

1969

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Semiology and Architecture

Over the 1950s and 60s, the study of language and signs was increasingly applied to areas outside linguistics, most notably by writers such as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and A.J. Greimas. Charles Jencks (b 1939) was one of the first writers in English to apply it to architecture (he studied English Literature and Architecture at Harvard). As part of a critique of Modernism, Jencks' use of semiology laid the foundation for the Post-Modernism of which he was a principal champion.

Meaning, Inevitable yet Denied

This is perhaps the most fundamental idea of semiology and meaning in architecture: the idea that any form in the environment, or sign in language, is motivated, or capable of being motivated. It helps to explain why all of a sudden forms come alive or fall into bits. For it contends that, although a form may be initially arbitrary or non-motivated as Saussure points out, its subsequent use is motivated or based on some determinants. Or we can take a slightly different point of view and say that the minute a new form is invented it will acquire, inevitably, a meaning. 'This semantization is inevitable; as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself; the use of a raincoat is to give protection from the rain, but this cannot be dissociated from the very signs of an atmospheric situation'. Or, to be more exact, the use of a raincoat *can be* dissociated from its shared meanings *if* we avoid its social use or explicitly decide to deny it further meaning.

It is this conscious denial of connotations which has had an interesting history with the avant-garde. Annoyed either by the glib reduction of their work to its social meanings or the contamination of the strange by an old language, they have insisted on the intractability of the new and confusing. 'Our League of Nations symbolizes nothing' said the architect Hannes Meyer, all too weary of the creation of buildings around past metaphors. 'My poem means nothing; it just is. My painting is meaningless. Against Interpretation: The Literature of Silence. Entirely radical.' Most of these statements are objecting to the 'inevitable semantization' which is trite, which is coarse, which is too anthropomorphic and old. Some are simply nihilistic and based on the belief that any meaning which may be applied is spurious; it denies the fundamental absurdity of human existence. In any case, on one level, all these statements are paradoxical. In their denial of meaning, they create it. (pp11-12)

The Sign Situation

The first point on which most semiologists would agree is that one simply cannot speak of 'meaning' as if it were one thing that we can all know or share. The concept meaning is multivalent, has many meanings itself; and we will have to be clear which one we are discussing. Thus in their seminal book *The Meaning of Meaning*, Ogden and Richards show the confusion of philosophers over the basic use of this term. Each philosopher assumes that his use is clear and understood, whereas the authors show this is far from the case; they distinguish sixteen different meanings of meaning . . . (p13)

In the usual experience, the semiological triangle, there is always a percept, a concept and a representation. This is irreducible. In architecture, one sees the building, has an interpretation of it, and usually puts that into words . . . In most cases there is no direct relation between a word and a thing, except in the highly rare case of onomatopoeia. That most cultures are under the illusion that there is a direct connection has to be explained in various ways. One explanation is neoplatonic; another is psychological. In any case, everyone has experienced the shock of eating a thing which is called by the wrong name, or would question the adage that a rose 'by any other name would smell as sweet'. It would not smell as sweet if called garlic.

But the main point of the semiological triangle is that there are simply *relations* between language, thought and reality. One area does not determine the other, except in rare cases, and all one can really claim with conviction is that there are simply connections, or correlations . . . (pp15-16)

Context and Metaphor

There are two primary ways to cut through the environment of all sign behaviour. For instance fashion, language, food and architecture all convey meaning in two similar ways: either through opposition or association. This basic division receives a new terminology from each semiologist, because their purposes differ: here they will be called context and metaphor.

It is evident, as a result of such things as Morse Code and the computer, that a sign may gain meaning just from its oppositions or contrast to another. In the simple case of the computer, or code, it may be the oppositions between 'off-on' or 'dot-dash'; in the more complex case of the traffic light each sign gains its meaning by opposition to the other two. In a natural language each word gains its sense by contrast with all the others and thus it is capable of much subtler shades of meaning than the traffic light. Still one could build up a respectable discourse

with only two relations, as critics have found. The perennial question of whether a good, bad symphony is better or worse than a bad, good symphony is not as it appears an idle pastime – simply because one adjective acts as the classifier while the other acts as the modifier and vice versa . . . (p21)

The other dimension of meaning is conveyed through associations, metaphors or the whole treasure of past memory. This is often built up socially, when a series of words conveys the same connotations in a language. But it also occurs individually through some experience of relating one sign to another: either because of a common quality, or because they both occurred in the same context (which would *be* the common quality, *pace* behaviourists). Thus an individual might associate blue with the sound of a trumpet either because he heard a trumpet playing the blues in an all blue context (the expressionist ideal), or because they both have a common synaesthetic centre; they both cluster around further metaphors of harshness, sadness and depth. The behaviourist Charles Osgood (*Measurement of Meaning*) has thus postulated a 'semantic space' for every individual which is made up by the way metaphors relate one to another . . . (p22)

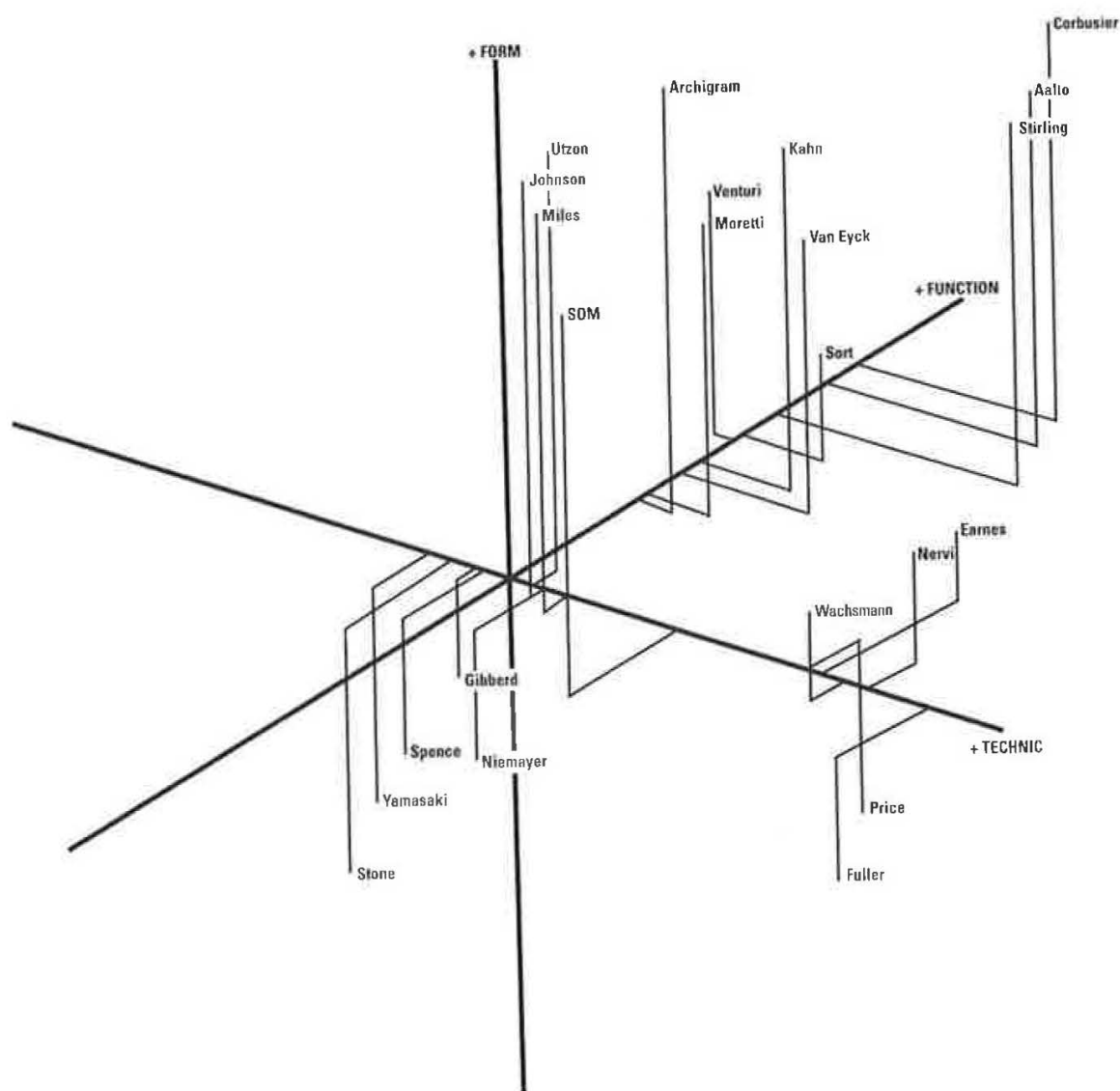
Multivalence and Univalence

When one sees an architecture which has been created with equal concern for form, function and technic, this ambiguity creates a multivalent experience where one oscillates from meaning to meaning always finding further justification and depth. One cannot separate the method from the purpose because they have grown together and become linked through the process of continual feedback. And these multivalent links set up an analogous condition where one part modifies another in a continuous series of cyclical references. As Coleridge and IA Richards have shown in the analysis of a few lines from Shakespeare, this imaginative fusion can be tested by showing the mutual modification of links. But the same should be done for any sign system from *Hamlet* to French pastry. In every case, if the object has been created through an imaginative linkage of matrices (or bisociation in Koestler's terms), then it will be experienced as a multivalent whole. If, on the other hand, the object is the summation of past forms which remain independent, and where they are joined the linkage is weak, then it is experienced as univalent. This distinction between multivalence and univalence, or imagination and fancy, is one of the oldest in criticism and probably enters any critic's language in synonymous terms . . . (p24)

To concentrate first on the univalence of the *Semantic Space* [see diagram overleaf], one can see how architects tend to cluster around similar areas, which to my mind constitute groups or traditions. Secondly, my preference for the

technical school is shown by comparing it with my distaste for the formalists. The latter is shown on the negative side of all three poles, not because it does not make positive efforts, but because in my judgement it fails (this *is* a diagram of pre-judice). Lastly, Corbusier, Aalto and Archigram are far out on the positive side and thus explicitly show my preference. But this is not all. What is also indicated is that my experience of the latter inextricably links matrices which are normally dissociated.

Extracts. Source: *Meaning in Architecture*, Charles Jencks and George Baird eds, Barrie & Rockliff: The Crescent Press (London), 1969. © The Contributors and Design Yearbook Limited.



Charles Jencks, *Semantic Space of Architects*, 1968

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