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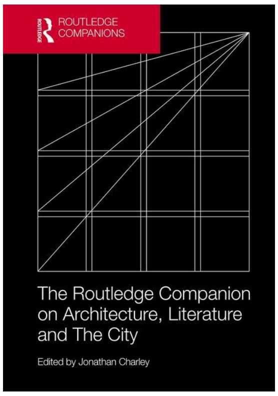

The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City

Jonathan Charley

Literary language and architectural meaning

Publication details

https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613154-12

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Published online on: 17 Aug 2018

How to cite :- Alberto Pérez-Gómez. 17 Aug 2018, *Literary language and architectural meaning from:* The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City Routledge
Accessed on: 21 Jan 2019
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613154-12

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11

Literary language and architectural meaning

Mood in Alain Robbe-Grillet's House of *Jealousy*

Alberto Pérez-Gómez

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In a recent book, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (2016), I have argued that throughout history, architecture has provided a communicative setting for cultures as its primary function, speaking intellectually and emotionally to embodied consciousness, disclosing places attuned to significant human action. This primary function, traditionally associated with an epiphany of beauty, opens up spaces where one may attain self-understanding through action in communion with others, and is a fundamental condition of humanity's psychosomatic health. Architecture, whether it is permanent or ephemeral, whether considered at the scale of the individual building or the scale of the city, resides in those physical environments that harmoniously complete, rather than alienate, human consciousness.

My interest in literary language and its relationship to architecture does not propose literature as an auxiliary inspiration for architects, or as a literal model for physical structures. Language, when properly understood through phenomenological hermeneutics, is inherently poetic, originary, and polysemic, and contains the very possibility of retrieving cultural roots for an architectural expression which creates appropriate atmospheric qualities. These qualities respond to pre-existing *places*, whose presences are made significant through articulate stories.

This interest is incongruent with present-day trends in architectural theory and practice. Literary language is at odds with the unambiguous prose of technical specifications, and with rational "decision-making" discourses aimed at consensual design by committee, uses of language that are more commonly present nowadays. This is not unusual in itself: the contemporary world is generally suspicious of natural language. Metaphoric in nature, it is deemed fuzzy and deceitful, particularly when compared to so-called mathematical languages, such as those that our computers understand and that "get things done," regardless of cultural frameworks. In North America, some years before the turn of the millennium, writers declared "the end of theory" in architecture. Taking certain observations by Foucault as a mantra, they have retained a profound suspicion of language, construing it as an irredeemable instrument of power and manipulation. Architects and critics have even proposed that in order to practice, it might be best to *avoid* holding any theoretical position, simply participating in the chatter of potential clients and societies, "going with the flow" in order to get things done. In recent years, this has supported a growing obsession with algorithms and parametric design, a strategy of form generation that deliberately bypasses language while legitimizing itself with the prospect of infinite formal novelty and its presumed ethical neutrality.

While this condition has been exacerbated during the last two decades, disregarding natural language in the process of architectural design is not a recent phenomenon. In the wake of nineteenth century positivism and its increasing acceptance of specialization in all areas of knowledge as the only way "forward," professional disciplines such as architecture became driven by instrumental efficiency. Taking their cues from the theories of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1819), who argued for rational self-referentiality, architects focused on pragmatic, functionalist concerns, believing that by efficiently solving space-planning and structural problems, forms would sufficiently communicate their functions. Nothing else was needed. The previous century's intentional formal expression, an analogy to expression through language, was deemed unnecessary, and even an aberration. In fact, Durand explicitly asked future architects taking his courses to bypass what he believed were irrelevant issues of linguistic expression in their designs, instead solving functional problems whose resolution would repeatedly produce pleasure, seeking biological homeostasis rather than *attunement*, which is by necessity a *concordia discors*. He thought that extruding the building from its plan would bring about meaning automatically, performing the mere expression of a sign. This mathematization of design processes is still with us in our contemporary infatuation with the computer. City planners prevailed over architects and urban designers, adopting the values of the engineers in the service of political power and economic expediency: reason, utility and efficiency became the determinants of the physical environment, assumed to communicate clear semantic messages only when deemed necessary, unencumbered by emotional intentionality.

Nineteenth and twentieth century architects, trying to protect the discipline from the consequences of this position, which would effectively make architecture a subset of engineering, emphatically associated architecture with the Fine Arts. They stressed the importance of formal issues in building composition, seeking a visual, stylistic coherence; their motivations were political, religious or aesthetic ideologies, or the egocentric concerns of an architect's self-expression. Although the result might be in line with fashions, the architectural mainstream generally assumed theory and design discourse concerned nothing other than applied science or formal methodologies. This ignored a rich set of traditional discursive options rooted in mythical and poetic language that had generated culturally significant work in the early stages of architecture's history in Europe. Architects in later modernity, when confronted by their inability to engage new materials and express modern values through traditional forms and processes, had no option but to experiment, engaging creative processes to find novel, emotionally charged forms. Historically, architecture has performed like other artistic disciplines engaged in poetic making, which does not impose, but discloses, revealing something that is *already there* and is thus familiar and habitual to a culture while being also new. Architecture as a poetic discipline has suffered during the last two centuries, showing the limitations imposed by solipsism, producing near nonsense. These are the symptoms of architecture made for architects, *particularly when detached from language* and not framed through appropriate critical and ethical questions, acknowledging the primacy of meanings that emerge from the bottom-up, from habitual cultural situations and topographical conditions. This has prolonged the crisis of the discipline. Yet the profound human necessity of inhabiting a resonant world we may call home, even when separated from an innate sense of place by global technological civilization, and humanity's fundamental existential questions, to which architecture traditionally answered, remain as pressing as always.

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Architects contributed to build human environments as successful communicative settings until the beginning of the modern period. The reasons for this are too complex to discuss here, but they concern European cultures' shared understanding of a cosmic order, which served as a primary metaphor for architectural design. When this mimetic possibility was questioned as a result of modern philosophy and science in the late-seventeenth century, architectural writers became aware of the linguistic dimension of architecture, and proposed several theories of expression in analogy to language.

The architectural theories of character and expression that developed during the European eighteenth century were very diverse. They attempted to understand architecture's potential significance both discursively and emotionally, and in this summary I shall not attempt to do justice to their intricate subtleties. One of their central concerns was to adequately *express* the destined uses of a building so that it could provide a harmonious setting to actions, representing the status of the building as if it were a social entity, the "mask" or public persona of its client. Jacques-François Blondel, the Professor of Architecture at the *Académie Royale d'Architecture* during the 1750s, believed that excellent buildings possessed "a mute poetry, a sweet, interesting, firm or vigorous style, in a word, a certain *melody* that could be tender, moving, strong, or terrible" (Blondel, 1771, I, p. 376). Just as a piece of music communicated its character through tonal harmonies, evoking diverse states of nature and conveying sweet and vivid passions, proportion, now generally understood as geometric magnitude and no longer as Pythagorean arithmetic ratios, acted as a vehicle for architectural expression. Thus buildings could be made terrifying or seductive, yet capable of expressing their character, whether the structure was "the Temple of Vengeance or that of Love." The inevitable mathematical and geometric qualities of architecture became subject to linguistic expression, whether discursive and poetic or emotional. This early modern development constitutes the origin of our own possibilities of understanding how fiction and natural language may be crucial in design.

Taking some cues from earlier character theory, two late-eighteenth-century French architects, Nicolas Le Camus de Mezières (1780) and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1804), sought alternatives to an objectifying aesthetics and tried to acknowledge the full spatio-temporal reality of lived experience in order to grasp the nature of architectural meaning. They emphasized the emotional "space-in-between" the inhabitant and the building, the space of action, one never before theorized, articulated through *open* narratives kindred to much-later literary and surrealist techniques, and to cinematographic montage. The very nature of theoretical writing about architecture was also questioned. They rejected the nascent assumption of theory as *techne* or applied science and declared the need for a new architectural discourse capable of transcending the limitations of what they mistakenly, yet justifiably, in view of Claude Perrault's late-seventeenth century interpretation, perceived as Vitruvian theory's prosaic scientific prescriptions and their reincarnation in Renaissance and Neoclassical treatises.[1] Thus, they thought the intentions of a new poetic architecture could be better-articulated if the architect engaged narrative forms. Narrative and emplotment gave Ledoux and other architects the tools to imagine an architecture that no longer simply reflected the conventional order of society, like the "masks" of the earlier eighteenth century architecture. Architecture, now fully in the realms of human politics and fiction, was devoid of intrinsic transcendence, and because of this, architects held new responsibilities. Ledoux understood that it was now necessary for architecture to project a better future for society, and that this project issued from the critical imagination of the architect/writer, not from rational analysis or mere societal consensus. His ideal city of Chaux, described in exquisite literary form in his lavish *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'Art, des Moeurs et de la Législation* (1804), proposes life as lived in new institutions, formally innovative yet always seeking a reconciliation with the natural world, a "space of appearance" for the "new man" of the French Revolution. The new political subject could not dwell in the old classical architecture. Drawing from Rousseau's understanding of historicity, Ledoux was keenly aware that the new humanity was irremediably other than humanity's existence within the *Ancien Régime*. Thus he designed places for freedom and responsibility, and his literary description discloses the ethical and moral consequences of living in this new world.

Personal expression, a retrieval of the universal *within* the creative soul of the architect, became a condition for this poetic possibility, producing a construct of the architect's imagination. This realization corresponds to the nascent paradigm of Romanticism. Nicolas le Camus de Mezières imagined the inveterate space of desire transferred to the experience of the private home, shifting the emphasis from architecture's exterior to its interior in search of "limits" that could no longer be found in the infinite, homogeneous space of natural science, a space which, in European cultures, was increasingly identified with actual lived space. Employing descriptive narrative in his treatise *Le Génie de l'Architecture* (1780), he illustrated the manner in which architects must seek to design rooms, conceptualized as "qualitative" spaces characterized by moods appropriate to specific actions, paradigmatic of harmonic environments, joined and modulated as if in a theatrical experience, producing a house which seduces the inhabitant and becomes a poetic image of dwelling. Every space has its appropriate colours, light, ornaments, textures, and iconography, and prepares the inhabitant for the adjoining room, ultimately leading to a sense of recognition and wholeness in the *boudoir,* literally a space apart, the uncommon sacred place which is the space for love. This is the first instance in the history of architectural discourse in which the *quality* of space becomes the subject matter, and atmospheres and moods are conveyed not through mathematical proportional relationships - like harmony in music - but through poetic words. This is the inception of the modern concept of *Stimmung* or atmosphere, a term that would be used by Romantic philosophy and later passed on to phenomenology and architecture; its continued relevance can be seen in the works and theories of the contemporary Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. At the time when place, as an intersubjective cosmic *topos*, was being obliterated from the public's memory, Le Camus sought to retrieve it *in discourse*, in the hope of actualizing it in built architecture.

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> Now the shadow of the column – the column which supports the southwest corner of the roof – divides the corresponding corner of the veranda into two equal parts. This veranda is a wide, covered gallery surrounding the house on three sides. Since its width is the same for the central portion as for the sides, the line of shadow cast by the column extends precisely to the corner of the house [...]Opening lines of *Jealousy.*

I would now like to examine one particular literary example from the twentieth century, the work of French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, for its remarkable ability to express mood in architectural and urban environments and for its particular relationship to the theoretical project tradition in modern and contemporary architecture, which is concerned with retrieving the enigmatic and *fundamentally erotic* dimensionality of human lived experience.[2] Without being prescriptive, I will try to demonstrate the fertility of his literary strategies for the architectural imagination.

Robbe-Grillet's remarkable contributions to the world of literature have been amply discussed. While part of the twentieth century group of French writers associated with the *nouveau roman*, his work is very different from that of Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Saraute, Claude Simon, Michel Butor and others. For the purposes of this essay I will merely identify a few aspects of his literary approach crucial to understanding the relevance of his writing for architects, drawn from his own theoretical essays, and from an interview granted to the author in 1992 and subsequently published.[3] For reasons that will become evident later, I will evoke his 1957 novel *Jealousy*, a work where a "paradoxical" architecture plays a crucial role.[4]

One aspect that distinguishes Robbe-Grillet's fictional narrative from the traditional nineteenth century novel is the predominance of "space" over "time." A traditional plot or storyline is often difficult to discern, as if the novel was structured "vertically" rather than "horizontally," somewhat analogously to the music of contemporary composers like Philip Glass or Stephen Reich. This characteristic has been pointed out by many critics, and he himself admits to this tendency.[5] Robbe-Grillet's work seems to consist of a careful, absolutely precise, even metric, description of settings. In this way, his work is similar to Kafka's, about whom he wrote that Kafka's hallucinatory effects had nothing to do with vague descriptions or misty atmospheres, but rather emerged from an extreme accuracy of detail. This obsessive precision is reminiscent of architectural representations: orthogonal drawings deployed in the Cartesian space of descriptive geometry in the form of plans, sections and elevations that enable the production of buildings. For architects, this sort of precision is a condition of technological production that only appears in European practices after the nineteenth century and was theorized by Durand; however, for Robbe-Grillet it is a condition of expression, communicating moods and emotions, construing a world that propitiates mystery and reverie. As Robbe-Grillet insisted for over forty years, his fiction cannot be characterized as a naive "objectivity" in polar opposition to "subjectivity." In this way, his work poses a fascinating challenge for architectural expression, one that is resonant with the concerns of theoretical architectural projects since the eighteenth century: more about this later.

Robbe-Grillet explains: "Every instant in my novels describes a setting which appears to be objective, but if we attempt to draw it, we realize that it is impossible."[6] Referring to his novel *Jealousy*, Robbe-Grillet elaborates on his regret that a "plan" of the house in which the action takes place was added to the English edition. The diagram was not his idea and contradicts the text on several points. There is, for instance, a room that appears in the text at certain moments and not at others, obviously not acknowledged in the objectified drawn plan, with "uncertain contents […] possibly the site of a crime."[7] The person who made the sketch obviously had no notion of this and acted as if the description was linear: "in effect, Balzac-like." In *Jealousy*, unlike the rooms described by Balzac in *Père Goriot*, the furnishings are not fixed: "At every instant there is a spatial shift, a mobility of space, or the apparition or disappearance of certain elements. The entire room may or may not exist, and this is enormously important for the narrative."[8]

While a writer like Balzac would follow a linear narrative in his plots, taking for granted a linear time implicit both in Christian mythology and modern science, in Robbe-Grillet's work such linearity is denied. Time appears as a thick present with dimensions, never fixed, often reversible. This does not mean that "nothing" happens. On the contrary, there is a line of action; there are human, passionate lives lived in the novels, but such action is made present through its inextricable link to space, *through* the enactive perceptions of the narrator.[9] Conversely, while in traditional novels, the author usually draws on the psychological interiority of characters, in Robbe-Grillet's fictions there is nothing purely interior: as Rainer Maria Rilke famously wrote: "The inner – what is it? if not intensified sky [...]." This approach is congruent with recent cognitive theories of consciousness, as being not merely "in" the brain, but as fully embodied and also "out in the world."[10]

To define objectivity's appearance, which is not frozen but appears in embodied, kinaesthetic consciousness, Robbe-Grillet uses the term "objectivism," "a subjectivity supported by objects – an objectivist subjectivity."[11]. It is important for me to stress this aim's affinity with recent cognitive theory's description of the way in which human consciousness operates. Human consciousness is not merely its intellectual, representational manifestation, so familiar to us; eighty per-cent of it is pre-reflective, like the portion of an iceberg hidden below the surface. This pre-reflective consciousness is not "unconscious" or "subconscious." It is truly non-representational consciousness, invisible under the sea, yet active in the "thick" present of experience, supporting the top layers which we identify with our thinking egos. For such an understanding of consciousness, a continuity exists between dream and woken states.[12] This oneiric quality is a characteristic that we can discern in much truly moving architecture, and is very evident in Robbe-Grillet's fiction.[13] An inhabitant's primary experience of architecture includes both modalities: a pre-reflective, passionate, embodied and multisensory engagement in the world for which time is not necessarily linear (or cyclical), upon which linguistic, scientific or mythical articulations are founded. The ancient Buddhist philosopher Nargajuna, writing in the second century CE, put it succinctly: there is a *co-dependent arising* of object, subject and action as we experience the world, none of which can be postulated to exist independently and apart from each other.[14]

In Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, the architectural setting supports moods and atmospheres through its very "objectivity," while relentlessly appearing "sited" in the overpowering tropical presence of a lush banana plantation. The house reveals the meaning of the place and its architecture enhances all pre-existing qualities. In the narrative, architecture is the paradigmatic "space of desire" that enables all human passions, the "space of appearance" where we *are* only *with* and through the Others. It gives place to habits whose variations are either allowed or frustrated by the physical environment, producing possible attunements and revealing meanings. The geometric objectivity of the architecture is important, but its significance constantly shifts with events, and is never self-referential. Its objectivity is the objectivity *given* in human perception itself, one that doesn't exist independently from the world of experience. The objective or ideal chair, for example, is *given* with every particular and distinct individual chair but can never be attained in itself as an autonomous "object."

In Robbe-Grillet's architecture, moods and atmospheres are not internal to consciousness: they are *in* the world. Without naming internal feelings, the reader experiences jealousy through the eyes of a husband who describes the setting in which his wife interacts with a neighbour. Robbe-Grillet restricts himself to portraying, in minute detail, the architecture that gives place to quotidian actions: the building, whose form casts varying shadows under the sunlight; the chairs, placed by his wife on the veranda so that she sits close to Frank, visiting from the neighbouring plantation to share a drink, while the narrator's chair faces the plantation beyond the veranda so that he must turn his head deliberately if he wishes to address the pair. Actions are also described with precision, such as the manner in which A..., the heroine, serves a drink to the guest with significant care; the placement of their hands on the arm rests, never static; the place settings at the dinner table; and the violent, sexual squashing of a venomous centipede by Frank, making an indelible mark on the wall, while A… clenches her fist around the cutlery and her gestures are mimetic of horrific pleasure:

> The details of this stain have to be seen from quite close range, turning toward the pantry door, if its origin is to be distinguished. The image of the whole centipede then appears not as a whole, but composed of fragments distinct enough to leave no doubt. Several pieces of the body or its appendages are outlined without any blurring, and remain reproduced with the fidelity of an anatomical drawing: one of the antennae, two curved mandibles, the head and the first joint, half of the second, three large legs. Then come the other parts, less precise: sections of legs and the partial form of a body convulsed into a question mark.[15]

While Robbe-Grillet's precise writing can be further excerpted to convey its stylistic uniqueness and precise poetic character, I would like to argue that it is futile to quote from the novel itself to demonstrate the observations made above: the novel cannot be reduced to images, exactly as one often feels about good architecture, where meanings are present to experience but pictures fail to do it justice. The setting of the novel is always in the present: lives are lived and actions take place, passions are intensely felt, but no one section can convey an experience of space that can only be communicated in the full temporality of the narrative.

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Robbe-Grillet's literary architecture has a particular affinity with the tradition of theoretical projects in modern and contemporary architecture, which I have called a "practice of resistance" to the banality of technologically and commodity-driven design. Coinciding with character theory's emergence during the eighteenth century, architects who perceived the difficulty of building eloquently and poetically in a world where lived space was identified as a prosaic geometrical entity (as Cartesian space or as 3-D) proposed alternative modes of practice. First among them was Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), who realized the limitations imposed upon the discipline by the *identification* of lived *tópoi* with geometric space. Piranesi's *Carceri* etchings provide a remarkable demonstration of this awareness. His etchings follow a dynamic transformation from a "first stage," in which internal spaces are constructed according to the rules of perspective in Cartesian space, specifically through the two-point perspective method of Galli Bibiena's *perspectiva per angolo,* into an exploded "second stage," thereby questioning the emerging cultural assumption by which lived space was identified with the space generated by perspective constructions (Galli-Bibiena, 1711). This second stage produced emotionally charged spaces, congruous with their program as "prisons," creating an architecture whose precision and geometric integrity are apparent in Piranesi's images, yet which would, in fact, be impossible to "build" as though the depiction were coherent with orthogonal plans and elevations. Similar to the house setting of Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, this "paradoxical" architecture is irreducible to orthogonal drawings, yet nevertheless represents a totally self-conscious and deliberate attempt to retrieve the depth of *real vision* as it appears in synesthetic, multi-sensory embodied experience, in which time and space cannot be dissociated.

Piranesi's insight was continued by artistic movements in the twentieth century such as surrealism and cubism, and by a host of architects who remained aware of the issues that modern practice had to confront when seeking to unveil meaningful place. Architects such as Jean-Laurent Lequeu (1757–1826), John Hejduk (1929–2000) and Daniel Libeskind (1945–) have sought to retrieve the experience of a primordial depth in their theoretical projects, understood as the "first dimension" in alignment with Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the term, a dimension irreducible to the "other" two. Such depth is fundamentally *erotic*, and impossible to render once representation is ruled by Cartesian geometry, as it is in linear perspective. These works proclaim the impossibility of depth, which does not also acknowledge time, its appearance in the world inseparable from our motility, never truthful when condemned to a stationary point.

While this mode of practice has been critical of the technological world, it does not deny building. Rather, it reveals that perception is modified by conceptual structures in our technological world-culture, which make it difficult to grasp the meanings of *presence* in their entirety. Concepts of space and time derived from science modify perception, and *places*, primarily qualitative and crucial for being, remain concealed. This poses great difficulties when building physical environments, making it an inherently challenging task to create atmospheres that, while stable, as in Robbe-Grillet's "objectivist settings," may be expressive and appropriate to the human actions they frame, providing a sense of attunement and well-being, contributing to our psychosomatic health. Nevertheless, exemplary modern and contemporary architecture has been built, granting inhabitants with rewarding experiences, often resonant with our recollections of oneiric consciousness, providing a sense of wholeness, revealing limits and the place of human dwelling, both mortal and infinite, a coincidence of opposites.

As I have suggested, key to understanding the possibilities of such eloquent architecture is the concept of time. Time is not simply a sequence of punctual "presents" in which the actual "present" doesn't exist, since the moment we grasp it, it is already "past." We can now comprehend, through phenomenology and recent neuroscience, that the "real" nature of experiential time is a "thick" present, endowed with a permanent dimensionality: an immediate and a mediate past and future, a history and a project, enabled by a physiology of neural loops. This is a complex issue that cannot be developed here, but it is crucially significant.[16] It confirms the traditional understanding, present in many cultures, of time and space's inextricability from experience, which is present in both excellent architecture and Robbe-Grillet's *oeuvre*.

It is important to observe that space, in the rationalist, functional and formalist architecture of the last two centuries, was dissociated from time, following the models of physics. Thus "architectural space" was objectified, identified with the "synthetic" space of axonometry (a Cartesian space). This remains the "space" manipulated in the majority of current practice, the space that appears in computer screens and is deployed through common architectural software such as CAD, BIM and Rhino. Time, even when engaged in architectural practices, has been typically conceived as a linear "promenade," a concept that saw its inception during the eighteenth century, became commonplace in the nineteenth and twentieth, and is engaged today through video representations and "fly-overs" of objectified computer models.

This misunderstanding of space and time's autonomy was congruent with architecture's conceptualization as one of the Fine Arts, assumed through eighteenth century philosophical aesthetics. Indeed, architecture's association with the Fine Arts became generally accepted only during the eighteenth century. This reveals a supposition about the work's reception, which differs from assumptions that had operated since Vitruvius and throughout the Renaissance. While not totally immanent, architecture's expression or significance was increasingly internalized and transformed into a problem of "composition," brought to fruition through an objectified building. The temporal dimension, which was both emotional and intellectual, understood by the "user" through its spatio-temporal *situation*, comprised of the rituals and poetic programs housed by the architecture, had always been central to architectural meaning; now it receded in favour of architecture's conception as "aesthetic object." Its potential significance could now be "read" out of time. The ultimate accomplishment of this new paradigm would be achieved only after 1800, resulting in an architecture reduced to a sequence of novel or exciting forms for voyeuristic visits in which linear time became an added factor, rather than intrinsic to the situation. It produced what would become known as the *promenade architecturale*, a place for tourism often better understood through "pictures" rather than through genuine participatory experience. Imagining such a visit through projects became part of the "aesthetic judgement" by the juries for the coveted "Prix de Rome" of the École des Beaux Arts. Buildings could then be conceived as literal frameworks for "discursive" writing, like Labrouste's *Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève,* or even in some instances generated as forms motivated by fictions, yet incapable of transcending their status as aesthetic objects.

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Contemporary Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas has demonstrated how *place* is a condition of consciousness in perception and how it is given *with* language.[17] The reference here is to Heidegger's *emerging* language, not language as an arbitrary code of more or less transparent signs, which could be improved and replaced by some universal Esperanto, as commonly assumed by constructionist linguists. Heidegger understands language as our fundamental human expressivity, inherently poetic, indicative, polysemic and open, in continuity with the body's own expressivity and gestures; language is our connection to others in view of our primordial social being, and is therefore connected to cultural habits. Properly understood in this way, language is not arbitrary: it has the capacity of speaking about the world through us.

Thus we can draw some final conclusions about the fruitful relationship between poetic language and architecture. Regardless of whether modern and contemporary fiction can truly play the role myth did in pre-modern cultures, as Louis Aragon thought was possible in his "antinovel" *Paris Peasant*, we can imagine how poetic fiction might play an important role in design. Fiction can elaborate programs and disclose atmospheres, furthering an architecture that gives *place* to significant human action, resonating with the purposefulness which characterizes our biology, while acknowledging our generalized nihilism and the fact that contemporary man does not generally believe in ritual's efficacy as a form of participation through action, since ritual action's results are not necessarily the responsibility of those who act. Most of these questions were first acknowledged by Romantic philosophers such as Schlegel and Novalis, who came to the conclusion that the *novel* was the central form of artistic expression, more capable of addressing our modern existential questions than any other form of discourse. Poetic language is the privileged medium of moods and atmospheres, *Stimmungen*, and the expression of *Gemüt*: the Romantic concept of emotional consciousness that anticipated the current neuro-phenomenological understanding of embodied, emotional cognition.

To this we may add the insights of Paul Ricoeur, Richard Kearney and Elaine Scarry, among others, who have suggested that the human imagination is *primarily* linguistic.[18] Furthermore, we also know through neurobiology that mental images are not picture-like, but rather literal re-enactments of scenes, necessarily operating through language.[19] All this poses a fundamental challenge for architects, often consumed by pictures and their iterations.

Literary language is helpful to architectural design in many ways. It can be a rich source of understanding when we seek to grasp the nature of urban contexts with all their cultural complexities, essential for an ethical and poetic practice of architecture and urban design. This is something that scientific mapping and statistics can never accomplish. Literary narratives are crucial to set *in place* human actions, as in Ricoeur's narrative model of *prefiguration, configuration and refiguration*.[20] This schema might suggest a narrative understanding of architectural site as *prefiguration*, form and atmosphere as *configuration*, and lived program as *refiguration*, accounting for the nature of the project as an ethical promise, communicating through emotion and reason. By engaging hermeneutic and poetic language, we can imagine how architecture may offer better alternatives to our obsessions with fashion and form, reconciling the architect's personal imagination with an understanding of local cultures and pressing political and social concerns, the crucial dilemma we have inherited with our modern condition. The novel is, significantly, a literary form that, although invented in Romantic Europe, now exists in most world cultures. It is a crucially important source of wisdom for architects practicing across borders in our global village, wishing to truly listen to the Others for whom the project is a promise of a good life, to account for their values and world-views and thus design genuinely communicative places.

Notes

1 This position also appears in the writings of Etienne-Louis Boullée, *Essai sur l'art* (Paris: Hermann, 1968); Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux, *Lettres sur l'architecture des anciens et celles des modernes -1787* (Facs. reprint, Genève: Minkoff, 1974). For a greater elaboration of this issue, see A. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), chs. 1, 4 and 9.

2 For an elaboration of the "space of desire" as paradigmatic architectural space, where both emotional and cognitive meanings occur for embodied human perception, see Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love, Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), and my studies on the 1499 erotic novel/architectural treatise *Hypnerotomachia Polifili* in *Timely Meditations*, vol. 1 (Montreal: RightAngle International, 2016), ch. 4.

3 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, *Essays on Fiction* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), originally published in French in 1963; and Alain Robbe-Grillet and Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "Paradoxical Spaces in Literature, Film and Architecture: A Dialogue with Alain Robbe-Grillet," *CHORA Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, vol. 2, ed. A. Pérez-Gómez and S. Parcell (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), pp. 245–268.

4 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957). Translated as *Jealousy,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1959).

5 Robbe-Grillet, Alain and Pérez-Gómez, Alberto. "Paradoxical Spaces in Literature, Film and Architecture: A Dialogue with Alain Robbe-Grillet," *CHORA Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, vol. 2, ed. A. Pérez-Gómez and S. Parcell (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 245.

6 Ibid., p. 249.

7 Ibid., p. 249.

8 Ibid., p. 249.

9 Existential phenomenology, particularly in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and in more recent so-called "third-generation" cognitive theory, emphasizes that human perception and consciousness is never passive, but rather "enactive." For a further elaboration and the consequences of this awareness for architecture see my own *Attunement*, op. cit., chs. 5 and 6.

10 See, for example, Alva Noë, *Out of our Heads, Why you Are not your Brain, and Other Lessons in the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

11 Robbe-Grillet, Alain and Pérez-Gómez, Alberto, 1994, p. 249.

12 This is a concept familiar to Buddhist philosophy and explained by Evan Thompson in *Waking, Dreaming, Being, Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

13 Good architecture offers societies a place for existential orientation, in this experience it is close to our perception of space in dreams. This is its primary, perhaps its only essential function. It allows us to feel — with our inner touch— complete and meaningful as we participate in action, yet leaves open a space for wonderment and meditation. When successful, architecture allows for *participation* in meaningful actions, conveying to the participant an under-standing of his or her place in the world. In other words, it opens up a clearing for the individual's experience of purpose through participation in cultural institutions. It is, however, not possible to paraphrase the order it conveys. It is radical orientation in *experience*, beyond words, and experiencing what appears as "given" is analogous to the experience of beauty, in nature or in works of art. So, while its theory may be rooted in mythic or poetic stories, philosophy, theology or science, architecture is neither of these, but an *event*. As such, it is ephemeral, yet it has the capacity of changing one's life in the vivid present—exactly like an erotic encounter. Thus, it can be said to embody knowledge, but rather than clear logic, it is knowledge understood in the Biblical sense: it is a carnal, even sexual experience of truth. For this reason it's "meaning" can never be objectified, reduced to functions, ideological programs, formal or stylistic formulas. Likewise, its technical media are open rather than specific (like say, building typologies), including all artefacts that enable human dwelling "at the limits of language:" a most important alternative once modernity co-opts most building to serve the aims of technology, fashion or consumerism.

14 Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Roach. *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 221.

15 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 62.

16 This concept, originally developed in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, has been taken up by neurophenomenology in the last two decades. See, for example, Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), chs. 1 and 2. For its architectural applications see A. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement, Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), ch. 5, p. 139 f.

17 See Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

18 This is a recurring concept in Paul Ricoeur's vast philosophical production and developed by his student Richard Kearney in *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). From a different perspective, the primacy of the linguistic imagination is also discussed by Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

19 Thompson explains that in fact we visualize an object or a scene by mentally enacting or entertaining a possible perceptual (kinaesthetic) experience of that scene. See Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life, Biology, Phenomenology and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 278–279.

20 See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

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