'Meaning' and 'Context' in the Language of Architecture

Jānis Taurens

I will start my paper with a brief listing of presuppositions, then characterise the problem connected with the understanding of the term 'language of architecture' and the above-mentioned presuppositions, outline the direction of possible answers and, in conclusion, describe what I understand concerning the semantics of architecture and the two approaches to the interpretation of architecture within this frame of understanding.

Presuppositions

There are five presuppositions in the proposed approach to the interpretation of architecture. First, I suppose that we can speak of the language of architecture in the non-metaphorical sense of the term 'language'. Namely, we can speak of the expressions of architecture, much as we speak of linguistic expressions in our natural language, and of the meaning of architectural expressions or, to put it simply, of architectural meaning.

Secondly, I believe that it is possible to create a semantics of architecture, using the conceptual apparatus that has been used in various philosophical models of language.[1] A weaker version of the first presupposition would be to state an isomorphism of the respective semantic theories and not of the two structures – verbal language and architecture. I use the term 'isomorphism' as did Douglas R. Hofstadter in his book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, namely: 'The word "isomorphism" applies when two complex structures can be mapped onto each other, in such a way that to each part of one structure there is a corresponding part in the other structure, where "corresponding" means that the two parts play similar roles in their respective structures.' (Hofstadter 1980: 49.) We

[1] Various philosophical theories of language are considered here as models, not so much as competing ones but simply as different approaches to the interpretation of language.

can say that the statement of isomorphism between the notions of interpretation is weaker than the statement of isomorphism between language itself and architecture, because the phenomenon – verbal language and architecture – is one, while theories of interpretation are numerous and there are more possibilities of mapping the respective concepts onto each other.

This is connected with the third presupposition: to choose theories of meaning in the tradition of analytical philosophy as a model for the semantics of architecture. The plural 'theories' here is important, and maybe 'approaches' is a better term, because not all philosophical reflections on language in this tradition could be called 'theories'.[2]

The fourth presupposition is connected with one specific understanding in analytical philosophy, which is the opinion that the theory of linguistic meaning is concerned with the understanding of language. Here I am following Michael A. E. Dummett, who states that 'a theory of meaning is a theory of understanding' (Dummett 1973: 92).[3]

And the last presupposition is that architecture here is understood as a constructed, realised, actually existing architecture (a paradigmatic situation in my opinion is architecture in a city). Rephrasing Roger Scruton's idea of musical meaning – and I agree with him – what is not part of what is understood by the spectator who sees architecture with understanding is not part of the architectural meaning.[4]

Problems

Although we can begin with a seemingly simple question, as did Nelson Goodman in the title of his article *How Buildings Mean* (see Goodman 1992), the answer, if we insist that this meaning is linguistic in nature, will depend on what we consider as essential features of language, and what their counterparts in architecture could be. And here we find a large diversity of opinions. Martin Donougho, in

[2] The term 'theory' is particularly problematic if we are thinking about the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (after his return to Cambridge in 1929) or the philosophy of John Langshaw Austin.

[3] In his second great work on Gottlob Frege's philosophy of language, Dummett regards this thesis as 'considerably more problematic' (Dummett 1981: 74) than Frege did and elaborates the problems connected with this view (see Dummett 1981: 74–82).

[4] In his article about musical meaning Scruton writes: 'And what is not part of what is understood, by the listener who hears with understanding, is not part of the [musical – *J. T.*] meaning.' (Scruton 1988: 171.)

his article 'The Language of Architecture', has attempted to systematise different theories of language, which could be used as a model for the interpretation of architecture. The variety in his list is quite instructive: 1) a 'logical model for a possible, indeed an ideal, as he says, language: an approach derived from Gottlob Frege and continuing via Alfred Tarski and Rudolf Carnap'; 2) a theory of language based 'more upon the actual users' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, the late Wittgenstein, I should say, John Langshaw Austin, Paul Grice); 3) language as a system of double articulation (for example, from a limited number of distinctive sounds may be formed a multiplicity of words); 4) generative grammar (Chomskian linguistics); 5) several polar oppositions central to language proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, for example, that between 'langue' and 'parole' (or code and message, competence and performance); 6) the 'behaviouristic nature of linguistic understanding' (Donougho says '… one strand of semiotics, stemming from Charles Morris', but does not mention Willard Van Orman Quine's 'stimulus meaning'); 7) so far as architecture is an art, it can be considered as 'language or symbol system' – Nelson Goodman's approach (see Donougho 1987: 57–58).

To a certain degree, the answer to this variety is to be found in the third presupposition of this article – in the choice of language models for the interpretation of architecture in the tradition of analytical philosophy. But here appears the serious problem for the semantics of architecture, namely, the arguments of Roger Scruton in his *The Aesthetics of Architecture*.[5] The essence of his argument is expressed in the statement that 'there can be no explanation of linguistic meaning which does not show its relation to truth' (Scruton 1979: 164). The references for this statement are given as Frege's 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung' ('On sense and reference'),[6] Alfred Tarski's semantic concept of truth and Donald Davidson's first article on the application of this semantic conception of truth for natural languages – *Truth and Meaning* (see Scruton 1979: 284).

Solutions

To meet Scruton's arguments we need a better insight into theories of meaning. Summarising the development of philosophical semantics we could speak

[5] The title of the relevant chapter is 'The language of architecture' (see Scruton 1979).

[6] I use the Dummett's translation of the *Bedeutung* as 'reference', Peter Geach and Max Black translated this article as *On Sense and Meaning* (see Frege 1980).

of 'classical semantics', which is based on writings by Gottlob Frege and the semantic conception of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and the development of semantics towards pragmatics (I'll call it 'pragmatic turn'), when language models involve situational aspects related to the use of language. Models of classical semantics signal three main drawbacks: they differ from the practice of our ordinary language, they are too simplified and idealised, and they are based on several problematic suppositions.

Firstly, the basis of semantics is the principle which says that meanings must be determined. This also means that linguistic expressions are divided into the meaningful and the non-meaningful (as we can see in *Tractatus*, two variants are possible in the latter case: expressions are nonsensical or senseless as tautologies and contradictions[7]).

Secondly, the sentence is central in semantics, and it is the affirmative sentence which has truth value (one reason why the affirmative sentence is chosen as an example for semantic models is that classical semantics is marked by an interest in logic and mathematics, the problems of which in the case of linguistics are understood as language problems).

Lastly (and this is also valid in further philosophical reflections on language), the hidden structure of language is of relevance in language theories. As Wittgenstein expresses it: 'Die Sprache verkleidet den Gedanken' (*Tractatus*: 4.002); the English translation of *Tractatus*, 'Language disguises thought', is not as good at this point. Of course, the conceptualisation of this hidden structure is different in different theories.

In classical semantics, an elaboration of syntactic structure exists; for example, we can speak of constituent expressions of the sentence (complete and incomplete expressions, as in the semantics of Frege), their different semantic roles and the relationship among the sentences themselves (it could be called 'horizontal structure'). On the other hand, Frege introduces a distinction between expression, its force, sense and reference – 'vertical structure', as I call it. Nevertheless all these distinctions could be called 'static' and are separated from situational aspects of language use.

[7] See *Tractatus*: 4.461, 4.4611. For references I use Wittgenstein's numeration, which is more convenient, and the edition of Wittgenstein's German text with the translation by David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuinness (see Wittgenstein 1961).

The concept of truth has a special role among the classical semantic conceptions. This is determined by the fact that the affirmative sentence is taken as a model. However it is this attempt to consider the concept of truth as essential to semantics that reveals the limitations of the presuppositions of classical semantics. It is important that the direction in semantics connected with the concept of truth, developed by Tarski, and the attempt to apply it to natural languages lead to the principle of holism – 'Understanding a sentence means understanding a language'[8] – and acceptance of the semantic significance of extra-linguistic elements, e.g. the correlation of meaning and belief for Davidson, which makes arguable the central role of the truth concept in semantics.

The explanation of meaning based on the use of expression ('meaning as use'), its connection with our system of beliefs and forms of life, the replacement of the concept of language, which corresponds to the linguistic competence of the speaker, with a precisely indefinable concept of language games, language seen as action in the theory of speech acts, the emphasis on situational aspects of communication in situational semantics, the distinction between the roles of the listener and interpreter in communication schemes – all of these mark the pragmatic turn in language theories.[9]

Semantics of Architecture

What about the semantics of architecture now? I shall outline two approaches to the semantics of architecture which, to make it easier, could be related to the terms 'meaning' and 'context'. The terms correspond to the distinction between the classical and pragmatically (contextually) oriented semantics of verbal language.

The first approach is concerned with the building as principal architectural expression, other expressions being defined via their roles in the determination of

[8] Reference to this aphoristic remark of Wittgenstein is given by Willard Van Orman Quine when he characterises his variant of holism (see Quine 1973: 76–77).

[9] Some important points of reference for the above-mentioned conceptions are: 1) Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (see Wittgenstein 1963); 2) Davidson's essays on the truth conditional theory of meaning, its limitations and the interdependence of meaning and systems of belief, which are published in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (see Davidson 1984), and for the role of the speaker and interpreter – the essay 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' (see Davidson 1989); 3) for speech act theory see Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (see Austin 1973) and John R. Searle's *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (see Searle 1969); 4) for situation semantics – *Situations and Attitudes* (see Barwise, Perry 1983).

the meaning of building. The role of the building in the semantics of architecture is isomorphic to the role of the sentence in the semantics of verbal language. This approach ignores the pragmatic aspects of meaning and its logical model can be found in the semantics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Fregean semantics. A separate building can be further analysed in smaller meaningful architectural expressions. Separate building elements are 'incomplete expressions', that is, following Frege's principles, we can speak of them only from the point of view of a building as a complete architectural language expression, seeing other constituent meaningful elements as values of architectural variables. Under such an interpretation, building elements are incomplete expressions which are understandable only in the context of the building.

Yet we have to take into consideration the differences between architecture and verbal language: 1) in architecture (even within one style), there are more incomplete expression types than in verbal language; 2) in an architectural object, there may be several expressions of the same type, which does not mean that this object, as in the case of the sentence, could be divided into several elementary complete expressions (sentences); 3) the supposition about only one complete analysis is doubtful; 4) building materials, the shape of the building etc. could also count as types of expression, and they can not be spatially clearly distinguishable as in the case of linguistic expressions where every expression has a distinct place in the linear arrangement of the sentence.

There are two main problems to be solved in this approach. First, in the semantics of verbal language there is an important question, regarding the hierarchy of linguistic expressions, about the smallest meaningful expressions. And classical semantics offers ontological distinctions parallel to linguistic classifications to justify them. As Frege states his famous principle in his *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, 'never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition' (Frege 1959: x), and as Wittgenstein states in his prophetic intonation in *Tractatus*, 'the world is the totality of facts, not of things' (*Tractatus*: 1.1), propositions being the ontological counterparts of facts. The atomic proposition itself consists of distinct types of linguistic expressions – 'proper name', 'predicate', 'expression of relation' in the semantics of Frege, or just 'name' in the more abstract typology of *Tractatus*. This is a commonly accepted viewpoint in the classical semantics of verbal language, but how to determine the smallest meaningful elements of a building? The second problem for such an approach is the concept of truth, which is indispensable in classical semantics,

where the meaning of an expression is interpreted via its role in the determination of the truth conditions of a proposition.

To sum up, in the semantics of verbal language what an element is, is determined conventionally and to linguistic expressions correspond ontological elements that are defined on the basis of linguistic classifications. The correlation of ontological and verbal structure is ensured by the concept of truth value and the related concept of the semantic role of linguistic expressions. If the understanding of architecture is determined by how its elements are structured to a certain, further non-dividable level (but there is no further justification in categories that are different from that of architectural expressions), does it mean then that architectural syntactic structuring is subjective or that there could be more than one analysis of a particular building? I think we have to answer affirmatively to this question – what is important is the attitude with which we look at architecture, and the interest that makes us speak of a separate element in the context of a building or a building in a still wider context.

Contextual aspects of architectural meaning

In the second, contextual approach – as the term itself shows – the architectural meaning is understood as context-dependent, the term 'context' being understood not only as a spatial context of a greater architectural expression, but more widely. We could begin with a simple and intuitive listing of possible meanings of the term in architecture. First, it would be the spatial context, which in architectural interpretation seems to be more customary. It could mean: 1) a specific building seen in the context of other buildings (this mainly refers to the city); 2) a specific building seen in the context of the surrounding landscape; 3) a specific element of the building seen in the context of all the other elements of the building; 4) the relationship between a building's exterior and interior (this list is far from complete, of course). Such a context can be understood within the model of classical semantics, although the city in this case would appear as 'simply a great architecture' as it was thought to be by Leon Battista Alberti (see Solá-Morales 1996: 10). But it could as well be a different context – not spatial: 1) the context of the same type or author or period/style of buildings (they can stand apart both in space and time from the given object); 2) the context of theories and concepts related to the building; 3) the context of a certain lifestyle (forms of life) etc. (this enumeration is not meant to be complete).

To illustrate and further develop these statements about context and the problematic character of the concept, it is important to characterise the approach of Ignasi de Solá-Morales, which offers us a new way to understand architecture in the city. In the XIX Congress of the International Union of Architects, which took place in 1996 in Barcelona, Solá-Morales introduced five categories to conceptualise the network of interactions between architecture and the city. The first category is the form of change: 'Mutations'. This means that spaces in cities are 'undergoing genuine mutations: sudden, random and unforeseeable from the slow logic of evolution. These are processes with a high degree of autonomy, in which the principal line of development proceeds from within the process itself rather than from any demands or restrictions imposed by the existing environment' (Solá-Morales 1996: 13). The other categories are: 1) the form of motion: 'Flows' ('material and immaterial flows, physical and real or purely informational and symbolic, can no longer be treated as separate'); 2) the form of residence: 'Habitations'; 3) the form of exchange: 'Containers', in which the exchange, the expense, the distribution of gifts are produced. As Solá-Morales writes: 'A museum, a stadium, a shopping mall, an opera house, a historic building conserved in order to be visited, a tourist centre: these are containers.' Architecture becomes just a dressing for consumption. And the last category – the form of absence: 'Terrain Vague' (lost, empty lands), the only one where historical meanings are preserved (see Solá-Morales 1996: 15–16, 20–21).

From these categories or quasi categories we can see that even in the intuitively simplest case of context – architecture in the context of the city – there are many elements which are not easy to conceptualise, but which nevertheless play an important role in the understanding of architecture. How can we speak at all then of a particular building and its meaning, about an understanding of architectural expression?

To answer these questions or, to be more precise, to show possible ways of development for architectural semantics, we could turn to an elucidating example (the reason is also that in the case of architecture we could speak about particular 'language games' and situations, not about a universal language of architecture). So the question will be about the main, let us say contextual, moments which influence the architectural meaning, for example, of the Parthenon.

(1) The historical ensemble is created in such a way as to be perceived best from the walk of festivity devoted to the patroness of the city – Athena. It be-

gins in the agora (marketplace) from which the Acropolis is seen, then it is approached by a pathway that zig-zags up to the entrance gateway – the Propylaea; we see the statue of Athena Parthenos, and passing the Parthenon, which you at first sight can not see frontally, the path points toward the corner of the temple ('there are no symmetrical compositions in the Acropolis!'[10]), then runs along the side of the Parthenon to the entrance at the far end (see, for example Markuson, Mikhailov 1973: 178–180).

(2) It is characteristic of Greek architecture that the horizontal lines of the temple are curved, and so are the vertical lines (sides) of the columns – as if they are under pressure from the roof. It seems that the Greek temple, if we compare it with modern, more technical buildings, is more like a sculpture than architecture (see Alpatov 1987: 33).

(3) The special, natural light of Greece must not be forgotten – this aspect is mentioned by many art historians (see, for example Alpatov 1987: 142–143).[11]

(4) There is an important connection between architecture and landscape – for example Le Courbusier, making comments on his early drawings of the Acropolis, exclaimed: 'From the Propylaea we can see the sea and the Peloponnese' (Le Corbusier 1970: 48).[12]

(5) At present, the Parthenon is pure white marble without any colour, but was not at the time of Pericles, and now, of course, it is only ruins.

(6) We could call the Acropolis a 'container', using the category of Solá-Morales; it is impossible to see it without a crowd of tourists taking photos, but

(7) we know the elements of Doric order and we can say that they form a complete vocabulary of elements with distinct and clear rules determining their concatenations; a single free-standing column we see as an incomplete expression, and its meaning as determined by the context of the system of the order (we could fix the context and then the first model – that of classical semantics – works).

(8) We could speak about formal (part of some kind of universal language of architecture) qualities of the Parthenon, its proportions, and

[10] This is an exclamation by Le Corbusier, written under his drawings of the Acropolis (see Le Corbusier 1970: 48–49).

[11] Alpatov also quotes other authors when writing about specific light conditions in Greece.

[12] The Acropolis may not be the best example to characterise the importance of the landscape for architecture, but, then again, from the Acropolis we have a nice view of the surroundings of Athens (see Alpatov 1987: 145–146).

(9) last, but not least, the Parthenon is a kind of 'paradigm', which changes the meaning of the Greek temple – to use Wittgenstein's term from his lectures in Cambridge 1932–1935[13] – similar to the paradigm created by William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which changed the meaning of the word 'love'.

Could we now say that the above-mentioned points create distinct places in some kind of logical space for the architectural meaning of the Parthenon, to which we can say 'yes' or 'no'? I have not seen the Parthenon but I have seen hundreds of photos and read many descriptions and interpretations. And I do not know the meaning of the architectural expressions just discussed. I have at my disposal only semantic categories, like a meaning-blind man who could speak of semantics without understanding verbal language (the last example, of course, is based on a contradictory assumption, because in the case of verbal language we can use the same language for object language and meta-language). The two men can understand architectural meaning differently – the communication is between architecture and each of them, but I can say that you did not understand (or understand only partly) the architectural expression, and then give the arguments to change your attitude, and show you the building again (it is not as easy as to repeat the sentence), but the resulting understanding will either take place or not. All we need to understand architecture can be seen in architecture itself, but to understand it there must be some prior process of learning. The criterion of understanding is what we say, how we speak of architecture and how we act on it, but the architectural meaning itself is not translatable into words.

[13] 'We might say that it is the paradigm which has given the word "love" content. But for this purpose we need not discover two people in love, but rather the paradigm which belongs to the language.' (Wittgenstein 1989: 143.)

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