Resonances of the Unknown

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relevance of second-order cybernetics for a theory of architectural design and related discourse.

Design/methodology/approach – First, the relation of architectural design to the concept of "poiesis" is clarified. Subsequently, selected findings of Gotthard Günther are revisited and related to an architectural poetics. The last part of the paper consists of revisiting ideas mentioned previously, however, on the level of a discourse that has incorporated the ideas and offers a poetic way of understanding them.

Findings – Gotthard Günther's conception of "You" is specifically valuable in reference to a theory of architectural design in the sense of an architectural   poetics.

Originality/value – The research furthers the field of architecture by contributing to it a new theory in the form of an architectural poetics. It addresses questions of design with a procedural framework in which critical engagement is an intrinsic principle, and offers an alternative to existing discourses through a poetry of architectonic order that is open to the   future.

Keywords: Architecture, Poiesis, Gotthard Günther, Inhabitable theories, Cybernetics, Philosophy
Paper type: Conceptual paper
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> Tell me (since you are so sensible to the effects of architecture), have you not
> noticed, in walking about this city, that among the buildings with which it is
> peopled, certain are mute; others speak and others, finally – and they are the
> most rare – sing? (Valéry, 1964, p. 175)

writes the poet Paul Valéry in his seminal work Eupalinos from 1921 in which he sends to the stage of literature again two of Plato's main characters – Phaedrus and Socrates – in a dialogic conversation. The Eupalinos is a narrative reflecting both on the position of design in relation to analytical thought, and on the position of the designer in relation to the edifice. Valéry defines architectural design by relating it to "poiesis". He refers to a specific meaning of "poiesis" which can roughly be translated with the term "creation". However, the term seems to have existed with a set of interpretational overtones that make translation to contemporary languages difficult. In a translation of Plato's Symposium we can read:

> You realise that the word "poetry" (poiesis) is a term of wide application.
> When something comes into existence, which has not existed before, the
> whole cause of this is "creation". The products of every craft are creations and
> the craftsmen who make them are all creators (Sheffield, 2008, p. 42).

Eventually, the question that relates to the meaning of "poiesis" is an expression of a struggle with epistemology. In this struggle, the analytic disciplines have gained dominance over the creative. The relevance of imagination within the cognitive act has been reduced (Beer, 1980, p. 63).

The Eupalinos deals with the issue of reconciliation between these different approaches in several ways. "There had been in me an architect that the circumstances did not succeed in forming" (Valéry, 1964) states Valéry's Socrates. For the representative of philosophy, reconciliation can only be achieved on the basis of the assumption of a common origin. He presents an analytical solution. However, in order to finally achieve reconciliation we would still need to prove this common origin. Valéry juxtaposes this analytical solution by suggesting another way of reaching reconciliation through "poietic" processes. These seem to be capable of achieving a specific form of synthesis without the necessity to make reference to a common origin.

Eventually, the question that Valéry is engaged with is one, which is recurring in the studies related to second-order cybernetics. There are notions corresponding to the ones mentioned above, for example, in the writings related to "autopoiesis" – a term and concept that has been coined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in 1973 (Maturana and Varela, 1980). In his "Preface to autopoiesis", Beer (1980, pp. 63-5) writes:

> Historically, synthesis seems to have been too much for the human mind – where practical affairs were concerned. [...] It is not about analysis, but synthesis. It does not play the Game of the Categories. And it does not interrelate disciplines; it transcends them. [...] The dissolution of the deadlock within the disciplinary system [...] has got to be metasystemic [...].

The nature of an autopoietic system is based on relations and processes and not on properties of compounds (Maturana and Varela, 1980). The same can be said for an architecture related to "poiesis". However, in contrast to autopoietic systems which create themselves, the processes that relate to "poiesis" in, for example, architectural design have an author – the architect.

The problematics in contemporary theories of architectural design seem to lie in part on the ignorance of a systemic approach, which also leads to the avoidance of reflection on the author. Architecture often appears to be realized on the basis of an obscure knowledge. However, as described above, there are indications that this, which seems obscure, is related to an understanding of practice as poetic practice. Detached from the author, any theory of architectural design, cannot but objectify the inhabitant, and thus must fall short in addressing the inhabitant in his/her complete emotionality. The inhabitant cannot be a user with a standardized viewpoint, unless all that, which is beyond an assumed norm, and also the future is excluded.

Architecture's prime interest may, in fact, lie in mediating our Being-in-the-World (Sloterdijk, 2004). At the same time architecture presents an option to share these theories, and to inhabit them. Yet, "to inhabit" suggests an activity that is beyond interpretation. It suggests an option for full possession in the sense of re-creation. How do I create, what can be re-created by someone I cannot know? How do I speak about it?

There is a series of questions arising when asked to create and to speak about what is understood to be(come) frameworks for (unknown) life. Essentially, such research needs to deal with the question of the unknown and related to this the question of open form. This text attempts to make suggestions on how one could think and address the above-mentioned issues, and develops on the idea that a concept of inhabitation may be feasible only on the basis of a theory that extends the well-known two-valued logic that has been dominant in the Western world from Aristotelean times onwards.

The text's focus is thus on the notion of architecture as a transcendental concept. It draws from it an argument for the understanding of architecture as a process that creates borders rather than borderlines, limits rather than limitations and is a discipline of radical communication that always seeks to extend itself towards an "Other" – the unknown – yet, without measuring it in an attempt to first make it provable, and then to address it. Perhaps, Paul Valéry would have agreed with the notion that poetic discourse allows us to maintain a specific order within the time-based realm of language, one that

could be called architectonic (Vesely, 2004, pp. 92-107). It might present us the option of mediating architectonic order within the realm of language, and to initiate an approach to an understanding of space on a level other than that of space itself. Possibly then, of such texts one could speak of as architecture in a broader sense; as poetic narratives of architectonic order. Or, in reference to Valéry's (1997) Eupalinos and Heidegger's (2002) The Origin of the Work of Art, one could suggest that such texts present a meta-architecture.

At the beginning of the essay collection entitled Between Past and Future, Arendt (1994, p. 7) cites an aphorism by the poet René Char: "Our heritage is not preceded by a testament". Every generation, Arendt reminds us, must rediscover a specific space of thought. She calls this space "non-time space" – the gap between past and future. In order to better understand Arendt's term, it must be mentioned that in the German language only one word exists for both "presence" and "present". Non-time space is thus presence, and presence is where past and future conjoin.

Günther's initiation

In light of the above, we will consider the research of Gotthard Günther from an architectural point of view. Gotthard Günther, born in 1900, was a German-American philosopher and logician, known for his expertise on Hegel. He emigrated from Germany in 1937, via Italy to South Africa, and in 1940 to the USA. There, he worked on a system called place-valued logics. A book whose title translates to Idea and Outline of a Non-Aristotelian Logic was published in Germany in 1957 (Günther, 1957). In 1960, he joined Heinz von Foerster's Biological Computer Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (von Foerster et al., 1997) where he stayed until 1972, and where he became influential in the development of second-order cybernetics. Gotthard Günther repeatedly attempted to raise interest in post-war Germany for (American) cybernetics, first through the back door of the publication of an anthology of American science fiction in 1952 (Günther, 1952b), later through lectures and presentations. He moved back to Germany in 1972. Professor at the University of Hamburg, he held lectures in Hamburg until his death in 1984. His engagement in Germany in favour of cybernetics was not particularly successful. His work until today, in fact, has been mostly ignored. It is feasible that he would have been more successful in the English speaking world, yet, much of his work was published exclusively in German.

In reference to the research of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling – one of the proponents of German speculative idealism – Gotthard Günther discovered what one could call a logic gap. The classic setting knew an undefined Being that appeared represented "as world" in the objects. The subject needed to be confirmed as "in the world" through its relation to Being. It was dependent. Descartes liberated the subject from this dependence. By his "cogito ergo sum" (Descartes, 2002), the ego was pulled onto itself, yet, "in the act of reflection" (Günther, 1957, p. 83) it also pulled itself out of the world. There is now, Being as objects in the world, and an ego outside. Yet, suddenly there is another entity, also capable of reflection and capable of pulling itself out of the world. It cannot be theorized as ego nor as object. In it, the act of reflecting appears as will:

> The You is an "object of second order" that is capable to offset itself both from me (the ego) and from the world – the objects of first order. It is thus "a Third, free from both" (Günther, 1957, p. 83).

You is thus an existence that cannot be theorized within the realm of two-valued logic. We could also state that within two-valued logic, You is unknown. Can we speak about it?

> All languages that have developed up to now in our terrestrial civilizations presuppose a two-valued vision of the world. Their structure of reflection therefore is also rigorously two-valued, and the linguistic means to adequately express poly-valued experiences are lacking [...]. The speculative idealists instinctively comprehended the gap between classical colloquial language and theory of reflection, and searched to construct linguistic emergency bridges (Günther, 1957, p. 18).

The problems encountered in considering questions of architectural design are similar to those that Gotthard Günther expressed. The inhabitant – addressed in designing – is essentially a You. And, in their dependence to You, questions cannot be solved in a language that is bound to two values. The research into this issue, which I call "inhabitable theories", had led to Leibniz, Hegel and Arendt, and to the writings of Celan, Duras, Blanchot and Lévinas among others. Isolated fragments emerged that appeared to fit a puzzle. In the interim, however, the structure remained inaccessible. Gotthard Günther's work provides an argument for the liberation of thought from its ligation to the dual values of language, instead, relating it to the practice of designing. The "emergency bridge" that Günther had described could be constructed through the means of an architectural composition – however, on the level of language. The following section consists of an attempt to enter, on the level of discourse, into this very movement, which could assist in initiating an understanding that transcends binary logic. A discourse of architectural design emerges, one which performs its own theories as a kind of meta-architecture, i.e. the texts describing the rules for "inhabitable theories" perform their own order, and are thus in essence, architectural. The reader may decide if the resulting text could be understood as a kind of "science fiction" that delineates the beginning of an existence of a higher order:

> Today, we stand amidst the first emerging attempts to achieve a transition from the second metaphysics to a third metaphysical level of man [...]. At the beginning of every new metaphysical epoch of man is the myth, which constructs the framework for the oncoming concrete history (Günther, 1952a, p. 238),

writes Günther in the comment to the volume of short stories of American science fiction that he edited for the German audience in 1952. The edifices may sing.

Towards another discourse

I am one. I walk to be, always
The last in my sequence
My memories are operators to my dreams

You may question a passage without a beginning, and I say yes: it is true, my oneness needs careful construction. It begins with an assumption of an actuality that I might call with Hegel "true infinity". It is a true without an option for a false. No in between is given either:

> The image of the progress to infinity is the straight line, at the two limits of which alone the infinite is, and always only is where the line – which is determinate being – is not, and which goes out beyond to this negation of its determinate being, that is, to the indeterminate; the image of true infinity, bent back into itself, becomes the circle, the line which has reached itself, which is closed and wholly present, without beginning and end (Hegel, 2004, pp. 149-50).

Lenses were invented first to set the world on fire. From time to time, Hegel saw the shadows that were created by the fire just behind him. At other times, he might have feared to pass away to nowhere with a glass of toxic liquid in his hand. Once more, he thus returned to the beginning – the beginning you were searching for?:

> [...] when man begins to philosophize, the soul must commence by bathing in this ether of the One Substance, in which all that man has held as true has disappeared; this negation of all that is particular, to which every philosopher must have come, is the liberation of the mind and its absolute foundation (Hegel, 1806).

Yet, what unmelts onto the world might be a composite. "I saved you!" said Spinoza. "False", said God. Immune against this speaking God was Leibniz. The fire warmed his back. The ether was folded onto the world, and viewpoints were created.

We are now the fluid living mirrors of the infinite universe, that which includes everything. We are substantial form, each reflecting the whole, each reflecting every other. All things are enfolded in us, and that which we cannot perceive distinctly appears confused. The resonance of truth is the bond between us, we who are indivisible, different in the degrees of distinct perceptions, memories included, body and mind, striving from perception to perception, always acting, led by desire. We wish to be one. Every consistent system must logically be incomplete? Heroes pass sail siren song islands while she is weaving.

From outside, the library appears in all its innocence. Socrates speaks to Phaedrus in the original narrative of love, and fails; while towers are built to never reach the heavenly beyond. They may never reach out to You – beyond a two-valued logic that made objective Being coincide with subjective Thought in heaven. From this landscape, You were logically excluded. Objectively one can conclude that misunderstanding was logically included.

From inside, the library that I have entered a long time ago, projects a void – You, in present and in future – and knows a language of different order, of multiple values and dimensions. The singing edifice is resonance of higher order: I have been created to always become what you desire me to be. I am the sole opportunity, a mere offer to You – to follow the traces that resonate your voice – your unknown voice. I do not wish to speak but your speech. I want to dissolve in your desires, want to be possessed, be made all your own. It is You – the unknown addressed – who is my orientation. I come as a perfect gift, without expectations.

All logic that includes You and me in a distant future time must be of a higher order. It entangles itself in You – to take you within, to make you creator and to dissolve whoever you were before – once, at the beginning of curiosity. For all that which resonates, resonates in You. A language that attempts to speak a higher order must speak the void that can be filled with value from the meta-level. All void is gesture.

You are the unknown addressed to become creator and author of another, yet still hidden story, to be told in a future present:

> [...] who experiences that there are more intensive and higher forms of spiritual life, than are represented through the human Gestalt has no other chance but to desert from humanness. For it is the categorical responsibility of consciousness to realize in itself the highest form of experience that it possibly can realize (Günther, 1952a, p. 232).

A theory may be reduced to application by sacrificing the future for predictability. A place, writes the anthropologist, is actual to those who constantly perform its borders:

> Do we now perhaps find the place where the strange was, the place where the person was able to set herself free, as an – estranged – I? Do we find such a place, such a step? (Celan, 1983, p. 195).

> YES BECAUSE [...] yes I said yes I will Yes (Joyce, 1989).

How infinite can I think You? [...] so the journey ends, the siren song fades.

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