



When is a building like a bang?

Description

There's some theoretical support for the idea that a building is a kind of shock, or at least belongs in the same semiotic category as a sudden noise emitted from a machine.

Articles by philosopher and semiotician Elisabeth Walther-Bense (1922-2018) are in German – unfortunately, not yet available in English translation, or even online in German that I could find.

So I am relying on a brief account of her statement on architecture in the magisterial 576 page 1990 *Handbook of Semiotics* by Winfried Nĳth. Lest we think architecture has escaped the application of Peirce's [ten categories of signs](#), Walther identified where buildings fit within Peirce's complicated schema.

Nĳth writes, “Walther determines the factually existing building as a *dicent indexical sinsign*” (438) (my italics). That's the raw, basic sign category that appears at the apex of Peirce's hierarchical pyramid.

In [a previous post](#) I equated this category with the communicative function of a shock or an explosion, as when a tray of cutlery falls to the floor. A building is a complete qualitative expression (dicent), is connected to a source (maybe a cause) though without resembling it (index), and is a singular expression (sinsign). Nĳth states it thus:

“Being a singular object fixed with respect to time and space makes it a *sinsign*. By referring to the architect who designed it, the building becomes an *index*, and as a cultural object which evokes judgments and evaluations, the building is a *dicent*” (438) (my italics).

At first blush the equivalence of a building to a bang appears absurd. A system of classification that puts a building in the same category as an accident is indeed fraught. Looking at the *dicent* part of the category descriptor, it's hard to think that the sudden annoyance felt at the sound of a tray of crockery crashing to the floor is in the same category as the complicated evaluations we exercise on entering a building.

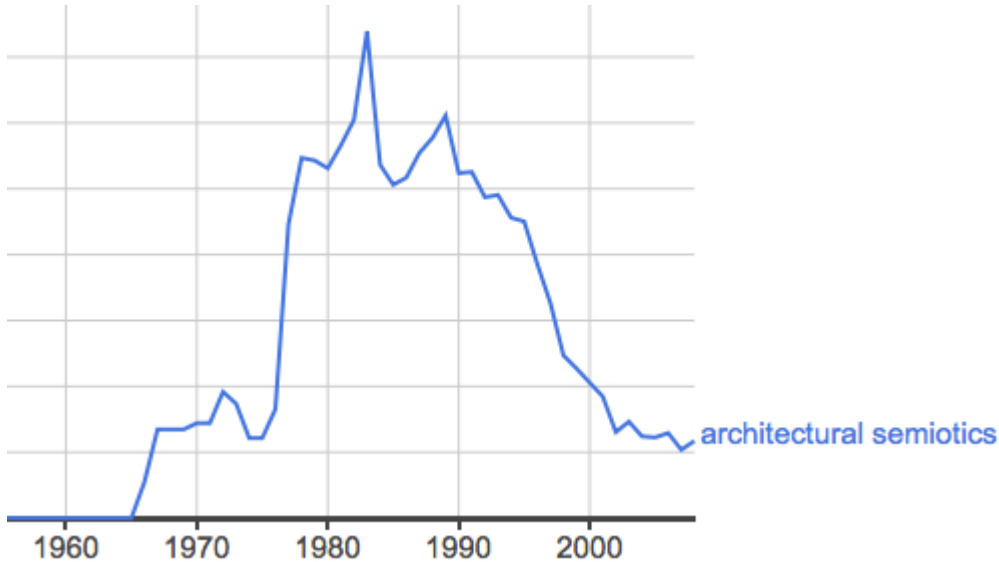
Considering the *index* part, I don't suppose an architect (or design/construction team) bears a similar relationship to the building as a falling hammer does to the sound it makes as it hits the tiles.



But from a phenomenological point of view, initial impressions afforded by being in or experiencing a building matter, i.e. our immediate bodily response to and engagement with a place. Sophisticated evaluative reflections follow. Do we need semiotics to tell us that?

The end of architectural semiotics

Here's a Google [NGram](#) showing the rise and fall in the frequency of the term "architectural semiotics" proportional to all words in Google's extensive repository of books. The graph provides some indication at least of the popularity of the field over time.



I'm wrestling with the observation that semiotics fell out of favour in architectural theory around 1990. Here are some candidate reasons.

1. Semiotics and its terms became so woven into the fabric of architectural discourse that semiotics no longer needs to be singled out as a special subject.
2. There are ways of describing the experience of architecture (as above) other than via tortured semiotic categories. Perhaps the embodied, phenomenological account does away with the need

for many of the distinctions advanced in semiotics. Critical theory has provided a similar substitute. You don't need to be a semiotician to recognise the power structures in play in various sign occurrences.

3. Semiotics promised a kind of systematisation and order, similar to systems theory and design methods. But it has proven impossible to operationalise. In any case, the [poststructuralist](#) project has undermined any recourse to putative certainties implied by such scientism.
4. The subject of semiotics has been exhausted by texts such as *The Handbook of Semiotics* (1990). What is there left to say? A corollary to such a pluralistic and encyclopaedic account of semiotics is the common complaint expressed by many cultural neophytes: there are so many different opinions about what is semiotics that it really can't matter what you think. Relativism breeds contempt.
5. One must always entertain the possibility that semiotics is now 'out of fashion' • that the discourse of semiotics belongs to an older generation. A new generation that wants to make its own discoveries moves on from that, much as Thomas Kuhn described the idea of a paradigm shift.

None of these reasons precludes the possibility of a revival however, or a more stable, nuanced, historically informed, and comparative approach to semiotics. There may also be something in semiotics that can inform aspects of architecture still unnoticed.

References

- Kuhn, Thomas (1962), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- NÃ¶th, Winfried (1990), *Handbook of Semiotics*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Walther, Elisabeth (1974), *Allgemeine Zeichenlehre: EinfÃ¼hrung in die Grundlagen der Semiotik*, Stuttgart: dva. [General Semiotic Theory: Introduction to the Basics of Semiotics]

Notes

- Also see post: [Whatever happened to architectural semiotics?](#)

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. Peirce
2. semiotics

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