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Terms and Terminologies in Mediterranean Architecture

Implications in Architectural Education

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Abstract:

In architectural education, the verbal language is equivalent to or sometimes more imperative than drawings and graphics. It is the means of enhancing students' expressive and communication skills with people who are encountered or even incidentally involved with architectural creation.

It is argued that some commonly-shared terminologies are used either interchangeably or fashionably; bearing a variety of latent connotations and associations that can only be understood through the comprehension of their contextual cultural references. This results in students' confusion and misconception of such terms and thus their frustration and hindrance of the use of language in architecture.

This paper evokes the preceding dilemma. It aims at drawing a framework towards redefining commonly used architectural terminologies. Its methodology is based on reviewing a case study centered on exploring a sample of students' conceptions of the term "Mediterranean Architecture". The results assert on the importance of architectural talk in developing students' critical thinking as well as confidence in self expression and communicating ideas.

The paper concludes by emphasizing the significance of examining terminologies in planting seeds of creativity in students of architecture, and thus the capability of generating action when encountered with cultural expression.

Key words:

Language – Meaning - Architectural Talk - Terminologies – Architectural Meta-Language – Mediterranean Architecture

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Introduction:
Language and the Negotiation of Meaning . . .

Language is regarded as the highest achievement of human evolution. Without it, the very process of thinking is unconceivable. Language evokes the meaning of an individual's own intentions/perceptions/conceptions and understandings. As Mead puts it, a speaker observes his own behavior from the point of view of a person with whom he/she is in communication. The individual, accordingly, becomes an object for him/herself, evoking his/her own conscious awareness and critical examination for the efficacy of his intended meaning(s). Through language, a person is able to bring his/her social experience into consciousness. Thereby, achieving a level of effective control over that experience, which would not be possible otherwise[1].

Based on the preceding, there is no exaggeration that the possession of the mind is entirely relative to the capacity to make use of language in bringing social experience into context. Rationality, therefore, is associated with one's fundamental ability to attain control, through a process of self-conscious thought, over one's own environmental experience in relation to others'[2].

This asserts that language is a living and dynamic thing. Change of meaning, thus, is inevitable. Words and phrases and terminologies, albeit fixed, are subject to conditional manipulation. They are incorporated into the language and leave behind merely a trace, a colonized prior meaning, or occasionally, a new meaning. Concomitantly, words and phrases and terminologies are also a matter of subjectivity, as they present unembellished responses aroused in the self based on one's own anticipation of meanings.

Language and the "Architectural Talk" . . .

In our professional milieu –on both academic and professional levels- and in our search for ways of "talking" about architecture, mismatches occur[3]. Such mismatches are not only a result of the disability of words to keep pace with changes occurring in current practice, but also as result of the inconsistency of the "micro-cultural" context of our conception of the same meanings. It is evident, therefore, that the mythic power of words, their inability to present constant meanings, and their ability to dissemble make of design-talk a disheveled process[4].

The language for architecture, is thus such a powerful tool and at the same time fraught with difficulty. When the traditions and normative values that provide the common meaning are eroded, we may find ourselves in surroundings, which, in comparison with other societies, are meaningless[5] – or meaningful!!!

This evokes a critical question; in an age of uncertain meaning, how might we attain a stability of the semantic dimension of architecture and the built environment? How can we be

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[1] Mead M. Webber, 1964
[2] Mead M. Webber, 1964
[3] Paul-Alan Johnson, 1994
[4] Paul-Alan Johnson, 1994
[5] Chris Abel, 1997

talking the "same language"? It is argued that there should be right and proper means of interpreting architectural "meanings", through the re-examination of terminologies, which is undoubtedly to serve as a definitive purpose in the critical discourse of architecture, and in the development of architectural knowledge. The resolution to this apparent dilemma lies in a realization of the epistemological function of architectural terminologies. Aiming at generating consensual ideas, and thus help us talk the same architectural language, and understand things that we don not yet understand.

Epistemological Argument:
The Need for Re-Examining Terminologies in Architectural Education . . .

According to Vitruvius, poetry delights the feeling of the reader, and leads him smoothly on to the very end of work[6]. But, this cannot be the case with architectural treatises, because those terms which originate in the peculiar needs of the art, give rise to obscurity of ideas from the unusual nature of the language. Paradoxically, Levi Strauss stated that language, an unreflecting totalization, is human reason which has its reason and of which human knows nothing[7]. This argument entails the inconsistency of architectural terminologies on the basis of common meaning. That meaning that a built form aroused in the designer, is the same as that aroused in any one involved in the social act of building. Be him a client, a user, a critic, a fellow architect, or a passer by – simply any other. Some meanings may of course be attached, of which the designer may not be aware. Debatably, without a basis of common meaning, there can never be consensual control over the effectiveness of the "architectural talk". Only when architects –academics and practitioners- anticipate such consensus – at least in part – through the common response aroused in themselves, as well as others, does such control becomes possible[8].

Architectural terminologies, as such, are factually a powerful tool rather than only a potential capacity. The call for the re-examination of the commonly used architectural terminologies is argued to lead architects to collaboratively and actively construct of a meaningful environment. This is regarded as more than a matter of environmental quality: it is one means by which we –architects – distinguish ourselves as servers of society and civilization.

A significant confusion of the use of terminologies is quite evident in architectural education. Based on a personal position, it is claimed that some commonly shared terms are used in schools of architecture interchangeably, or fashionably. Bearing a variety of latent connotations and associations that can only be understood through the comprehension of their contextual cultural references. This is witnessed to have resulted in a majority of students' confusion and misconception of such terms and accordingly, their frustration and hindrance of the use of language in architecture.

Despite the fact that the verbal language is equivalent to, or sometimes more effective than drawings and graphics, as it is means of enhancing students' expressive and communicative skills with people who are encountered or even incidentally involved with architectural creation. Yet, the verbal language is also means of enhancing students' critical/analytical thinking, in their search for the "right meaning", and through the "cultural-contextualization" of ideas. The verbal language, hence, is regarded as a capability of generating action when

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[6] Vitruvius, Book V, Introduction
[7] Peter Eisenman, Quoted in Emanuel, 1980
[8] Chris Abel, 1997

encountered with a human/social/or cultural expression. Thereby, the built environment serves as a vehicle for shared responses and enters into the social process of communication[9].

Architectural Language: A "Meta-language" . . .

It is claimed that architectural language is a meta-language, designed purely for the interpretation, and not for the composing of primary texts. According to Scruton, meta-language is this language which enables talk about architecture, the language that informs theory, the vocabulary of design talk[10]. When we talk about architecture, certain terms are conventions and others are invented for the discussion or else being lost. At first, deriving from art and sculpture, via Vitruvius, the theoretical aspirations of architects have seen concepts seized from other disciplines to create an amalgam meta-language. Terms specific to physics, mathematics, biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, genetics, literature and electronics are colonized by architecture, while architectural terms are in turn plundered by philosophy, literature, history and computer science in a merry chicken-and-egg dance. Words transferred from other disciplines bring with them their antecedent meanings but begin to lose their former specifity in favor of their meaning in the new found "meta-language" of architecture[11].

A transportability of words belies their transparency, because upon close examination some words do not convey what might be intended at a particular time or conceived in their selection. Their genealogy "gets in the way", and they need readjustment. The difficulty architects have in declaring some unity with the term "architecture" for instance seems not to inhibit its use in computer science, history or the media. Disappointedly, architects may always have felt little sympathy for verbal analysis. It was only for the Modern movement, and never again since, has architectural talk been an intellectual discourse tackled so openly and unabashedly[12].

Examining Terminology:
A Case Study . . .

In response to personal as well as public professional and academic dissatisfaction with the mal-use of architectural terms in architectural education, an initiative experiment was undertaken as part of design methods and theories course[13]. The experiment aimed at three consequential objectives; 1. Familiarizing students with "terminologies" permanently associated with design, 2. Systematizing students' thinking approaches towards analyzing and interpreting the meanings of universal architectural terminologies, and finally, 3. Developing students' collective consensus pertaining to the "meta-language" of architectural talk. In order to achieve the preceding objectives, the experiment was structured of three successive phases, each of which responds to an objective.

[9] Chris Abel, 1997

[10] Roger Scruton, 1983

[11] Roger Scruton, 1983

[12] Juan Pablo Bonta, 1990

[13] Design Methods and Theories Course; offered to junior students, Architecture Department, Misr International University. Taught by the author, fall 2003, the sample comprised eleven students.

1. Examining Terminologies Associated with Design:

Aiming at familiarizing students with their meanings, an in-class exercise was devised, where some often used terms were listed –in both English and Arabic wordings- and students were asked to explain each in their own terms, reflecting on their own understandings of their meanings and giving examples. Terms included: Idea; Notion; Concept; Metaphor; Analogy; Essence; Ideal; Alternative[14]. Afterwards, a group discussion took place, aiming at reaching a consensus of the meanings of the proposed terms.

2. Examining Universal Architectural Terminologies:

Aiming at systematizing/adjusting students' thinking approaches towards analysis and interpretation in quest for true meanings, an in-class discussion was evoked around the term "Islamic Architecture"[15]. Along the discussion, an exploration of the term and its use took place. My hidden scenario was to direct the students towards a systematic questioning centered on *what is Islamic about architecture?*[16] Some students tackled the definition from a formalistic approach, others associated it with certain historic era, and others correlated it with geographical determinants, suggesting its correspondence to climatic conditions, building resources and environmental dictates. Religious rapport, was a forth approach. Although incomplete delineated, yet, every methodological approach to the definition of the so called architecture was right – in a way. Factually, the discussion emphasized to the students as well as to me, the inherited fallacies in the act of generalizing "universal" architectural terms. The outcome of such discussion was inevitably successful. The acclaimed success was not only in terms of students' own exploration of the definition of the term, but also in terms of paving the way for an integrative-contextual approach for defining one of the commonly used architectural terminologies.

3. Examining Interchangeable/Fashionable Architectural Terminologies:

Aiming at students' acquisition of a level of literacy with respect to the architectural "meta-language", and on the occasion of this conference, "Mediterranean Architecture" was a suitable term for a re-examination. As take-home exercise, the students were asked to devise a description of the term implication, and it was left for them to decide the approach for dealing with the exercise. Along two successive weeks, students' confusion was crystal clear. Some have searched the web coming out with "Mediterranean" architectural examples. Others scanned the department library in search for a methodological clue of the "style". And some adopted the procedural "Islamic Architecture" provisional approach to defining the term.

Students' Responses:

According to *Mahmoud Essam*, Mediterranean Architecture is this architecture that makes benefit of its association with the sea. Its two major determinants are the climate and the surrounding natural context. Based on such determinants, the description of Mediterranean Architecture –according to *Essam*, is the sea-oriented architecture; the response to the climate, and the employment of the surrounding building material and visual elements of colors and ornamentations. *Essam* concluded that Mediterranean Architecture can only be defined in lights of context and climatic attributes.

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[14] A topic in the discussion forum on ArchNet website, raised by prof. Ashraf Salama. http//www.archnet.org /discussion forum /topic: examining terminology, November 2003
[15] Essam Safey Eldeen, 2002
[16] Ali El-Faramawy, 1997

From a relevant perspective, *Ayman Sobhy*, explained that Mediterranean Architecture may be defined with reference to geographical attributes, while also correlating it with historical-civilizational precedents. He suggested that the geographic link of the three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa) around the basin of the Mediterranean Sea has long had the upper hand in defining a Mediterranean civilization, whose details were individually signified along history, and in particular countries. He demonstrated Egypt and Greece as exemplars, highlighting the evolution of building types and the use of building materials along history in the two countries. *Sobhy* concluded that Mediterranean Architecture can only be defined in lights of geographical attributes.

Nada Adel, asserted that the sum of countries circumscribing the Mediterranean Sea resemble a "community", in which individual differences are reflections of identity. She demonstrated examples from the entire countries of the Northern Mediterranean, emphasizing the "cultural identity" of each, and correlating it with its architectural characteristics. *Nada* concluded that, Mediterranean Architecture is an expansive and flexible term, and that can only be defined in lights of historical and cultural attributes.

Yehia Abdel Qader did not attempt at defining the term. Rather, he attempted at shedding lights at the formalistic attributes that are likely to characterize a style. He presented different examples of "coastal" residences, pointing out the vivid colors, the bold simplicity, the textual contrasts, the natural stone building articulations, the tiling and the use of stucco as hallmarks of the refreshing – unpretentious style. *Abdel Qader* concluded that Mediterranean Architecture is a formal-architectural style.

As for *Tamer Sarkis*, he too did not attempt at defining the term as such. Rather, he attempted at defining Mediterranean countries as a reality that ought to "politically" unite, aiming at attaining a supposition of "Mediterranean Architecture" that would be equivalent to "Western Architecture", or "Architecture of the Mediterranean World", equivalent to "Architecture of the Islamic World". *Sarkis* thus, concluded that Mediterranean architecture is a living reality that acquires its definition in lights of political attributes.

Hazem Mamdouh described Mediterranean Architecture as this architecture generally characterized by courtyards and fountains, flat roofs, structured columns and arches, cement, stucco and tiling, and considerable vernacular appropriateness. *Mamdouh* distinguished the differences of architecture of the Mediterranean countries in relevance to their original "classical" influences. He demonstrated examples from Italy and Spain, discriminating between the "Feminine" Italian, with more European influences, and the "Masculine" Spanish, with more North African influences. *Mamdouh* concluded that Mediterranean Architecture is a term that has become a catchphrase like "Victorian Architecture" or "Colonial Architecture". He affirmed that all three are based on long lived historic styles that have undergone many permutations but are now painted with a brush that reduces them to architecture equivalent of a sound-bite.

And finally *Yasmine Magdy* found it hard to generalize a single definition of the term. Rather, she suggested that there are some general dominants in the Mediterranean region that are associated with the geography, climate, shared history, and accordingly cultures and life styles that have altogether resulted in some recognizable characteristics for the region. *Yasmine* concluded that Mediterranean Architecture might be described as particular shared design features for the particular Mediterranean region.

Discussion . . .

I don't claim that I've totally succeeded in achieving the objectives of the experiment. But the experiment was enjoyable and satisfactory. Along its three phases, the students were completely and independently involved in a process of exploration of meanings. They also learned how to deal with different thinking approaches towards dealing with the verbal language of architecture; that is the "meta-language". Happily and interestingly, I was astonished with their newly acquired confidence of self expression and ideas communication. One question that arises out of this experiment is whether the accomplishments of the students primarily depended on the level of their inherent abilities, or whether the majority of students did possess an acceptable level of inherent abilities[17]? For me, I accept the latter opinion. It is then our responsibility as educators to guide them, through dedication, patience and persistent efforts, reinforce and bring out those abilities.

Another important issue that comes forward as result of this experiment, and that has to do with the main argument of this paper, is that it is possible to initiate a methodological architectural talk, where the commonly used terminologies find a way for re-examination and perhaps re-definition. The results of the experiment assert that architectural education should be the test bed for architectural talks, regarded as an intellectual skill students need to master when they are encountered with practice upon their graduation. And rather than looking at architectural discourse as an end in itself, it should be regarded as only a step in a life-long involved process. Such a process should not only provide the students with the opportunity to further develop their intellectual abilities to deal with the "theoretical" aspects of architecture. But also should place extensive efforts on developing their abilities to face the unexpected challenges confronting dealing with the built environment. These challenges include, among many others, the continuously ever-changing socio-cultural contexts in which architecture exists[18].

Conclusion . . .

What is needed in architecture is a word to describe the study of the talking of architecture. "*Theoreography*" or "*Theoreology*" are contenders, just as "*Historiography*" and "*Historiology*" describe the employment of writing history and the knowledge or study of history[19]. It is recommended that an emphasis should be placed on the significance of language in architectural education. And it is asserted that enhancing the verbal language is a corner stone in planting the seeds of creativity within students of architecture, regarded as this intellectual skill of generating action when encountered with cultural expression.

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[17] Mohamad Al-Asad, 2002
[18] Mohamad Al-Asad, 2002
[19] Paul-Alan Johnson, 1994

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