

ARCHITECTURE AS LANGUAGE

On the narrative character of architecture

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1. A research perspective

The deep relation between Architecture and language has been frequently affirmed throughout the history of architecture (Simitch 2014). Mies van der Rohe states the analogy between architectural design and language: “*I’m not working on Architecture [...] I’m working on Architecture as a language. You have to have a grammar in order to have a language. And then you can speak in prose. And if you are really good, you can be a poet.*” Language is used by architects to paraphrase the experience of their work, to spotlight and emphasize the ideas, the visions and the meanings that may be hidden to the observer.

The explicit reference between lexical senses and spatial forms opens a significative level of analysis of the process of signifying in architecture. We use the metaphor of ‘*the narrative character of architecture*’ to qualify the illocutionary intent of the architect, so that the connotation mechanism and its evolution throughout the design process becomes a primary object of an investigation about the ideative phase of design. Hence, the proposed perspective of analysis is about semantics and the generation of senses, inevitably dependent on the domain of architecture, and definitely idiosyncratic, at least as the textual analysis of novels. It is an attempt to define a direct description of the ideation process without any reference to its psychological genesis or to causal structures that complementary scientific approaches can provide (Schon 1991)(Oxman 1994)(Cross 2011). This approach is aimed at defining open ended means for telling the

rich and deep interpretative schemas of the works of architecture that can be used in many situations, not least in education.

2. Methodology and preliminary results

Architects frequently talk about the *driving concepts* when they talk or write about their design work. A handful of concepts is often at the nucleus of a design, they convey its gestalt qualities and usually express a more profound level of meaning, bridging the elusive qualities and relationships occurring among the architect's graphic gestures. We point out this level of signification by calling it *character*. Characters are the main units of signification, crossing the border between the lexical and graphical signs.

Hence, three types of knowledge are used to trace the definition of characters: *lexical*, *visual*, and *objective*. Lexical knowledge is made of lexemes, either single words or groups of words, which are well grounded on the standard denotative semantics, as usually found in dictionaries. Lexemes are linked each other according to a set of semantic relations as synonym, hyperonym, meronymy, etc. Visual knowledge is made of design sketches at different level of abstraction. We distinguish among sketches that depicts some degree of reality and sketches that are pure abstract figures, since they convey a different semantic contents. Objective knowledge is made of faithful depictions of real things.

Tracing or figuring out the emerging of relations among elements of these different knowledge types, along the design timeline, let us point out the dynamic of the ideation process. As far as design characters emerge, new senses and new narrations overlaps during the course of time, and the complexity of the design sense becomes more and more open to the sight of the understating.

Interestingly this dynamic can be observed, as it really occurs during design sessions using protocol analysis, and designers can be qualified in terms of the quality and of the richness of their discourse semantics.

References

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