

Toward a Rhetoric of Architecture

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Most visible in recent arguments of the nature and definition of architecture education is Boyer and Mitgang's report on architectural education, *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*, which argues that "making the connections, both *within* the architecture curriculum and *between* architecture and other disciplines on campus, is, we believe, the single most important challenge confronting architectural programs."¹ In this essay, I reflect upon my research into the careers of eighteenth-century author-architects, such as Horace Walpole, to suggest that their exchanges between literature and architecture offer what I call "a rhetoric of architecture" to contemporary architectural education. Specific references to the careers of Horace Walpole are given fuller treatment in my book *From the Temple to the Castle*; here, I am interested in articulating a theory of architecture which might facilitate a way of making connections between architecture and other disciplines on campus.

A brief review of Mark Gelertner's synthesis and critique of five theories of architectural form in *Sources of Architectural Form* can help in suggesting how literature might contribute to architectural design theory. For example, the idea that "an architectural form is shaped by its intended function" ("form is function"), overlooks that many buildings have a form that is more than what is required by their function. According to another theory of architectural design, "architectural form is generated within the creative imagination," in other words, from an architectural "genius," but Gelertner reminds us that there are nonetheless similarities between buildings which make it difficult to cite them as isolated examples of such genius. It is also argued that "architectural form is determined by the prevailing social and economic conditions"; however, similar economic conditions can produce a variety of different forms. As for the belief that "architectural form derives from timeless principles of form that transcend particular designers, cultures, and climates," Gelertner points out that few architects today would argue that the Five Orders provide all the architectural knowledge a practicing architect needs.² Perhaps most convincing is the idea that "architectural form is shaped by the prevailing Spirit of the Age."³ As the history of shaped spaces, architecture invites both spatial and stylistic consideration of form (Romanesque, the Gothic, the cruciform, etc.). After all, it was Mies van der Rohe who claimed that "architecture is the will of the age conceived in spatial terms."⁴ Thus, in the terms of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century classicism, proportion, as a mechanism for creating spaces with reference to shapes (a ratio of human height to the built height, or of the built height to built width, etc.), would then be one way of understanding architecture historically.

However, Horace Walpole's critique of proportionality, in both *Strawberry Hill* and *The Castle of Otranto*, points out that by the mid eighteenth-century in England architecture no longer uses form — understood spatially — to resolve determinate historical conditions,

that architecture is no longer the will of the age expressed in spatial terms per se. With *Strawberry Hill* and *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole tests the degree to which forms can be both spatial and historical; the fact that neither *The Castle of Otranto* nor *Strawberry Hill* are actually Gothic, i.e., medieval, reveals the limits of exclusively considering form spatially. Walpole's parodies recognize that form is no longer used spatially, thereby marking an important shift in the understanding of form, and challenging whether it is still possible to understand form as historical. Those who would consider *The Castle of Otranto* or *Strawberry Hill* Gothic are wrong, precisely because of the forms; in other words, what is called "form" created the impression (and that which is called "form" could disprove it).

Literature — the study of "historical products organized according to rhetorical criteria," according to Franco Moretti — offers a way around this impasse in design theory: treat form as rhetoric.⁵ In the case of Walpole's *Strawberry Hill*, for example, the seeming castellations, when considered in literary terms, constitute part of the rhetoric of the building: it is the rhetoric that leads to the supposed Gothic associations. Thinking that they are Gothic requires being persuaded into overlooking, for example, the "diminutive" scale. It requires overlooking, in architectural terms, form understood spatially. The "problem" that then "haunts" literary and architectural theory after Walpole is that people mistake rhetoric for form. Walpole's work suggests that form is rhetorical. That is why form can be apprehended as content; both form and content are rhetorical. Moreover, it is precisely because form is rhetorical that it can be "apprehended as content" or that there can be a "content of the form."⁶ Both form and content are rhetorical.

To say that the art side of architecture's combination of service and art is rhetoric may seem to imply that the social element of architecture is not real, i.e., that it is *merely* rhetorical. In general, it seems that architects are concerned that linguistic approaches to architecture would separate architecture from what is thought to be its most important Modernist legacy, articulated most famously by Le Corbusier: "It is a question of building which is at the root of the social unrest of to-day."⁷ The concern is that considering architecture in literary terms means a loss of architecture's social commitments. Rhetoric is as social and as political as architecture, if not more so. Effective rhetoric, rhetoric in practice, must be timely, or, in Kenneth Frampton's literary-architectural terms, "critical" and "contextual."⁸ Saying that literature or architecture is rhetorical does not mean that either of them is somehow separate from social or political situations; instead, it affects how one imagines connections between the aesthetic and the historical. For Kenneth Burke, and for this essay, "critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situations in which they arose," with the important proviso that, as Burke adds, "the situations are real."⁹ Moreover, although there could be an element of this retreat from social change

in linguistic theories of architecture. It is not, on the one hand, clear that all non-linguistic theories of architecture are by definition agents for social equality. Nor is it certain that such a retreat is a consequence of linguistic approaches.

Moretti's succinct definition of literary texts as "historical products organized according to rhetorical criteria" could also apply to a building — a historical construction organized according to rhetorical criteria — and, in some sense, such a definition has already been developed for it.¹⁰ Karsten Harries, for example, claims that "the work of architecture is essentially a functional building with an added aesthetic component." "I have called that "aesthetic component" metaphor or rhetoric; architecture is building with metaphor. Similarly, Peter Eisenman argues that "the distinction between building and architecture depends on 'a sign of architecture.'" "In other words, on one level, the distinction between building and architecture depends on a metaphor, a "sign." However, on another level, it could be said that architecture is the rhetoric of building, meaning both that the difference between a "mere" building and successful "architecture" is rhetorical, and that architecture, as a study, has become the preferred discourse of building.

Although literature is made of words, for better or worse, we rarely actually think so; we tend to forget that literature is "just" words, and we become involved in, say, "the meaning," or "the form," or "the argument," etc. In fact, however, any time one sees more than a "word," one has fallen for the metaphor or the metonymy. And the same is true for architecture. Anytime one sees more than building materials arranged to provide shelter or to shape a space, one is falling for the metaphor or the metonymy. Diane Ghirardo, executive editor of the *Journal of Architectural Education*, has written about what she calls an "Architecture of Deceit"; I like the phrase, but am afraid it is like the notion of "figurative language," in making a distinction where there need not be any.¹³ In the same way that all language is figurative, all architecture is an architecture of deceit.

Because rhetoric is here seen as a strategic response to a real situation, the relationship between literature or architecture and history is dialectical, not expressive. I am sympathetic to Lukacs's claim that "every form is a resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence," but I would qualify it by saying that although every form attempts to resolve or posits the resolution of a conflict, it is more likely that a "text does not resolve the conflict, it *names* it." "In this sense, "form," or as I would call it, rhetoric, is the rhetoric of representing a historical situation. The relationship between a work and its time is a dialectical interplay between the rhetoric of resolution and the problem that form is supposed to resolve.

Of course it would be inaccurate to say that all architectural form is rhetorical. Form is rhetorical only after it is no longer spatial, or after it becomes "stylistic." Or, form is rhetorical only after Walpole, so to speak. In Walpole's architectural terms, form is rhetorical after proportion is no longer the measure of a building's formal success. That is, in architecture, form really is form (i.e., a "spatial form") with, say, the Pantheon or Cathedral at Chartres. Similarly, in literature, form really is form (i.e., a "spatial form") in, say, *terza rima*. But Walpole's argument is that proportion, for example, or that spatial understanding of form, is more appropriate to the past. One could say that form understood spatially is a pre-modern concept, and that the rhetorical understanding of form is modern. Walpole's work, which is, in one sense, formalistic, but at the same time anachronistic or a-historical, marks this shift, either from the pre-modern to the modern, or from the spatial to the rhetorical understanding of form, a shift, in any case, which had occurred prior to Walpole's proto-Gothic. Generally, form is today understood in the way Walpole treated it — as a kind of association, rather than as shape.

The possibility that architectural form is rhetorical, which locates this essay as post-Walpole, offers new ways of tying architecture to questions of representation implicit in rhetoric, of raising issues

which are in fact specific to architecture as a discipline, especially with respect to architectural representation, which could be described as the site where architectural discipline, practice, and literature, understood rhetorically, meet.¹⁵ When mid-eighteenth century British architecture begins to reject the proportionate (and the classical), and embraces instead an architecture of participatory viewing, in which viewers use their imagination to recover the historical period of the building, architectural representation interrogates and opposes two principle techniques: the plan and the view.

Between 1660 and 1760, architectural representation, and thus architecture as both discipline and practice, were changing. In the seventeenth century, "the plan dominated architecture as never before or since."¹⁶ A plan, a stylized map of a building, idealizes the building's orderliness. In its emphasis on idealized order, the plan is similar to and is perhaps more fitting for the classical arguments over proportion. As mid-eighteenth-century architecture begins to move beyond proportion, publications begin to rely more on the architectural view, with its assumption of a human's interaction with the building. Robert Adam's *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian* (1763), for example, features a two-part gatefold engraving; a "Geometrical Elevation of the . . . East Wall of the Palace" on the top is contrasted with an "Elevation of the same wall as it now remains" on the bottom." The second image, by seeming to reveal the passage of time, implies that it more accurately shows the wall as it is, and raises the question of which would be a "better" way of representing the building: the orderly, idealized, "geometrical" elevation, or the disorderly, "actual," associational view. Not only do these images imply different, less "reductive" ways of imagining a building as it is, the visual texts of at least these particular architectural publications give the viewer a choice of how to see a building: plan or view, idealized or "experiential." Offering a reader a choice of how to read architecturally the same building indicates a perceived insufficiency of one single representation, or more accurately, one technique for representation.

The shared explanatory or representational power of drawing and writing means that they perform similar roles in architecture and literature. It is in the process of putting something onto the page or in words, and sometimes not before that process, that one comes to understand what one thinks. Architect Renzo Piano, for example, contends that "unless you draw something, you do not understand it. It is a mistake to believe that now I understand the problem and now I draw it. Rather, right at the time you draw you realize what the problem is and then you can rethink it."¹⁸ Similarly, Calvin O. Schrag defines writing as "at once discovery of self and self-constitution," and reminds us that it "takes place only against the background of a language already spoken, which has both a history and a formal structure." "That is, writing and drawing take place against the background of a discipline and a practice, both. Discipline in this context means both the history of a field, and the central activity that is presumed to justify the development and/or perception of a semi-autonomous practice. In architecture, both meanings of discipline are joined in architectural representation, just as they are joined by persuasive writing in literature.

If architecture is rhetorical, there are a variety — maybe an infinitude — of gestures which can be used strategically for different situations (rather than an iconography of architectural styles, according to which there is "Classical," "Gothic," "Shingle," "Modern," etc.). This rhetorical understanding, then, is not the same as stylistic pluralism; it is not a question of choosing from a pre-existing palette. Nor is it tied to some particular type of rhetoric; it is not, for example, a "Ciceronian" understanding of architecture, although such specifics can matter. (See for example, Christine Smith's analysis of how Alberti's "*concinuitus*" is related to Classical rhetorical theory."²⁰) In that architecture understood rhetorically is a question of strategically shaping space contextually for effects (with the question then being what effects, for whom, and why), it is architecture itself, rather than some variation within it, that becomes

a variation on Frampton's "critical regionalism."²¹ It is true that with architecture, there is the "existing palette" of building materials. But the materials can play a role in the rhetorical considerations, rather than being understood solely structurally, which is part of why it is so important to consider what Kenneth Frampton calls "the poetics of construction." It is not so much a question of choosing whether to be a classicist or a structural rationalist in architecture anymore than it is a question of whether to write as a classicist, modernist or postmodernist in literature. After Walpole it is possible to see that there are not "styles" in the usual sense; it is not simply the case, for instance, that Vanbrugh chose a "Whiggish" style. Rather, what is usually considered style can instead be seen as a strategic, contextual claim, a way of representing. Of course the issue then becomes trying to understand why a particular style has been or maybe should be chosen. But that is no more a problem for architecture than it is for literature.

NOTES

- ¹ Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang, *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* (Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996), p. 85.
- ² Mark Gelertner, *Sources of Architectural Form: A Critical History of Western Design Theory* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 3, 7, 11, 14.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁴ Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), p. 74.
- ⁵ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1988), p. 9, original emphasis.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 99; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987).
- ⁷ Le Corbusier, *Toward a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (1927; reprint, New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. 14.
- ⁸ See Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983).
- ⁹ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 2d ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967), p. 1.
- ¹⁰ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1988), 9, original emphasis.
- ¹¹ Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 4.
- ¹² Peter Eisenman, "Misreading," *House of Cards* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 173.
- ¹³ Diane Ghirardo, "The Architecture of Deceit," *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).
- ¹⁴ Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p. 6; Paul DeMan, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed., rev. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 237. Although we now know that it is very awkward that it should be DeMan who would want to emphasize an unresolved conflict, his point is still important: it may be too hopeful to either assume or to argue that a form can ultimately resolve a conflict, or a fundamental dissonance of existence.
- ¹⁵ Ellen Messer-Davidow, David Shumway, and David J. Sylvan, "Foreword," *The Recovery of Rhetoric: Persuasive Discourse and Disciplinarity in the Human Sciences*, eds. R. H. Roberts and J. M. M. Good (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), p. x. Also see for instance Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, *Rhetoric in an Antifoundational World: Language, Culture, and Pedagogy* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998). In *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), Robert Scholes contends that "now, and the signs of it are everywhere, the pendulum is swinging back to rhetoric." (20)
- ¹⁶ Ackerman *Distance Points*, p. 373.
- ¹⁷ Robert Adam, Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalato in Dalmation (London, 1763), plate X.
- ¹⁸ Renzo Piano, "The Building Workshop," "The Social Uses of Drawing," *Why Architects Draw*, ed. Edward Robbins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 127.
- ¹⁹ Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), p. 16.
- ²⁰ Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism, 1400-1470* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), p. 98.
- ²¹ See Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 16-30.
- ²² Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, ed. John Cava (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).