

**Architecture, Language,
and Meaning**



Approaches to Semiotics

49

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Architecture, Language, and Meaning

*The Origins of the Built World
and its Semiotic Organization*

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Because perception and action take place in continuous dependence upon the environment, they cannot be understood without an understanding of that environment itself.

Ulric Neisser, *Cognition and Reality*, 1976, 183.

Preface

The aim of the present volume is the elaboration of a semiotic perspective on the problems surrounding the origins and evolution of the built environment. The present text is an arrested moment in an ongoing research program begun in 1970 at Yale University, continued since 1973 at MIT, and since 1977 in Ithaca. Some of this work was reported on elsewhere (D. Preziosi 1979a). The following represents the application of the current results of that research program to the growing body of important speculation on the question of human cultural origins.

At the present time, the energies of researchers in a wide variety of disciplines, from cognitive anthropology to zoosemiotics, are being directed to the elaboration of theoretical models for socio-cultural origins and evolution. One of the most important frontiers currently being explored in the panoply of concerns regarding the nature and organization of human semiotic activity is the area of *architectonic theory*—the set of methods and perspectives currently being brought to bear on the evidence for systematicity in the significative organization of built environments. The increasing urgency of this task, discussed in the Preface below, is augmented by increasing indications regarding the systemic correlativities in the design features of architectonic and linguistic systems: as a result of the recent maturity of architectonic theory and analysis, we are now in a position to begin to explore both broadly and concretely, the nature of the similarities and differences between these two fundamental panhuman sign-systems, redressing the isolation of sophistication of insight in verbal semiotics.

While architectonic theory today operates from a broadly holis-

tic perspective on the built environment in its totalities, this has not always been the case, and for generations the study of the built environment had been fragmented into a variety of foci and subject matter, and a variety of methods and conceptual domains, from 'architectural history' to environmental psychology to interactional and spatiokinetic analysis. What has lucidly emerged over the past decade is the view that only a holistic and integral perspective on the entire set of significative environmental behaviors can make sense of the synechdochal indications of systematicity in the organization of the variety of modalities in the visual realm. It has additionally become apparent that it is only in such a framework that we may begin to more fully understand the nature of verbal semiosis, and its embeddedness among the network of sign-systems defining and defined by culture.

The present volume is embedded in the theoretical perspectives on the built environment elaborated during the present decade in the aforementioned research project, and constitutes a provisional attempt to elaborate a pansemiotic framework for the interactive origins and evolution of cultural semiosis. As such, the present study is necessarily incomplete and provisional, despite its interactional and comparative focus. We are only at the beginning of a new and exciting phase of semiotic inquiry, and any study such as the present one constitutes more of an opening to dialogue than a set of formulaic pronouncements. Purely and simply, we need to know considerably more from a variety of disciplinary perspectives to be able to address the issues raised below in a more than delicate and tentative manner. In particular, both semiotic inquiry and the study of perceptual and cognitive psychology need to become increasingly sensitive to the overlapped nature of their concerns: much of the recent work in the latter area has profoundly important implications for the development of semiotics, and it is patently the case that all semiotic analysis bears implications for the future development of perceptual psychology. The study of human semiosis and perception comprise compatible and complementary (and supplementary) perspectives on the constructive orchestration of meaning. In the writer's view, both semiotics and perceptual psychology rightly reject the role of viewer or observer or decoder or reader as a passive cryptographer and affirm that

semiosis and perception are cyclic, temporal, and interactive activities oriented toward the significative construal and production of information. We may very well suggest, more than impressionistically, that in their fundamental mechanics they are metonymically related as two sides of the same coin, and metaphorically related by their equivalencies of process.

As saliently noted by Ulric Neisser in his important recent study (Neisser 1976:183), 'Because perception and action take place in continuous dependence upon the environment, they cannot be understood without an understanding of that environment itself'. The present volume has as one of its aims the portrayal of the systematicity of the built environment, and attempts to define a number of areas where the recent growth of architectonic inquiry may augment our understanding of the origins and evolution of human cognition.

The initial impetus for the present study was the occasion of an interdisciplinary graduate seminar conducted by the writer at MIT in 1975 on the origins of architecture, concurrent with the aforementioned research program on the semiotic analysis of built environments. The appearance of this volume itself runs concurrent with an analytic and taxonomic study of Paleolithic settlement remains as presently known, a study which has as one of its goals the elaboration of a typological framework for the comparative analysis of built environment formations in human history.

The research upon which the present book is based was supported in part by various grants and fellowships, including a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1973-1974), and various supportive grants from the Department of the History of Art at Yale University. I am also grateful for the in-house leaves from the Department of Art and Architecture at MIT during 1973 and 1974 which enabled me to begin putting in order the accumulation of notes and data begun several years before. The initial impetus for the exploration of the issues discussed in the present volume and in concurrent writings came from the generous allowances of time offered by a Charles Eliot Norton Fellowship from Harvard University, and a Harvard Travelling Fellowship, during 1964-1966.

The number of persons whose interactions with the writer have

affected the present study to its benefit is very great. Many colleagues, friends, and students have left an imprint on this book in direct and indirect ways, and it has often been the case that a chance remark or a brief conversational interaction has stimulated a train of thought which ultimately led to the clarification of the aims of this project. I must above all acknowledge the contributions of many students and friends in my graduate seminars at Yale and MIT whose lively, informed, and insightful conversations and enormous energies were crucial both in the launching of this project and in its continuation. My teachers at Harvard and my colleagues at Yale, MIT, and Cornell have been similarly generous with their time with someone perhaps overtly impatient to define the right questions to ask. The following list is partial, and I have tried to include all those with whom some (even momentary) personal interaction has affected the present report to its benefit:

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Donald Preziosi

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Overview: Linguistic and Architectonic Signs

In the semiotic task of revealing more clearly the place of language in communication, the study of nonverbal communication—and in particular the analysis of visual communication—has acquired today a fundamental urgency and importance.

The study of visual semiosis has been and still remains an enormously difficult task, for not only must we deal with complexities of organization which have no direct correlates in nonvisual sign-systems, but we must also carry forward the necessary extrication of visual semiotics from its verbocentric captivity without falling into any number of opposite extremes.

We cannot adequately understand any form of communication *in vacuo*, for the various kinds of sign-systems evolved by humans have been designed from the outset to function in concert with each other in deictically-integrated ways, and it becomes increasingly clear that every code contains formative elements whose meaningfulness is ambiguous without indexical correlation to sign formations in other codes.

Human communication is characteristically *multimodal*. In the ongoing semiotic bricolage of daily life, we orchestrate and combine anything and everything at our disposal to create a significant world, or simply to get a message across. A semiotics of communicative events in their multimodal totality has yet to be born, and it will not come about until we have a more profound and complete understanding of the nature, organization, and operant behaviors of sign-systems other than verbal language.

The attempt to bring this about through the scientific superimposition of design features drawn from the study of verbal lan-

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guage upon other sign-systems has, by and large, been a failure. While it is true that much has been learned by such a procedure, the ultimate expected illumination has tended to be rather dim and fleeting in comparison to the energies expended, or, as more often has happened, the mute stones have remained mute.

This silence has induced some, for example the anthropologist Edmund Leach, to claim that it is only because all the things in an environment can be given lexical labels that we can recognize what they are—which is patently false (Leach 1976:33). As Michael Silverstein carefully reminds us, speech-acts are co-occurrent with events in distinct signaling media which together make up large-scale communicative events (Silverstein 1976:11-56).

Despite its truly unique powers and affordances, verbal language is not an active figure against a passive or static ground. This becomes increasingly clear the more we learn about the nature and organization of nonverbal sign-systems. One area of research which has grown up in recent years which uniquely promises to clarify the place of language in communication, and which has already served to collaterally illuminate certain features of the organization of linguistic systems themselves, is the area of architectonic analysis, concerned with the study of the system of the *built environment*—what has come to be called the *architectonic code*.

In part, the emergence of architectonic analysis as an integrated framework for the study of the built environment has become an inevitable and necessary result of the convergence of a series of perspectives on space- and place-making activity. While research elaborated over the past few decades under the rubrics of proxemics, kinesics, environmental psychology, man-environment relations, architectural history, body language, and perceptual psychology has had significant input into architectonic analysis over the past decade, not all of what each of these has had to say has been relevant. Each has been elaborated for different purposes, and each focusses upon a selected portion of the architectonic totality.

The first and most important approximation of such a synthesis came about during the 1960s with the emergence of 'architectural semiotics' and the quest for minimal meaningful units in architecture. Much of this work consisted of plugging in architecture to