

On Writing (about Architecture)

BY
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I found something interesting when I recently installed Instagram on my phone. Though I was looking forward to sharing my photographs (which, though not all instant captures, captured remarkable instances about the built environment), I knew that many people now use the app, and that like many forms of social media, its popularity has allowed it to create trends, which seems to have led to the ubiquity of so many aspirational selfies and food shots. Rifling through this seemingly endless stream, I saw how flat architectural photography had become. With the proliferation of aspirational and lifestyle snap photography, the photogenic qualities of built space have been pushed to the fore, while the myriad ways in which architecture shapes our lives have been pushed to the periphery. Ironically, despite this proliferation of imagery, architecture is at risk of being marginalised.

Contemporary architectural photography tends to focus on the quality of lifestyle that is associated with a given design; idealised lifestyles associated with the promises of modernity, like so much self-referential, glamorous isolation. Architectural photography has a proclivity toward iconicity by virtue of its subject matter – the built world stands as an exhibit of judgement of our relationship to the world, and is so used to represent desired ends. Architectural discourse, which includes photography, fulfills this purpose, but it is at best a limited understanding of architecture, and one that can be challenged. Indeed all architectural discourse that (like photography) is primarily visual tends to share this proclivity to contextualise built form as the space of human consumption. The challenge of these forms of discourse is to project the quotidian aspects of the architecture that speak of a broader relationship to our world. Within the medium of photography itself, for example, moments of resistance may be found that suggest more complex sets of relationships and a broader context than the designers' initial intentions (as the photographs accompanying this text attempt to do).

This seductive aspect of architectural photography, reinforced by the increasing realism of rendered scenes that typically precede built space, can dominate the discussion, analysis and public perception of significant architectural projects, to the point that other design considerations, such as responses to particular social or physical contexts, are inadequately addressed or just ignored. At its most cynical, this focus on retinal delight is capable of reducing architectural experience to a series of one-liners; a series of unrelated moments comprising a building. Short of employing collage to point out the fallacies created by some architectural photography, it is arguably writing, in combination with photography, which offers the greatest opportunity for ongoing re-assessment of a number of preconceptions about our relationship to the built environment, which may ultimately translate into an appreciation for the capacity of architecture to reveal and challenge such preconceptions.



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this page, from the top:
Villa Savoye, Poissy, 2014
Castelvecchio, Verona, 2013

facing page: Condominium construction site, 2004



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This is not to suggest that architectural photography by itself does architecture a disservice. It plays a crucial role in advocating the value of design, presenting architecture in its myriad social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Its ability to make explicit comparisons and contrasting associations can make architecture more accessible to a wider audience. However, there is a kind of exactitude that can only be gleaned from the capacity of language inscription. This capacity is eminently useful to architecture, as it can evoke lived experience in a way that much architectural photography does not.

Writing about architecture tends to be either academic or journalistic. Academic writing is often at risk of alienating the reader through esoteric references, but uses a vocabulary and language that points to the values behind design approaches, offering insights into the relationship between architecture and the circumstances that inform its design; the capacity for language to express the ambiguities and contradictions of living in the built environment is made evident when understood in context of the practices and relationships that are at the roots of words. Though it is not commonplace for this analytical approach to appear in journalistic reviews of buildings, their level of analysis reminds us of the greater virtues that architecture must serve, and must ultimately translate to an approachable argument about the value of the built environment. Written language is eminently capable of underscoring these larger relationships that architecture plays a part of, and this capacity is even more crucial when observed through an etymological lens.

The roots of words contain a residuum of wisdom about lived experience, which is informed by our development of relationships to the things around us. The ways in which words come about tell a story about how we have lived, live now and might live in the future, and how we have come to understand the world around us. As we explore the roots of words, we come to know how architecture plays a fundamental role in the formation of lived experiences, and how it exists as an exhibit of lived experience in general.

This understanding is well described by the eighteenth century philosopher Giambattista Vico, in his account of the importance of etymological analysis in understanding the human condition. In his book *The New Science*, Vico draws insights from the origins of ancient words to speak to the evolution of cognition, including the development that takes place in early childhood in creating a 'situatedness' of understanding.¹

What then, of language inscribed, when so much of culture focuses on self-actualisation, on the amassing of experiences and practices when they are doled out as commodities? Where is the virtue of architecture when it is served up in glossy shots of its modernist promise? The current proliferation of architectural photography has not only flattened architectural experience to two dimensions, it has encouraged the perception and pursuit of architecture primarily as a form of retinal delight. By drawing upon that which differentiates written discourses from photographic ones, this reduction can be challenged, and in disrupting the flattening effects of idealised imagery we may both recover and uncover greater understandings of the 'value' of architecture.

¹ This reality is evocatively described by Heidegger, who in 'Building Dwelling Thinking' writes "It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature." This nature comes about through the everyday practices that imbue our lives with meaning. He gives a detailed account of the roots of the word building; how its etymology speaks of the Old Saxon word *wunon* and the Gothic *wunian*, like *bauen* (building), mean to remain in place. *Wunian* means to be at peace; to be at peace means to be free – *friede* – to be safeguarded. "To free really means to spare. Real sparing is something positive that takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being..." (Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013, p 149) This simple account points to how 'building' is sustaining, and thus offers powerful insights into architecture's role in mediating the natural world – how and why it ought to be safeguarded.