

Autonomy and Heteronomy in Architecture Theory: Part III

***The Disjunction of House and Home
in Contemporary Architectural Theories
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Instead of an assessment of the conjunction of house and home, contemporary architecture theorists have raised what they call *the question of domesticity*. As will become obvious in the following pages, this questions in tangential to that which interests us: it cannot be said that it does not touch it, but it does not settle on it. It rather uses it as an entry to some virtual spaces.

Let's thus examine how contemporary architecture theories *touch* the question of the conjunction between house and home. Rather than conjunction, they predicate disjunction, rather than reassessment, dismissal. For example, Marco Diani and Catherine Ingraham write:

The insatiable and complex demand for physical comfort—for the “axis,” which is one of the paths “home”—in all architectural buildings (even the most austere) stands directly against experiments in building, or even thinking, the grotesque, the pluri-dimensional, the ideological, the sublime¹.

It is true that architecture is taking thought about the building of houses, not about homes. But should not a house be the shell of a possible home? Many architecture theorists write as if they were thinking that it shouldn't. But how do they, personally, live that disjunction?

Besides, I don't think that the words physical comfort here mean exclusively a state of

¹... as Mrs Farnsworth could indeed testify, see Marco Diani and Catherine Ingraham, “Introduction,” in Marco Diani and Catherine Ingraham, *Restructuring Architecture Theory*, Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, p. 1.

satisfaction or homeostasis with the surrounding world. It should rather be understood in the verbal sense of comforting. I understand the search for comfort as a longing for an “axis,” for what Rykwert calls “focus”: the axis that, through the hearth, relates the underworld to the upperworld, and that many cultures symbolize by the tree or the column of smoke that brings the flavor of human libations—fruits of the soil and the underworld—to the gods. Yet, we hear that this longing stands against experimenting and even thinking in architecture. Is a house the abode of *autonomous* dwelling acts by the dwellers themselves (in which case it becomes a home), or is it the laboratory for the architect’s experiments with “the grotesque, the multidimensional, the ideological, the sublime,” and hence a space whose inhabitants are submitted to the other’s law (*heteronomy*)? Most of the architectural theorists reviewed here favor the latter.

In other words, house and home are disjoined and, as I will try to show, each leads a separate existence: the building, or for this effect, the house as an object of experimentation, and the home as the repressed that inevitably resurfaces, as for instance in the search for communitary security and orientation of the Latin American squatters,² or, quite differently, in the staging of a dismantled “domesticity” by some artists and architects.³

Yet, if architecture theory refuses to settle on the conjunction of house and home, where does it want to head? The answer might be: to some virtual space, beyond all past literary imagination. But again: is such space *inhabitable*?

² See for instance: Lisa R. Peattie, *View from the Barrio*, Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1968; John Turner, “Housing priorities, settlements patterns, and urban settlements in urbanizing countries” in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, November 1968; William Mangin, *Peasants in Cities. Readings in the Anthropology of Urbanization*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970. More examples in Jean Robert, (*En*)*trust People*, Mexico: Housing International Coalition, 1996, the bibliography, pp. 127-136.

³ For a statement of “postmodern,” dismantled and disembodied domesticity, see Christine Poggi, “Victor Acconci’s Bad Dreams of Domesticity,” in Christopher Reed, ed., *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Literature*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, op. cit., pp. 237-252. For documentation about the return of domesticity in some contemporary architecture (often by female or feminist architects, see the end of the article), Sharon Haar and Christopher Reed, “Coming Home, A Postscript on Postmodernism,” in Christopher Reed, *Not at Home*, op. cit., pp. 253-273.

The Influence of Literary Theories on Architectural Theories

One of the striking things about architecture theory today is how badly it is influenced by literary theories and philosophy. These influences cannot be explained away as mere consequences of the disenchantment—starting in the sixties—with classical modernism. They are new imports, from domains other than the ones in which modern architecture had taken roots. In the heroic period of modernism, in the time of Bauhaus and de Stijl, architecture would import a formal language from the visual arts, mainly painting and sculpture, as well as forge some legitimizing slogans out of scientific metaphors (think of the theories of urbanism since Ildefonso Cerdà,⁴ with their tissues, their arteries, nodes and nervous centers), but it had little use for literature or philosophy. Architects then had their own literary and philosophical stamina, think of Le Corbusier.

Or perhaps would it be more appropriate to say that both contemporary literature and contemporary architecture share an interest in semiology? The following quote from Marco Diani and Catherine Ingraham seems to confirm it:

The implication of the refiguration of representation, which prepares the way for the presence of the past in postmodern architecture, can be seen by noting central insights that emerge in contemporary semiology. Signs, we have learned, do not represent objects or events that once were present. To the contrary, the sign is always the sign of a sign. Forever entangled in the play of signification, we never have access to things themselves and thus can never penetrate naked reality. What we often naively take to be objectivity is actually nothing other than a sign or set of signs whose signature has been forgotten. Inasmuch as we deal only with signs and never with “reality” as such, our knowledge is inescapably fictive. Unlike (almost all) his predecessors, the postmodernist not only recognizes but gaily embraces the fictions among which he is destined to err.⁵

⁴ Ildefonso Cerdà, *Teoría de La Urbanización*, Madrid 1867. Facsimile: Barcelona 1967. Abr. Fr. edition: *La Théorie Générale de L'urbanisation*, presented and adapted by A. Lopez de Abersaturi, Paris, 1979.

Comments on Cerdà's work: Françoise Choay, *La Règle et Le Modèle : Sur La Théorie de L'architecture et de L'urbanisme*, Paris, 1980; Joseph Rykwert, “House und Home,” in Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Uta Kleine, *Anthology for Jean Robert, Raum und Geschichte*, Hagen: FernUniversität, 1998, Kurseinheit IV, pp. 1 - 11;

Jean Robert, *Raum und Geschichte*, Kurseinheit 1, Hagen: FernUniversität, 1998, pp. 31-34.

⁵ Mark C. Taylor, “Deadlines Approaching Anarchitecture,” in Marco Diani and Catherine Ingraham, *Restructuring Architectural Theory*, op. cit. p. 20.

But architecture theory no longer expects from linguistics or semiology the “explanation” of architectural forms.

[The Opposition years have] given way with a noticeable loss of faith in the capacity of the linguistic and philosophical model to explain architecture, and thus a loss of faith in the transparency promised by the “age of textuality.” Perhaps this is because architecture cannot even be thought apart from “form” and formalisms.⁶

The architectural movement which calls itself “postmodern” vindicates the power to add signs to a world of signs, in absence of a beyond called reality.

Perhaps the literary concept that became most popular among avant-gardist architects is defamiliarization. Here is how Bernard Tschumi, a “deconstructivist architect,” justifies the cooption of that literary idea by architectural theory:

In recent years, small pockets of resistance began to form as architects in various parts of the world - England, Austria, the United States, Japan (for the most part, in advanced postindustrial countries) - started to take advantage of [the current] situation of fragmentation and superficiality and to turn it against itself. If the prevalent ideology was one of familiarity - familiarity with known images, derived from 1920s modernism or eighteenth-century classicism - maybe one's role was to defamiliarize. If the new, mediated world echoed and reinforced our dismantled reality, maybe, just maybe, one should take advantage of such dismantling, celebrate fragmentation by celebrating the culture of difference, by accelerating and intensifying the loss of certainty, of center, of history. [...] In architecture in particular, the notion of defamiliarization was a clear tool. If the design of windows only reflects the superficiality of the skin's decoration, we might very well start to look for a way to do without windows. If the design of pillars reflects the conventionality of supporting frames, maybe we might get rid of pillars altogether⁷.

The term *defamiliarization* is a translation of *ostran(n)enie*, a Russian word meaning “making strange,” “unfamiliar” popularized by the Russian Formalists, a school of literary criticism that began in two groups, *Opoyaz* (an acronym) founded in 1916 at St. Petersburg and led by Victor Shklovsky and the Moscow Linguistic Circle founded in 1915. Both groups were influenced by the

⁶ Marco Diani and Catherine Ingraham, “Introduction,” in *Restructuring Architectural Theory*, op. cit., p.1.

linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. They stressed the autonomy of the text and, more important for our purpose, the discontinuity between literary and other uses of language. They placed an “emphasis on the medium” and analyzed the way in which literature is able to alter or “make strange” common language. They insisted on the predominance of form and technique over content. Proscribed in 1929 in the USSR, the Formalists had nonetheless a great influence in the West, notably through the work of linguist Roman Jakobson. The following example of the use of defamiliarization by an American writer will suffice to illustrate the point:

The mirror reflected what seemed at first a priest. A white robe, which fell from his thick shoulders in crescent folds, circumscribed with diminishing accuracy the ponderous art of his great head, and gave to his obesity the suggestion of vulnerability rather than strength as he sat face to face with the fact of himself. This effect was intensified by the resignation with which he suffered what might have been his acolyte, also dressed in white, either to anoint his flourishing, grey-brown hair as if in preparation for some imminent solemnity or to give it a tonsure⁸.

What you finally get, is the familiar scene of a man in a hairdresser’s chair. Similarly, what you get at the end in “defamiliarizing architecture,” is some public building... or a house. Yet, can I transpose the brief definition of literary Formalism quoted above to architecture and speak of “architectural formalism”? This formalism would, I paraphrase, stress the autonomy of architectural space and, more important, the discontinuity between architecture and common uses of space. It would place an ‘emphasis on the medium’ and analyze the way in which architecture is able to alter or ‘make strange’ common spatial experience and insist on the predominance of form and technique over content.” Is this perhaps the architectural theory of the age of show⁹?

Literature presupposes literacy, that is the fact that a great number of society’s members are

⁷ Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997, pp. 237, 238.

⁸ Frederick Buechner, *A Long Day’s Dying*, 1949, quoted in R.H. Stacy, *Defamiliarization in Language and Literature*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977, p. 4.

⁹ Ivan Illich, “Guarding the eye in the age of show” (work in progress), in Barbara Duden, Lee Hoinacki, Ivan Illich and Sebastian

fluent in the art of reading.¹⁰ Literacy, and I will say later why the term should be understood as alphabetic literacy, has given us what George Steiner called “the bookish mentality” which in turn gave literature the importance it has in our society.¹¹

It is often when an epoch comes to an end that it most obsessively displays the technical prowesses that made it possible, as in a sort of recapitulation. Think of the last generations of gothic builders, of their filigreed towers, their quasi flat vaults and their inversed arches. Or think of the clippers, the fastest commercial sailing ships ever designed, that for some decades could compete with the new steamers.

Do we not assist, in literature, to a recapitulatory display of the technical elements of the trade, the letters themselves and their permutative and manipulative possibilities? Raymond Queneau, for instance, published ten sonnets under the title *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961) and invited the reader to rearrange them in the hundred-thousand-billion ways indicated by the title. With *La Disparition* (1969), Georges Perec was able to write a whole novel without using the letter e. Of what cultural changes these games¹² are the symptom is not quite clear. The omnipresence of screens, as the new, now immaterial, support of the text, the “hypertext,” but on the other hand, the resiliency of the book have still to be interpreted in a broad historic and cultural perspective. I share with Ivan Illich the hope that, if the ethology of reading is changing, this change will induce some to cultivate new forms of communitary reading, around old and new “houses of the book”

Trapp, *Zur Geschichte des Blickens*, pp. 97 - 115, available at Kreftingstrasse 16, 28203, Bremen or at www.pudel.uni-bremen.de

¹⁰ Eric Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975.

¹¹ George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and of Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

¹² The possibility of such games exists since the dawn of the alphabet, and paleography attests that, since the beginning, such games have been marginally played. Eric Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*, op. cit. p. 191, comments on “the habit of manipulating the arrangement of letters”. However, such manipulations had decorative rather than “semiotic” purposes. They were limited by the predominance of speech over writs in the pre-classical epoch: Havelock also remarks that in *Frogs* Aristophanes’s Euripides represents himself as a poet whose “fluency of diction” is “an infusion stained out of papyri” which may mean that his poetry draws upon expressions favored by the idioms of documental speech, contrary to Aeschylus, whose spoken verse can outweigh not only the corporeal presence of Euripides but also his “papyri.” Aristophanes juxtaposes oral and literate styles to the advantage of the former (p. 286, 7).

(similarly, I grope for a rebirth of communitary home- and place-making).

Do we not assist to a comparable “recapitulation” in architecture? I am not only alluding to the “ironic” conjuring up of the past, which is overtly the construction of a fictitious “pastness,” but also to the dismembering of the narrative sequences of the *promenade architecturale*, to the influence of cinematographic and choreographic techniques. Meaning in architecture, as in choreography, happens through the body, through what bodily motions conceal and reveal, through the “narratives” that the sequences of these motions construct and deconstruct. In Summerspace (1958), choreographer Merce Cunningham ordered such sequences by chance procedures. In Biped, presented in New York in the spring of 1999, the sequences and the phrases were arranged at random by a computer.¹³ “Our knowledge that the scene is not going to develop forces us to view it more sharply. Because A is not flowing into B, we actually see A.”¹⁴ A becomes a unique “event.”

Architects who use comparable serial manipulations acknowledge the influence of choreography and cinematography, as well as of writers who, like Queneau and Perec, expected singularity from permutations and rearrangements of the elements of (written) language.

What we have to ask however is, how far we can draw the analogies between architecture and literature. Again, you could object that one dwells in buildings but not in the printed pages, but this is questionable: the bookish man literally carves a home in books—though he does not quite inhabit them bodily. The difference is more subtle and profound. It has to do, more than with writing (and more than with building), with reading (and with making a “home,” with and without quotes). Modern reading—silent reading¹⁵ --is generally a solitary pleasure. Establishing a home is

¹³ David Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, quoted in Joan Acocella, “The Gambler. Merce Cunningham, at eighty, continues to roll the dice,” in *The New Yorker*, New York, August 9, 1999, p. 84-87.

¹⁴ Joan Acocella, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁵ Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text. A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 explores the changes in the technology of writing and the ethology of reading during Hugh of St Victor’s life time, in the XIIth

not.

[H]uman dwellings are always more or less communal. However shabby and casual it may look, a rustic dwelling depends on being part of an articulated (I am even tempted to say an organic) layout; often a layout which was understood as a body with head and members into which the homesteads were “integrated.” I would argue further - that a house, whether it is rural or urban, can only be a true home in such neighborly circumstances. While the lonely hearth will not quite make a home therefore, yet the erection of the home-house into a castle which defies its neighbors, and may be seen as quite separate from the public realm, makes it much less of a home. Or, in other words - an individual can have many houses, but only a person can make a home.¹⁶

Perhaps, the primordial reality is relational (the “thou,” the “community”) and if so, the alleged demise of “reality” is but the shadow of a neglect for “relationality”? If it is so, to make a home is a neighborly activity that engenders a reality.

Illich tells us that reading has passed from being a communitary, to being a solitary activity. This is the true crux of the comparison between literature and architecture, between modern, silent reading and home-negating housing. The reader whom Queneau or Perec invites to manipulate letters and words, multiply interpretations and face polysemies is the solitary, silent reader. Similarly, the “architecture of disjunction” appears to me as a choreography for the “lonely crowd.”¹⁷

The question that concludes this essay is of course: can we historcize the “question of domesticity” and its negation? In other words: what remains of the “disjunction of home and house,” if we consider it in the mirror of the past?

century. As a consequence of these changes, silent, solitary reading superseded loud, public reading. For a funny account of this change and its consequences, enjoy Jorge Luis Borges, “Del culto de los libros,” in Prosa completa, Barcelona: Bruguera, 1985, vol.3., pp.119-123.

¹⁶ Joseph Rykwert, “House and home,” op. cit. p. 5, 6.

¹⁷ David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, eds, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973.