Imagining the building: architectural design as semiotic construction

P. Medway, Department of Education and Professional Studies, King's College, Franklin-Wilkins Building, Waterloo Road, London SE1 9NN, UK
B. Clark, Centre for Communication in Professional Activity, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

Reporting on three days of observation and recording in a Canadian architects' practice, the authors display the progress of the collaborative design of one element of a large building as a 'design stream' into which various influences flow, affecting what is being constructed. That construction is seen in semiotic terms as a complex of signs in which three components can be distinguished: a 'virtual building', an envelope of considerations and a network of associated references and meanings. The primary product is thus not the drawings and written specifications but an 'idea'. 'Maps' of the sequence of design events show the semiotic transactions that take place, and attention is drawn to the role played by different semiotic (or symbolic) modes, and especially to that of spoken language.
© 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: architectural design, design activity, design practice, social design

Do we not make one house by the art of building, and another by the art of drawing, which is a sort of dream? —Plato

'Design' in English is both a verb and a noun. As a noun it takes two forms: first, a *non-count* noun referring to the process ('design is an opportunistic activity'): 'design' in this version can't be preceded by 'a' or 'the' and can't have a plural; and, second, a *count noun* referring to the products of the process ('the design was unsuitable', 'several designs were considered'). That much is commonly understood (though not necessarily in those esoteric linguistic terms). What has been rather taken for granted, however, is what *the* design, the product of the design process, is. We think the typical understanding is that it's the constructed-in-advance representation that will

www.elsevier.com/locate/destud
0142-694X/03 $ - see front matter *Design Studies* **24** (2003) 255–273
doi:10.1016/S0142-694X(02)00055-8
© 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd All rights reserved Printed in Great Britain

determine essential features of the eventually-to-be-constructed artefact. In architecture and engineering the representation will often be a set of drawings and written specifications.

But what is the representation a representation *of*? The common sense answer is, 'the building that is to come into being.' But representations, simply by being representations, bring objects (objects of cognition, ideational entities) into existence without any necessary reference to actual or future states of affairs in the world. The drawings can thus also be regarded as representing an *existing* building, one that does not exist in constructed form but that nevertheless has many characteristics of buildings—specific shapes, configurations, dimensions, materials and so on. And we have evidence that architects in their deliberations are most often addressing this existing *conceptual* or imagined or dreamed building and not the one that *will* be built: they say, 'Let's lower the balcony here'—but there isn't a balcony because the ground hasn't even been broken yet. There is no doubt that this imagined building, which we have referred to as the *virtual building* (VB)[1], despite being unreal in a physical sense, is a solid social fact, something known, often in great detail, to participants, both inside and outside the office, in the activities that cause the building to get conceived, financed, approved and built.

Clearly this symbolic or semiotic artefact, the VB, is, together with its representations, the product of the design process and may aptly be called the design. But it isn't the whole product, and one purpose of this paper is to draw attention to what else the outcome of design activity might be. Without deciding in advance what 'the design' is, we choose to study rather *what gets produced or comes into existence*, as well as *how* these effects occur, in the course of design: what new things and what new connections between things appear in the world.

Our epigraph from Plato is helpfully suggestive. If design dreams an object, the process may have some of the characteristics of dreams, which include not only clear representations of people, places and situations but also associative overtones, resonances and moods that impart an affective colour and tone to the experience.

1 *A semiotic approach to studying design*

The problem with studying design is that the virtual building, its intended product, isn't visible. Of course, design is typically associated with and is often only possible with the aid of material artefacts such as drawings. But these aren't the design. The design, in its emergent and final states, is a *complex of ideas*. It exists in consciousness, an object of cognition, which

1 Medway, P 'Virtual and material buildings: construction and constructivism in architecture and writing' *Written Communication* Vol 13 (1996) 473–514

دریافت فوری ← متن کامل مقاله

ISIArticles
مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات