



Conservative hermeneutics

Description

What can architecture and design learn from theology? Rowan Williams's announcement last week that he will step down as Archbishop of Canterbury has revived discussion among activists within the Anglican Church and elsewhere as to whether Williams is in fact a liberal or a conservative. He's certainly not an "ultra" or what he describes as "that savage and menacing beast called a fundamentalist." Much can be revealed by considering Williams's attitude to texts. What is his attitude to interpreting written documents, eg the bible? For anyone interested, there are clues in his scholarly lecture called "The Bible: Reading and Hearing" available [online](#).

The art of interpretation, *hermeneutics*, originated in biblical scholarship, of which Williams is an expert. As we can ask of any scholar "what is your attitude to interpreting texts?" I'll leave Rowan Williams and theology to one side for the moment.

Educational hermeneutics



In the secular context, the battle lines between (i) a liberal

and (ii) a conservative view of interpretation were drawn in the 1970s during a series of discussions in the academic literature involving Eric Hirsch, Emilio Betti, Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Their positions are ably drawn together by the educational philosopher Shaun Gallagher in his book *Hermeneutics in Education* published in 1991.

Eric Hirsch represented the conservative position on hermeneutics very clearly. He called his best-selling book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987). According to Hirsch, to instill a sense of social and cultural cohesion and to improve the lot of the disadvantaged, any nation should encourage a common cultural language. One way to do this is to programme into the school curriculum a *canon* of preferred books (and other literature) that everyone should read.

Shared cultural literacy is the first step to social mobility. According to Hirsch this even helps radicals and dissenters, and enhances their impact as communicators, as everyone is party to similar vocabularies, references and allusions. After all, the most skilled reformers are those capable of turning the cultural references of the *Ä*lite against the *Ä*lite.

Hirsch's strategy involves conserving and building on a culture, by recourse to common cultural sources, eg in its books. Hirsch continues to advocate the same strategy with his recent book *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools* published in 2009. Hirsch also started the [Core Knowledge Foundation](#), the current website of which affirms, "we believe that shared knowledge, a shared narrative, and shared ideals of liberty and tolerance are indispensable ingredients for effective citizenship and for the perpetuation of our democratic institutions."• This educational strategy clearly appeals to right-leaning conservative groups in the US.

If readers and writers share a common cultural background, ie they are familiar with the same literary canon, then it will be easier for a reader to grasp the writer's meaning. For example, the average

reader in the 21st century has difficulty understanding, or even recognising, the references to Greek antiquity of earlier scholarly writing. We can no longer take for granted that everyone has read Homer and Aristotle. This makes reading J.S. Mill, Edmund Husserl, C.S. Lewis (to name a few) just that bit harder.

So a shared canon is important in grasping what any writer means. The writer's meaning is crucial for Hirsch. He advances the "common sense" view that a text means what its author intends it to mean. The significance of this meaning may vary in time, change with context, and access to the author may recede, but the text still harbours an original meaning planted there by the author.

Conservation of meaning

Preservation of the canon goes with the conservation of meaning. The conservative thinks that a text conserves and transmits meanings. For conservatives, interpretation involves discovering and uncovering fixed truths, even if interpreters dispute what those truths are.

Let's move away from literature. A conservative hermeneutics of *art* not only tries to preserve the artistic canon, but typically involves mining the artwork and the record for the intentions of the artists or author in creating the work in the first place. The final arbiter in the matter of the work of art's interpretation is what the artist meant by the work, which in the case of a historical work involves comparing and sifting evidence to uncover these authorial intentions, and of course debating the evidence for them.

Such a view gains support from the idea of impartiality, that it is necessary to approach any philosophical problem (or interpretative situation) with a clear mind, ie without the prejudice born of the interpreter's current context and social condition.

This conservative approach also suggests that the viewer (or reader) can have immediate contact with the artwork (text, building, design), or access to an *essence* of the artwork that is independent of the viewing situation.

Conservatism in architecture

Conservatism has many meanings in everyday usage. In politics, conservatism promotes the importance and preservation of traditional institutions, including a return to how things were, traditional values, or simply offers resistance to change. People often characterise its extreme form as fundamentalism.

A conservative view of architecture might similarly over-value the archive, the architectural canon, the prime examples of what makes good architecture, but also conserve, revive and promote what it sees as core architectural values, authority structures, and rules.

There are several demonstrations of the conservative impulse in architecture. The *rationalist*, as conservative, might equate to the classicist, asserting that architecture conforms to natural laws, and is subject to the authority of geometrical and enduring principles of reason. Traditionally this meant preserving the classical rules of proportion. In more modern guise the rationalist may advance the view that functional requirements determine the architecture (form follows function), or an adherence to

objectivity, scientific detachment and rational method.

Historically, the *romantics* thought of themselves as free spirits, as if to counter the dominance of a stodgy adherence to classicism. For example Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as romantic, wanted to be “free and virtuous, superior to fortune and opinion, and independent of all exterior circumstances” (Rousseau, 2008, p. book VIII). But such free spirits can purvey conservative traits. The romantic, as conservative, under the guise of free-spirited adventurism, clings to the authority of charismatic and eccentric leaders, particular architectural canons, or notions of an originary source to architectural creation, and the concept of genius and celebrity, commonly invested in key design leaders, constituting a kind of conservative subjectivity.

Ayn Rand’s approving presentation of the fictional architect Howard Roark in the novel *The Fountainhead* has come to epitomise such a conceit, that of the maverick free-thinker struggling against mediocrity. (See earlier [post](#).)

Of course, conservatism runs through every aspect of social life. Most people will want to preserve things they hold as important, but as any voter knows there are those who more readily deploy the cause of conservation as a rallying cry.

Against conservative hermeneutics

There are many arguments against a conservative hermeneutics.

- The meaning of a text changes, even for the author.
- The interpreter can never wrest themselves from their own current prejudices, and that of their communities. Claiming impartial interpretive faculty is unrealistic, if not dishonest. A work’s meaning is what you make of it here and now.
- Rushing back to the author for authoritative adjudication on the meaning of their own work suggests a closing off of interpretation. The question of meaning gets “resolved” by what the author says.
- Authors of texts are presumably highly adept at a verbal discourse around the issue of meaning. Creators in other fields may not be so competent (artists, designer, architects or musicians), nor does the practice of their art need it. To question what a particular work of art means extends beyond what the particular artist has to say on the matter.
- Agency in the authoring of a work is complex in any case. Authors, artists and architects work within communities, and build on the work of others. A conservative hermeneutics is after all highly individualistic, celebratory of the achievements of singular authors and not hermeneutical communities.
- The “literary canon” is surely subject to change over time, especially with the current upheaval in communication technologies, literary forms and subject matter.
- If this brand of conservatism supports the primacy of “core knowledge,” then there’s a tendency towards conformity, suppressing diversity. A unifying curriculum of core cultural sources serves the interests of those with the power.

Hirsch has a response to these objections, for which his critics have ample counter arguments. The more liberal position of Gadamerian hermeneutics affirms the repetitive and re-presentational nature of interpretation that I’ve alluded to [elsewhere](#).

Anarchybishop

Let's return to Rowan Williams, who *almost* affirms the open-ended nature of textual interpretation in reading the bible as text!

So to identify a written text as meaningful is to claim that the continuous possibility of re-reading, the impossibility of reading for the last time, is a continuous openness.

That's my attempt to say what I think he means. In fact he says something more theological: "So to identify a written text as *sacred* is to claim that the continuous possibility of re-reading, the impossibility of reading for the last time, is a continuous openness *to the intention of God to communicate*" (my italics).

His wording is clever (and not careless), as the last italicised phrase is not claiming openness to what God means, ie the divine author's intentions. This would imply the kind of conservative *fundamentalism* that Williams rejects. The openness is to the idea that God *intends* to communicate, a phrase clearly open to multiple interpretations and re-interpretations.

This post is a reworking of arguments advanced in

- Coyne, Richard. 2011. *Derrida for Architects*. London: Routledge, pp.74-98.
- Snodgrass, Adrian, and Richard Coyne. 2006. *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking*. London: Routledge. See chapter 4, "The disintegrated curriculum" pp.89-108. This chapter is in turn based on an earlier article: Coyne, Richard. 1996. Deconstructing the curriculum: Radical hermeneutics and professional education. *Edinburgh Architectural Research (EAR)*, (23) available as a [PDF](#).

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See a theological [critique](#) of Williams's essay.

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