



# ARCHITECTURE'S PRETEXTS

SPACES OF TRANSLATION

Aarafi Kanekar

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## Spaces of Translation

*Aarati Kanekar*

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### On Translation and the Spatial Construction of Meaning

Understanding a sentence is more akin to understanding a piece of music than one might think. Why must these bars be played just so? Why do I want to produce just this pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? I would like to say “Because I know what it’s all about.” But what is it all about? I should not be able to say. For explanation I can only translate the musical picture into a picture in another medium and let the one picture throw light on the other.<sup>1</sup>

Ludwig Wittgenstein

This book is based on the idea that we have a richer understanding of a medium by shining a light on it through another. My endeavor is in understanding architecture through the filter of other symbolic forms such as poetry, literature, music, painting, theater, and cinema. Here I use symbolic form as described by Cassirer: these forms, which include myth, language, art are formative to our understanding and not just representative of ideas that already exist.<sup>2</sup> The book addresses issues of construction, translation, and the transformation of meaning across media. As suggested by the roots of the word translation – “to transfer” or “carry across” there is an aspect of crossing boundaries, accentuating differences, and slippage in perception. There is always an element of metamorphosis when meaning is translated between one symbolic form and another so that the body of the work undoubtedly becomes modified when perceived from different vantage points. It is, as Walter Benjamin posits in *The Task of the Translator*, the essential feature of a translation, “a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife.”<sup>3</sup> So the translation becomes not a reproduction but a reincarnation of the original, taking on a life of its own in a new language or mode of expression: “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.”<sup>4</sup> Translation then offers a productive

dialogue that allows for new interpretations and associations. Discussions in translation theory have long focused on the relative autonomy of the translated text vis-à-vis concepts of “equivalence” and “function” that are widely accepted as cornerstones of translation studies.<sup>5</sup> In the preceding quotation, Benjamin’s “afterlife of the original” has a parallel with Borges’ idea of a translator’s “creative infidelity” when he writes, “it is [the translator’s] infidelity, his happy and creative infidelity, that must matter to us.”<sup>6</sup> These ideas obviously question the concept of equivalence and are indicative of what is perhaps the more interesting and significant aspect of any translation, at least as it pertains to intermedia translations – its autonomy. While much of translation theory naturally focuses on linguistic translations within literature and poetry, the question of autonomy becomes more pressing when we consider these with respect to translations between different media and, more specifically, if we consider the question of correspondence, accuracy, and fidelity to the original. Roman Jakobson’s “intersemiotic translation” or transmutation is probably closer to this notion when discussing this transference or transposition between media.<sup>7</sup> While there is no denying that various forms of artistic expression contribute in their own diverse ways to influence architectural thinking, throughout this book the cases analyzed show that there is an internal logic that dictates the expression of the work within each medium. Underlying the set of essays presented in this book is an appreciation and study of the inherent logic that any medium possesses. Therefore, the term “translation” used throughout this book takes into consideration the fact that meaning is contingent on the medium of expression. Kittler’s phrase, “a medium is a medium is a medium,” is intrinsic to this discussion. Nevertheless, he goes on further to question the issue of “translation” stating that, “therefore it [a medium] cannot be translated. To transfer messages from one medium to another always involves reshaping them to conform to new standards and materials.”<sup>8</sup> This notion has been instrumental in the use of the word “transposition” instead of “translation.” One can argue that “translation” itself inherently involves a transfer and reshaping when a shift in medium is involved. Related to this is the question of what gets translated and how. However, before addressing this let me clarify why translation is significant in architecture.

## Significance of Translation in Architecture

In the creation of architectural meaning, it has been generally understood that syntactic devices contribute towards the constitution of social or cultural relationships, the accommodation of activities and programmatic requirements, and the delivery of functional performance. Symbolic and figurative modes, on the other hand, operate in the representation of meaning. The cases discussed in this book are based on the understanding that syntactic or relational devices play a significant role even in terms of representation of meaning. For example, the design of a church expresses ideas of religion not only through symbolic

figures such as the cross or the dome symbolizing heaven but also through syntactic relationships and the perceptions that are generated from them as in the relationship of the altar to the manner in which one navigates through other spaces from the church entrance. Over and above the potential representation of cultural ideas, forms and syntactic relationships are of course meaningful in themselves, to the extent that we can recognize them and understand them. It is precisely because forms, insofar as they are recognizable and understandable, are already meaningful, that they can also be used to represent additional meanings.

Dealing with the relationship between a specific medium of expression and its translation to architecture offers one way to bring the general questions raised here into sharper focus. Usually, studies of how meaning is represented in architecture are made more difficult, because of the nature of concepts that architecture tries to represent. It is difficult to establish representation of meaning when expressing concepts such as religion, power, justice, myth, and so on. And, although they are commonly understood, their definition remains diffused over a large number of texts and discourses, so that special scholarship is needed before we can describe their structure, and, therefore, before we can even begin to explore their representation in architecture in any systematic way. Although it is commonly accepted that broader ideas such as religion are represented in the design of churches, justice in the design of courts, monuments designed in honor of war veterans or even social and political figures have other underlying concepts, we are not sure exactly what is represented and exactly how, even if in some architectural works more specific ideas are represented, such as myth and history in the Parthenon, Newtonian physics represented in Boullée's design of Newton's Cenotaph, the philosophical ideas of Anthroposophism as represented in Rudolf Steiner's Goetheanum at Dornach. The representation is held to be there by conventional acceptance, but the means and structures through which it is constructed elude our understanding. It is the specificity in construction of the design "brief" and the interaction between the "charge" and the "brief" that seems to be important in these cases.<sup>9</sup> This book will attempt to address issues concerning the intelligibility of compositional structure and formal meaning in architecture. In order to focus on this, the forthcoming chapters concentrate on specific architectural projects that are either inspired by and/or based upon works in other arts, or specific conceptual ideas that are shared between some architectural projects and works in another art form which can help understand architecture.

## The Construction of Spatial Meaning

Of particular interest in this book is the question of spatial construction of meaning. The term "spatial meaning" is used to refer to implicit or explicit spatial relationships as dimensions of the construction of meaning in any medium as well as significance attributed to space by a work.<sup>10</sup> The aspect of giving form or shaping the imaginary is a significant aspect here. Any understanding of formal

devices in the construction of meaning in art is inevitably connected to the issue of externalization of art or what Bruno Latour terms as mobile immutability. For him, this presence of absent things is achieved through what he calls two-way connections established through many contrivances such as perspective, projection, map, log book, etc. which allow translation without corruption.<sup>11</sup>

Although many philosophers and scholars consider art an intuitive process, its externalization is essential in order to understand and analyze it. Similarly, meaning, which may already be present in the imagination, needs to be externalized for it to be analyzed. The externalization of art is implicitly linked to its medium of expression and it is this logic of the medium that becomes extremely significant in its conception and construction. While the material and making is paramount, one should not consider that the externalization is limited to the particular medium used for its tangible embodiment, which could vary from stone to metal in sculpture, or include various different materials in the case of architecture, but more importantly, it embraces form, rhythms, patterns, lines, shapes, in other words, the conceptual logic, or the manner in which a composition is put together – its constructional logic. Some scholars, like Adolf Hildebrand, have called these the “architectonic” elements of art. These “architectonic” elements are important not only in the visual arts but even in non-visual arts such as music, poetry, and literature. These are levels of articulation that have also been referred to as “substance of expression” by scholars like Louis Hjelmslev.<sup>12</sup>

There are features inherent and implicit within verbal and visual arts, even those that appear to be as different as literature and poetry seem to be from painting and architecture. In fact, theater directors who translate literary texts into plays on the stage often bring these aspects to our attention. The famous stage director, Peter Brook, made a very significant observation: “The sort of play that Shakespeare offers us is never just a series of events: it is far easier to understand if we consider the plays as objects – as many-faceted complexes of form and meaning in which the line of narrative is only one amongst the many aspects – and cannot profitably be played or studied on its own.”<sup>13</sup>

The idea of formal construction in the generation of meaning is common both to visual arts like painting, sculpture, and architecture, and to non-visual arts like literature and music. This is especially apparent through the compositional pattern, the formal logic, and the experiential attribute that is observed across these arts. In visual arts this formal structuring varies from the figurative and almost iconic, to the non-figurative and abstract – consider Venturi’s duck on the one hand, and on the other hand, Eisenman’s combinatorics in his house series. In non-visual arts this could take the form of thematic structure, as well as compositional structure. For example, without the strength of diction and verse that it displays Dante’s *Divine Comedy* would never have its impact and richness. The conceptual and formal means of expression here are not mere technicalities to externalize the imagination but part and parcel of the artistic intuition. Whether it is a sonnet, a haiku or any other form of verse, specific

formal structures are followed to create meaning or new structures are generated which give meaning.

In visual and non-visual arts the idea of “construction,” in the conceptual sense of the term, is linked to the synchronic understanding and viewing of a work of art as a complete whole. Even in modern literature the reader tries to construct meaningful patterns within the most disparate work to allow it to be viewed as a complete whole.<sup>14</sup> This aspect of “grasp[ing] a writer’s total pattern” to “see what he means” is pointed out by Northrop Frye when writing on the issue of rhythm and pattern in temporal arts, like music, and spatial arts, like painting, and comparing these to literature.<sup>15</sup> All arts, according to this view can be conceived temporally or spatially, wherein the spatial conception is linked to synchronic understanding, as against the temporal conception, which is diachronic. Literature, from this point of view, seems to fall between music and painting: “its words form rhythms which approach a musical sequence of sounds as one of its boundaries, and form patterns which approach the hieroglyphic or pictorial image at the other.”<sup>16</sup> This brings an additional dimension in the analysis of visual and non-visual arts – temporal and spatial aspects that are embedded within each. It is, therefore, possible to see parallels between reading a piece of literature and experiencing architecture as activities that can be comprehended as sequential unfolding that is diachronic in nature, while their mental or conceptual understanding is achieved by reconstruction of the whole, which by default is synchronic. Frye refers to this feature in literary creation when he writes of “the sequence of events that hold our attention being shaped into unity,” in a narrative text, “we expect a certain point near the end at which linear suspense is resolved and the unifying shape of the whole design becomes conceptually visible. This point was called *anagnorisis* by Aristotle, a term for which “recognition” is a better rendering than “discovery.”<sup>17</sup> The neat separation of the arts of time and of space that Lessing propounds is questioned here even when one considers Eisenstein’s discussion of montage in different arts and the marking of time in still pictures. Nevertheless, there are certain comparable aspects within spatial and temporal arts wherein unlike other visual and plastic arts, such as painting and sculpture, which can usually be perceived and experienced synchronically, architecture is distinct in that there is generally an aspect of sequentiality of experience when one moves through space, and except for the panopticon where all spaces could be perceived from a singular spot, there is an element of the diachronic in architectural experience. This then is comparable to the reading of a story or novel in literature wherein there is a progression or sequentiality is involved (or to other temporal arts, such as music, dance, and cinema that also unfold over time).

Diachronic unfolding can be seen very explicitly employed in the design of gardens like Stourhead, which is possibly the best-known example of the use of allegorical narrative in the design of the romantic landscape garden.<sup>18</sup> The unfolding of events along a specific path or route is a device often used by architects since ancient times. Besides this, there have been projects wherein the



distinction between sequencing and narrative is employed creatively. Tschumi's *Manhattan Transcripts* exploits the internal logic of sequencing as a device in the construction of meaning. Writing about the project, he says, "the sequence of images can be compared to the progress of a novel or a piece of music."<sup>19</sup>

In both architecture and literature, treated as examples of visual and non-visual arts with spatial and temporal dimension respectively, there is a notion of logical construction. In architecture, it lies in the experiencing of different parts of the building and spaces in succession and the conceptual understanding of the whole by mental reconstruction. This, in turn, could be seen as corresponding to the sequential reading of literary creation and the putting together of various aspects of the story, i.e. the events, characters, etc., which in some sense is analogous to Northrop Frye's distinction of the author's narrative as a linear movement from his meaning, which he sees as the integrity of his completed form. A counter argument to this notion of the shared logic of construction between architecture and literature has been made by some critics who distinguish between the narrative mode of literary expression and the presentative mode of visual expression.<sup>20</sup> For them, the relationship between elements in architecture is perceived in a different manner from the way a syntactical expression in literature is perceived, and, therefore, the elements of architectural expression are believed to create a simultaneous effect whereby the eye does not follow a specific sequence that is seen in literary expression. While the analogy between architecture and language has been widespread,<sup>21</sup> that between architecture and literature or poetry has been relatively little argued. It has generally been raised when the question of style is debated. It has also often been observed that architects use the analogy between literature and architecture to legitimize the poetics of their architectural composition. An example of this is Ledoux's statement that "architecture is to masonry as poetry is to belles-lettres."<sup>22</sup>

It is certainly not the case that one finds the analogy to literary creation only in writing on architecture; in fact, in the field of literary criticism too there are studies on the architectonic aspects of literature. Of the various studies revolving around architecture and literature, some of the most direct ones related to the architectonic aspects of literature can be seen in the work of Tzvetan Todorov and Joseph Frank.<sup>23</sup> While Todorov deals with the issue of putting together various aspects of the story – the logic of construction, for example – Frank deals with the issue of spatial form in literature, especially in terms of the temporal logic and the compositional structure. The seminal works of Northrop Frye and Roman Jakobson, although not directly related to the spatial aspects, can be seen as dealing with the architectonic characteristics of literature.<sup>24</sup> Besides these, there have been a whole range of studies looking at the architectural and spatial images in literature, specifically of the work of Joyce,<sup>25</sup> the novels of Jane Austen,<sup>26</sup> ancient epics,<sup>27</sup> the representation of the city in Dickens, Balzac, Hugo, Benjamin, Baudelaire, and many others.<sup>28</sup>

Studies comparing visual arts, for example, architecture compared with painting and sculpture are not unusual.<sup>29</sup> In fact, there have been many instances