

Ingenious, eloquent and persuasive? Towards a Critique of Architecture as Communication

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Introduction

As a wayward child Hermes stole and told lies. In the process he did, however, prove himself ingenious, eloquent and persuasive. This impressed Zeus, his father. Hermes recognized this and asked to be made his herald; he promised to be responsible for all divine property and never again to tell lies, although he did not promise always to tell the whole truth. Amongst other things Hermes was shown how to foretell the future from the dance of pebbles in a basin of water. He assisted the three fates in the invention of the alphabet, astronomy, the musical scale, and weights and measures.¹ With the tools for recording instructions, placing things in relation to the world, according things a sense of proportion and harmony, and specifying quantities of material with which to build, architecture is made possible. But at what moment does a *work* of architecture come to exist? Perhaps architecture exists from the moment it is conceived, and paper architecture *is* architecture. Then again, as architecture is subject to an endless process of change, perhaps it never really exists at all, but merely hovers on the boundary between being and becoming.

If we are lucky architecture may be captured in documents that survive its various transformations. Only documents, in their original lexical and graphical states, remain unchanged, never the architecture to which they refer. This fact does not, however, promise easy access to architecture; texts change in their possibilities for reading because we change with the world. Hermes, fleet of foot, herald, bears messages he does not fully understand and is never able to relay perfectly, something is always lost in translation and some distracting surplus is always gained. Hermeneutics implies the passage of time, estrangement, distance, the growing apart of language.² Interpretation and translation become necessary to make sense of texts, to renew their meaning, and every reading distances the reader even as it preserves a sense of reality.

Stories told and retold, dialogue conducted according to conventional rules, the enunciation of a plan in logical order and using correct terminology, these are examples of *muthos*, formulated speech.³ In pre-alphabet societies 'the magic world of the ear' sustained the imagination; 'hearing was believing'.⁴ The transition from an oral culture to one based on literature, as occurs in ancient cultures—China, Greece—signals a dramatic shift from the mnemonic imperatives of narrative to the demonstrative rationality that writing requires and embodies. Eloquence had a particular value, a value diminished by writing. In participating in the invention of the alphabet, Hermes was acquiescing to the wisdom of Zeus. Zeus may have admired Hermes' eloquence but not his

¹ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: volume 1*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, revised edn. 1960), p. 65.

² Tobias Vogt, 'Hermes—Hermeneutics—Hermeticism: translations out of nowhere,' (48°57' N 9°10' E | 49°1' N 12°5' E, 2007).

³ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 186ff.

⁴ Marshall McLuhan and Q. Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. ?

deceitfulness. Lies are harder to perpetrate in writing because of the fixed transparency it lends to discourse. Text inscribed legibly on some durable surface can be read and re-read, which means that it can be tested and contested, interpreted, and re-interpreted.

A stable system of values gives rise to a need for conventional social, cultural and spatial formations, in architecture to conventional orchestrations of surface to define space and form. The inscribed skin, the scenographic, is thus the necessary unifying element whether in the woven fabric of the primitive hut or in the orders and dispositions of signs and traces in classical buildings. This (Vitruvian) conception of architecture was undermined by the early modernist's obsession with transparency, and material and structural expression. Skin became an encumbrance; to adorn, to furnish, to decorate, became sinful. Stripping the body bare was thought to be both hygienic and democratic, but is also profoundly inhumane. Minimizing outward signs of individuality is, after all, a totalitarian strategy. The trajectory of such thinking, from the industrial rationality and democratizing vision of the 'Crystal Palace' (The Great Exhibition, 1851)⁵ to the occulted corporatism and faceless opacity of the SAPA building (1972),⁶ is thus *tragic* in the classical sense; through conflict and excess, heroism is disrupted, undone and ultimately damned.

In postmodernism the scenographic returns, ironically, as a largely irrelevant surplus. No stable system of values emerged in the post-world-war, cold-war, and now, terror-stricken millennial world. Our systems are characterized by rapid change, uncertain values, 'glocalization', etc. and they seem to require strategies beyond the logic of permanent inscription, strategies of space and media that are dynamic, responsive, and even prophetic. Arguably, the cinematic and the genetic have taken over from the scenographic, and the space/form dichotomy has been superseded by spatiotemporal dynamics as the key problematic of architecture. The twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre (1971) are forever preserved—parochially as a disrupted American dream, and more generally as a potent symbol of the delusion of invulnerability under which economic power necessarily operates—not in their materiality, but in millions of movie images. The invisible flows of money and information that make the post-industrial world go round (and occasionally go 'bang') increasingly materialize in images, structures and forms with which we must contend. Is communication, in such a radically participative sense, therefore, at the very core of contemporary architecture? And does this require that we rethink the architectural heritage as part of that larger cultural expression?

Architecture and communication – six propositions

This perspective on architecture, as a contemporary cultural expression, underpins an attempt during the academic year 2009-10 to engage postgraduate architecture students in a critical exploration of the communicative facets of architecture. To focus their, and my, thoughts, I devised six propositions

⁵ Essentially conceived by Joseph Paxton as an industrial process of modular construction represented in a sectional elevation drawing.

⁶ As illustrated in: Chris Wilkinson, *Supersheds: the architecture of long-span, large volume buildings*, (Oxford: Butterworth Architecture, 2nd edn. 1996), pp. 69-70. 'This building was seen as the ultimately simple undecorated shed and marked the end of the line for this form of architectural exploration.'

regarding the possible relationships between architecture and communication. They are situated somewhat retrospectively, as follows.

Architecture as embodied knowledge—the first proposition was that: *architecture embodies ideas which, it is intended by designers, are communicated to its users and to wider audiences.* It is one that places store by the notion of intention in architectural design. However, the value of intention is contestable. It may be that the complexity and open-endedness of architectural possibilities is such that without the reassuring illusion of control the designer would too easily lose heart and give up. Intention is undoubtedly the kind of touchstone that stands the test of ...well, to be honest, it is difficult to say what kind of test intention stands up to, certainly not ‘translation’.⁷ Perhaps no more can be said than: the way in which intention is articulated makes it a powerful rhetorical and political device. But what we would like to show is that architecture embodies knowledge of some lasting significance.

Architecture as social narrative—the second proposition is that: *architecture constructs social narrative, that is, it acquires meaning through extended use and reuse, and it thereby establishes a recoverable history that links events to original programme.* Archaeology appears to thrive on a scarcity of evidence; when traces are few they provide a certain comfort in the limited space for interpretation they offer. Architecture, the surviving urban realm, is much more unsettling, first because it covers over ancient traces, buries them under the living fabric, which understandably we are more inclined to inhabit in established places than locate in virgin territory, and second because the living is intricate and dynamic, and what never stands still never presents a pattern of traces stable enough to succumb to a certain reading. Indeed, ‘the high visibility of relics, especially of old buildings, leads many to over-estimate—and over-value—the stability of the past’.⁸ We would like to construct histories, too often we end up with mythologies.

Architecture as medium—proposition three is that: *architecture provides a matrix, a canvas, a multitude of channels for explicit communication of information, values and ideologies.* Commissioning architecture always involves a surplus of communication, a surplus that often suppresses what architects believe architecture should communicate, if indeed they think of architecture in terms of communication at all. And some do not. The architecture of the ubiquitous big shed, for example, communicates overtly instrumental and often fleeting messages through its physical presence by the motor way and through computer systems distributed around the globe. Such communication is generally invisible to the general public. However, in the expo pavilion it is not only visible; it assaults all the senses in presenting an idea of national identity.

Architecture as language—the fourth proposition is that: *architecture is a system of signs, always mobile and subject to processes of re-invention, but in any contingent cultural context functioning as a language and therefore decodable.* This is perhaps the most immediately attractive proposition regarding the relationship between architecture and communication. It seems easy enough to read the characteristic forms, structures and spatial arrangements of a particular

⁷ Text ‘does not have some original life-giving intention invested in it by an author, whose presence is either simply revived or substituted by a dead sign. Rather, it “lives on” ...’ Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida’s Haunt*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), p. 4.

⁸ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 243.

architectural style as highly symbolic, as representing the social purposes of a community in a very concrete manner, and less directly its values and beliefs.

A Saussurian approach to the semiotics of architecture casts the elements of architecture and their composition in terms of *langue* and *parole* respectively. Architectural elements comprise a lexicon and the conventions of construction and decoration a grammar. In terms of form, structure, space, material and surface, therefore, the arbitrary relations between signifiers and signifieds become conventional and define architectural language. This raises the possibility of a communicative architecture.

Arguably Peircian semiotics adapts to the interpretation of material culture rather better. Rather than emphasizing the structural view of language it focusses on the notion of language as a practice, on situated communicative acts. In this view intentionality and the connotative dimension of communication are more important.⁹ This raises the possibility of architectural production as the negotiation of meaning.

Architecture as disciplinary nexus—the fifth proposition is that: *architecture simultaneously facilitates and delimits a range of communication processes that may be analysed in terms of associated social and cultural processes, e.g. power relations, organization, learning, liberation, discipline, care, etc.* The Foucaultian and Post-Marxist tones of this proposition are immediately apparent. Panopticism, in its original form, has been shown to represent but one instance of an insidious disciplinary impulse.¹⁰ Humans crave the illusion of control. They wish control of their environment, physical and social, and architecture can be seen as the materialisation of this forlorn longing for security, stability and certain knowledge. The purpose of architecture, therefore, is to embody and communicate who we are and how we are to behave.

Architecture as discourse—the sixth and final proposition is that: *architecture participates in the negotiation of meaning and the achievement of solidarity and is therefore a projection into the possible futures of humanity.* Following proposition five, this one offers the other side of the coin, so to speak. Architecture provides a means of coping with the contingencies of physical and social reality. It creates places in which free encounters are possible, in which difference can be freely expressed and allowed to play. Visionary architectures contribute to a continuing conversation not about who we are but about what we ought to become. As designs they are more powerful than this however; they demonstrate *realizable* possibilities for change.

Discussion – a pragmatics of architecture

The six propositions were presented to students as provocations, invitations to engage in critical thinking in architecture, not in the abstract, but in relation to

⁹ Eco, U. (1973) 'Function and sign: semiotics of architecture', in *Publications of the Graduate School of Fine Arts*, vol. 2 (University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia), pp. 131-53 (reproduced in Neil Leach (ed.) *Rethinking architecture: a reader in cultural theory*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 173-202.

¹⁰ Thomas A. Markus, *Buildings & Power: freedom and control in the origin of modern building types*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1993); Bennett, T. 'The Exhibitionary Complex' in *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics*, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 59-88; and Gandy, Oscar H. Jr. *The Panoptic Sort: A Political Economy of Personal Information*, (Westview Press, 1993).

their often well-established interests in the design studio. They had a choice about how to marry the two and inevitably some achieved this rather better than others. Students found some propositions to align with their interests and others to be somewhat marginal and we might speculate about the reasons for this but that would be the subject for another paper.

The discussion here sets out to offer the beginnings of a critique of architecture as communication. It refers to some of the research undertaken by students during the year 2009-10.¹¹ However, the focus is at one remove. It does not try to arbitrate on the various arguments regarding the performance of architecture as communication. Rather it attempts to sift through the discourse looking for a sense of direction and in this endeavour Rorty is our guide. Postgraduate architecture students are engaging, but more importantly, in the present context, they are *engaged*. They have real-world interests and are motivated to explore possibilities for change and to envision new realities. In this regard they are good at what the 'liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at', putting the situation of those that are not free or equal into a language that changes things for the better.¹²

Fraser-Betts was intrigued by the idea that architects might intentionally embody ideas in a building and expect them to be 'communicated' to its users. He conducted a study of public reactions to the Nottingham Contemporary when it opened in November 2009.¹³ Situated in the Lace Market area of Nottingham, this modern art gallery was designed by Caruso St. John Architects. The study draws on a variety of sources: reviews in professional architectural journals, arts columns of national news papers, local press coverage of the project including letters from the general public, blogs and on-line discussion lists contributed to by local activists, architecture students and



Figure 1: sensory encounter with the Nottingham Contemporary (© 2009 M. Fraser-Betts).

members of the general public. Adam Caruso provided an account of the building design and the practices' intentions in choosing specific materials, massing the building as a cascade down the hill side, and creating specific details and textures on the facades of the building. Each decision is rooted in a belief that 'buildings can achieve an auratic presence that comes through associative memory and direct experience'.¹⁴ Given this professed phenomenologically informed approach Fraser-Betts orchestrated his own encounter with the building in advance of any data collection or analysis (figure 1).

When he did come to evaluate others' responses to the building, and in some cases, responses to the *idea* of the building, it, therefore, came as something of a surprise that although 'the vast majority of people have had an emotive response to the building' the building itself is 'seemingly illegible'. Professional

¹¹ Proceedings are to be published in the autumn of 2010, and made available via the University of Lincoln institutional repository < <http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk>>.

¹² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 94.

¹³ Matthew Fraser-Betts, 'Nottingham Contemporary', (see note 11 above).

¹⁴ Adam Caruso (1999). 'The feeling of things.' *A+T ediciones Vitoria-Gastiez*, Issue 13, pp. 48-51. <<http://www.carusostjohn.com/text/el-sentimiento-de-las-cosas>> [Accessed 03.02.10]

critiques may evidence a ‘more lucid understanding of the design and its embodied ideas’ but ‘they seem sadly wasted on the vast majority’ of the general public.

The next question might be why this should be the case. Does it come down to that old nugget, a question of paradigm incommensurability, an unbridgeable gulf between the phenomenological and structuralist perspectives and their contrary subjectivist and objectivist epistemologies?¹⁵

The question of whether a history is recoverable from the social narrative that architecture constructs through its extended use and reuse was taken up by Bio in his study of riverside reinvention in Birmingham and Lincoln.¹⁶ Bio used first-hand and documentary accounts of current regeneration schemes in the Brindley Place/Gas Street Basin area of Birmingham and the Brayford Pool area of Lincoln. He also ranged across archaeological accounts of Iron Age, Roman and industrial revolution settlement patterns in these locations. Bio’s analysis suggests that through cycles of dereliction and reinvention ‘re-occurring patterns emerge ...irrespective of function and dynamics’ and ‘a complex of original and altered remains [have been] enlarged by subsequent thoughts and deeds.’



Figure 2: Lincoln Sound Maker: An Urban Rant (© 2010 Will Picken).

The scope for this form of analysis on the urban scale is clearly enormous and the proposition that the narrative layering that successive bouts of decline and regeneration achieve, over centuries or even millennia, is cumulative rather than episodic begs to be challenged.

No student approached head-on the idea that architecture provides a matrix, a canvas, a multitude of channels for explicit communication of information, values and ideologies. Picken did, however, touch on an aspect of this proposition in a radically different type of research project.¹⁷ Inspired by practices associated with phenomenological explorations of the urban,¹⁸ Picken generated a *drift* through Lincoln city centre directed entirely by the perception of sound sources (figure 2). Overlaid on an orthodox street map, this creates the opportunity to analyse the aural aspects of its architecture. Picken observes that when ‘space is traced through emotionally engaged listening’ it becomes apparent that ‘perceived distance, or “acoustic horizon”, is controlled by the environment’s aural architecture.’ In relation to Picken’s larger project, which is the possibility of an aural architecture in practice, this is certainly intriguing.

¹⁵ Gibson Burrell & Gareth Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, (Heinemann Educational Books, 1979) pp.25-32. Burrell and Morgan explicitly recognized the potential for applying their scheme to other fields, cf. p.35.

¹⁶ Kofi Bio, ‘Re-invention of the Riverscape,’ (see note 11 above).

¹⁷ Will Picken, ‘ ’ (see note 11 above).

¹⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice Of Everyday Life*. (University of California Press, 2002); R. M. Schafer, *The Tuning Of The World*. (Random House Inc., 1977); and J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes Of The Skin: Architecture And The Senses*. (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2005).

It is notable that reference to Venturi and Scott-Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* has fallen out of fashion. Since the original idea of the roadside sign as architecture many more possibilities have emerged for replacing skin with information, for example, by playing with the crossover between the digital and physical realms. Ito's 'Tower of Winds' and 'Egg of Winds' projects, and Asymptote's virtual New York Stock Exchange project, come to mind.

If architecture as explicit communication attracts very little attention architecture as symbolic communication attracts a great deal. Hadley's application of Barthe's semiotic theory of the fashion system to the market for new housing in Britain is revealing.¹⁹ There appears to be a clear disconnect between how the ideas of 'house' and 'home' are mediated in British culture. The myth of 'home' is subject to processes of simulation, in which consumer desire feeds off nostalgia, a longing for an imagined shared past. Yet this is reflected primarily in the exterior appearance of mass produced houses with their endlessly repetitive references to Elizabethan half-timbering, the Georgian town house, and cottage vernacular. The interior, on the other hand, 'is manipulated by the effects of technology and the practices of consumption.' The high-tech fitted kitchen, utilities and modular storage are almost universal.

Barthes' account of the fashion system provides but one model of semiotic analysis. As indicated above, a Peircian approach, as updated by Eco and more recently Gottdiener, offers broader possibilities, ones that embrace communicative practices in general rather than focussing on those specific to the media.



Figure 3: The Johns Practice, interior views during daytime working and an evening charity event (© 2010 Elizabeth Harris).

The communication that architecture affords and how this relates to social and cultural processes has tended to attract studies of institutions—hospitals, prisons, museums, schools, etc. Harris looked at the workings of the open-plan office of a small architectural practice in the context of the building it designed for itself.²⁰ The almost domestic scale of the environment, and the nature of the work undertaken there (figure 3), undoubtedly set it apart from the larger-scale and more anonymous corporate activities of the typical open-plan office. Consequently the analysis is of particular interest. Although the panoptic principle clearly applies in this environment it does not appear dominant. At the individual level, mutual respect rather than (self)discipline appears to characterize the moderation of behaviour; such that 'staff interact freely and at ease' indeed as 'relationships between staff appear to grow stronger ...hierarchical boundaries appear to diminish.'

This suggests that organizational spaces can effect a liberatory atmosphere *by design* and this begs the question of where its limits lie. Is this a question of scale or culture or both, for example?

¹⁹ Sasha Hadley, 'Fashion and Architecture: exploring parallels between the fashion system and postmodern residential architectural signification,' (see note 11 above).

²⁰ Elizabeth Harris, 'People at Work: a phenomenological understanding of human perception in an open-plan working environment,' (see note 11 above).

The final example illustrates how the visionary dimension of architectural communication connects very readily with immediate cultural concerns. As Tobe has illustrated, architecture *participates* in film, often as a principal character.²¹ It shapes the atmosphere and trajectory of the shadow world into which we are drawn as we pursue the narrative. Townsend approached the idea that architecture participates in the negotiation of meaning and the achievement of solidarity by looking at how architecture literally projects possible futures in science fiction genre movies.²² Focussing on adaptations of Philip K. Dick's short stories and novels—Minority Report (eponymous), Total Recall (*We Can Remember it For You Wholesale*), and Blade Runner (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*)—and referencing Jackson & Carter's argument that myth acts as an attenuator of complex reality,²³ Townsend shows how current social and philosophical themes are addressed by adopting the structures of Christian and classical mythologies. He makes a particularly revealing observation that the architectural conventions of the Science Fiction movie genre embody an ideological, possibly a pathological, critique of modernism. Although, straightforwardly, 'architecture acts to support the narrative and [communicate its] moral imperative to the audience,' modernist spaces are consistently associated with the criminal, the evil, the immoral.

Clearly, the unbuilt and the unbuildable can hold the imagination in peculiarly powerful ways. There remains the promise, however, of radical humanistic critique of the buildable and the built. Who will dare, that is the question?

Conclusion

In the beginning humans lived within the earth. Epimetheus distributed capacities to all the animals until there were none left. Consequently, through his oversight humans were deprived of any means of surviving. Prometheus stole fire from the gods to ensure the survival of humans as they emerged into the light. They built cities to protect themselves from wild animals but they did not possess the art of civilized living. Zeus sent Hermes to convey to all humans a sense of justice and mutual respect. Only then is it apparent that civic virtue cannot be *given*, it must be achieved through an endless and universal cycle of teaching, learning and practice.

If there is social hope, as Rorty suggests, it rests in the engagement of philosophy in an ironic form, one that replaces love of wisdom with the practice of cultural politics.²⁴ In this venture the open field of communication is the interminable human project. Architecture is implicated in this project as both the materialization of social space and the expression of human encounters in all their richness and diversity. Architecture is communicative, therefore, because it constructs the open field of communication. Without it we live in isolation, return to the dark, to the earth. And architecture is communicative because it participates in life. It is not the backdrop, the stage, the *mise-en-scène*, architecture literally embodies the justice and mutual respect

²¹ Rene Tobe, keynote address, The Cultural Role of Architecture, University of Lincoln, 23-25 June 2010.

²² Ian Townsend, 'Mythologies of the Modern in the Science Fiction Film Genre,' (see note 11 above).

²³ N. V. Jackson, & P. Carter, 'The Attenuating Function of Myth in Human Understanding,' *Human Relations*, Vol. 37 (1984), pp. 515-533.

²⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

that make civilized living possible. It is no accident that when we regress *en masse* and violence erupts we deface art and destroy buildings; all that is civilized, meaningful and purposeful is inscribed into the fabric of the city. There is an implication here that the scenographic in architecture is open to far wider interpretation than so far realized. In starting to explore the possible relationships between architecture and communication I discern a sense of expectation, a certain frisson, a realization that a critique of architecture as communication is important but also risky. If one questions dominant ideologies—rational-technocratic, material-spatial, etc.—what should one expect? Ex-communication?

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