

Roger Williams University
DOCS@RWU

School of Architecture, Art, and Historic
Preservation Faculty Publications

School of Architecture, Art, and Historic
Preservation

2009

Psychoanalysis and Identity in Architecture

John S. Hendrix

Roger Williams University, jhendrix@risd.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.rwu.edu/saahp_fp



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hendrix, John S., "Psychoanalysis and Identity in Architecture" (2009). *School of Architecture, Art, and Historic Preservation Faculty Publications*. Paper 10.

http://docs.rwu.edu/saahp_fp/10

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture, Art, and Historic Preservation at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Architecture, Art, and Historic Preservation Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.

Psychoanalysis and Identity in Architecture

John Hendrix

Architecture at its best is an expression and reflection of the human psyche, in which cultural identity plays an important role. In order to understand better the role that architecture plays in changing concepts of cultural identity, it is helpful to understand better the role that cultural identity plays in the human psyche. Cultural identity is given by language, and an important part of the psyche is composed of the laws, relations and customs of a cultural identity as given by language, what Jacques Lacan called the Symbolic Ego, as given by the Other, the linguistic matrix, which is what forms the unconscious. The Imaginary Ego, the independent bodily and sense experience of the individual, is absorbed into the Symbolic Ego, as a result of the Mirror Stage, though not without internal conflict. In architecture, how can the physical, sensual experience of the architecture be absorbed into the symbolic, linguistic experience of the architecture in such a way that the architecture reflects the role of cultural identity in the human psyche in a way that is resonant to everyone in a culturally pluralistic world? What is the relationship between architecture and individual and collective ego formation? In architecture, as in any language, particular vocabulary elements have particular cultural associations. This makes the architecture, in one way, metaphysical: the vocabulary elements function as signifiers, and communicate an idea which is independent of its material presence. How are culturally specific ideas represented by the signifiers in the material presence of architecture in a way that has resonance for everyone? What are the elements of identity formation, as communicated in architecture, that all human beings share?

According to Lacan, the irrationality of the rational sequence of metonyms, the presence of absence within signification, or within meaning, is made present at the point the metonymic chain in language produces signification, which is the “anchoring point,” the *point de capiton*, which occurs retroactively, after a phrase is completed, and is the point at which the net-

work of signifiers in the metonymic chain corresponds to a network of signifiers in the concept, and thus accomplishes signification. The metonymic chain accomplishes this without “crossing the bar” into meaning, or the signified; the idea is not present in the metonym itself.

This type of production is labeled by Lacan “*signifiance*,” as opposed to significance or signifying, a type of production in language which does not cross the bar, the point of resistance, between the signifier and the signified in language, from the Saussurean model. *Signifiance* contains the presence of the irrational, as in architecture, and the absence of the signified, and thus the absence of the subject, and the absence of being, though it is predicated on the presence of that absence. As the concept of the metonym in language corresponds to the process of displacement or *Verschiebung* in Freudian dream work, in the relation between dream thoughts and dream images, the dialectic of the rational and irrational corresponds to the dialectic of conscious and unconscious thought. This correspondence leads to the formation of the Lacanian concept of the unconscious, that the unconscious is structured like a language, and it is through this concept that architecture and psychoanalysis, or the philosophy of the structure of the psyche, or the philosophy of the identity of the human subject, and in particular its identity in language, and the study of the mechanisms of conscious and unconscious thought, correspond.

Unconscious thought is seen as a different form of thought than conscious thought, and exhibits aspects of the irrational in relation to the rational. The linguistic structure of the dream image of Sigmund Freud is seen as diffuse, clumsy and awkward; it is missing the organization of conscious reason, while its forms are mimetic of it. If the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, in Lacanian terms, if the unconscious is the network of language and rules into which the subject is inserted, it is only so in so far as it is a mimesis of the discourse of the Other. Dream images, the manifest content of the dream, are not capable of representing logical relations between the dream thoughts, the latent content of the dream, according to Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, or of representing logical relations between conscious thoughts, the relations created by syntactical rules.

Dream images can be compared to architecture and the visual arts in their incapacity to incorporate to any significant degree the syntactical structures of language. The desire on the part of the visual arts, in particular architecture, to engage as much as possible the syntactical structures of language, reflects the desire on the part of the arts to interweave the Imaginary and the

Symbolic, in Lacanian terms, in the complete constitution of the subject. The Imaginary corresponds to the perception of the image, and the mnemonic or memory residue of the image which is incorporated in dreams, while the Symbolic corresponds to language, the signifying structure into which the perceiving subject is incorporated. In Freudian dream analysis, dreams remain a function of the Imaginary rather than the Symbolic, though the composition of the dream is determined by linguistic structures, which are the structure of the unconscious.

Linguistic structures which can be found in dream composition include metaphor and metonymy, which, as Lacan demonstrates, reveal the unconscious in conscious discourse, as well as syntactical mechanisms such as ellipsis, pleonasm, hyperbaton, syllepsis, apposition, catachresis, and anonomasis, which are the mechanisms of condensation and displacement, regression and repetition, which contribute to the composition of dream images as elements of the unconscious registered in the subject by the Other of Lacan, the linguistic superstructure which determines the subject in ways that are not always conscious, and which do not always correspond to rational thought, but which can be revealed through dream work or composition in art and architecture. In that these are the mechanisms which allow the subject to moderate the dream discourse, they are not mechanisms of the dream itself, but rather the conscious reading of the dream; the unconscious can only be found in conscious thought, as an absence, and the irrational can only be found in rational thought, as that which is other to it within itself.

Among the syntactical mechanisms, ellipsis involves the omission of a word in a syntax without altering the signification, introducing a gap in the syntactical structure. A pleonasm is the use of more words than are necessary for the signification, so it is a repetition, and a condensation. A syllepsis is the use of a word in a syntax which agrees with one word in the syntax grammatically but not another, so it is a displacement, suggesting the irrational within the rational. An apposition is the placing of a word in a sentence to explain another word, as a repetition. A catachresis is the incorrect use of a word; an anonomasis is the use of a title instead of a name. These are the primary condensations and displacements, along with metaphor and metonymy, which are active in both language and dream construction. They can all be used as strategies in architectural composition.

Syllepsis can be found in the overlay or interweaving of geometrical forms, for example, where a form which is rotated or shifted might correspond to one underlying form in a certain way but not to another. Such an

overlaying can result in the creation of a transformational relation, which signifies the relation between the form of the composition and the underlying conceptual structure of the composition, the signifier and that which is signified. As Vitruvius wrote, “Both in general and especially in architecture are these two things found: that which signifies and that which is signified.” The signifier of the architecture is the forms, geometrical solids and architectural vocabulary types, and their sensual appearance in space as perceived by the viewer, in the Imaginary of Lacan, while the signified is the conceptual relations between the forms as they are constructed in the mind of the viewer, in the Symbolic of Lacan. The signified in architecture involves frontality as opposed to spatial recession, solid as opposed to void, symmetry as opposed to asymmetry, axial as opposed to centrifugal, that is, the disposition of the forms as conceptualized in the composition, as the signified in language involves the condensation and displacement of the syntactical mechanisms of dream work. In linguistics, the signifier of a language is the phonetic form or physical signal, while the signified is the corresponding mental analysis that arises in response to the physical signal of the phonetic form, as in architecture.

The syllepsis can act as the *point de capiton*, the anchoring point of Lacan in the signifying chain, which is the point at which the overlay and interweaving of the forms reveals an underlying conceptual structure, as the syntactical mechanisms do in language. The anchoring point of Lacan is the point at which, in the retroactive anticipation of meaning on the part of the subject in the course of the diachronic establishment of a syntactical structure, a sentence for example, the subject enters into the structure in the gap between signifiers, linguistic units, and is represented by one signifier to the next signifier, either diachronically or retroactively, and the subject becomes aware that there is a disjunction between the signifier in language and itself, a bar which cannot be crossed, because the structure of the signification, the discourse of the Other, is the unconscious, which is not accessible by conscious thought.

The anchoring point reveals the presence of the unconscious in conscious thought, and it reveals the presence of the irrational in rational discourse. The anchoring point can be analyzed in the syntactical mechanisms of dream work, or in architectural composition, for example the point at which a system rotates or flips, forms are interwoven, or centripetal and centrifugal organizations overlap, revealing the signified of the composition in the signifier, or, as it might be seen, the unconscious in the conscious.

An apposition would be one element of a geometrical form which is designed to correspond to another geometrical form, as in a previous site condition; the apposition may be the doubling of an element, a self-repetition which reveals the repression of another element, as in metaphor. A catachresis would be that element in a geometrical form which is purposefully out of place, as often happens in the dream; the catachresis reveals the self-enclosure of the signifying system of the language, and the production of nonsense, as in metonymy. An autonomasis would be the substitution of a type-form for a form in the architectural composition, to stage the dialectic between the metaphysic of the architecture and the *signifiante* in which it is engaged, the signifying production, in the dialectic between the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

The coexistence of the mnemonic image and the phonetic element in the writing of a dream is the coexistence of the Imaginary and Symbolic, and the coexistence of the mnemonic residue of the visual perception and the mnemonic residue of the auditory perception, the traces interwoven into the language of the unconscious. The visual residue is the “thing presentation” or *Sachvorstellung*, according to Freud, and the auditory residue is the “word presentation” or *Wortvorstellung* in the formation of the dream image, which is described by Freud as the transition from the latent content to the visual image of the dream in a “concern for representability,” or *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*. The coexistence of the thing and the word in the representation, in the writing of the dream, is a “double inscription” or *Niederschrift* which involves condensation and displacement, repression and repetition, and which corresponds to the coexistence of conscious and repressed or unconscious images which may occur in the preconscious, in the memory of the dream, and which constitutes the structure of conscious language in the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy in particular.

The *Niederschrift* contributes to the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* of the dream, which is the representation of a representation, according to Freud, but which, according to Lacan, is that which takes the place of the representation; the mnemonic residue of an image in perception is transformed by syntactical mechanisms in the unconscious as it is seen as the mnemonic residue of the dream. The replacement of the representation poses a disjunction between what is seen by the subject and what is represented in the mind, between the signifier and the signified, as given by language, which structure perception itself. The disjunction between what is seen and what is represented to mind is the disjunction between sense-experience and reason in

metaphysics, between the real and the ideal, in the terms of Transcendental Idealism, or between the form and the idea in the terms of classical philosophy. The disjunction of the metaphysic is displaced, in linguistics and psychoanalysis, from the structure of reason in consciousness to the structure of language and the unconscious, as seen in the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. The disjunction between what is seen and what is represented reveals a divided subject, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, a subject which does not know itself, and a subject which is divided from its conscious reason, as reason becomes other to itself. The basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to be found in linguistics, and in the study of perception, the nature of representation in vision. It is for that reason that psychoanalysis has such importance for art and architecture.

As a result of the complex network of psychical relationships which produce the dream images, and the mechanisms of condensation and displacement, dreams are composed of disconnected fragments of visual images, syntactical structure in language, and thoughts, the *Sachvorstellung* and the *Wortvorstellung*, which are seen in a variety of logical relations to each other in a palimpsest of traces which is difficult to unravel, and which can appear to be irrational. Architecture can appear as an irrational combination of a palimpsest of layers of rational relations between traces. The palimpsest of dream images is seen by Freud as the condensation and displacement of figures and spatial relationships, such as foreground and background, and the coincidence of opposites, as in the simultaneity of frontal and recessional or solid and void.

The network of logical relations which contribute to the composition of dream images is too complex to be unraveled in dream analysis. Displacement, condensation, fragmentation, substitution and the *coincidentia oppositorum*, coincidence of opposites, are products of the complex network of logical relations, or the mnemonic residues of such, in the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* in dream thoughts, which is too complex to correspond to any logical structure. In the process of the dream formation, the logical links which hold the psychical material together are lost. It is the task of psychoanalysis to restore the logical connections which the dream work has destroyed, as dreams are seen as access to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind, as Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, an access to the psychical mechanisms which psychoanalysis seeks to understand. Lacanian psychoanalysis furthers this quest in the analysis of the linguistic mechanisms of which dreams are a product.

The relation between the dream image and the dream thought, and the signifier and signified in any language, can be seen in the relation of the subject to language. The dream image responds to the dream thought, the latent content, in the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, as a form of psychical activity in response to perceptual activity. The content of the perception is anticipated and rearranged, as the subject is anticipated in language, retroactively; the word represents the image to another word as the signifier represents the subject to another signifier, and it is that series of relations which make both the dream and language intelligible. The representation of the image by the word, of the subject by the signifier, is a tool for intelligibility in architectural composition.

Lacan compares the distortion or *Enstellung* described by Freud in the dream work to *glissement* in signification, the sliding of the signified under the signifier in the course of the signifying chain, as seen especially in metaphor, where one word takes the place of another, which bars the subject from signification, from the language which it produces in conscious thought. In the gap between what is perceived and what is represented in the dream as the mnemonic residue of perception, a direct connection is lost in the process of distortion, as the connection is lost between the signifier and the signified in language. Freud's dream condensation or *Verdichtung* is compared by Lacan to the combination of signifiers in metaphor. Displacement or *Verschiebung* is compared to the transfer of signification in metonymy, where the correspondence between signifier and signified is maintained, but shifted, and rendered nonsensical.

The only difference between the mechanisms in language and the mechanisms in the dream work, according to Freud, is the difference between the intentions of communication in language and the consideration of representability in the dream, which is also a mechanism of a type of communication, which combines both *Wortvorstellung* and *Sachvorstellung* in conscious discourse, as can be seen in an architectural composition. The elision of the subject in language, in the dream and conscious discourse, creates an absence of the subject to itself in its reason. The anticipation of the subject in the signifying chain caused by the absence of the subject, which occurs at the *point de capiton*, or the inaccessibility of the unconscious, is that which causes desire in the subject in signification, the impossible attempt to find fulfillment. The desire of the subject is the desire of the Other, for Lacan, the discourse of which the unconscious is composed. Desire is enacted by the *objet a* of La-

can, that which is missing from the subject, and in perception the *objet a* is found in the Gaze, that which is missing from perception.

Architecture, in particular in compositional strategies and the interweaving of geometries, enacts the *objet a* and the Gaze in describing the desire of the subject in the division of the subject in psychoanalysis, in the inaccessibility of the subject to that which defines it, which is the unconscious. In this way, architecture can function as a diagrammatic model of human identity. Architecture represents the most complete expression of human identity precisely because it entails the impossibility of the reconciliation of the subjective and objective, of form and function, of conceptual and empirical reality. In that architecture must always be tied to functional requirements, it is art, that is, it express the human spirit, when its form contradicts itself, is other to itself, or when its form contradicts its function, enacting a transformational relation, and the disjunction between conscious and unconscious thought, between presence and absence in the human condition, is revealed. The unconscious of the individual, and the collective unconscious of a culture, are known as an absence within a presence, and architecture functions to reveal that absence, to reveal the unconscious of a culture, the zeitgeist of a culture, and thus communicate a cultural identity.

Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, New York: Avon Books, 1965 (1900).

John Hendrix, *Architecture and Psychoanalysis*, New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits, A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton, 1977 (1966).

———, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton, 1981 (1973).

———, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968 (1956).

Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, trans. Frank Granger, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931 (27 BC).