THE MEANING OF MEANS: SEMIOLOGY IN ARCHITECTURE CASE STUDY: VILLA SAVOYE

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ABSTRACT
As a sign system, architecture could be analyzed the way we examine a work of literature. While group of words arranged syntagmatic could establish an integrated meaning, elements in a building are systematically configured to form a meaningful work of architecture. Analogous to words, those architectural elements are symbols representing meaning which serves as a foundation for an architectural object. Therefore, as a system of signs, architecture serves as a medium which communicates relevant and contextual meaning. Occasionally, architects overlook meaning which lives among the cultural context of the society, or even worse, they neglect the meaning possessed by signs built in an architectural work. More or less, buildings subsequently turn into meaningless signs. With the semiology approach of Saussure and Jencks, we could decipher the formation of meaning possessed by architectural objects from various standpoints, both denotative and connotative, and through the lens of architect and user. Thus, we may understand architectural work as a whole, even to its most fundamental meaning.

Keywords: Architecture; Meaning of Means; Semiology; Sign; Symbol

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1. INTRODUCTION
The continuous search for meaning is a marked characteristic of mankind. Through the meaning making process, we attain deeper knowledge of the basic principles, concepts, and even the most complex ideas. Along with it, we also express those meaning to other individuals. Symbol or sign, beginning from cave paintings drawn by our ancestors to the alphabet that we widely use today, were invented to communicate meaning, which itself is an abstract entity, into the exoteric form that is intelligible to others [1].

While a sentence, word, or even letter serves as a medium which communicate meaning, architecture also serves a similar purpose. It allows an architect to express meaning to the building’s users and surroundings. Thus, we may classify architecture as a system of sign which communicate relevant meaning to its surrounding context [2]. Aside of the meaning expressed by the architect or conveyed by an architectural object, we should also take into consideration the meaning received by other individuals interacting with the building. Various interpretations of a building form and physical appearance might convey multiple iterations of meaning, depending on the cultural and emotional background of the individual [3].

Throughout the history of mankind, architecture had been relegated from being the physical embodiment of collective culture and belief system into an exclusive form of individual expression [4]. Occasionally, architects overlook meaning which lives among the cultural context of the society, or even worse, they neglect the meaning possessed by signs built in an architectural work. More or less, buildings subsequently turn into meaningless signs.

Counteracting the problem, first this research is to look for meaning as the essence of an architectural work. Second, this research is also intended to deconstruct the process of making meaning of an architectural object from various perspectives. It is hoped that through this study, we can understand the work of architecture as a whole, even to the most basic meaning.

2. MATERIAL AND METODE
2.1. Materials
Villa Savoye was a vacation house built in the 1929 by renowned French architect, Le Corbusier. The villa, which was located in the outskirt of Paris, was chosen as the case study of this research due to its legacy as one of the most popular and earliest work of modern architecture in the 20th century. Contradictory to its modernist nature, the design of Villa Savoye was inspired by Classical Architecture of the ancient Greek and Roman era, reinterpreted by Le Corbusier after his expedition throughout the Mediterranean region in 1911 [5].

On the other hand, diverse interpretation of meaning of villa savoye design had ignited controversies, not only in the academic and practical realm of architecture, but also from the savoye family who inhabit the villa [6]. Nevertheless, the building was declared as a historical monument by the French government in 1965. The villa had also been opened for public ever since, allowing further interpretations of meaning by those visiting it.

2.3. Methods
The analytical method of this study deconstruct multiple iterations of meaning conveyed by Villa Savoye architectural form and function, comparing meaning interpreted by the architect himself (Le Corbusier), architecture academics and practitioners, users of the building (Eugénie Savoye), as well as the general public. The meaning making process was examined through the semiological approach of Ferdinand de Saussure [7], in which the meaning residing inside our
thought (signified) and the symbolical representation of the concept (signifier) was unified in the form of a sign. This concept would later be adopted to the architectural realm by Charles Jencks [8].

Moreover, those interpretations were also analyzed using the connotative and denotative approach (also pioneered by Saussure) [7]. In this approach, meaning was examined in two different levels, denotative meaning which possessed the universal perception on an object and connotative meaning which was relative to individual cultural and emotional background. Using both denotative and connotative meaning, we would be able to evaluate the difference between individual interpretations of an architectural object. Using these methods, this study aims to investigate the relation between an interpretant and architectural object (as a symbol) in the meaning making process, as well as their interaction in both physical and transcendental realms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Semiotic: Meaning, Symbol, and Sign System

Etymologically, the word “meaning” was derived from the old English word “mænan”, which denoted “mind”. Thus, “meaning” itself was a product of the human mind. We tend to interpret physical objects and express them into abstract concepts through our mind. In the meaning making process, concepts were deconstructed and turned into its purest form of expression to be understood by our rational mind.

While the Aristotelian viewed man as a creature distinguished by a rational principle, thus defining them as “Animal Rationale”, Ernst Cassier thought otherwise. The German philosopher proposed to define mankind as “Animal Symbolicum”, arguing that our ability to think rationally was not the sole defining attribute of humanity. He believed that the trait of rationality had brought mankind to a whole new realm of symbols. Our ability to process abstract concepts also enabled us to represent them through symbols [9]. Although they represent the concepts generated by our thoughts (reference), the symbols themselves did not have any direct association with the actual objects (referent). It was through our thought (referent) that an indirect relationship between symbols and objects (reference) was established [10].

![Diagram depicting the relationship between symbol, thought (reference), and object (referent)](image)

Figure 1 Diagram depicting the relationship between symbol, thought (reference), and object (referent)
The symbol became a medium for us to express and communicate abstract concepts to other individuals [1]. Ferdinand de Saussure, laid the theoretical foundation of semiology. In his dyadic sign theory, the Swiss linguist stated that a sign was defined by two aspects, a signifier (significant) and signified (signifié), in which the signifier was a symbol representing a signified (meaning/thought) [7]. It was the unified relationship between symbols (signifier) and meaning (signified) which defined human civilization and all of its culture. Therefore, as a cultural product, architecture itself corresponded to the meaning and sign system of semiotics [2].

3.2. Semiotics of Space and Symbolic Architecture

Architecture began to exist as human started to give meaning to the space they inhabit. According to Rober Mc Murtrie, the existence of space was realized by mankind after it went through the semioticization/meaning making process. Space was then categorized into the semioticized space (those which had gone through the meaning making process) and non-semioticized space (those which had not been realized and explored by human) [11].

Intuitively, every living creature sought for shelter to keep them from both physical and mental harms. In the early civilization, our ancestors began to use caves, a space with enclosure protecting them from the physical threat of beasts and climate, as their shelter. Cave inhabited by man then went through the semioticization process. With its function as a shelter, human began to interpret cave as a form of space [2]. In the mind of our ancestors, concept and meaning of a cave (signified) and its function as a shelter constructed a mental image. Safety and protection which the cave provided was also associated with the mental construct, then a symbol (signifier) was born. Every time that man felt threatened, they would recognize cave as a secure space.

As the basic construct of architecture, the meaning of space was represented by a sign. The relation between meaning, symbol, and the object was defined by Charles Jencks in his semiological triangle [8], in which meaning (thought/signified) was related to two aspects, the symbol (signifier) and referent (thing/object). Both aspects correlated simultaneously with human existence as the unification of mind and body. Referent was the object physical form, interacting with our physical body in the spatial realm, symbolically acted as the signifier or mental image representing the object in the while transcendental realm of our thought.


In the year 1911, Le Corbusier began his trip to the Mediterranean while recording his interpretations of classical architecture in his sketchbook. Those sketches manifested Le Corbusier’s fascination toward classical architecture works such as the Parthenon, a temple dedicated to the Greek goddess, Athena. The construction of Parthenon took 15 years, from 447 BC to 432 BC. Located on the Athenian town of the Acropolis, the building designed by Greek architects Iktinos and Callicrates was regarded as the signifier of Ancient Greek Culture, Athenian democracy, and even Western Civilization during its era [12].
Although Parthenon, no longer served its original function as a temple, a gaze at its façade still evoke a feeling of sacredness. Standing still on top of a hill, analogous to the sky where the Gods and Goddesses reside, the Parthenon was decorated with a repetition of Doric columns. A sacred level commencing the transition between the realm of Gods and ours called “stylobate”, served as a base for the temple. Supported by Doric columns, the triaglyph (the upper part of an entablature beams) was decorated with metope carving depicting ancient Greek’s legends.

Le Corbusier interpreted Parthenon as the peak of ancient western civilization. With balance and order, architecture liberated man out of the worldly chaos. In his logbook, Le Corbusier drew the Parthenon as geometric shapes while its surrounding nature was depicted as scribbled line, suggesting the juxtaposition between order and chaos [5]. While Parthenon had the Doric columns, Le Corbusier designed pilotis (round columns with small diameters arranged in modular system) to support the building mass. The villa seems as if it was floating above the ground, symbolically separating it from the world. Another feature that Villa Savoye had was the ribbon window, a continuous stripe shaped window traversing the building’s façade. Aside from giving a strong accent to the façade, ribbon window also served as a display, framing the daily life of those living inside Villa Savoye, an equivalent of the Parthenon’s metope depicting tales from the ancient Greek civilization.
While they differed physically, the symbolic elements (signifier) of Villa Savoye and Parthenon led to a common meaning (signified). Both of them indicated that the order, which separated human and the natural environment, was brought through architecture and the built environment. The signified resided in the ancient Greeks believes, as well as Le Corbusier’s vision of the modern world.

Despite gaining tons of praise and awards, a lot of critics and opposition were given to Le Corbusier’s icon of modern architecture. The biggest of them all might came from the Savoyes themselves, the family who commissioned and inhabited Villa Savoye. In a letter to Le Corbusier, Eugénie wrote that her family could not sleep during the raining season as the rain water kept leaking through the Solaris roof of the building down to the main bedroom below. The massive ribbon window spanning through the building façade also jeopardized the villa’s thermal comfort. During summertime, the vast area of glass immersed the inhabitant of the villa in an excessive amount of heat while heat lost was a guarantee during winter. Several months residing the building, the residents’ health quickly deteriorated due to the extreme thermal condition inside.

Aside of physical damages, psychological discomfort was also caused by the spatial configuration. Originally, Le Corbusier arranged the rooms using the proportion of the golden ration as a guide, the same method used by architects during the classical period of ancient Rome and Greece. He prioritized visual proportion of space over psychological comfort, compromising several rooms such as kitchen and dining area on the building’s edge.
3.4. Denotation and Connotation

As an architectural icon which initiated and inspired the rise of modern movement, the Villa Savoye’s design was not a write off for sure. Architectural elements were perfectly tailored to fit the building’s functional and visual aspects, creating an alluring harmony between form and function. Nevertheless, individual interpretations toward meanings (signified) differed, even when they were represented by the same symbol (signifier).

Saussure defined *semiological* meaning as denotative and connotative. While a rose might be interpreted as a plant with red coloured flower and sharp pricicles protecting its stem, another might have classified it as a symbol of love, beauty, and delight. Villa Savoye’s *pilotis* functioned as structural support, yet Le Corbusier viewed them as a boundary separating human and the worldly chaos of the natural realm. Le Corbusier’s greatest rival, Frank Lloyd Wright thought otherwise and saw them as an arrogance toward the surrounding context. Through literal understanding of an actual object, denotation was derived. The interpretation of the rose as a red coloured flower and *pilotis* columns as a structural element revolved around fundamental and universally accepted denotative meaning. In contrast, connotative meaning was based on a variety of individual interpretations, altered by one’s culture, environment, or even personal experience.

Familiarity enabled our mind to construct a mental representation (symbol/signifier) of an object. While the denotation was based on the properties of the actual object, symbols (which resided inside the transcendental realm of the human mind) did not retain any direct relationship with the object itself. As described by Charles Jencks in his *semiological* triangle [8], a sign was constructed through the unification of symbol (signifier) and meaning (signified). Since meaning itself was connotative and arbitrary, the interpretation of a sign depended on the personal view and beliefs held by the individuals interacting with the object. Whilst Umberto Eco classified function as the denotative meaning of an architectural work [2], connotative meaning involving specific context may not be disregarded, or else architecture would become a functional yet meaningless sign.

Connotative meaning was ever associated with the cultural aspect (a system of believing and meaning agreed upon and practiced continuously by a group of people) [3]. Thus, when a different set of meaning was offered that certain group of people, the sign would not be understood comprehensively. Even though the residents of Villa Savoye may acknowledged the denotative function of ribbon windows as an opening or *pilotis* as structural support, they might never have agreed upon the connotation implemented by Le Corbusier in those elements. As a sign system, architecture should not ignore the meaning and individual perception.

4. CONCLUSION

As an architect, we were well equipped with an extensive design knowledge, technical skills, and aesthetic taste required to construct the built environment. Nonetheless, we might not turn a blind eye to the fact that architecture was a part of its surrounding context, not a product of individual effort and believe. Hence, an architect should pay attention to the set of meaning which live among the building’s users.

In the case of Villa Savoye, we could observe that a set of meaning implemented in an architectural work by the architect might contradicted with the values believed by the inhabitants of the building. In the end, a building must satisfy both the denotative function and symbolical connotation comprehensively in order to be truly accepted.
REFERENCES