



Interpretation by design

Description

As for all the arts, it's easy enough to indicate how important interpretation is in architecture. Designers interpret the clients' and users' requirements, the brief, the regulations, and the site. They also interpret buildings and texts about architecture, not to mention drawings, instructions, illustrations, and photographs.



part of building, designers interpret texts, discourses, artefacts, beyond stuff about buildings. There's all of literature, interpret.

This great interpretive exercise is brought to bear on the

actual design of a building, landscape, urban intervention, project, system, or programme. So interpretation is obviously an important and wide reaching process, brought to the service of design, which is a different activity or so many people think.

In one of the few texts on the subject of architecture and interpretation, theorist Juan Pablo Bonta drew a distinction between design and interpretation: “when a designer discusses his work, he is behaving as an interpreter, not as a designer.” Bonta proposes that designers can certainly interpret what they have created, but they may not be as competent at interpreting as they are at designing. Apparently, design and interpretation each require different competencies.

For architectural theorist Breatriz Colomina, interpretation is crucial to architecture’s place as a profession, but is none-the-less ancillary to design. Interpretation is the means by which architecture is distinguished from mere building. Architecture “is an interpretive, critical act,” she affirms. Architecture has a linguistic aspect different from the practice of building: “A building is interpreted when its rhetorical mechanism and principles are revealed” (p.7). But for Colomina designing is different than interpreting.

Interpretation and authority

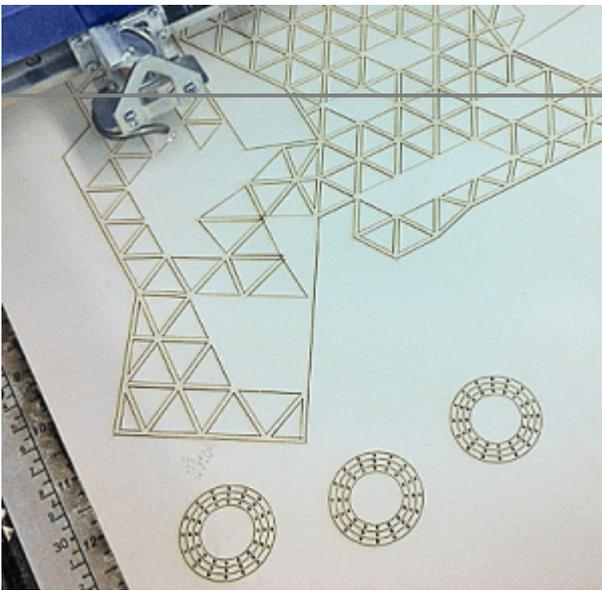
For such theorists, to interpret a building is to talk about it, articulate, critique, comment, and contextualise, and to move architecture into the realm of discursive practice, using verbal language, words, and commentary. This interpretive dimension affirms the place of architecture in professional, academic and cultural discourse. They think that interpretation gives architecture authority as a discipline above merely making things.

But colleagues and I think that interpretation has a role even more crucial than that of asserting architecture’s authority. Interpretation and design coalesce. Whereas we agree that architecture is a discursive practice, and is abetted by talk and writing, we have attempted to demonstrate in several articles and books that to design is after all the same thing as interpreting. To design is to interpret. My colleague Adrian Snodgrass and I have attempted to examine the consequences that follow from such a *hermeneutics* of design.

If we take on board the dynamical, cyclical understanding of interpretation that we’ve explored elsewhere, then design appears to carry all the trappings of the interpretive process. This is the hermeneutical project of phenomenological philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, who position interpretation at the centre of human action and understanding. In fact they *conflate* processes of interpretation, application and understanding, as if they mean the same thing. In philosophical terms Gadamer ascribes to interpretation an “ontologically positive significance” (p.236). If interpretation is that broad then design is inevitably part of it.

Design and process

What difference does it make? At least one consequence for architecture follows from thinking of design as interpretation. Interpretation is after all a *process*. So a hermeneutics of architecture draws attention to the practices and processes of architecture, the means by which it comes about, its praxis and politics, architecture’s gaps, fissures, alterations, repairs, mess and glitches, rather than just the pristine architectural product.



Except when it started to address method in the nineteenth

century, architectural writing rarely considered design as a practice, focusing rather on the finished artefact, and its conformity or otherwise to ideal generative principles. Architectural theorists attended little to the processes by which the sculptor, draftsman, mason or master builder weighed up one possibility against another, or decided which precedent to adopt, or how to deal with the conflicting requirements of the site or of the team, let alone the politics of the time.

Irrespective of what the Renaissance treatises said, I think that these decision points define architecture at its most interpretive. Architecture is grasped as an interpretive practice when designers appear to be making difficult decisions, or more precisely, when they are caught up in creative-political practices. But design is inevitably interpretive however we go about it.

This argument for design as interpretation also affirms the role of design as *research*. Design is a means of thinking and generating new understandings, not only *like* interpretation, but *as* interpretation.

References

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Notes

- Interpretation is “the revenge of the intellect upon art” (p.7) according to Susan Sontag. It operates at one remove from the processes of imaginative production, and burdens creativity with layers of meaning, at the cost of an engagement with the materials and practices of artistic making. Sontag’s complaint is actually against a conservative style of interpretation, in which critics strive to excavate the “true meaning” or the “latent content” of a work. Reservations about the role of interpretation in architecture commonly assume a conservative position, that interpretation assumes the fixity of the object to be interpreted, even that there are correct and right interpretations, generally able to be arbitrated by the original intentions of the author or producer of the thing being interpreted, and that interpretation is somehow removed from the object being interpreted.
- Gadamer doesn’t talk directly about design, but addresses poetic composition and its interpretation. See pp.66-73 in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*.
- We have to search hard for reference to the interpretive function in early writing about architecture, eg the Renaissance treatises. Interpretation is there, but occluded by a concern with coherence, architecture’s persistent striving for unity.
- See other blog posts tagged [interpretation](#).

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1. Architecture

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1. building
2. design
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5. hermeneutics
6. interpretation
7. making
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