

## HOW DO BUILDINGS MEAN? SOME ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION IN THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

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Architectural history as we know it has been written tacitly adhering to the crudest version of the paradigm of communication: all the attention has been focussed on the design of the new forms, none on their interpretation. It is time to realize, that even within the limits of the paradigm of communication, there should be a history of meaning, not only a history of forms.

Juan Pablo Bonta

You think philosophy is difficult enough, but I can tell you it is nothing to the difficulty of being a good architect.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

### ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest from historians in the built environment, the use of architecture as evidence remains remarkably under-theorized. Where this issue has been discussed, the interpretation of buildings has often been likened to the process of reading, in which architecture can be understood by analogy to language: either as a code capable of use in communicating the architect's intentions or more literally as a spoken or written language in its own right. After a historiographical survey, this essay, by contrast, proposes that the appropriate metaphor is one of translation. More particularly, it draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to suggest that architecture—and the interpretation of architecture—comprises a series of transpositions. As a building is planned, built, inhabited, and interpreted, so its meaning changes. The underlying logic of each medium shapes the way in which its message is created and understood. This suggests that the proper role of the historian is to trace these transpositions. Buildings, then, can be used as a historical source, but only if the historian takes account of the particular problems that they present. In short, architecture should not be studied for its meaning, but for its meanings. As historians we are always translating architecture: not reading its message, but exploring its multiple transpositions.

### I

Architecture is widely perceived to possess meaning: to be more than mere structure. As Umberto Eco has noted, “we commonly do experience architecture as communication, even while recognizing its functionality.” Yet how that meaning is inscribed, how that communication works, and how it can be interpreted by historians remains unclear. For some writers, architecture—like all the arts—is an emanation of the *Zeitgeist*. For others, it should be understood as an expression of the underlying social order, or as an aspect of deep culture. Still others would interpret it as a self-contained sign system, with its own grammar, syntax, and ways of meaning. What unites these authors, however, is the idea that architecture can be understood by analogy to language: either as a “‘code’ capable of use to communicate the architect’s ‘intentions’ to the users of their buildings,” or more literally as an equivalent to spoken or written language in its own right. As a consequence, they imply, architecture is a text that can be read. By contrast, this essay will seek to show that these suppositions are unhelpful to the historian. Architecture is not, in reality, simply a language, and buildings cannot, in actuality, simply be read. Rather, the process of designing, building, and interpreting architecture should be

likened, not to reading, but to a series of translations. This analogy arguably offers a more helpful approach to architectural history, which is more like translation than it is like reading. More precisely, I shall suggest that architectural interpretation—and indeed architecture itself—is analogous to a series of transpositions. This argument, which draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, rests upon three assumptions. The first is that architecture, like all meaningful human action, is capable of being understood; that it is, as Paul Ricoeur would have it, in some respects a text. Indeed, as Bakhtin has observed, “if the word ‘text’ is understood in the broad sense—as any coherent complex of signs—then even the study of art . . . deals with texts.” The problem is that buildings are a particular sort of text: one that bears very little similarity to verbal, linguistic, or even artistic texts. As such, the idea that they can be read—read in the same way that one reads a novel, a portrait, or even an archaeological site—simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Architecture is instrumental as well as ornamental and symbolic; it serves a function; it is subject to the laws of physics; and it is also an art form. Second, architecture and architectural interpretation involve a wide of variety of media and genres. Simply to represent this as text *tout court* misunderstands the multiplicity of texts encountered by an architectural historian. Third, and finally, it can be argued that as a structure evolves from conception to construction and then to interpretation, both the intention of the creator and the meaning comprehended by the interpreter may change. Following Bakhtin, these three assumptions provoke two conclusions. First, that the historian should attempt to understand the evolution of a building as a series of transpositions: with meaning in each transposition shaped by the logic of the genre or medium in which it is located. Second, it can also be argued that these multiple transpositions—these manifold texts—together make up the work of architecture itself. The historian’s role, I will conclude, is to trace these transpositions, and in that way uncover the many meanings of architecture.

## II

The assumption that buildings are a means of conveying meaning is not, of course, a new one. In 1745 Germain Boffrand contended that “An edifice, by its composition, expresses as on a stage that the scene is pastoral or tragic, that it is a temple or a palace, a public building destined for a specific use, or a private house. These different edifices, through their disposition, their structure, and the manner in which they are decorated, should announce their purpose to the spectator.” Indeed, he went on to suggest that “the profiles of mouldings and other parts which compose a building are to architecture what words are to speech.” Nor was he alone. From Vitruvius to Venturi, architects and writers on architecture have maintained that buildings are more than utilitarian; they are instruments by which emotions, ideas, and beliefs are articulated. Thus we can understand the buildings of the Acropolis as evidence of the social life and religious practice of Periclean Athens; the castles of medieval England as the embodiment of Arthurian idealism; and even the buildings of Disneyland as part of “the architecture of reassurance.” Nor is this perception confined solely to writers—it is shared by architects, too. Just as Augustus Pugin’s neo-Gothic nineteenth-century churches were intended to articulate Christian values and inspire Catholic revival, so Norman Foster’s rebuilt Reichstag was intended to express a commitment to democracy through its architectural form. Intuitively, too, it seems wholly unproblematic to imagine that we can interpret a building and understand its meaning. This intuition, moreover, appears to be supported by experience. “Meaning in the environment,” as Charles Jencks has suggested, “is inescapable, even for those who would deny or deplore it.” As children we learn to make sense of the world around us through the visual and spatial cues of the buildings we encounter. In adults this process continues. The result is a sophisticated engagement with architecture, in which the architect’s intentions and the interpreters’ experiences shape and construct meaning. For as Juan-Pablo Bonta put it, “efforts to construct a meaning-proof architecture have always been *de facto* unsuccessful. . . . An architecture designed to be meaningless— or, more

precisely, an architecture interpreted as intended to be meaningless— would *mean* the desire to be meaningless, and thus could not actually *be* meaningless.”

Increasingly historians have also come to accept the value of the built environment as historical evidence. In the last twenty years, studies of medieval and early modern court life, of town halls and town houses, of schools, hospitals, factories, and even embassies, have all attempted to uncover the meaning inherent in architecture. More and more historians have come to share Robert Tittler’s insight that

Something valuable has been lost in the movement of professional historians away from the physical evidence of the past. For all its obvious virtues, our near exclusive pre-occupation with written or spoken sources has overwhelmed a consciousness of the physical record, the built environment of past societies, which was so central to the likes of Gibbon, Burckhardt, and Henry Adams.

Some of these histories owe their inspiration to the work of such figures as Michel Foucault or Edward Said. Others are more obviously indebted to Erwin Panofsky or Nikolaus Pevsner. Still others refer to Clifford Geertz, E. P. Thompson, Henri Lefebvre, or Edward Saja. But quite what each and all of them are doing with architecture remains unclear. How they conceive buildings as conveying meaning is often left opaque. Nor should this surprise us. While the use of images and of art by historians is the subject of a significant literature, the use of architecture is relatively unexplored from an analytical perspective.

In the fields of art history and of archaeology, by contrast, the debate about the interpretation of meaning is both highly significant and highly developed. Although there continue to be serious disagreements, the idea that an image or an object can both convey meaning and be used as historical evidence is axiomatic for many practitioners. Art historians have shown that paintings and drawings, photographs and sculpture can illuminate the intentions of the artist, the patron, and the wider culture in which the artifact is produced. Archaeologists have similarly sought to derive meaning from objects, interpreting intention and positing communication. Increasingly—and interestingly—this analysis also takes into account responses to these media, showing that there is a history of reception as well as of production; a history of the gaze as well as of the brushstroke. More intriguingly still, both art historians and archaeologists have persistent recourse to the metaphors of language and text when discussing their disciplines. A broad consensus, for example, has emerged that concludes that photography is language; that a photograph “communicates by means of some hidden, or implicit, text.” So too art historians have produced a “feminist reading” of Impressionism, have advocated “reading the messages” of Celtic art, and have practiced “Reading Medieval Images.” Equally, archaeology can be understood—in Ian Hodder’s words—as a process of “reading the past.” In that respect both art history and archaeology share a similar understanding of meaning, an approach to interpretation that is comparable to that of conventional architectural history. Nonetheless, there are good reasons for thinking that the models offered by these two disciplines are not strictly pertinent to the study of architecture. The differences in subject and in sources suggest that a different approach is necessary. In relation to art history, in particular, it needs to be borne in mind that although architecture is an art it is also more than an art. Architecture, unlike many arts, exists in three dimensions. Architecture, unlike most arts, is not primarily representational. Architecture, unlike all other arts, serves a functional as well as an aesthetic role. The architect Louis Kahn once commented that while a painter can paint square wheels on a cannon to express the futility of war, and a sculptor can carve the same square wheels, an architect must always use round wheels. Although he was making a polemical point, his aphorism does hold true: a building must not just look good; it must also serve a purpose. It must house or contain, protect and sustain. Architecture thus serves a dual role. It is, as Ralph Rapson

once commented, “both a fine art and a highly precise social and physical science.” As such, the tools of art history may not on their own be the most appropriate ones for historians of architecture to use.

The insights of archaeologists can also be problematic, despite the superficial similarity of their subject. True, they often explore the built environment. It is true, too, that any such analysis will necessarily take account of both its functional and symbolic qualities. Archaeologists also stress the need to assess the way in which a building relates to its environment, to neighboring buildings, and to the landscape. But the difference between the study of architecture in the historic and prehistoric worlds is significant—and becomes more so throughout time. Put plainly, the range of evidence available to historians is simply far greater—and not only because they usually deal with buildings that are extant. More importantly, architectural historians of the modern world can also draw on a wide variety of non-material evidence. This may include specific knowledge about the architect, patron, and purpose of the building. It may also include its reception and interpretation—both by contemporaries and by subsequent critics. Architectural historians are also often as interested in the plan, the brief, the representation of a building in pictures, photographs, and maps, as they are in the building itself. Moreover, architectural history encompasses things that were not built—and were never meant to be; things that were not built—but were intended to be; and the theory of architecture more generally. These aspects of architectural history transcend the purely archaeological. They also raise serious methodological problems. But if neither art history nor archaeology offers a clear way forward, what does? It is clear that there is a problem here, and the solution seems opaque at best. *Pace* John Gloag, it is simply not the case that “Buildings cannot lie,” or that “they tell the truth directly or by implication about those who made or used them,” much less that “architecture is a living language that may be understood without acquiring a lot of detailed technical knowledge.” Not only is this unhistorical, it also ignores the wide variety of media and genres with which the architectural historian is presented. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that many writers have chosen to ignore the methodological issues that arise from their subject. Nor is it remarkable that other authors have begun to have doubts about it in principle. George Bernard, for example, has questioned whether the buildings of Tudor England possess anything more than purely aesthetic meaning. “Was in the end architecture not simply more about architecture . . . than it was about power or politics or anything else?” he asks. Kevin Johnston and Nancy Gonlin have posed the same problem in their study of Mayan commoner residences. While conceding that buildings can convey meaning, they nonetheless doubt that current research has truly uncovered precisely what that meaning is. “We must ask ourselves,” they write, “whose meanings do such studies retrieve, and how representative are such meanings of . . . society as a whole?” It is an important problem—and it raises many questions. How should the historian respond to it? Even if architecture does convey meaning, can a historian ever really uncover it? What is needed is a securely theorized approach.

### III

One strategy might be to return to the origins of architectural history, to explore how previous writers have sought to answer these questions. Although books on architectural practice have proliferated throughout the ages—from Vitruvius to Palladio and from Serlio to Gilbert Scott—the history of architecture really only became a subject of study in the eighteenth century. It grew, rather unself-consciously, out of antiquarianism, and the assumptions made by eighteenth-century antiquarians have remained remarkably influential throughout the evolution of the discipline. For writers like John Carter and John Britton, writing in the 1780s and 1810s, architectural style was presumed to be indicative of social and intellectual development. It was also strongly linked to national culture. Consequently, for many eighteenth-century Englishmen, Gothic architecture was synonymous with native liberty: the

translation of such quintessentially English values as “plain speaking, plain food, sincerity and frankness” into an architectural idiom. Similarly, historians like Edward Gibbon saw the “decline” of the arts and of architecture as expressive of the corruption of the Roman Empire. Perhaps the most important figure in the development of architectural history of this period was Johann Joachim Winckelmann. For although his focus was not strictly architectural, he was nonetheless hugely influential. In his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1763) Winckelmann argued that climate and culture, politics and intellectual life, all shaped the art of a period. Or, in other words, it could be shown that a piece of art was a good index of the spirit of the time in which it was produced. This presupposition was to become a core principle of much subsequent writing. As Arnold Hauser put it, with only a little exaggeration: “Every important historian of art since Winckelmann has . . . seen in art a mirror of the spiritual evolution of the peoples, and has sought to solve the central problems of art history by way of a comprehensive vision.” Winckelmann’s insights about art were soon applied to the history of architecture. His insights, and those of his antiquarian contemporaries, were to shape the subject irrevocably.

Above all else, it is clear that Winckelmann was of central importance to Hegel—whose influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century architectural history is undeniable. Hegel took Winckelmann’s intuition and transformed it into a clear relationship between art and the *Zeitgeist*. Moreover, while Winckelmann dealt only with sculpture, Hegel gave an account of all the arts, including architecture. For Hegel, architecture was an imperfect art. Precisely because it served two purposes—both practical and aesthetic—it could never truly embody the Spirit. Its very materiality meant it could not be a truly spiritual art. Nonetheless, a generally Hegelian reading of architecture remained highly influential in the following two centuries. Arguably, all the major figures of modern art and architectural history were building on broadly Hegelian foundations. Jacob Burckhardt is a case in point. Although he differed from Hegel in many respects, he shared a similar understanding of the role required of the art historian, writing to Kinkel in 1847: “Conceive your task as follows: How does the spirit of the fifteenth century express itself in painting?” Others soon followed his advice. Indeed, as Michael Ann Holly noted in 1984, “Despite art history’s many diverse areas of research during the last 100 years, there remains something of the Hegelian epistemology in the work of every art historian.” The same is arguably true for their architectural colleagues.

This does not mean, of course, that all art or architectural historians became outright Hegelians, even though there is a Hegelian ring about much that they wrote. Heinrich Wölfflin’s confident assertion that “Different times give birth to different art. Epoch and race interact” does derive much of its inspiration from Hegel, while Alois Riegl’s belief that art was dependent upon “the period, the race, the whole artistic personality” shows a similar family resemblance. But these writers were also intrigued by other approaches to architectural history. Riegl, indeed, was fiercely opposed to Hegelian metaphysics, while Wölfflin, as Joan Hart has shown, owed as much to Kant as he did to Hegel. Drawing on the insights of the *Critique of Judgment*, and influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey, Wölfflin sought a more psychologically satisfying explanation for artistic development. Style, he concluded, was the “expression of a temper of an age and a nation as well as the expression of the individual temperament.” Thus the shift between Renaissance and Baroque styles in architecture, for example, could be seen as the product of different psychological states in the cultures that produced them. Similarly Riegl argued that developments in late-Roman art could be explained by reference to changes in contemporary thought, while the twentieth-century fascination with ancient monuments might be understood as a response to the pressures of modernity.

It was a compelling thesis—and one that became highly influential. “As an art historian I am a disciple of Heinrich Wölfflin,” wrote Sigfried Giedion in the late 1940s. Through him, he continued, “we, his pupils, learned to grasp the spirit of an epoch.” In this, he spoke for many. Nikolaus Pevsner, for one, was the natural heir to this tradition. “There is the spirit of the age,” Pevsner declared, “and there is

national character. The existence of neither can be denied, however averse one may be to be generalizations.” Equally, Erwin Panofsky presupposed an essential unity within each historical period: a spirit that would be expressed “in such overtly disparate phenomena as the arts, literature, philosophy, social and political currents, religious movements, etc.” Thus Panofsky attempted to show that “there exists between Gothic architecture and Scholasticism a palpable and hardly accidental concurrence in the purely factual domain of time and place,” a concurrence that came about because of the “mental habit” of Scholastic philosophy. Likewise, Pevsner maintained that, “The Gothic style was not created because somebody invented rib-vaulting. . . . The modern movement did not come into being because steel-frame and reinforced concrete construction had been worked out,” he continued, “They were worked out because a new spirit required them.” Pevsner saw Mannerism as the expression of Counter-Reformation spirituality; the Baroque as a product of growing secularization; and Modernism as a recognition of the realities of the “machine age.” Giedion again sums up the argument well. “However much a period may try to disguise itself,” he wrote, “its real nature will still show through in its architecture.” Buildings conveyed meaning, then, and what they meant was the spirit of the age in which they were constructed.

It might be objected that this tradition was exclusively German. Certainly, it was in Germany that architectural history was first professionalized, and in Germany that the most systematic attempt was made to theorize the discipline. But from the mid-nineteenth century onward, both Britain and France also saw the development of a subject governed by a common set of assumptions. British authors such as John Ruskin and James Fergusson, and French architects such as Eugene Viollet-le-Duc and Auguste Choisy, also shared a sense that a period and a culture expressed itself through its buildings. For Ruskin, architecture was an index of a society’s moral quality: the *Stones of Venice* illustrates the corruption of the city as revealed in its built environment. For Choisy, the realities of climate, resources, way of life, and technological skill drove the forms and styles of building throughout history. True, these authors rarely expressed an explicit debt to either Hegel or Kant. Ruskin owed his Romanticism as much to Walter Scott as to German philosophy, while Fergusson and Viollet-le-Duc were increasingly influenced by the racist ethnography of de Gobineau. But their endeavors shared a similar inspiration—and it was one that was perpetuated into the twentieth century. Choisy was followed by Thomas Graham Jackson and Reginald Blomfield; John Summerson and J. M. Richards followed them. Jackson understood Gothic as a style created by the “restless temper of the modern world.” Summerson saw Georgian architecture as authentically English and the International Modern Style as an emanation of the *Zeitgeist*. Richards, writing in 1956, sums up their position well: “countries . . . have their own different temperaments and ideals. . . . They also have a past, and the national culture of which their modern architecture is part is not separable from its roots.” As this suggests, even apparently amateur architectural historians outside Germany believed that buildings embodied ideas, identities, and the spirit of the age.

By the mid-twentieth century, then, it was widely accepted and clearly established that architecture possessed meaning, and that it was expressive both of the *Zeitgeist* and of the culture that produced it. Naturally, there remained critics of this approach. From a broadly Kantian perspective, Ernst Gombrich set out to overturn what he saw as the corrupting influence of Hegelian thought on the history of art and architecture. He argued that writers such as Panofsky projected their interpretation of history onto works of art rather than reading meanings from them. “I do not believe,” he declared, “that Mannerism was an expression of a psychological crisis . . . I do not believe in the spirit of the age . . . I do not believe like Hegel that the Absolute Spirit created Rococo.” At the same time, the professionalization of architectural history outside Germany tended to lead to a more formalist approach, which discounted or downplayed the link between buildings and wider society. The rise of a documentary history of architecture, pioneered by Howard Colvin in the postwar period, also challenged more metaphysical or idealist explanations. But the idea that architecture conveyed social, intellectual, and political meaning

did not go away. A steady stream of publications in the last thirty years has argued that Elizabethan architects sought to evoke an ideal of chivalry in their buildings, and that the late-nineteenth-century “Queen Anne” Revival was the expression of middle-class identity; that the villa form has consistently been used by similar social groups; and that the classical orders represent an attempt to formulate a people’s relationship to the numinous. And there are numerous other examples. They differ in approach and in argument, but they agree on the rhetorical, metaphorical, and symbolic function of architecture.

Questions nonetheless remain. How can historians be sure that they are accurately interpreting their subject? How can they avoid falling into the trap identified by Gombrich: approaching a medieval building with the “*a priori* conviction that the Gothic style is a necessary result of feudalism or of scholasticism,” projecting meaning onto architecture rather than seeking to encompass its true meaning? For many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers the answer lay in a linguistic analogy. Each style of architecture, they argued, was analogous to a language: the historian should thus become fluent in that language and read the message it revealed. As Louis Sullivan argued in 1906, architecture is “a great and superb language wherewith Man has expressed, through the generations, the changing drift of his thoughts.” In this assertion, he drew on Ruskin, who declared that “The architecture of a nation is great only when it is as universal and as established as its language,” and foreshadowed Richards, who maintained that “architects have to-day to go back . . . and pick up the threads of a common architectural language.” Even in the late-1990s, some historians were making elaborate claims for the “timeless language” of “traditional architecture.”

From the 1960s onward, this linguistic analogy was pursued to its limit by an influential group of structuralist writers. Looking not to Hegelian aesthetics, neo-Kantian hermeneutics, or antiquarian empiricism, but to Saussurean linguistics, a group of writers attempted to import a structuralist methodology into architectural history. This was a highly original move—albeit one that drew on the example of social anthropology—and it soon proved remarkably popular, not least because it seemed to solve the problem of interpreting architectural meaning by setting that process on an apparently “scientific” basis. The structuralist approach to architectural history was based upon the assumption that architecture was a “sign-system,” a means of communication that was analogous to verbal or written language. This was not, of course, a new idea. Not only had the metaphor been used repeatedly before, but in the 1930s Jan Mukarovsky had suggested that architecture was best understood as a linguistic code. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, this analysis was pushed to new limits. What had previously been understood in purely metaphorical terms came to be approached literally. The “language” and “grammar” of architecture were reified to become the fundamental means by which architects communicated. Thus, for Charles Jencks, architecture possessed syntax, semantics, and the capacity for metaphor. The “units of buildings”—the doors and windows, the columns and partitions—were even, in his analysis, best seen as “words.” So too, Donald Preziosi was moved to argue that “the built environment is a *system of relationships* among *signs* (not among forms or materials *per se*).” Although, like most writers, he was not willing to follow Jencks’s literal view of architectural language, he nonetheless argued that the methods of linguistic analysis lent themselves naturally to architectural history.

Ostensibly, structuralism offered real benefits. It avoided the naïve determinism and problematic positivism of many architectural historians. It retained a sense that architecture functioned as a system of communication, that it possessed meaning. It did not stress the genius of the architect or the autonomy of the artistic tradition. Yet it soon became clear that the structuralist approach to architectural analysis was unsatisfactory. In the first place, the analogy between architecture and linguistics was highly problematic. If architecture truly were a language, we would be able to understand every building in the same way that we understand a written text. That is clearly not the case. Although one might concede that architecture is capable of bearing meaning, it evidently does not

do so in the way that a verbal or written language does. Something else is happening, something that the adoption of terms derived from linguistics cannot in itself explain. Moreover, in Henri Lefebvre's words, semiotic analysis was incapable of answering the question "do sets of non-verbal signs and symbols . . . fall into the same category as verbal sets, or are they irreducible to them?" If the latter, then semiotics is clearly not the solution. In the second place, structuralists tended to ignore the multidimensionality of architecture: "reading" the façade or the plan, rather than investigating how a building was experienced or how it influenced the behavior of its inhabitants. As the satirist Louis Hellman observed, "Defining architecture in terms of language is inherently limited." A structuralist analysis found it hard to take account of the "space, time, form, atmosphere, texture, colour, and so on" that also comprise the built environment.

Perhaps most importantly, the advent of post-structuralist thought challenged architectural theorists just as much as it affected literary critics. In particular—although it was not phrased in these terms—the 1980s and 1990s saw the death of the architect. The post-Hegelians had conceived of this figure as an instrument of the *Zeitgeist* and their critics had written of the architect as hero. Even structuralist analysts had understood the architect as the author of an architectural text. By contrast, the post-structuralist approach was really a theory of reception rather than creation. The role of the architect was, as a result, at a discount. In post-structuralist terms, architecture was best understood "not just as the practice of a specific form of 'writing,' but primarily as an art of 'reading.'" This approach placed a premium on personal experience. Buildings were no longer seen as expressions of their architect's creativity, nor of wider social changes. "Architecture," declared Edward Winters, "is not concerned with meanings so much as it is with significance." By inhabiting buildings, by looking at them, by experiencing them, it was argued, we give significance to them and read meanings into them. A critical part of this process was the examination of space, and how the production of space owes as much to those who consume it as it does to those who create it. In this process, the post-structuralists placed the multidimensionality of architecture firmly at the forefront of their analysis. Consequently they appeared to escape the trap of assuming that linguistic methods of interpretation could be transferred to architecture wholesale. Could space "be called a text or a message?" asked Henri Lefebvre:

Possibly, but the analogy would serve no particularly useful purpose, and it would make more sense to speak of texture rather than texts in this connection. Similarly, it is helpful to think of architectures as "archi-textures," to treat each monument or building, viewed in its surroundings and context, in the populated area and associated networks in which it is set down, as part of a particular production of space.

By acknowledging the importance of the user, by stressing the significance of space, and by emphasizing the ambiguities of architectural meaning, Lefebvre and his allies offered a highly engaging mode of analysis.

Yet, in many ways, the post-structuralist turn raised as many questions as it answered. First, there was the issue of authorship. To what extent did the intentions of the architect shape the experiences of the user? Could it ever be said that this was a process of communication, or that buildings contained essential meanings as a part of their fabric? Equally problematically, the post-structuralists found themselves unable to abandon linguistic analogies completely. Michel de Certeau argued that "A spatial story is in its minimal degree a spoken language, that is, a linguistic system that distributes places insofar as it is articulated by an 'enunciatory focalization,' by an act of practicing it."<sup>123</sup> In his *Postmodern Geographies* Edward Soja complained that, "we still know too little about the descriptive grammar and syntax of human geographies, the phonemes and epistemes of spatial interpretation."<sup>124</sup> Lefebvre, of course, maintained that any attempt to use semiotic codes as a means of deciphering social space "must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a *reading*. This is to evade both history and practice." Nonetheless, just a few sentences later

even he was claiming that just such a code had existed in the nineteenth century: a code “which allowed space not only to be ‘read’ but also to be constructed.”<sup>125</sup> The post-structuralists could not escape their linguistic and philosophical training. More importantly still, despite the attractiveness of their approach, it simply does not answer the question of whether architecture possesses meaning. On the one hand, they suggested that meaning is imposed by observers; on the other, they described buildings and space as part of a language system, with the potential to possess intrinsic meaning. The problem, it seemed, remained intractable.

## VI

Where, then, does this leave the historian? Inevitably, this account of the search for architectural meaning is just one among many. It must be admitted that in such a short survey innumerable influential voices have been ignored. Moreover, the sharp distinctions between these competing schools can be overstated. It is significant that Charles Jencks’s *Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, for example, uses the tools of structuralist rather than post-structuralist analysis. But even this necessarily limited discussion has raised some critical issues. Two in particular stand out. In the first place there seems to be common agreement that architecture does convey meaning. In the second, there is broad agreement that an architectural historian can—and should—seek to interpret this meaning. In general, nonetheless, the means by which this is done remains much less well defined. Common to almost all approaches is the metaphor of reading, whether strictly applied (as with structuralism) or broadly conceived (as in the case of much nineteenth-century writing). In the remainder of this essay, I hope to show that this analogy with reading is inapposite, and that although other metaphors of interpretation might reasonably be adopted, that of transposition is in fact the most appropriate.

This is not to suggest that buildings cannot be understood as texts. The problem is that buildings are a particular sort of text—one that does not yield readily to the process of reading. For one thing, the very materiality of architecture differentiates it from other types of text. It was for this reason that Lefebvre suggested it might be useful “to think of architectures as ‘archi-textures.’” At the same time, too, the fact that buildings are subject to the laws of gravity, the fact that they have to function as well as to appear, means that they do not possess the creative freedom of a work of fine art or literature. As Paul Crowther put it, “The more an art-form’s embodiment is tied to real physical material ordered in terms of mechanical relations, the less scope it has for being unambiguously ‘about’ something.” Although there can be no doubt that architects do aestheticize even the most apparently functional elements of a building, and that they make choices as to how to treat drains and roofs as well as columns and pilasters, it would be foolish to deny that, at base, architecture is a craft, that a building which does not stand up cannot communicate anything at all. Moreover, it is clearly the case that the means by which a building stands up can only be considered a form of communication in very particular circumstances. Historians forget the practical imperatives of architecture—and their effect on the buildings they study—at their peril.

More strikingly still, architecture is not strictly speaking a representational art. The work of Nelson Goodman makes this plain. Architectural works, he writes, unlike sculpture or painting or poetry, “are seldom descriptive or representational. With some interesting exceptions, architectural works do not denote—that is, do not describe, recount, depict or portray. They mean, if at all, in other ways.” And Goodman goes further. “However effectively a glue-factory may typify glue-making,” he writes, “it exemplifies being a glue-factory literally rather than metaphorically. A building may express fluidity or frivolity or fervour; but to express being a glue-factory it would have to be something else, say a toothpick plant.” Goodman’s point rests upon a very fine distinction between representation and expression, but it is important. While parts of the building may indeed be representational, it is

exceptionally rare for the building as a whole to be nothing more than a representation of something else. True, the ornaments of the building—its orders, its sculptural decoration, and so on—may well make reference to people, to concepts, or to beliefs. The stone drapery on convent buildings in early-modern Naples (intended, by metonymy, to stand for the bodies of the nuns the walls enclosed), and the use of forked sticks and colored spots in Batammaliba homesteads (intended, symbolically, to articulate important theological ideas) share this common function. Equally, one building may be intended to refer to another, as Lord Burlington's house at Chiswick was meant to inspire association with Palladio's Villa Rotonda in Vicenza. Even the plan of a building can have a representational role. In Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's utopian town plan of Chaux, his Oikéma, or temple of sexual instruction, was given a shape resembling an erect phallus. These elements, though, form just a part of a building. The building itself is something more: more than the sum total of parts, more than a collection of its representations. In the end, it expresses itself more than it represents anything else.

The study of architecture, moreover, is about more than just the study of a single building. An architectural historian may also investigate the process of design, of construction, and of use. The evolution of a building from conception to habitation occurs in a number of overlapping stages. In the first place, historians need to investigate the architect or architects of the building. Naturally, this is not always possible. For antique or medieval buildings, the architect is often unknown. Even in more modern examples, surprisingly little is known about the designer, the builder, or their collaborators. Nonetheless, knowledge about a designer undeniably sheds light on the design: it may explain a particular feature, or situate the structures within a particular set of artistic traditions. At the same time, too, it must be remembered that an architect does not work on his or her own: he or she may rely on draftsmen or masons or engineers. The impact of Christopher Wren's draftsmen on his work is well known. The relationship between Victorian architects and their craftsmen was similarly seminal. To study one without the other would seriously distort an understanding of both. An architect also will have to respond to the demands of a client or clients. This may mean making radical changes to their original proposal, as the redesigned Divinity School in Oxford (c. 1420–1490), reworked Foreign Office in London (1861–1868), and battle over the rebuilding of the World Trade Center in New York (2004–) all demonstrate. Even once the building is erected, its purpose may change as its inhabitants and their needs change. Hagia Sophia, once an embodiment of Byzantine Orthodoxy, became an expression of Ottoman Islam, and is now a symbol of Turkish national pride.

As this suggests, the way in which a building is interpreted will also change through time and among cultures. Just as early Western observers had great difficulty seeing Ottoman architecture as anything more than a decadent mixture of Persian, Byzantine, and other styles, so contemporary historians have differed in their interpretation of modernism, their understanding of particular buildings being critically shaped by their own preconceptions. This means that historians need to study buildings within their context, examining how they relate both to their immediate environment and to their wider culture. As Richard Morris has shown, it is impossible to make sense of church buildings without situating them within their landscape. Similarly, Kathleen Curran has demonstrated that the German, American, and English Romanesque Revivals of the nineteenth century can only really be understood with reference to a common search for appropriately Protestant architecture. This insight also means that historians must explore how architecture is interpreted by its users and viewers. Architectural description—both verbal and visual—will consequently be of immense importance. John Evelyn's assessment of the incipient English baroque, and Villard de Honnecourt's depiction of Gothic architecture in the thirteenth century, each give the historian an idea of how buildings were received by contemporaries. So too, the ways in which architecture is represented visually—in paintings, drawings, plans, and prints—will yield insights into how a building was interpreted.

Architectural history thus deals not only with buildings, but also with those who built them, those who use(d) them, and those who sought or seek to understand them. It is also concerned with the process of

designing and executing plans, with plans that are not carried out, and with the reception of the building, both at the time it was built and thereafter. This diversity of focus, more than anything else, is why the analogy between language and architecture does not hold. The multidimensionality of buildings, their functionality, the variety of processes and people involved in their construction and interpretation: all of these factors distance architecture from verbal or visual texts. Although the study of texts and images might well involve a similar set of questions, the range of issues raised by architecture requires another approach. I wish to claim that more than anything this is about translation: about the way in which an initial concept is translated from idea to plan, from plan to drawing, from drawing to building, from building to use, and from use to interpretation by users and viewers. Just like translation, too, this process can only be understood in its context.

This is not, of course, the first time that such a comparison has been made. Lefebvre, for one, wrote about deciphering or decoding spaces. Goodman described a sculptor undertaking “a subtle and intricate problem of translation.” To some extent, too, Roman Jakobson’s short essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” offers a helpful way forward for architectural analysis. Jakobson argued that there are three different types of translation: intralingual translation, or rewording; interlingual translation, or translation proper; and intersemiotic translation, or transmutation. In the first case, verbal signs are interpreted by signs of the same language; in the second, verbal signs are interpreted by signs of a different verbal language; and in the third—in intersemiotic transmutation—verbal signs are interpreted by means of non-verbal sign systems. This is what occurs when artists seek to represent an event or an idea in paint or in sculpture. They transmute one message into another medium. It is an important point, and one that highlights the different sorts of texts with which architectural historians must contend: verbal, visual, and plastic. Unfortunately, Jakobson did not develop this insight, much less explore its implications for architecture. He also failed to explore quite what this transmutation would do to the message being translated. Would the process change it? Or—as Jakobson seems to imply elsewhere—would the message remain immutable?

A clearer model is offered by another literary theorist: Jakobson’s “binary ‘other half,’” Mikhail Bakhtin. Like Jakobson, Bakhtin was not of course primarily concerned with the visual or the architectural, although he did recognize that his work might have an application in those areas. Perhaps surprisingly, nonetheless two elements of his analysis are strikingly relevant to architectural history. Bakhtin argued that different genres embody differing ways of understanding reality, that each genre is—as Caryl Emerson puts it—“a category of consciousness.” Thus, even before a story is written, the author, adopting the conventions of the genre, will make an assumption about the workings of time and space within that genre, about the logic within which the narrative will have to operate. This will determine the perspective from which the story is told, its structure and form, and the behavior of the characters within it. Where this becomes interesting is when a story is taken from one genre and transposed into another. There the logic will be different—sometimes radically so. As a result, the story itself will be changed. Each genre will reshape the perspective from which the story is told, the logic of the narrative, and the behavior of the characters within it. At the same time, Bakhtin was aware that how each narrative is understood is critically dependent on who tells it, to whom, and in what environment. “The text—practiced, written, or orally recorded,” he wrote, “is not equal to the work as a whole. . . . The work also includes its necessary extratextual context.” In some senses, a text is remade by each re-reading. This does not mean, as in deconstruction, that the author is dead, or that a theory of reception alone can suffice to interpret a text. Rather, it means that a historian or critic must be sensitive to the ways in which a work is transposed by different contexts.

How, though, does this relate to architectural history? In two ways: first, because it provides a mechanism by which buildings evolve from concept to construction to interpretation; and second, because it helps elucidate the relationship among the architect, the architecture, and their interpreters. If instead of seeing the distinction among plan, section, elevation, model, and building as one of medium,

historians were to conceive of it as one of genre, then it would be possible to explore how transpositions occur at each stage of development. The conventions of representation in a plan and in a drawing are very different. So too the difference between a plan and a building is great. Yet in any project they are linked by a series of transpositions. This will shape each artifact, and inevitably influence the final product of the process: the building itself. Equally, Bakhtin's division between the text and the work is highly pertinent. If the historian understands the building (or the plan, or drawing, and so on) as the text, but the response to it by contemporaries and by other historians as another part of the work, then it is possible also to trace how each of these different transpositions make up the work as a whole. This should encourage the historian to investigate how architecture changes through time, as alterations in use, in taste, and in environment transform responses to a building, an architect, or a critic. A post-Bakhtinian analysis thus recognizes the diversity of genres involved in architectural history and the specific logic of each genre, while acknowledging the relationship among them. This relationship is maintained through a number of transpositions, transpositions that it is the historian's job to uncover.

In practice this will mean that historians need to go beyond the study of individual buildings and parts of individual buildings. If their meaning is truly to be uncovered we need to explore the evolution of the building, from concept to construction and beyond. This will be done by exploiting every possible piece of evidence: written, pictorial, and material. But rather than imagining that these sources speak directly to the historian, or are unproblematically related to one another, due care will be taken to see how the logic of each genre has shaped that source. The development of perspective, for example, undoubtedly affected the evolution of architectural drawing. As long ago as 1956 Wolfgang Lotz first suggested that the perspective section and the section with orthogonal projection were inventions of the Italian Renaissance. So too Mario Carpo has shown that the shift from script to print, and from hand drawing to printing was instrumental in changing the canons of architectural beauty in the Renaissance. More recently, the architect Frank Gehry has acknowledged that his work would be impossible without the invention of "smart machines." Computer-Aided Design arguably made his Guggenheim Bilbao possible in both practice and in principle. The same point could be made about the development of the plan, or written architectural criticism, or the pictorial representation of buildings. Each of these genres has its own rules and its own rhetoric. How that affects their accounts of architecture should be an important part of a historian's research.

As an idea is transposed from one genre to another, it will undergo repeated change. Nicholas Hawksmoor's Easton Neston (c. 1695–1702) was transposed from drawing, to model, to building, to representation. In the process, it was changed and reshaped repeatedly. Its representations have also changed. In 1715, *Vitruvius Britannicus* stressed its formal, symmetrical, classical propriety. In 2002 Vaughan Hart stressed its baroque, expressive, and esoteric qualities. Although they looked like different houses, they were of course, the same: one building, but transposed several times. There is a continued link among all these different forms. Indeed, each genre arguably influences the others. The evolution of a specialized vocabulary, for example, undeniably altered how people understood architecture, and how architects themselves conceived it. Equally, as Gillian Darley has shown, Joseph Gandy's illustrations of John Soane's work both influenced the public's reception of the work and Soane's own perception of it. "It is as if Soane's architecture had been waiting for someone to translate [sic] his buildings from pleasing fair copies into continuous narrative—a visual argument with which to confront a critical world," she writes.

Gandy's characteristic high viewpoint and altered perspective achieved a magnification of space accentuated by the miniaturized figures. He ensured that Soane's interiors were a picturesque journey; the succession of brilliantly lit and profoundly dark spaces was, in his hands, a validation and evocation of Soane's intentions.

Yet more than this, as she goes on to make clear, this representation shaped Soane's imagination. The transpositions between the built and the pictorial were mutually reinforcing and mutually fertile. It is in the study of these transpositions that meaning can be found in architecture. A historian can study how architects translate their personal vision into architecture, just as Theo Van Doesburg sought to transpose the artistic principles of De Stijl into building. Or one might explore how clients embody their values in building, just as the Soviet Union attempted to create a Socialist Realist architecture. One might even examine the transposition that occurs when a building's audience seeks to make sense of it. When Eero Saarinen was commissioned to build the TWA terminal in New York, his self-declared aim was to "express the drama and specialness and excitement of travel." Yet his audience soon understood the building in other terms. They compared it to a bird in flight. The building had not changed, but its meaning had. It was a shift that Saarinen accepted pragmatically. "The fact that to some people it looked like a bird in flight was really coincidental," he commented. "That was the last thing we ever thought about. Now, that doesn't mean that one doesn't have the right to see it that way or to explain it to laymen in those terms, especially as laymen are usually more literally than visually inclined." Saarinen had unwittingly identified a series of transpositions. His conception was transposed into a building, and the building itself was transposed into criticism. At each stage, the conventions of the genre had shaped the response. Thus, Saarinen, with his modernist aesthetic and belief that architecture could inspire emotion, had hoped to express the drama of flying. His audience, by contrast, using a non-architectural rhetoric, had responded more literally, and seen a bird rather than flight. With his willingness to explain the building in precisely those terms, Saarinen even seems to be transposing meaning himself.

The interpretation of these transpositions is, of course, highly complex and far from straightforward. It requires the historian to develop a sophisticated understanding of each genre—of its rules and rhetoric, its potential to enlighten and to deceive. This will particularly be the case when dealing with written accounts. For here the transposition is between the visual or material and the verbal. It is a serious intersemiotic leap—and one that can be problematic. What, for example, is one to make of Giuseppe Terragni, the twentieth-century Italian architect, who "made a practice of supplying lengthy theoretical justifications for his buildings, in which designs apparently without meaning were associated with the correct political rhetoric"? He described his Casa del Fascio in Como as an exemplification of Fascist ideals. Yet subsequent writers have seen it as an apolitical building, expressing nothing more than his commitment to a Rationalist aesthetic. For some, the Casa is an archetype of dehumanizing modernism; for others it is evidence of Terragni's wilful narcissism. Each of these views is the result of different transpositions. As the Casa is transposed from client's brief to architect's proposal, from the history of modernism to the history of Fascism, so its meaning changes. The logic and the rhetoric of each genre will shape and reshape the discourse. As this suggests, the context of these transpositions is critical. Seeking to sell the design to his clients, Terragni argued that it exemplified Mussolini's dictum that "Fascism is a glass house." Attempting to defend a pioneering building, his admirers sought to isolate him from the politics of the period, claiming that he was apolitical. Later historians, by contrast, used the Casa del Fascio as evidence of Italian Fascism's ambiguities and contradictions. In that respect, they have separated the text—the building—from the work. The work includes all these transpositions, all these contexts, all these different meanings. Rather than attempting to identify which is the "correct" understanding, it seems more reasonable to acknowledge this variety of meanings. A true interpretation of the building will take all these different versions—all these different translations—into account.

Architecture, then, does not convey meaning: it conveys meanings. The historian's role is to uncover them. Buildings are not simply texts, and architectural history is not simply a process of reading them. Rather, researchers need to undertake a delicate process of translation. Adapting Bakhtin's analysis, we can tentatively propose two conclusions. The first is that the evolution of architecture from the initial

idea to its interpretation by historians and other critics can be likened to a series of transpositions. At each stage, the logic of the genre will shape and reshape it. The second is that the totality of these transpositions makes up the work of architecture: not an artifact that can be simply described, but a multifaceted construct capable of multiple interpretations. It is perhaps a complex conclusion, but acknowledging complexity is the only proper response to a complex problem. As Eco argued, we do commonly experience architecture as communication, even while recognizing its functionality. The message, however, changes when we experience architecture as a plan, as a picture, in text, or as structure. In everyday life, and as historians, we are continually translating architecture.

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