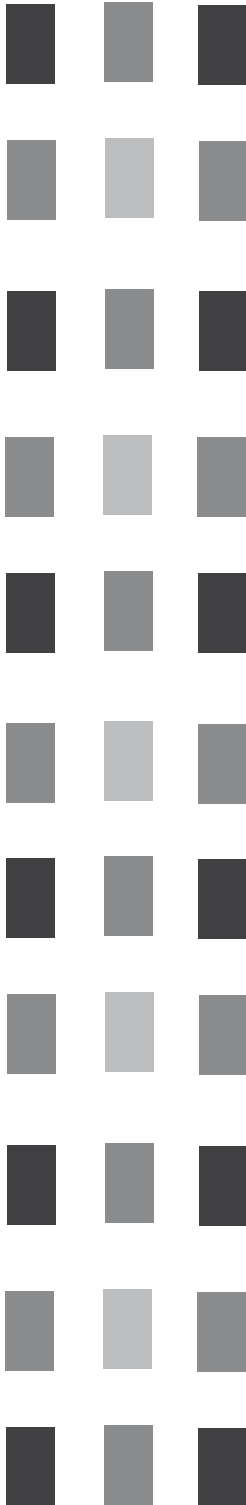


The Empire of Language

Adrian Forty



Not long ago, Mario Carpo suggested to me that language's capacity to describe architecture has expanded greatly over time. Is this really so? Can we say more about works of architecture than someone in the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries could ever have said or thought? If this is so, what are the consequences for architecture? Is architecture better or worse off as a result?

Let us start with the obvious, because the obvious is sometimes overlooked: architecture is not a single medium activity. Since Alberti's day, architecture as a practice has relied on at least three different media, drawing, language (both spoken and written), and building. Although there has been more or less continuous disagreement as to which of these media is the most purely 'architectural', there is not much doubt that the activity of architecture as we know it would not exist were it not for the continued combined operation of all these three media together. This situation, of being a multiple media activity, does at times produce a certain amount of tension, because while these different media do act together, they are also rivals. Language, drawing and building all have features of their own – one could say that each has a different agenda – and while most of the time, they get along together, there are certain ways in which they refuse to be subordinated to one another. Language refuses to play drawing's game, and drawing refuses to play building's game. These moments of discord have caused people to sometimes question whether one or another of the media really belongs to architecture at all – and of the three media, the one that has most often been regarded as suspect, as non-architectural, is language. While some commentators have taken a broadly inclusive view, others have wanted to exclude particular media, and most often it is language that is excluded. A good example of the inclusive view was the English seventeenth century diarist and architectural writer John Evelyn. Evelyn said that the art of architecture was embodied in four persons. First of all there was the 'architectus ingenio', the superintending architect, the man of ideas, knowledgeable about the history of architecture, skilled in geometry and drawing techniques, and familiar with law, medicine, optics and so on. This figure is the equivalent of our modern day notion of the 'architect'. Secondly there was the 'architectus sumptuarius' – the person with the money, the patron, "with a full and overflowing purse" as Evelyn describes him. Thirdly there was the 'architectus manuarium', the craftsman who was to execute the work. And fourthly there was the 'architectus verborum', the architect of words, skilled in the craft of language, whose task it was to talk and write about the work and to interpret it to others.¹ But against Evelyn's inclusive perso-

nification of architecture, there have always been others who have resisted the inclusion of language within the company of the others. This disagreement is a normal, recurring feature of architecture, and is the result of architecture's being made up of different media.

Of the different media, language is the one that is most threatening, because language is the most mobile, the one that most wants to insinuate itself everywhere, the one with the most ambition to bring everything under its domain. Considered as media, language is fast, whereas drawing is slow, and building even slower still.

For language, the greatest challenge is the unutterable; language always aspires to speak about what cannot, or has not yet been said. Language users are always tantalised by the possibility of reaching into, and verbalising depths of experience that have hitherto resisted the incursions of language. The conquest of the unspeakable is language's greatest, perhaps one might say, its only ambition. From the point of view of other media, language poses a threat to them, because language always wants to take over and to articulate their own particular modes. Drawing, on the other hand, or photography, are quite content to leave alone areas of experience beyond their immediate domain, they do not have ambitions beyond their own medium; but language cannot resist the temptation to try to speak about everything. It is this, the imperialism of language, that makes it seem a threat. There's a fear that if language should come along and explain everything about a work of architecture, then architecture would lose its reason for existence. All the arts, not only architecture, are at a similar risk from language – as Heinrich Wölfflin wrote, "If it were possible to express in words the deepest content or idea of a work of art, art itself would be superfluous, and all buildings, statues and paintings could have remained unbuilt, unfashioned and unpainted"². There must, it seems, always be something in any work of art that is reserved from language, that is out of language's reach.

But if this is a problem for all the arts, it is especially acute for architecture, because of architecture being a multiple media practice. In architecture, the different media of which it is made up are to an extent hostile to each other, and language in particular is always seeking opportunities to take over and describe the emotions aroused by the other media. In other words, architecture as it has existed since the Renaissance is in a state of permanent instability. Now if we accept that language is always trying to get a hold of the territory controlled by other media, and sometimes it is successful in those attempts, then its gains must be at the expense of the other media. As language's empire grows, so it would seem, the other

empires should shrink. In fact though, this has not happened – drawing and building have managed to retain their own autonomy, but they do it by innovating, by producing new work that is, initially at least, out of language's reach. Language may be voracious, but it is possible for architects to project new things that, at least for a time, defy verbal description or explanation.

There is a second aspect of language's imperialism and that is that its descriptive capacity is always increasing, always expanding. New words are created, new metaphors are made, faster than old ones are discarded. It is in the nature of language users to be always looking for new ways of saying things, and of finding ways to describe previously undescribed experiences. Language does not stand still, it needs always to be on the move into unoccupied territories. As new words and metaphors are created, they pile up on top of the old ones, but the old ones still remain available in our stock of vocabulary. It takes much longer for discarded words and phrases to die out than it does for new ones to be introduced – and the result is a constant expansion of the language available to speakers. This process, the second aspect of the imperialism of language, occurs as language is always extending into new territories of experience, while only very slowly, if at all, does it retreat from its previous dominions.

One response to language's imperialism, the characteristic response of the mid-twentieth century architect, was open war on language. Remarks like Mies van der Rohe's "Build, don't talk" are pretty common amongst mid-twentieth century architects. Nor was architecture alone in this – there are plenty of examples of studied inarticulacy amongst painters too – like Francis Bacon's remark, "If you can say it, why paint it?". But architecture is denied the luxury of silence: architects have to talk about what they do, they have to explain everything, every corner, every detail, often over and over again, to other architects, to tradesmen, to contractors, to clients, to building inspectors and so on. So even though Mies might dismiss language, the reality was that he could not, and did not. Mies talked just as much as any architect.

If we are to look at the process of linguistic colonization of architecture over the last two hundred years or so, there are really three distinct areas in which language has increased its power. The first is in terms of stylistic classification – the invention of words to describe works with particular stylistic characteristics – gothic, baroque, rococo and so on – were important advances in making it possible to talk about architecture. The second area is in terms of architectural description, of parts of buildings, and particularly of Gothic buildings, which really developed in the early nineteenth century, in Britain with the writers William

Whewell and Robert Willis, in France with Viollet-le-Duc. And the third area is to do with the description of sensations aroused by works of architecture, with the subjective experience of architecture, all of which belongs to the revolution in architectural thought started by Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, and developed by Goethe and his circle. The development and refinement of a terminology for the effects of architecture upon the subject was the achievement of German art history, and of British and American nineteenth century architectural writers. It is really this third category, the development of critical vocabulary that I want to give most attention to, because it is here that there have been the greatest opportunities for verbal innovation. But before I come to this, I'd like to say something about where new words come from. I find it fascinating how new critical words are formed, the way some stick, but others fail.

Alberti, who was the first to develop the modern concept of architecture as a practice that operates through the combination of different media, through writing, building and drawing, and was responsible for what was probably the largest ever single advance of language into the architectural domain, acknowledged the difficulty of casting into words things he wanted to say about buildings. When the existing language failed him, he resorted to metaphors – of a remarkably rich and diverse kind – and when he was stuck for a word, he borrowed from elsewhere. "Words", he writes, "must (...) be invented when those in current use are inadequate; it will be best to draw them from familiar things"³. The example he gives is of the fillet: "We Tuscans call a fillet the narrow band with which maidens bind and dress their hair; and so, if we may, let us call "fillet" the platband that encircles the ends of columns like a hoop". But when it came to the more important of his critical concepts, Alberti did not do what he said and borrow words from familiar things, he coined new ones of his own – lineaments, 'concinntas' – and the result has been confusion amongst his readers in later centuries.

Now, to take an example of the way in which language constantly expands, and rarely retreats, take a simple case, the wall. Alberti, true to his principle that a building is very like an animal, talks about walls as "skin"; and to this metaphor he adds another, that some walls are more like a "shell". These two metaphors have been very durable, but in the nineteenth century two more were introduced. First of all, the veil which is Ruskin's preferred term for the part of the wall between the base and the cornice; Ruskin is very particular about this metaphor, choosing it in preference to the word 'body' because, he says, it is more expressive.⁴ Then, of course, Semper

comes up with the description of a wall as a dressing, or a cladding, the description that is normalised in Otto Wagner's circle. Now the point is that all these metaphors are available to us, the new ones don't drive out the old ones, they co-exist together – the language available for talking about, in this case walls, is enlarged, and never contracts.

Let us look now at the effect a new word can have. The word I want to talk about is 'square'. This word appeared quite suddenly in English, in the early 1660s, to describe a new sort of urban space. The first place to be designated a 'square' was Southampton (now Bloomsbury) Square in London, and the term seems to have been invented by its developer, the Earl of Southampton. John Evelyn records having gone to dine with the Earl at his house (which occupied one side of the square) in 1665, and he noted that the earl "was building a noble Square or Piazza"⁵. Now what is remarkable about this word is that English already had at least eight other words for describing enclosed urban spaces, so why the need for another one? Furthermore, the one that the Earl invented, 'Square' is not a metaphor; nor was it borrowed from another language, for it was entirely unconnected to the words available in other European languages – place, platz, piazza, plaza, praça – all of which share the same common root. Evelyn was conscious of the word's novelty, because he reinforced it by using piazza (which had been in use in England since the 1640s), but little did he know how 'square' would take off. Within about thirty years, 'square' had become the normal word for these sorts of urban enclosures. What is more remarkable, is that many existing spaces, that had been called other things, like yard, close or court were renamed as 'Squares'. The word was infectious, as it took over and displaced other names. Now what is important about this word 'square' is not simply that it gave a name to a new sort of urban space, but that in English it provided a generic term for talking about all urban enclosed spaces, whether or not they are actually square, have four sides, or have gardens in the middle. The word did not drive out the old words, but it introduced, and made possible, a discourse about urban spaces that distinguished between streets and other spaces without tying one down to the actual features or characteristics of any particular place. With 'square' we have a case of the possibilities of architectural discourse being most definitely enlarged.

Now let us take another 'S' word, 'space', and look at the effects of this on architecture. What sets twentieth century architectural discourse apart from that of previous centuries is the availability of the concept of 'space', and of a language for talking about it. Whether we read what has been written about twentieth century architecture, or what was written about past architecture during

the twentieth century, it is the command of this new language of space that makes it so utterly different. Sir John Soane may be described as "an architect of space and light", to quote the title of the recent exhibition, but unfortunately Soane, poor fellow, himself lacked the means to talk about space in his or anybody else's work. The entry of the language of space into architecture was really a late effect of the revolution in aesthetics brought about in the eighteenth century by, initially, Edmund Burke. Burke proposed that the causes of beauty do not lie in things themselves, but in our perceptions of them, and that therefore it was in our sensations that we should look for the aesthetic. For Burke, aesthetic effects are strongest when they go straight to our emotions, without passing through our intellect: "beauty demands no assistance from our reasoning"⁶, he writes. As developed by Kant and the philosophers and writers around Goethe, the field of philosophical aesthetics was to produce an account of the sensations produced by works of art. 'Space', although it had been identified by Kant as part of the apparatus of perception, only made its arrival into aesthetics in the 1890s; the writings of Hildebrand, Schmarsow and Lipps in the 1890s all variously contributed to the notion of 'spatiality', the mind's ability to perceive space, as what it is that observers are uniquely able to experience in architecture. Space fulfilled a prime requirement for architectural aesthetic experience, because it is not mediated by anything but the built work itself, and because it requires no process of rational analysis to appreciate it; these have been its recurring attractions for architects and critics – in the 1970s, Bernard Tschumi writes about space in terms that Burke would have entirely approved of: "Space is real, for it seems to affect my senses long before my reason"⁷.

Now the curious thing about 'space' is that there was a fully developed vocabulary for 'spatiality', and a fairly sophisticated analysis of past architecture in terms of spatiality before there appeared, in the 1920s, a modern architecture of space. It is a rare case of language having arrived there first, and of a discourse existing before the work created the effects that were to be described. And although architects rapidly took over 'space' as the purest, most irreducible property of architecture, and with the results that are familiar to us, made much of it, nonetheless 'space' had one fatal shortcoming. 'Space' was easy to talk about, too easy to talk about, it came with a ready-made language, from philosophy, from aesthetics, from mathematics. Already in 1928, before any of the great works of the new 'spatial' architecture had even been built, there were, according to Moholy-Nagy, forty-four differently named kinds of space known to criticism. And if there

were forty-four in 1928, there must be double that number now. Despite its characteristic of appealing directly to the aesthetic faculties of the mind, 'space' lent itself too easily to linguistic elaboration. The reasons for 'space's' fall from grace in late twentieth century architecture are many and various, but amongst them, we should include its verbal origins.

The last twenty years have seen a rapid expansion in the capacity of language to discuss all artistic fields, not just architecture. This has been in part because of the growth of critical theory, and particularly that other feature of the empire of language, that is the speed and ease with which linguistic theory made its way into every branch of criticism. But the other thing that has contributed to the expansion of language has been psychoanalysis. As a practice that puts all its faith into language, psycho-analysis, 'the talking cure', aims to bring all human emotions and all emotional processes under the dominion of language; psycho-analysis has had obvious appeal to the study of aesthetics – and has provided it with a whole new vocabulary – the uncanny, the abject, sublimation and so on. Now while access to this whole new vocabulary to describe aesthetic responses has been of great benefit to architecture, it has also, like all advances of language, been at some cost; part of what was particular to architecture becomes linked to experiences and emotional conditions aroused by other things, and as a result architecture has been put in danger losing some of its uniqueness.

Among architects, the response to this incursion of language is the traditional one, to develop architectural effects that are resistant to language. We see this with the recent interest in 'materiality'. What is talked about as materiality is not just about the precise use of well-chosen materials – if that were all there was to it, it would be no more than good architecture has always been. No, materiality – and I am not going to fall into the trap of defining it – seems to be about placing such an emphasis upon materials that the traditional categories of modern architecture – form, space – are pushed aside. It is a way of escaping from 'form',

from 'space'; and compared to these categories that have become thoroughly appropriated by language, it is very difficult to say anything much about material. We can talk about the physical properties of materials – hard/soft, warm/cold, smooth/rough – but the language to say much about their aesthetic properties does not yet exist. There's no doubt that part of the appeal of 'materiality' comes from its not having been colonised by language; and it is fairly impervious to representation in any medium, whether linguistic or visual. This is certainly suggested by Peter Zumthor – talking about the Thermal Baths at Vals, he says, "Material is stronger than an idea, it's stronger than an image because it's really there, and it's there in its own right"⁸. It is the immediacy, the fact that it cannot be translated into another medium that Zumthor likes.

Now while 'materiality' appeals because it is resistant to language, nonetheless of course people do try to talk about it – and it is interesting to see how. There are really two sorts of discourse around 'materiality'. There is the description of the properties of materials – "the woodness of wood; the sandiness of sand" as the Smithsons put it⁹; and there is the attempt to describe the responses evoked by materials, to name the emotions that are aroused by materials. This is much more unfamiliar territory, and is more of a challenge. Sartre made an attempt at it in his novel *Nausea*, and some of the things that have been written about minimal art are interesting, but in architecture, 'materiality' has, so far, defeated language – it is a form of architectural expression that words deal with only clumsily. But given time, I have no doubt though, that language will prove equal to it, and before long, we will have a fully-developed vocabulary of material effects. But by then, of course, the other media of architecture, building and image-making, will have moved on to create new modes of expression that are once again impervious to language.

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Notes:

- 1 Fréart de Chambray, R.: *A Parallel of the Ancient Architecture with the Modern [...] to which is added an account of Architects and Architecture*, by John Evelyn Esq., London 1664.
- 2 Wölfflin, Heinrich: *Das Erklären von Kunstwerk*, Leipzig 1921; see Antoni, C.: *From History to Sociology*, (1940), english translation, London, 1962, p. 244.
- 3 Alberti, L. B: *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Rykwert, N. Leach and R. Tavernor, Cambridge/Mass./London 1988, Bk VI, ch. 12, p. 186.
- 4 Ruskin, J.: *The Stones of Venice*, vol. I (1851), ch. IV, § iv.
- 5 Evelyn, John: *The Diary of John Evelyn*, 1620–1706, ed. E. S. de Beer, 6 vol. s, Oxford 1955, v. 3, p. 398.

- 6 Burke, E.: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (1757), ed. J. T. Boulton, Blackwell, Oxford 1987, p. 92
- 7 Tschumi, Bernhard: *The Architectural Paradox*, (1975), in: Tschumi, Bernhard: *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge/Mass./London 1996, p. 39.
- 8 Spier, S.: *Place, authorship and the concrete: three conversations with Peter Zumthor*, in: *Architectural Research Quarterly*, v. 5, no. 1, 2001, p. 19.
- 9 Smithson, A. & P.: *The "As Found" and the "Found"*, in: Robbins, D. (ed.): *The Independent Group: postwar Britain and the aesthetics of plenty*, 1990, pp. 201–202. See Williams Goldhagen, Sarah: *Freedom's Domiciles: Three Projects by Alison and Peter Smithson* in: Williams Goldhagen, Sarah and Légault, R.: *Anxious Modernisms, Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture*, Cambridge/Mass./London 2000, pp. 75–95, for an existentialist interpretation of the Smithson's work of the 1950s.