



Philosophy of Architecture



Erasmus+

Lecture 4. Meaning and other language-like phenomena in architecture

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4.1. Introductory remarks

Historically, the analogy between architecture and language was based on certain similarities on the level of grammar and syntax categories.

This and also semantic aspect is important when we are analyzing communication aspects of architecture. Architecture can communicate to us stylistic as well as local and national cultural identities.

But the semantic features of architecture, also semantic information regarding various local identities that figures out as certain typological memory, can act as a catalyzer of creational solutions what can be made by architects and town planners, and of course by the heritage conservators.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

The architecture-language analogy is at least as old as Vitruvius.

The Renaissance humanists made this analogy a central principle of architectural theory. The search for a canon of architectural rules was likened to the literary imitation of the Latin masters. And in the classical orders, and the sets of rules that governed their combination and distribution, sixteenth-century Renaissance architects and theorists created a recognisable grammar of ornament, what amounted to a syntax.

On these classically impeccable foundations the architecture-language comparison, in all its manifestations, entered the mainstream of Renaissance and post-Renaissance architecture in western Europe, as a theory of design and a practical technique for classification and knowledge.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

The style of individual architects was likened to literary styles; architecture was compared to eloquence, as an art both useful (communicative) and pleasing (emotionally powerful), the evolution of architectural style was likened to the slow growth of a natural language', and the nature of architectural composition came to be related to linguistic structures: the elements or parts of the building (profiles, mouldings, etc.) were to architecture what words were to sentences.

But the metaphor of language, used figuratively as an illustration or example, could not conceal the fundamental differences between visual and linguistic forms.

To theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the architecture-language analogy failed to stand up to detailed analysis; it was more of a conceit than a model.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

Architecture did not permit the same clarity and accuracy of expression as language, nor did it tolerate the same diversity of styles as the vernacular languages.

The elementary forms of buildings, unlike words in speech, were not arbitrary, as in language, but derived from permanent, universal, and scientific laws (i.e., those of statics). Architectures intrinsic qualities were to do with technical and aesthetic values, not the imitative and phonetic properties of sculpture and painting.

Linguistic philosophers, semioticians, and literary theorists have argued that language provides the model for all the symbolic systems that constitute the arts, including the visual.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

If all human activity is expressive, and all modes of expression - verbal and visual - share certain permanent structures of the mind, structures that are essentially linguistic, then architecture, along with the other visual arts, behaves much like a text, and the relations between architecture and language are resolved, ultimately, around questions of grammar.

But can the elements of architecture be compared to the classic units of linguistics, and if so, do they behave in similar ways? What is the exact relation between the rules of grammar in the written and spoken word and the conventions used for the ordering of architectural parts, particularly the classical orders?

Both might be described as systems of communication, but what is the nature of the architectural sign, and what is the specific mode of knowledge presupposed by architectural and 'natural' languages?

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

Architectural signs are surely perceived very differently from those of speech or text: unlike texts, art cannot construct discrete linear sequences carrying information.

Susanne K. Langer has adapted Lessings distinction between narrative and presentative modes into an aesthetic position that separates language as, primarily, a "discursive form," and the arts as essentially "presentational forms" symbolic of feeling.

The former derives its meaning by placing one symbolic element - words, punctuation marks, figures, letters - after another in a significant order, sequentially, and therefore in the dimension of time.

The latter presents us with a form of an entirely different kind, a Gestalt, an organic unity, perceived and apprehended as a whole and therefore inexpressible in any other way than through itself.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

To this neo-Kantian view of an inexpressible, ideal unity of art, George Steiner has added his own reading of artistic language - literary as well as visual - as a hermetic system that conceals rather than reveals its true meanings.

For Steiner the communicative powers of languages as the conveyors of information are far less important than the function of languages - all languages - to conceal, to make fictional.

There is no sign of consensus between these two extreme positions - the one preoccupied, some would say disproportionately, with language as the primary category of experience, the other eager to cordon off each system of representing the world as genetically different discourses.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

The theoretical links between the visual arts and language suggested by linguistic philosophy, structuralism, or the science of semiotics cannot and must not be ignored in any discussion of a unified theory of the arts, but nor can the theoretical issues be isolated from the particular pressures, values, conflicts, and interests that produced them.

Critical analysis goes hand in hand with historical contextualism. With this approach in mind, we can have a broad view of the relations between architecture and language.

The language analogy was enlisted by architects and architectural theorists for all sorts of purposes that have little to do with what architecture intrinsically is.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

But what of the essential resemblances between architecture and language? How we can define architecture as language? What does architecture say.' and how does it say it? The first, and obvious, identification between architecture and language lies in their shared semiotic and semantic powers.

Certain authors identify architecture as a system of communication and expression, though the ambiguities of image and form versus the clarity of verbal discourse mean that architectural significance will never have the semantic precision of the spoken or written word.

Architectural style, for example, was often identified as a potent sign of national identity, whether of French cultural imperialism in the Angevin Gothic of southern Italy, or of Anglo-Norman English' in the distinctively English' Gothic of the British Isles in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

Classicism could also evoke supranational values for social groups whose class interests transcended national identities.

Whatever the precision and diversity of its messages, architecture emerges as a semiotic system of some flexibility and strength.

The second obvious, and much-cited, identification between architecture and language lies in an area diametrically opposed to the semiotic or semantic powers of languages: in the structural and non-mimetic character of both discourses.

Like grammar (the rules governing the relations of words in a sentence and their correct usage), the classical theory of the orders gave architects a set of rules for the combination and distribution of architectural parts into the equivalent of syntax (in linguistics the combination of individual words to convey meaning).

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

Cammy Brothers argues that the orders (unlike other aspects of classical architecture such as ground plans or spaces) were easy to integrate into a modern building: they established a system of mutual constraints that controlled the design of an entire façade, from the largest containing elements to the smallest decorative details.

Beside this grammatical discipline, which made the building - like a sentence - expressive and intelligible, the more flexible proportions of mediaeval constructive geometry, into which a myriad of details were slotted without a coherent set of modular ratios, seemed to some Italian commentators, particularly Vasari and Palladio, like babble and confusion.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

As we see, the parallels between linguistic and architectural structures are more ambiguous and more complicated than these comparisons suggest.

In the creation of a systematic architectural theory by Italian humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the vocabulary and figurae of classical rhetoric, indeed the conceptual structures of classical treatises and discussions on rhetoric, had a decisive influence.

4.2. The architecture-language analogy

They emphasise that the recovery of the classical style was not a matter of rigid rules but of creative imitation, for which the closest parallel was the literary emulation of the Latin masters.

The contrast between the mediaeval reluctance to formulate any independent aesthetic principles for architecture and the Renaissance humanists' use of language and metaphor to create the structures and terms of a systematic theory is nicely exemplified in the notion of decorum - the fitness of form to purpose and meaning.

When Alberti articulated decorum as a category of visual interest in painting, sculpture, and architecture, he set it within a theoretical framework and confirmed its value as an instrument of art criticism up to the Enlightenment.

4.2. The role of semantics in creation of architecture

He couched the notion in humanists' Latin, and - most significantly - he borrowed the idea and its associations from language, from Aristotle's and Cicero's justification of the need for decorum in poetry, rhetoric, and architecture. Just as the poet and orator must work within the boundaries of propriety and decorum if their words are to be affective and persuasive, so the painter must render the human body according to character, age, and status, and the architect "adapt the magnificence of the building to the dignity of the owner.

Words, said Wittgenstein, are the gears that mesh with our behaviour: and in the defining way in which humanist Latin and its vocabulary classified and enforced observation.

4.2. The role of semantics in creation of architecture

Renaissance theories of the visual arts exemplify the broad conclusions of modern philosophies of language - that language is not just a label that attaches names to already-existing, objectively separate things, but is a set of concepts that help to create the very categories in which we experience the world.

Latin rhetoric and grammar, more than any other single agent, defined and reorganised the humanists' visual consciousness. Baxandall neatly summarises the process: 'The words were the system.'

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4.2. The role of semantics in creation of architecture

The semantic information plays great role in presenting sociocultural memory.

The importance of the consideration of *memory*, i.e. of information that introduces the consistent patterns of the process of evolution understood as *becoming* for the preservation of the identity of a dynamic system is proved by the theory of the dynamic system organization, by molecular biology and semiotics.

The memory of a system (when cyclically and recursively participating in the process on the basis of feedback with respect to the system itself) functions as a specific auto catalyser that certifies to the protection of the system's identity in the chronologically following historical synchronic cut despite any external impacts.

4.2. The role of semantics in creation of architecture

Semiotics accentuates the importance of semantic information (something external; of social dimension) in the text formation.

In the feedback that takes place within the interaction between the creator (author) and the initial text as if in a kind of auto catalyst loops where the memory of the signs or *semantics* functions. The semantic component that lays both behind the initial text (i.e. as the foundation for design) and the final text embody the memory.

However, it remains hidden in the space of semantics since it solely reveals a hypersemantic aspect. As a certain 'field' (analogy with a field that is made up of any radiant substance and whose effect is catalytic) it also manifests itself as a specific text whose quality is exclusively functional: it operates not as a message but rather as a code encompassing the information about the very type of language (and functioning as catalyzer).

4.2. The role of semantics in creation of architecture

Such an organizing principle of operation is found in the metaphorical and mythical mechanisms.

At present the individual characteristics of localities as well as their architectural and environmental objects are treated “objectively” treated. Their descriptions are introduced in the form of an “objective passport” which is unsatisfactory from a holistic point of view.

Finally the treatment of the peculiarities of a certain locality by applying the principle of “subjectivity” could be much more reasonable.

In the mentioned case priority should be given to conceptual modeling of the locality’s own history also taking into account the evolution of other localities of the same type as a background, thus demonstarting the experience of its evolution in a broader context.

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Such kind of information should guarantee a fruitful dialogue (through appropriate representatives, such as governmental institutions, designers, etc) between the community and a locality itself that is recognized as a living and even “thinking” organism (on the basis of systemic and organism qualities).

Here a “subjective passport” may be regarded as a kind of an “intellectual” model of a locality (where memory represents the “interests” and “possibilities” of it as a certain subjectivity).

Memory itself could be understood as a set of concepts that are semantic interpretators in terms of preservation of locality’s identity defined on the basis of its evolution.

In such a case, “subjective passports” prepared in the mentioned way essentially come out as locality’s “semantic passports”.

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The structure of such passports could follow the pattern of semantic dictionaries, i.e. the Thesaurus type where search of information acquires a dynamic rather than linear character.

The newly-developed theory of system evolution and organization (I. Prigogin, I. Stengers) says that any dynamic system as a living organism in critical points of development (making project decisions by designers and politicians is exactly such a point for a locality) must respect its experiential memory in order to preserve its identity in the future.

The effect of such an experiential memory reminds the functioning of autocatalytic loops in chemistry as well as the morphogenesis of an embryo in molecular biology.

In our case, memory in the form of Thesaurus is an element enabling such an autocatalysis of a locality regarding as a dynamic system.

4.2. The role of semantics in creation of architecture

Information concerning a locality which could be found in the Thesaurus of locality as a “semantic passport” should allow the differentiation of attributes of “core” and “peripheral” significance (in the latter case they are common to various localities and thus less important from the point of view of preserving the identity of a certain locality).

Also, there exists demand to present information about important attributes of a locality that have been lost during the course of evolution, thus revealing the potential to regenerate them, if they are still important on a conceptual plane.

All the possibilities of innovation are very important because they could allow to express in locality the creative individuality of contemporary architects and in such a way to give a chance for locality subjectivity to last in future.

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For the cultural heritage objects and cultural localities such “semantic passports” could be prepared, where the the “core” features of localities within a different taxonomic radius should be explicated.

Such knowledge bases could be implemented as important components of environmental management and monitoring systems that are based on new informational technologies, including expert systems and geographical information systems - GIS.

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