

The Role of the Unconscious in the Architectural Imagination

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What can psychoanalysis offer to the imagination and creativity of architects, in understanding their role in society and solving problems? What does architecture tell us about the human psyche? The imagination is necessary for architecture as a mode of knowledge. The imagination bridges the gap between perception and understanding. Architecture is a mode of thought, different from other ways of thinking. How does the imagination work, in the relation between the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, as defined by Lacan, in the intersection of perception and language? What role does the unconscious play in the formation of images in dreams and the imagination? The signifier in the unconscious plays a role in the formation of images. Should images be seen solely in the realm of the Imaginary or conscious thought in the ego, or can they be seen as an interweaving of the Imaginary and Symbolic, conscious and unconscious? Does the signified play a role in the formation of images? How are the images situated in the realm of the Other? Can an underlying conceptual organization of experience be related to the unconscious? How are images generated in the intersection of perception, language, and the unconscious? How can forms in architecture reflect processes in the psyche?

Architecture is based on function, or conscious reason, and image, or conscious ego. How can the unconscious be incorporated into architecture? There are many elements of the human psyche which are studied in psychoanalysis that are neglected in contemporary architecture and architectural theory. It is necessary to map a way that these other elements can be incorporated into architecture, through educational reform, in the form of workgroups, seminars, symposia, and publications. It is necessary to define specific concepts in psychoanalysis and analyze historical precedents in architecture in order to enable contemporary architecture to communicate and contribute to people beyond function and image. It is necessary to understand how architecture is influenced by its own unconscious or Other, its media, technology, conventions, politics, social conditions, cultural values, and the desire for the Other. Architecture needs to understand the ways in which the psyche is understood in psychoanalysis, and incorporate them in architectural education and practice, in particular the role of the unconscious.

Elements of the knowledge of the unconscious that can be incorporated into architecture include: gaps, scotomata, fragmentation, incompleteness, discontinuity, vacillation, absence, contradiction, méconnaissance, inaccessibility to the self, insertion of the self into language, dream work (condensation and displacement), dream images, hallucinations, imagination, poetic language (metaphor and metonymy), the unheimlich, the sublime, the pleasure principle, the death drive, sensation (fear, pain, horror, delight), jouissance, das Ding, sublimation, palimpsest, perversion, the neurotic and psychotic, and the dialectic of the subjective and objective (ideal and real, phenomenal and noumenal, Symbolic and Imaginary, inorganic and organic, metaphysical and empirical, noetic and discursive, eidos and morphe). Each of these elements can be the subject of site studies of buildings, landscapes and urban configurations, and proposals for new ways of doing architectural research and experimental design. As Freud said, no application of psychoanalysis “has excited so much interest ... as its use in the theory and practice of education.”

As Lorens Holm wrote in the Introduction to *Architecture and the Unconscious*, “there are a number of recent texts that draw on psychoanalytic theory as an interpretive approach for understanding architecture or that use the formal and social logics of architecture for understanding the psyche. But there remains work to be done in bringing what largely amounts to a series of independent voices, into a discourse that is greater than the sum of its parts, in the way that, say, the architect Peter Eisenman was able to do with the architecture of deconstruction or that the historian Manfredo Tafuri was able to do with the Marxist critique of architecture.” Lorens continued, “By addressing the unconscious we open up new ways of thinking about architecture. An interdisciplinary discourse between architecture and psychoanalysis may be able to address the link between individuals, cities and communities. Psychoanalysis is the talking cure: it is the model for a certain kind of problem solving, which involves solving seemingly intractable problems in the real world by untying the internal knots that prevent thinking creatively about solutions.”

The imagination is usually explained in terms of neuroscience, cognitive psychology, or phylogenesis, all based in consciousness. Explanations of the role of the unconscious in the imagination are hard to find, but if psychoanalysis has shown anything, it is that the imagination is not possible without the unconscious. The role of the imagination is central to the conceiving of architecture, thus the role of the unconscious. Jacques Lacan tells us that prior to the mirror stage, the infant experiences unmediated visual perceptions of the environment around it; it is absorbed into the environment, as it were, and does not distinguish itself from the environment, as it has no consciousness of itself in relation to or in

distinction from the environment. This all changes when it first recognizes itself in the mirror as an image or an object in distinction from the environment, an “orthopedic” totality. The independent orthopedic image of the self as a totality in relation to the environment doesn’t quite mesh with the self of the subject that has been formed in relation to the environment prior to the mirror stage, so a split in the subject occurs, a “dehiscence.”

From then on the psyche of the human subject is marked by this split or self-alienation, between the Imaginary, the conscious ego in perception brought about by the Mirror Stage in the self-recognition of the subject as an orthopedic totality, and the Symbolic, or the unconscious, which is being formed by the Other, linguistic representations of the relations between the self and the environment. The Mirror Stage occurs, not surprisingly, when the infant begins to speak. The linguistic representations in the unconscious solidify the independence of the orthopedic ego from the environment. From the Mirror Stage onwards, a direct, unmediated perceptual experience is no longer possible, contrary to what the Phenomenologists say. All perceptions become functions of the mechanisms of the perceiver’s psyche. All perceptual experience becomes mediated by the unconscious, by the underlying linguistic structure of experience. The Imaginary, the perceptual experience, is absorbed into the Symbolic, as it were, and the perceiving subject is defined by the language of the Other which forms its identity.

Immanuel Kant said that objects can only be perceived and thought as part of a “manifold,” a totality of all thought and experience which defines everything that is perceived within it. The role of the manifold creates an apperception, a combination of multiple perceptions, as opposed to a perception, a singular act identifying a singular object. It is impossible for me to perceive an object without conceiving it in relation to everything else I perceive in the manifold. This is the function of the Other, the unconscious, in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Cognitive science tells us that it is impossible to perceive an object without constructing it in our minds first. Thus in architecture, the architect must understand the relation between perception, the representation of perception, the underlying linguistic structure of experience, and the unconscious. While the roots of the formula for psychoanalysis can be found in philosophy, as elaborated by Lacan, it is contrary to the philosophy of Phenomenology. The architectural imagination has to involve the relation between words as representations and visual images as forms; the underlying linguistic structure of the psyche plays a role in the formation of visual images, in the unconscious mind. An understanding of how the unconscious mind works in relation to conscious thought and experience leads architects and

artists to create visual forms which act as guide lights to an exploration of the human psyche. (10 minutes)