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Understanding architectural design: expressive and figurative paradigms

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Abstract

Creativity and design are the most important characteristics in architectural conception. They offer both new solutions in complex situations and add novelty to the architectural object.

This paper develops two theoretical paradigms about architectural design, based on an aesthetic-tectonic approach. Specifically, the analysis focuses on two architectural objects: Frank Lloyd Wright's reference to Japanese architecture, and Le Corbusier's reference to Ibadite architecture.

Starting with abstract-figurative processes we identify two initial paradigms: the figurative paradigm, which constitutes a direct (object-to-object) reference; and the expressive paradigm which, constitutes an indirect (object-to-idea) reference.

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1. Introduction

An addition to theories about architectural form, the exploration and understanding of architectural design is a very interesting field. Here we examine the issue from a semiotic (Chandler, 2001) and semio-logical (Eco, 1986),

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(Hillier & Hanson, 1984) point of view through a reflexive approach (Creswall, 2013), (Chebaiki & Chemrouk, 2015) and a visual-comparative exploration of the architectural object (Chebaiki & Chemrouk, 2015).

The reflexive approach calls for a brief theoretical overview. The objective is to identify the main registers of the architectural space (Lévy, 2008) in order to have a better understanding of the issue. This overview leads to the definition of two principal paradigms: expressive and figurative, which in turn stimulate architectural design.

On the other hand, the visual-comparative exploration calls for case studies. This consists of projects that have integrated conceptual references into a specific architecture. Our first example is Frank Lloyd Wright's reference to traditional Japanese architecture (Nute, 1994). The second is Le Corbusier's reference to Ibadite architecture, applied to the Notre Dame du Haut Chapel at Ronchamp (Ravéreau, 2003). These two examples reveal, through the paradigms that are developed, the postulates that are intrinsic to architectural design.

2. Architectural design and semiotics

In philosophy, the notion of design refers to aesthetics and character, as seen in the work of Hegel for example (Hegel, 1979). In the Hegelian definition, form, style and design take account of a set of requirements connected to the design and execution of ideas (Hegel, 1979) whatever the domain of application.

With respect to modern semiotics, Peirce's logic directly addresses the form (Simon, 1969). He interprets it as a meaning and a self-interpreting sign. The result is that the sign is considered to be something this is determined by the form (Simon, 1969), (Rénier, 1989). This observation reminds us of the architectural object, which is principally materialised by the form. Moreover, the components of the architectural space mean that the output of architecture is complex and multidimensional. These components (according to the definitions of Lévy and his work in semiotics) have five spatial registers (Lévy, 2008): the urban space, the utilitarian space, the aesthetic symbolic space, the bioclimatic space and the tectonic plastic space. Each of these registers have their own design levers, partially overlapping with the triad of registers proposed by Rénier and Alberti (Lévy, 2008), (Genard, 2002).

Of the five spatial registers, here we are interested in the aesthetic symbolic and tectonic plastic spaces. The aesthetic symbolic space concerns the relations between space and geometry, and space and mathematical measurements. It addresses geometrical concepts and symbolism through the history of art, and is manifested in the act of composition. The tectonic plastic space concerns the actual visual space. It refers to meanings found in art history (the history of styles in particular), and manifests in architectural expression (Lévy, 2008).

These two spatial registers (the aesthetic symbolic and tectonic plastic spaces) are particularly interesting given current concerns about environmental quality. Their interest lies in the understanding of three conceptual and architectural issues:

- The first is the understanding of activities and exercises related to design and spatial production. Here, the aim is to bring an appropriate spatial quality and meet multidimensional requirements (landscape, layout, energy solutions, etc.)
- The second is the understanding of the architectural discourse. Here, the aim is to ensure cohesion and spatial harmony, the manifestation of the place's identity, together with its personalization. Or, on the other hand, the adoption of a paradoxical discourse.
- The third issue relates to the socio-cultural sphere in the environmental trilogy (energy consumption, economic growth and social cohesion). By ensuring that aesthetic symbolic criteria are met, architectural design can ensure the preservation of patrimonial values and the development of multiple forms of inheritance, while responding to social and contemporary concerns.

3. Two paradigms of architectural design

By integrating an introspective approach and a visual exploration of the architectural object (De Saussure, 1983), our semiotic analysis reveals certain axioms relative to the structure of the architectural space. The latter is distinguished by:

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