The Semiotics of Architecture

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Abstract

People do not often realize the important role that semiotics plays in the world of architecture. Semiotics allows us to view the artistic aspects of architecture in a completely different sense. From hidden messages to direct representation of emotion and overall cultural climate, architecture is a true eye opener to the importance of semiotics.

Introduction

Few people would deny that architecture communicates. Architecture in the least sense is a language and an art. Apart from the communicative element, architecture also functions. For example, a tiled roof does not only communicate protection from environmental elements, it also functions to protect against these elements. Semiotics in architecture is a means of obtaining a deeper course within the built environment. Semiotics is a way of understanding the ambiguity, metaphor, and the metonymy that occur in an architectural meaning. Semiotics is the first step of understanding how a building communicates.

One question that can be asked is the similarity between verbal and architectural languages. Verbal languages consist of words that are held together by grammatical rules. The words form clauses and phrases which make sentences in a paragraph. The same for architecture which comprises different members that form a unit. Architecture is not a building. It is a drawing or design that is used to develop a building. Donald Preziosi in his book, Architecture, language, and meaning, states that the difference between verbal language and architecture is that

in verbal language, the medium is relatively homogeneous. When considered within the context of the English language, it is seen that there are only so many letters and punctuation marks that can be used in English communication. On the other hand, architecture employs many materials in its communicative potential. This involves engagement and interaction with the communicative aspects of place, depth, space, and distance. This interaction involves different perceptions, sensory modalities, and bodily actions (Preziosi, 2012).

The above is an introduction to semiotics of architecture. The second section of this paper will have the title, "Importance of Architecture," which will offer a perspective on how architecture has been used to convey messages ((1)). The biosphere [[1]], deconstruction [[10]] have been interpreted over the years. Architecture has been known as a form of emotive function [[13]] since medieval art times, and the aspect will be discussed in this paper.

The following section will be titled "Language, Signs, and Semiotics," introducing the reader to the study of architecture using an approach that focuses on signs and symbols instead of art or structural design ((2)). This section will tell the narrative behind the " sign [[51]]," "denotation [[9]]" and "semiotics" [[47]], and it will introduce the reader to some of their essential characteristics. Juncaj 2 The fourth section is titled "Crawford's Theory of Architectural Semiotics," introducing the reader to a particular architectural theorist who has written extensively about architecture and semiotics ((3)). This author discusses how the representation [[45]] of architecture can be explained in terms of firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]] of a symbolic process and how the semiosphere [[48]] plays a huge role in the discipline. This section will summarize some key points from his works, which can be found in the literature review portion of this paper. The fifth section is titled "Symbolically Significant

Architecture," I will try to show how a building or a place can reflect a particular set of cultural values. Through kinesics [[25]], this section will analyze architecture as a mode of communication as it plays an essential role in understanding the role of architecture in people's cultures, societies, and human interaction (10)). In architecture, kinesics is reflected through different shapes and designs that form a significant part of building design ((4)). For example, tall towers have a certain sense of strength or power represented by their height, which is transmitted to passersby as they look at them with awe, telling them not to mess with those masters of the world up above. The following section is titled "Culturally Significant Architecture," I will try to show how certain buildings and places reflect aspects of a specific culture that are highly significant to people living here. Architecture represents culture, which includes symbols to communicate messages from architects to its viewers using context '[7] ((5)). The relationship between semiotics and architecture is very similar to the relationship between language and culture. In language, there are two types of signs which are denotation [9], signs [53], and connotation [6]. The other section is titled "American Identity in Architecture," which will establish certain buildings around the country that have come to epitomize America. This section will mainly apply the concept of "metalingual function [[27]] of communication and how it has influenced the American Identity in Architecture. In architecture, kinesics is reflected through the use of different shapes and designs that form a significant part of building design. For example, tall towers have a certain sense of strength or power that is represented by their height which is then transmitted to passersby as they look at them with awe as if telling them to not mess with those masters of the world up above ((6)). The following section is titled "Formal Qualities of Architecture," which will illustrate how the look and feel can also indicate cultural

values. Modernism [[28]], myths [[29]], and infinite semiosis [[24]] have influenced the formality of architecture. In architecture, kinesics is reflected through different shapes and designs that form a significant part of building design. For example, tall towers have a certain sense of strength or power represented by their height, which is transmitted to passersby as they look at them with awe, telling them not to mess with those masters of the world up above ((7)). The following section is titled "Designing Women," which will try to show how certain design decisions taken by architects can affect the architectural representation of women. The image of schema [[21]] has significantly influenced how architecture has represented women ((8)). In the postmodernism era [[39]], women have changed what they represent in society which can be observed in different aspects of modern architecture.

The final section is titled "Architecture as a Movement or Fantasy," in which I will try to offer some concluding reflections about how the semiotic approach to architecture has helped us better understand the subject in its hyperreality [[19]]. People today experience this state of hyperreality, but they do not recognize it since it is all around us, making us believe that we can never be tricked or deceived by a signifier without actually knowing whether or not we have been deceived in the first place. The concept tries to explain how society focuses more on how things look rather than learning something new from them even though they are empty inside ((9)). In other words, people pay more attention to the surface, to the simulacrum rather than what lies beyond it. The conclusion of this paper outlines the semiotic notions incorporated in the examination of architecture throughout the paper.

The Importance of Architecture

Over the course of many centuries, architecture has been a representation of society. Architecture has represented the values, culture, successes, and downfall of different civilizations. Anthropological architecture can study the monumental structures in buildings that make up a city's fabric. From this information, anthropologists can derive a lot of information about the life and culture of the people who inhabited the city.

The basic role of architecture is to create the physical environment that people live in. However, architecture is more than the physical environment. Architecture, as has been seen, is also part of human culture. Architecture is a way of representation – this is the way in which humans see themselves and the interaction they have with the world around them. Architecture is not just about aesthetics. Architecture also ensures the utilization of the maximum utilization of the functional elements.

Modern western architecture draws a lot of influence from ancient Egyptian and Greek architecture. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks created the pyramids. These were taken and expanded by the Romans. Roman civilization allowed for the construction of detailed temples. The industrial revolution brought life to modern-day architecture. Due to mass production, there was availability of iron and glass that allowed for the affordable construction of taller buildings. In the 20th and 21st century, technology has been one of the biggest influencers of architecture. The advent of computers led to development of computer software that are currently used in architectural design (Edwards, 2014).

The use of computer technology has allowed for a semiotic approach to product architecture design (SAPAD). This is an architectural design method that constructs a product

from three dimensions including behavior, product, and signification. The importance of architecture when considered within the context of communication is that it does not characterize signs on the basis of behavior or objects that would verify the meaning. The meaning is characterized based on the codified meaning that is based on the social and cultural context in which the architecture is developed (Hu et al. 2015). This shows that the other importance of architecture is to represent the social and cultural context.

Language, Signs, and Semiotics in Architecture

As mentioned, architecture may be considered a language system. In this regard, it may be included in the plot-arranging dimension. Application of semiotic tools to this language system means allowing semantic content into architecture. This integrates different forms that distinguish the culture, epochs, cities, and the general idea of beauty in architecture. According to Ionescu (2016), the communication and aesthetics and beauty confirm the relationship between architecture and affectivity.

Just like other artists, such as sculptors, the architect has to pass his work through social, cultural and historical meanings. This creates architectural images which portray the idea of usefulness, beauty, and durability. The semiotic dimension of architectural sign is therefore built around functionality, reliability, and formality. This means that it is difficult to imagine an architectural piece created for the sake of it. Apart from the message of functionality, architectural pieces have the additional message of durability that is communicated through the materials used in construction (Bosman, 2018). For example, American embassies in different parts of the world are constructed using strong materials. This communicates the message that

the buildings are fortified against terrorists. The other message is about protection of the occupants of the buildings.

Crawford's Theory of Architectural Semiotics

Crawford's theory has played an important role in the evolution of architecture regarding space and structure. This is a function-based model of architecture that was developed by Crawford who advocated for the everyday. The everyday space is different from the carefully planned, officially designated, and mostly unused public spaces that characterize American public life. The role of semiotics is therefore to create a political language that would bring to fore the new demands of social order. Architectural semiotics should therefore create social order. This should not occur from the political ideologies that are imposed from the outside. Rather, they are developed from the specific concerns originating from the lived experiences of the different people in the city or urban environment (Hu et al. 2015).

Space is therefore more important than the structure since it helps in development or establishment of order. This order communicates the culture and values of the people living within a given architectural masterpiece.

Symbolically Significant Architecture

Architecture has over the years communicated the aspirations of social institutions and fulfilled the practical needs of these institutions. Different buildings have different forms of expression which influence their architectural types. For example, throughout history, churches and temples have had different forms of expression from residential houses. For example, temples have been constructed with high ceilings and facades. This has reflected the culture and traditions of the users.

The symbolism of architecture can be understood either consciously or subconsciously. The perception of the symbolic form is dependent on whether one has interacted with them or not and also on the social and cultural context in which they are established. Throughout history, the plan has been the basic form of communication in architecture. In many cultures and generations, the circle has been used symbolically to signify tombs, houses, and religious structures.

Modern structures are designed and developed with elevation. The symbolic form for elevation has been the dome, the stairway, and the tower. Domes signify a circle. In ancient Christian architecture, the dome was a symbol of power and influence. In the renaissance time, the dome was used in palaces and government buildings. For example, in the United States, the Capitol is domed to signify the power of the building and also of the persons occupying the building.

Symbolically significant architecture helps in facilitating the use of a building for different purposes. There are different messages that can be communicated through different architectural features, such as domes, stairs, and roofs. These include resistance, association, and decoration among others. This shows that architecture is important in shaping individual culture and identity (Dixon, 2017).

Culturally Significant Architecture

Architecture has a cultural significance that is displayed through the cultural heritage which is a physical expression of long-term cultural diversity. Heritage informs the identity which provides the solidarity needed by members of the society to associate with one another.

For example, different architectures in Rome, Germany, and the United States have different cultural meanings.

The focus of cultural heritage is to preserve the authenticity of a place. For the case of Germany, Rome and the United States, cultural significance of architecture has promoted self-awareness and pride among the citizens. For instance, there are many famous buildings and chapels in Rome that have been in existence for many centuries. These have been a source of pride for many citizens in Rome as they marvel at the architectural masterpiece of the time in which these buildings were designed. In the United States, the skyscrapers have been a source of pride for the nationals. Pride and heritage provide a lot of information on the identity of a people. This is why the Romans have protected the traditional structures that were constructed many centuries ago.

In the modern context, architects and planners have had different views on the cultural significance of architecture. This is due to a better understanding of modern social challenges, such as climate change and global warming. Architectural designs have therefore focused on ensuring sustainable functional spaces (Hubbard, 1996).

Buildings are essential components of a society. They tell the stories of the transformation of a society and the cultural progression that the society has experienced. Buildings also show the differences that exist between one society and the other.

American Identity in Architecture

American architecture is the architecture that is generated in the modern-day United States. American architecture can be traced to the 17th century during the colonial period. British

settlers brought with them European standards in their design of homes, offices, shops, and other public utilities.

American architecture evolved through the years due to its interaction with other cultures. Modern American architecture can be traced to the 1960s. Frank Lloyd Wright is one of the architects and philosophers credited with the development of modern architecture. His designs of homes integrated art. Wright's designs were known as the prairie style. Most of his designs were characterized by open planning, asymmetrical façade elevations, and horizontal emphasis. An example of Wright's design is the Robie House.

Due to transformations, the suburban home became the identity of American architecture. The suburban homes have a good relationship with the environment since there is landscaping involved in the design. Modern American architecture is also characterized by use of modern and sustainable materials in construction. This allows for easy movement and expanding the size of the house.

Formal Qualities of Architecture

Formal qualities refer to configuration of buildings. Formal qualities are accorded scale and shape during design. Space can be both internal and external. There are different elements that must be considered in formal architectural design including shape, scale, rhythm, proportion, color, and light.

However, there are different challenges that modern architects may experience as they design the formal qualities. One of the challenges is ensuring the design does not have an adverse effect on the environment. Architects are expected to be unique in their design. While at

this, they are also expected to propose the use of recyclable or environmentally-friendly materials. Some of these may have an undue effect on the formal qualities of a building.

Designing Women

The design decisions taken by architects affect the representation of women. Historically, women have been isolated in the architecture profession to the extent that their contribution has not been strongly considered (Adams et al. 2016). Architecture makes a symbolic interpretation of social relations. Through this, architecture organizes people in a space. When considered within the context of women, it is seen that architecture imagines the concept of place and how the place is used for a particular activity or the physical boundaries that exist between activities. For example, when a building is designed and women restrooms are provided for in the lower floors, the message that this has is that women are relatively weak and cannot climb the stairs. Modern designs make women's facilities relatively more beautiful than men's facilities. For example, there are changing and grooming rooms in women's restrooms. This can create the perception that women care more about their body and beauty than men. The few numbers of women in the architecture profession has created fantasy which has affected the representation of women.

Architecture as a Movement or Fantasy

Architecture can be considered both as a movement and a fantasy. As a movement, architecture draws from different social and cultural transformations. There are different fantasies that have been imagined by modern architects. These fantasies have been based on advancement in information and communication technologies that have promoted the marketing and advertising efforts of buildings (Wu, 2018). Through these fantasies, buildings have been

constructed as moving objects which represent virtual reality. The physical movement of space is analyzed more comprehensively against the different factors and elements that influence the fantasy. Some of these factors include the formal elements, such as shape, size, distance, and location (Loron & Loron, 2014). Virtual hyper-reality has been used in architecture to generate these fantasies. The use of artificial intelligence systems will ensure continuous use of these technologies based on the needs of their users.

Conclusion

The semiotics of architecture is based on the communicative element of architecture. Architecture delivers different sets of information to the audience. In the United States and other parts of the world, architecture has experienced different forms of transformations based on the interaction that members have had with other cultures. Modern architecture has specific features. The use of technology in architecture has created virtual realities which have been used to construct fantasies.

References

(A)Adams, A., & Tancred, (D)P. (2016). (T)*Designing women: Gender and the architectural*

   profession. (P)University of Toronto Press.

This book explores the tension that existed between the architectural profession and the

few women in the profession. The authors note that initially, there were few women in the

profession. The book then lists the contribution of these women. The study on women is

anchored on the theoretical framework of sociologist Cecilia Davis. The argument advanced by

the authors is that it is not enough to state that women are excluded. Rather, it is important to

understand how women are included and the nature of inclusion of women in architecture. The

authors argue for a methodological shift and they state that women should not be considered as

the margins of the profession. To consider women as the margin of the profession is to perpetuate

male dominance. This book can be used by persons interested in understanding the role of

women in development of architecture in the United States and Canada.

(A)Bosman, G. (D)(2018). (T)Ownership and care in culturally significant architectures: Three

   case studies. *Acta Structilia, 24*(1), 1-26. http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150487/as24i1.1

This article by Bosman states that even though public buildings are not permanent, they

are robust and durable enough to outlast a few generations. The care provided to private and

public buildings is a reflection of the social attitudes. The materials used in constructing a

building inform the care that will be accorded to the building. This has caused the rejection of

certain materials to be used in building and construction. The case studies used by the author in

the article show that ownership and care in maintenance are indicators of communal well-being.

Information in the article can be used to choose materials for constructing buildings to improve their sustainability.

(A)Dixon, I. (D)(2017). (T)*Revealing identity through the lens of appropriation*. Dissertation.

(P)University of Cincinnati.

In this dissertation, Dixon argues that even though the prints of African Americans can be seen in creative fields, such as fashion, fine arts, literature, and dance, African Americans are not very visible in architecture. The author argues that there are signs of African American architecture in many communities in the United States. There are some that can be seen through graffiti which represents hip-hop culture. This dissertation can be used to understand how resistance can occur when the cultural values and aspirations of African Americans are not considered.

(A)Edwards, B. (D)(2014). (T)*University architecture*. (P)Taylor & Francis.

In this book, Edwards argues that some of the most exciting pieces of architecture are available in university campuses. In universities in Europe, Far East, and America, Vice Chancellors and their architects have produced some of the best forms of architecture. The purpose of the book was to highlight the importance of university architecture. The book is recommended to persons interested in managing university estates. Information in the book can influence students and decision makers on the importance of architecture in society.

(A)Hu, F., Zhang, X., Shen, X., & Ran, G. (D)(2015). (T)Semiotics approach to product

architecture design: A case study of cooking activity. (P) *5th International Conference on Advanced Engineering Materials and Technology,* 654-664.

In this article, the authors discuss the semiotics approach to product architecture design (SAPAD). The author traces the history of SAPAD and the three dimensions of behavior, product, and signification. The authors use the SAPAD model to analyze a cooking activity in a Chinese kitchen. This introduces new dimensions to significance in the context of product architecture. The authors then combine analysis from behavior to product thereby establishing relationship between signification and object.

(A)Hubbard, P. (D)(1996). (T)Conflicting interpretations of architecture: An empirical

investigation. (P)*Journal of Environmental Psychology, 16*(2), 75-92.

https://doi.org/10.1006/jevp.1996.0007

This article is anchored on the concept of environmental preferences. The author states that environmental preferences are not solely determined by an individual's characteristics. Instead, environmental preferences are socially constructed. The author draws on European social psychology to show the similarities and differences in people's identification and interpretation of architecture. This source can be used by researchers seeking to understand power and ideology and its influence on architecture.

(A)Ionescu, V.(D) (2016). (T)Architectural symbolism: Body and space in Heinrich Wölfflin and

Wilhelm Worringer. *Architectural Histories, 4*(1), 10-19. http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.213

This paper is a critique of Jacques Rançière's conception of modern aesthetics. According to Jacques Rançière, the modern aesthetic regime is characterized by the relationship between visual and language. The author considers the works of Heinrich Wölfflin and Wilhelm Worringer to interpret architectural spaces. The conception of space developed in the article is related to the theory of symbolism developed by Th. Vischer's and J. Volkelt.

(A)Loron, A. S., & Loron, M. S. (D)(2014). (T)Virtual reality of fantasy travel utopia. (P)*European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences, 3*(4), 238-249.

The advancement in technology has resulted in the development of virtual reality. Architecture is one of the most important containers of virtual reality technology. The technology of virtual reality was initially preserved for computing and gaming. However, advanced systems have resulted in the use of virtual reality in buildings. This has created the element of movement in buildings. Virtual reality has been used in advertising because it can represent human imaginations.

(A)Preziosi, D. (D)(2012). (T)*Architecture, language, and meaning: The origins of the built world and its semiotic organization*. (P)Walter de Gruyter.

The purpose of this book is elaborate on the semiotic perspective on the problems surrounding the history and origin of the built environment. The researchers employ their energy in different disciplines including anthropology, sociology, and zoosemiotics. Through this, they are able to have a wider view of the semiotics of architecture. The author also discusses the difference between architectural language and verbal language. This difference can explain the spatial interpretation of the environment.

(A)Wu, W. (D)(2018). (T)*Architecture: Where mutual fantasy may live*. Dissertation.

In this dissertation, Wu states that fantasy originates from and reflects desires. Fantasy is a way through which individuals recognize themselves and establish a relationship with the environment around them. Architecture is a platform for accommodating the fantasies. Wu states that mutual fantasy occurs when two or more people have the same fantasy. Wu argues that architecture is a medium that can be used to observe mutual fantasies.