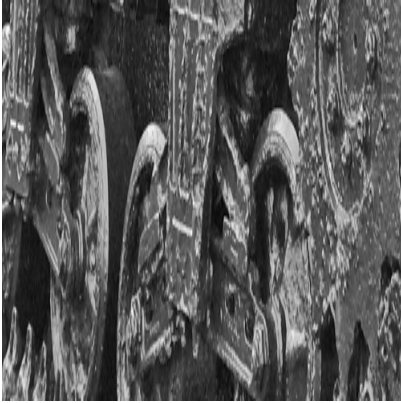




Architectural pragmatics

Description

It's important to get to the truth. Michael Gove, the current UK education secretary, thinks that we are selling short the truth about WWI: "Our understanding of the war has been overlaid by misunderstandings and misrepresentations which reflect an, at best, ambiguous attitude to this country ie to denigrate virtues such as patriotism,



This is an inadvertent admission that claims to

truthfulness actually serve some pragmatic purpose " in this case to encourage national pride.

Something similar pertains to architecture and philosophy, and all those cultural and theoretical sources that architecture draws on.

For an architect the test of any set of ideas is what difference those ideas make to the way architecture is practiced, talked about, assessed and taught.

In their professional lives architects need be concerned less with the question, 'is it true?' than, 'what practical difference does it make?'

At least this is how I think about the philosophies and theories of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida. This mode of interrogation is practical, examining how the work of the philosopher fits within a context of the practices of architecture: designing, documenting, building, reflecting, evaluating, interpreting, critiquing and defending, as well as formulating architectural histories and learning about architecture.

Philosophical pragmatism

The Pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty makes a pertinent observation in relating disciplines such as mathematics and philosophy to the practical sphere: 'Although some mathematics is obviously very useful to engineers, there's a lot of mathematics that isn't. Mathematics outruns engineering pretty quickly, and starts playing with itself' (71). He says the same applies to philosophy in relation to politics: 'philosophy, we might say, outruns politics' (71).

I would add the same for philosophy and architecture. It is easy to get carried away with philosophy, that is, to be distracted from what we want to accomplish as architects by many fine philosophical distinctions and intricate disputes. We need sometimes to wrest philosophical thought back to practice, though the practice of architecture is broader in its scope and conceits than engineering, if less theorized than politics.

How does philosophy's influence operate? It does not necessarily *cause* architects to change their practices. Think of paradigms or fields of practice into which philosophical writings might intervene, as nodes within networks of influences, or gravitational fields within constellations.

In an interview Derrida alludes to the way texts and other modes of creative production can interact, in this case in his relationship with the architect Peter Eisenman.

So I gave this text to Peter Eisenman and in his own way he started a project that was correlated with but at the same time independent of my text. That was true collaboration not 'using' the other's work, not just illustrating or selecting from it! and so there is a kind of transparency or, I would say, a productive dialogue between the concerns, the styles, the person too (72).

Occasional correlations, independence, interdependence between transparent layers, dialogues, the merging of styles, interactions between personalities, and even conflicts: these are the mechanisms by which philosophical texts and architecture exert their influences on one another.



Notes

- This post is derived from the Introduction in *Derrida for Architects*.
- Read more about the conflicts stirred up by Michael Gove's comments in the Mail Online: [Michael Gove blasts 'Blackadder myths' about the First World War spread by television sitcoms and left-wing academics](#). Also see articles in the [Guardian](#) and [BBC News](#).
- Also see post [Conservative hermeneutics](#) with reference to the writing of US conservative intellectual Eric D. Hirsch.
- Also see [The past is a construct of the mind](#) on history and facts, and posts on [Derrida](#).

References

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Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. conservative hermeneutics
2. Derrida
3. philosophy
4. Richard Rorty
5. truth

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