

Language as an architectural design tool. Analysis and description of a designing discursive practice

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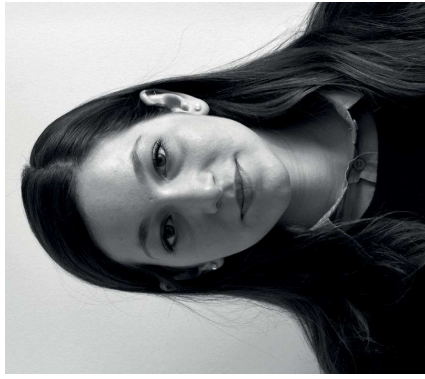
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# LANGUAGE AS AN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN TOOL: ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION OF A DESIGNING DISCURSIVE PRACTICE



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What role do language and texts play in the architectural design process? It is the purpose of this research to provide an answer to this question, developing a line of argumentation structured on two levels. On the first level, the thesis is aimed at describing a discursive practice characterizing the architects' design action: to do so, it carries out a linguistic and stylistic analysis of a selected corpus consisting of project reports written for some important national architectural competitions between the Second World War and the Seventies. On the other level, and concurrently, it suggests an interdisciplinary approach to the relationship between linguistics and architecture, in an attempt to demonstrate how the proposed method of analysis can contribute to the theoretical reflections related to the architectural design process, thus trying to overcome sector-based perspectives.

What do linguistics and architecture have to do with each other? There is no actual state of art on the topic in the current publishing world, still many essays deal with this issue both in the linguistic and the architectural fields with different starting points. For this reason, the first step in order to build an interdisciplinary relationship between the two is to define a space where a number of common subject matters can be observed.

The peculiarity of language used in the architectural branch has received great attention from that specific domain of linguistics which studies and describes the birth and the progression of Italian as a language in re-

first half of the XXth, consolidating to such an extent that for some time it became a model for other western countries.

From the second half of the XIXth century until the present days, though, the Italian architectural language has been progressively influenced by social, economic, and political changes, as well as by an increasing range of communicative situations and targets. The varieties of contemporary Italian, its sectorial and specialized languages, are yet debated by another branch of linguistics, called sociolinguistics. The field of study dedicated to specialized languages, in fact, largely focuses on the different communicative situations and targets. It considers not only the variations on the lexical level, but also involves the syntactic and textual one. It thus deals with linguistic register and texts production, relating to the categories of textual typologies and genres. Some papers on contemporary Italian architectural language have classified it not just as sectorial, but even as a specialistic one when referring to the highest communicative level – namely the expert-to-expert relation. At the same time, contemporary architectural language is deeply rooted in professional practices, where the "to do" dimension introduces significant register fluctuations, different textual genres, and a plurality of communicative typologies. Specialistic communication is indeed an important medium in the making of the cultural process, since at the basis of it lie the mental schemes and the encyclopaedia that give meaning to what we perceive.

It was however as early as the '60s and the '70s of the last century that linguistics and architecture found a meeting point. The increasing success of semiotics and structuralism, in fact, led to a theorization of architecture as language. A language characterized by a recognizable and legible structure, as well as able to communicate its functions, defined both by denotative and connotative meanings. A language with its own code, whose organization could be shaped as the one provided by Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics and his pivotal dichotomies. In this case, then, the relationship between linguistics and architecture tackled their epistemology, aiming at building a theory of architecture modelled on the semiotic or linguistic one. Nevertheless, the connection between the two is more clearly intertwined in the production of oral and written texts related to the whole architectural domain. Language devices, as much as textual typologies and genres, in fact, engage with the historical and theoretical disciplinary code unanimously shared in a specific time period, or with the one that expresses the architects' reflective thinking: as a matter of fact, they also deal with the ability to communicate, convey, and spread architectural culture, just as much as with the professional practice and the drafting of documents. Indeed, architects write to reflect upon the principles that shape their knowledge; to explain their thoughts and their beliefs about architecture, cities, and society; to describe their own or others' graphic representations; to promote their intentions and persuade other people about the legitimacy of their proposals; to communicate with their work group and regulate others' behaviour.

Both linguists and historians of language, on the one hand, architects and historians of architecture on the other, are therefore interested in describing the multiple uses of architectural language and its functions. Still, the latter also show the need to systematize the extensive branching of contents involving the architectural domain. Linguistic tools are thus employed in an attempt to better define how architectural knowledge structures itself through

theoretical, critical, historical, informative and practical dimensions. Considerable collections of essays then testify this effort. Some scholars query what features theoretical texts have or should have respectively looking at the presence of stable utterances and at the recurrence of discursive practices; or analysing lexical and textual choices used in a sampling of books. Some investigate how words shape and convey knowledge by drafting some kinds of glossaries and dictionaries which reflect past or present positions on architectural culture. Some others wonder which register and wording should be used to connect a specialistic knowledge to the common reader, and to let architectural critics be also the medium of historical and social instances. At last, some scholars look into the role of language and texts in the architectural design process accordingly to an ethnographic point of view, as much as a pragmatic and narratological one, or examining texts produced in practice.

At the end of this synthetic overview, we may then conclude that linguistics and architecture share a number of subject matters which surely pave the way to the development of a more integrated interdisciplinary approach,