

Structuralism in architecture: not a style but a tool for critique

Description

Influential twentieth century architectural historians such as Charles Jencks and Kenneth Frampton have promoted a particular approach to architectural analysis in which architectural theories have *adherents* – or at least groups who wish to associate with the theories – who then produce certain kinds of buildings as a *result* of those theories. The danger of architecture’s willingness to subscribe to styles and movements is that it diminishes the value and wider applicability of the theories on which it draws (and that it generates).

One case in point is the theory of meaning known as **Structuralism**, which began as an approach to linguistics developed by the Swiss linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) at the end of the 19th century.

Consider a domain outside of architecture. In literary studies, any written work (poem, book or play) is available for Structuralist analysis. So an analyst following the Structuralist approach can examine the work of Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jane Austin, Kafka, or J.K. Rowling in Structuralist terms, whether or not those authors themselves subscribe to the ideas of Structuralism. Examining these works through the lens of Structuralism does not make any of the authors under study Structuralists. Nor is the critic claiming the authors or their works are Structuralist.

So Structuralism is not a movement in the same way that Expressionism or Surrealism are movements, with adherents who wish to classify their works in that way, or who follow the procedures or methods of that movement. Structuralism is an approach to critique and analysis in literature, art, architecture, and beyond.

However, there have been architectural practitioners who associated with Structuralism, notably the architects Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) and Herman Hertzberger. They were also party to an organisation known as **Team 10** that sought to break away from abstract modernism and claimed to be restoring a sense of meaning, place, contingency and humanity in its buildings. Writer Dirk Van Den Heuvel says in an article about Team 10 and so called **Dutch structuralism**,•

Although structuralism never turned into a real movement or an organized group, it is possible to identify a number of architects who held similar ideas about the relation between the user and architecture and who were inspired by Aldo van Eyck and his Municipal Orphanage. Dutch structuralism is about making open-ended building structures by the repeated use of basic elements. Both the elements themselves and the way they are linked are conceived to facilitate multiple uses and future growth and change. Hertzberger was the only architect among the Dutch structuralists to declare explicit relations to the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, referring for example to the former’s distinction between *langue* and *parole* (p.208).

So it would be very limiting to confine Structuralism in architecture to this group. The application of the ideas within Structuralism is really much bigger than any group of buildings or group of practicing architects.

Levi Strauss introduced Structuralism to anthropology, and Piaget to psychology. It was Roland Barthes who applied Structuralist analysis to a wide range of cultural phenomena: paintings, posters, food, drink, fashion and social practices. There was a strong political dimension to Barthes's cultural analysis.

So Structuralism claims extremely wide applicability. The Structuralist approach of analysis is applicable to any text (a street sign, newspaper headline, report, legal contract, script or great literary work), and any kind of building (shed, speculative housing scheme, office block, iconic building, a whole city).

Structuralism may of course have influenced the kinds of buildings and urban spaces that we now occupy, but this is very indirect, and not the result of adherence to a movement. It's probably more helpful to think of interweaving conversations rather than cause and effect.

Suggesting that Structuralism applies itself universally does not say that it is 'right' or the best approach to analysing architecture. In fact the more productive and interesting discourse in architecture is arguably Structuralism's successors, Poststructuralism and [Deconstruction](#), which are also shortchanged if limited to architectural styles or movements.

It's fair to say that architectural theory's development is now much more nuanced and sophisticated than that exhibited in Jencks's and Frampton's encyclopaedic approach, which is about the interrelationships between movements and styles. Theorists now are more inclined to look to original sources, or sources outside of architecture. (The *Thinkers for Architects* book series by Routledge is one example of this move.) There's also a move to think carefully about architectural spaces outside those interventions deliberately designed and built by architects, including non-places, marginal zones, favelas, as well as the *practices*, *institutions* and *power politics* of buildings and occupants. Discourses based on style scarcely begin to address these themes, and even diminish them by placing them in distinct categories - death by labelling.

There's a question of whether crowd-sourced encyclopaedism advances or diminishes the cause of architectural theory. It's tempting to think the latter. In looking up 'Structuralism (architecture)' in wikipedia (on 16 March 2012) you could be left with the impression that Structuralism began with architects and has an autonomous existence within that discipline. My optimism resides with the 'Talk' tab that reveals something else again.

References

- Barthes, Roland. 1973. *Mythologies*. Trans. A. Lavers. London: Paladin.
- Piaget, Jean. 1970. *Structuralism*. Trans. C. Maschler. New York: Basic Books.
- Risselada, Max , and Dirk van den Heuvel (eds). 2005. *Team 10: In Search of a Utopia of the Present 1953-81*. Rotterdam: NAI.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. *Structural Anthropology 1*. London: Penguin.

Commentary on Aldo van Eyck and Dutch Structuralism

- Frampton, Kenneth. 1985. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames and Hudson. pp.300-301
- Jencks, Charles. 1973. *Modern Movements in Architecture*. New York: Penguin. pp.311-318
- Jencks, Charles, and George Baird (eds). 1969. *Meaning in Architecture*. London: Barrie & Rockliff. pp.170-213.

Also see

- [The opposite of architecture](#) (Structuralism)
- [Architectural unconscious](#) (Structuralism)
- [Architecture as the last fortress](#) (Deconstruction)
- [Derrida for architects](#) (Deconstruction)
- [What buildings want](#) (Louis Kahn and Phenomenology)
- [Inconspicuous architecture](#) (Heidegger)
- [The reception of architecture](#) (Hermeneutics)
- [Interpretive communities](#) (Hermeneutics)
- [Circles and how to get out of them](#) (Renaissance geometry)
- [Panoptic man](#) (Foucault)
- [Le Corbusier's error](#)
- [Otaku architecture](#)
- [Urban occupy](#) (Activism)
- [Why music reaches the parts that architecture can't](#)
- [Architecture and music](#)
- [Architectural remainder](#)
- All posts tagged [Architecture](#)

Date Created

March 16, 2012

Author

rcoyne99