

Branko Mitrović*

ARCHITECTURE AND PHILOSOPHY AND WAGES OF OBFUSCATION

ABSTRACT: The paper analyses possible contributions of philosophy and philosophers to architecture and architects' work. During the twentieth century, a number of dominant positions in philosophy, such as the view that all thinking is verbal or that conceptual thinking determines the contents of perception, significantly limited the ground for productive intellectual interaction between architects and philosophers. With the demise of such positions in recent decades, one can hope that philosophy and philosophers could make genuine contributions to architectural theory.

KEYWORDS: architecture, philosophy, phenomenology, deconstruction, architectural education

* Branko Mitrović: Department of Architecture and Technology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology; branko.mitrovic@ntnu.no.

This is an Open Access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not transformed in any way and is properly cited.

Some years ago, four architecture students came individually to talk with me about phenomenology within a single week. Each of them was enrolled in the same final year architecture studio; in the previous year they all took the architectural theory course that I teach and read Martin Heidegger's "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." However, they did not come to talk about Heidegger. They wanted to learn how to design a "phenomenological building". When I asked what a "phenomenological building" was, each of them stated the same example: that is when you put glass on the façade, so you get the phenomenon of light reflexion. As I inquired about the origin of this definition of phenomenology, I discovered that it came from a visiting professor who taught them studio and who derived this understanding from a recently published essay by Steven Holl.¹ When I checked the essay, I could see how the misconception came about. In the essay, Holl indeed talks about phenomenology, and mentions "attention to phenomenal properties of the transformation of light through material."² My colleague simply identified "attention to phenomenal properties" as "phenomenology." Steven Holl was thus not guilty for the misunderstanding.

WHAT ARCHITECTS DO WITH PHILOSOPHY?

What is the role of philosophical material in contemporary architectural thinking and education? Few architectural academics would argue that this is irrelevant. In fact, there exists widespread hunger for philosophical texts among architectural academics. Such texts are widely used in studio as well as in theory courses. *The way* they are used, however, is likely to exasperate a philosopher. From a philosopher's perspective, architects do not engage in arguments, but mine philosophical texts for the material that will make the narratives they fabricate about their designs appear more intellectual. Engagement with philosophy often does not go beyond the misappropriation of philosophical terminology, which is used randomly and with limited understanding of its meaning.

At the same time, it is true that the question of the role of logical arguments in architecture as a discipline is a difficult one. Should logical arguments matter in architectural design in a way that is not reducible to

¹ S. Holl, "Questions of Perception – Phenomenology of Architecture," in S. Holl, J. Palasmaa, A. Pérez-Gómez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, William Stout Publishers, San Francisco, 2007, pp. 40–61.

² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

their role in the fabrication of the narratives concocted in order to promote these designs? Can architectural designs have *any* properties that have some *other* purpose besides the promotion of the design and its author? In the 1990s, it was not uncommon to argue that architects are public intellectuals, that *everything* architects do counts as architecture and that the only relevant thing architects do is self-promotion. In other words, architects' self-promotion is the *only* content of architecture as a discipline and the use of philosophically sounding combination of words counts a high-ranking strategy in such efforts. It then follows that all architecture schools can teach their students is to behave like architects, since there are no skills or knowledge specific to architecture that other professions (engineers, planners) can do better.³ The use of incomprehensible philosophical jargon to bamboozle one's clients and colleagues is consequently one of the most valuable skills that architecture students are meant to imbibe during their architectural education.

Philosophers' perspectives on such abuse of their discipline are bound to be negative. Nevertheless, it is also fair to say that philosophers have made very little effort to engage with architects. The few times I have heard philosophers mention the "philosophy of architecture," it was mainly to add that "little work has been done in that field." One would expect to find some articles on architecture at least in the journals that specialise in aesthetics, but this happens rarely. What is even worse, when philosophers actually engage with architecture, they sound naïve and have limited number of examples (buildings) to cite. Sometimes, one gets the impression that they cannot read a building's plan. Occasionally, they make serious blunders based on elementary mistakes, such as Nelson Goodman's erroneous attempt to prove geometrically that perspectival projection does not represent the disposition of light rays that reach the eyes.⁴

I argue in this paper that poor communication between the two disciplines is largely the philosophers' fault, and that it results from a set of systematic commitments that has dominated philosophical thinking during the twentieth century. But I also want to point out that times have changed, and express the hope that we may be looking towards times marked by more fruitful collaboration between the two disciplines.

³ See G. Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2002.

⁴ See B. Mitrović, "Nelson Goodman's Arguments against Perspective," *Nexus Network Journal*, 15, 2013, pp. 51–62.

DECONSTRUCTION, PHENOMENOLOGY AND ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

Obviously, I can mainly talk on the basis of my own experiences within English-speaking scholarship. They began in 1992 when I arrived in Philadelphia for my doctoral studies in architectural history at University of Pennsylvania. I was lucky to have gone to Penn in those years, where – unlike some other doctoral programmes in architecture at that time – we were expected to read the fundamentals of the discipline: Vitruvius, Alberti, Barbaro. We were trained, and trained well, to become scholars in architectural history and theory, while contemporary fads were mainly seen as a waste of time. However, outside Penn’s Furness Library, the intellectual world of architecture was deeply divided between two dominant and colliding ideologies – deconstruction and phenomenology. Deconstructivists were noisier and stood for a definite, recognizable architectural style; long-term, however, the influence of the position called “phenomenology” has been more persistent. Whatever their differences, in many ways, both sides worked with the same assumptions that I found difficult to accept. There are at least five fundamental points they shared:

- a) Both were programmatically anti-visual.
- b) Both insisted on the primacy of language in human thinking or reduced human mental activities to verbal behaviour.
- c) Both “explained” the creativity of individuals (including architects) by their membership in collectives such as culture or tradition; the 1990s were the heyday of cultural constructionism.
- d) In the form these positions were often articulated in architectural history and theory, they both implied the rejection of free will (for instance, in the form of the rejection of the possibility that architects can make design decisions independently of their social or cultural environment).
- e) Both systematically rejected, or made no effort to be compatible with, the materialist understanding of the world and the modern scientific worldview.

By the time I faced these positions I already had pre-doctoral degrees in architecture and philosophy, and this made me cautious about wider implications of the theoretical claims that I encountered. Both positions were hard to square with any reasonable conception of architectural

history I could think of. Architects are certainly concerned with the visual aspects of their designs, while the programmatic rejection of visuality that both positions preached reduced the discipline of architectural history to the enumeration of architects' acts of verbal behaviour. Renaissance architects, for instance, certainly cared much about the way their Ionic volutes looked; replicating the narrative ("meaning") that they produced in relation to the volutes (e.g., that they "represent female hairs") tells us nothing about the reasons that motivated the choice of one type of the geometric construction of the volute over another. Our visual interaction with the world is infinitely more fine-grained than language can account for; the visual is simply not reducible to the verbal. Further, cultural constructionism (including the claim that individual view emerges from the tradition they belong to) unavoidably results in the reflexive argument: if all truths are culture-relative, then this must also be the case with the claim that all truths are culture-relative. Applied to architectural history, cultural constructionism reduced the discipline into a mindless classificatory exercise: all an architectural historian needed to do was to classify architectural works according to the cultures and traditions they belonged to. Since individual architects were meant to be deprived of independent reasoning powers or free will and their intellectual lives and creativity were seen as mere manifestations of their cultures or traditions, classification according to culture or tradition was meant to explain everything.

Turning to analytic philosophy to resolve these problems was hardly an option. Willard van Orman Quine, Michael Dummett, or Donald Davidson in various forms also reduced human thinking to a verbal activity.⁵

⁵ For a general history of the view that all thinking is verbal, see M. Losonsky, *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006. Willard van Orman Quine's view was that only material, physical token-sentences could be properly regarded as truth-bearers, so he was consequently obliged to argue that only such sentences can be believed to be true or false – in other words, that there can be no non-verbal thought-contents that can be true or false. In his article "Meaning in Linguistics" (in W. van Orman Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, Harper and Row, New York, 1961, p. 61, he stated that "there is in principle no separating language from the rest of the world. [...] It is not clear even in principle that it makes sense to think of words and syntax as varying from language to language while the content stays fixed..." For Dummett, see, for instance, his essay "Language and Communication," in his book *The Seas of Language*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 166–187 and especially the essay "What Do I Know When I Know a Language," also in *The Seas of Language*, p. 97. Donald Davidson tried to argue that neither language nor thought have conceptual priority over each other, but ultimately the way he phrased his arguments suggests that he assumed the priority of language. D. Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 155–170. The article was

The rejection of visuality was part of Quine's behaviourist programme. An architectural historian who reads in Quine's influential article "On What There Is" that it is impossible to imagine the Parthenon visually (that "the idea of the Parthenon is invisible") must think that something has gone very wrong indeed.⁶ Hard-core behaviourism, it should be mentioned, died off much slower among philosophers than among psychologists. Mental rotation, the human capacity to imagine spatial objects from different sides and rotate them in imagination was firmly established and well-studied in experimental psychology as early as the 1970s.⁷ An architect's daily work largely depends on this ability that modern CAD programmes merely imitate. However, when I tried to discuss visual imagination and mental rotation with some analytic philosophers in the late 1990s, I was asked whether I was "also hearing voices."

PHILOSOPHY AND ARCHITECTURAL THEORY

For a large part of the twentieth century both analytic and continental philosophy were dominated by the assumptions that are very difficult to square with standard architectural practice, architectural profession, scholarship in architectural history or architectural creativity in general. The point is not merely that these assumptions contradict some important aspects of architects' understanding of their own work. More significantly, architects' standard procedures are often perfect counter-examples to these philosophical assumptions. A good example is the claim that human thinking is always verbal and linguistic, defended by remarkable tenacity by both analytic and continental philosophers throughout the twentieth century. If it were true, no building could ever have been planned, described or surveyed using drawings. The widespread tendency of twentieth-century philosophers to denigrate or even deny

indeed interpreted by Searle that way; see J. Searle, "Animal Minds," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 19, 1994, pp. 206–219.

⁶ "The Parthenon is visible; the Parthenon-idea is invisible. We cannot imagine two things more unlike, and less liable to confusion, than the Parthenon and the Parthenon idea." W. van Orman Quine, "On What There Is," *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, p. 2.

⁷ This pertains to the experiments about mental rotation by Roger Shepard and Jacqueline Ann Metzler that examined mental rotation, the ability of the human mind to imagine an object from different sides. Obviously, for architects, mental rotation is a vitally important thinking process simulated today by various CAD-type programmes. See R. Shepard J. Metzler, "Mental Rotation of Three-Dimensional Objects," *Science*, 141, 1971, pp. 701–703.

the human capacity to think visually is probably enough to make any meaningful interaction with architecture as a discipline impossible: in their creative process as well as in the technical execution of their works, architects vitally depend on visual thinking. Visual means of communication (drawings, models) are unavoidable when one wants to discuss and define spatial properties of architectural works. The claim that “there is no innocent eye,” understood in the strong form as this was the case in the 1970s (for instance by Nelson Goodman or Marx Wartofsky) made human visibility a social convention, completely unrelated to the human capacity to think about the spatial properties of spatial objects. It is utterly unclear what architectural practice could look like once visibility is separated from spatiality.

It is in fact a remarkable phenomenon that architects persisted with attempts to communicate with philosophers through an era in which philosophers’ contribution could have been hardly of any use to architecture. The phenomenon is encouraging because it indicates a high level of trust that philosophers enjoy in many architects’ eyes. It is also a worry because it illustrates architects’ lack of interest in meaningful engagement with philosophical material. The impression is that architects love and seek to imitate philosophers’ verbal behaviour, but care little about the meaning of what philosophers are saying.⁸ If architects are prepared to repeat and cheerfully advocate philosophers’ statements, while these statements contradict architects’ daily professional practice and everything they do, then they either do not understand these statements or do not really care what they mean and use them as mere self-promotion tools. How seriously can one take an architect who preaches (as many did in the 1990s) that everything is a text and then uses drawings in his or her work? (I actually know of an architecture school where, during the 1990s, students would pin up pages of printed text on the wall in their crits because they were taught in the theory class that “everything is a text.”)

Introducing philosophical culture into architecture as a discipline, its theory, creative and professional work, is thus likely to be a harder task than it may appear at the first sight. What architects need to learn from philosophers is to analyse and think critically, and not merely repeat, outside the context and for the purposes of self-promotion, the specific statements uttered by individual philosophers. The introduction of critical

⁸ For a systematic analysis of architects’ use of philosophical texts see B. Mitrović, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Fraud*, Oro Books, San Francisco, 2022.

thinking into architectural profession and education means that the philosophical culture of making arguments needs to penetrate beyond verbal communication about architectural works into the actual creative process and practice. For this to happen, one needs to engage with architects in the realm of their work and show that the philosophical ways of making arguments (rather than replicating philosophers' statements) can contribute to the design process. The point I would like to make here is that (after decades) we live again in an era when meaningful and useful exchange between philosophers and architects has become possible.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The philosophical landscape has changed tremendously in the past twenty or thirty years.⁹ The point is not merely that deconstruction, anti-realism, cultural constructionism and similar fashions of the late twentieth century have lost their influence. More fundamentally, the positions that used to block fruitful exchange between architects and philosophers have lost their credibility one after another. The ground-breaking moment for the rejection of the view that all thinking is verbal was the publication of John Searle's highly influential 1983 book *Intentionality*. Searle's important thesis was that the study of the contents of human thoughts cannot be equated to the study of human verbal behaviour. In the subsequent decades extensive psychological research on the mental processes of animals and pre-linguistic infants came to support this position: if animals or pre-linguistic infants can think, it is hard to say that language is necessary for thought.¹⁰ The idea that perception and visual thinking are inseparable from conceptualisation came under attack as early as 1969 in the book *Seeing and Knowing* by Fred Dretske.¹¹ Dretske formulated the idea of non-conceptual content in the philosophy of perception, and opened an important field of philosophical research that has flourished since the late 1980s. Since the late 1990s, this position has been supported by extensive experimental psychological research about the impenetrability of visual perception, especially following an influential

⁹ For an elaboration of the implications of these changes for architecture as a discipline, see B. Mitrović, *Visibility for Architects: Architectural Creativity and Modern Theories of Perception and Imagination*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2013.

¹⁰ For a summary of these works see J. L. Bermúdez, *Thinking without Words*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.

¹¹ F. Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, The Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1969.

paper by Zenon Pylyshyn published in 1999.¹² By the late 1990s these positions started to affect positions in other fields of philosophy; Nick Zangwill's revival of formalist aesthetics is particularly relevant for architects and it correlates with discussions about formal architectural properties in the context of the use of digital media in architecture.¹³

The 1960s produced a huge wave of cultural-constructionism and anti-realism that swept over the humanities and came to dominate architectural academia and theoretical thinking about architecture in the 1990s. Looking back after more than twenty years it is fair to say that it produced more smoke than light; few architectural writings of that era, motivated by then-contemporary philosophical positions, are more than historical documents of self-promotion strategies believed to be fruitful during the era. This should not be surprising: it must have been excruciatingly hard to defend seriously, in the realm of architecture as a discipline, the suppression of visuality or the view that all thinking is verbal. In the meantime, as mentioned, concentrated and systematic realist and empiricist attacks have made such positions obsolete in modern philosophical thought.

CONCLUDING RUMINATION

Where do we stand now? There are good reasons for optimism, since the opportunities for productive exchange between architecture and philosophy are better than they have ever been in the past century. Architectural thinking can significantly profit from more philosophical treatment of the problems it faces. By this I mean, for instance, the complex theoretical problems that arise when one considers the use of visual methods in architectural communication, ethical problems in architecture, or the problems of conservation of heritage architecture. One may also hope that in the future research in aesthetics will be less hampered when considering the visual and spatial nature of architectural works. In architectural history, research on philosophical influences in architectural theory is a field in which little work has been done.

¹² Z. Pylyshyn, "Is vision continuous with cognition? The case for cognitive impenetrability of visual perception," *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 22, 1999, pp. 341–423. For the relation between the research on the impenetrability of vision and non-conceptual content see A. Raftopoulos, *Cognition and Perception: How Do Psychology and Neural Science Inform Philosophy?*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2009.

¹³ N. Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2001.

There is, however, a more profound influence that one hopes philosophy will exercise on architecture and its theory. This pertains to the ability to form arguments and develop their logical implications. One should avoid the form of interaction between philosophers and architects which enables the latter to conclude that they can pick and choose from the views of philosophers as it suits them. Architectural theorists of the past were able to structure their positions in accordance with the arguments they wanted to make – such as Leon Battista Alberti or Geoffrey Scott. Introducing standards of intellectual rigour in architectural theory – a discipline so marked today by remarkably relaxed attitudes – is going to be a formidable task. But at least, for the first time in many years, philosophy is again an ally.

REFERENCES

- Bermúdez, José Luis (2003), *Thinking without Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald (2001), “Thought and Talk,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 155–170.
- Dretske, Fred (1969), *Seeing and Knowing*, Chicago: The Chicago University Press.
- Dummett, Michael (1993), “Language and Communication,” in *The Seas of Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 166–187.
- Dummett, Michael (1993), “What Do I Know When I Know a Language,” in *The Seas of Language*, pp. 94–105.
- Holl, Steven (2007), “Questions of Perception – Phenomenology of Architecture,” in Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, pp. 40–61.
- Losonsky, Michael (2006), *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitrović, Branko (2013), “Nelson Goodman’s Arguments against Perspective,” *Nexus Network Journal*, 15, pp. 51–62.
- Mitrović, Branko (2013), *Visuality for Architects: Architectural Creativity and Modern Theories of Perception and Imagination*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Mitrović, Branko (2022), *Architectural Principles in the Age of Fraud*, San Francisco: Oro Books.
- Pylyshyn, Zenon (1999), “Is vision continuous with cognition? The case for cognitive impenetrability of visual perception,” *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 22, pp. 341–423.
- Raftopoulos, Athanassios (2009), *Cognition and Perception: How Do Psychology and Neural Science Inform Philosophy?*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Searle, John (1994), “Animal Minds,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 19, 1994, pp. 206–219.

- Shepard, Roger, Jacqueline Metzler (1971), "Mental Rotation of Three-Dimensional Objects," *Science*, 141, pp. 701–703.
- Stevens, Gerry (2022), *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Van Orman Quine, Willard (1961), "Meaning in Linguistics," in *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, New York: Harper and Row, pp. 47–64.
- Van Orman Quine, Willard (1961), "On What There Is," in *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, pp. 1–19.
- Zangwill, Nick (2001), *The Metaphysics of Beauty*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.