



Wittgenstein's secret place

Description

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) wrote diary entries in code. I've been reading Dinda Gorle's book *Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries: Semiotic Writing in Cryptography*. There are several touch points with architecture and place.

Wittgenstein had trained as a mechanical engineer, and undertook a serious foray into architecture when he designed his sister's house, which followed the austere modernist style. He worked on the project with a trained architect, though by all accounts the design followed Wittgenstein's specifications and he obsessed over the details. The philosopher Richard Sennett describes Wittgenstein's friendship with Adolf Loos, whose disdain for ornamentation at the time influenced the austere design of the Wittgenstein house.

The Wittgensteins were a wealthy family and could afford the expense, but his sister never lived in the house, and Wittgenstein grew to dislike it. Some authors see the design of the house as a pivotal moment in the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy, which transitioned from the dry logical formalism of his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* to his more fluid conceptions of human understanding that focussed on language games (*Philosophical Investigations*). Following Sennett, it's as if the task of making, of crafting and resolving design challenges, eventually blunted Wittgenstein's insistence on logic as the apogee of human understanding.

Wittgenstein's earlier and only other journey into architecture came with his commissioning of a hut in Norway. It was a simple structure in the local style, but it was built according to his personal preferences and he retreated there while working in Cambridge. The site was remote, isolated and at the head of a fjord with views of the mountains. Scholars have drawn similarities, and differences, with Heidegger's simple hut retreat in the German Black Forest.

Semiotics

Wittgenstein didn't align his philosophy with semiotics, nor with Charles Sanders Peirce, though others have brought Wittgenstein's ideas about language into its fold, notably Ogden and Richards in their book *The Meaning of Meaning*. Winfried N's expansive *Handbook of Semiotics* on page

101 refers to Wittgenstein's insight about meaning: "the meaning of a word is its use in language," and thereby aligns Wittgenstein with Peirce's pragmatism. Gorle makes extensive use of Peirce's semiotic theories as an entry point to Wittgenstein's use of cryptography. I've explored the semiotic tradition in architecture in my book *Peirce for Architects*, and rehearsed some of the ideas in blog posts. See [Peirce decoded](#).

For Sennett, Wittgenstein's house for his sister lacks the nuance, the evidence of process of the architect's craft, as exhibited for example in the work of Adolf Loos.

"Getting things in perfect shape can mean removing the traces, erasing the evidence, of a work in progress. Once this evidence is eliminated, the object appears pristine. Perfection of this cleaned-up sort is a static condition; the object does not hint at the narrative of its making." (258)

Cryptographic writing

This obsession with showing the final product and concealing its development is arguably in keeping with the character of the *Tractatus*. It's also consistent with the idea of cryptographic writing. Keeping things concealed. Wittgenstein's subsequent philosophical writing is open, incomplete, conversational, and process-oriented.

Wittgenstein's use of cryptography in personal correspondence may have been a continuation of the kind of parlour games exercised by a large wealthy family of very close home-schooled siblings. I'm inferring that judgement from Gorle's description of his early life. The cryptographic code was not especially inventive. It was a relatively simple case of a substitution cipher.

Further in keeping with an interest in cryptography, Wittgenstein seemed to harbour secrets. His family was of Jewish origin though they were baptised as Catholics. He was unhappy in the army and subsequently it seems, suffered from severe depression. Three of his brothers committed suicide. His unprepossessing Norwegian hut gives greater expression to the nexus between place and secrecy than the house he designed for his sister, though there's more to be said via his associations with "mysticism."

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Note

- Image is a screenshot of a spreadsheet that converts plain text to code and back again using Wittgenstein's substitution cipher. He wrote his diary entries in German.

Category

1. Uncategorized

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