

# Words and Buildings

A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture

Adrian Forty

With 216 illustrations



To my parents, Ray and Gerald Forty, with whom I first discovered the pleasures of language

First published in the United Kingdom in 2000 by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX

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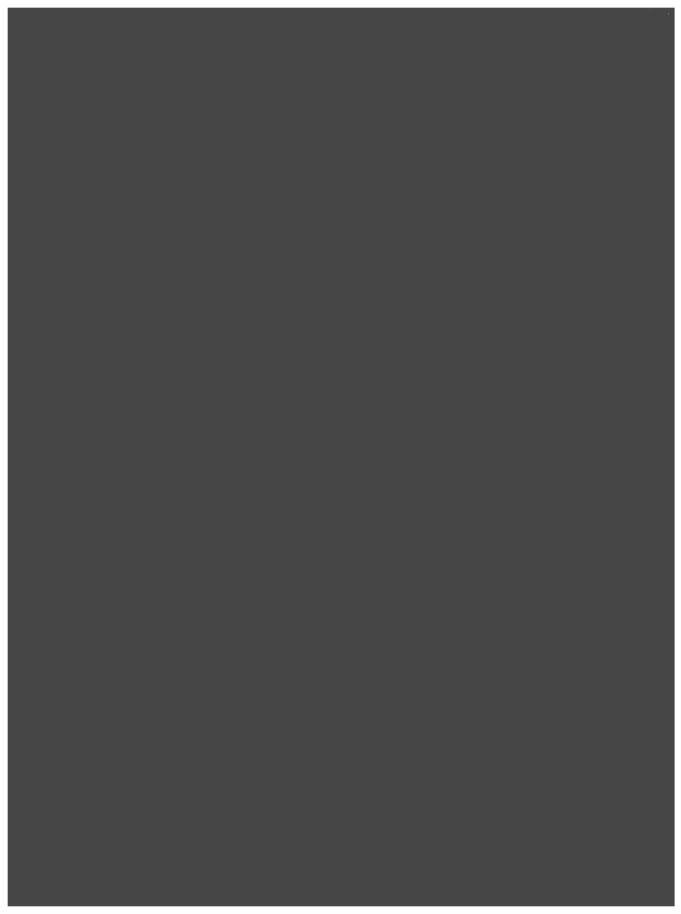
An earlier version of chapter 4 appeared in *Desiring Practices*, edited by Katerina Rüedi, Sarah Wigglesworth and Duncan McCorquodale, and published by Black Dog Publishing in 1996; and chapter 6 appeared previously in *The Architecture of Science*, edited by Peter Galison and Emily Thompson, published by MIT Press in 1999.

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This book has two parts. Part I is an enquiry into the spoken and written language of modern architecture. It is about some of the general tasks that verbal language performs in architecture; about language's own processes relative to those of architecture; and about the formation of metaphors. It asks what language gives to architecture – and where language lets architecture down.

Part II is a historical and critical dictionary of the words that formed the core vocabulary of modernist architectural criticism. The story it tells is one of words always being inadequate to meanings, of meanings escaping words to find new metaphors. One of the models for Part II was Raymond Williams's *Keywords*. If the result bears little resemblance to Williams's admirably concise book, it is in part because Williams was concerned with language in general, whereas this is an enquiry into the language system of one particular practice – modern architecture – and to ask the task of words within that practice becomes necessarily a discourse about the practice itself.

Few things being definite in the world of language, there is nothing final about the book's contents; I am confident that every reader will be able to find something with which to disagree.



'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass, Chapter VI



G. B. Lenardi, Allegory of the arts of architectural representation (detail). From G. G. Ciampini, *Vetera Monimenta*, Rome, 1690

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What happens when people talk about architecture? Are sullen lumps of concrete, steel and glass animated by the words that we shower upon them? Or does every word spoken or written about it diminish a work of architecture, and deprive it of a part of its being? These are not new questions. The seventeenth century French author Fréart de Chambray in his Parallel of the Antient Architecture with the Modern, the first comparative study of the orders, took a strong view of the matter, writing that 'the Art of Architecture does not consist in words; the demonstration ought to be sensible and ocular' (11). But Fréart's English translator, John Evelyn, in the Account of Architects and Architecture which he appended to his edition of Fréart's Parallel, approached the matter differently. Evelyn asserted that the art of architecture was embodied in four kinds of person. First was architectus ingenio, the superintending architect, a man of ideas, familiar with the history of architecture, skilled in geometry and drawing techniques, and with a sufficient knowledge of astronomy, law, medicine, optics and so on. Secondly, the architectus sumptuarius, 'with a full and overflowing purse' - the patron. Thirdly, architectus manuarius, 'in him I comprehend the several artizans and workmen'. And fourthly, architectus verborum - in whom he classed himself - the architect of words, skilled in the craft of language, and whose task was to talk about the work and interpret it to others. Evelyn's personification of the parts of architecture expressed an important idea: that architecture consisted not just of one or two of these activities, but of all four of them in concert. The critical language through which a work of architecture's qualities were explored was no less a part of architecture than the idea conceived by the architectus ingenio or the craftsmanship of the artisan. In this divergence, between seeing language as lying within architecture, or as foreign to it, we have a problem that underlies what this book is about. In terms of Evelyn's personification, can architectus verborum be admitted to the company of architects, or must he for ever remain outside? How are we to think about these questions? And indeed, do they matter?

The relationship between architecture and verbal language has not been much talked about, even though, as one architectural theorist, Tom Markus, recently



'Build, don't talk'. Suspicion of language, coupled with a compulsion to talk about architecture, has been a common trait amongst modern architects. Mies van der Rohe in conversation with Stephan Waetzoldt, with Dirk Lohan in the background, Berlin, 1967.

pointed out, 'Language is at the core of making, using and understanding buildings' (4). That the relationship has had so little attention is partly due to the modern tendency to identify architecture primarily with the mental work of creative invention – with Evelyn's *architectus ingenio* – at the expense of its other constituents. More particularly, architecture has, like all other art practices, been affected by the longstanding assumption in Western thought that experiences mediated through the senses are fundamentally incompatible with those mediated through language: that seeing something bears no relation to being told about it. Nowhere was this assumption more evident than in

early twentieth-century modernist art, where it was held that the particular property of every art was to offer an experience unique to its own particular medium, uncommunicable through any other medium. For the visual arts, this led to the view, as the Bauhaus artist and pedagogue László Moholy-Nagy wrote in his book *The New Vision* (1928), that 'Language is inadequate to formulate the exact meaning and the rich variations of the realm of sensory experiences' (63). In every visual art, language fell under suspicion – and architecture was no exception: one might recall Mies van der Rohe's terse remark 'Build – don't talk' (Bonta, 1990, 13), a sentiment whose echo was to be heard throughout modernist architectural circles. Under these circumstances, there was something of an interdict upon serious investigation into the architecture–language relationship.

Although recently the part played by language in the pictorial arts has been questioned, and doubt cast upon the modernist belief that an art could be purely visual, nothing comparable has happened within architecture. In so far as the issue is thought about at all, it is generally supposed that what is spoken or written about works of architecture is merely a tracing of them, an always less than adequate reflection of their 'reality': yet language itself constitutes a 'reality', which, while not the same as that formed through the other senses, is nonetheless equivalent.

If language is a necessary part of architecture, the difficulty is to describe the relationship in such a way as not to make language simply an accessory for as well as being a part of architecture, language is unquestionably also a system in its own right. As an example of how to think about the place of language within a complex social practice, Roland Barthes's The Fashion System (1967) provides a model that has not been equalled. And Barthes's opening questions - 'Why does Fashion utter clothing so abundantly? Why does it interpose, between the object and its user, such a luxury of words (not to mention images), such a network of meaning?' (xi) - may just as well be asked of architecture. Though the differences between architecture and fashion are great, the similarities are sufficient to make Barthes's analysis of fashion an inspiration in investigating such questions in relation to architecture. For in particular, just as fashion is a system with three parts – a material product (the garment), images (the fashion photograph) and words (the fashion commentary) - so architecture is a three-part system constituted out of the building, its image (photograph or drawing), and its accompanying critical discourse (whether presented by the architect, client or critic). What the analogy of architecture with The Fashion System makes clear is that language is not something that simply gets in the way of architecture, but is a system of its own on a par with that of buildings.

In two important respects, though, architecture is more complex than Barthes's model of the fashion system. Firstly, its images are of two kinds, one