if it justifies itself, so to speak. This is the messiest part of associating meaning. Although it seems to say something, it is uncertain what it says about something. There is always uncertainty in this situation. It is also risky in speech. Linguists call this a language reference, a reference to reality, whether what I say applies to anything in reality or not. According to Chomsky, the creator of generative grammar, we can say an infinite number of sentences, even a three year old child. Sentences no one has ever said before. But we filter out wrong sentences; we don’t even hear them. So a language statement only works if it has a reference, if it says something about something. This is what happens when we design.

If in the end the professors say: “Of course, a locker room, clearly”, then the girl designed something. But the professors may also say: “This is not a locker room as it is, please keep working on it”. Then she will take more references, information from reality, she will work on it, then go in the next day with bubble structures, with spaces connecting like cells, they will say something again. You get the picture. This shows that it is not that easy for meaning to stick to a given language statement. The sudden ideas of metaphors usually make use of this vacuum of meaning. That is where they push in. And this is where the adventure of individual language, the building of a personal mode of expression starts, where through associating meaning you can say novel things or even create new meaning. Of course, it is not easy to go through the eye of a needle.
It is not easy to cite examples until we have talked about spatial narration, about telling spatial stories. Maybe we should take Eisenman’s Santiago de Compostelai cultural centre to see what it is like to consciously handle narration and spatial storytelling, and to create grand poetry from them. Or take Makovecz. This is of course the level of buildings and cities, of multiple narratives, where several spatial stories coexist, often within each other, intertwined. Good architecture cannot be imagined without multiple spatial narratives. Good buildings always have spatial stories projected together.

Eisenman’s Santiago de Compostelai cultural centre

The city is always a scene of accumulated spatial narratives as well, just think of its varying use, the passing of time, not to mention new constructions. Do not make me spell it out: if you build something in an 18th century town in the 20th century, you will have language statements from different origins on top of each other. From a linguistic point of view, these can lead to a great deal of misunderstanding, deceit, mischief and deception, but also to great expressiveness, of course, in the right hands. Eisenman examined this issue when he began to deconstruct the language of architecture to see how it works following Jacques Derrida’s example. In 1986 in Verona he took the city wall (Whiteman 1986), the crossing Roman roads with the street network, Juliet’s residence and the church where she married Romeo in secret, and the cemetery where they died, lifted them out of the structure of the city. He then invented the concept of scaling and reduced or more typically increased their sizes to various scales. He magnified and moved the church, he increased the city wall to a different scale, and created brand new geometrical situations. So he joined the archetypically important forms of Verona. Then he took Shakespeare’s drama and two more Romeo and Juliet plays and their elements. He associated the conflicts and the two families separating the lovers with the Roman crossroads; he matched their love to the network of streets as it connects everything; he paired death with the cemetery and their love with Juliet’s house. He scaled these elements in Verona’s space according to how they appeared in the narrative and structure of the drama. He perfectly put together a complicated, high-level literary narrative and a spatial story that can be devised from it. He placed them into an already multilayer urban network of narratives. He writes that when he drew these magnifications he began to see the meaning of these spatial structures. We can believe him because it is visible how the Roman structure still divides Verona like it did the families of Montague and Capulet. If we studied spatial narration more substantially we would understand
the beauty of this poetic experiment, and we would understand why Péter Eisenman’s significance is epochal.

Storytelling is spectacular even in spoken language. Why do we love stories and films? Why do I have trouble sleeping if I cannot tell someone what happened to me during the day when I get home? We have a compulsion for telling and consuming stories. This is why we have tales, jokes, television, and literature. Human culture is almost exclusively about narration. Telling stories has an interesting nature. In the chaos of time, spoken stories can restore some sort of order. We have to explain the essence of diverse events briefly, effectively and to the point. If we did not structure our days into stories we would not know what is happening to us, where we are, who we are. We learn the world as we tell it, and we are told.

Peter Eisenman: Romeo and Juliet project - The first superposition, the labyrinth and the final superposition
As everyday storytelling creates order out of the chaos of time, so do built spaces in the chaos of space. Since the beginning of human history, people have organized the world around them into spatial stories to give meaning to how they live. This is our spatial narration. Its structure is similar to spoken narratives, except that spaces are the characters in spatial stories, not people. As I move a new situation emerges, a new spatial character appears and joins the story – a door, a new space, a new situation. I move forward in the spatial story, I find lights, colours, materials. These, as personality traits, show the character of spatial actors in the plot, which unravels and ends through walking across these spaces.

The language of spatial stories belongs to everybody, we could not live otherwise. I am afraid the spatial existence of man is a much more serious issue than you would think. It is about conditions you cannot exist without, like when they spin you as a child with your eyes closed, and when you open your eyes you do not know the direction or where you are, and for a moment you lose yourself because you cannot interpret the space around you. Then you can feel the same helplessness. When you sleep abroad and you think in the morning that you are at home, and because everything is in a different place you lose your consciousness for a moment. Because people are linked fundamentally to their spatial narrative, so much so that they must keep saying internally “I am here, I go this way, this is me”. They can only stop for a moment when they are sleeping or drunk, otherwise they keep repeating it. We spend our time awake under the compulsion of spatial narrative, and we instinctively identify the spatial stories put around us, the ones the architects play with, by the way.

Bibliography


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