On the language of architecture
A closer look at three theorists to further an understanding of meaning in the built environment

29-11-2024

Merijn Vonk
4645618

Borders and Territories
Transient liquidities along the New Silk Road IV

Taught by Filip Geerts, Stefano Milano, Marc Schoonderbeek & Oscar Rommens

Abstract
This paper presents a literature-based investigation into how people interpret the language of architecture through a phenomenological lens, drawing on the works of Kevin Lynch, Pier Paulo Tamburelli, and Italo Calvino. Focusing on the perception of architecture and meaning in the built environment, the study explores concepts such as the image of the city and the relation between architecture, memory and experience. The three theorists are chosen because, while writing within a similar framework—i.e. with conviction that buildings don't communicate singular meaning, they explicitly and implicitly hold slightly different metaphysical accounts of the built environment and its ability to communicate with people. Lynch focuses on the designing of cityscapes through a priori aspects of the image of the city, Tamburelli argues for an a posteriori design approach in which a wide variety of actions are accommodated as to be remembered and Calvino suggests all buildings speak and say the same. Their points are summarized, clarified and put next to each other. Ultimately, the paper recognizes a need for clarity in building form and cityscape, and sees an opportunity for architecture to make possible collective meaning and memory by coincide of building and human activity.

Introduction

Architecture has often times been equated with language, and the metaphors hereto run wild. Different letters—brick, stone, glass, wood—put together might form distinct words—wall, window, Column, freeze—to be put in right grammatical order to create language—Roman, Byzantine, modern. Different languages might hold different words, some could even have different letters altogether, and similarly the same words put into different grammatical order might form an entirely new language: for writers it is a lovely frenzy of figure of speeches tying the world of architecture to the world of language. If however architecture can be seen as a language, it should also be able to *say* something. Much like a language being *heard*, people should be able to *see* buildings, understanding them by the architectural elements—words—and compositions—sentences—they form. Though popular throughout architecture history in the likes of Vitruvius, Serlio and Neutelings Riedijk, Western architecture literature in the 20th and 21st century has become increasingly critical of buildings that *speak*. This poses problems of its own however: if the built environment doesn't *say* anything, does it not matter how we shape our cities?

Given the above framework, this thesis looks to examine the relationship between architecture language and meaning through the works of three Western theorists writing in the last 60 years: Kevin Lynch, Pier Paulo Tamburelli and Italo Calvino. These thinkers offer different perspectives on how architecture communicates meaning, from Lynch's ideas on imageability of the city, to Tamburelli's assertion that architecture can only hold a possibility of future actions, to Calvino's poetic exploration of cities as subjective stories. The question driving this inquiry is:

> ''*How do people interpret the language of architecture, and what does this mean for the designing of the cityscape?*''

On a priori clarity

In 1960 Kevin Lynch in his book '*the image of the city'* first introduced the world to the term wayfinding, a term referencing people's ability to easily find their way in the city they live or dwell in. Key to wayfinding, according to Lynch, is the imageability of city form: how easy it is to form a mental image of the city. Most of Lynch's book is about the architectural elements that make for a good—strong— mental image of the city, but at the premise of the book is a thesis on how those elements communicate meanings.

As early as the introduction Lynch splits the mental picture of the city—an environmental image—into three components: identity, structure and meaning. Identity being so much as the recognition of an object as separate from other objects, structure referring to the placement of an object in relation to other objects and the observer, and meaning saying something about the implication of an object. To give an example: a chimney can be identified as being something else than a window, it is structured to be on top of the house at approximately 50 meters from me, and—I think—it means that the house has a fireplace. These three things then, according to Lynch, continually form our image of the city, everything we see we recognize, place, and give meaning to. Note how this has in it almost a chronological order. When interpreting the structure and identity of the built environment, Lynch recognizes a plurality of meanings evident in cities, writing that even buildings that easily communicate with observers hold different meanings. Put in his own words: ''*So various are the individual meanings of a city, even while its form may be easily communicable, that it appears possible to separate meaning from form, at least in the early stages of analysis*'' –Lynch (1960, p. 9). Lynch here plays a trick, skillfully dancing around a problem without fully solving it. At the premise buildings can communicate meanings, these however are so diversely interpreted that a singular meaning is lost. The building might still communicate one, but we as a species are too diversely loaded to interpret them the same. Lynch brushes over the issue without diving into it, he writes: ''*Our purpose is simply to consider the*

need for identity and structure in our perceptual world, and to illustrate the special relevance of this quality to the particular case of the complex, shifting urban environment'' –Lynch (1960, p. 10). So to Lynch the image of the city, which in entirety is formed by three components, can be adequately researched by looking only at the first two components: identity and structure. Put simply, for the researching of a *strong* image of the city it suffices to know that the chimney is not the house and the chimney is somewhere near the house and me. Whatever chimneys or houses or windows or streets are and do can be interpreted differently by a plurality of people and is not investigated within this book. Though not the premise of this paper, it is worth questioning whether or not this strong image of the city can ever be formed without meaning: can a street be recognized without knowing that one can walk on it? Lynch here presupposes an a priori reality, one that is outside of us, one which we can all see the same but interpret differently. He underpins this himself when at the end of the book he writes: ''*…different groups may have widely different images of the same outer reality''*—Lynch (1960, p. 131).

Moving forward within this framework and on the basis of questionnaires done in three American cities, Lynch recognizes 5 elements of the built environment that influence the imageability of the city: Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes and Landmarks. It is these architectural elements we continually try to organize: to identify and structure. Within this; ''*…the images of greatest value are those which most closely approach a strong total field: dense, rigid, and vivid; which make use of all element types and form characteristics without narrow concentration''* –Lynch (1960, p. 90). Designing a good cityscape inside of Lynch's framework and the American city then, is to place the above architectural elements— Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes and Landmarks—in a *strong total field*. Chimneys should not too densely populate one area of the cityscape, they should be somewhat equally spaced with other chimneys, placed on clear edges along distinguishable paths within bordered districts linked by readable nodes and interspersed sometimes with landmarks at strategic places. The good cityscape is easily recognizable and distinguishable so that its image can be easily remembered, it is—a priori—*clear*.

On a posteriori meaning

In his book '*On Bramante*', published in 2022, Pier Paulo Tamburelli takes a similar stance on the communicative abilities of architecture as Lynch. Early on in the book he writes: "*In architecture, the indirect link between spaces and experiences is always more convincing than the direct one between meanings and figures—which is not strictly impossible, but always too vague to communicate effectively and too weak to spark the imagination''*—Tamburelli (2022, p. 38). At the premise the argument resembles Lynch strongly: architectural elements—figures—can communicate meaning, but too little to be well understood. Tamburelli diverges from Lynch when in the same sentence he points at the link between spaces and experiences to stand at the basis of meaning in the built environment. To give an example; the time I was allowed to sit by the fireplace until past my bedtime hearing stories of my grandfather's military service will always be at the top of my mind when I see a chimney, giving me a strong emotion. The figures on that same chimney referring to selfless service and glorious motherland will most likely not make me feel any particular way, and will just be there without me understanding the reference. This leads Tamburelli to argue the a posteriori meaning, the one by memory through experience, will always spark more—emotional—response to the built environment then the a priori one. Tamburelli then proposes two things when designing the cityscape.

Firstly, Tamburelli argues for buildings that have very little to *say*. Because memory comes from experience, and experiences come from possibility to action, from for instance the possibility of sitting next to my grandfather at the fireplace, architecture can be seen as the opening up of possibility to action. This should then be a prime driver for the building of the built environment: to open up a wide variety of *possibilities to action*. Put in Tamburelli's words, he argues for an ''*…architecture constructed around activities that are neither anticipated nor explained, nor controlled, nor psychoanalyzed but just accommodated—and accommodated in such a way as to be remembered''* (Tamburelli, p. 75). The

figures on the chimney would not have steered me and my grandfather into having a conversation about his military service, it is the fact that it opens up the possibility to sit together in warmth and proximity that brings forward the possibility for that action, and it is the fact that I was able to do that action that makes me feel a certain way when I see chimneys today.

Secondly, and note the link to the quote above, Tamburelli argues for buildings that help to remember experiences—*actions accommodated in such a way as to be remembered*. For this Tamburelli references an hypothesis by Arnold Gehlen, who in a short essay '*Man, His Nature and Place in the World*' tries to convince his reader that ''*One can ultimately explain the preference for symmetrical figures only by their improbability*''—Gehlen (1988., p. 146). This leads Tamburelli to believe that we only experience our cityscapes in negativa: as something that is not probable. Pace the Modulor, we experience and recognize the built environment not because of natural (nor divine-) rules governing us, but vice versa: because spaces stand out from an inherently chaotic natural backdrop. To further clarify Tamburelli gives the example of the opening scene of '*2001: A Space Odyssey*', where the apes ''*recognize the singularity of the monolith without any need for an aesthetic theory and without making reference to any preceding symbolism*'' (Tamburelli, p. 151). The monolith, a big black perfectly smooth rectangle, is recognized because it stands out from the natural landscape, the apes recognize it because it is *not* what they usually recognize around them. Architecture too, is recognized because it is not nature, because it stands out from nature: ''*…forms like the sphere and the cube, quite apart from any rhetoric about "divine proportion," would be imprinted on the memory of human beings (and then recognized, named, recalled, and associated or contrasted with other forms) only because they are statistically unlikely*''—Tamburelli (2022, p. 151). So the built environment cannot be understood through any natural or divine proportion, but can be *more easily* remembered when being in the shape of something that is statistically unlikely in nature. The argument resembles Lynch greatly at this point, with a good cityscape needing to be organized—designed with basic forms—as to be easily remembered.

These are then the two things that architectural design can provide according to Tamburelli: it can open the possibility to action without trying to steer the action, and it can help remember the action by the using of easily recognizable forms. Put in his own words: ''*…architecture could be seen purely as the production of rooms to contain the desires of others, a technology able to lend precision to actions without predetermining their nature, able to augment the definition of the memory of others, and to anchor those memories to places*''—Tamburelli (2022, p. 75). Note how both Lynch and Tamburelli recognize a plurality of meanings evident in cities, yet where Lynch focusses on an a priori strong image of the city—devoid of meaning, Tamburelli focusses on the a posteriori meanings of people in cities and how to augment them in memory. Both writers argue for clear and recognizable cityscapes.

On a continual plane

To add to the discussion it is worth to look at the work of Italo Calvino, who in his book '*Invisible Cities*', first published in 1972, simultaneously takes a more modest and more radical view on communicating architectures in the city. Calvino's book reads like a fever dream, with short and beautifully written stories describing cities of the opaque. In the book the reader, through narrations of Marco Polo to Kublai Khan, is guided through 55 cities with female names. The city descriptions are interspersed by small chapters with personal conversations between the Venetian traveler and the Emperor of the Mongol empire. On architectures ability to communicate meaning Calvino never writes directly, and yet he touches on the subject extensively. Polo's city descriptions are always written from his own perspective: the traveler describes the places he's been through the memories he has of them. This means different elements of cities come forward depending on what made the biggest impression. Some cities are remembered by their towers, some by their walls, some by their markets, some the splashing of the rain in the canals, some solely by that one single boy you saw skip by. Together they

reveal how deeply architecture is tied to individual experience, memory, and perception. Somewhere near the end of the book it becomes clear how loaded this experience, memory and perception is, when Marco Polo, in one of the short conversations with Kublai Khan says: ''*Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice. (…) To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice*''—Calvino (1974, p. 78). So Calvino tells of cityscapes that take on meaning not only through present individual experience, but also through past experiences of given individual. In the case of Marco Polo, every city is described in terms of the city he grew up in: Venice. There seems to be an overlap between the stories cities tell, and the stories Marco Polo tells, at the end of the book Calvino writes: ''*I speak and I speak, Marco says, but the listener retains only the words he is expecting (…) It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear*''—Calvino (1974, p. 123). So malleable is the reality of the cityscape that it has nothing to *say* about its interpretation. The malleability of the reality of the cityscape becomes even more clear in some of the city descriptions, some of which describe cities which cannot exist, and yet are as real as any other. The most vivid example of this is the city of Armilla, a city which ''*…has no walls, no ceilings, no floors: it has nothing that makes it seem a city, except the water pipes that rise vertically where the houses should be and spread out horizontally where the floors should be: a forest of pipes that end in taps, showers, spouts, overflows*''—Calvino (1974, p. 42). Calvino masterfully plays with stories and reality, the city without walls, ceilings and floors exists as a story, just like all other cities only exist as stories, just like all other things only exist as stories. In his own words: ''*…each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents*''— Calvino (1974, p. 125). I would argue there is no a priori and a posteriori in Calvino, simply by not addressing it he does away with the issue: buildings *sein da* because of people's *dasein*, because of buildings *dasein*, because people *sein da*. Indra's net propelling neither forward nor backward yet in constant motion. A continual plane of together-existence. Calvino's cityscapes then do *talk*, even more, they always say the same, which is always different. Where Lynch and Tamburelli accept a plural and diverse interpretation of the cityscape and theorize on top of it, Calvino dives back into one singular interpretation; that of Marco Polo. The framing then becomes different, and by letting go of a universalist approach Calvino's built environment becomes perfectly capable of *speaking*: it says exactly that which Marco Polo hears it *say*, thus becoming universal again.

Adding narrative

Within this paper three Western theorists have been cited, parts of their arguments have been brought forward, in the selection of which three different stances on the built environment, meaning and reality arise. Lynch dives into a priori realities of the image of the city. Tamburelli uses an anthropological thesis by Arnold Gehlen to understand how a posteriori interpretations of the city are—more easily—memorized and recognizes the importance of experience and thus for possibility to action brought forward by the built environment. Calvino urges us to move out of a priori or a posteriori meanings and, by the departure of a universalist approach and an acceptance of a plurality of realities, gives an account for cityscapes that do *speak*—by simply saying everything that is *heard*. Both Lynch and Tamburelli, via different roads, argue for a certain clarity within building forms and cityscapes, with the former arguing for clear Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes and Landmarks and the latter arguing for the usage of clear geometry in buildings. Lynch's five architectural elements, derived from questionnaires in three American cities, might however be too limited to describe other cities. Consider for instance the mountainous city—with paths not just going left and right but also up and down, with both the public and its paths moving in and out of the edges, diffusing its borders, with nodes consisting solely of one elevator connecting multiple planes and with landmarks, visually clear yet acting three stories below the city dweller—where Lynch's five architectural elements might have to be substituted for more fitting elements. Tamburelli's theory holds practical difficulties as well. At the basis of his argument stands the statistical likeliness of people remembering city forms, the initial

hypothesis by Gehlen however does not dictate the size of the forms being used, nor does it say how they are to be distributed for optimal remembrance. The ideal cityscape for Tamburelli and Gehlen can consist of one thousand small square buildings or 1 extremely large square building housing one thousand apartments. Windows can be squared, circular, triangular, all placed in one line, on one façade, equally distributed or overlayed all together, if at least the geometrical clarity remains. Both theories hold true within their framework; Lynch works—at least to some extent—within the two dimensional American city, and Tamburelli's inclusion of Gehlen's anthropological research works within a very theoretical book on architecture. Both do less to dictate how to actually build new cityscapes within new circumstances. This might however not be a problem, just like beauty can be pursued without knowing what it is precisely, it could also be possible to aspire clarity, without a theory dictating its working in the cityscape: *something* can be pursued without knowing what *it* is. This paper follows this line of thought and recognizes a need for clarity in cityscapes without finding the need to bring forward a theory of how to achieve that clarity: it becomes then a theory that has nothing to *say*, except that it is a very important theory.

Moving forward with the second part of Tamburelli's argument, the Italian writer and architect recognizes a potential for architecture and the built environment to open up a possibility of actions in which experiences can be had. To further clarify, consider Tiananmen square, which, by being a vast, tiled and largely empty space holds up a public sphere in which it is possible to convene, it does not however hold the possibility to take shelter from the sun underneath a tree. Consider also the roads leading up to it, which open up the possibility of easily driving large vehicles to the premise of the square without hinder of natural landscape, taking also away from the possibility to dig a hole in the soft soil below the tar. Such is the nature of the built environment, I argue, that it folds possibilities of action, bringing forward some and leaving behind others. The folding has no *say* on what is to happen, it can simply hold a private or public realm in which actions can take place. Taking this folding potential, and combining it with Calvino's cityscape on a continual plane and his recognition of architectures ability to *say* anything that is *heard*, it might be possible to argue for an architecture that brings forward the possibility for certain collective actions, which in turn can lead to collective experiences and memory, creating within time a reality of the built environment *speaking* about realities in that time. To give an example, consider the White House in Washington, 'het torentje' in The Hague, and the Atomium in Brussels, three symbols of power with architecturally distinctive appearances. In these cases, it is not the singular architectural element that conveys power, it is instead the coincide of architectural element with actual power. Buildings always coincide with human activity, which in turn then becomes linked to the building within time, which in turn becomes linked to human activity within time. Meaning in architecture then isn't necessarily an individual endeavor, dictated by memory through experience, it is instead also a *cultural* one, dictated by collective memory through collective experiences: buildings *sein da* because of people's *dasein*, because of buildings *dasein*, because people *sein da*. Taken together this paper recognizes the folding potential of architecture, it's ability to *say* anything that is *heard*, and adds to that a collective dimension: a hypothesis for good architecture that makes possible collective memory by coincide of building with human activity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of how architecture communicates meaning reveals a complex interplay of perception, memory, and experience. With Lynch, Tamburelli and Calvino a short introduction was given to three writers who accept a plurality of truths within the cityscape and to some extent diverge from a priori meanings in architecture language. I argue Lynch, with his account for a mental image of the city split into identity, structure and meaning does go back to an a priori reality, one in which an image of the city can be strong or weak independent of whether people have interpreted it. Tamburelli does something similar when arguing for the usage of basic forms in architecture to advance people's ability to remember cityscapes, although where Lynch uses the a priori reality of identity and structure

to form strong images, Tamburelli uses an anthropological hypothesis of Arnold Gehlen to convince the reader of the importance of geometrical shapes. Tamburelli departs even more from Lynch when he explores the a posteriori meanings of people and buildings, advocating for architectures that open up a plurality of possibilities to action to further the possibilities of experiences. Lastly when interpreting Calvino, I argue he moves out of a priori or a posteriori meanings and, by the departure of a universalist approach and an acceptance of a plurality of realities, gives an account for cityscapes that do *speak*, by simply saying everything that is *heard*, thus becoming universal again.

The paper recognizes the importance of clarity within the built environment, with a theory that has nothing to *say*, it recognizes the folding potential of architecture—bringing forward certain possibilities to action—as well as its ability to say anything that can be heard, adding to this a collective dimension: an opportunity for architecture to make possible collective meaning and memory by coincide of building with human activity.

Such is then the conclusion of this paper, that the language of architecture has nothing to *say*, except within time and context, in which it has *everything* to say.

Bibliography

Calvino, I. (2023). *Invisible Cities* (W. Weaver, trans.). Penguin Random House UK (Original work published 1974)

Gehlen, A. (1988). *Man: His Nature and Place in the world* (C. Mcmillan & K. Pillemer, trans.). Columbia University Press (Original work published 1940)

Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city* (1st ed.). The Technology Press & Harvard University Press

Passini, R. (1984). *Wayfinding in Architecture* (1st ed.). Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc.

Tamburelli, P. P. (2022). *On Bramante* (1st ed.). Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Need for common realities,

If Tiannenmansquare were a forest the center of the protest movement would not have experienced the killing at the edge, . Architecture within this framework becomes *cultural*, buildings *sein da* because of humans *dasein*, on a continual plane of being/nonbeing.

Ultimately, the paper recognizes a need for clarity in building form and cityscape, and proposes an hypothesis for good architecture that makes possible collective memory by possibility of collective action.