



The opposite of architecture

Description

If the universe requires antimatter as well as matter then surely anything is entitled to an opposite. With architecture it's easy to identify candidates for the role. Anarchitecture could be a kind of anarchic practice against orderliness. If architecture is building something then its opposite probably involves pulling it down.

If people think architecture produces iconic, spectacular, canonic, well-formed and acceptable structures for human habitation, then its opposite could be humble, impoverished, marginal, unsanctioned, badly built, possibly unliveable and unacceptable structures – perhaps like shanty towns, camps in front of banks, the unclassified, or things that we might think are buildings but on that have no ambition to present as buildings at all: quarks, sections of objects that look like flies a long way off (Borges).



To play around with opposites is to play with language. That

people who are good with words have little trouble thinking of an opposite to just about anything indicates how wired up we and/or our world are for binaries.

Writers have conjured with the opposite of: falling, sex, cabbage, things, love, politics, trees, fish, and architecture (Google them). There's also a party game where people shout out words in succession. Each new word has to be an opposite to the one they've just heard. (It's easiest with verbs and adjectives.)

But some think that this is how language operates anyway (as binaries), and if architecture is a language, then it's rife with, and even sustained by, oppositions. At least, this is the **Structuralist** view of language, which aligns closely with the idea that architecture is a language.

Ferdinand de Saussure (the parent of Structuralism) identified the importance of *difference* as the driver to understanding words (ie working out what a word or sentence means). What could be more usefully different and important than the way two similar words sound *almost* the same (eg pin and pen). He went so far as to say

The sound of a word is not in itself important, but the phonetic contrasts which allow us to distinguish that word from any other. That is what carries the meaning (p.16).

This is about subtle differences, but also *oppositions*, ie *difference-max*.

The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss translated de Saussure's observation into a recognition of the binary structure of all cultural phenomena, including myths. Think of hot/cold, male/female, in/out, raw/cooked, or the more esoteric: born of human lineage or born from the earth (the myth of autochthony).

From the ridiculously obvious to the sublime, architecture illustrates such dual structuring perfectly: inside and out, solid and void, traditional and modern, form and ornament, material and immaterial, sacred and profane, oriented to heaven and fixed to the ground, facing the light and retreating to/from the dark. The game even extends to pitting one opposition against another (light/dark versus inner/outer shadows). In architecture opposites get transformed; they also struggle for supremacy.

Why do people think it sufficiently important to label the front and the back of a rectangular building with different words (â??frontâ?• and â??backâ?•) whereas the other two *sides* don't have a single word for each? The question concerns not only the way people talk about buildings, but also the practice of designing.

It requires concerted action on the part of a designer to pay attention to things that are not readily discriminated in language (via a particularly well-established opposition), and to thereby resist the obvious.

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Also see [Transilience](#), and other posts about [non-place](#) and [language](#). I've also added a piece about [Aldo van Eyck and Structuralism](#) (16 March 2012).

Category

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Tags

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