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Reading buildings: The textual turn of architecture as a parallel to the spatial turn in literary studies[i]

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Abstract:
This article seeks to explore the parallels between the spatial turn embraced by contemporary literary theory and the so-called textual turn in architecture. More specifically, links between the contemporary developments of architectural theory and practice and literary criticism are established. In order to highlight the nature and origin of the connection between these two contemporary tendencies, this paper draws on a number of authoritative texts of both literary criticism as well as architectural theory, predominantly within the Anglo-American context.
Architecture is presented from the viewpoint of the 20th and 21st centuries, which accentuates its liberation from a purely formal understanding by emphasizing the human involvement in its interpretation. The conception and structuring of physical spaces are therefore regarded as conditioned by processes similar to those involved in the construction of meaning in language and literature. Thus, while literary studies benefits from the extension of its field of study through the inclusion (and contemporary primacy) of the spatial point of view, architectural criticism invites active participation in the construction of its meaning, in other words, its reading. The processes of the mutual influencing and enrichment of both the textual turn in architecture and the spatial turn in literary studies is exemplified by means of contemporary architectural works that embody the synergic relationship of the two traditionally separate fields – (literary) text and architecture.

Introduction

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the humanities, particularly philosophy and literary theory, have acknowledged the significance, if not primacy, of the category of space.

The direction of literary studies sometimes labelled the (postmodern) spatial turn has been oriented primarily towards the treatment of space and place in literature as space has become "a central metaphor and topos in literature" (Peraldo, p.1).[ii] This paper attempts to shed light on the implications of the spatial turn in literary studies for the development of contemporary architectural theory and practice and highlights the synergic potential of the connections.

The period which marks a watershed in the development of contemporary critical thinking is the late 1960s. This period not only developed an ongoing critique of its philosophical predecessors, but it also itself inspired unparalleled developments in the fields of science as well as the arts, in particular theoretical discourses (Hauptmann).[iii] What preceded this change in cultural, intellectual and architectural paradigms was perceived as modernity, but the concept itself was only mediated (Frampton, p. 51). As Kenneth Frampton further claims in his essay "Place-Form and Cultural Identity in Design" (1988), he, as a member of the generation of architects who started to practise their metier in the 1960s, and his peers did not envisage creating architecture whose form would be absolutely novel, unlike the architects of the interwar period. Instead, he and the others "saw our task as a qualified restoration of the creative vigor of a movement which had become formally and programmatically compromised in the intervening years" (Frampton, p. 52).

This derivative tendency was challenged by ground-breaking findings in a number of disciplines, literary theory being, rather surprisingly, one of the most influential. Literary theory seemed to be equally formative as other disciplines, and also acutely perceptive of other branches of knowledge. Of the theories that most affected architectural theory and steered the direction of its thinking towards the inclusion of a linguistic approach, Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) and his emphasis on semiotics, and Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality (1969) are the most widely acknowledged (Hauptmann iv). [iv]

The upsurge of architectural debate inspired by the proliferation of ground-breaking critical texts, such as Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France and his *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and A *Thousand Plateaus* (1980) from the two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is mostly connected with the period of the late 1960s to the 1990s, labelled "the first decades of the Western neoliberal tradition" (Wilkinson, 2019). The idea of "speaking architecture" is, however, much older. since the postmodern idea behind architectural works, suggesting that some of them willingly encourage a definite, given, often single meaning, echoes the concept of *architecture parlante*, itself being self-explanatory as far as its function or meaning is concerned.

This approach was identified in the Enlightenment period and first labelled in the middle of the 19th century in an anonymous essay based on the work of Claude Nicolas Lédoux (1736-1806), one of the first representatives of the French Neoclassical style of architecture. This "speaking architecture" may be comprehended as a field of decisively modern, if not avant-garde, discourse tied in with the rise of the new bourgeois republic in the process of liberating its expression from the Church and court in its search for new means of communication (Wilkinson, 2019). From the point of view of the historical development of perspectives on the language of architecture, there are certainly more examples of either extreme or a more intense iconicity of buildings, ranging from inscriptions on walls to buildings shaped like letters or physically embodying the ideas or ideals behind them, which would naturally inspire a comprehension akin to that of language. In order to decipher the nature of the language buildings speak, one comes to the conclusion that "even those buildings that do not bear inscriptions or resemble texts themselves have been called legible" (Wilkinson, 2019).

A similar tendency is observable in the changing approach to modernist buildings, often considered elitist, unresponsive or even boring by the postmodernists. Despite the fact that the linguistic turn in architecture is said to have been pioneered by semiotics, cultivated mainly in the late 1960s, which focused on the ability to "read" mainly the traditional symbols in architecture, constructivism, considered to be a branch of modernism, "designed – and sometimes built – structures that were more text than building" (Wilkinson, 2019). Modernism, however, attempted to de-textualize space in the sense of disrupting the conventional symbolism of previous styles. In spite of this effort, even the simplest facades addressed their viewers in some way. Eventually, the advent of the so-called international style was a further attempt to embrace a wholly abstract approach to space, but it did not turn out to be the victory of a purely phenomenological approach to space.

The emphasis on the expressive potential of architecture was swiftly adopted by the theoreticians, who readily argued for the employment and configuration of architectural language. One of the pioneering monographs that introduced the notion of such a type of language was Charles A. Jencks's *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977). In Jencks's view, architecture involves, or should involve, human experience in its conception as its fundamental component. The development of architectural language (similarly to the self-conscious poetic language of New Criticism) should reflect both structure as well as the use of various poetic devices, e.g. metaphor or irony. The resulting architecture would be multifaceted and would be able to affect humans on both cognitive and emotional levels. Its language should merge traditional and modern aspects, as well as both the ordinary and the artistic (Jencks, 1997,

p. 312). The architect's role in this conception is to incorporate both traditional as well as unexpected meanings (Jencks, 1997, p. 315). For Jencks, a postmodern building is "one which speaks on at least two levels at once: to other architects and a concerned minority who care about specifically architectural meaning, and to the public at large, or the local inhabitants" (Jencks, 1981, p. 6).

In spite of the allure of Jencks's propositions, other theoreticians, and most notably the aforementioned Kenneth Frampton, considered them a call for "a free-floating, pluralist populist architecture, primarily conceived in terms of accessible imagery" (Frampton 53), and what is more, "the instruments of semiotics and communicational analysis were scientifically adduced, as a means of bestowing an apparent legitimacy on what was little more than a manipulative form of admass advocacy" (Frampton, p. 54). What Frampton proposed in place of Jencks's polyvalent language of architecture is to be found in the periphery rather than in the apparent centres – he called for an authentic architecture drawing on the relationship between the environment, its inhabitants and the age-old traditions of building, in other words, he tentatively proposed that regionalism could bestow the desired authenticity and communicative charge to building practice.

The Phenomenological Perspective

The publication of Frampton's criticism of Jencks's *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, coincided with the publication of Heinrich Klotz`s *The History of Postmodern Architecture* (1988), which became the first comprehensive monograph on postmodern architecture. In accordance with the postmodern vision of architecture, Klotz justifies the involvement of semantics, syntax and morphology. In Klotz's view, these linguistic disciplines provide tools to "liberate architecture from the muteness of 'pure forms'" (as quoted in Harries, p. 84). A building thus turns into a site of creative endeavour, which is not reduced to factual standards but corresponds with poetic ideals and invites "the handling of subject matter on an epic scale" (ibid.)

It is not a coincidence that the quote summarizing Klotz's persuasion is taken from one of the most influential works combining architectural theory and philosophy published in the last 20 years: Karsten Harries's *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1996). In this work, Harries, Professor Emeritus at the Department of Philosophy at Yale University, strives to answer the question of the nature and possible roles of contemporary architecture. May architecture serve as an anchor in the complex contemporary world? Is architecture able to mediate the embedding of isolated individuals within a whole or a community? Searching for the answer, Harries first

inspects the current role of architecture and characterizes it as an undermined one, stemming from its inability or reluctance to commit and its resulting identity crisis. Next, he argues that the emphasis on aestheticism, which gradually became the dominant aspect of postmodern development, has contributed to the current marginalization of architecture. Then he studies the language of architecture, the *sine qua non* of architecture's ability to communicate meanings (if that is to be expected from it).

This is where he draws on the ideas of the famous German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, condensed in his 1951 lecture "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", which he gave to an audience comprised of architects on the occasion of *Darmstädter Gespräch*, a conference focused on the theme of "Man and Space". He further elaborated on the topic in his essays "The Thing" (1950) and ".. Poetically Man Dwells…" (1951).[v] According to Heidegger, there is a close connection between language, dwelling and literature, where one phenomenon presupposes the presence and existence of the other. In order to express this interconnectedness and mutual conditioning, Heidegger employs metaphors and various parallels, e.g. "[l]anguage is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home" (Heidegger, 2011, p. 147); "Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 215). As Heidegger writes in his famous essay "Building Dwelling Thinking", "building puts up locations that make space and a site for the fourfold" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 156). Some buildings possess the ability to preserve "the fourfold, to save the earth, to receive the sky, to await divinities, to escort mortals" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 156). He sees the "fourfold" as the "presencing" of dwelling (ibid.). What Heidegger also postulates is the role of human beings as the measure of all things.

For Harries, in accordance with Heidegger's dicta, architecture is the art of imposing boundaries on space, which in his view is never inert or devoid of meaning (Harries, p. 180). To underline the humanistic turn as well as to highlight the role of language in the process of building and dwelling, Harries calls for the development of a "semantics of the natural language of space" (Harries, p. 180), which would reflect the human dimension and involvement within space and spatial relations, and which would also include "paintings, poems, novels and fairy tales" (ibid.) besides past works of architecture.

It is also necessary to consider the complexity and the nature of the relationship of a building to the idea behind it, and also take into account its communicative intent:

> Works of architecture speak to us as all buildings do, and yet there is the difference insisted on by Ruskin and Pevsner: architecture must be thought of both in relation to and also in

> opposition to all merely functional building. The same goes for 'language' - but how then is that language to be understood? Eco points out that buildings denote the building type they exemplify. Works of architecture, I want to propose – very tentatively, only as a kind of trial balloon and quite aware of how preposterous such a proposal is likely to seem – do not just denote the kind of building they are: they do so by representing buildings. *Architecture is an art of representation.* (Harries, p. 96, emphasis in original)

The nature, structure and the outcome of the mental processes involved in this procedure mirror the way in which a meaning is negotiated in language. Thus, Harries indicates the importance of the role of language as well as the tight connection and mutual conditioning of individuals, buildings and community in his overarching ethical conception of architecture. He sees the ethical role of architecture is superordinate to its aesthetic preoccupation and is able to prevent both formal chaos and general disorder, for the expression of which a biblical metaphor is borrowed: "(h)uman beings are not self-sufficient: having lost their place in paradise, they have to find their place in a genuinely human order; they have to know and join themselves to one another" (Harries, p. 365). Harries's optimistic Romantic reading of the biblical myth permeates his work, highlighting architecture's ability to mediate meaningful existence, whilst replacing the formalist approach with new sets of meanings and methods, often borrowing from other fields of knowledge, mainly the humanities. The language of architecture is conceived as a multi-layered, interdisciplinary quality of architecture, capable of mediating its ethical message.

More recent and less academic but still influential works, such as Alain De Botton's popularizing bestseller *The Architecture of Happiness* (2006) or Rowan Moore's *Why We Build* (2012) follow the directions suggested in *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. Alain De Botton, a great promoter of the practical implications of philosophy, which makes him an object of constant ridicule to experts and a source of great admiration to the mass reading public, develops his most successful work by far, *The Architecture of Happiness*, on the premise that: "As we write, so we build: to keep a record of what matters to us" (De Botton, p. 123). Rowan Moore, a trained architect and well-known architecture critic for *The Observer*, elaborates on the volition aspect of the building process in his *Why We Build*. Once again, he hints at the vital humanistic aspect of architecture by proclaiming that "[b]uildings are always incomplete. Or rather, they are completed only by the lives for which they are the setting. From this paradox comes much of the fascination and misunderstanding of architecture" (Moore, 2012, p. 91). In terms of the possible integration and/or application of linguistic categories and aspects, Moore

rather contrasts the sphere of architecture with that of language: “A building is not a sentence, which in principle has the ability to match and express a thought closely. It is not linear, like language. Compared to the fluidity of words, a building is atrociously clumsy, but it can be lived and inhabited as books cannot be” (Moore, 2012, pp. 91-92). Moore identifies bad architecture as that which does not allow for complex and mutable interpretations and multiple effects, stipulating a single meaning which makes it too literal. Quality architecture, on the other hand, “allows future, yet unknown, realities to take place within it” (Moore, 2012, p. 92).

Moore’s insistence on the plurality of meanings and democratic readings of the spaces and places architects design is a testimony to the intellectual trajectory, which echoes other thinkers, apart from Harries, whose works have helped to shape both contemporary architectural theory and practice and which have very often derived their meaning from their linguistic engagement. [vi]

The textual turn within urban planning

The linguistic turn in architecture was first pioneered mainly by semiotics, which sought to focus on rather traditional elements of architecture. The deconstructivists’ approach marked a further shift in the direction of its interpretation as it, drawing on poststructural and postmodern theories, decided to perceive buildings as well as cities as texts to be read, preferably disregarding their conventional meanings and preferring personal ones (Wilkinson, 2019).

Indeed, this understanding is apparent even in works dealing with the urban experience. One of the seminal texts, Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974), focuses on the everyday perception of the city by an individual, “the ordinary man”, or “a common hero” as he puts it in the dedication. One of the sensations which characterizes the experience of the modern metropolis is connected with high-rise buildings. A person observing the view from the top floor feels detached, elevated above the reach of the hustle and bustle of the city streets. De Certeau compares this transformation from actor to spectator, or even voyeur, to a textual practice – reading, to be more specific. Seen from an elevated position (de Certeau employs the example of the World Trade Center), the city and its streets become a text to be read, deciphered and assessed. The world by which one was possessed “lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god” (De Certeau, p. 92).

While the textual approach is implied by the interdisciplinary nature of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which acts as a probe into various aspects of contemporary urban existence, merging philosophy, literary criticism, sociology and history, environmental urban planning does not seem to be a field that is acutely receptive of the latest developments in philosophy

and literary criticism. And yet, one of the pivotal works of city planning, *The Image of the City* (1960) by American urban planner Kevin Lynch, embraces the textual view, stipulating the aspect of legibility as "crucial in the city setting" (p. 3). Lynch stressed mainly the practical aspect of legibility as a visual quality which facilitates recognition of various parts of the city, so that these can be organized into "a coherent pattern, just as this printed page that is legible" (p. 3). His insistence on the approachability and imaginability of the urban space clearly postulates a massive proliferation of humanizing tendencies concerning the approach to and the structuring of space as well as a regard for the experience of the individual. Thus, his work may be regarded as a bridge between the modernist approach, highlighting the necessity of structure and clean simple lines, and the postmodern or even deconstructivist approach, urging the creators to invite the users of architecture to participate in the creation of its meaning.[vii]

There also have been natural efforts to emphasize the social nature of space, highlighted by scholars such as Henri Lefebvre. In his *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre, a Marxist philosopher and sociologist, famously stipulated that "(Social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre, p. 26). As far as the textual properties of space are concerned, Lefebvre almost begrudgingly acknowledges them, but does not see this activity as particularly purposeful, as it is impossible to reduce space to text in his view.

Some of the contemporary perspectives also take into account the technological aspect and integrate it within the postulate suggesting the textual properties of architecture. In his essay for *The Architectural Review*, Tom Wilkinson stresses that to read a cityscape does not necessarily involve the application of literary and linguistic procedures to architecture or understanding space in a wide array of its phenomenological complexities. To read a physical space rather refers to "scrolling through the city", meaning that as you move you look at the screen of your phone for a direction. The extreme consequence of such a tendency would be the predominance of reading over actual seeing.

Conclusion: Contemporary perspectives on the textual properties of architecture

As Michel Foucault predicted in his 1967 lecture entitled "Of Other Spaces", "[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (Foucault, 1986, p. 22). Before architecture indicated a textual turn, literary theory displayed a spatial turn with a wide array of works dealing with the spatial practices behind the poetics of a literary text. What followed was a swift embrace of various aspects and approaches developed mainly within the context of literary theory by architectural theory and practice. The subsequent debate concerning the possibility of a proliferation of linguistic and literary aspects in architecture reached its peak in the period

between the late 1960s and the 1990s. The vigour of the debate in that period was unparalleled, especially compared to its dwindling in recent years (Harries, Hauptmann, Wilkinson).

The question that energized the architectural sphere, that is whether or not buildings are to be read, had been raised repeatedly in the past and had been mostly dealt with in connection with the iconicity of *architecture parlante*. However, this seemingly simple and straightforward question inspired further inquiry into the interplay between symbols, structures, texts and contexts within the sphere of architecture and also within the realm of human activities in general. As a result of this far-reaching quest for answers, architectural thinking absorbed and simultaneously contributed a great number of ideas from different fields of knowledge, mainly the humanities, with philosophy, literary theory and social sciences among the most prominent. Inspired by these influences, those architects and theoreticians who decided to embrace the postmodern paradigm often did so in order to eschew what they saw as the elitist and/or uncommunicative works of the modernists. What they proposed instead was a style that would encourage at least two possible ways of reading, one meant for the general, lay audience and one for the more knowledgeable, expert audience.

Postmodern building therefore often hovered over the precipice of kitsch and was branded manipulative and populist by some of its critics. On the other hand, the iconicity of the buildings drew closer to the concept of *architecture parlante* and, what cannot be underestimated, the buildings in question asked for, if not demanded human participation in the process of the construction of their meaning. Deconstructivism put more emphasis on this tendency, not only urging humans to view buildings as text but also inviting them to disregard the conventional symbols and to replace them with countless possible interpretations, liberating and pluralizing the artistic expression. As a result, writing and building are mostly seen as being either indivisible or at least compatible processes, with both presupposing some form of "reading".

Currently, the textual turn in architecture has taken a number of different forms. This is reflected in contemporary architectural discourse being beset by simultaneous contradictory processes of abstraction of space on the one hand and its materialization and commodification on the other. Some authors see the textual turn as a means to an end, which should help to convey other functions of architecture, such as its ethical one. The more radical perspectives focus on the current proliferation of technologies as well as developments in mapping, and they study their influence on the process of reading buildings and architecture. This merging tendency has been mostly embraced by architects, who see it as the premise of their practice: architecture which does not exist in a vacuum but within a larger stream of images and ideas (Stan Allen as quoted in Steffens, p. 14).

Nowadays, however, architects such as Michael Sorkin voice serious concern over the "contested" (Steffens, p. 128) nature of contemporary space resulting from environmental, social and cultural inequalities and the resulting struggles and conflicts. The textual turn in architecture has accentuated awareness of contested spaces but, at the same time, it provides instruments to protect and preserve such spaces and places. Sumayya Vally's design of the 2021 Serpentine Pavilion demonstrates this ability while employing a combination of textual, literary and architectural methods in the creation of her "architectural essay" (Moore, 2021). The work was the result of juxtaposing spaces that are vital for migrant communities, both existing and already disappeared, by sampling parts and aspects of spaces and details from over 50 sites around the capital, then combining them together "in a process of layering, splicing and subtracting" (Wainwright, 2021).

Apart from drawing the audience's attention to the threatened places and space and their irreplaceability within the migrant community, Vally's creation may be viewed in the context of assemblage theory, another recent, poststructuralist perspective, developed by Manuel DeLanda in his 2006 monograph *A New Philosophy of Society*, which draws heavily on the work of Deleuze and Guattari. The theory, originally developed within the context of treatment of place, has been readily embraced by other disciplines, such as architecture or geography. An assemblage is a distinct whole whose qualities are derived from the interactions between its parts (DeLanda, p. 5). Unlike in an organic structure, the individual sections are replaceable and their removal does not disrupt the whole, only its meaning, as this is based on its interactions.

Vally's work operates on a similar premise, it does not presuppose any given way of viewing and perceiving, it is not determined by symmetry, it may be approached from many different angles and experienced in a number of ways. The whole of the pavilion is based on the interactions of its disparate parts and their viewers/visitors, who may actively participate within the process of constructing the structure's meaning and thus "read" it. The reason why the author decided to represent and put a particular emphasis on the often "lost and vulnerable" (Vally as quoted in Moore, 2021) spaces is once again tied to language: "because we don't recognise them architecturally as part of our lexicon" (Vally as quoted in Wainwright, 2021). The conception of Vally's Kensington pavilion dignifies the contested space while simultaneously being able to "conjure an atmosphere of coming together" (Wainwright, 2021). Not only does Vally's creation exemplify the synergy of the linguistic and the literary interacting with the architectural, it also embodies the aspirational potential of such a fusion.

Endnotes:

[i] The research for this article was supported by the Czech Science Foundation, project number 20-24867S "Representations of Space in the Novels of Jim Crace and Simon Mawer".

[ii] Literary theory has generated a number of interdisciplinary approaches, developed since the 1970s, which combine the abstract and the concrete, the practical and theoretical, the humanities and sciences, such as geopoetics, psychogeography or geocriticism.

[iii] In order to explain the nature of the so-called textual turn in architecture, it is necessary to elucidate the parallels between the disciplines, drawing on works pioneering this perspective. The monograph *Architecture and the Time of Space* by Deborah Hauptmann mainly concerns contemporary architecture and the way it reflects influential contemporary theories of space, time, body and cognition.

[iv] Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsona's work "Semiotics and Architecture: Ideological Consumption or Theoretical Work" may be regarded as one of the first Anglo-American theoretical works viewing architecture through the lenses of the contemporary French intellectual postulates as well as the Italian focus on semiotics. The article was first published in the first issue of *Oppositions*, an architectural journal produced between 1973 and 1984 by the Institute for Architecture and Urban studies in New York" (Hauptmann iv).

[v] These are of course not the only architectural texts he produced; other influential ideas on the subject can be found in *Being and Time* (1927), "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935), "Art and Space" (1971), which nevertheless seem to lack the concentration and forthrightness of the first group of texts, at least according to Adam Sharr, the author of *Heidegger for Architects* (2007), a concise introduction of Heidegger's work to the architectural audience as well as *Heidegger's Hut* (2006), a study of the unique space of the three-room cabin in the Black Forest Mountains of Southern Germany which directly inspired many of Heidegger's most iconic works and stances.

[vi] In her monograph, Deborah Hauptmann mostly highlights the role of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as the authors of influential theories of space, time, body and cognition, but she also stresses the contribution of Henri Bergson, Louis Althusser, Gabriel Tarde, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Maurizio Lazzarato to contemporary theories (p. iv).

[vii] In his manifesto, *Towards a New Architecture* (1927), Le Corbusier, the doyen of modernism, insisted on the use of primary forms in architecture and justified his preference by their aesthetic qualities and mainly their clarity: "Primary forms are beautiful forms because they can be clearly appreciated" (8). Primary forms were largely derived from his penchant for "regulating lines", which he saw as "An inevitable element of Architecture. The necessity for order. The regulating line is a guarantee against wilfulness"(9). In Le Corbusier's view, regulating lines not only complements primary forms, it also partly conditions them. More importantly, it mediates and facilitates an understanding which "brings satisfaction" (9).

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