

Beyond Meaning: In Search of Meaningfulness in Architecture

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The phenomenon of universalization, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional culture... but also of what I shall call for the time being the creative nucleus of great cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life, what I shall call in advance the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind.

— Paul Ricoeur'

DESTRUCTION OF CULTURES AS THE "CREATIVE NUCLEUS"

The meaning of architectural works had deep foundations in many cultures when there was a coherent bond between architecture and its natural and behavioral setting. Architecture thus had both practical and symbolic meanings to the members of a culture. Yet in the contemporary situation, culturally endowed meaning is becoming increasingly problematic.² Under this condition, architecture seems to be reduced to its factual or functional level. Paul Ricoeur, in his important article "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," expressed this problem as the "subtle destruction" of cultures as "the creative nucleus," or "the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind," as he put it, on the basis of which we interpret life.³ The condition of modernity in general — especially universalization — "constitutes a sort of subtle destruction" to this nucleus of cultures, even as it advances the material condition of humankind. For,

in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past. It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.⁴

Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher of Critical Theory, referred to Max Weber when he traced the founda-

tion of this contemporary condition in "the project of modernity," which separated what was once a unified world-view into three spheres.

They are:

... science, morality and art. These came to be differentiated because the unified world-views of religion and metaphysics fell apart. Since the 18th century, the problems inherited from these older world-views could be arranged so as to fall under specific aspects of validity: truth, normative rightness, authenticity and beauty. They could then be handled as questions of knowledge, or of justice and morality, or of taste.⁵

The Enlightenment thinkers expected, from this separation, "to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life — that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life," and specifically that "the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings."⁶ However, according to Habermas, "The 20th century has shattered this optimism." As the result, none of these autonomous segments is capable of treating the wholeness of "the hermeneutics of everyday communication."⁸

The difficult situation that architecture faces today may be described as the result of this separation between art, science, and morality. The public, having experienced the assumed success of empirical science and having learned to associate science with positivistic clarity and objectivity and, on the contrary, art with the obscurity and subjectivity, is confused about how to understand architecture. With the increasing fragmentation of culture, the issue of meaning in architecture has been relegated to the subjective and therefore regarded with skepticism, while the more objective aspects of architecture, such as the function, have been elevated.⁹

This tendency can be observed every day in the design studio of any architectural program. A beginning student usually wants to stick to the use and function of a given

project and is hesitant to deal with aesthetic side of design. Such a student, if pressed might say a highrise building has a meaning, but when pressed further will often define that meaning as its use. In the end, meaning recedes into a tautology: "A highrise building means that it is a highrise." Brought up in this environment, even a student at the graduate level may respond to a critic by saying "I as an architect do not dictate what people feel about my building, therefore I do not have an intended meaning for my design." In short, students are hesitant to deal with the subjective side of architecture. They feel safer in the objective camp. To them, both intentionality and response are in the subjective domain. What's more, they cannot reconcile the notion of intentionality with the relativity of response — the notion that "anything can mean anything to anybody."

Architecture needs to find a means to deal with these difficult issues. Unless the architectural profession can find a way to make meaning meaningful to the public, society will cease to regard architecture humanistically, and ordinary people will become more and more detached from the joy of life which architecture once provided. This would be a serious loss. It may not be an exaggeration to say that to survive as a humanistic endeavor, to retain its ability to edify, architecture has somehow to reconstruct a way to be meaningful. Leon Battista Alberti, in the latter half of the fifteenth century, set out to write his treatise in architecture with a purpose of elevating architecture to the level of humanities. In a sense, our task as educators and practitioners is to shoulder that burden once more and try to restore the place of architecture in the human life.

THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY AND FAKERY

The restoration of meaningfulness should not be confused with the revival of traditional culture. There are, of course, many efforts to keep various cultural heritages alive already under way. And architecture is not immune to this approach. One of the ways is to come up with a traditional form while taking advantage of the new technology and materials. However, such a quest for authenticity, by its nature, contains the danger of becoming fakery. Kimberly Dovey, in a provocative article, argued that "the phenomenon of fakery is essentially a replication of meaning":

Meaning is thus the foundation of fakery, and replications are forms that attempt to carry authentic meanings ... It is important to understand, then, that inauthenticity emerges out of the very attempt to retain or regain authenticity."

If we agree with Dovey that "Authentic meaning cannot be created through the manipulation or purification of form, since authenticity is the very source from which form gains meaning", then we need to find the way in which the paradox posed by Ricoeur, that is, how to advance toward universal civilization while simultaneously returning to the sources of national culture.

MEANING AND MEANINGFULNESS

In order to begin constructing a logical platform on which to consider this problem, I propose first to revisit the notion of meaning in architecture. In particular, I want to distinguish the notion of meaningfulness from that of meaning in dealing with the above problems. In other words, I will argue that, whereas the conception of meaning in architecture based on semiotics has concentrated on referential content, either denotative or connotative, meaningfulness in architecture can have a transcendent significance." To understand the distinction between these two notions, it may be helpful to imagine something which has a meaning, yet is not meaningful — a stop sign might be an example — and a case in which a something's meaning is unknown, and yet it is acknowledged as meaningful, as, for example, the famous stone heads of Easter Island. I should acknowledge, of course, that a stop sign could become meaningful to someone, and that the meaning of the Easter Island heads may yet be discovered, but both are improbable.

In order to investigate the issues in and around this notion of meaningfulness in architecture, I propose next to examine the notion of text and interpretation as they appear in hermeneutical phenomenology, drawing particularly on selected works of Paul Ricoeur.

EXPLANATION OF IUCOEUR'S PLACE

Ricoeur, a French philosopher of this century, took up hermeneutical phenomenology in an attempt to grapple with problems of modernity.¹² On the one hand, hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, has a long tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks, in which the objective of interpretation is to make clear what has been obscured through the passage of time. On the other, phenomenology, proposed by Edmund Husserl in the second half of the nineteenth century, has emerged in this century through philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a critique of positivist-empiricist philosophy. Hermeneutic phenomenology, "a philosophical tradition created by the synthesis of two continental orientations," was originated by Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, but to this tradition Paul Ricoeur has made "an outstanding contribution."¹³

Ricoeur began by criticizing the shift in the modern hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher for its limitation in the concept of meaning.¹⁴ According to Ricoeur, Dilthey made a big mistake by taking the understanding to be that of the author, instead of that of the text. Schleiermacher suggested that through the twofold process of the grammatical and the psychological interpretations, one is able "to make explicit the assumptions in accordance with which the original expression was produced, and thereby 'to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself.'"¹⁵ Comparing the purpose of the hermeneutic tradition, Ricoeur considered this to be a limitation. Instead, Ricoeur aimed to synthesize the hermeneutics and phenomenology, and once again to

treat the interpretation of text as it matters to the interpreter. For Ricoeur, "... the objective meaning is something other than the subjective intention of the author.... The problem of the right understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged intention of the author."¹⁶

Ricoeur's argument has obvious relevance to the problem of meaning in architecture. In the cultural whirlwind of postmodernity, architecture cannot rely on a particular culture to warrant its meaning. Ricoeur's proposal for an alternative to the denotative notion of meaning opens up other possibilities. It may be possible to consider architecture meaningful by giving thought to the hermeneutic implications of interpretation by a culturally detached observer. Of course, designing with a culturally detached audience in mind has profound implications for original intent, but we'll come to those presently. For the moment, we must deal with the peculiarity of meaning in architecture.

ARCHITECTURE AS TEXT

Architecture is not a language. It may have a vocabulary, but only by the most fanciful metaphorizing can it be said to have a grammar, and it certainly doesn't have a set of denotative symbols. Yet, is it nevertheless possible to usefully consider architecture as a text?

Ricoeur defined a text as "any discourse fixed by writing."¹⁷ That, of course, excludes most architectural work, but some of Ricoeur's textual terms are at least applicable by analogy. One of the most important notions is the "exteriorization" that occurs when a discourse is inscribed, and the gap "that inserts itself between saying and what is said."¹⁸ The significance of the distinction between a spoken dialogue and a written discourse lies in the text's semantic autonomy.¹⁹ The author, by the act of writing, loses control over words. Because of this, however, Ricoeur can argue the legitimacy of the kind of interpretation that makes sense out of the text whose original meaning has been obscured. If one looks at architecture, especially under the contemporary conditions of destructed cultures, it is clear that architecture has this condition of exteriorization and the semantic autonomy. Just as Ricoeur legitimizes the interpretation of a text, one can draw the relevance to the interpretation of a piece of architecture which does not aim for the original meaning but for meaningfulness to the viewer. With the understanding that there are important differences between them, I would like to continue the comparison between architecture under the destruction of culture and the written text to draw some significant observations.

APPROPRIATION IN TEXT INTERPRETATION

What, then, is the significance of interpretation of a text which is not the same as the original meaning at the production? To explain this, Ricoeur argues for what he calls the notion of appropriation. Referring to the etymological root as seen in the Latin *appropriare* — "to make one's own," Ricoeur explains that to appropriate a text through interpre-

tation is "to make one's own' what was initially 'alien,' so that 'interpretation brings together, equalises, renders contemporary and similar.'" Through the act of appropriation, the interpreter "does not seek to rejoin the original intentions of the author, but rather to expand the conscious horizons" "by actualising the meaning of the text."²⁰

Here the implication for architecture is clear: A piece of architecture becomes meaningful text to an interpreter when he/she achieves appropriation through interpretation. Only by this step can it move beyond meaning to meaningful. The meaning in such a case of appropriation is not always the same as that originally intended; on the contrary, meaningfulness takes its power from the possibility of interpretations that evolve out of the original intent.

The appropriation of a text is in fact what Paul Ricoeur regards as the significance of his hermeneutics: "the very work of interpretation reveals a profound intentions, that of overcoming distance and cultural differences and of matching the reader to a text which has become foreign, thereby incorporating its meaning into the present comprehension a man is able to have of himself."²¹

Appropriation, then, in allowing architecture to stay meaningful, become important in the context of the universalization. For, just as a historical object is made meaningful by a new interpretation, and a work of architecture can be made meaningful to culturally detached stranger.

SUPERIORITY OF AN INTERPRETATION OVER ANOTHER INTERPRETATION—DISTANCIATION

At this point I would like to raise an important question: If we admit multiple interpretations, are those interpretations of equal value? If the original meaning cannot serve as the standard by which other interpretations are judged, how can we rank the interpretations? Without answering this question, the students' confusion about "anything can mean anything to anybody" cannot be clarified.

Here we can think about a memento, for example, a pebble I picked up in the courtyard of the Louvre three years ago. The stone is meaningful to me, for it reminds me of the wonderful time I had in Paris. It is however necessary to distinguish the kind of meaningfulness that grants architecture its relevance to humanities from the meaningfulness of a memento. The significance of the latter dwells solely in the association I make with its place of origin. Its relationship to its meaning is purely arbitrary and therefore unintelligible to any other person.

The meaningfulness of a text, on the other hand, arise from its organization, the relationship among its parts and between the part and the whole. As such it can be explained by an interpreter in a nonarbitrary fashion that can be understood by another person.

While certainly may be that anything can mean anything, among all possible interpretations there are superior and inferior ones, depending on how deeply and coherently the organization of the text is engaged.

As Ricoeur sees it, the interpretation of a text is not totally subjective for the interpreter. The interpretation is based on what Ricoeur calls "distanciation," meaning that the organization of the text can be submitted for rational argument away from the subjective realm of the author or the interpreter. Although it is not objective in the empirical sense, the text can be considered objectified.²²

NECESSITY OF THE ORIGINAL MEANING

The role of the interpreter, thus clarified, points to the role of the author's intent in this process. The author, or architect, as we might say, plays a crucial role in purposefully organizing the work so that it may later be interpreted in a nonarbitrary way. To be meaningful, as I've suggested, the later interpretation need not coincide with the original meaning. The organization of the text, which embodies the author's meaning, persists even after being detached from the author. This organization allows the interpreter to come up with his/her own appropriated interpretation, but also anchors the interpretation.

APPLICATION

This study has attempted to state a position concerning what architects can do in response to the destruction of cultures as the "creative nucleus." If my conceptual distinction between meaning and meaningful can be accepted, then it follows that architects who are concerned about the failure of culture should aim not so much to endow their work with meaning but rather to design it in such a way that it will invite interpretations even by the viewers who are culturally detached. Only then can the architect hope that the work will remain meaningful beyond the cultural boundaries of time, space and language.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," in *History and Truth*, trans. Chas. A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 276.
- ² For the discussion of the problem raised here, see, for example, Perez-Gomez, Alberto. "The Modern City: Context, Site, or Place for Architecture?" in *Constancy and Change in Architecture*, ed. by Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1991, pp. 77-89.
- ³ Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization ...," p. 276.
- ⁴ Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization ...," pp. 276-7.
- ⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity — An Incomplete Project," trans. by Seyla Ben-Habib, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay press, 1983), pp. 3-15. p. 9.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ricoeur commented on limitation of Kant's objective and subjective dualism in relation to the criticism toward the Modern hermeneutics.

- ¹⁰ Kimberly Dovey, "The Quest for Authenticity and the Replication of Environmental Meaning," in *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*, ed. by David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer (Dordrecht; Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), pp. 33-49, p. 36.
- ¹¹ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) distinguishes seven different meanings of the words "mean" and "meaning":
 - (1) I mean to help him if I can.
 - (2) The passage of this bill will mean the end of second-class citizenship for vast areas of our population.
 - (3) Once again life has meaning for me.
 - (4) What is the meaning of this?
 - (5) Keep off the grass. This means you.
 - (6) That look of his face means trouble.
 - (7) "Procrastinate" means — to put things off.
 The distinction between "meaning" — (6) and (7) above — and "meaningfulness" — (3) and (4) — that I propose has been explained as that between "logical or literal meaning" and "psychological meaning". See John Herman Randall, Jr. and Justus Buchler, *Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Barnesand Noble, 1943), p. 121.

The semiotic understanding of architectural meaning has emphasized the "meaning" as something refers to something else. Umberto Eco's "denotative" — factual and use-based — meaning and "connotative" meaning — which assumes culturally bound symbolic systems — are both "meaning," rather than "meaningfulness." See Eco, "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture," in *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture*, ed. by Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunt, and Charles Jencks (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980).
- ¹² John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 36.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 22.
- ¹⁵ Thompson, p. 37.
- ¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 210-1. See also Thompson, p. 53. Ricoeur's critique against the denotative meaning was shared by other philosophers, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who stated that "It is illicit to use the word 'meaning' to signify the thing that corresponds to the word." (See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 40.) So-called ordinary language philosophy is founded upon this critique. (See Thompson, pp. 16-7.)
- ¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics ...*, p. 145.
- ¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding: On Some Remarkable Connections among the Theory of the Text, Theory of Action, and Theory of History," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. by Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 153.
- ¹⁹ The author's dissertation, "Design through Drawing: Eero Saarinen's Design for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Competition," (University of Pennsylvania, 1992) dealt with the creative nature of multiple interpretations that architects make over the drawings. In this previous study the drawing was considered to be a kind of text which is to be interpreted. The multiple interpretation was a significant nature of the drawing since the drawing, once drawn, receives the distanciation from its author and its original meaning. In my dissertation, the new interpretation, which are not aimed to arrive at the original meaning, was demonstrated to have creative nature in terms of design development.

- ²⁰ John B. Thompson, "Editor's Introduction," in Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, p. 18.
- ²¹ Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 4.
- ²² Gadamer's argument about the role of decoration is relevant here. Refer to Truth and Method.

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