Investigations in Architecture and Literature

Edited by:
Klaske Havik
Jorge Mejía Hernández
Susana Oliveira
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nai010publishers
Writing Place

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Art, be it painting, literature or architecture, is the remaining shell of thought. Actual thought is of no substance. We cannot actually see thought, we can only see its remains. Thought manifest itself by its shucking or shedding of itself: it is beyond confinement. (Hejduk 1988: 340)

With these philosophical words John Hejduk, by then the Dean of the Irwin S. Chanin school of architecture of the Cooper Union, concluded a short story that he used as a preface to Education of An Architect, a book illustrating the educational methods used at the Cooper Union. In fact in his own teaching Hejduk often used narratives as a kind of metaphor to convey certain key ideas to his students (as the one in this quote). The anecdotal story that he used in this preface, recalled a personal observation made when he was teaching in Texas and it reads as follows:
During a certain season in Texas, at dusk, some tree trunks seem to be phosphorescent... they give off a dull, blazing light. Upon close scrutiny it is found that the trunk of the tree is completely covered with discarded shells which were the outer body of certain insects. The startling fact is that the shell is intact; the form is exactly as it was when its original inhabitant was inside, with one difference. The inside has left, leaving the outer form which looks like an x-ray, producing the luminous effect. Suddenly we hear a chorus of sound coming from the dark leaves above. It is the sound of the insects hidden in the tree in their new metaphysical form. What is strange about the phenomenon is that we can see the insects' shell forms clinging to the tree, empty shells, a form that life has abandoned. While we fix our eyes on these apparitions, we hear the sound of the insect in its new form hidden in the trees. We can hear it but we cannot see it. In a way, the sound we hear is a soul sound. (Hejduk: 8)

In Hejduk’s educational approach this type of narratives played an important role not only to convey his own reflections (the remains of his own thoughts) to his students, but also to get them to reflect on the thoughts behind their own work in an unobtrusive way.

His colleague the poet David Shapiro, curious about Hejduk’s way of teaching, once asked him in an interview: ‘So how do you teach architecture?’ And Hejduk, with his characteristic precise and meaningful choice of words, answered: ‘Osmosistically, by osmosis’ (Hejduk 1991: 59).

It seems that the term ‘osmosis’ he used here refers to the common English expression ‘learning by osmosis’, which for instance means the way very young children unconsciously learn to master a spoken language simply by being immersed in their environment. So in this case osmosis would stand for ‘any gradual, often unconscious, process of assimilation or absorption, as of ideas’, as the dictionary informs us. What, however, did Hejduk mean when he consciously turned the phrase ‘learning by osmosis’ into ‘teaching by osmosis’? The subtlety and calculation with which Hejduk chose the word ‘osmosis’ (from Greek ôsmos, to push, or to thrust) can be seen in the continuation of his answer to David Shapiro’s question:

I never draw for the student or draw over their work and I never tell them what to do. I try, in fact, to draw them out. In other words draw out what’s inside them and just hit a certain key point whereby they can develop their idea.
By playing with the words ‘draw’ and ‘drawing out’ (as the opposite of the ‘push’ and ‘thrust’ of the Greek ὀσμος), he not only indicated to the reversal in osmotic direction that takes place between ‘learning by osmosis’ and ‘teaching by osmosis’, but he also seems to allude to the root of education per se, which is related to the Latin verb educere, to bring or lead out (from ex-, out + ducere, to lead).

Accordingly, Hejduk’s answer that he ‘teaches by osmosis’ could be interpreted as a form of teaching that explicitly tries not to inscribe the mind (and instruct the hand) of the student with the teacher’s own pre-existing knowledge (and/or skills), but rather seeks a manner of educating that tries to guide the student in awakening his own sub-conscious potential by (and of) himself. What Hejduk in his interview with David Shapiro meant with ‘just hit a certain key point’ is that he would take such key points and wrap them up in narratives like wrapped sweets in pieces of cellophane paper, whereby it would be the act of unwrapping, the unravelling of the narratives by the students themselves, that would draw them out. It is a form of teaching that regards the accumulation of knowledge to be first of all based on personal reflection and the acquiring of skill to be grounded in personal experience, that is, a way of teaching that tries to lead the student towards a direct and personal form of understanding.

A form of teaching that also the chair for ‘Wohnbau und Grundlagen des Entwerfens’ (Dwelling and Basics of Design) of the Faculty of Architecture at the RWTH Aachen University, wholeheartedly subscribes to.

While contemplating Hejduk’s methods of using narrative in architectural education and looking for ways to employ narrative in our own teaching, we stumbled over an intriguing definition of narrative that is closely related to the idea of dwelling in space and time. It was provided to us by H. Porter Abbott, the eminent theorist on narrative of the University of California Santa Barbara. In his The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative he writes: ‘Narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time.’ And he further explains this definition with:

... wherever we look in this world we seek to grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well. Narrative gives us this understanding; it gives us what could be called shapes of time. Accordingly, our narrative perception stands ready to be activated in order to give us a frame or context for even the most static and uneventful scenes. (Abbott 2008: 10)

Architecture, as we all know, has to do with the design of these spatial ‘shapes of time’ for ‘even the most static and uneventful scenes’ that Porter Abbott speaks about, but on the other hand we also know that architecture deals with designing the temporal
Figure 1. 'A House of Dovecotes', Mariel Kaiser Crompton
frame or context' in which activities can take place. For many years we observed that students, while making a design, mainly concentrated on getting the first aspect, the 'static and uneventful scenes' right. In other words getting their spaces in terms of square metres, function and distribution organized. This would ultimately result in a kind of schematic design mainly in terms of plans with some furnishings to indicate the function of the spaces, and some sections and elevations to indicate the design's volume and form.

Such a design would probably work on the level of its distribution of functions, but on the level of 'use' it would be without any 'life', or, to use the words of Porter Abbott, without any 'shape of time' or 'narrative'.

We further observed that for the students, architecture was initially very much something external and abstracted, a kind of 'form' and not something internal, spatial and filled with atmospheres and activities.

In terms of architectural education, getting this first aspect sorted out would be fine for a student's first steps in learning how to design. Thus, in a matter of learning by doing, acquiring the basic skills for solving a small programme in terms of a spatial design that has to house specific functions. But too often one sees that beyond this initial point in learning how to design, the student would only be confronted with design tasks to house evermore complex functions and programmes.

In terms of architectural education this might further develop the student's basic skill in doing so, but it is not going to develop the student's understanding of the second aspect, that is architecture as the spatiotemporal 'frame or context' for 'use', or, to use Porter Abbott's words again, to understand architecture as 'shapes of time', or architecture as that which houses narratives.

We deliberately use the distinction between 'function' and 'use' here, since the first, 'function' (at least for us) entails a very mechanistic and one-dimensional concept of space and time, while the second, 'use' harbours a much more complex and multidimensional concept of activities and narratives taking place in both space and time.

So to also develop a student's understanding of architecture as a spatiotemporal frame or context for 'use', we started to develop design tasks that involved narratives. And as such to encourage the students to immerse themselves into spaces not as a kind of abstract form, but spaces as a frame or context of atmospheres and activities.

Probably the most important thing we learned over the years for ourselves was that it is necessary that the concept of such a design assignment also entails a specific expressive technique by means of which the students have to communicate their design and present their end product (for instance collaging, drawing and imaging
Figure 2. 'The coincidence concealed within the discovery of the stars', Stefanie Oßenkamp
techniques, or scenographic and model-making techniques). Only by the use of such techniques can the assignment provoke the necessary precision in expressing and developing their skill in producing thoughtful designs. That means designs that not only deal with architecture as a set of static and uneventful scenes for ‘functions’, but also architecture as the spatiotemporal frame or context for ‘use’. Or, in Hejduk’s words, architecture as a ‘shell of thought’ left by the student’s simulation of ‘life’ in the form of its own narrative.

Within this educational context we should not forget that as educators we can transmit knowledge and skills, but that (like experience) we cannot transmit understanding, since understanding is something the students have to acquire themselves (as they also have to have their own experiences). What we are able to do is to plan the design tasks in such a way that they become a sort of educational game, by means of which the students, if they play them seriously, can acquire understanding. It also is in this sense that the term narrative is interesting, since it not only comes from the Latin narrare, to tell, relate, recount, explain, literally to make acquainted with, but also from gnarus, knowing, having knowledge of a thing, being acquainted with a thing, being skilful, being practiced. Derived from the Proto-Indo-European suffixed zero-grade gne-ro-, which again comes from the root gno- or gneh-, to know. So the etymology of the term narrative as such already seems to incorporate both the knowledge side and the skill side of the educational ‘coin’ called understanding. Before giving you a few examples of how my team and I now try to use literary methods in architectural education at RWTH Aachen University, allow me to start with an example from the early 1990s. This will not only bring us back to John Hejduk’s Cooper Union, but will also show you in an anecdotal way that both the conception and the delivery of such a design assignment needs meticulous preparation.

Collage
As a guest professor at the Cooper Union in New York, I was asked by John Hejduk to direct a kick-start workshop with the theme ‘collage’. Collage was something I had never dealt with myself, and to be honest I didn’t really like to deal with collages made by students as such. Since my experience at other schools was that when you asked the students to express something by means of a collage, what you would see is that they took some magazines, ripped some obvious images out of them and then, without much thought or composition, glued them together. Such collages, in my opinion, pay very little respect to the material, to the precision and craftsmanship, and to the technique of montage to generate meaning or imagination in a collage. And for me these were the aspects I valued, since they are what links this theme of collage to architecture.
Figure 3. ‘Memories of Julia Parker’, Annika Reddemann
In order to challenge the students to understand these aspects in relation to design, I had to develop this kick-start workshop in which precisely these aspects – respect for the material, for the precision and craftsmanship, and for the technique of montage – would appear as a key to understanding the broader and deeper meaning that this theme of ‘collage’ might incorporate for them and later for their design project. I started off with a lecture on the technique of montage as used (and described) by Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, and I tried to show to students the precision and craftsmanship used by Eisenstein to express specific emotions and meanings via the technique of framing, of cutting and piecing together, thus montaging. In a second, seminar-like lecture, I showed them a set of collages done by Max Ernst, and pointed out the precision of his cuttings and his carefully constructed compositions of lines and images done in such a way that in the end the collage didn’t look like a collage made of parts pieced together anymore, but more like the image of a single (surreal) engraving. And I tried to explain to them how this whole could be interpreted as a narrative told by the pieces, and the way one could interpret the relationships of the pieces to one another and within the totality of the image. As a next step I gave each student a very short story from a book with the title *Mirror in the Mirror: a Labyrinth* by Michael Ende, a German novelist normally known for children’s books such as *Momo* and *The Never-ending Story*. *Mirror in the Mirror*, however, is not a storybook for children; it is a collection of 30 very short stories inspired by the paintings of his father, German surrealist painter Edgar Ende. The stories in *Mirror in the Mirror* are very spatial in terms of their architectural setting, and the task for the student was to read the story and imagine it as being a scenario (for a theatre play or a film), and then to design its scenography. The technique to be used was that of the collage (and the montage) – that is, cutting out and piecing together. The only material I allowed the students to use, however, was a real $100 banknote in its entirety (by means of which I tried to force them to be very economical and precise in the use of their material). Both sides of the bill could be used for complete images or pieces of them, in order to build structures by using lines, surfaces and patterns. Finally, they had to bring it together in a collage cum montage in such a way that it would become the backdrop for the scenes of their story. You can imagine the initial reaction of the students when I told them that the only material to be used was a real $100 banknote. So I reassured them that they could practice with copies, but that in the end I only wanted to see collages made of one real $100 banknote. I also told them that they could always get their money back if they took the collage to the National Bank, but that of course the whole point of this exercise was for them to give the banknotes added value by means of their work. And
Figure 4. Section, 'Living in a Clockwork', Melanie Brügger
that if their work resulted in a well-made collage, they would never exchange them for a new banknote.

As you can also imagine, I was absolutely unsure of what the results would be after the three days they were given to work on it. I simply had to rely on my tutoring skills. Since I also didn’t really realize from the beginning that a $100 bill is actually relatively small, the presentation was done by means of an endoscopic camera (linked to a large screen) that the student would have to move over the collage, or zoom in and out of it, while at the same time another student would read the corresponding story aloud.

The results were absolutely amazing, and it’s a pity that I don’t have any images to show you, but those images as such would not say much anyway without also publishing the corresponding story from Ende’s book (which would go beyond the scope of this article).

However, what I achieved in just a view days was that the students started to understand that architecture, besides providing static and uneventful scenes, also provides the spatiotemporal frame or context in which narratives take place. In this case we started with the narratives of Ende that evoke both a spatial context and a temporal structure for their ‘use’. The expressive technique of collage and montage was here not only a mere means to communicate their design and present their end product, it also tried to teach them something about narrative time (in terms of montage) and the precision of narrative relationships between things (in terms of collage). And last but not least that material has value and that precision and craftsmanship can (and should) not only add value to it, but also express the often invaluable part of an idea.

Wohnbau Aachen

At the chair for ‘Wohnbau und Grundlagen des Entwerfens’ of the Faculty of Architecture at RWTH Aachen University, this line of thinking about and practicing architectural education is continued.

Although in English the chair’s title officially is ‘Housing and Basics of Design’, the German term Wohnbau interestingly entails more than just ‘housing’, literally translated in English it would be something like ‘dwell-build’ or ‘dwelling-building’, which from Heidegger’s point of view would be a form of a pleonasm.

In essence, the term Wohnbau deals with more than just the design of houses, it envelops the whole idea of dwelling, ‘as men’s way of being on the world’ to use Heidegger’s words.

Dwelling is a verb, an action that is inspired by its cultural circumstances and as such forms the basis of any dwelling’s form and its architectural expression. So within our design courses my team and I try to make the students more aware of these cultural
Figure 5. Entrance, 'Living in a Clockwork', Melanie Brügger
the size of the given houses on Bedford Square. This context posed boundaries that at first sight did not seem to be apparent, but would strongly influence the design in terms of 'use' and the scale of the collection, like every strong architectural 'frame or context' would do. The sheer size of the houses not only created possibilities, but also demanded a radical approach towards the role and design of the collection. A simple family life and a cabinet with objects would not fill the available space with 'use'. As a result the designs were not simply structured by programmatic square metres and a typical programme of purely functional demands, but by a self-written narrative about the house's different uses. In this design task, narrative, dwelling, life, collection and home had to be integrated in one consistent design. Like the protagonist of a novel, who's thoughts and actions advance within the story, every decision that the student made in his narrative produced new spatial organizations, which helped to build up a complete and useful character that could fulfil the spatiotemporal demands of the house. From several psychiatrists, a hatter, a pigeon fancier up to an astronomer, all protagonists created an unexpected and an outcome not imagined beforehand.

During the project the students were also introduced more theoretically to some of the narrative qualities of architecture. Starting with a seminar entitled 'Image Building' and an excursion to London, followed by several workshops, and ending with the symposium 'Against the Grain'. This programme aimed at getting them more acquainted with alternative methodologies within architectural practices, research and education. By introducing them to different techniques, from scenario writing to collages and architectural drawings to models, we offered the students a varied set of tools that could help them to express their protagonist/collector and their design. Here again, it is not the educator’s task to determine the outcome in advance, but the student’s task to search for the mix and match in which the complexity of a self-created narrative can be explored and communicated.

The protagonist in fact played the role of an invisible incalculable force that, week by week, crystallized a bit further in the student’s project. This open mode of experimenting meant opening new doors and following unmapped routes. By sending the students in different directions between the scheduled presentations they had to figure out for themselves and their protagonist which path or technique would best represent their ideas. Here the use of literature and especially the novel was favoured and recommended to the students.

As a guiding principle, the narrative strengthened the fictional reality of the project and the experience of ourselves as being mere observers. Through the structure of
Figure 7. 'Casa Biachi, M. Botta starring in Faust, J.W.V. Goethe',
students Amelie Kulassek and Paula Frasch
the narrative, we were forced to simultaneously enter the imaginative fiction and the framework created by the student. By focussing on the narrative qualities of their fictions, drawings and their respective (large-scale) models we as educators shifted from a mere aesthetic or functional approach towards a sensibility of 'use' and 'shapes of time'. Instead of evaluating the empty shells, the narratives formed the key element to give us insight into the thoughts and ideas of the students.

Working within the structure of a narrative, we also noticed a shift from the mere visual design position towards a multisensorial experience. The students became very sensitive to sound, smell, tactility and other sensorial qualities that were triggered by the characteristics of the collections. A clockmaker’s house distinguished by the many sounds generated by the different timepieces, the different rhythms of the many staircases within the astronomer’s dwelling, and the tactile properties of the numerous green objects in the refurbishment of a psychiatrist’s office and dwelling.

**Haustheater**

Another project that takes narrative as a starting point is a yearly recurring instant-design workshop entitled ‘Haustheater’, a combination of the German word for house and theatre. Within this workshop that is a bit inspired by the Cooper Union collage workshop described above, the rules and preparations are simple: we set up two bowls with paper cards, one containing world-famous houses, the other a selection of theatre plays. So the combination, determined by picking a card from each bowl, resulted in a random selection of houses with plays. These plays had to be staged, meaning a selected scene of the theatre play had to take place within and/or around the house. The only expressive means the students were allowed to use was the plan drawing; so they not only had to draw the plan of the house as a spatial collection of static and uneventful scenes, but as a plan in ‘use’, a frame or context in which the selected scene was taking place.

Thus, the programme of the assignment is determined by the narrative of the selected play and the spatial possibilities of the house. Since the combination of both house and play was generated by a random selection, the first mission of the students was to bring these two together in a coherent way. This meant reading the play and selecting a specific scene parallel to analysing the possibilities of the house. Besides that they had to prepare the architectural plan of the house as first being an organized set of spaces, so a set of static and uneventful scenes which will then form the basis for the eventual outcome. From the start the students were confronted with a programme determined by the limitations of the narrative of the play, the spatial possibilities of the house and the aforementioned methodology of a one-to-one experience and its spatiotemporal notation.
Figure 8. 'Niemeyer House, O. Niemeyer starring in *Death of a Salesman*, A. Miller', students Sonja Kellerman, Lisa Mühlnickel
As an intermediate step, the students had to perform the chosen scene on a temporary stage created within the university. On this stage the theatre act had to be presented by means of a verbal presentation simultaneously supplemented by the projected drawing of the floor plan. The architectural drawing of the plan of the house had to be used in its most elementary form, just the plan in white lines on a black background. During the performance, actions and movement had to be indicated by changing the projected viewpoint and/or scale of the plan. Thus, during the performance of the act, turning specific places on the initial plan into a spatiotemporal set of scenes in which the different acts were montaged together. This of course then had to result in plan drawings that were completely staged and equipped with furniture, attributes and protagonists, activating the plan of the house and as such indicating its possible 'use'.

After an evening of theatre performances, the students were asked to convert their presentation into a small booklet. Within each booklet the text of the theatre act and fully equipped plan drawings had to be placed next to each other, thus creating a new stage adaption for the play. As within every project, results vary but the average outcome exceeded our first expectations.

We found out that in setting the fully equipped architectural drawing of the plan to be the final result of the project, the students knew beforehand what was expected of them. And although the time they could spend on such an instant design workshop is very limited, the educational results, in terms of the use of narrative to acquire understanding of the spatial possibilities of a house as a spatiotemporal frame or context for 'use', were very promising.

Since most of the houses we selected are widely used as references in literature and lectures, students tend to think they know these houses. But there is a difference between recognizing a house and really knowing a house. Again, by focussing on the house as a temporal frame or context for 'use', the act of staging, or so to speak the introduction of a narrative, forms the basis for a thorough investigation into its architectural characteristics. The students had to make use of, or counteract upon, the static and uneventful scenes of the initial plan with the narrative of the play. For instance, the voids within Maria Botta's Casa Bianchi became a part of the deadly scene in Goethe's *Faust*. The stone in the Niemeyer house took a leading role in the end scene of *Death of the Salesman* and the Eames house became a battlefield in Karel Capeks' play *R.U.R.*

Our goal is not to create strange and uncommon events within houses. Our aim is to introduce the students to the complex activities and dialogues that occur within dwelling. Take, for example, Wladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot at Frank Lloyd
Figure 9. 'Eames House, C. and R. Eames starring in R.U.R., K. Capek',
students Niklas Gröhl, Sebastian Natge
Wright's Jacobs House. An uncommon event that students never expected to stage within a house. The inhabitant and the dwelling as such act upon and counteract each other. Dwelling is not static, predetermined or given. It is a complex activity that demands an empathic attitude of the students, one that can open up imagination.

Conclusion

To us, architecture and in particular the design of housing is much more than the disposition of private and public spaces or architectural elements like stairs, floors and walls. A house is a stage, a spatiotemporal frame or context in which the act of dwelling takes place. Dwelling as stated before is a verb, one that is culturally motivated, personalized and above all understood as an activity. We therefore introduced narrative and ‘use’ instead of ‘function’, which is rather uncommon, but as such triggers the students imagination. In doing so we try to transcend a purely formalistic, stylistic or functional approach towards design. By triggering a student's imagination we try to compel the student to use his own experience and understanding.

In general, we should be aware of the fact that with every architectural design, we project new possible perspectives on a landscape, an urban plot or a building. We therefore always operate in a fictional reality, in which we have to communicate our shell of thought with a broader audience. To realize this, the traditional architectural tools of drawing, model and eventually rendering might not be sufficient. The empty shell in itself is not enough to justify the design. We need tools, like a narrative, that can communicate our shell of thought by triggering the imagination.

How is it that the author of a novel is able to bring the spatial qualities of a context across in only a few sentences? We think that while reading, we substitute the authors description with our own experiences. Therefore by making use of literature and narratives in general, we have discovered a methodology that shifts the student’s focus of the design from something external and abstracted, a kind of outside ‘form’, towards something more internal, spatial and filled with atmospheres and activities. One could say that by using narrative we try to make the invisibility of (architectural) thought more tangible for us as educators, but mostly for the students themselves.

1 John Hejduk was one of the most inspiring innovators of post-war architectural education. Along with Bernard Hoesli, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, Hejduk was part of the so-called Texas Rangers, a group of young and enthusiastic architecture teachers who in the second half of the 1950s worked closely together to build a new curriculum for the University of Texas in Austin. From there, their new ideas about educating architecture spread along with their founding fathers to the ETH Zürich, the Universities of Cornell and Yale, and of course the Cooper Union.
Writingplace: Investigations in Architecture and Literature marks a step forward in the debate on architecture and literature. Exploring the interrelations between both disciplines, this book brings together a series of reflections on written language as a key element of architectural culture and, more particularly, on the potential of using literary methods in architectural research and design.

Acknowledging the possibilities of literature as a field of research that is able to explore architectural imaginations, Writingplace establishes a ground for international scholars, writers and architects; a common ground to further investigate the productive connections between architecture and literature.

The Writingplace Laboratory for Architecture and Literature was initiated in 2011 at Delft University of Technology. Now an international collaboration of architects, writers and researchers, the Writingplace collective explores alternative ways of looking at architecture, urban places and landscapes through literary writing. It considers itself a laboratory: testing conventions and limits, transcending boundaries while gathering and producing professional knowledge.

Writingplace.org