

## **MEANING... Architecture**

RANDALL TEAL

University of Idaho

DARIN HARDING

University of Idaho

### **INTRODUCTION**

Students who embrace architecture as being existentially significant and who pursue the implications of what this means are often gripped by a kind of terror. The following article is an exploration of significance in architecture. It came about as the result of a dialogue between myself and Darin Harding, who had been a student in one of my seminars in the fall of 2007. Through our conversations there arose a crisis of meaning, significance, experience, language, and the relevance of the designer in the creation of architecture. In these discussions architecture evolved into an open question, a question that was often best enacted and reflected upon rather than explained outright in certain terms. The question of doing meaningful work came to a head in the student's final thesis project, outlined in email to a colleague:

**Darin:** I really regret to say this and I wish so badly that I could be typing the words of a new found idea.... but truthfully I have never been so confused in my entire life. My head is crammed full of thoughts but I have absolutely NO idea what to do. ... I keep reaching further and further into this abyss feeling like I am approaching a richer architecture or an idea that resonates personally but I'm just lost in the dark. I'm about ready to throw my head through a wall ... I want so bad to do something great but my reach for greatness seems to be the very cause of my stagnancy. I'm sorry to keep bothering you and even more sorry to update you with this pettiness but so it is. Any advice would be great. Thanks.

**Colleague:** Be simple. Don't expect the apocalypse to come out of that broken head of yours. It's not

going to happen. Just pick something painfully simple and start working with it... You are in a state of reflection, and by being there, you are doing exactly the wrong thing. You are doomed there. Give up. Give in. Be open. Talk to Randy.

Teaching this sort of commitment to architecture is fraught with ambiguity and open endedness such that it is often difficult to explain. To me this is necessary and should not be something that one attempts to define. As both a teacher and designer I am not interested in answers, I am interested in paths, in wormholes, in dread and in triumph, of overcoming and of failure. Design should be an odyssey, for it is the places life takes us that reveal our values in terms of what we find to be meaningful. Architecture is the record of our encounters.

After the aforementioned email Darin came and talked to me. This is where our paper began to take shape.

### **VALUES AND EDUCATION**

Driven by the desire to create meaningful architecture, Darin was concerned about the validity of the work he was doing and ultimately about the contribution he could make to the world through design. Design for Darin was a difficult negotiation between the free flow of creativity and the justification of its results. He asked in a paper he wrote during our seminar:

What is meaningful architecture? What does it look like? What is it that makes it meaningful and how did it become so? For me, meaning is everything.

I rejoice in the sight of aesthetic creation laced with layers of significance ready to be uncovered by any who accepts the challenge. And I recoil at the presence of wasteful, thoughtless construction, and superficial, shock-value design. It began with my first architecture presentation as we all sat exhausted from what we thought was a lot of time put into our final work. The tone of the critique was quickly set and we began to realize that a beautiful drawing wasn't enough. The critics wanted to know why it was beautiful, they wanted *meaning*. Why did you curve this element, and why is it symmetrical? *I didn't know, I just did*. Then came the clash with the professor who insisted a concept serve as a vehicle to drive my design process. Why do I need a concept and why are we talking about cars in an architecture studio? And so it went.

At that stage of my life, design was so simple, free, and fun. Now it's painful and frustrating. Unbeknownst to me at the time, a fascination with meaning began to slowly swell within me, mostly from what I indescribably felt was a contradiction in what I was being taught. Assignments in classes told me to create random mappings of seemingly arbitrary subjects which were then somehow supposed to assemble meaning? Un-fooled by this sham, I recall writing down irritably "just because you didn't control the outcome doesn't mean that it is now original and holds meaning." I felt at that moment that there must be a single, ultimate design process that would weave meaning into a work of art and I wanted to find it. It seemed so simple. Not simple in the act of figuring out the process but simple in the fact that there was only one ultimately right process. This perspective, although having since been corrected still remains difficult to completely suppress. If there is good work and bad work then there must be a best and worst, implying a singularity, a one. How do I design that one? This seems to be the cycle of thought that churns in my mind throughout a design process. It was then that a professor emerged and revealed questions that tugged at my personal philosophy. Meaning does not precede experience but occurs in the process of experience itself, so therefore draw, even when you don't know what to draw. There is no universal solution. These types of statements shook my then comfortable philosophical foundation and caused me to gain a more apt perspective. Today, I continue in the development of this perspective with a new found understanding and respect to the infinite nature of this search.

I found Darin's questioning, reflecting, and striving to be inspiring. I was encouraged to hear not only someone asking these questions but also to see someone have some important revelations as well. Darin's comments raise questions about what is it that we find meaningful about our built environment and how these questions about meaningful architecture are addressed in architectural education.

## THE MATTER OF MEANING

In taking up the question of meaning, especially with students, there are several issues that tend to surface immediately. First, and perhaps most important, is whether one sees architecture as being more than just the instrumental development of buildings. That is to say, a first concern of mine is that students are presented with the possibility that there might be a reason for architecture to be seen as an extension of an already rich environment. And further, I want them to see that this extension might be achieved through humble means. In other words, architecture can be meaningful to us, and yet meaningful architecture does not need to be the "great" work. Buildings such as, one's home, one's school, the stores in which one shops can all potentially contribute to the richness of life.

Those students who enter into the realm of meaning usually then have to first pursue the notion that architecture actually *means* something, as in the signifier/signified relation. This is to say that they pursue a relation where one can "read" the meaning rationally and often quite literally. This understanding of architectural meaning as something legible seems to be attractive to many as it is tangible or at least somewhat comprehensible. For instance, the U.S. Holocaust Museum has this sort of transparency in that it makes vague references to train stations, factories, and smokestacks infusing the building forms with allusions to the Holocaust itself. Meaning of this sort is generally a kind of closed system, filed away with the announcement of, "oh – I get it." Despite its possibilities for conveying meaning, this approach, as Darin has suggested in his narrative is also problematic. As Darin points out, it can often fall prey to arbitrary or self serving assignments, in the sense of a justification or defense: i.e., my building has curves to relate to the rolling hills of the region. Further the value of a building of this sort tends to end at the boundaries it has set up for itself, in this way architecture that *means* something is not endowed with an excess or openness of meaning. On the other hand however, as Darin astutely observed, simply obstructing the signifier/signified relation does not necessarily make a building meaningful either. I empathize with these concerns.

Perhaps one place to start with the question of meaning is persuasion. Although our minds

frequently ask for a rational explanation, our humanity is often more convinced when it has been moved. For this reason I think rather than asking students to present a design logic, we might be better to ask them to persuade us. Effective persuasion invites us to participate; this is where the notion of meaningfulness begins to shift toward an open system (as Roland Barthes describes of the Eiffel Tower<sup>1</sup>) and perhaps becomes more interesting as there begins to be an excess of meaning. The Eiffel Tower as something, "that both is and is not," finds itself having to stand on its architectural merits alone. That is to say, logic alone cannot save it. For Barthes the Eiffel tower is significant, yet it is difficult for him to define why this might be. Perhaps this difficulty is the very indicator we are looking for. It might be recalled that in 1914 Clive Bell asserted that, "we have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feelings for it."<sup>2</sup> So perhaps it is this ability of works to fill us with emotion that are (at least in part) a measure of their value. This thought brings us face to face with the diversity and instability of meaning.

#### **MULTIPLE VALUES, MULTIPLE TRUTHS, MULTIPLE MEANINGS**

The elusive multiplicity of meaning was taken up as central problem in the early thinking of Martin Heidegger. He later turned this pursuit of the "meaning of being" into an interrogation of truth, which he wanted to show was not mere correspondence, or, "...the empty 'generality' of an 'abstract' universality..."<sup>3</sup> Heidegger pursued the phenomenon of truth through the Greek term *aletheia*, which he explained was experienced as a revealing or uncovering.<sup>4</sup> For Heidegger *aletheia* presents the idea that a truth is concealed until a *situation* occurs that brings certain aspects of the person-environment relation into a harmonic resonance. The situation is a light that illuminates the truth of the encounter, revealing possibilities that might be taken up in that context. This illumination, like the light of the sky, is variable. It brings no absolute truth, rather opens up a perpetual negotiation of revealing and concealing as the situation changes, evolves, and transitions into a multitude of new circumstances. Heidegger describes this ongoing transformation as: "one being places itself in front of another being, the one helps to hide the other, the former obscures the latter, a few obstruct many, one denies

all".<sup>5</sup> By this description Heidegger is suggesting that there are only perspectives on an event and each new perspective or situation necessarily obscures and changes former understandings. In this understanding of truth one finds a paradox wherein the moment one truth is uncovered, an equivalent but different truth is simultaneously covered up. For example, at dinner time the truth of the table is that is the place of gathering for the meal; this event covers over a different but equivalent truth that during the day the table functions as a work space for one of the home's inhabitants. Elsewhere, Heidegger states this understanding of truth more plainly simply saying that "...all true thought remains open to more than one interpretation – and this by reason of its nature."<sup>6</sup>

At first this notion of multiple perspectives was troubling for Darin when approaching the reading discussions in seminar:

My initial struggle came in what I thought was an irrelevancy problem. People thoughtlessly blabbing opinions which seemed to take the discussion hostage and leave us to spinning our wheels, not getting to the point. This seemed an unproductive practice and at first, drove me crazy. "A waste of time" I voiced to the professor, yet I agreed to give it another try. Little did I realize that it was actually dwelling in such a state that allowed doors to be unlocked which would open new levels of understanding to me.

Truth that is made of its very multiplicity delivers faint warning of the dangers of seeking explicit definition. Heidegger makes this danger manifest as he describes a misguided attempt to understand the stone from an absolute perspective:

A stone presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness exerts an opposing pressure upon us it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments. If we try to lay hold of the stone's heaviness in another way, by placing the stone on a balance, we merely bring the heaviness into the form of a calculated weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight's burden has escaped us... Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction.<sup>7</sup>

It is not meaningless to break open or weigh a stone, but one must remain aware as specific types

of understanding come by way of specific orientations. It seems that the metaphysical tradition's perpetuation of the subject/object split has helped to emphasize the surveying attitudes of science and transparent signified relations to meaning. Heidegger urges us to not forget that things also become meaningful when they are working within a particular set of circumstances. Herman Melville adds the experiential to the list of meanings not to be forgotten:

...it may be fancied, that from the naked skeleton of the stranded whale, accurate hints may be derived touching his true form. Not at all ... the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan.<sup>8</sup>

So for both Heidegger and Melville, it is not only that these involved aspects of meaning not be overlooked. But the important thing is that they are perhaps more meaningful than other understandings. Striving for definitive understanding always places one on the verge of crossing a line where clarity destroys the mystery of meaning.

### USE: THE LANGUAGE OF MEANING

Situational truths rely on "things" to structure and hold open their possibilities. Heidegger's famous essay "The Thing" shows how the jug's vitality is found in its support of certain events that are initiated and "gathered" by its presence. In this way, the jug has a power to focus a world of involvement.<sup>9</sup> If the jug were merely to coordinate liquid, glass, and gullet as a functional object then it would not be particularly meaningful. However, if this is a coordination that also works on us, encourages awareness, focuses an event, then perhaps it begins to have meaning. Unlike the simple object of use, when things gather and coordinate through their use, they can free us for activities, relate us to others, bring connections to our location, etc. in this way they become meaningful. In establishing these types of relations what we see is that practices are not merely coordinated but

also felt to be significant. In short, meaning needs both coordination and wonder to be understood as *meaningful*. This situational understanding of significance all occurs within what Heidegger calls language.<sup>10</sup>

If one thinks of architecture as a kind a vocabulary that connects with the language of relations found in a situation, then perhaps this provides a better way to approach meaning. This requires that we focus not on the forms of architecture, which would bring us back into an interrogation of objects and a sign/signified relations. Instead it asks that we think about architecture as an articulation the language of its circumstances, much like the Greeks whose, "'works' exist only in the medium of the word..."<sup>11</sup> When architecture works on us, one begins to understand language as something we inhabit. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari suggest that language is "an assemblage of enunciation," which, "does not speak 'of' things; it *speaks on the same level as* states of things and states of content."<sup>12</sup> Heidegger has a similar notion: "...we are moving within language, which means moving on shifting ground or, still better, on the billowing waters of the ocean."<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon of "moving within language" suggests that a kind of dynamism is part of the coordination of practices and that this dynamic provides a compliment to mere coordination revealed through a heightened awareness of the vital force of a situation.

Consider again the Eiffel Tower in Barthes description: it acts as *both* a vital or wondrous presence as well as maintaining a stabilizing orientation to the city. Further, writing this after just having seen the Tower from the Center Pompidou I am reminded of its existence as a kind of measure for the city, revealing scale both horizontally and vertically, the latter being something that one becomes strikingly aware of with the ungainly form of La Defense seen in proximity on the nearby horizon. Of course Barthes suggests the Tower is not "useful" thus making it a special case, open to hold our values. However, I would argue that it is "useful" in exactly these ways. Even with Barthes' example of Maupassant, one witnesses the tower becoming a place that coordinates the activity of lunch and places him in a particular relation to the rest of Paris.<sup>14</sup> Further, Maupassant's revulsion at the sight of the tower also suggests the tower is useful as provides a mirror for his values.

If wonder is to be found within the coordinated aspects of a situation it is to both mostly subtle and also relies on the individual awareness. In this way wonder is not necessarily found in the object of concern but rather in what significant relations are made evident and taken up by the individual. In this way, even the activity of washing dishes can be wondrous if one is properly attuned, that is to say if one focuses on the task at hand and is attentive to the world that opens around it. This particular notion of wonder as it relates to "use," is similar to the way Deleuze and Guatari speak of the "pragmatics" of language. To them "pragmatic" does not imply insignificance. Further, neither the word nor the situation is singularly important, but rather what is revealed in the coupling. They explain that "'I swear' is not the same when said in the family, at the school, in a love affair, in a secret society, or in court: it is not the same thing, and neither is it the same statement; it is not the same bodily situation, and neither is it the same incorporeal transformation."<sup>15</sup> In other words, "pragmatic" is not just an item that is used to do something else, it is something that actually shapes and changes the interaction and this shaping is specific to the details of the situation and one's involvement within. A similar interplay, flexibility, and transformative power perhaps marks architecture as pragmatic in a related way -- the Eiffel Tower is useful because it agitates Maupassant, intrigues Barthes and reveals the scale of Paris to me.

This richer understanding of use is tied to and facilitates our participation in certain situations. That is to say, events arise and are supported through our involvements with the paraphernalia of the world. Heidegger's development of truth through the examples of items that are "working" in their environments, the Greek Temple, the peasant woman's shoes, the hammer, etc., all suggest that for something to take on meaning it cannot be devoid of function. Further, it suggests that function is not just a mean/end relation, but rather opens a world of significance. And in fact it is this understanding of function that draws humans into the truth of being. This occurs at all scales, from a baseball game to a conversation with a friend. A kitchen, for example, becomes more meaningful as a place when one is not merely standing around in it but rather is preparing a meal, putting away the groceries, or even cleaning the dishes, as these activities reveal what is specific to this kitchen—much more so

than merely looking. This call to participation affords deeper, more temporally based relations with places and in turn they become meaningful.

## NO CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps meaning in architecture starts with a structuring of a place as it presents itself to us. This place might be of large scale—that of the city, or on a small scale—that of the dining table. Thus the instability of meaning. One person, or one group of people finding the same building or built thing might take from it significantly different meanings, or assign it greater or lesser importance, this is as it should be. Similarly, in writing this paper about meaning it remains an interpretation that holds my values, Darin's values, and provides a measure for the values of others as they agree, disagree, or respond to it. Although less singular, architecture has a similar state of being. In this way it seems the one thing that we understand about meaning is that each of us tints it a slightly different hue and this is where it shows its relation to our values and simultaneously brings something of our values back to us. For Darin it seems that simply asking the question of meaning afforded him an opportunity to struggle, which in itself has become something significant. He may not have answered the question of what it all means, which we hope will not be seen as an attainable goal, but perhaps just by asking these questions he has taken a step closer to his own values and the potential value of architecture. Darin says of his relation to meaning currently:

Every time I try to explain this it weakens it... Meaning for me has now shifted from something achieved – a universal solution - to situational resolution. My initial belief was that meaningful architecture could change the world. To this day I continue to oscillate back and forth whether or not I believe it has the power to do so. Perhaps it's not so much about the architecture itself rather it's more about a designer's level of commitment to a situation?

In the end, maybe meaning and value is like the Eiffel Tower - it seems what allows it to be significant is that we can all approach it, go around it, engage it – but never fully own it. For now I will have to be satisfied with this as a description of meaningful architecture.

## ENDNOTES

1. See article referenced in the call for papers. Roland Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower," in *Rethinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997).
2. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914) 18.
3. Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 153.
4. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 1-28.
5. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 52.
6. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 71.
7. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 45-46.
8. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, the Whale* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000) 385.
9. Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
10. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper One, 1971).
11. Heidegger, *Parmenides* 117.
12. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 87.
13. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 192.
14. See again, Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower." referenced in the call for papers. Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower."
15. Deleuze and Guattari's, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* 82.