

## Design as Language

It's important to understand that the limits of our knowledge are the limits of our language (Wittgenstein), and this applies to all forms of language, Architecture being one of them. Language is the channel of information and the communication of ideas. Our thinking is determined by language; we first speak to ourselves, and therefore we think. But language is composed of a series of rules that structure and organize it. This system of order can be translated into Architecture, where the elements of communication are physical: matter, gravity, light, space, scale, and texture are all realities of the physical world. In a way, this makes Architecture more "real" and long-lasting than verbal language.

As with spoken or written language, where we first learn to read before we learn to write, so it is in Architecture: we must first learn to understand and decode the built environment before we can design. And even earlier, we begin by listening. Just as we first hear language before we speak it, our first contact with space is sensorial and experiential. We start "by ear," by body, by presence, before moving into the methodological study of formal spatial systems. Our first space is the womb, and we gradually shift to more complex categories of spaces, recalling Peter Sloterdijk's classification of spheres or qualities of spaces. Humans are constantly interacting with physically built and culturally/socially constructed environments. We are always in movement across artificial, virtual, and mental spaces.

Language was the tool that allowed humans to break away from other species. If we understand language as a sophisticated means of transferring knowledge, then human development and civilization are direct consequences of this power to communicate. Language evolved from a survival tool, meant to outsmart predators, to the medium through which we interpret the universe. And as we designed language, language in turn became part of our design.

It is astonishing to consider the world we inhabit today. Human beings have designed every aspect of our constructed reality, from geopolitical borders to the size of the keyboard I'm using to write this essay. Everything that has been modified or invented by humans was designed. Etymology, as always, offers insight: the word "design" comes from the Latin *designare*, from *de* (out) and *signare* (to mark, to sign, to choose, to designate). To design is to choose, to decide, to mark. This is significant, because to choose is also to include or exclude.

Where, then, do we draw the line of what constitutes Architecture? One might argue that for something to be considered Architecture, it must create space, but this is vague and overlooks the etymology of *tectum*, the root of our discipline. *Tectum* means "to cover," to provide a roof (*techo* in Spanish, *teto* in Portuguese). Architecture must provide shelter.

That sense of protection, of covering, is a fundamental condition of existence. We inhabit the world by modifying it. This is evident in Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, which reminds us that to build is to dwell, and to dwell is to be.

Just as culture is transferred through language, so too is culture transferred through Architecture. The classical and neoclassical traditions function as structured sets of symbols and instruments designed to convey and propagate a universal architectural language. This vocabulary allows Architecture to be didactic and communicative. Through it, we engage in a dialogue with the past, reading Architecture as an open vocabulary; its "grammar" capable of being applied across contexts. This is the beginning of universalization, akin to what Modern Architecture attempted. In many ways, Modernism is indebted to classicism. (Mies van der Rohe, one could argue, is a classical architect in every sense. But let's not get into that.)

Tectonics emerged as a language of construction, a syntax that reveals the logic behind the arrangement of elements. A "tectonic" Architecture becomes a didactic explanation of how it is built and what it is made of. Yet this is not the only material language available. The "stereotomic" approach, its counterpart, expresses a logic of mass rather than assembly. Where tectonics is light, focusing on joints, and associated with wood construction, stereotomy is heavy, solid, rooted in earth or stone. These two approaches, tectonic and stereotomic, represent opposing but equally articulate languages in Architecture, each rooted in material logic and cultural tradition.

Architecture's dialectical relationship with nature further reveals how design operates through language. From the moment humans began altering their environments to inhabit them, a dialogue with nature began. The way we place and shape our living spaces reflects the values and intentions we wish to express. In the past, this conversation was more local, limited by material constraints and cultural insularity. Today, ecological consciousness and environmental ethics are central to the design process. Architecture now communicates values through strategies like rainwater harvesting, passive ventilation, orientation to the sun, the use of local materials, and the preservation of natural ecosystems. All of these are expressions of a generation that speaks its values through architectural language.

Construction, in many ways, is a technical language, where every element describes its own function. Building is a process akin to writing: each has rules, structures, and a compositional logic. Writing music follows a similar thought process. But where literature and philosophy remain unbuilt, abstract frameworks, and music translates into sound, still immaterial, Architecture transforms drawings into matter. In Architecture, the "writing" of plans, diagrams, and sketches culminates in a physical reality. It is the literal translation of thought into form.

Aesthetics, too, are part of the architectural language. Through them, we communicate values, often unconsciously. Historically, Architecture has been a tool of power: religious, political, economic. Scale, form, material, and opulence have been employed to signify dominance. But that aesthetic language is now shifting. The values embedded in our discipline are being redefined. We are seeing, through design, how different aesthetic choices can create more inclusive languages; “inclusive” not only in form but in accessibility and affordability. A new image of Architecture is emerging, one that speaks not of exclusion or grandeur but of shared resources, appropriateness, and dignity. This aesthetic turn opens up space for new voices and new vocabularies. It begins to decenter the canon and broaden the conversation.

In conclusion, design as language can be a powerful tool to shape the world we live in. Like any language, it can unite or divide; it can shorten social gaps, or widen them. It can communicate values and transfer an honest approach to construction and structure, or it can serve the interests of spectacle, technology, and formal excess. What we design will ultimately shape not only our present but also the future to come. So we must choose our words carefully...