

*By way of an Introduction: These pages contain individual chapters from my 1990 book, *Postmodern Sophistications*. I have obtained the rights to the essays am making them available separately. The entire text of the book is also available on Research Gate.*

*The underlying aim of this collection of essays was to question the opposition between the Sophists and Plato. That classic dispute has been the model for many discussions of tensions within our society:: on the one hand you have the clever manipulative salesmen who care nothing about truth. On the other hand the rigorous scientific investigation that never quite makes contact with politics. Rootless nihilism vs. naturally grounded values. Anarchy vs. Rules.*

*These essays developed a pragmatic middleground, using ideas from Heidegger and Dewey; in later writings I rely more on Hegel. But the point remains the same: don't listen to the Straussians and others who try to force our thinking (or our politics or art or philosophy) into a blunt opposition between truth-loving traditionalists (Socrates) and flaky relativistic postmoderns (the Sophists). It was not so simple in Greece and it's not so simple today.*

*Part of the book deals with postmodern critiques of rational knowledge, with Lyotard and Habermas on center stage. Their opposition remains relevant, although post-1990 developments in deconstruction and critical theory have widened and deepened the debate. The points made in these essays remain useful, if not complete.*

*The second part of the book deals with architecture, where modern and postmodern staged a public standoff. The word postmodern has now gone out of fashion in architecture. But the earlier use of the term still applies to the attempt to weave historical references back into architectural practices that had been taught to seek formal purity. . I stand by my diagnosis of postmodern architecture as just another modern distance from history, and my argument that that modern*

*architecture's proclaimed distance from history was itself an illusion. We are more embedded in history than the moderns wanted to think, although that embodiment is not as total and restrictive as they imagined for our ancestors.*

*If you find any of these ideas useful, true, provocative, let me know. If you find them absurd or useless airy nothings, I'd still be delighted to learn from your reactions.*

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*This essays asks whether it is really possible to be detached from history.*

## **Chapter 9. Where Do the Architects Live?**

We hear a great deal about local context these days. Even the jet-set creators of signature buildings deliver some words about context before they drop their creations into the midst of cities. Architects flit here and there, checking out the native languages. Perhaps the architects' designs treat this language ironically; perhaps they treat it earnestly. But where do the architects live?

In this chapter I will argue against universalism in architecture, whether modern or postmodern. Changing the modern "no!" against history into the postmodern "let it all in!" solves nothing. The significant move would be to accept *some* languages, some design vocabularies, as *native*, yet without saying that the architect lives in the fixed, bounded space of possibilities we attribute to the traditional, pre-modern mentality.

In the heyday of modernism architectural school often began with a course devised at the Bauhaus, in which the students worked through a series of exercises whose purpose was to make them confront colors, shapes, and materials directly. The students were to learn to deal with colors and materials in a way free from traditional ideas about appropriate design. The course was to liberate the students, to help them begin anew, without historical prejudice, as pure designers confronting pure problems. Thus the

students could help develop that universal design language that modernism sought for the new civilization.

In his theories about modernization Max Weber claimed that any remaining pockets of substantive traditional values were being pushed to the margins of life by the triumphant march of instrumental rationality. The modern movement in architecture made similar claims. There might be external constraints on the new universal culture and its designs, but there were no intrinsic limitations within the new culture itself, since it was not based on prescribed substantive values and social roles.

The modernist universal language has become suspect in recent years, but it is not clear what is supposed to replace it. Almost no one suggests a simple revival of the traditional styles. Instead, we have ironic re-use of traditional materials. This postmodern irony also appears to have no particular shape of its own and no internal limits. It replays modern universalism with the signs reversed. But where do the architects live?

We need to think about the location of the architects, not just about the client's semiotic code or taste culture. What does it mean for the architect to have limits and native languages? A limit is where something ends, but it is also, like a native language, where something begins.

Modernism presupposes that once the self or society has been purified of traditional restriction it will face an unlimited field of possible actions. There may be contingent constraints of many kinds, but in principle our purified vision and action begin afresh with the widest field of possibilities. In contrast I want to assert that history opens only limited possibilities. The architect lives somewhere definite, with his or her own native languages.

At first glance it seems a cliché to say the architect lives in a definite place. There are a host of factors, none of which seem especially dramatic, which locate the architect: her early experience, education, books read, buildings seen, what is current in the profession, what the public will pay for, regional taste, available materials, the quality of local construction skills, and the like. For example, to be an architect in Maine where I live means you are surrounded by the historical presence of northern New England villages and mill towns, several typical styles of wood construction, including plain

farmhouses and shingle style cottages, the cold climate, and other factors all of which are quite different from what might influence an architect working in Atlanta. The Maine architect may sketch a form but decide it was not salable, or that the materials were not available, or that it would not fit in with the rest of the town. We all live somewhere and suffer various influences. So what?

What is at stake is this: could the Maine architect, though in fact limited by various regional factors, in principle access an unlimited field of possible forms and styles? This is the modern (and often the postmodern) claim that presupposes the detached modern self and society.

We need to examine how the architect relates to possibilities. In one sense, this is a very abstract issue. For the architect does not relate to "possibilities;" the architect deals with designs that are acceptable to the client or not, constructible or not, and other practical limitations that cannot be easily joined into some master list of what is "possible."

But the mundane issues hide a deeper question. In deciding what the client could be persuaded to accept, or what shapes the local trades could construct, the architect relates to a certain background. What is the *repertory* from which the recommended form is drawn? What are the limits, if any, of the field of possible forms that the architect works from?

I will explore this question by considering several suggestions. In deciding what is concretely possible the architect might draw from a repertory that consists of all *possible* forms, or all *historical* forms, or all forms the architect has *experienced*. None of these suggestions will prove adequate, but examining them will help us understand about limits to the language of architecture.

#### *Does Architecture Speak a Language?*

Concerning limits, in this and later chapters I will be referring to architectural *languages* and *vocabularies*. Though this is a common way of speaking about architecture, the practice needs some defense. (Cf. Donougho 1987 for a helpful study of the various ways in which architecture might be said to involve a language.) It seems clear that if we define language strictly then architecture does not possess a language. (Though it is also true that in many of its uses language itself is less "language"-like than some philosophers

would have us believe.)

Current discussions about the nature of language mostly center around the structure of sentences and what constitutes their meaning. Architecture contains no sentences; buildings do not combine their parts to make predicative or relational assertions.

Roger Scruton makes this the key to his argument that all talk about architectural languages and vocabularies should be scrapped in favor of talk about conventions and styles (cf. Scruton 1979, and, in reply, Donougho 1987, Rustin 1985).

However, architecture does have something analogous to words, namely the elements in architectural design that stand in mutual contrasts within chains of substitution and combination. For example, consider the classical orders, or the varied modernist types of windows. When a Doric column or a strip window is present, it is experienced as there in place of some other order or window that could have been used. When the user experiences the building in this way the user "understands" the building as one possible expression using a vocabulary or code that is capable of other expressions. This is similar to someone who understands the meaning of a word, or a move in a game, through knowing the other possible words or moves that could have been used.

While architectural elements stand in mutual contrasts that are organized loosely into vocabularies, and they combine in ways guided by conventions, those conventions are not like the strict rules for combining words into sentences. They are more analogous to the flexible rules for combining sentences into paragraphs and texts (cp. Donougho 1987, 62). A column supporting a lintel, or a wall and a window, do not make a sentence that predicates some quality of some object. But such sub-groupings can combine with each other into a whole that has many of the qualities of a text. Like a text, a building makes a separate object that may or may not be a "whole" and that can be analyzed and read in different ways. While a building cannot make one precise point about one object, it can act as a text might in opening up a whole world of activity and meaning. Also, more like a text than a sentence, a building can violate the modes of organization usual for its "genre," though those modes remain present as what has been departed from.

There is no strict separation in architecture between what in sentences might be distinguished as "ungrammaticality" and "semantic impertinence," both of which might be

used in metaphorical moves in Ricoeur's sense of the term. ]

Like linguistic expressions, a building may be a move in many games at once. The choice of architectural vocabulary and the way that vocabulary is handled is also a social and political statement. No language game exists alone, though they all have some independence. We exist as the intersection of many codes and games, at once constrained and constituted by that multiplicity.

Buildings also have an involvement and bodily presence that cannot be captured by speaking about signs and communication systems. Living a building is not like reading a message. Some would take this as severely limiting the use of terms like "language" and "vocabulary" in discussing architecture (cf. Klotz 1988, 420). I would rather say that this points up the mistake in conceiving language as only a matter of signs and communication systems.

#### The Master Language

Consider now the first suggestion mentioned above: in deciding what is feasible in a given context, the architect draws from a repertory consisting of all possible architectural forms. To describe that repertory we might use geometry. Any building occupies a volume; imagine all possible volumes. The task is difficult; there is an uncountably infinite number of shapes a volume could have. Combine these with the similar number of possible surface treatments. Even granting that not all the shapes would be perceptibly different to us and that fewer still would stay upright if built, the number would still be non-denumerably infinite. Such a repertory is un-surveyable, and so useless to us; we need a catalog.

Yet given the aim of making all possible forms available, we cannot use any specific architectural vocabulary to provide a catalog of the possible forms. In terms of the suggestion we are considering, specific architectural vocabularies would present subsets of the larger collection. What we would need is a master language that makes the total set available.

It would seem that geometry should provide the master language. The platonic solids and other simple shapes can be discerned in most constructions; perhaps some suitable geometric language could be devised for the total shape of all buildings. But this

is doubtful; what set of purely geometrical elements would serve equally well to analyze, say, Isozaki's Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (whose decomposition into simpler solids seems straightforward), Hagia Sophia (where the decomposition is ambiguous), a New England farmhouse (where the small deviations from regular shapes are important in the design), and Porre's Cuban Center (where the historical and biological associations overwhelm any purely geometric analysis). A great many abstract geometrical analyses can be applied to these buildings, but it is not clear how we would select *the* basic analysis; there is no one clear canonical decomposition of the total shape suitable for every case. Even if this were possible, such analysis would be more relevant to some buildings than to others.

Other purported master languages have been based on functional analyses. Units such as entrances, walls, stairs, windows, or functions such as entering, supporting, extending, ascending, and so on, have been suggested. Though none of these proposals have been worked out in sufficient detail, they all run into problems. Either the number of basic units multiplies without clear boundaries, or else the language is applied with great difficulty to the variety of styles, periods, and cultures already available. As heuristic methods of analysis such proposals have their merits, but when employed by architects as a supposedly universal language, the proposals merely become more local dialects.

It is certainly possible to point out formal features that show up in virtually all architecture. Symmetry, balance, scale, flow of space, and so on, are present (as affirmed or as denied) in any building. But these formal characteristics do not make a universal vocabulary; they are features that can be exhibited in different ways by different vocabularies. They are analogous not to elements of a vocabulary but to features of a text; texts can be described as balanced or symmetrical no matter in what language they are written.

Those inclined to structuralism have sought another kind of universal language by seeking basic elements from which the various architectural vocabularies might be generated. If one gives up the attempt to find one master vocabulary for architecture (as people gave up the quest to find some basic vocabulary underlying all the languages spoken in the world), one might still seek some kind of elements which while not

themselves vocabulary items still are universally present.

The parallel here is phonetic analysis. For example, aspirated and unaspirated "k" (as in "kick" vs. "skin") are not distinguished in English (they are allophones of one phoneme) but they can be used to differentiate words in ancient Greek or Chinese (there they belong to different phonemes). The linguist searches for basic contrasts in terms of which the phonemes of all languages are constituted: voiced/unvoiced, aspirated/unaspirated, tongue placement positions, and many others. Phonemes of any language can be analyzed into bundles of these contrasts. Though no languages share exactly the same phonemes they all employ the same sub-phonemic contrasts.

Phonetic analysis is astoundingly successful. Attempts to perform the same analysis on the lexical level by finding basic "sememes" behind all words have met with less success. If there were architectural parallels to these kinds of analysis they would not themselves be items in any architect's vocabulary but rather those basic elements from which any vocabulary was constituted. One might imagine perhaps items such as horizontality/verticality or enclosure/openness. Although some analyses of individual styles along these lines have been offered, no convincing universal proposal has been constructed.

Even if successful, such analyses are only useful retrospectively. Phonetic analysis provides analyses of existing sound systems, not a list of all possible languages. We could form such a list by making all possible combinations of the characteristics, but since the list would be produced by exponential multiplication applied twice over (once to generate the phonemes and once to collect them into possible languages) the results would be, while finite in number, inconveniently large. The same difficulty would hamper any proposal to find a usable scheme of elements behind all architectural vocabularies.

There is a still more basic difficulty in the architectural case. The success of phonetic analysis depends on the limited number of ways a stream of air can be modified by our human vocal organs. It would not be possible to analyze with the same concepts the speech of an alien who produced sounds by a tympanum that did not use a stream of air. The primitives of phonetic analysis cannot analyze musical sounds in all their variety. Although there are many constraints on architectural form, the possible variations are not



so constricted as to be likened to the limited possibilities of human speech. They are like the wider possibilities of musical sound.

Another suggestion is to develop a master language from building types (market, church, meeting hall, city office, home, and so on). But types do not form a language. Building types have more independence than words, because they get their identity not only from relations to one another but from reference to our social activities. But our social activities involve too much bricolage for them to fit into a useful master language. New types are invented when the underlying activity changes, as we can see from the efforts of the modern movement to find architectural forms for new industrial and commercial activities that had already developed independently. So no master list of building types is possible.

Thus there seems to be no sense in which we can say that the architect draws concrete possibilities from some repertory that includes all possible architectural forms.

#### Equal Access to History

The second suggestion was to limit the architect's repertory to all historical forms, or at least to all documented historical forms. This suggestion runs into a number of problems. It does not mean much to say that historical forms are available until one has specified a mode of presentation that will make them accessible to the design process. But if there is no master language, no mode of presentation will be sure to present "all" the historical forms. (And would it do justice to those novel forms that enlarge the historical repertory? I will be discussing the enlargement of architect possibilities in a later chapter, so I leave this question aside.)

Even granting for the sake of argument that there is some system for making historical forms available, there are still grave problems. Only if it could all be kept at an equal distance would all history be equally available. But some historical forms are unavailable to us.

It seems strange to claim that some parts of history are unavailable to us. Can't we build any form we know about? We could build a Gothic cathedral, reproduce the temple at Jerusalem, build a ziggurat.

But could we really reproduce the ancient buildings? We could certainly build a

copy of a Gothic cathedral. It would have the same geometrical form. Likely we would not use the same system of construction; it would be very expensive to build the cathedral as they built it, and we are not sure of all the details of the process. But we could make a copy that would look the same. Or would it? Our exact copy would not be in the right place. Even surviving Gothic cathedrals no longer have the same look now that they are embedded in a new society. Even believers must see them differently now. For one thing they no longer dominate the skyline of their cities. Nor are their plazas used in the same way. We cannot live a Gothic cathedral in the old way, because we do not live the life the building originally fitted into. Nor do we have the fertility cults or royal hierarchy to "do" a ziggurat. Religious buildings are the most obvious examples of this lack of fit, but an Indian bazaar, a Greek theater, or a Renaissance piazza would do as well. Our copy would stand in our space, surrounded by our buildings and activities. It would not shape lives in the old way.

There is an additional problem if we try to build in an ancient genre but do not make an exact copy. We may work from documents and surviving buildings, but we cannot be sure we know how to build a new shape that would fit the old rules. It takes an ongoing form of life, Wittgenstein would say, to decide whether a proposed example extends the series or violates the rules. That ongoing community is not available to us. Even when the rules are written down, as in Vitruvius or Alberti, there still needs to be a community to decide what counts as following the rules.

These are limits we cannot will or create away. We have no equal access to history. On the other hand, we are not imprisoned within fixed limits; we can envision other forms of life, but we cannot on our own make the decisions such a community might enact.

My argument so far has presupposed that we want access to history that will allow us to continue the past. What if we gave up the ideal of continuity, paid no attention to how the past understood or analyzed their forms, broke historical forms into parts in any way we chose, and used those parts in our current ironic play and parody? Then would not history be equally available, with all its distances abolished?

This would be postmodernism with a vengeance (a vengeance against time, as Nietzsche would say), replacing any hermeneutical ideal of continuity or understanding

with the parodic manipulation of text fragments. But whatever the success of this in literary art, it cannot succeed in architecture, since buildings are to fit into ongoing activities. If the architect's dealings with past forms were as free of the need to understand the past as the parody method suggests, then there would be no need to deal with the past at all. One might as well use a random number table to generate the forms, but randomness abolishes parody.

If the past becomes *only* a repertory of abstract shape and building fragments, it is true that we are freed from the obligation to understand it, but neither is there any longer a second level of meaning to play with. Unless the fragments of historical forms carry *some* understanding of their use in their home environment, they cannot be twisted to produce parody or irony. The composition becomes a flat assemblage with no interaction between meanings. Parodic use requires understanding. But if any understanding of the historical forms of life is required, then there is no equal access to history.

#### Vocabularies and Memories

Our third suggestion is that the repertory that forms the background of the architect's work is simply those forms and styles that the architect has encountered. In some sense this has to be correct, but how does the architect relate to those possibilities?

Imagine an assiduous architect who has photographed every angle of every building he or she has ever seen, has kept a copy of every architectural journal and photocopied every picture in every book he or she has read. This architect's memory of buildings and types is available; it can be surveyed and cross-indexed. Is that archive the field of forms the architect works from? No, for we would have to add the architect's dreams, reveries, the flitting dance of possibilities as the pencil hovers. Even if there were some way to catch all these forms, how would we organize them? Any order we come up with is unstable, for tomorrow the architect might see the memories in a new light. It happens in literature: Joyce changes the way we read Virgil. It happens in architecture: Venturi makes us see Luytens again, Gaudi becomes important and old memories are rearranged. The past, even the personally experienced past, does not stay fixed enough to provide a secure base.

Architectural possibilities do not line up neatly for inspection, and there is no

algorithm that will generate them in a surveyable order. Whether we are talking about abstractly possible forms, historically realized forms, or personally experienced forms, the architect needs some mode of organization and presentation to define a useful repertory. The architect needs a vocabulary that generates a set of basic forms or types and suggests ways of combining and decomposing them.

I have been arguing that the architect cannot relate to possible forms without a vocabulary, for only by mutual contrast are possibilities made definite. Yet no architect today knows only one vocabulary. Again we can ask where the architect lives: if I can build in five vocabularies where am I? hovering over them in empty space? No, for once again there is no equal access; there are relative differences in availability. There will be saliences and distances, with some styles or vocabularies taking a foreground position.

These differences of availability are not an unimportant by-product; they are part of what allows there to be a repertory of styles. There are multiple causes of such saliences and distances, and of the particular axes along which the contrasts run. Few of them are matters over which the architect has much control. And if the architect deliberately goes against the currently salient vocabularies, the desired effect will depend on the accepted configuration retaining its hold.

Relations of contrast among styles and vocabularies provide meaning. Speaking of the classic orders, Jencks quotes Gombrich's point that "within the medium at the architects' disposal, Doric is clearly more virile than Corinthian" (Jencks 1977, 118). The orders exist as orders by standing in relations to one another along a variety of axes. But, as Jencks also points out, the intrusion of a new style (the Gothic-Hindu as Nash used it) disrupts the relations and changes the relative positions of the styles along the same axes (72).

There must be a limited number of salient styles or vocabularies related along various accepted axes of contrast. If there were an indefinite plurality of styles and none were particularly salient as the highest in this or that quality, then the problems we saw earlier with the suggestions about all possible forms would recur on this level. Without sets of differences there are no meanings. It is true that the notion of fixed meanings may need deconstructive therapy, but that will not mush all styles together into some vague identity.

Such a mash of styles is where some fear postmodern architecture is leading us. This is rightly condemned even as we admit that we have it always with us. Just as no language can avoid the possibility of flabby metaphors, so no configuration of styles can avoid the possibility of bland mixtures. But this does not mean that above the various styles there is some universal platform from which the architect can perform the mixtures well or badly. I have been arguing that the architect does not float freely over an unlimited field of possibilities but must live somewhere within a limited configuration of styles and vocabularies. A universalism that banishes history for the sake of the master language fails, as does a universalism that declares ironic equal access to all history.

The plurality of architectural vocabularies means that we should suspect claims to universality, but also that we should use what historical contrasts and continuities we do find, since these are all there is to architectural language. If we cannot base ourselves on some master vocabulary, neither can we wish away what meanings are already embodied in our ongoing local practices. That is what the modern movement tried and failed to do.

This conclusion may seem to suggest we are in the imagined situation of the premodern builder imprisoned within a small compass of styles, without the self-consciousness we value so highly. How do we avoid being imprisoned by our limits? In the following chapters I examine how we extend our limits and criticize ourselves.