Hermeneutics as Architectural Discourse

If there is an ahistorical essence of architecture, it cannot be simply deduced from a collection of objectified buildings, theories, or drawings. The reality of architecture is infinitely more complex, both shifting with history and culture, and also remaining the same, analogous to the human condition which demands that we address the same basic questions to come to terms with mortality and the possibility of transcendence opened up by language, while expecting diverse answers which are appropriate to specific times and places. Architecture possesses its own "universe of discourse," and over the centuries has seemed capable of offering humanity far more than a technical solution to pragmatic necessity. My working premise is that *as architecture*, architecture communicates the possibility of *recognizing* ourselves as complete, in order to dwell poetically on earth and thus be wholly human.[1] The products of architecture have been manifold, ranging from the *daidala* of classical antiquity to the gnomons, *machinae* and buildings of Vitruvius,[2] from the gardens and ephemeral architecture of the Baroque period to the built and unbuilt "architecture of resistance" of modernity such as Le Corbusier's La Tourette, Gaudi's Casa Batlo, or Hejduk's "masques." This *recognition* is not merely one of semantic equivalence, rather it occurs in experience, and like in a poem, its "meaning" is inseparable from the experience of the poem itself. As an "erotic" event, it overflows any reductive paraphrasing, overwhelms the spectator-participant, and has the capacity of changing one's life. Therefore, the prevailing and popular contemporary desire to circumscribe the epistemological foundations of our discipline concerns primarily the appropriateness of language to modulate our actions as architects, and yet it can never pretend to "reduce" or "control" its meaning. The issue is to name the kind of discourse which may help us to better articulate the role our design of the built environment may play in our technological society as we approach the end of the millennium.

Indeed, after two hundred frustrating years dedicated to testing the possibilities of instrumental discourses in architecture, following the mode of theorizing introduced by Durand, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that a radical alternative must be contemplated. Perpetuating a dialectic of styles or fashions is as senseless as the notion that architecture can only provide material comfort and shelter. Furthermore, it is not enough to invoke pluralism and diversity as an excuse for fragmented and partial answers. The first responsibility of an architect is to be able to express where he/she

stands, here and now, rather than postponing answers under the rubric of either progressive knowledge or deconstructive strategies.

A first step is to obtain some clarity concerning the role of discourse in a practice that was traditionally acquired through long apprenticeship. The common and false assumption of our digital age which maintains that meaning is simply equivalent to the communication of "information," makes this discussion even more pressing. The realization of a project obviously demands different kinds of knowledge, including specialized information. But is there a way we may conceptualize what is of the essence in architectural discourse, a mode of speech that might result in a working hierarchy of the knowledge required for the realization of architectural work?

The beginning of our tradition, as reflected in Vitruvius's *Ten Books*, has rendered certain aspects of the knowledge necessary to the architect as *techne* --a stable discourse founded on *mathemata* that could be transmitted through a "scientific" treatise. Nevertheless, traditional theory also acknowledged that the crucial questions of meaning and appropriateness could not be reduced to that same level of articulation. Appropriateness (*decorum*) was always understood in relation to "history." The appropriateness of a chosen "order," for instance, depended on the capacity of the architect to understand the work at hand in relation to precedents articulated through their stories, which in pre-modern times also referred to mythical beginnings. And even when it came to the crucial aspect of proportion, the epitome of regularity and a transmissible *mathesis* that served as an ontological bridge between the works of man and the observable cosmos, the practicing architect always had to "adjust" the dimensions of the work according to the site and purpose of the specific task, in the "thick present" of execution, rather than subject his practice to the dictates of theory.

We have come to understand that instrumentality and prescription are merely partial aspects of architectural discourse, neither of which can account for the potential meaningfulness of the operation they address or help to realize. More fully, we recognize that the word, through its original capacity for story-telling, articulates the possibility of meaning, in that it names intentions in deference to a "space of experience," either a cosmic (traditional) or historical (modern) world, and with respect to a "horizon of expectations." Thus the projections of the architect's imagination construe a better future for the common good. Despite the uncertainties that accompany the work of architecture as it is cast into the world and comes to occupy a place in the public realm, particularly the ultimate unpredictability of the work's meanings and social values, the word must serve us to articulate our intention of meaning. Indeed, despite the unavoidable opacity concerning the movement between

non-instrumental (poetic or meditative) language and making, the phenomenological wager is that the continuity between a thinking self and one's acts and deeds may be grasped and cultivated. In order to act properly we must learn to speak properly, an obvious requirement for the teaching and practice of architecture. The fragmentation and instrumentality that we simply take for granted in our discipline must therefore be subjected to critical scrutiny.

The issue for architecture is not merely "aesthetic" or "technological," if by these terms we understand exclusive, autonomous values. Rather, the issue is primarily **ethical**. Architectural practice must be guided by a notion of the common good, preserving a political dimension understood as the human search for stability and self-understanding in a mutable and mortal world. Instrumentalized theories, regardless of whether they are driven by technological, political or formalistic imperatives, or by a desire to emulate models from the sciences, are always unable to account for this dimension. What kind of speech can therefore be postulated as a primary meta-discourse? I will suggest that a solution might be found in recent hermeneutic ontology, particularly in works of philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer,[3] Paul Ricoeur and Gianni Vattimo. I propose architectural theory *as* hermeneutics, understood as the projection into language of the crucial ontological insights present in the late philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[4]

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In order to arrive at this conclusion, one might begin by recalling some aspects of the relationship between architecture and science. Rather than assuming that scientific thought and architectural theory have only become linked as a result of recent "revolutions," such as the end of metaphysics, logocentricity, or classical authorship, it is important to understand that architecture and science were linked at the very inception of our Western tradition. Their aims always ran in parallel. Philosophy and science, the crowning jewels of the *bios theoreticos,* aimed at revealing truth; a truth understood since Plato's *Timaeus* as mathematical correspondence. Plato's *Timaeus* became not only the model for science until its culmination in Newtonian physics, but also the model for architectural theory. Plato's demiurge was an architect, creating the world out of geometry in the space of a primordial gap and from a *prima materia* (a universal plastic matter) consubstantial with said space(*chasho/chaos/chora*). Thus the architect in the theory of classical antiquity is never a creator *ex nihilo*, for what is revealed is always in a profound sense, already there. The architect's cosmos is Plato's cosmos, and the philosopher's "cosmobiology" underlines all "revelations" of architectural meaning in traditional architectural writing. Architecture disclosed truth by revealing the order of

the cosmos in the sublunar world, showing the wondrous order of nature and our living body through the use of analogy. It was a form of precise knowledge implemented by (a predominantly masculine) humanity to frame the (inveterate feminine) rhythms of human action, of political and religious rituals, guaranteeing the efficacy and reality of the human experience. One could argue that architectural theory, therefore, **was** science, in it had the same status as *scientia*, while being in a non-instrumental relationship with practice. *Scientia* **named** that which should be contemplated, the proportional order that architecture embodied, not only as a building, but as a human situation, in the space-time of experience. Not surprisingly, Plato's Socrates evoked Dedalus in his *Euthypro* (II c-e) as his most important ancestor.

As I have tried to show in other writings, this *status quo* starts to change during the seventeenth century, although the transformations often evident in theoretical treatises do not affect architectural practice until the nineteenth century.[5] Two important figures should be named in this connection. In the mid-1600's, Girard Desargues developed a truly instrumental theory of perspective and stone-cutting which was rejected by practitioners, and a few decades later Claude Perrault extrapolated his understanding of biology and physics into architectural theory. In his controversial *Ordonnance for the Five Kinds of Columns* (1683), Perrault questioned the traditional role of proportions to guarantee the relationship between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, and the importance of optical corrections that had always been regarded as the reason for any observed discrepancies between the proportional prescriptions in theoretical treatises and building practice.[6] Both, the guarantee held by proportions and the arguments concerning optical correction, had been well established in all prior architectural treatises. Perrault could not understand the traditional priority of practice and the power of architecture to demonstrate perfect measurement for embodied, synesthetic experience; he could not believe that the architect's task hinged on his ability to adjust such proportions according to the site and the program at hand. For Perrault, the status of theory was no longer that of an absolute mythical or religious truth. As was the case in the new Cartesian physics, theoretical formulations were merely the "most probable" and mathematically precise, "induced" from analytical observation. The purpose of theoretical discourse was to be as easily "applicable" as possible, a set of recipes to control an architectural practice which in his view was always prone to error and subject to the clumsiness of craftsmanship. Architecture and its applied theory were conceived by Perrault as a discipline participating in a progressive history, which in all likelihood was bound to be perfected in the future.

In a certain sense, Perrault was merely continuing the tradition of architecture as

science. Yet, he radically transformed the nature of architectural theory and practice. This heralds the "beginning of the end" of traditional (classical) architecture, to paraphrase Peter Eisenman; it is the end of a way of conceiving and making buildings which was related to a cosmological "picture" that served as an ultimate, intersubjective framework for meaningful human action. The beginning of our architectural crisis does not date back a few years to the end of the avant-garde, or even to the inception of panopticism and the Industrial Revolution, or to the demise of the Beaux-Arts in the early twentieth century. Rather, it must be seen in parallel with the beginning of modern science itself and its impact upon architectural discourse. After Perrault, but particularly after Jacques-Nicolas-Louis Durand, the popular teacher of architecture whose early nineteenth-century work contains *in nuce* all the theoretical presuppositions and stylistic debates that still plague us, the legitimacy of architectural theory and practice, predicated on its "scientificity," was reduced to pure instrumentality. The value of architectural theories was henceforth made dependent on their applicability. Other well known forms of deterministic theory followed suit, from Eugène-Emannuel Viollet-le-Duc's structural paradigms, to Buckminster Fuller's technological dreams, to more recent behavioral and sociological models. Even today, after Jean-François Lyotard's well-publicized critique of the Grand Narratives of science,[7] architects and theorists still tend to view this issue quite uncritically.

These misunderstandings are compounded by a general disregard for the history of architecture as a complex, multifaceted cultural order with significant epistemological connections, and embodied in a diversity of artifacts. Such a history of architecture is impossible to reduce to a typology or sociology of buildings, or to a single, progressive and continuous line, or yet to discontinuous, hermetic moments. History need not be a burden for practice. In his seminal essay *On the Uses and the Disadvantages of History for Life*, Friedrich Nietzsche articulated both the dangers and the possibilities opened up by history for a new man, particularly for the creative and responsible individual in the postcosmological era.[8] There are, of course, useless and problematic forms of history, particularly pseudo-objective progressive narratives, but this should not result in an unwillingness to pay attention to what we have been, which is, indeed, what we **are**. As I will elaborate later, there is a particular way to understand and "use" history as a framework for ethical creation. Lacking a living tradition for architectural practice since the nineteenth century, we are in fact called to re-construct it, visiting and interpreting the traces and documents of our past, invariably with fresh eyes, to discover hitherto hidden potentialities for the future, like one recovers coral from the bottom of the ocean, or extracts pearls out of ordinary looking mollusks.

Much recent writing on architecture of diverse ideological filiation, ranging from scientific and methodological approaches, to more carefully considered attempts to continue the project of critical rationality from the Enlightenment, often reiterates the view of history as merely an accumulation of uninteresting shells, quite dead and unyielding. This sense of history is easily embraced because it coincides with popular assumptions about linear temporality and technological progress, viewing the past as an alien and closed book. Thus it results in a preference for "alternative" scientific or ideological models. Chaos and catastrophe theory, for example, often irresponsibly extrapolated into architectural theory, are made to suggest formal strategies for architecture, metaphorical connections that are in themselves merely a mannerism of modernity. Identifying truth with science and science with applied science, i.e., the theory of technology, the result is an incapacity to consider truly radical alternative modes of thinking architectural theory. Indeed, these strategies seem to offer no new possibilities beyond the relationship between theory as applied science and practice as technology inaugurated by Durand almost two centuries ago.

I may be reminded that the disjunction of form and content in aesthetics is itself a historical event that took place during the seventeenth-century, particularly after the decline of Baroque architecture. Indeed, elsewhere I have described anamorphosis in these terms, demonstrating this initial disjunction of presence and representation.[9] But the splitting of art into form and content is also the result of our civilization being "thrown" into history. As long as we, as a civilization, may not be completely beyond historicity, we should not merely disregard it. In other words, however I may share a dislike of this problematic split as expressed by postmodern critics and poststructuralist philosophers, to pretend it doesn't exist is a dangerous delusion. Leibniz could start from the mathematical and operate on his *clavis universalis* because of his theological *a priori*. God had ordered the world and because of His perfection, the present was always deemed potentially perfect and therefore the best possible. God was at the end (and the Beginning) of it all. Leibniz imagined our free will as a ferry boat in a river; as individual monads "without windows," we all go our own chosen ways, while we are still loosely guided by Divine Providence. This sort of human action, however mathematically guided, operated in a traditional world. Only the eighteenth-century saw the beginning of history, in the sense which is familiar to us when we hear in the news that a political figure, signing a peace agreement, just "made history." History as human generated change is not "natural," it is part of the modern Western consciousness, with its obsession for scientific progress and material improvement. It could be argued that before the Enlightenment, particularly before the works of Vico

and Rousseau, human actions were more or less irrelevant vis-a-vis the explicit order of creation. Renaissance architecture, for example, turned its eyes towards the past but only to confirm its actions of reconciliation with a cosmological order that was perceived as absolutely transhistorical, just as History was unquestionably the sacred narrative of the church --with salvation, and therefore apocalypse, just around the corner. Modern history, however, starts from the assumption that human actions *truly* matter, that they can effectively change things, as with the French Revolution, and that there is the potential for "real" progress as well as for self-inflicted extinction. The present is therefore qualitatively different from the past. This "vector" has indeed characterized modernity, its absolute hegemony having been questioned for the first time by Nietzsche, and most recently by postmodern cultural critics.

I share Gianni Vattimo's perception that while History as the Grand Narrative of progress and the avant-garde may have ended, we must yet *accept* our historicity.[10] We can never simply overcome modernity and leave it behind: rather we can convalesce, heal ourselves of resentment, and reconcile our present with our past. In other words, it is time to embrace, rather than try to resolve, the *aporias* associated with our human condition since the nineteenth-century. We cannot act as if we lived in a cosmological epoch, in a perpetual present that might make irrelevant a distinction between architectural form and its intended meanings articulated in language, leading us to abdicate responsibility for our actions vis-a-vis a socio-political reality, nor can we merely pretend to continue the project of modernity with its future orientation, its faith in planning and social engineering, and its absurd disregard of form in favour of a pragmatic functionalism which implicitly denies that architectural significance is experienced as a human situation in the vivid present. All we can do is modify the terms of our relationship to historicity, accepting the multiplicity of discourses and traditions, while assuming our personal responsibility for projecting a better future, through the **imagination**, that true "window" of our monadic selfhood. This is what a hermeneutic discourse aims to accomplish. Clearly today, in a world of complex technological systems, we control, individually, very little; yet our actions, even a decision to recycle paper, have a phenomenal importance. This absurd situation is itself a consequence of our technological reality, our wholly constructed world. This is why, I would argue, formalistic strategies in architecture, regardless of their legitimizing frame of reference (in Marxist theory, linguistics, physics, or evolutionary biology) may be dangerously irresponsible.

The alternative, lacking as we do a theological *a priori*, is to start from our lived experience and its historical roots to construct a theory. As Vico has pointed out, such a

normative discourse cannot be considered legitimate unless it recognizes mythopoetic speech (with its imaginative universals) as the primary human means to address the questions that were born with humanity and are crucial to ground our mortal existence.[11] We must engage a perceptual faith aiming to discover the exceptional coincidences we call order. To discover, through our making, that connections do exist, and that their significance may be shared with other human beings: In the case of architecture, with the occupants and participants of projects and buildings. The world of our experience includes the artifacts that make up our artistic tradition, and in turn those revelatory moments we call architecture, moments of recognition in spatio-temporal forms that are completely new, yet strangely familiar when finally articulated in language. Understanding these forms of specific embodiment and articulating their lessons in view of our own tasks, we will have a greater chance to construe an appropriate architecture, an intersubjective reality that might fulfill its social and political task as an affirmation of culture. The issue for architecture is the disclosure of a social and political order from the *chaosmos* of experience, starting from the perceptions of meaning that our culture has shared and embodied in historical traces, while projecting imaginative alternatives going beyond stifling and repressive inherited institutions.

This is what Ricoeur in his late formulation of hermeneutics in *Time and Narrative* describes as our negotiation between the *space of experience* and the *horizon of expectation*.[12] The architect must be able to forget and remember at the same time. Here, Ricoeur is drawing from Nietzsche's description of how history must be placed in the service of life and creation rather than becoming a discipline for the accumulation of deadening information. The architect's narratives and programs must begin by accounting for experiences of value, thus articulating an ethical practice. Historical narratives will constantly open up our *space of experience*, while fictional narratives allow the imagination to engage the *horizon of expectation*. It is not necessary to choose between an eternal present (a cosmic presence without past and future) and a historical absent present (in which only past and future truly exist), between linear time and cyclical time. While we must accept our destiny as responsible historical beings, our personal self is not a Cartesian ego deluded by games of power, originality or domination. Beyond the dichotomy of cyclical and linear time which mythically corresponds to feminine and masculine epochs, the future awaits us under the sign of androgyny, invoking a responsible self that does not disappear in a poststructuralist exercise of dissemination, but rather exercises the personal imagination towards ethical action.[13]

The issue is to ground architecture and its meanings through its relationship to language, to understand history (stories) as the one mode of speech capable of articulating human truths --relevant concepts that orient action "here and now"--and therefore as the appropriate discourse of architectural theory. In polemical opposition to deconstruction, hermeneutics demands closure in the form of pre-judice, an ethical position, a responsible self that questions and acts. It privileges rhetoric over writing. As well, in opposition to the arguments of early Foucault, often exacerbated by his disciples in art history, hermeneutics allows for both the discontinuity implicit in our historicity (the fact that cultures and times are truly different), and the necessity of constructing plots.[14] We are our story, and our autobiography is always different and the same. Allowing for the reconciliation of discontinuity and continuity, stories thus become an architectural theory, a meta-discourse for architecture.

Through a dynamic of *distanciation* and *appropriation,* hermeneutics leads to self-understanding. It is precisely due to our distance from the subject of study, i.e., the texts and artifacts of our architectural tradition, that we can find possibilities for the present. While it is true that our re-construction of the "world of the work" is never endowed with absolute certainty, and that we cannot avoid being late-twentieth century men and women, the wager is that this effort, coupled with a self-consciousness about our own prejudices, will amount to a *fusion of horizons*. This is both the aim and "method" of hermeneutics. We cannot simply read "ratio" in Vitruvius as meaning late-twentieth century "reason:" while we are not Romans from the time of Augustus, we must "imagine" the difference, because we can respectfully share in the questions. A refusal to do so is the limitation of both deconstructive "close readings" and more traditional analytical attitudes in architectural theory. Our effort of interpretation is meaningful, this capacity to interpret is in fact our endowment, a gift that comes to us from having fallen into history, a truly modern/postmodern faculty. The self-awareness of our questions, the world "in front" of the work, mandates that we construct a plot and bring our insight to bear on present actions, to bear on the future. As Hanna Arendt has pointed out, we must recognize history as a vast treasure, barely touched, to construct a future in the absence of living traditions.[15] In hermeneutics truth is interpretation, always a revealing-concealing, never posited absolutely and objectively. Yet, hermeneutics is able to account for change, growth, and perhaps even evolution. There is something we share with our Paleolithic ancestors, even if it is "only" the capacity for mytho-poetic language, our awareness of mortality, and of human space as the place of endless desire. Changing answers to the self-same questions reveal a progressive differentiation that we may call, with Eric Voeglin, the

order in history, one that is never fully and finally clarified and must always be re-articulated in the language of myth and art. In our own times, this demands a demystification of the scientistic "answers" supposedly provided by sociology, anthropology, biology, and other sciences. Hermeneutics thus denies a nihilism of despair (or a cynical, amoral attitude) that might emerge as a result of the homogenization of our cultural inheritance, allowing for the possibility of an ethical practice through the personal imagination, while fully acknowledging the dangers of late-industrial consumer society.

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[1] This formulation is an elaboration of Hans-Georg Gadamer's understanding of the "representational" function of the work of art . See The Relevance of the Beautiful (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1986).

[2] See my essay "The Myth of Daedalus," AA Files 10 (London, England: Architectural Association, Autumn, 1985).. This topic has been subsequently developed by Indra K. McEwen in her Socrates' Ancestor (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1994).

[3] In this short essay I will be paraphrasing important concepts from these three philosophers. My position, however, closer to Ricoeur and Vattimo, is reflected in the references. For Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutices, the foundation work is Truth and Method (London, England: Sheed and Ward, 1975).. The more concise Philosophical Hermeneutics (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1976) and the essays collected under the English title Reason in the Age of Science (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1986), are a better introduction. There are two excellent general introductions to hermeneutics, including the history of hermeneutics since the Reformation and an account of the Romantic hermeneutics of Dilthey and Schleiermacher by Richard Palmer, Hermeneutics (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1969), and Josef Bleicher, Contemporary Hermeneutics (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1980). This last book is more up-to-date in its treatment of 20th century figures.

[4] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, <u>The Visible and the Invisible</u> (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1968). The notion of "perceptual faith" that is so crucial in grounding hermeneutics in experience derives from Merleau-Ponty. For an elucidation of the consequences of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in architecture, see my recent <u>Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge</u> (co-authored with Louise Pelletier, Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1997).

[5] This relationship between architectural theory and practice remained essentially unchanged until the end of the Renaissance. For more details about the transformation of this relation and of the nature of theory and practice after the Scientific Revolution, see my own <u>Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science</u>, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1983)<u>.</u>

[6] See Claude Perrault, <u>Ordonnance for the Five Kinds of Columns</u>, (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art 1993), "Introduction," 1-38. First edition, Paris, 1683.

[7] Jean-François Lyotard, <u>The Postmodern Condition. A report on Knowledge</u> (Manchester U.K.: Manchester University Press 1986), esp. ch.5 and 9.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, <u>Untimely Meditations</u> (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press 1983) 57 ff.

[9] Alberto Pérez-Gómez, <u>Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science</u>, chapter 5.

[10] Gianni Vattimo, <u>The End of Modernity</u> (Baltimore MA: John Hopkins University Press 1988), esp. Part III, 113 ff.

[11] Giambattista Vico, <u>The New Science</u> (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[12] Paul Ricoeur, <u>Time and Narrative</u> (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press 1988), 3 vols. See esp. vol. 3. For hermeneutic theory in Ricoeur, see also <u>History and Truth</u> (Evanston Il: Northwestern University Press 1965), and <u>The Conflict of Interpretation</u> (Evanston Il: Northwestern University Press 1974).

[13] For the issue of ethics and architecture see also A. Pérez-Gómez, "Architecture, Ethics and Technology," introductory essay to the volume of the same title, published in Montreal, Canada, by McGill-Queen's University Press (1993). The volume contains essays presented at a conference held in the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Contributors include Dalibor Vesely and Lily Chi, among others.

[14] As an example of this hermeneutic "method" applied to the issue of architectural representation, please see A. Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, <u>Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge</u> (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997).

[15] Hanna Arendt, <u>Between Past and Future</u> (New York, NY: Penguin, 1961).