

ARCHITECTURE AND THE DIALOGICAL SPACE OF ENCOUNTER

Schawn Jasmann

Carleton University
School of Architecture
Ottawa, ON, Canada, M3B
s@schawn.com
http://www.schawn.com

Abstract

In the process of contemporary architectural design there is a privileging of measured visual information over other forms of representation as primary vehicles for the construction and construing of meaningful human experience. Within our contemporary cultural context there are other forms of cultural production that have not privileged such empirical models and as such have been utilized to establish an alternate aesthetic, for the purposes of construing meaning, that is entirely contrary to the modernist aesthetic ideal. This paper will focus on one form of alternate cultural production, namely the dialogic, and in so doing will identify how it informs possibilities for the thinking and making of architecture.

1. Introduction

The approach to the design of architectural environments today is one that remains largely fixed to a program-centered orientation. That is, many design strategies consider firstly the rendering of programmatic function, as a privileged metric followed by visual, description, within the function/experience relation of the architectural design. This approach has a tendency to generate rather limited results especially when compared to contemporary cultural production practices, particularly those that utilize interactivity within the confines of the digital medium.

Of particular interest to this paper is how the architectural design process can be approached in an imaginative and innovative way through the use of digital tools in relation to ideas pertaining to the dialogic. This approach is examined more closely through such critical questions as:

- a) How does the practice of contemporary architectural design readdress its internal conceptual framework(s) if architecture is approached as a resonating field of exchange between material form and bodily activity/action?
- b) How are the processes of design reconsidered differently from an program-centered planning model if the resonant field of architecture privileges the affectation/movement-motion relation as the basis for inquiry?

If we consider this relation seriously, then perhaps it can be said that it is defined as the body's relationship to the space, time, and matter of the event enveloped by a material construction that assists in the active shaping of that event. Therefore, the emphasis for contemporary architectural practice would be the event space of program in relation to the variability of bodily perception and movement. This perhaps, can be said to be but one fertile domain of inquiry for architecture today, one that analogously could be described as a resonant field that is comprised of the

logic of generative conceptual strategies (rendered through language) and the corporeal logic of its application (rendered through geometry and materiality and further explicated through embodied building) and ultimate receptivity. This domain of inquiry is thus a field that circumscribes the fluid, turbulent and often unsettled exchange between multiple metaphoric and physical bodies in motion, be they between or of linguistic, cultural, bodily, technological, mythical, philosophical, corporeal and incorporeal origins. How does architecture acknowledge these relational exchanges in terms of the geometries of living, both of the individual and of the larger cultural collective? One such way is through the use of narrative as a principled means of employing temporally structured bodily and material engagements as descriptors of the event spaces of the program. For instance, in an open plan of a domestic setting, where all key programmatic spaces overlap without distinguished thresholds, it is only the anticipation of witnessing the body engaged in the functional imperative of those spaces that can be revealed, and principally through literary devices (for the purposes of a greater range of communication). Thus a narrative account or story can be utilized as the primary means of building that communicative bridge, of convincingly painting the perceptual image of what is to be realized by the design and construction processes.

1.1. Through narrative eyes: The dialogical as a form of "relating" within the architectural design process

In Bernard Tschumi's "*Parc La Villette*"[1] and John Hedjuk's "*Cathedral*"[2], the architects examine and utilize multiple narrative conditions as temporal nodes or keyframes in order to structure the programming of the critical event space(s) materially, symbolically and psychologically. These event spaces are understood not only in their capacity to choreograph the body but also shape the manner in which meaning is construed within the ongoing dialogue of the way in which we relate to the world. It is this idea of relating that is of particular interest, and, more so, how new forms of relating can be

revealed and therefore utilized in approaching the architectural design process.

The dialogic, as a contemporary form of relating between multiple bodies, is an identifiable form of encounter between the architect and the design process. It brings to fore a condition in which contingency and indeterminacy (key markers of the dialogical enterprise) are established as integral to the development of the architectural project and ultimately lead towards the construction of meaningful human experience.[3] Within the architectural design process there exist multiple traces of isolated moments, localized vectors of time corresponding to a selected narrative event, where an unfolded dialogic exists. An example of such an isolated event would be, for instance, John Hedjuk's "Sanctuary" series of architectural watercolors, where they illustrate specifically isolated narrative events (as envisioned by Hedjuk) that have occurred between Christ and an assortment of characters (of a biblical nature). These watercolors serve as the basis for the derivation of Hedjuk's "Cathedral" building and were the primary vehicle(s) through which Hedjuk was engaged during the design development of the project. The space of the dialogue between Hedjuk and his ideas through his watercolors is the space of the dialogic. This space of engagement is not unlike other dialogical spaces between architects and their drawings.

However, the dialogic is not limited to the process of drawing alone. Rather the dialogic is very much apart of a larger set of processes comprised of the analysis and interpretation of ideas pertaining to space, form, geometry, materials, code restrictions and program, to name but a few. It is through these ideas that the architectural project slowly unfolds and presents itself as a constructed entity awaiting the life of its occupants to slowly animate their respective narratives within its walled boundaries, to engage the respective programs in relation to the spatial boundaries that define and shape its operational territory.

The dialogic thus abounds within the architectural design and construction processes. It exists between the architect and the end user(s) through his drawings, the builders and the architect through his drawings, and the end user (client) and the architect through the finished building. Thus the entire design and construction process is potentially dialogic in nature where the process of making architecture is continually transformed through means of relating inter-subjectively (between subjects) as a dialogic form of relating towards the construction of a meaningful architecture.[4] Not only is the dialogic form present in the architectural design and construction process(es), it has additionally become a dominant form within the contemporary field of interactive digital art production. [5]

1.2. The dialogic encounter within project X12__01E

Project X12__01E foregrounds the dialogic as a privileged condition in order to appraise its possibilities of informing an architecture-making strategy. As outlined earlier, much architecture is often considered in relation to the unfolding narrative structures from which it is conceptually constructed. Thus the programmatic activities that are specific to carefully designed areas of experience often

result from an examination of the temporal domain of the imagined narrative conditions that were initially examined upon the definition of the architecture to which it refers. It is through such a process that we can begin to discuss the current project.

The current project (X12__01E) is a multi-part work. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus exclusively on the first two parts. The first part is a digital interactive component that explores the implied spatial conditions of animate geometries that are created from the hand-penned text of a child's narrated story. This first component interactively reveals the story to the user-navigator/architect aurally, textually and visually. The user-navigator/architect is digitally and interactively engaged in a process driven dialogue with an animate navigational system (supporting the visualization of the story words/sentences/phrases) through which visual geometries of the words and sentences begin to unfold within the space of the story-telling experience. Figure 1. These visual descriptions (of geometric expressions) are then ported into 3d modeling software in order to further explore their implicit geometric potential within the process of spatial mapping through modeling, animation and visualization processes.

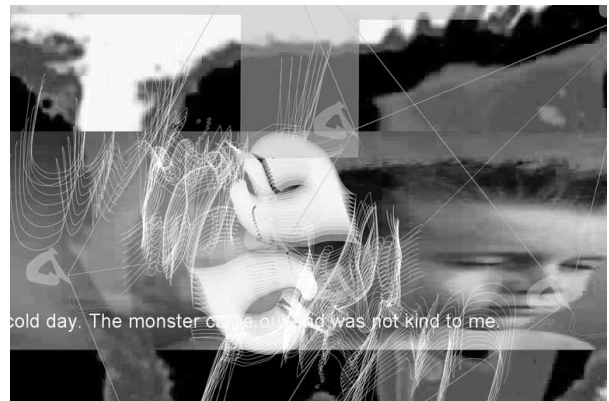


Figure 1: Screen capture from Part I of project X12__01E.

Once the text data in hand written form has been imported into the 3d software, it is positioned in 3d model space as per its (x,y,z coordinate) point of utterance in real space by the child. The hand written word, sentence, or phrase is then copied over a series of vertical increments that correspond to the acoustic path of the spoken word, sentence or phrase. What results is a 3d matrix of points of origin. This mapped matrix serves as the carcass for which the word, text, and/or phrase clusters are 'jacked into' 3d space and positioned as per their original declaration. This transmogrification of the text from real space to digital space through the input of hand-scribed text attempts to control the interpolative contamination by the computer as it pertains to the originating 'real' uttered source. Once the vertical text increments are in place, describing the carcass from which the new surface/skin will hang, the lofting process begins. The lofting process yields a textual-volume (textvol) that is then rendered with an emphasis on yielding visceral qualities such as transparency and luminosity, two characteristics that are often present in a well-crafted story. Figure 2

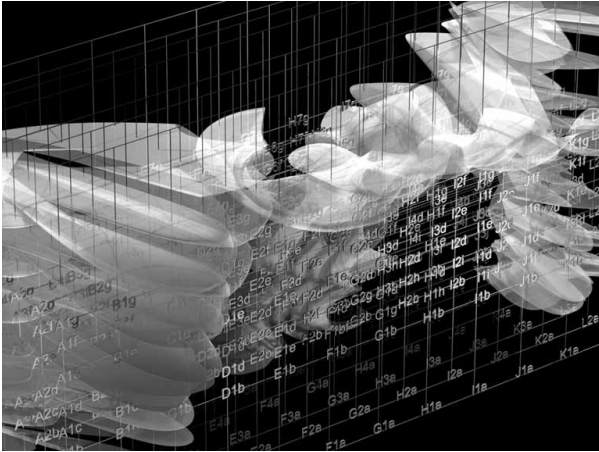


Figure 2: Part 2 of project X12__01E: Rendering of 3d luminous text volumes.

We now have a single luminous volume that serves as but one measure of a 3d visual geometric expression of either a word, sentence or phrase. This single 3d digital volume is to be quickly joined by others (as the story unfolds and the 3d process continues). As we look back into the 3d world space of the model, we are witness to a dancing collection of luminous and animate textual volumes. This collection permits further exploration through more metric material processes, such as rapid prototyping or a variety of engineering analyses for establishing the 3d volume's potential for future material construction (these processes are currently being investigated). But perhaps most importantly, the exclusivity of the process invented in order to reach this point is one that constructively applied concepts regarding the dialogic, which is undoubtedly a prevalent 21st century cultural condition.

2. Conclusion

The dialogic in project X12__01E permits the user-navigator/architect to experience the core content of the interactive work by participating in not only its reception but also its actual form-giving process. Thus the work in its initial form would present itself not as a totality, ready for reception, but rather in a temporal state of becoming, awaiting for the user-navigator/architect to probe the work and in so doing initiating a dialogical encounter. It is through such an encounter that the body assumes an active role in the reception and the shaping of the works' potential future, specifically towards the creation of a two-body relation.

The first body is defined as body_1 with geometric and material traits of the physical and mental body of user-navigator/architect. The second body, defined as body_2, is understood through the framework of language that takes its form as the story. This body_1/body_2 relation is continually undergoing transformation as there is a deliberate attempt to cross-pollinate the initial Euclidean measured position of the storyteller (the child) with the monadic (qualitative experience of the story) as they are presented as the written text and cinematic visuals. Both are equally integral to the act of establishing a condition conducive to the manifestation of meaningful experience and therefore closer to a valued orientation towards the making of an architectural expression. If the experience of multiple story-forms are coupled such that the two forms or bodies (the metric and experience) are presented simultaneously through a mediated intermediary zone, such as a topological zone that is comprised of both the positional and moving, then the elemental dimensions describing the space of human experience have been isolated and can be utilized as material for conceptual generative strategies in the design of narrative/story based architecture. [6]

Project X12__01E proposes a dynamic hybrid construction that is composed of the written and spoken word, physical acts of "bodily-real" interaction, and digital modeling and fabrication (ongoing) processes. This project suggests an alternative approach to the complex processes involved in the thinking and making of architecture with a conceptual and pragmatic emphasis upon the dialogic. It is an approach that offers one of many dialogical (and thus relational) forms of experience, one that is both linguistically and visually (and possibly viscerally) rich. It is within this approach that future blueprints for architecture of contingent meaning exists.

References

1. Tschumi, Benard. Architecture and Disjunction. London: MIT Press, 1996.
2. Hays, K. Michael. Sanctuaries: The Last Works of John Hejduk. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2002.
3. Catalano, Joseph S.. Thinking Matter: Consciousness from Aristotle to Putnam and Sartre. New York: Routledge, 2000.
4. Rokeyby, David. "Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media" in Critical Issues in Electronic Media. ed. Simon Penny. 133-158.
5. Druckrey, Timothy, ed. Ars Electronica: Facing the Future. London: MIT Press, 1999.
6. Massumi, Brian. Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. London: Duke University Press, 2002.