Body World and Time: Meaningfulness in Portability

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Introduction

Architectural scholars and professionals have long recognized the erosion of culturally endowed architectural meaning: technology transfer has caused the relationship between form and its means, so evidently reciprocal in indigenous construction, to crumble. Natives and tourists alike now deprecate traditional architecture while applauding the pseudoauthentic. If the irreversible universalization of technology and of man constitutes "a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional culture … but also of what I shall call for the time being the creative nucleus of great cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life,” is architecture doomed to lose its meaningfulness?

Portable architecture allows us to contemplate how architecture may still be meaningful in the absence of cultural imprimatur, It may be compared to the temporal and spatial adaptation of a literary work, say, Macbeth performed by Kabuki actors in London and Tokyo, While translation and reinterpretation make the original literary piece portable, architecture, in order to make sense in a foreign land, needs to achieve portability of meaning through use of its own elements, such as color, form, and texture.

This paper will examine two portable theaters: Aldo Rossi’s “Teatro del Mondo” and Tadao Ando’s “Karaza.” Wherever they are set, they succeed in being meaningful architecture, Through their inherent properties, pure to the point of abstraction and rudiment, they ground themselves in the basic references of humanity: body, world, and time.

An insistence on the rudiments is clear in Ando and Rossi. Ando stated:

I believe three elements are necessary to crystallize architecture, One is authentic materials, or to put it another way, materials that possess substantiality. The material can be, for example, unadorned concrete or unpainted wood. The second element is a pure geometry, which provides the foundation or framework that enables a work of architecture to have presence. It might be a mass in the form of a Platonic solid but more often is a three-dimensional frame, The last element is “nature.” By this I do not mean nature in the raw but instead a — man-made nature — chaotic nature that has been given order by man, or order abstracted from nature, It is light, sky, and water made abstract. When nature in such guise is introduced into a building composed of authentic materials and a pure geometry, architecture itself is rendered abstract by nature, Architecture acquires power and becomes radiant only when materials, geometry and nature are integrated.

I will examine the discussions of architectural meaning of the latter half of this century, influenced primarily by the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. The issues raised, especially that of arbitrary versus natural, have a significant bearing as to how much meaning of a particular architecture is bound to a specific place. I will then examine the notion of text, in the tradition of hermeneutics and especially in the works of Paul...
Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Their understanding of textual interpretation opens up many more possibilities than the application of linguistics to architecture. There arises a possibility for appropriating a piece of architecture at various locations, with such an interpretation that is supported in a nonarbitrary manner by its inherent properties as a text and can stand a rigorous examination. To contrast with the linguistically driven concept of meaning, I will propose to consider meaningfulness in architecture. Finally, the notion of culture will be redefined. This analysis will lead to a conclusion that culture which assigns a meaning to a form deserves less attention than culture that keeps a form alive and inherited as meaningful.

Culturally endowed meaning of architecture

In consideration of the culturally endowed meaning of architecture on the one hand and meaningfulness of portable architecture on the other, the first theoretical question to be reviewed is of the relationship between a form and its content. Form here addresses the physical properties of architecture while content, or meaning, should be considered the metaphysical counterpart of a form. Some critics of architecture, such as Umberto Eco, Charles Jencks, and Alan Colquhoun, have argued that the meaning of an architectural form is assigned in an arbitrary manner, with the relationship being made possible solely by a societal agreement. One recognizes a certain influence of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Toilet bowls used for cleaning olives by the population in southern Italy has become a favorite example used to illuminate the arbitrary nature of form–meaning relationships.5

Alan Colquhoun emphasizes the culturally endowed arbitrary meaning of architecture over what he calls the “expressive content,” in his assertion of typology over the modern architectural theory. To argue against the notion of the expressive content in a form, Colquhoun refers to E. H. Gombrich, in particular to “Expression and Communication,” in Meditations on a Hobby Horse.6

Gombrich demonstrates that an arrangement of forms such as is found in a painting by Kandinsky is, in fact, very low in content, unless we attribute to these forms some system of conventional meanings not inherent in the forms themselves. His thesis is that physiognomic forms are ambiguous, though not wholly without expressive value, and that they can only be interpreted within a particular cultural ambiance.7

The idea that a form has in its inherent properties very little to generate a meaning, but a culture endows a meaning to a form, is similar to the fundamental argument Ferdinand de Saussure held concerning a word and its meaning when he introduced his notion of semiology in linguistics, Colquhoun states:

This attitude toward signification, though related explicitly in some of Gombrich’s writings to information theory, has a certain resemblance to that of structural linguistics based on de Saussure. According to de Saussure, the linguistic sign is comprised of a signifier and a signified, and while these are arbitrarily related, they form an indissoluble unity.8

Saussure developed an argument that “the linguistic sign is arbitrary,” in which sign is defined as the unity between signified (a concept) on the one hand and signifier (a sound-image) on the other.9 Saussure is aware of possibilities of natural signs, and cites pantomime as an example. However, he stresses the arbitrariness by stating that the main concern of semiology as a new science “will still be the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign.” Saussure stresses that any sign, or “every means of expression” for that matter, as long as it is “used in society,” “is based, in principle, on collective behavior” or “on convention”.10
The term [arbitrary] should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (we shall see ... that the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community).  

Saussure’s argument is buttressed by the refutations he offers against the anticipated counter-arguments concerning interjections and onomatopoeia. If we accept that a sign is arbitrary and that “every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behavior or on convention,” as Saussure stresses, then we need to ask if architectural meaning is also based on the assignment by the collective behavior or on convention.

Dialectically opposed, at least seemingly so, are those who claim to have found in certain inherent properties in architectural forms the basis for their meanings. Geoffrey Broadbent and others have argued for architecture as iconic sign, while Juan Pablo Bonta indicated that architecture is, at least to a certain extent, “systems of indication which need not be codified.” These studies are based on Peirce’s semiotics rather than Saussure’s semiology. To compare with Saussure’s, Peirce’s definition of sign covers many more subject matters than words in a language, for, according to Peirce, a sign is “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.” As a result, Peirce gives the same degree of attention to what Saussure would call natural or motivated signs, which in Peirce’s terminology are icons and indexes, as he does to symbols, or Saussure’s arbitrary signs. In comparison, Saussure’s strong insistence in arbitrariness of sign is at least justified when we recognize that his study is focused strictly on languages as used, without attention to the origin of word formation.

A careful examination of these studies reveals that Saussurian architectural critics did not mean the two positions to be exclusive. Even Jencks, a strong believer in preponderance of arbitrary meaning in architecture, did not ignore the peculiar nature of architectural meaning: “In comparison with spoken language, the architectural language is more ‘motivated’ and less ‘arbitrary’ which is to say that it has a higher ratio of indexical and iconic signs.”

It is possible for a single piece of architecture to have both aspects simultaneously, or the weight may shift between the two in the course of time. However, when presented in contrast, these two positions seem to detach culturally granted architectural meaning from portable architecture. For portability includes a move from one culture to another, Portable architecture’s meaning, then, may be limited to that which is iconic, and arbitrary meaning will presumably be lost in the course of a shift to another culture.

Saussure’s exclusion of, or disinterest in the making of a word — when he rejected onomatopoeia and interjections as natural signs and insisted the focus of attention be on the usage of a word — is a crucial flaw, at least from an architectural point of view. The understanding of arbitrariness in word-meaning relationships in linguistics, when applied simplistically, gives too much authority to the culture as a meaning giver to an architectural form, while regarding form as having very little to do with the meaning in itself. Under this assumption, the meaning of architecture is fixed, and a viewer without the culture of origination has no possibility of making sense out of the form. Architectural communication then is limited to what is considered right by the original cultural community, They become responsible for the transmission of the correct meaning.

Eco is not unaware of the possibility in which an artist tries to embed a self-referential code in an object of art. To compare with Saussure’s position, Eco takes an interest in how an artist makes a sign. After stating that “all the ingenuity of an architect or designer cannot make a new form functional (and cannot give form to a new function) without the support of existing processes of codification,” Eco retrieves the
of his architecture is the ornamental stringcourse or molding, which is often placed where it shouldn’t be.

3. Redundancy and miniaturization in the aesthetic text. Another reason reading architecture takes more time than reading building is the redundancy of messages that refer to themselves and even to small messages within the whole.

4. … another aspect of the aesthetic text, is that it is hermeneutic, esoteric and, even at its limits, completely private…. The difficulty in decoding these texts, the aesthetic effort and time expended in making up plausible meanings as you look at an unfamiliar architecture, are obviously all part of the aesthetic game.

5. … it is continuously open to new interpretation, multivalent and plural in its range of meanings…. Yet there is a far more important aspect of multivalence than this: the ability of the aesthetic text to articulate radically different experiences, emotions and values as a whole.

[Italics added by author]

Obviously Jencks has postmodern, ironic architecture in mind, and this fact is revealed by the words I have italicized above. One might say that Jenck’s strong interest in postmodern architecture has limited his consideration of the self-referential code in a piece of architecture to those of irony and superficiality. Having lost, as modernists such as Adolf Loos have pointed out, the root of tradition, does it follow that postmodern irony, succeeded by deconstruction’s express denial of meaning, is the only possible way for architecture?

Architecture as meaningful text

There is another way of looking at architectural meaning, which requires a piece of architecture to be a text, the organization of related
parts, which gives rise to a certain meaningfulness. Text here goes beyond “any discourse fixed by writing,” but retains a semantic autonomy in the sense that a gap “inserts itself between saying and what is said.” The responsibility of author can be considered, and the relevance of an interpretation discussed in a non-arbitrary manner. Here, architectural communication, then, is more like an appreciation, and sharedness of culture is based on the possibility of an architectural piece making sense in different settings. Culture then will be given a possibility of expanding communication in the world, instead of being an alienating influence.

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, whose original inquiry can be found in the work of Aristotle, and developed as the study of Biblical scriptures. Much closer to our time, Immanuel Kant’s statement regarding the interpretation of Plato drew the attention of, for example, Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834), William Dilthey (1833–1911), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). In *Critique of Pure Reason*, the second edition of which came out in 1787, Kant stated:

> I need only remark that it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in ordinary conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him better than he has understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention.”

The contemporary development of hermeneutics may be seen in the works of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, with the philosophical foundation of phenomenology.

The significance of phenomenological hermeneutics is two-fold: appropriation and distanciation. First, the significance of interpretation of a text lies not so much in arriving at the subjective intention of the author but rather in the appropriation of the text. Here, to appropriate a text through interpretation should be considered as, with the word’s etymological root in the Latin *appropriare* — “to make one’s own.” Appropriation of text is then “to make one’s own” what was initially “alien,” so that “interpretation brings together, equalises, renders contemporary and similar.” Through the act of appropriation, the interpreter “does not seek to rejoin the original intentions of the author, but rather to expand the conscious horizons” by “actualising the meaning of the text.”

Armed with this notion of appropriation, one might draw a distinction between hermeneutic meaning and linguistic meaning. In particular, I would rather extend the former term to “hermeneutic meaningfulness.” To understand the distinction between these two notions, it may be helpful to imagine something which has a meaning, yet is not meaningful — a stop sign might be an example — and a case in which something’s meaning is unknown, and yet it is acknowledged as meaningful, as, for example, the famous stone heads of Easter Island.

Here I would draw attention to Rossi’s interests in the Sardinian monument.

Sometimes I regard time as a plastic object, in which elements whose original meaning we have forgotten, are preserved, alongside the fragments of a beautiful building. … We cannot, however, always put together what has been broken and therefore take little interest in understanding what has been forgotten. … There is a Nuraghian monument in Sardinia that I have always attempted both to understand and to imitate. It leads down into the earth and is nothing but a stairway leading to a point, lit from above. … It always seems to me unbelievable that this great architectural work of art should not belong to the realm of architecture as such, I find it unfortunate that its ancient meaning, if it ever had one, remains a secret.
Secondly, seen as a text, one can study the relationship between parts and between a part and the whole when evaluating an interpretation, by which an interpretation can be explained in a nonarbitrary fashion.\textsuperscript{32} “The meaningfulness of a text … arises from its organization, the relationship among its parts and between the part and the whole. As such it can be explained by an interpreter in a nonarbitrary fashion that can be understood by another person … the organization of the text can be submitted for rational argument away from the subjective realm of the author or the interpreter.”\textsuperscript{33}

In order to understand the notion of distanciation, it might be useful to refer to Gadamer’s discussion on memento, as a contrast to text. An example may be a pebble I picked up in the courtyard of the Louvre five years ago. Gadamer states:

Of all signs, the memento most seems to have a reality of its own. It refers to the past and so is effectively a sign, but it is also precious in itself since, as a bit of the past that has not disappeared, it keeps the past present for us. But it is clear that this characteristic is not grounded in the being of the object itself. A memento has value as a memento only for someone who already — i.e., still — recalls the past. Mementos lose their value when the past of which they remind one no longer has any meaning. Furthermore, someone who not only uses mementos to remind him but makes a cult of them and lives in the past as if it were the present has a disturbed relation to reality.\textsuperscript{34}

The meaningfulness of a text in comparison arises from its organization, the relationship among its parts and between the part and the whole. As such it can be explained by an interpreter in a nonarbitrary fashion that can be understood by another person.\textsuperscript{35} Based on appropriation and distanciation, the role of the author can be argued. The author plays a crucial role in purposefully organizing the work so that it may later be interpreted in a nonarbitrary way. The organization of the text, which had embodied the author’s meaning to the author, persists even after being detached from the author. This organization allows the interpreter to come up with his/her own appropriated interpretation, but also anchors the interpretation.\textsuperscript{36}

As if for the purpose of ascertaining the body of text, Rossi placed his theater on a boat, which keeps its world wherever it travels, while for Ando, the notion of bridge as both connection and separation between the two worlds is important. Ando stated, in reference to his Japan Pavilion for Expo. ’92, “The bridge in this pavilion takes visitors to a fictional world, a world of dreams. Then again, it is a bridge spanning East and West.”\textsuperscript{37}

The making of a world, so to speak, of its own, supported by its organization as a text, works especially well in the case of theater. Theater, after all, is a place of representation created by the playwright and actors. Supporting this notion of theater as a temporary creation of an illusory world is, in addition to the bridge of Ando and the boat of Rossi, the use of scaffolding as the buildings’ structure made visible at the eye level as well as at the underside of the roof of both theaters.

Hermeneutic meaningfulness requires much more time than the linguistic meaning does from an interpreter. It is usually important, when a language is being used, for the people involved to decipher the meaning instantaneously. We can think about the frustration and ineffectiveness when one has not quite learned the specific language being used, or the case of simultaneous translation. However, architecture is something that is there for a long time. Even with temporary construction, the scale of time span that is attached to a circus tent is drastically different from speech. One does not have to have a simultaneous deciphering of meaningfulness out of architecture. Not only can one take time, approaching, going through a doorway, through a hall and stairs, but one can also
come back to the same building again and again and enrich the experience of interpretation. It is more important for a piece of architecture that people take time to appreciate it. This requirement of time for hermeneutic interpretation in return gives the reason why that piece stands for the time it stands.\(^3\)

Commenting on Ando’s buildings, Jackie Kestenbaum points to the time required for interpretation:

To visit an Ando building is to relinquish all presuppositions about architecture and take on Ando’s Weltanschauung. … to negotiate an Ando building is an arduous task, alternating exertion with contemplation, a process whereby the spatial phenomenon imprints itself upon the mind and body and resonates for days. … It is the resonance one feels in holy places, where personal memory is not a prerequisite, where the place itself bears the weight.\(^3\)

As a demonstration of applicability and relevance of this distinction, one might compare postmodern architecture and pseudo-authentic as based on pseudo-linguistic meaning on the one hand and Rossi and Ando based on hermeneutic meaningfulness on the other. Postmodern architecture and pseudo-authentic are both signage, while Rossi and Ando produced text.

Ando is sensitive of the problem of the pseudo-authentic, and instead longs for materials, such as concrete, and pure geometry, which are devoid of past meaning that is no longer shared:

By trying to reproduce in modern materials (concrete and steel) and their suitable techniques, forms that came into being in relation to Japan’s traditional building material (wood) amounted to ignoring the inevitable and fundamental connections between material and form. For this reason buildings making this attempt sustained many difficulties and before long, ceased to emerge. The contradiction between the unaltered forms of the past and today’s living style, which differs sharply from the living style of the past, is too great. … the concrete I employ does not have plastic rigidity or weight. Instead, it must be homogeneous and light and must create surfaces. When they agree with my aesthetic image, walls become abstract, are negated, and approach the ultimate limit of space. Their actuality is lost, and only the space they enclose gives a sense of really existing. Under these conditions, volume and projected light alone float into prominence as hints of the spatial composition. And this is what gives meaning to a geometric composition.\(^4\)

One may say that meaning is to communication as meaningfulness is to interpretation. That is, the former deals with the understanding of the author, in the setting of a dialog, whereas the latter deals with the understanding of the text.\(^4\)

Architecture as appreciated is not so much architecture as communicating. If architecture has physical and spatial qualities in such a way that a person, not necessarily with the same cultural background as that held by the architect in designing, can approach it to appreciate, making sense out of as many parts, the whole, and the relationship between parts and the whole as possible, then this architecture is meaningful.

**Role of culture and precedents**

Now the question arises: what is the role of cultures and precedents? Specifically, if culture has something to do with sharing among a certain group of people, what is it that is shared? Here, Colquhoun’s discussion on the exchange value is illuminating in the sense that for Colquhoun, what is exchanged is not meaning of a form, but rather, an ideal of the form, that is another kind of metaphysical counterpart to which the artifact is a close physical approximation:
... artifacts have not only a “use” value in the crudest sense but also an “exchange” value. The craftsman had an image of the object in his mind's eye when starting to make it. Whether this object was a cult image (say, a sculpture) or a kitchen utensil, it was an object of cultural exchange, and it formed part of a system of communication within society. Its “message” value was precisely the image of the final form which the craftsman held in his mind's eye as he was making it and to which his artifact corresponded as closely as possible.\(^{42}\)

The implication of hermeneutic meaningfulness is this. Pressing the distinction, I might state that cultural sharedness does not so much fix meaning into form — it rather lies in a form which has a capability of staying meaningful.

Both Rossi's and Ando's theaters can be considered as attempts to keep the form which humanity has carried throughout the history. Vitruvius describes the ideal theater as based on a circle and four equilateral triangles.\(^{43}\) Palladio's design for Teatro Olimpico was a result of the Renaissance appreciation of Vitruvius, and the wooden tiers are arranged in half an ellipse. It is convincing that the Shakespearean Globe Theater of Elizabethan London also had a reference back to a Vitruvian description.\(^{44}\) As for the theaters by Rossi and Ando, it is not at all difficult to derive from the Vitruvian arrangement of equilateral triangles, a square, a rectangle, and an octagon, three of which make up Teatro del Mondo, while Ando's dodecagon is immediately derived from the twelve points of Vitruvian triangles. Ando's explanation includes a reference to an Eastern view of the world:

I think a dodecagon represents the world. The number twelve is symbolic of the cosmos. In Japan, there are twelve animals corresponding to the twelve-year cycle of the calendar. In the West there are twelve months to a year and so forth."

Rossi, being “superficially annoyed by the frequent accusation that there is a young architectural movement that imitates me and builds like Rossi all over the world,” comments on Palladio:

Let us take an example that means much to me. Palladio, as we know, created a style of architecture that is closely linked to the spirit of a place, to the “genius loci.” Therefore, one finds the Venetian Palladio of villas and palaces, as well as the Palladio visible throughout the world — from Louisiana to Russia, from England to France — where a wonderful form of Palladian architecture has developed. I believe that certain English Palladian architects, such as the Adam brothers, have sometimes reached greater perfection than Palladio himself. They raised Palladian architecture to its peak, and yet there is still a difference between this perfection and the Palladio in Vicenza, or the Palladianism of his Italian imitators who tend to be much more Baroque. I cite this example to show that the basic principles of an architectural style, once they have been created, exist over long periods of time and are capable of development. Modernism has already partially attempted to do this, although I believe that its notorious failures result from the fact that it created a caesura, not something continuous.\(^{46}\)

Consider two cases: Victorian houses on the one hand and the portable theaters by Rossi and Ando on the other. Victorian style, surviving the journey over the Atlantic once, has ended up as kitsch-post-modernism and pseudo-authentic. The two architects’ theaters, on the contrary, keep alive the fundamental human appreciation of geometry, which had already been expressed two millennia ago by Vitruvius. A form that is merely supported by a culture's fixation for its meaning will have little chance of surviving through time and space, while a form that grows out of uni-
versally discernible properties will continue to be meaningful. In the harsh light of contrast it seems plain to me that architecture should pursue meaningfulness rather than mere meaning.

1 This paper is a part of the author’s ongoing research on meaningfulness in architecture. Grants from Texas Tech University and University of Nebraska–Lincoln have supported the effort thus far.


8 Colquhoun, “E.H. Gombrich and the Hegelian Tradition,” Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change, pp. 152-158, For Colquhoun’s reference to Ferdinand de Saussure, see, for example, his discussion on “onomatopoeic” relationship between forms and their content in Colquhoun, p.49, where he makes a parallel comparison between works of art and language.


10 de Saussure, p. 68.

11 de Saussure, pp. 68-69.

12 de Saussure, pp. 69-70.

13 de Saussure, p. 68.


16 Peirce defines an icon as “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such Object actually exists or not,” an index “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object,” and a symbol “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object,” in manuscript c. 1903, in Buchler, p.102.

17 Jencks, p. 80.

18 Eco, pp. 22-23.

19 Eco, pp. 11-12.

20 Jencks, pp. 86-94.


22 Here, the author is aware of the need to compare the number of notions and definitions offered, for example, Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” (1971) in Image Music Text (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp.155-164, whose notion of text is the basis for Hal Foster,”(Post) Modern Polemics,” in Perspecta 21; or Jean-François Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?” in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).


25 Aristotle, Poetics.


29 “Meaning” itself is a word that requires a great deal of consideration. See, for example, Ogden and Richards, Meaning of Meaning, and Edmund Husserl’s distinction between formal and transcendental meanings.

30 The distinction between linguistic meaning and hermeneutic meaningfulness may be further clarified by referring to the concept of artistic representation compared with the notions of indication and substitution by Gadamer. See Gadamer, Truth and Method, pp. 152-155.


33 Handa, pp. 612-613.


35 Eco talks about it now, distinguishing meaning according to author, interpreter, and text. Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

36 Handa, p. 613.


38 Rudolf Wittkower’s notion of “art as a living heritage” needs mentioning here. See Wittkower, Interpretation of Visual Symbols,” in Allegory and The Migration of Symbols, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).


41 One can refer to the difference between Erwin Panofsky and Rudolf Wittkower in their treatment of “meaning” on the one hand and “visual interpretation” on the other. Panofsky, on Iconology, based on context, place/time. Wittkower, on art as living heritage, Wittkower’s emotional response to the art, when the piece is detached from the code system which it relied on.


43 Vitruvius, On Architecture, trans, Frank Granger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), Bk. V. Ch. VI.

