

Architecture Not Language – A Note on Representation

Richard Francis-Jones

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Issues of representation or meaning in architecture seem to bring such insecurity to architects, theorists and critics alike, that we immediately set off in desperate searches of other fields for credible explanations that can in some way be applied to architecture. This tendency to explain architecture with reference to other arts has been evident since the beginning of the modern period. But in more recent times references—particularly to literary theory—have become normative. Architectural theorists, critics and commentators seem to prefer excursions into literary theory for borrowed insight, rather than genuine investigation into the nature of our art.

Among architects themselves, there is a certain feeling of inadequacy, an embarrassment about our craft to the extent that we envy so-called purer arts that do not suffer the pollution of function or the limitations of construction. This art envy is evident in the projection of architecture as sculpture in the work of such architects as Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry, and in the proliferation of overworked graphic simulations so prevalent in our numerous publications.

Not that we should be hermetically sealed within architecture: clearly this would be a contradiction of the collective and social nature of our work. But it is necessary to take great care with references and searches outside architecture. There is danger in turning to other arts to seek models and rules, as in this way architecture can be reduced to mere translation, with its subtlety, specificity and complexity consequently obscured.

This is particularly the case in discussion and investigation of the issue of architectural representation, where the turn to literary analogy is most common. Architecture is often discussed in terms of syntax, text, palimpsest, etc., and it is suggested that architecture is a language, or perhaps many languages, as the term “language” in architecture now appears to be synonymous with style. But architecture is not a language. It does not communicate like language. It is not spoken, written or read. It is built, crafted, assembled and inhabited. It is a social and collective endeavour.

This misunderstanding of the representational nature of architecture, so prevalent in contemporary debate, can possibly be traced back to the birth of modernity and the fundamental split, or fracture, in architecture that

followed: a fracture that began to separate the surface from construction, intellect from craft, image from the reality of making, and theory from practice.

Perhaps the first signs of this fracture can be located in the work of Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72). Alberti did not rise through the guilds or trades; his interest in architecture was primarily intellectual. His famous treatise on architecture contains no illustrations; architecture was to be thought, idealised and theorised. Alberti placed great emphasis on the idealised representational role of the façade, most clearly illustrated in the Palazzo Rucellai (1446–51) in Florence, where an idealised conception is applied over the actual reality of its assembly and construction. The stone construction of the façade economically

conforms to the restriction of the block size and coursing but is completely masked through the application of an independent veneer that geometrically idealises and represents. With the

Palazzo Rucellai, the fracture of modern dualism has been made and the space opens between the surface and construction, between the intellectual architect who reads and the master craftsman who makes, between the idealised image and the reality of its making.

Despite many attempts to repair this fracture in architecture—such as the eighteenth-century Enlightenment search for absolutes and origins within a structural logic¹—the space of modern dualism continued to open, to the extent that in the nineteenth century architecture was reduced to the conception of a series of ready-made representations of moral and historic ideals: a value-free eclecticism, a veneer of good manners drawn over an instrumental rationality.

But at the beginning of the twentieth century, modern architecture made a heroic attempt to bridge this increasing gap or representational void, through the tearing away of the idealised façade and outright rejection of stylistic and metaphorical devices of tradition. Modern architecture was not viewed as neutral constructions on whose surfaces representation is displayed, but as an autonomous, internal and abstract search for meaning behind reality. Abstract modernism turned inwards, separating from the world of myth and tradition in an autonomous search for truth and Utopia. This search of seemingly absolute formalism was intimately and ideologically connected with the new technology and actual productive forces of society. Although built largely with traditional materials and techniques, modern architecture projected an idealised representation of technology and myth of the new Utopia.²

However, after World War II, when the building technologies proposed by modern architecture began to succeed in the realm of production, idealised and rhetorical representations faded. The forms of Modern architecture, seemingly out of ideological necessity, became perfectly transparent to function, pure instruments of the production process. Architecture was reduced to serviced, sealed containers, glazed within the ubiquitous structural frame, barely registering either use or location. This bankruptcy of architectural representation left a void in modern architecture, an absence of content raised to a poetic silence in Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building in New York of 1958.

The "almost nothing" has become a "big glass"... reflecting images of the urban chaos that surrounds the timeless Miesian purity... It accepts [the shift and flux of the phenomena], absorbs them to themselves in a perverse multi-duplication, like a Pop Art sculpture that obliges the American metropolis to look at itself reflected... in the neutral mirror that breaks the city web. In this, architecture arrives at the ultimate limits of its own possibilities. Like the last notes sounded by the Doctor Faustus of Thomas Mann, alienation, having become absolute, testifies uniquely to its own presence, separating itself from the world to declare the world's incurable malady.³

After the Seagram building there were some attempts to breath life into this silent emptiness—for example, in the rhetorical worship of structure and desperate display of services in works by high tech architects: artificial life-support systems strapped to neutral constructions in the hope that some sign of meaning would emerge.

However, the bridge of the modern project that offered some hope of restoring the fracture in architecture seemed too difficult to cross. The modern project was abandoned and the separation that brought this crisis of representation was embraced. The multiple languages of post-modernism filled the silence and covered the modern emptiness. Architecture returned to the convenience of a separation most clearly expressed in Robert Venturi's

concept of the 'decorated shed': idealised, clever and witty representations were applied to neutral constructions—a system admirably suited to contemporary production methods and speculative development. This is the period of multiple architectural languages, over-intellectualism and extensive borrowing from literary theory: loud, scenographic representations of little or no tangible meaning or significance, completely separated from the craft of architecture.

Furthermore, the predominance of the photographic image over the built reality, and the publication over the work, in contemporary architectural culture increases this separation of surface from construction, image from reality, theory from practice.

Our contemporary pluralism of architectural languages seems a little like the ill-fated Tower of Babel. The project of architecture collapses and disappears beneath the multiple languages that merely talk architecture.

It is therefore necessary to understand architectural representation beyond this intellectual separation. Architecture is not really like language; it is not read like text. It is at once more direct and ambiguous: it is an art that we inhabit. Architecture's representational force derives from the way it frames and orients us in relation to the world. It is perhaps most accurately understood as the proposition of alternative realities within reality, worlds within the world.⁴

In architecture, representations of reality are explored and postulated through the formal relations of the building and the reality of its making—not merely through the surface application of an idealised image but through the spatial organisation, formal order, structure, construction and specific relation with the site and interpretation of the programme.

Thus, the representational nature, or meaning, in architecture does not depend on its stability, function or the efficiency of the means of its production, but on the way in which all of these have been limited and subordinated or transformed by purely formal requirements. Purpose is therefore not a restrictive condition that compromises our art, but an integral element of specific representation.

Architectural representations should not simply present a record or expression of reality, but should provide critical frames within which to understand our human condition. The presence of conflict in our society should be acknowledged, together with the need for social criticism and social engagement of architecture as a critical activity. We shall therefore be made aware of the conditions of our lives through the construction of alternative realities within which things are reset in a slightly different order.

Architectural representation becomes the making of critical frames in which to understand reality, a formal means of cognitive effect, with an ethical and social purpose.

This is far removed from individual acts of personal expression or the generation of recognisable personal styles. Critical representations are not simplistic statements of the world's contradictions and conflict, nor false reassurances of our well being. Social contradictions should not merely be stated, but should be critically examined and resolutions sought.

Finally, it is important to emphasise architectural representation not as a separate intellectual act of idealism but as relative and specific investigations. Meaning in architecture does not come from the work's detachment from the world, but from the way it frames and transforms as an extension of its site and ethical interpretation of its social purpose.