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## Reading Diacritical Marks: Experience, the Body and Architectural Drawing

Antony Moulis  
Department of Architecture  
University of Queensland

*Some marks in architectural drawings serve a diacritical function. The marks are those which extend across spaces in plan views, as if testing, or commentating upon, possible paths of travel through space. These marks, I propose, are diacritical in that they form the limit of what is coded by the drawing by pointing to the body and indicating the body's experience of space. It is evident, in considering these marks more closely, that they are held in a particular kind of opposition to orthographic marks in drawing. I use the work of Louis Marin on narratives of language and the body to build an argument about how these orthographic marks and diacritical marks come to be "opposed". In doing so, I show another order of the body in architectural drawing beyond the traditional "building as body" metaphor. More than this, I seek to show how the privileging of experience in modernist practice can be read at the level of a design technique.*

In text, a diacritical mark, made above or below a written letter, indicates how a letter is translated into speech. By indicating the pronunciation of text, diacritical marks form the limit of what is coded by the text, while at the same time, pointing to where the body is introduced into signification. Such marks also establish a hierarchy of the text, which indicates how the text is "deferred to" or "authenticated in" speech. Consideration of the function of diacritical marks in text, and the way they indicate and implicate the body, led me to consider marks in architectural drawings that have a comparable function.<sup>1</sup> The marks I am referring to are those which extend across spaces in plan views, as if testing possible paths of travel through space. These are generally loose freehand lines having the appearance of being drawn over a finished and ruled orthographic drawing. The function of the marks is to indicate how the content of the drawing "translates" into a building to be experienced. It is in this sense that the marks might be described as "diacritical" in that they form the limit of what is coded by the drawing by pointing to the body, and indicating the body's experience of space. As diacritical marks in text characterise the body in terms of a performance (voice) so the diacritical mark in an architectural drawing characterises the body in terms of a performance (of movement through architectural space). In each case the body is identified by a graphic form and it becomes the locus of effects which can also be read graphically.

Diacritical marks in architectural drawing have an important role in design practice. They facilitate reflection on the content of a plan drawing and set up the possibility of distinguishing the effect of one plan arrangement from others. Diacritical marks also indicate a conceptual understanding that architects have of their drawings; that these drawings serve to represent spaces that will be occupied in the ways shown. Indeed, in modernist design practice, these marks indicate a priority given to a particular kind of thinking about the experience of space and movement.<sup>2</sup> And yet diacritical marks have been treated as a ubiquitous aspect of architectural practice. Where those marks are described, they are simply seen as casual or incidental; a broad indication of the fact that the architect is thinking about the experience of space as he or she designs.<sup>3</sup> To entirely assume the practice of using these marks in architectural drawing begs some important theoretical questions. How exactly do these marks function? What can they reveal about the formation of the body and experience in the practice of architectural drawing? In this paper I

<sup>1</sup> John Macarthur suggested the term diacritical to me whilst in discussion of some research I have been doing into aspects of architectural plan form in the work of the modernist architect Le Corbusier.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Jarzombek describes the concept of experience in modernist aesthetic discourse as one which attempts to be trans-historical and a-theoretical in claiming experience as a universalising concept. See Mark Jarzombek, "De-Scribing the Language of Looking: Wolffin and the History of Aesthetic Experientialism", *Assemblage*, 23 (1994): pp 28-69.

<sup>3</sup> See Iain Fraser and Rod Hemmi, *Envisioning Architecture: An Analysis of Drawing*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994, p 40.

will consider these questions, firstly, by looking at a more conventional conceptualisation of the body by architectural lines and, secondly, by considering how we might theorise diacritical marks as "forming" the body in architectural drawing.

If we think about the relationship between the body and lines in architectural drawing then, in conventional terms, we think about the "building as body" metaphor. The classical orders of architecture were, of course, understood in relation to a set of bodies—with a particular type of body assigned to each of the types of columns.<sup>4</sup> If the interlocutor of this relationship between building and the body was geometry, then its facilitator was line—the graphic mark which provided the means of proposing and verifying the proportions of the body so they might be applied to buildings. While the system of geometric proportion could establish a set of relations between buildings and the body, that system could also exhibit a certain independence from both; an independence made evident through the deployment of line as a visually distinct overlay.<sup>5</sup> In this way the deployment of line enabled the "derivation" of geometry from the body and yet also its transfer—from the body to the column, to the parts of the building, to the plan and so on.

More recently however, the "building as body" metaphor has been understood to harbour a greater complexity. The means of re-evaluating this metaphor has proceeded, to some extent, through a further examination of the conceptualisation of the line in architectural practice; an examination which shows how line reveals and reinforces critical assumptions of architectural practice. Consequently, the use of line by architects can be seen as a means for *determining* the traits of the body rather than a means to simply and straightforwardly *record them*. Thus an architecturalised body is produced by the attribution of certain values and possibilities to the body.

Catherine Ingraham describes the relation of concepts of the body and architectural lines as a residual effect of orthographic practice.<sup>6</sup> According to Ingraham, the use of orthographic practice by architects leads architecture to "directly contend with the problem of inhabiting the space of linear geometries".<sup>7</sup> Further to this she notes that:

"Architecture... must construct the inhabiting subject along geometric lines. To do this, of course, the subject undergoes a certain orthogonal stylization. As the Vitruvian man or Le Corbusier's modular have shown us, this architecturalizing of the subject often takes the form of inscribing in, or measuring the body against, geometric space."<sup>8</sup>

Architects use linear geometries and they construct the architectural subject in similar terms. As Ingraham points out, this has the effect of imparting a precise kind of value to the body out of the terms of architectural practice. It is not far to go from the geometrically stylised body suggested by Ingraham to an understanding of other aspects of the stylisation of the body that are evident through the architect's deployment of lines (diacritical marks providing the example that I will pursue here). I have already suggested that diacritical marks reveal a body that is characterised with respect to its experience of movement in space. Here, however, I will argue that these marks do more than simply "form" the body by way of a line. In particular I will show how these marks raise broader questions about technique and its theorisation in architectural drawing. A crucial aspect of diacritical marks as technique is the ultimate priority the marks give to the body's experience of space. This priority is one that is read from a drawing and yet, more critically, it is priority that is theorised in the very act of marking a line or "path" upon the drawing surface.

<sup>4</sup> For an historical account of the relations between the order of the body and architecture see Joseph Rykwert, *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> The use of line to create visually distinct proportional overlays was a feature of early 20th century studies of geometry. For example, see Ghyka, Matila, *The Geometry of Art and Life*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Ingraham, "Lines and Linearity: Problems in Architectural Theory", in Andrea Kahn (ed), *Drawing/Building/Text: Essays in Architectural Theory*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991, pp 63-84.

<sup>7</sup> Ingraham, "Lines and Linearity", p 81.

<sup>8</sup> Ingraham, "Lines and Linearity", p 81.

In order to read diacritical marks in this way I first require some tools for my analysis, and here I will make reference to the work of Louis Marin on narratives of language and the body.<sup>9</sup> His work concerns the way in which the body is structured or represented through text (and these concerns have certain parallels to my concern with the body as structured in architectural drawing as I will later show).

The object of Marin's analysis, that will occupy me here, is one of Aesop's fables—the story of Aesop's own beginnings as a storyteller. Briefly, the story unfolds as follows. Aesop is born deformed and mute and must take work as a servant to secure his keep. Despite these physical misfortunes he is possessed of an agile mind. One-day Aesop's master returns home bearing some prized figs. He puts the figs aside and instructs his chief servant, Agathopus, to bring them to him later after his bath. When Aesop enters the house, Agathopus and his friends decide to consume the figs themselves and blame Aesop for their disappearance (they consider Aesop a fool who is incapable of defending himself against their accusations). When the master demands an explanation of the disappearance of the figs and Aesop is accused he throws himself at the feet of his Master to stay his punishment. Aesop then drinks some warm water and induces himself to vomit (all that re-appears is, of course, the water). When Aesop indicates that his accusers do the same, and repeat his action of vomiting the contents of their stomachs, the true culprits are finally revealed.

Marin's interest in analysing this particular fable concerns the way in which a mute body (a body without speech) is able to come into language through gesture. What is at issue for Marin with this mute body come into language is the relation of power and language. Understanding this relation, in the terms set out in this story, is, for Marin, a means of gaining insight into the way a truth-telling fable is constructed. For Marin the mute body of Aesop is distinctly animal-like. It is one that "simulates a symbolic regression to the level of instinct".<sup>10</sup> And yet what is compelling about the story that Aesop's animal body constitutes is that it cannot be outdone by language. Through gesture, the animal body is able to construct a fundament or truth greater than that of language, and in observing this, Marin is suggesting parallels between the construction of this animal body in the fable and the representation or structure of fable narratives.

So how is it that Marin sees this mute body come into language? And how is that body structured as a gesture? Firstly, according to Marin, in a limited form, that is, in bringing a halt in that march of events, which will lead inevitably to Aesop's punishment. This gesture is the supplication of Aesop before his master, a gesture which defers the established narrative of events in favour of a contingent moment. According to Marin this contingent moment allows a space to develop in which other narratives might form, creating "a place or stage where a game can be played out".<sup>11</sup> The place or stage of this game is Aesop's body, which is able to form a narrative that is tangential to the already established narrative of events.<sup>12</sup>

For Marin what is revealed at this point is a contest between the capacity of both language and gesture to tell the truth. At first, it is language, which has the upper hand, and thus power resides with Aesop's accusers. The power of language is established discursively. Language, as Marin explains, is "the discourse of the strong"<sup>13</sup> and its qualities are representational and monologic. It is representational in that it speaks for past events (of things that have disappeared). It is monologic in that it constitutes the only trace of these past events and thus its claims must go uncontested. Language thus harbours the possibility of deception because there is no test of its claim to truth regarding the witnessing of things now absent or disappeared. Aesop, the mute, cannot enter into language and he is powerless without it.

And yet Aesop is able to form a counter narrative conjured out of the gestures of his body. This narrative of gestures can also be explained discursively. In short, Marin describes Aesop's gestures as constituting

<sup>9</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", in his *Food for Thought*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp 44-54.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 44.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 46.

<sup>12</sup> Marin makes the observation that this gesture of deferral, as a beginning of the fable, is quite unlike an indexical gesture of pointing that might be associated with such a beginning. See Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 46.

<sup>13</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 47.

"a produced body",<sup>14</sup> one that is formed by acting out through instinctive gestures. Chief among these gestures is Aesop's staging of the act of vomiting; a gesture he performs for his master in order to prove his innocence. Thus, for Marin, "the body is made to perform or play"<sup>15</sup> and this performance is critical because it constitutes a counter narrative to the already established narrative of events. After this staged action of the body comes another gesture, one of indication. Aesop signals towards his accusers to repeat his act. At this point, as Marin puts it, the accusers "are to repeat his (Aesop's) produced body".<sup>16</sup> As a result it is Aesop who has assumed a type of mastery over others through the conduct of a game or play with them. As Marin states, "(Aesop's) staged body becomes the stage upon which the body of others must perform".<sup>17</sup>

The body and its gestures have produced an evident truth, more powerful than the truths provided by means of language. It is as if the body is able to constitute an original truth, before or beyond language, in a way that is total and ever present. And yet for Marin the body does not constitute a meta-discourse in these terms. In the end this undoing of language (its power) is not because of a natural superiority of the body in truth telling. Rather it is to do with a particular relation of the body and language—of the possibility that both tell stories but that the story told by the body is capable of inverting the logic of the original story told in language. For Marin, the body's claim to a "superior truth" over language is constituted through this tactic of inversion.

I will now return to a more detailed discussion of diacritical marks in architectural drawing using Marin's work as a framework for my analysis. To begin I will suggest that we can think of orthographic marks in architectural drawing as the "language" by which architectural narratives are constituted. Secondly, I will suggest that diacritical marks (those lines in drawing which describe the spectator's encounter with building) fall out with this conventional narrative "language" and yet those marks are able to constitute counter narratives in similar terms to those described by Marin.

Orthographic conventions dominate architectural drawing practice and, as a consequence, it is seen that the authority of drawing is given over to the presentation of buildings as objective form. Diacritical marks, pointing as they do to the subjective affect of form, would seem secondary or incidental by comparison. And yet diacritical marks have an extraordinary power in drawing. Their power is to indicate a "truth" about architectural space (of embodied experience), which is counter to the "truth" of objective form presented in the orthographic views of a building. Accordingly, the diacritical mark is an "intuitive" witness of architectural space, and it would have us recognise how highly abstracted (and "opposed" to our experience) is the orthographic view of space which is set out by a plan. And yet I would argue that the function of diacritical marks is not to point to a "natural" opposition of experience to the plan, rather diacritical marks provide a useful means to conceptualise the precise relation between experience and the plan. Indeed, the technique of using diacritical marks is crucial for those architects who design for subjective effects. In order to understand how a precise relation between experience and the plan is organised by the architect through this technique it is useful to closely examine how we read the act of making orthographic marks and diacritical marks, in turn.

If we think of the architect's process of making an orthographic design drawing, such as a plan, then we could acknowledge that the process entails the making of a series of marks by the architect, which will have been produced over time and in a certain order. We could also acknowledge that, for the architect, the making of each new mark relies to some extent on the process of interpreting the marks made just prior to it. This process of interpretation might lead to a series of changes, deletions and additions in the drawing. The architect's work on a drawing is ongoing, and thus we could say that information about a

<sup>14</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 49.

<sup>15</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 49.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 50.

<sup>17</sup> Louis Marin, "The Fabulous Animal", p 50.



design is created through the drawing activity of the architect rather than in a single instant (or entirely prior to drawing).<sup>18</sup>

And yet when we *read* an architectural design drawing, such as a plan, we do not incorporate this time of making into our reading of it nor do we find particular value in knowing in which order the lines were executed (to know in minutes what lines were added or subtracted). We set aside a reading of drawing as a set of activities and discrete markings and instead we interpret the lines of the plan as pertaining to a complete design layout which, theoretically speaking at least, we apprehend instantly. Thus the orthographic lines that we see appear to speak with authority of a design which is *finalised* and already a given. This is despite the fact that the design drawing is, practically speaking, incomplete and might be amended by the architect at any time in the future.

The way that orthographic marks in drawing speak so authoritatively and truthfully of the building might be likened to the way that Aesop's accusers rely on the structuring of language in making their claims. As Marin points out, what is critical to their claims is the structuring of language in representational and monologic terms. Orthographic marks in architectural drawing can be seen as similarly structured. Thus orthographic marks are representational in that they appear to speak at once of a design, which is already given (they attest to the truth of a building's form that we might build authoritatively from the drawing). Orthographic marks are monologic because the reading of an architect's drawings is assumed to proceed in terms of orthographic conventions. Thus, in theoretical terms, there is no legitimate place here for other kinds of reading that could be as authoritative.

And yet there is another kind of authority in architectural drawing, one which is set out by way of diacritical marks. Diacritical marks might be similar to orthographic marks, in that they are created through gesture and over time, and yet we do not look past the gestural qualities of diacritical marks when we come to read the line (as is the case with orthographic marks). Indeed, the performance of the body, which produces the diacritical mark, remains critical to our reading of them. By seeing the gesture, in the form of the mark, we envisage the architect situated in a spatial and bodily relationship to the drawing. In this regard the mark is a performance, and it bears witness to an act of the architect. What then is the effect of reading this performance?

Most importantly diacritical marks appear to interrupt the "givenness" of a plan drawing by presenting a counter narrative in relation to the plan view. By way of these marks there appears to be an alternative way of reading the plan and seeing what it denotes. Where the diacritical mark is used as a test of a plan, its power to produce a counter-narrative within the plan is realised. This power is to overturn or amend the existing orthographically presented arrangement of the plan where that plan fails the test performed by the diacritical mark. In their use diacritical marks can act as arbiters of the plan and thus they present a superior "truth" to an orthographic one.

We can also observe how the diacritical mark clearly implicates another body apart from that of the architect. Within the conceptual formation offered by the drawing the architect imagines that their gesture is repeated, in bodily form, by those who enter and inhabit their building. Borrowing from Marin we could say that *the staged body of the architect becomes the stage upon which the body of others must perform*. And further to this we could say that *the architect's body is the place or stage where a game is set out*.

And yet what is the structuring of this game? We need to look carefully to appreciate the conceptual subtleties of the architect's gesture and the game it orchestrates.

Firstly we need to appreciate that the action of the architect's body is indeed a performance (it is a deliberate orchestrated act rather than a natural one). The architect does not need to make this mark (we could take it as self evident that passage is possible at the points where diacritical marks are shown). Secondly, we need to appreciate that the repeat of this performance, the imagined action of the spectator's body in moving through and experiencing space, is also staged; determined or indicated by the line.

<sup>18</sup> This way of understanding the architect's processes in creating a design drawing (as a sequence of mark and interpretation) is presented by Daniel Herbert in his analysis of cognitive process and architectural drawing. See Daniel Herbert, *Architectural Study Drawings*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993), 54-64.

Might we assume that the action of forming diacritical marks is more than this game? That this action indeed convenes a meta-narrative indicating the truth of our experience of space, which here is referred to in an architect's drawing? Using Marin we can avoid this all-embracing claim and see another possibility, namely, that the truth of our experience of space as understood by architects is constructed as a formulation within drawing. As we saw from the work of the Marin, the body is not only capable of forming its own narratives it might also, in tactical terms, invert the logic of other dominant narratives. Thus the diacritical mark, signifying the body, is able to tell a story with a particular potential—that potential, as we have seen, is to overturn the orthographic narrative of drawing by force of its own particular narrative construction.

And yet we can go further in describing the experience referred to by diacritical marks as constructed, rather than natural or somehow freely acquired, by observing how these marks are highly determining in what they set out. Thus, in the same way that an accent over a letter in text instructs the mouth into a particular shape to produce the correct sound so the gesture line in the plan points towards the correct way to experience *this* architecture. Consequently, a diacritical mark does not denote a free or natural appropriation of architectural space by the body, rather it points to a particular positioning of the body with regard to its reception of architectural space. As a result, diacritical marks make for a very exacting game in relating the experience of the body to architecture.

In the end what is significant about diacritical marks is the way that they couch certain architectural assumptions about the body and experience as a formulation in architectural drawing. As I have shown, this formulation provides a remarkable possibility to the architect. It offers a means for the architect to confirm a discourse about experience and the body in the very action of orchestrating that experience. Thus, through this subtle formulation in drawing, and by the action of their own bodies, architects are able to reflect back to themselves the "truth" of the body's experience of building as a type of game—apparently secure in the knowledge that the building, and its experience, will be built according to plan.