

Autonomy and Heteronomy in Architecture Theory: Part V

***Architecture Between Orality and Literacy?*
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Finally, I will drive you home to the hypothesis around which I have been circling. The influence of literary concepts and of philosophy on contemporary architectural theory is not casual. The same kind of recapitulation is at work in literature, philosophy and architecture. The silent and solitary reader of texts and hypertexts on screens is echoed by the traceless solitary resident of the modern apartment.

I suggest that the ongoing historic debate on the conflicting relationships between orality and literacy is not only relevant for literary theory. Home stands maybe to house—or what I call historic domesticity to contemporary anti-domestic architecture—as orality to computer-literacy. And this has been so far overseen by architects and architecture theorists alike. Let’s look over the fence behind which linguists, historians and sociologists discuss a fascinating thesis.

This thesis states that true literacy does not begin historically with Egyptian or Chinese ideograms, Mayan pictograms, Mesopotamian cuneiforms or Mediterranean syllabaries and not even with the Northwestern Semitic consonantic “alphabets” from which the Phoenician, the Hebrew and the Arabic scripts evolved. It starts with the alphabet, invented by the Greeks between 720 and 700 B.C.

True, the inventors of the alphabet built on the experimentations of the Northwestern Semitic scripts, that the Greeks received from the Phoenicians, probably in bilingual Cyprus, where

it was first used to engrave prayers in stone.¹ True also that two forms of writing had been known to the Greek previously: the Cretan linear A and the Mycenaean linear B, of which only the latter has been approximately deciphered by British architect Ventris. There are no traces of the use of any of them after the XIIIth century B.C., which was followed by the so-called “dark age,” in fact a period of flourishing oral culture in which the grounds for the classical Greek civilization were laid.

The conservation of memories in an oral culture happens through mnemotechnic formulae rich in assonances, “rhymes,” voluntary redundancies: pre-alphabetic speech is “formulaic.” Reading Mediterranean pre-alphabetic writs is like searching the garden’s grass for eggs on Easter morning: the reader’s eye wanders through the lines, looking for common expressions of speech: formulae. This cannot be otherwise, because pre-alphabetic scripts were trapped between two contradictory requirements: simplicity, that is the reduction of the signs to a small number which can easily be memorized, and consistency, that is the possibility to relate every sign with a sound with a minimum of ambiguity. Among the old Mediterranean scripts, the Mycenaean syllabary called linear B achieved a remarkable simplicity (about 90 signs) at the cost of consistency: it could only represent open syllables (syllables ending with a vowel), so that a lot of guesswork was left to the reader.² Consequently, a “text” could only be a record of what had once been said, and consisted of formulae well known to the reader and to his hearers. Since reading required this “recognizableness,” the written documents of the pre-alphabetic period are impoverished memories of oral utterances. They were descriptive (of practical transactions or of heroic feats) and imitative of the oral way to bespeak them.

The interesting question is here whether something of this thesis does not apply to architecture, that is, if there is not an epical, “oral” lore of architectural formulae or archetypes

¹ Eric Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975.

² In Mycenaean syllabic script, this text’s next sentence would approximately read:

whose memory would run through the whole history of architecture. Does perhaps the contemporary practice of “defamiliarization” frustrate a deeply ingrained, atavic (“epic,” “pre-literate,” “oral”) desire for architectural recognizableness?

This is the question that a recent book by Anthony Antoniades endeavors to raise and in part to answer.³ He recalls that

...Rykwert made the deepest dissection to date into the origins and creation of the hut, one of the earliest archetypes. In the process, and furthering his own belief that ‘... if architecture was to be renewed, if its true function was again to be understood after years of neglect, a return to the ‘preconscious’⁴ state of building, or alternatively to the dawn of consciousness,⁵ would reveal those primary ideas from which a true understanding of architectural forms would spring...’ he created his book *On Adam’s House in Paradise*,⁶ one of the most revealing “pirouettes” between the days of our mythic origins and the applications of today [...]. Rykwert’s contribution was an interpretive construct based on one of the architectural archetypes of mankind.⁷

Antoniades discovers other primordial architectural archetypes in the legend of *Gilgamesh*, in the *Ramayana*, the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Kalevala*, among other testimonies of oral, pre-alphabetic or early alphabetic lores, and gives, for each of them, illustrated examples of their survival in architectural forms. This confirms, if it were necessary, that architecture is a more primal experience than literacy and literature and invalidates Bernard Tschumi’s aphorism that “there is no architecture without texts.”⁸ This is because architecture is a

co-se-que-ly a te cou o-ly be a re-co of wha ha o bee sai. Find the Eastern eggs in this pasture.

³ Anthony C. Antoniades, *Epic Space: Towards the Roots of Western Architecture*, New York: van Nostrand and Reinhold, 1992.

⁴ Following Jack Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Ann Arbor MI: Bks Demand Umi, the transition from “prelogical” to “logical,” or “preconscious” to “conscious” states of minds, from magic to science, from Levi-Strauss’s “savage mind” to domesticated thinking can be explained more elegantly as changes from orality to diverse stages of alphabetization. Following Goody’s intuition, I suggest to read “pre-alphabetic” where Rykwert writes “preconscious.”

⁵ Ibid.: “to the dawn of alphabetization.”

⁶ *On Adam’s House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1981.

⁷ Anthony C. Antoniades, *Epic Spaces*, op. cit. p.xii.

⁸ Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1997. I confess that I have been tempted for a while to adopt his restriction as an equivalent of the distinction between epic (oral) narrative and literature, that is between orality and literacy. Tschumi’s suggestion would open to a distinction between preliterate, “epic” built forms and architecture as a literate, read alphabetic activity. However, I finally rejected the suggestion because, like Humpty-Dumpty, for whom words meant what he intended them to mean, it does too much violence to linguistic usage: the word architecture recalls the *arche-tehton*, the “head-carpenter,” by no means a figure limited to the literate realm. Primitive domestic, and epic architectures could be terms that stand vis-à-vis historic architectural forms as orality stands to literacy.

gesticulatory art: it involves the whole body and is perceived in its movements, while reading immobilizes the body to the benefit of the eye: our bodily “memories” are of a more primitive, “oral,” or, to retake Antoniades’s word, “epic” character than our visual memories. Good architecture could relate modern man to his oral origins, which does not mean that architects should literally “sketch and do ‘huts’,” as some members of the “Postmodern, Historicist” group have understood Rykwert to enjoin them doing.⁹

The alphabet opened to radically new possibilities. Because of the correspondence of graphic signs and pronounced sounds, it made writing independent from the recognition of spoken formulae. For the first time, things that had never been said could be written. Similarly, forms that had never been built could be thought of, though I surmise that this generally happened much later, perhaps as late as the breach of the great tradition at the end of the 17th century, in the time of “the first moderns.”¹⁰ Being a bodily and gestual activity, architecture offered resistance to its utter alphabetization and the oral transmission of architectural knowledge survived far into the alphabetic age.¹¹

Writing slowly became less descriptive and more conceptual. It started to look for the ground of things, behind appearances. For Walter Ong, the fact that the Greeks invented philosophy is less due to their specific genius than to the fact that they invented a unique new way of writing, the alphabet. In *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*,¹² Ong insists that philosophy and all the sciences depend on alphabetic writing. They are not the products of the unaided human mind, but of the use of a technology that has been so deeply interiorized that it

⁹ Anthony C. Antoniades, *Epic Space*, op. cit., p. xii.

¹⁰ Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1980.

¹¹ Joseph Rykwert, “The Oral Transmission of Architectural Knowledge,” source lost. “[before the XVth century] there is virtually no record about the transmission of ideas and skills. A great deal must have passed through evanescent gesture; perhaps as much as through graphic records and through words.” (p.1)

¹² New York: Methuen, 1982.

became part of the mental processes themselves. And he concludes: philosophy must become philosophically conscious of itself as a technological product. I plead with architects for a similar recognition concerning architectural theory.

The invention that made this “technology” and its interiorization possible is based on an analysis of the speech organ’s working: the vowels represent the vibration of a column of air in the larynx, while the consonants (which only “sound-with,” which are no sounds in themselves) represent the way the tongue and the lips initiate or stop the emission of sounds. Following Havelock, the alphabet is a “table of elements” of speech, a feat that required a high degree of abstraction. All ulterior atomistic ideas, like Democritus’s atoms and Plato’s elementary forms (Timaeus) seem to be metaphors of the letters.¹³ But is the functionalist reduction of the home to a place for satisfying basic needs supposedly universal and codified in standards not another effect of the alphabetic reduction of human speech and of the letters’ metaphorical power? And what are the “postmodern” hesitations about functionalism, if not the expression of doubts about the literate nature of architecture, even if they seek answers in a cooption of extremely literate experiments, or further, in the “simulations” of the system world?

Can architecture really settle in a world of pure signs without a real beyond? I think not. I hope that this reminder of the origin of the alphabetic mindset in a “technology” that was interiorized in modern man’s mental processes will contribute to clarify the debate on the nature of architecture. After all, philosophizing architecture theory should also become philosophically aware of being a technological product.

¹³Jack Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Society*, op. cit.