



Introducing hermeneutics to an architectural audience

Description

Hermeneutics is of course simply the study of interpretation – what interpretation is, and how it works. But to study *hermeneutics* requires you to come to terms with the philosophies of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. To gain entry into hermeneutical discourse the scholar needs to come to terms with a particular collection of books and essays (a canon) – Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, for example – and be prepared to learn a few words of German and Greek.

The need to adopt a particular canon and terminology is not unusual in academic scholarship, but the term *hermeneutics* does present some barriers to entry not evident in the case of related studies focussed around looser terms such as phenomenology, feminism, postmodernism, structuralism, and other *-isms*.

This constraint imposed by a canon and language presents as a possible –hermeneutical barrier– that could in fact deny access to architects and artists with a nascent appetite for its insights. There’s an irony here, as hermeneutics supposedly provides sophisticated and nuanced insights into concepts such as openness, community, application and encounters with –the other.–

Practical hermeneutics

I was struck by these observations during an excellent conference this week called [The Hermeneutics of Practice](#) run by philosophers Nicholas Davey and Todd Mei at Dundee University. Several presenters alluded to the difficulty of persuading people in their fields (law, art, design, health care) of the relevance of hermeneutical study. As I presented late in the conference I was able to work through this problematic in my own presentation, and related to my own discipline of architecture.

It occurred to me that I have found ready reception for hermeneutics in architecture, especially when it’s presented as part of an Architectural Theory course, along with other *-isms* of proven relevance to architecture. Though not conclusive, my main evidence that hermeneutics is introduced successfully to architecture students resides in the ways hermeneutical themes are treated in student essays, journals, and accounts of their practice in the design studio. They seem to –get it.–

In the case of architecture the cannon is expanding, as I note Paul Kidder's book *Gadamer for Architects*, Lindsay Jones's *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, and our own *Interpretation in Architecture*.



Four entry points for an architectural hermeneutics

1. One of the main entry points to indicate architectural relevance is in the use of the word "interpretation" in everyday architectural discussion. An architect will have to interpret the brief, the client's requirements, drawings, plans, photographs, regulations, etc. Architectural history seems wrapped up in interpretation somehow, and there are always texts about buildings and theories to be interpreted, sometimes with difficulty. I think this is a fairly straight forward initial indication of relevance.
2. The second key to entry resides in the idea of **reception**. Buildings have reception areas. We get received by buildings. There's also the question of how we building users *receive* the buildings we encounter. As I've explored in another blog ([the reception of architecture](#)), reception is a key concept in hermeneutics. So there's a strong metaphor in play here, that I would argue is more than just a tangible architectural crutch to help us understand an abstract concept. *Reception* is both crucial in space and in understanding. If I had more space than is available in this post I would argue that understanding is spatial in any case.
3. The third access point for architecture is in the idea that to design is to interpret. That requires more argumentation, but it rests on the similarity between how Gadamer describes interpretation, as a two and fro movement, and descriptions of design in architecture, or any creative pursuit for that matter; e.g. where Donald Schön says of design: "The principle is that you work simultaneously from the unit and from the total and then go in cycles back and forth, back and forth" (78). We expand on this similarity elsewhere, but again, I would argue that this similarity is more than just a coincidence. Interpretation and creation coalesce. This is the main point of our book *Interpretation in Architecture*.
4. My fourth and final point of access to an architectural hermeneutics is the idea of the *threshold*. Here the architectural theorist can appeal to a colourful narrative that also has personable and spatial correlates. Hermes, from whom derives the term hermeneutics, was the trickster god. Plato said, "the name Hermes" seems to have something to do with speech: he is an interpreter (*hermeneus*), a messenger, a thief and a deceiver in words, a wheeler-dealer and all these activities involve the power of speech" (from Plato's *Cratylus*, 408a, 126).

Radical hermeneutics

The putative link between hermeneutics and deception then moves the would-be hermeneutical scholar into the realms of a *radical hermeneutics*, as expounded by Jacques Derrida, John Caputo and others. Hermes occupies the threshold, and is described as a boundary crosser, someone who hides in the shadow of the doorway, a deceiver â?? though you can never be quite sure.

This function brings to mind Bernard Tschumiâ??s observation that â??the ultimate pleasure of architecture lies in the most forbidden parts of the architectural act; where limits are perverted, and prohibitions are transgressed. The starting point of architecture is distortionâ?• (91). Such sentiments are now fairly mainstream in architectural theory â?? another link with hermeneutics.

Iâ??ve not really explained what hermeneutics is in this post, but at least referenced some relevant hooks into architecture. For further explication see posts tagged [hermeneutics](#).

References

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Note

- The image above is of one of the pavilions in Bernard Tschumiâ??s Parc de la Villette.

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1. Architecture

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2. Art
3. design
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