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On the Relationship Between Architectural and Literary Narrative

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Abstract. The article presents the links between architecture and literary narrative, the characterization of which enriches one's thinking about contemporary architecture. These include devices used in literary and architectural narratives: quotations, metaphors, perspective (and focalization), retrospection and anticipation. A building also corresponds to the rules of syntax and semantics, the concept of an event is being introduced more and more frequently to the art of building, and the factor of time is becoming more and more visible in it. In the era of rapid changes in space, durability ceases to be a prerequisite for a building, whereas more emphasis is placed on its "interaction" with the user. The architectural story is heading towards a dialogue.

1. Introduction

The article aims to analyse the links that emerge between architectural design and literary narrative. Like the historical one, contemporary architecture conveys ideas through the arrangement of space as well as the materials and forms used by the designer which are to reflect the social goals it is designed for in space. This is what the architectural narrative that is created in specific cultural realities (which is worth emphasizing) look like. Both architecture and literature are products of culture. The creation of the former one is the sequence of space while that of the latter one – the sequence of events in space and time. However, the term "narrative" is also understood as the "structure" of a literary work – a specific way of selecting and combining parts in order to create a coherent whole that evokes an emotional effect on the recipient intended by the author. The structuralism of the work is the factor that approximates architecture to literature most closely, and both disciplines are subject to the laws of harmony and composition.

Being the era of developed technical knowledge, rapid circulation of information and relative economic stability, the 21st century is also the time in which the accelerated and simplified process of designing and constructing buildings is frequently devoid of reflection on the quality of the architecture thus obtained. The mercantile treatment of new structures exclusively through the prism of numerical factors (including usable floor area, costs of implementation and exploitation) is pathological. Numerous new developments are just an imitation of neighbouring buildings or other patterns of dubious quality. These include: chain restaurants, shopping centres, or highlander inns in the lowlands (commonly found in Poland). They confirm Nigel Coates's thesis: *We live in a morass of meaningless quotation* [1, p.160].

At the same time, the rules of the classic canons of beauty do not apply today, the functions of structures are constantly changing and buildings are created for a specific period of time.



The historical foundation of the art of building – the Vitruvian triad – is thus being negated. Yet, the symbolic function of architecture remains unquestionable. According to philosopher Nelson Goodman: *A building is a work of art only insofar as it signifies, means, refers, symbolizes in some way* [2, p. 33].

The paradigms of the 21st-century architecture also include: the lack of explicitly determined typologies, codes, meanings [3, p. 28] and the user more frequently assuming the role of the creator of space. The concept of an event appears in contemporary architecture more and more often, which influences its narrative. The narrative which, correctly understood, does not consist in a mere reproduction of certain structures or their elements, but in providing architectural structures with meaning.

The above factors trigger the desire to establish a dialogue about architecture as a language. The dialogue that allows to bring contemporary architecture closer to society, as it is often considered incomprehensible, which leads to dissatisfaction of users and turning to the aesthetics based on pastiche of historical forms.

2. Narrative and architecture

Originally signifying a type of a literary utterance presenting a specific course of events in the time order, the concept of narrative has long since expanded its meaning. The Russian Formalists began the departure from regarding this category as strictly related to literary studies at the beginning of the 20th century. It currently occurs in various scientific fields, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, historiography or fine arts. It can be argued that it has become the thinking paradigm of our time.

For contemporary theorists of narrative (e.g. David Carr, Charles Taylor), narrative ceased to be a structure of certain texts, turning into something more fundamental, *which enables and precedes the creation of such texts – the way of organizing our experience of time – the structure of self-understanding* [4, p. 13]. Man not only creates narratives as texts, elements of culture, but also their mental processes have narrative properties. Temporality and finitude render the narrative similar to the ontological structure of human existence and serve to construct the identity of an individual. Narrative imitates life, and life imitates narrative, just like Oscar Wilde's art imitates life, and life imitates art.

Narrative in architecture adopts several forms – from the meanings in the conceptual content of the design to the methods of its presentation, such as models, drawings, etc. It conveys the semantic meanings of buildings and places as well as social and cultural content. It constructs meanings by creating space and social bonds [5]. As Mark Rakatansky proves *there is no mute architecture* [6, p. 201], but there is an absolute narrative in architecture – the buildings whose main purpose is to convey meanings. This transference does not necessarily entail the figurativeness of form. An example of such a design is the Roman Danteum (1942), the unbuilt monument of Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri for Benito Mussolini.

Although the building was to fulfil the functions of a library and a museum, the description of the design reveals the architects' main intention: Dante's "temple" – an emotional "path" leading through the Divine Comedy. It was designed in honour of Dante and the Roman Empire as political inspiration (and aspirations) of fascist Italy. The space sequence constitutes an allegory for the Divine Comedy. It was to lead from hell through purgatory to paradise, correspondingly to the journey made by the narrator of the poem. Terragni, however, deprived the building of direct, figurative references, focusing instead on abstract forms and proportions of the rooms that referred to the form and structure of the text [7].

3. Structure

Structural thinking is an element that closely binds architectural and literary work. In literary narrative, a text constitutes a material form of the message. A story is the content of the text while a plot – a sequence of logically and chronologically related events. All layers of a literary work are received simultaneously, but they are not identical. Different texts can narrate the same story [8, p. 4-5]. An

architectural work also possesses a multi-layered structure: a material, formal and semantic level. “Stones-words” compose forms, creating a “building-story”. Also here, all levels are perceived simultaneously. Just as the plot of a fairy tale or myth can adopt many stories still drawing from one archetype, buildings with a specific function reflect one ideal model. [9].

To create narrative, one needs a “text” consisting of units dependent on the media used (painting, film, literary, spatial work, etc.). Words form sentences that in turn compose an utterance. The presence of “words” or elementary, architectural semantic units in architecture (such as a door, window, column, wall) has been presented many times, not only derived from the semiotic codification of an architectural work whose foundations were laid by Umberto Eco [10]. The concepts of *words* in architecture, the *architectural dictionary* or *dictionary of architectural forms* and *components of architectural language* can also be found in the texts of Charles Jencks [11], Steven Holl [12], Michael Graves [13], Richard Rogers [14] and Mieczysław Porębski [15] among others.

Synthesizing their thoughts, one can acknowledge that the dictionary of architectural forms consists of hierarchically organized elements and “proto-elements” of architecture, each of which reflects its production process, construction and deconstruction of a building. The architectural dictionary remains open, expanding with new compositional elements with each new development. This continuous expansion process is facilitated by new technologies. It allows one to combine aesthetics with function, as noted by Horatio Greenough: *Beauty is the promise of function* [14].

The etymology of architectural concepts may come from profession or the outside world – a broadly understood culture with its symbolic and anthropomorphic layer. The architectural dictionary is a reflection of man and nature. Charles Jencks considers vocabulary associated with the architect’s profession to be more flexible and ambiguous than literary language. Like Eco, he sees its meaning dependent on the spatial context and cultural code used by the recipient [11]. Yet, the issue of reception is a complex matter in the architectural narrative. “Conventional” signs, i.e. the ones referring to the function of buildings, are comprehensible only to those recipients who are familiar with a given culture, which results in conveying different meanings when these are read in another reality (e.g. political one) [16].

Knut Hamsun Center by Steven Holl is an example of an individual language of architecture composed with words taken from outside architecture. The forms whose source can be found in the novel of the Nobel Prize winner were incorporated in the museum of the Norwegian writer. What one can find here is a balcony inspired by the *girl with sleeves rolled up polishing panes*, another balcony designed as an *empty violin case* or a window based on a woman with two blue feathers in a hat. The building itself is to be a metaphor for the human body with the backbone and skeleton in the form of a lift and staircase, as well as the skin – wooden elevations. The grass on its roof (referring to Norwegian sod roofs) brings hair to mind. In a conceptual drawing of the building, Holl placed a quote from *Hunger* depicting the idea behind the project: *Building as a Body: Battleground of Invisible Forces*.

4. Elements of narrative

A narrative text consists of signs – and this is also the case in an architectural narrative. What is more, the building complies with the rules of syntax and semantics. The similarity of literary narrative and architecture is also based on the occurrence of analogous aspects and the use of similar narrative devices, such as quotations, metaphors, time disturbances or narrative perspectives.

4.1. Quotation

Architectural citation is one of the basic methods of embedding a building in a spatial context. Recognizing quotation as a special type of denotation, Nelson Goodman acknowledged its non-verbal forms – musical and pictorial one. Referring to the non-verbal Goodmanian quotation, Remei Capdevila-Verning [17] established principles of the architectural quotations; these may be fragments of other buildings, a text (as seen in Gothic cathedrals), literary descriptions of buildings or drawings.

According to Goodman, the essential elements of a quotation are content and reference. In architecture, it is achieved by articulation, accentuating the cited element in the building.

Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia can be considered the flagship "citing" structure – a postmodern example from the period of quotation and pastiche. FAT studio's projects continue the postmodern tradition. The Grote Koppel building in Amersfoort (2010) contains quotations of the façades of other local structures. Each of these quotations is reflected in the forms on its façade, and so the elevation of Grote Koppel contains façades of entire streets, scaled down to one floor.

In turn, Hôtel Barrière Le Fouquet's in Paris designed by Edouard François (2006) is a replica of the authentic façade of the Haussmanian tenement house in the form of a concrete sculpture with freely arranged contemporary rectangular lighting. The scenographic costume allowed one to unify the existing heterogeneous elements that formed the structure and to give it a characteristic powerful image. In addition to architecture citing architecture, the art of creating space draws from outside its language, as seen in Gehry's giant binoculars in Venice (1991). In Crèche de la Girafe (designed by Hondelatte Laporte Architectes, Boulogne-Billancourt, 2012) these are children's toys: the figure of a giraffe, a bear and ladybugs.

4.2. *Metaphor*

A metaphor, or a literary comparison transferred to the world of architecture, is a significant means in the reception of a building. Being especially popular in postmodern architecture, the device has not disappeared along with it. The requirement for a successful metaphor is ambiguity, allowing to avoid the infantilism of a hot-dog stand in the form of a hot dog. The Sydney Opera House by Jørn Utzon (despite Jenck's analysis of its witty interpretations), the TWA Flight Center by Eero Saarinen in New York or the more modern Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg by Herzog & de Meuron (2016) can be considered successful metaphors. In turn, anthropomorphic references are clearly visible in Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias and Palau de les Arts by Santiago Calatrava in Valencia (1996-2009) – a human eye with a movable eyelid, forms imitating ribs, trees and shells shaped from white concrete, metal and glass (planetarium, cinema, museum, opera).

Substituting historical meta-narrative based on myths and religions, in contemporary metaphors, architects draw from the language of the latest science, e.g. cosmo-genesis or organizational patterns clashed with the cultural code [18]. Reflection or direct use of some elements of the terrain physiography (mountains, rocks, caves, watercourses, etc.) in the form or materials applied in a building invariably causes a "retardation" of time and softens a rational building structure. This can be seen in La Ciudad de la Cultura de Galicia, near Santiago de Compostela, designed by Peter Eisenman, (1999-2010) – an underground museum built into the top of the mountain, imitating the local landscape and wavy forms of the scallops guiding the pilgrims from Santiago. The structure is composed of six "ribbons" with a system of passageways between them. The layout was based on the historic network of downtown streets and along with the sequence of spaces – squares, colonnades, streets, gardens – transforms it into a peculiar city. The only geometric structures here are the two towers built to John Hejduk's design (for the botanical garden in Belvis in 1992).

According to one theory, the entire issue of narrative in architecture is actually a mere "game" of metaphors. Yet, it is a serious game as these metaphors are to play the role of cognitive models, a scientific model within the meaning of the processes of semiosis and symbolization (as a visualization of linguistic conceptions) [19].

4.3. *Rhythm, frequency, repetition – adapting architecture to movement*

According to the narrative theorist Mieke Bal [8, p. 3], the essence of a narrative text (whether it consists of linguistic or non-linguistic signs like sounds, painterly forms or film frames) consists in its orderliness, finite form and structural character – which renders it similar to an architectural work. Sequential ordering, regularity and harmony are also features of an architectural work. A rational structure, structural order, planned and reason-dependent layout are to introduce order into architectural development.

In turn, the order of the construction environment is to protect man against the unpredictability of the natural environment. Consistently applied architectural rhythm, such as the one found in the Venetian Procuratie at St. Mark's Square, can only be an artificially created element – even obsessively intrusive one.

Rhythm and harmony are to bring the work of architecture closer to a musical one. Rasmussen writes about the mysterious influence of rhythm – the necessity of a near physical experience of it – as when listening to a song. The experience of musical rhythm energises the listener, which was employed in design by Erich Mendelsohn and F. L. Wright [20, p. 134]. Despite the also present expressionist tendencies, contemporary structures in the rationalist trend are characterized by a consistent rhythm of windows on façades, columns and an even distribution of elements on façades (e.g. Langhaus by Diener & Diener Architekten, Amsterdam 2001). Repetition is an inherent feature of architecture.

At the same time, the ever increasing pace of movement along with faster and faster means of transport influence the reception of an architectural form. As early as half a century ago, Lefebvre analysed how the city space “flattens out” proportionally to the increase in driving speed [21, p. 313]. There also appear projects directly adapted to a different pace of movement. In Multicasa Duisburg Project (2002) Shin Takamatsu introduced rotund forms and a canopy along the entire length of the facility (including the square), adapting them to the speed of movement – the freeway and the high-speed railway running along the longest side of the plot.

4.4. Perspective

The concept of a “narrative perspective” corresponds to an architectural perspective. Literary “vision” is ontologically and conceptually based on optics. Its extent (i.e. the amount of information) is directly related to the observer's (or narrator's) point of view, the intensity and accuracy of depiction and the direction of the message. Remoteness or approximation is linked to the level of objectivity. According to some theorists of narrative, the total objectivity does not exist in literature [8, p. 146,147]. The visual perspective used in architecture for centuries has not been an objective form of representation either, it is considered a “symbolic form” – a method of representing transcendental content [22]. The method of depicting known as the “subtext” of architecture, influenced by aesthetic, philosophical and scientific factors [23, 24, 25].

Narratology operates with the concepts of an internal and external narrator possessing different ranges of knowledge (although neither an omniscient narrator nor an omnipotent architect exists), while architecture with focused and peripheral vision: an intense gaze that frames a structure and a subconscious tactile perception of the environment from inside the space. The first model of perception dominates at present, supplanting the other in the age of hegemony of sight [26, p. 17,28].

Differences in the method of depiction separate Western and Far Eastern cultures. A convergent perspective – placing emphasis on the relationship between an object and its observer – is an invention of Western culture. A parallel perspective, illustrating the local reception of space closely related to the experience of time and changes in the natural environment, is representative for the Far East. It reveals the actual dimensions of the space, making their reception independent of the observer (a building is not linked to physical movement and speed either, which does occur in the city of Western culture). This can be seen in the Japanese and Chinese handscrolls called Emaki-mono (11th to 16th centuries), where the depicted scenery – different views of the same space – changes in time and, allows one to read the story while unfolding the scroll.

Steven Holl built the design of Sifang Art Museum in Chinese Nanjing around the Far Eastern “resistance” to the Renaissance construction of perspective, creating a space with invisible vanishing points and the effect of viewing distant plans that distorts the viewer's perception. The architect introduced a subtle turning of the walls, ceilings and floors of the elongated blocks in all directions – the angles diverge slightly from 90⁰. Through the glass wall that closes the sequence of the interiors and the free-standing walls of the yard-garden, the space crosses visually into the surrounding

landscape, being delimited without the introduction of any clear boundaries. The vanishing points and construction of perspective were also hidden in the garden, manipulating the visibility and placement of the structures below and above the horizon, and directing a horizontal drawing of bamboo on the walls nonparallel to the floor [27, p.].

4.5. *Retrospection, anticipation, achrony*

Within the differences between the convergent and parallel perspective representing Western and Far Eastern spaces one may find an analogy to a dramatic and progressive literary plot: events with a short time span and a longer one – presenting progress. Literature also provides for techniques that diversify time, and time is related to space.

Gérard Genette replaced the notion of a narrative perspective with the term “focalization”, emphasizing the inclusion (or exclusion) of narrative information. A special kind of focalization, linking time and space, is to be memory – “seeing” the past. This vision carries features of subjectivism, sometimes divergent with reality or “delved” in details. It is an expression of opposition to “mapping” – looking down on and disregarding time and diversity. While architecture is considered to be a branch of art incapable of telling a story due to its tendency for durability – “monumentalization”, retardation of time – it operates with such literary devices as retrospection – allowing to return to the past – and anticipation – allowing to look to the future.

Mark Wigley characterizes a monument as a machine “institutionalizing time” – a space protected from its passage, preserving the attributes of the past [28]. A special kind of a retrospection is ruins, a metaphor for the collapse of semantic structures, especially allusive in the period of modernism – fragments of a lost whole that can no longer be rebuilt – the fall, catastrophe. Ruins were used in various ways – in the design of BEST supermarkets by SITE (1974-82), in War and Architecture series by Lebbeus Wood (1990s) and in a series of sculptures entitled Bronx Floor Series (1972-74) by Gordon Matt-Clark. In turn, anticipating, or designing a form “straight from the future”, brings architectural chimeras to life.

4.6. *A narrative “lie” – delusions, appearances, architectural chimeras*

The plane of the fictionality of an architectural narrative can be sought in the links between architecture and surrealism. The locus of surrealism in architecture is a contemporary city; the intellectual foundations of this current in art have already been addressed as characteristic components of urban space: blurring of the boundaries (between objectivity and subjectivism, perception and projection – and thus the physical space and cyberspace, reality and fantasy) and of the day-night division (due to artificial light and blackout used today) as well as the expansion of physical space (with virtual one, and with the world of dreams in surrealism).

Imagination, allowing one to overcome human limitations in surrealism, constitutes the basis of the event ontology of contemporary polis. Like a surrealist artist, a contemporary architect pursues a synthesis of the world of ideas and reality, nature and modern technologies. The past play with mirrors and illusionistic paintings (e.g. in Baroque) are nowadays replaced by manipulating the scale and the use of optical illusions, which allows for the creation of apparent space. This is accompanied by the display of moving images (as seen in Kunsthau Graz). A double façade, often completely detached from the building, allows for a free transfer of meanings and their unfettered quick change. Hence, the narrative is “movable” and adjusted to the user rather than imposed by the creator.

In Kunsthau Graz designed by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier (2003), new materials and morphology – non-Euclidian geometry – were introduced adjacent to the existing Baroque building, producing an extraordinary effect of a structure that resembles nothing before it (with the exception of Archigram’s drawings perhaps), deservedly called the “Friendly Alien”. The architects designed Kunsthau to be a completely alien structure in the context – a “creature from another planet”. According to Fourier, the injection of foreign elements is to revive the city. The lack of permanent exposition in the facility or the established programme allowed for the creation of a “black box” interior – variable, modified by curators each time (likewise, the façade with integrated variable

illumination). Each visit is to show a different configuration – another building to the visitor. It is a “museum programmed to constantly refresh its individuality” [29].

5. From structure through an event to a dialogue

In a literary story, the author creates events which, in its plot, correspond to the meanings that evoke specific emotions. A work of art and architecture possess an analogous structure (material – form – expression of the work). Owing to the presence of the semantic layer in the process of their perception, a “coat” of experiences and ideas assimilated through cultural education is imposed on the pure perception. It is in this layer that visual signs – narrative media – are transferred. They allow for the emotional engagement of the recipient who experiences pleasure, affection, humour. If it is possible to compare architectural narrative to the literary one, then the distribution of elements – actors, events of their time and place – is to evoke the desired aesthetic or emotional effect on the recipient. In architecture, the elements of the literary plot will correspond to spatial forms, place and temporal and spatial context.

In the 20th and 21st century, the concept of an event is being introduced more and more frequently to the art of building, and the factor of time is becoming more and more visible in it. In the era of rapid spatial changes, durability ceases to be a building's asset, whereas more emphasis is placed on its “interaction” with the user. Thus, the architectural story is heading towards a dialogue. This is fostered by regarding architecture as a combination of space, events and movements – a discourse about spaces and events initiated by Bernard Tschumi who referred to two metaphors of a building – a pyramid and a labyrinth. The pyramid as the conceptuality of discipline, linguistic and morphological layers, immobile element and the labyrinth – empirical experience of space (staying in a building). Tschumi introduces the concept of an event into architecture, linking it to the impression of shock and questioning the assumptions of architecture as an empirical experience and gradual cognition through movement in time sequence.

The temporary pavilion in Seoul designed by OMA – Transformer Prada (2009) – is an example of architecture created by users through events occurring in it. The pavilion was planned as a multifunctional one (gallery, cinema, fashion shows and other special events) and an appropriate shape of the floor plan was chosen for each function. A tetrahedral structure wrapped in a pneumatic polyurethane membrane stretched on a steel frame was thus erected. Each wall being of a different geometrical shape, the pavilion could change its form for the intended use. When, through the rotation of the body, one of the floors was on the ground, the remaining sides constituted its walls and roof with elements of the interior protruding into the space of the steel structure. The contemporary building was also contemporary due to its temporariness. It currently exists only in pictures.

6. Results and discussions

The above stylistic devices and relationship between architecture and literature indicate the links between literary and architectural narrative. However, the relationship between architecture and literary narrative is neither obvious nor commonly understood. Traditionally understood, these two fields of art operate with various means – a word and a building substance. They also have different purposes. Literature conveys cultural content while the overarching goal of building is the protection of human life. Literature and architecture seemingly refer to other areas of life, and there are fundamental differences in activity on these two fields that make them difficult to compare.

These discrepancies between the literary and architectural work are accompanied by their different characters resulting from temporal and spatial structuring. Linguistic text is a linear sequence of sounds reaching the recipient, transmitting specific contents in the temporal order and then passing. The structure of architectural text resembles a frame story. Architectural structures last and coexist in space; they are adjacent to each other, not ordered in time, but divided into places that are either easy or difficult to access – closer and further, which can be “read” in the order chosen by the user or completely omitted [15]. Such conclusions may lead to the assertion – also present in architectural

criticism – that the issue of the language of architecture is unfounded, and thus architectural structures are not subject to narrative interpretation [15,19].

However, the results of the discussion about language in architecture remain ambiguous [30]. Even the opponents of the existence of architectural narrative point to the fact that apart from the requirements related to durability, security and functionality, architecture is to express certain social meanings through form, and the presence of signs and symbols acts as a stimulus for the building process [19]. What is more, traditional research on architecture refers to empirical relations between it and the context, especially the cultural and spatial one, and in the Derridean narrative approach “there is nothing but description”. Thus, the art of shaping space is actually a mere collection of impressions – a game of meanings and various interpretations. Narrative, in turn, opposes the empirical vision of space, dealing with aspects of design omitted by analytical research (such as function or structure). By situating architecture in the sphere of art rather than technology, it makes the building a work of art.

7. Conclusions

The semantic layer in architecture is an essential component of the work. This is also true for contemporary architecture, which even the opponents of architectural narrative agree with.

Certain elements of the “architectural language” bring it closer to literary narrative, entitling one to speak about architectural narrative: structural construction, the use of quotations, metaphors, retrospection and anticipation, the issue of perspective and “architectural deception”, an event in architecture.

Architecture uses a language whose form speaks indirectly about the content, and narratology allows such cases. Theorists of narrative also recognize non-linear sign systems as languages, discerning narrative statements, for example in painting or sculpture.

Narrative in architecture is not related to figurativeness at all. As such, it did not end in the period of postmodernism, and is continued in individual ways of the architects’ statements reflected in the forms of buildings. Therefore, the discussion on the language of contemporary architecture has not yet been closed, and its results still remain inconclusive.

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