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ABSTRACT

The contribution offers a new perspective on the topic of narratives, settling links between the city, cognitive theories and the history of Architecture. As it has been neglected from a historical perspective, the power of narratives in architecture is being investigated at its most intimate roots. The paper succeeds in this work by drawing on the theories of cognitive and semiotic psychology, shedding light on architecture through its users. The individual in society, its construction, and most intimate contamination are intrinsically linked to the milieu of his/her own communities, in a continuous interaction between actions and habits, between phenomena and consolidated, stored narratives. A new space for architecture emerges. A space that not only supports as a shelter but also influences these habits, actively participating in the urban storytelling training process. Thus, as part of a whole, the architect finds his own place in contemporary cultural narratives, abandoning the deterministic idea of a 'creator' capable of harnessing and synthesizing the city by parameters. The search for the join between language and architecture is then investigated in selected episodes of architecture history, highlighting the presence of this relationship that has been disregarded by modernity.

Author's conclusions claim a return of the language as the cultural territory on which settling new implications of architecture. Beyond its ethical dimension, beyond the sole expressive capacity of its forms, architecture can become contemporary as it rediscovers the power of its language.

Metadati in italiano in fondo

Narrative Language, Architecture and the City



Cesare Cesariano, "L'età aurea", engraving, from Marco Vitruvio Pollione, Cesare Cesariano, *Di Lucio Vitruvio Pollione de architectura libri dece traducti de latino in vulgare affigurati* [...]. Second Volume (Como: Gottardo da Ponte, 1521), xxxi v.

Architecture's primary function throughout history may well be to provide a communicative setting for cultures, one that speaks both intellectually and emotionally to embodied consciousness, disclosing attuned places for significant human action. This role has been typically achieved in cities, embodying the very literacy of cultures.

Phenomenology, recently buttressed by findings in enactive cognitive theory, has argued that individual subjectivity is *from the outset* intersubjectivity, we are only insofar as we exist with others in place; intersubjectivity emerging through communally handed down norms, conventions, symbolic artifacts and cultural traditions in which an individual is already embedded¹. This is predominantly enabled by cities: the "space of appearance" as described by Hannah Arendt². While emerging from the world of perception, linguistic, polysemic symbols – also termed natural language – create a break with sensorimotor representations³. This is the world of architectural communication, the real context of architectural

endeavors, one that cannot be understood as being neatly divided into culture and nature, and presuming its objectivity for scientific analysis.

Sensorimotor knowledge stabilizes primarily as *habits*. Habits eventually result in stable gestalts: mostly acquired flexible skills and competences, established yet always open to change⁴. Habit is a trace left by actions. Present actions are shaped by habits because previous actions have given rise to habits. Such actions are never deterministic but always situated in *place* and motivated by purpose and meaning⁵. As Alva Noë puts it: "Without habit there is no calculation, no speech, no thought, no recognition, no game playing."⁶ Noë suggests that we could think of the city, paraphrasing Goethe, as "frozen habit." Habits are neither intellectual knowledge nor involuntary action: they are knowledge that is forthcoming through the body's motricity and effort.⁷ *The comprehensibility of architecture depends on acknowledging habits and framing them in new settings with appropriate atmospheres that may reveal limits and remain*

open to the ineffable. Rather than seeking some unattainable radical novelty, good architecture might thus offer humanity authentic situated freedom.

Just like the lived, emotionally charged environment cannot be reduced to parameters, there is no way that one individual, architect or planner can subsume culture – i.e., the richness of cities. This is a crucial aspect of our contemporary architectural problematic that has been brilliantly explained by Dalibor Vesely.⁹ There are real limitations to the concept of the architect as “creator”, imagining that his or her formal talent and skills may compensate for the flatness of our technological world embodied in postindustrial, alienating urban environments. When habits sediment into environments that convey negative or hostile emotions, however, what is the architect to do? It is not enough to seek more comfortable or behaviorally adequate environments. With a clear understanding of the stakes, the architect must act seeking instead culturally-specific poetic images, perhaps taking clues from expressive moments in relevant art and literature, accepting the “experimental” nature of formal search and perhaps even shock and defamiliarize a complacent society. And yet again, this cannot amount to mere search for novelty. A consideration of viable tools of representation for an architect to create appropriate moods and atmospheres is central to this concern.

A key in my view is narrative language, the language of history and fiction. The reflective subject emerges from the pre-reflective realm; “it is a function of speech, of natural language.”⁹ Emergent speech breaks the silence of the perceptual world and spreads further layers of significance over it; it brings the subject into relationship with itself. Speech cannot be planned without speaking, it is originally a pre-reflective act that brings the subject and object of speech, the speaking subject, into being. Languages are in fact gestural habits, the debris or sediments of the past communicative acts of a community, stored within the corporeal schemas of the contemporary population.¹⁰ Language embodies the shared practical sense of a society; it gives durable form to habits of perception, conception and reflection that have formed within the group.¹¹ Yet, speech is the medium of reflective thought.¹² Natural language is thus the appropriate way to negotiate enactive knowledge towards further action; it is therefore indispensable to drive the architectural project.

Speech and orality are primary.¹³ This is language understood in a sense very different from that of conventional poststructuralist linguistics. It is rather the emerging breath (air) that breaks the silence of the perceptual world and is capable of first giving shape to an atmosphere, spreading a further layer of significance over the world of perception. It is language as Vitruvius evokes it, as primary expression at the dawn of culture, emerging at the origins of architecture in that momentous occasion when humans, brought together by the need to keep a fire going, first assembled and *spoke*, contemplated the heavens, imitated its regularity and then built their first dwellings.¹⁴ Emerging language brings a subject into relationship with its self through an articulated story, which is

a life lived; it allows for the recognition of the ethical self that finds itself as invariable and distinct every morning (after about the age of 4), despite the constant mutations in an individual's lived experience. It enables the *me* that is constructed in the web of narrative discourse and imaginative representation, to be distinct from the *I* that embodies and repeats its history in the form of habits.¹⁵ This is the language that enables one to negotiate enactive knowledge towards further action, the language of history providing ethical orientation for action and the language of the architectural program, properly understood as a fictional projection of potential human life: the language of promises, such as architecture. In avoiding natural language as a fundamental component of the design process, modernist practices, from early 19th century functionalism to contemporary design through algorithms, are doomed to failure. Indeed, if Giorgio Agamben is correct, the aim of architecture, attuned atmospheres or *Stimmung*, lies precisely at the point of articulation between embodiment – in the form of habits – and language, which brings them to awareness and reveals their full affective and cognitive value.

The architecture of the city understood as the opening up of spaces where one may attain self-understanding through action in communion with others: this primary function – traditionally associated with an epiphany of beauty – may indeed be more fundamentally understood as a condition for humanity's psychosomatic health; an environment that harmoniously completes rather than alienates human consciousness.¹⁶ While engineers may be better equipped to solve building design problems in view of pragmatic use, structural efficiency and energy sustainability, architects like to think that they can contribute something of specific significance beyond those issues. Architectural theory, heeding Foucault, has been sometimes skeptical, noting that regardless of intentions, architecture expresses political and economic power. It can function as a sign, like publicity, and often becomes a commodity. Ethical practitioners rightly worry that their work should not merely express self-indulgence. Ultimately, and regardless of the representational intentions of designs – which should be driven by a quest for both beauty and justice – it is evident that communication of some sort, evidently multi-layered, is the primary social and cultural function of our discipline. And yet, while architects tend to think a lot about the role of pictures, drawings, forms, or even spaces as geometric volumes, they generally disregard language – especially the polysemic, inherently poetic languages we speak and write, assuming they have little to do with design and architectural meaning.

It is nevertheless obvious that living, natural languages, such as English, Spanish, Greek or French, constitute our primary mediation between pre-reflective embodied consciousness (with its motor skills), and intellectual articulation. The languages we speak (primarily oral) give us our cultural roots and are our primary medium to communicate. In this essay I want to address in general terms the crucial importance of language – understood in precisely this sense – and its historical relationship with a significant architecture, identifying

some aspects of this relationship and some specific strategies for its involvement in design.

As I have suggested, I take to heart the linguistic nature of human reality, particularly Martin Heidegger's observation that there is no Being before man speaks. I take my cues from philosophical hermeneutics and the concept of emerging language as part of the flesh of the world, in continuity with habits and gestures.¹⁷ I must repeat that this is at odds with a constructivist concept of language as a more or less arbitrary code, and merely acknowledge that this is a vastly complex and hotly debated issue. I will say a few more words about my philosophical position towards the end of this essay.

My concern with language in architecture is not as an auxiliary inspiration, as in the unambiguous prose of technical specifications, or that of rational and consensual design through a committee. Natural – original, polysemic, inherently metaphorical – language is central to the very possibility of retrieving cultural roots for architectural expression that may result in appropriate atmospheric qualities responsive to pre-existing *places*, typically themselves brought to presence through articulate stories. This concern is not current in architectural theory and practice. The contemporary world is generally suspicious of natural language, deemed fuzzy and deceitful, particularly when compared to so-called mathematical languages, such as those that our computers understand and that get things done. In North America, some years ago, writers declared the end of theory in architecture, meaning non-instrumental speculation. Taking certain observations by Foucault as a mantra, they have retained a profound suspicion about language, construing it as an irredeemable instrument of power and manipulation. In recent years, this has resulted in the current obsessions with algorithms and parametric design; a strategy of form generation that deliberately bypasses language while it legitimizes itself with the prospect of infinite formal novelty and its presumed ethical neutrality.

The disregard of language by architects in the process of designing is not as recent as it may appear. In the wake of nineteenth-century positivism and its increasing acceptance of specialization in all areas of knowledge as the only way forward, professional disciplines such as architecture became driven by instrumental efficiency. Taking their cues from the theories of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand¹⁸, who argued for rational self-referentiality, architects focused on pragmatic, functionalist concerns, believing that efficiently solving space-planning and structural problems would be sufficient for forms to communicate their function. Nothing else was needed. Intentional expression in analogy to poetic language, as had been theorized during the previous century, was deemed unnecessary and even an aberration. Trying to protect the discipline from the consequences of such a position, effectively becoming a subset of engineering, later architects reacted by associating architecture to the Fine Arts, stressing the importance of formal issues in building composition; most sought only a visual, stylistic coherence, whether motivated by political, religious or aesthetic ideologies, or by the egocentric concerns of an architect's self-expression. Although the

result was in line with aesthetic concerns, the architectural mainstream generally assumed theory (discourse) could be nothing other than applied science or formal methodologies; thus were ignored a rich set of traditional discursive options rooted in mythical and poetic language that had been crucial for generating culturally significant work in the early stages of the history of architecture in Europe.

To put my point across I would like to highlight a few crucial historical moments that are particularly illuminating. Writing in the first century BCE, Vitruvius understood fully the primary communicative function of architecture. Respecting the divisions of knowledge first put forward by Aristotle, his theory – a form of narrative that is totally unlike what we generally take for theory today – included properly theoretical knowledge, *theoría* leading to *sophía*; practical knowledge leading to *phronésis*, narrative wisdom; and technical knowledge, *téchne*. These were autonomous forms of knowing that contributed to the success of architecture as a communicative setting. Repeating the Ancient Greeks' conviction that architecture must imitate the perfect articulation of the superlunary cosmos, Vitruvius insisted in *dispositio* or order on the basis of proportions, stressing the importance of concepts such as commensurability: *symmetría* and *eurythmía*, significantly terms imported from both the plastic arts or *téchne*, and the performing arts associated with the theatre – music, poetry and dance.¹⁹ This articulation that architecture made possible was the most cherished property of culture: it was the aim of Greek *theoría*, the contemplation of order in Nature associated by Plato with *mathémata*, and mostly present to the senses in the celestial realm. This theory was expressed in discursive texts (like philosophy) and, Vitruvius tells us, is the same for a doctor or an architect. The actual practice of architecture, however, was never understood as the *application* of such theory. It involved both practical knowledge, conveyed through stories in the language of everyday life to make wise and prudent decisions, and *téchne-poíesis*, an irreducible knowledge of the body manifested in skills, induced at times by external forces and taught orally in relation to specific tasks while also acknowledging inborn talent. Indeed, Vitruvius' famous section in which he describes how architectural forms should be disposed according to mathematical proportions emulating the order of the cosmos includes, *in continuity*, the importance of storytelling in relation to a category he named *decor* (decorum, correctness – associated also to ornament). *Decor* accounted for crucial issues of meaning and appropriateness of form to cultural situations – we would say programs – as well as natural sites. We easily grasp today the formal issues involved in proportion but often miss the importance of the stories, such as those that illuminate the presence of the famous caryatids in the Athenian Erechtheion. The languages of *mathésis* and every day speech – or *mythos* – were complementary in Antiquity and remained so until the Renaissance. This is explicit in humanist works such as Alberti's *De re Aedificatoria* and Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Thus architecture could open a clearing for dwelling in a menacing, mortal sublunary world; it could communicate articulated order creating harmonious and tempered atmospheres, mimetic

of the heavenly star-dance, yet also dressed appropriately for specific tasks, situations or programs, and framing all-important cultural habits.

In this regard, the *Hypnerotomachia* merits some additional words. This erotic novel, published by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1499, is one of the most beautiful books ever printed.²⁰ It posits the new Renaissance architecture as a poetic medium whose purpose is to orient life, always torn by desire, vis-a-vis the uncertainties of destiny, and thus make human existence propitious at a time when humanity felt liberated for the first time from medieval theocentric determinism. The story, a strife for love in a dream told by Polifilo, describes attuned and tempered atmospheres that negotiate such desire and make a good life possible – even when confronted with the inevitability of love's separation at death. Only a literary form could have been appropriate to this effect.

The nature of architectural theory started to change after the inception of Cartesian dualism in the seventeenth century, moving away from philosophical and rhetorical discourse and closer to technical knowledge. Nicolas Malebranche, a disciple of Descartes, affirmed that only God is a *true cause* of all things, because only He knows *how* he makes things happen, including the perceived relationship between our minds and our bodies. Even if we will to move our arm, we don't really know *how* we move it, we are only witnessing an *occasional* cause, and ultimately it is God that moves our arm. Conversely, we could infer that whenever we *know* mathematically – clearly and distinctly – *how* something happens, for example *how* a lever operates in terms of the proportions between distances to the fulcrum and applied forces, or *how* an architectural plan or elevation is generated from strict geometrical operations, as is often the case in Baroque design, then we are not only ethically and effectively creative, but our mind is in fact operating through the very same ideas that are in God. Thus *know-how*, the expected aim of instrumental theories – previously *téchne*, Aristotle's irreducible technical knowledge – acquired the status previously held by contemplative *theoria*, eventually becoming *applied science*. In the short term, this assumption produced Baroque instrumental (yet transcendental) theories of architect polymaths like the Theatine father Guarino Guarini,²¹ and eventually the first truly proto-positivistic architectural theory in the Western tradition in the writings of Claude Perrault.²²

Perrault questioned the fundamental assumption that architecture is capable of re-presenting the order of the cosmos. In doing so, he opened up a modern awareness to the question of architecture's meaning. He believed that architecture, like human languages and civil law, changed in time and was the result of human conventions. The fact that the meanings of architecture may depend upon *custom* rather than *nature*, however, did not make it in his view any less important or culturally significant. Like the French language itself, at that point perceived to have attained its summit and proper codification at the Académie Française, architecture could and should be open to further refinement and "progress", thus eventually suggesting the possibility of architectural expression in the form of linguistic analogies.

In the Preface to his treatise, the *Ordonnance* (1683), Perrault questioned the analogy of architectural and musical harmony on the basis of the diversity of the two phenomena, addressed to independent senses conceived as autonomous mechanical receptors of sensory information. Thus he was the first writer ever to reject the usefulness of optical corrections to reconcile the proportional prescriptions derived from traditional theory with the actual execution of buildings expressive of harmonic regularity for an embodied synesthetic consciousness; previously it had always been accepted that such prescriptions should be adapted to accord with the real experience of architecture by the body. For him the only purpose of mathematical rules in architecture was to facilitate practice and systematize all dimensions in classical architecture so that buildings, now understood as aesthetic objects rather than primarily as settings for events, could be built exactly following the designs of the architect. In this way, for Perrault, ideal – mathematical – perfection was externalized into built form. Once this was understood, it became the task of the architect to innovate "aesthetically" within the "tradition" – now perceived as a sort of ornamental syntax – making works increasingly more refined and magnificent, capable of reflecting the glory and accomplishments of France during this period.

During the Enlightenment many architects questioned the instrumental intentions of Perrault's theories (which were easy to disbelieve given the conditions of pre-Industrial Revolution practice) and took his insights as a challenge to understand architectural meaning in relation to natural language rather than to mathematics, foregrounding the issue of decor from Vitruvius. Thus the problem of *expression* became primary.

The architectural theories of character and expression that developed during the eighteenth century are very diverse. They aspired to understand the potential significance of architecture both discursively and emotionally, and I shall not attempt in this summary to do justice to their intricate subtleties. The desire to seek harmony with a Divine nature could not be surrendered easily, particularly in view of the apparently definitive successes of Newtonian cosmology and its God/geometrician. A central concern, however, was to adequately *express* the uses for which a building was destined so that it could provide a harmonious setting to actions, as well as representing the status of the building as if it were a social entity – the *mask* or public persona of its client. Jacques-François Blondel, the most important teacher of architects in Paris around 1750, believed that excellent buildings possessed "a mute poetry, a sweet, interesting, firm or vigorous style, in a word, a certain *melody* that could be tender, moving, strong, or terrible" Just as a piece of music communicated its character through various tonal harmonies, evoking diverse states of nature and conveying sweet and vivid passions, so proportion (understood mostly as geometric magnitude and no longer as Pythagorean arithmetic ratios) now acted as a vehicle for architectural expression. Thus buildings could be made terrifying or seductive, and capable of expressing their character, be it "the Temple of Vengeance or that of Love."²³ Notice how the inevitable mathematical and geometric qualities of architecture became subject to linguistic

expression, both discursive and poetic (or emotional). This early modern development constitutes the origin of our own possibilities of understanding how fiction and natural language might be crucial in design.

Yet, a second consequence of the Enlightenment, with problematic future consequences, must also be noted. The association of architecture with the Fine Arts became commonplace during the eighteenth century. Arguing against Perrault, Blondel thought that beauty was immutable, and that architects, with an open spirit and keen sense of observation, should be capable of extrapolating it "from the productions of the fine arts and the infinite variety of Nature."²⁴ This reveals a different assumption about the reception of the work from that which had operated since Vitruvius. While not totally immanent, the expression or significance of architecture was increasingly internalized and transformed into a problem of *composition*, brought to fruition through an objectified building. The temporal dimension, which was always central in architectural meaning – both emotional and intellectual and understood by the user through the spatio-temporal *situation* (rituals and poetic programs) housed by the architecture – receded in favour of the conception of architecture as *aesthetic object*. Its potential significance could now be "read" out of time. The ultimate accomplishment of this new paradigm, to be found only after 1800, would be an architecture reduced to a sequence of novel or exciting forms for voyeuristic visits in which linear time became an added factor (rather than intrinsic to the situation): what would become known as the *promenade architecturale*, a place for tourism, often better understood through *pictures*, rather than for genuine participatory experience. Buildings could then be conceived as literal frameworks for discursive writing, like Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève, or generated as forms motivated by fictions – yet incapable of transcending their status as aesthetic objects.

Continuing the insights of earlier character theory, two late-eighteenth century French architects, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Nicolas Le Camus de Mezières, sought alternatives to this sort of objectified aesthetics and tried to re-introduce a temporal dimension to architectural meaning. They emphasized the emotional *space-in-between* the inhabitant and the building, the space of action, one never before theorized, and articulated through *open* narratives kindred to much-later surrealist techniques and cinematographic montage.²⁵ The very nature of theoretical writing about architecture was also questioned. This implied a new concept of transmission and education, one that could no longer depend on the assumption of theory as *téchne* or applied science. Boullée, Ledoux, and Viel de Saint-Maux declared the need for a new architectural discourse capable of transcending the limitations of what they mistakenly (yet justifiably in view of the Perrault's interpretation) perceived as the prosaic scientific prescriptions of Vitruvian theory and its re-incarnation in Renaissance and Neoclassical treatises.²⁶ Thus, they thought, the intentions of a new poetic architecture could be better-articulated by engaging narrative forms. Narrative and emplotment gave architects such as Ledoux the tools to imagine an architecture that no longer simply reflected

the conventional order of society, like the *masks* of the earlier eighteenth century architecture. Now fully in the realm of both human politics and fiction, devoid of intrinsic transcendence, architecture acknowledged new responsibilities. Ledoux understood that it became necessary for architecture to project a better future for society, and that this project issued from the critical imagination of the architect/writer rather than from rational analysis or mere societal consensus. His ideal city of Chaux, described in exquisite literary form in his lavish *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'Art, des Moeurs et de la Législation* (1804), proposes life as lived in new institutions, formally innovative yet always seeking a reconciliation with the natural world, a *space of appearance* for the new man of the French Revolution. The new political subject could not dwell in the old classical architecture. Drawing from Rousseau's understanding of historicity, Ledoux was keenly aware of the fact that the new humanity was irremediably other than that of the *Ancien Régime*. Thus he designed places for freedom and responsibility, and his literary description discloses the ethical and moral consequences of living in this new world.

Personal expression became a condition for this poetic possibility – a retrieval of the universal *in* the creative soul of the architect. This realization resonates with the nascent concepts of Romantic philosophy. Le Camus de Mezières imagined the inveterate space of desire transferred to the experience of the private home, shifting the emphasis from the public exterior to interiority, in search of *limits* that could no longer be found in the infinite, homogeneous space of natural science – increasingly (but erroneously) identified in European cultures with actual lived space. Employing descriptive narrative in his treatise *Le Génie de l'Architecture* (1780), he illustrated the manner in which architects must seek to design rooms, qualitative spaces characterized by appropriate moods to specific focal actions; these were to be paradigmatic of harmonic environments, joined and modulated as if in a theatrical experience, in a way that the house itself seduces and becomes a poetic image of dwelling. Every space has its appropriate colours, light, ornaments, textures, and iconography, and prepares the inhabitant for the adjoining room, ultimately leading to a sense of recognition and wholeness in the *boudoir*, literally a space apart, the uncommon sacred place which was the space for love. This is the first instance in the history of architectural discourse in which the *quality* of space becomes the subject matter, and atmospheres and moods are conveyed not through mathematical proportional relationships – like harmony in music – but through poetic words. This is indeed the inception of the modern concept of *Stimmung* or atmosphere, a term that would be used by Romantic philosophy and later passed on to phenomenology and architecture, as for instance in the works and theories of Peter Zumthor. At the time when place, as an intersubjective cosmic *tópos*, was being obliterated from the public's memory, Le Camus sought to retrieve it in *discourse*, in the hope of actualizing it.

Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas has demonstrated how *place* is a condition of consciousness in perception.²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, commenting on Heidegger, adds that mood or

Stimmung, the appropriate atmospheric quality we seek in architecture, "rather than being itself in a place, is the very opening of the world, the very place of Being."²⁸ Agamben elaborates that mood appears as the fundamental existential mode of *Dasein*, not in the ontic but in the ontological plane, "neither within interiority nor in the world, but at their limit."²⁹ One may recall the fundamental phenomenological context of these observations, already expressed by Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna in the second century of our era, when he affirmed the codependent arising of subject, object and action as we experience the world, neither of which terms can be postulated to exist independently or prior to the other.³⁰ One could then conclude that *place* is therefore present in contemporary culture, but hidden by our technological constructs, and it is the task of artifacts like literature, art and architecture to retrieve our attunement. Malpas has further pointed out that *place* emerges with language, but in a sense that we must qualify carefully. As I suggested, it is not language as commonly assumed by constructionist linguists, as an arbitrary code of more or less transparent signs that could be improved and replaced by some universal Esperanto, but rather understood as our fundamental human expressivity: inherently poetic, indicative, polysemic and open, in continuity with the body's own expressivity and gestures, language as our connection to others in view of our primordial social being, and therefore intertwined with cultural habits. Properly understood in this way, language is not arbitrary: it has the capacity of speaking about the world through us, and it comes to fruition in dialogue, through the voice, *Stimme*. The nature of poetic language, which is humanity's original speech, is that it can be translated out of time and place: like the work of art.

Thus, as we come back to consider the relationship of poetic language and architecture, we can immediately identify some crucial issues. Regardless of whether modern and contemporary fiction can truly play the role myth did in pre-modern cultures, as Louis Aragon thought was possible in his "antinovel" *Paris Peasant*, we may expect poetic fiction to function as much more than vague inspiration. Acknowledging its role in design, both in the elaboration of programs and in the disclosure of atmospheres, we can assume that it may further an architecture that gives *place* to significant human action, resonating with the purposefulness which characterizes our biology, even while acknowledging our generalized nihilism, and the fact that contemporary man does not generally believe in the efficacy of ritual as a form of participation through action (one whose results are not necessarily the responsibility of those that act). Most of these questions were first acknowledged by Romantic philosophers who believed the novel was the central form of artistic expression, capable of addressing our modern existential questions better than any other form of discourse; these concerns were taken into the twentieth century in the writings and works of surrealist artists. The novel is now universal, existing across cultures, while other narrative artistic forms, today crucial for our self-consciousness, such as film, illustration and modalities of photography, have taken up the same challenge and added important dimensions. Narrative, poetic language is the privileged medium of moods

and atmospheres, *Stimmungen*, and the expression of *Gemüt*: the Romantic concept of emotional consciousness that anticipated the current neurophenomenological understanding of embodied, emotional cognition.

Paul Ricoeur, Richard Kearny and Elaine Scarry, among others, have suggested in their own ways that the human imagination is primarily linguistic.³¹ Furthermore, we also know through neurobiology that mental images are not picture-like, but rather literal re-enactments of scenes, necessarily operating through language.³² All this poses a fundamental challenge for architects, often consumed by pictures and their iterations.

Understanding the importance of literary language for architecture also entails, fundamentally, grasping the crucial importance of narrative forms to disclose the nature of urban contexts with all their cultural complexities, essential for an ethical and poetic practice of architecture and urban design. This is something that scientific mapping and statistics can never accomplish. Let me emphasize: this is language in continuity with phenomenology, as part of the flesh of the world; language therefore in the sense defined by philosophical hermeneutics, inherently at odds, as Merleau-Ponty points out, with the so-called language of algorithms and its desire for absolute clarity and its unambiguous function as sign.³³ This represents a paradoxical inversion of the conditions that characterized Classical architectural theory with its symbolic mathematical proportions and geometries, necessitated by the changing conditions of culture I discussed in my very first book, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*.³⁴

It is plainly obvious that some of architecture's traditional cultural roles can no longer be implemented. The crisis affecting the profession since the beginning of the European nineteenth century has been well documented. Durand was explicitly responsible for asking architects (for the first time ever) to bypass what he believed were irrelevant issues of linguistic expression in their designs, and simply to solve a functional problem which would repeatedly produce pleasure: seeking biological homeostasis rather than *attunement*, which is by necessity a *concordia discors*. He thought that extruding the building from its plan would bring about meaning automatically: the mere expression of a sign. Such a mathematization of design processes is still with us in all our contemporary fashions and infatuations with the computer. City planners prevailed over architects and urban designers, adopting the values of the engineers in the service of political power and economic expediency: reason, utility and efficiency became the determinants of the physical environment, which was assumed to communicate, if needed, clear semantic messages unencumbered by emotional intentionality. Confronted by the inability of traditional forms and processes to engage new materials and express modern values, architects had no option but to experiment, engaging creative processes to find novel, emotionally charged forms. Like other artistic disciplines engaged in poetic making – a making that attempts not imposition but disclosure, the revelation of something that is *already there* and is thus familiar and habitual to a culture while being also new – architecture has suffered during the last

two centuries the limitations of potential solipsism and near nonsense. In our discipline this is the syndrome of architecture made for architects, *particularly when detached from language* and not framed through appropriate critical questions. This has prolonged the crisis and, some would even claim, the agony of the discipline. Yet the fundamental existential questions to which architecture traditionally answered, the profound necessity for humans to inhabit a resonant world they may call home, even when separated by global technological civilization from an innate sense of place, remain as significant as always.

At this juncture, the call for a careful and multilayered consideration of poetic and hermeneutic language in the generation of architecture and the built environment appears pressing. Narrative forms should be engaged for their fundamental capacity to orient ethical action; this is a call for history as interpretation through stories about the past, one that acknowledges the deep roots of our questions in the history of the Western world. Stories are also important for their unique ability to map architecture's urban context, increasingly synonymous with the human environment at large; they are crucial to set in place human actions, as in Ricoeur's narrative model of *prefiguration, configuration and refiguration*.³⁵ His schema might suggest for architecture a narrative understanding of site as *prefiguration*, form and atmosphere as *configuration*, and lived program as *refiguration*, accounting for the nature of the project as an ethical promise, communicating through emotion and reason. Engaging hermeneutic and poetic language in this fashion we can imagine how architecture may offer better alternatives to reconcile the personal imagination of the architect with an understanding of local cultures and pressing political and social concerns, beyond obsessions with fashion and form: the crucial dilemma we have inherited with our modern condition.

Furthermore, in view of the poverty, neutrality and even hostility of much of our postindustrial environment, narrative mediations of urban space, especially in the form of novels, films and other kindred media, that reveal possibilities for significant human life acquire a growing significance for any architectural practice that may seek to resist the pressures of consumerism, banal functionalism and ideological imperatives. In our pathological urban contexts, it does not suffice to make contorted buildings constructed with unfamiliar materials to house yet more shops and fashionable designers. It is not enough either to merely disrupt habits through effects, without proposing attuned alternatives for human action. An architecture that completes us and lets us dwell, recognizing our human condition, will not issue from any pictorial, formal acrobatics. To this aim, the narrative imagination is crucial, articulating our ethical responsibility from historical precedent and drawing from language a common ground for a better future.

¹ Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life, Biology, Phenomenology and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 403. See also Nick Crossley, *The Social Body* (London UK: Sage, 2001), a remarkably lucid treatment of the issue of intersubjectivity through Merleau-Ponty, and its consequences for the understanding of the social body.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago ILL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

³ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 409-10.

⁴ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 73.

⁵ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 121.

⁶ Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 125.

⁷ Crossley, *Social Body*, 127.

⁸ Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004).

⁹ Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, 79.

¹⁰ Noë, *Out of our Heads, Why You Are not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 107.

¹¹ Noë, *Out of our Heads*, 133.

¹² Crossley, *Social Body*, 80.

¹³ See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1972).

¹⁴ Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. I.D. Rowland and T.N. Howe (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

¹⁵ Crossley, *Social Body*, 148.

¹⁶ A full treatment of this issue is the topic of my recent book: Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: architectural meaning after the crisis of modern science* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016).

¹⁷ See particularly: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964). This is the position of hermeneutic philosophers in the tradition of phenomenology, like Paul Ricoeur and his students. George Steiner also argues against a constructivist theory of language in: George Steiner, *After Babel* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁸ Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, *Précis des leçons d'architecture -1819* (Facs. reprint, München: UHL Verlag, 1981).

Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, bilingual ed. F. Granger (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), Book 1.

²⁰ Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Polifili* (Venice, 1499). There is a recent English translation by Joscelyn Godwin, 1999. See also Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Polyphilo or the Dark Forest Revisited* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992) and ch. 4 in vol. 1 of this collection.

²¹ Guarino Guarini, *Architettura Civile 1737* (Facs. reprint, Milano: Edizione il Polifilo, 1968).

²² See Ch. 8 of vol. 1 in this collection, and Claude Perrault, *Claude Perrault's Ordonnance for the Five Kinds of Columns after the Method of the Ancients*, trans. I.K. McEwen (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993).

²³ Jacques-François Blondel, *Cours d'Architecture ou Traité de la Decoration, Distribution et Construction des Bâtimens* (Paris, 1771), 9 vols, vol. 1, 376.

²⁴ Jacques-François Blondel, *Architecture Française* (Paris, 1752), 318.

²⁵ Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *L'architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, de mœurs et se la législation -1804* (Facs. reprint, München: UHL Verlag, 1981); Nicolas Le Camus de Mezières, *Le génie de l'architecture -1780* (Facs. reprint, Genève: Minkoff, 1972).

²⁶ Etienne-Louis Boullée, *Essai sur l'art* (Paris: Hermann, 1968); Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux, *Lettres sur l'architecture des anciens et celles des modernes -1787* (Facs. reprint, Genève: Minkoff, 1974).

²⁷ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Jenny Doussan, *Time, Language and Visuality in Agamben's Philosophy* (London UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22-3.

²⁹ Ibid. Citing Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. K. Pinkus (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

³⁰ Nargajuna, *Stanzas of the Middle Way*, cited in Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991), 221.

³¹ See for example, Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), and Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³² Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 278-9. Thompson explains that in fact we visualize an object or a scene by mentally enacting or entertaining a possible perceptual experience of that scene.

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 5.

³⁴ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1984).

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3. vols. (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Narrazioni, linguaggio, architettura e città

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linguaggio; storia dell'architettura; cultura; narrazioni; comunità urbane

ABSTRACT

Il saggio offre una prospettiva alternativa sul tema delle narrazioni urbane, stabilendo legami tra la città, teorie della psicologia cognitiva e storia dell'architettura. Ormai trascurato sotto una prospettiva storica, il potere delle narrazioni in architettura viene quindi indagato alle sue radici più intime. Il documento riesce in questo lavoro attingendo alle teorie della psicologia cognitiva e semiotica, gettando luce sull'architettura attraverso i suoi utenti. L'individuo nella società, la costruzione della propria soggettività e le contaminazioni intersoggettive proprie delle comunità urbane sono fenomeni intrinsecamente legati all'ambiente urbano, in una continua interazione tra azioni e abitudini, tra fenomeni e consolidata, consolidando la costruzione delle narrazioni. Emerge così un nuovo spazio per l'architettura. Uno spazio che non solo sostiene come rifugio ma influenza anche queste abitudini, partecipando attivamente al processo di formazione allo storytelling urbano.

Così, come parte di un tutto, l'architetto trova il suo posto nelle narrazioni culturali contemporanee, abbandonando l'idea deterministica di un creatore in grado di sfruttare e sistematizzare la complessità urbana attraverso dei parametri.

La ricerca dell'unione tra linguaggio e architettura viene poi indagata in episodi selezionati della storia dell'architettura, evidenziando la presenza di questo rapporto, da sempre trascurato dalla modernità.

Le conclusioni dell'autore sostengono un ritorno del linguaggio come il territorio culturale su cui impostare nuove implicazioni dell'architettura. Al di là della sua dimensione etica, al di là dell'unica capacità espressiva delle sue forme, l'architettura può diventare contemporanea riscoprendo la potenza del suo linguaggio.

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