The Words Between the Spaces

Buildings and Language

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Using language – speaking and understanding it – is a defining ability of human beings, woven into all human activity. It is therefore inevitable that it should be deeply implicated in the design, production and use of buildings. Building legislation, design guides, competition and other briefs, architectural criticism, teaching and scholarly material, and the media all produce their characteristic texts. When these prescribe what is to be built then, in a sense, they can be said to 'design' the eventual building. When they describe what is already built they are formative of our judgement and responses.

The authors of this book, one a linguist, the other an architect and historian, examine how such texts relate to issues of national identity, power structures, the creation of heritage, and the evaluation of projects by professional and lay critics. The role of images in these texts is crucial and is discussed in detail. The authors use texts about such projects as Berlin's new Reichstag, Scotland's new Parliament, and the Auschwitz concentration camp museum to clarify the interaction between texts, design, critical debate and response.

Texts such as Prince Charles's *A Vision of Britain* and the 1919 Tudor Walters Report on 'Housing for the Working Classes' had a wide influence on thinking, debate and, ultimately, on what was built and what was left unbuilt. Through a close reading of these and other texts, the authors examine how the underlying ideological forces worked through language. Finally, they discuss how questions about language and texts might influence both the teaching and the practice of architecture.

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THE ARCHITEXT SERIES

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Architectural discourse has traditionally represented buildings as art objects or technical objects. Yet buildings are also social objects in that they are invested with social meaning and shape social relations. Recognizing these assumptions, the Archi*text* series aims to bring together recent debates in social and cultural theory and the study and practice of architecture and urban design. Critical, comparative and interdisciplinary, the books in the series will, by theorizing architecture, bring the space of the built environment centrally into the social sciences and humanities, as well as bringing the theoretical insights of the latter into the discourses of architecture and urban design. Particular attention will be paid to issues of gender, race, sexuality and the body, to questions of identity and place, to the cultural politics of representation and language, and to the global and postcolonial contexts in which these are addressed.

Foreword

The book you are about to read brings together two fields of study that are rarely combined in a systematic way and may be rather unlike other books you have read. The two fields in question are architecture, the study of buildings and the built environment, and discourse analysis, a branch of linguistics which studies language as it is actually used in real-world contexts. In this book, we explore how language is used, and what it does, in the particular context of writing and talking about buildings. Our title, *The Words Between the Spaces*, is meant to draw attention to the significance of language for our understanding of the built environment.

Writing a book on this subject requires expert knowledge about both buildings and language. Few individuals are equally knowledgeable about both, and we are no exception to that generalization. One of us (Thomas Markus) is an architect, the other (Deborah Cameron) a linguist. In writing this book, we have each brought our own specialized knowledge to bear on our chosen topic. Our discussions over a long period have produced a set of ideas and arguments which 'belong' to both of us equally, and for that reason we use the pronoun 'we' throughout the book. At the same time, however, our respective contributions to the book do reflect our differing areas of expertise. It takes many years to learn the special way of looking at buildings, or language, which distinguishes the trained architect, or linguist, from the layperson. Inevitably, then, the two of us – respectively an architect and a linguist – approach questions of architecture and language from different directions, and use different analytic tools to examine those questions. The linguist does not have the architect's command of architectural theory and history, nor can she interpret a plan, say, with the same ease and insight he can. The architect, conversely, is less practised than the linguist in noticing the intricate patterns made by grammar in a text or discerning its generic structure. The two have different stores of background knowledge, and different technical terminologies. Our skills, in short, are complementary rather than identical, and that is also reflected in the way the book is written. We have not tried to produce a seamless text that reads like the product of a

single mind; readers will probably be able to guess which of us was primarily responsible for which parts of the text.[1]

Another thing that will be evident to the reader of this book is its authors' cultural location. The texts and buildings we use as examples in the chapters that follow are, overall, a fairly diverse collection: our discussion deals with built structures in, for instance, China, England, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Poland, Scotland, Sweden and the USA. However, a rather significant proportion of our case studies come from England and Scotland, the countries where we ourselves are located. Sometimes, too, the texts we analyse were actually produced in the UK, even though they are about buildings located elsewhere. Since we are writing for an international audience, constructing arguments which, we hope and believe, are applicable to discourse about architecture in many societies rather than just the UK, the seeming insularity of our choices requires some explanation.

To begin with, we should point out one obvious constraint on our choice of texts: language itself. Discourse analysis is not only concerned with the *content* of texts, *what* they say, but also and importantly with *how* they say it: the details of their organization, grammar and vocabulary. Since these details are often lost in translation, this kind of analysis can only be carried out on texts in a language the analyst understands well. Between them, the authors of this book are able to read several languages, but since we cannot assume all our readers share any single language other than English, we have generally avoided presenting any detailed analyses of texts that are not in English. (In Chapter 7, which is concerned with the relationship of language and images, we do discuss one French text. We also refer in Chapter 2 to various historical texts originally written in languages other than English, such as Latin and French, but we do not analyse the language of these texts closely.)

English is, of course, an international language: not all our English-language texts come from countries where English is the first language of the majority of the population, nor were they all produced specifically for an audience of native speakers of English. For example, one of the buildings we discuss in Chapter 3 is the headquarters of the Scandinavian airline company SAS, which is located outside Stockholm in Sweden. The literature we analyse relating to this building was also produced in Sweden – but in English, which is widely spoken and routinely used for a range of purposes in Scandinavia. In Chapter 6 we examine texts relating to the Auschwitz museum which now exists on the site of the former Nazi concentration camp in Poland. Again, these texts were produced in English, addressed to an international audience of visitors to the museum and/or its website. So, confining ourselves to texts in the English language does not have to mean, and in this book does not mean, confining ourselves to the textual products of a single nation or culture. On the other hand, it does prevent us from choosing examples from those parts of the world where languages other than English are dominant – China and Latin America, for example, where the relevant

texts would be likely to be written in (respectively) Chinese and Spanish or Portuguese.[2]

A bias towards English-language texts is one thing, but what about our decision to make such extensive use of *British* examples, rather than, say, examples from Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and the USA? This is, in part, a question of cultural knowledge – the analysis of discourse calls for an extensive knowledge of the context in which it is produced and read – and also it is a question of *access* to textual data. Among the textual genres we have found it particularly illuminating to analyse are kinds of writing that do not usually circulate in the public domain (for instance, briefing documents relating to privately commissioned buildings, such as the call centre which we discuss in Chapter 4). To obtain relevant texts, we sometimes had to use professional contacts with particular institutions or architectural practices, and these on the whole were 'local' (i.e. British) contacts – though in some cases they reflected the involvement of the author who is an architect in European networks. In addition, it is often helpful to analyse a selection of different texts relating to a single building (e.g. the competition brief, the jury's report, press coverage of the competition and its outcome, popular and scholarly assessments of the merits of the finished building, etc.). Again, it is far easier to collect this material systematically when the analyst is 'on the spot'.

In fact, our choice of material for this book was quite strongly influenced by circumstances specific to the time and place of its composition. When we began work on it, we both lived and worked in the city of Glasgow in the west of Scotland: at that time and for several years afterwards, it happened that public discussion in both Scotland and Britain more generally was intensely preoccupied with architectural issues. Our home city of Glasgow was preparing for a year-long festival of architecture and design, Glasgow 1999; Scotland's new Parliament building was the subject of a major architectural competition; in the capital of the United Kingdom, London, plans were underway to mark the year 2000 with a series of new and striking built structures along the River Thames. For us, these initiatives were particularly useful, because they generated a steady stream of discourse – both expert and popular, in a range of styles and genres – about buildings and the built environment. For certain buildings, such as the Scottish Parliament and London's Millennium Dome, it was possible to compile over time a massive archive of writing about them, spanning every phase of planning and design (sometimes construction too), and representing every conceivable point of view on their merits. We were well placed to accumulate this material, and we make use of it in several chapters of this book.

There is a bias towards *written* language in the materials we have chosen to analyse, and the reader may wonder why. Was relevant spoken data not, in principle, equally available to us, and equally of interest? Certainly we can think of spoken discourse genres that would have made interesting examples for

analysis, such as the deliberations of competition juries or the discussions that take place between architects and clients. But this kind of discourse is most often produced behind closed doors, in private rather than in public, and is therefore difficult for researchers to access. It is true, as we have already noted, that some of the written texts we analyse were not produced for public circulation either; but persuading people to let you see a copy of a 'private' document – so long as it is not highly confidential – is usually easier than persuading them to let you record their private spoken interactions. Apart from being difficult to negotiate, the recording and subsequent transcription of non-public speech is also very time consuming, and in the event we decided not to attempt it: our few spoken examples come from 'public' sources, mainly the broadcast media. That should not be taken to imply, however, that we consider talk about buildings unimportant. Rather, investigating it in detail has proved to be beyond the scope of this particular project.

In addition to material from our own time and place, we have made some use of historical examples, such as the brief for an early nineteenth century lunatic asylum and an official report on housing produced in the early twentieth century. The value of these examples obviously does not lie in their practical significance for architects working today. We have chosen them, rather, because they provide very clear examples of our general thesis concerning the relationship between language, social and spatial structures (in the examples just given, for instance, those associated with gender and social class). We also explore this relationship in our analyses of contemporary cases such as the European workspaces and the Japanese housing development we discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, and some of the heritage monuments we examine in Chapter 6 (where issues of race/ethnicity and nationality are relevant as well). But it can sometimes be easier to 'see' the kinds of structures we are concerned with when the social and spatial categories they are built around (e.g. different kinds of 'lunatics', domestic spaces like 'parlour' and 'scullery') are *not* part of your own, taken-for-granted reality. Historical examples are useful, in other words, because our distance from the past they belong to makes them seem more abstract, and so helps us to grasp general principles which we can then apply to contemporary cases. Often in this book we follow this logic by starting with a historical example and moving on to analyse present-day examples in more detail.

We recognize, of course, that even our present-day examples will not be equally familiar or 'relevant' to everyone. Something like the Scottish Parliament building is unlikely to be a major topic of discussion among readers located in Seattle or in Seoul. But the aim of this book is *not* to inform readers about the details of particular buildings, nor indeed do we claim that all the buildings we discuss are especially interesting or significant, socially or architecturally. Our examples are exactly that – examples. We use them to exemplify the point that buildings, and our experiences or perceptions of buildings, are shaped in

important ways by the language that is used *about* buildings. It is an argument which we believe to be generally applicable, across languages, cultures and contexts. We have illustrated it with examples reflecting our own knowledge and interests, which are inevitably 'partial' in both senses of the word. However, we hope that our readers, wherever they are located, will be inspired to apply the same approach to examples reflecting their own experiences and concerns – to the textual conventions of their own languages and the architectural traditions of their own cultures. If *The Words Between the Spaces* enables readers to go beyond our specific examples and make meaningful connections between language and architecture in a range of social and cultural contexts, then we will have achieved our main purpose in writing this book.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Chapter 1: Why Language Matters

Language is a neglected subject in discussions of architecture, which is conventionally regarded as a visual rather than verbal activity. 'Architects', observes theorist and practitioner Ellen Dunham-Jones, 'tend to refer to themselves as visual people' (1997: 16). This professional self-image is faithfully reflected in popular representations of architects, which typically show them poring over plans, making drawings and models, or manipulating images on computer screens. But in reality, architects' work is both visual *and* verbal: language plays some part in almost everything they do.

This point is underlined by Dana Cuff's detailed study of architectural practice (Cuff 1992), for which she observed and interviewed numerous professionals and students. In training, she notes, students are encouraged to spend long hours in the studio, where they do not only draw, but also talk with instructors and each other; at regular intervals they face 'crits' delivered by architect-teachers in the medium of spoken language. In practice, the talking continues. Cuff cites findings showing that the average architect has only about half an hour a day when his or her work is uninterrupted by some kind of interaction (the architects she spoke to herself thought this an overestimate). Even the most 'creative', schematic design phase of a project rarely matches the idealized picture in which a solitary designer spends long silent hours at the drawing board. Making a building is a collaborative process which involves continual dialogue – with clients, with colleagues, with other professionals like engineers and landscapers, with building contractors. Cuff aptly describes what goes on in these interactions as 'constructing a word-and-sketch building' (1992: 97). She also makes clear how much *written* language is produced in any architectural project. Meetings are recorded in memos and minutes; letters may have to be written to various authorities and community representatives; agreements and contracts must be drawn up. Other texts to which architects may refer include building and planning regulations, briefs or building programmes, design guides and handbooks. Many of these texts are linguistically dense and complex, with a high proportion of verbal to visual material.

The observation that language pervades architectural practice is in one sense very obvious and banal. Everyone knows that architects must talk to clients, hold meetings with contractors, write memos, read planning regulations, and so on. But although architects may spend a lot of time actually engaged in these activities, few would spend much time reflecting on them. Whereas architects are expected to reflect on issues of design in a way that might be called 'abstract', 'theoretical' or 'analytic', they are not expected or encouraged to reflect in the same way on issues of language and its relationship to design. Language may be all around them, but it remains very much a background phenomenon, a part of what the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel called the 'seen but unnoticed' of everyday life.

In this book, our aim is to place language in the foreground: to 'notice' as well as 'see' what role it plays in the making of buildings. We argue that the language used to speak and write about the built environment plays a significant role in shaping that environment, and our responses to it. We try to show that reflecting systematically on language can yield insight into the buildings we have now, and the ones we may create in future.

The significance we claim for language in relation to the built environment is a function of its significance in human affairs more generally. Natural languages[1] are the richest symbolic systems to which human beings have access, and the main purposes for which we use language are fundamental to the kind of creatures we are. One of those purposes is, of course, communication with other people. Humans are not telepathic, and it is mainly by way of language that we are able to get more than a rudimentary sense of what is going on in another person's mind. But we also use language as an aid to our own thinking, whether or not we communicate our thoughts to others.[2]

Both these functions of language are relevant to the activities of designing and making buildings. True, language is not the only symbolic system involved: architects need to make mathematical calculations, and to represent form and space in drawings and models of various kinds. But they also need to use language to conceptualize what they are doing and convey it to others (given that making a building is typically a collaborative process). We say, 'a picture is worth a thousand words', but people rarely communicate, or think, in pictures alone; if called upon to elaborate the meaning of a picture or a mathematical formula – or, as we shall see, a building – they will use language.

Architects, like many other professionals, make use of linguistic resources developed over time for the purpose of reflecting, in speech and writing, on the phenomena which are their distinctive concerns. Architecture has its own linguistic *register* (the term used by linguists to denote a set of conventions for language-use tailored to some particular situation or institution – other examples include 'legalese' and 'journalese'). One obvious feature of the register of architecture is the extensive technical vocabulary architects must learn in the course

of their training. Learning what words to use is every bit as necessary as learning how to draw plans, calculate loads or use computer software for modelling; for the technical vocabulary of architecture is not merely a convenient shorthand, it is a system for thinking with. It provides the classificatory schemes which enable architects to 'see' as they do – and, importantly, as other architects do. Professional registers are often criticized as mystifying jargon whose main purpose is to exclude outsiders; but while that may indeed be one of their functions, they also allow a professional community's accumulated knowledge to be codified and transmitted in precise detail. In architecture as in medicine or law, 'learning the language' is inseparable from mastering the craft as a whole.

But when we claim that language plays a significant part in the theory and practice of architecture, we are not thinking only about technical terminology. Architects do not interact only with other architects, nor are the buildings they create expressions of some unique inner vision which need not be discussed with anyone else. As most introductory texts point out early on, architecture is a 'social art'. Any practice which is social must have a verbal component too, given that language provides humans with their primary means of social interaction.

Language-using is itself a form of social practice: as such it is implicated in the reproduction of the beliefs, relationships, attitudes and values that exist in a given society – and also, of course, in attempts to challenge the status quo. In other words, language is not simply a neutral vehicle for conveying factual information. All natural languages provide their users with multiple ways to represent the same object, state, event or process; the expression of differing perspectives on reality, just as much as the communication of facts about the world, appears to be among the purposes that language evolved to serve. The linguistic choices speakers and writers make can cue hearers and readers to make certain inferences about the meaning of an utterance or text, and these go beyond its purely informational content. Often, as we will see later on, they are ideologically significant, implicitly presupposing certain values and social relations. While they remain implicit and unnoticed, these presuppositions are difficult to resist or challenge. Noticed and made explicit, however, they can become objects of critical scrutiny.

Encouraging readers to take a critical position, both on language and on buildings, is an important goal of this book. Following Markus (1993), we regard buildings as primarily social objects (i.e. not just aesthetic or technical ones) which can and should be subjected to social critique. There are a number of issues this kind of critique may focus on. For instance, it may focus on the way a building's design reproduces particular kinds of social and power relations among its various categories of users (e.g. managers and workers in a factory building or staff and visitors in a museum). It may focus on the kinds of activities and social encounters a building design facilitates, and what other activities and encounters it makes difficult or impossible. It may also focus on the capacity of a design to endorse

– overtly or covertly – certain social values (e.g. 'privacy' or 'community') at the expense of alternatives.

Various tools have been developed for thinking critically about the social workings of buildings, many involving direct analysis of their form and the way they organize space. We want to suggest that the analysis of language is also a useful tool for understanding buildings as social objects. Texts[3] about buildings often turn out to be a source for the social, political and ideological values which other critical techniques reveal by analysing buildings directly. In this book, we will treat the analysis of buildings and the analysis of texts about them as complementary approaches to the same project. By focusing on the texts, we hope to alert readers to their non-obvious or 'hidden' meanings. Where appropriate, we will also show how these meanings emerge in actual buildings.

Because we want readers to be able to replicate the kinds of analyses we offer, we are not going to use a highly formal and technical linguistic apparatus. But some linguistic apparatus will be necessary, because the linguistic patterns which produce certain effects are not necessarily evident from a surface reading. Identifying them requires a deeper analysis, one which is attentive to linguistic form as well as content, and to regularities which manifest themselves across whole texts and sets of texts. At this point, therefore, we must spend a little time clarifying, for the benefit of readers with no specialist knowledge about language and linguistics, what we do and do not mean by those terms.

'LANGUAGE' AND 'LINGUISTICS': BEYOND STRUCTURALISM AND SEMIOTICS

At the beginning of this chapter we said that language is a neglected topic in discussions of architecture. Some readers may have found this claim puzzling, for it is certainly not true that the subject of language goes unmentioned in architectural writing. On the contrary, it has long been commonplace for writers and theorists to make comparisons and analogies between architecture and language. In his book *Words and Buildings,* the architectural historian Adrian Forty devotes a whole chapter to language metaphors in architectural discourse, which he subcategorizes under six main headings (Forty 2000, Ch. 4).[4] He mentions, for example, the idea that works of architecture are 'texts' that can be 'read', tracing it back as far as Quatremère de Quincy's 1803 essay *De l'Architecture Egyptienne*. This analogy, essentially between buildings and literary works, has been reinflected over time, but is still a familiar one. Another productive metaphor compares architecture to grammar rather than literature, suggesting that buildings, like sentences, are constructed by combining a set of formal elements according to a set of formal rules. Forty traces this idea back to 1802, when Durand published his influential teaching text, *Précis des Leçons d'Architecture*; he comments that the analogy had obvious attractions for educators charged with producing competent