

Architecture and Its Place in Nature

»Consciousness and Its Place in Nature« (Chalmers 2003) is the title of an article written by David Chalmers, which deals with the so called hard problems of consciousness, that means, with those problems that do not concern how functions are performed (Chalmers 1997:4), but deal with the emergence of consciousness in the sense of subjective experience. On the one hand, it is important to treat architecture from the very beginning not only as somehow stylish and useful heaps of stones that are additionally embedded in political and philosophical contexts (whatever that means). On the other hand, architecture belongs to nature just as much as trees, apes, and what apes produce. So architecture is situated between what can be grasped from a ›materialistic‹ point of view, on the one hand, and what depends on subjectivity, on the other hand. As far as a general theory of architecture is able to examine what is essential to architecture, one should keep in mind that we would probably not accept a set of characteristics as sufficient for a building being a piece of architecture as we have learned from Wittgenstein and others concerning categories in general (Kleiber 1993). Finding necessary conditions is not as simple as one may expect either. There is a closely related phenomenon however: Are not some individual buildings more representative of architecture as such than others? Gropius once designed a pigsty for the manufacturer Rosenthal. We are inclined to acknowledge it as a part of his architectural work due to the fact that the famous architect Gropius designed it and gave it a typical International Style appearance. Its being purely a pigsty, not a castle or a dwelling, however may be a reason to deny it this status as architecture (Isaacs 1984:1105).

Being a tool as a disposition

In order to characterize architecture as such, Umberto Eco distinguishes primary functions from secondary functions, the latter being connotative (Eco 1980). The examples he gives don't make his distinction clear at all, but they offer a possibility for clarification. Secondary functions somehow rest on primary functions (Eco 1980:25). Both are kinds of being suitable for something. I will explicate suitability in my own words: It always consists in a disposition. Dispositions were a central topic of the Vienna circle

philosophers (Carnap 1953:47 ff., Hempel 1977:183 ff.) and we can build on their endeavors. One of the most famous examples of a disposition is the quality of being soluble in water. A substance being soluble in water (D) implies that if you put it in water under certain circumstances (B), it will dissolve (R). And if a substance dissolves (R), if you put it in water (B), then it is soluble in water (D) generally. But we need not take this definition in a stricter logical sense, because of some among semanticists well known tricky implications of implication (see Carnap 1936, 1937). All in all what remains essential for dispositions is a pairing B – R respectively: x has the disposition D, which mainly consists in the sequence that R happens, if B happens.

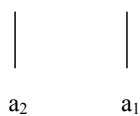
Now whatever we refer to as the suitability of a tool can be described in terms of dispositions. Take a hammer: If I use it in a certain way, I will succeed in driving a nail into a wall. My body motion is part of condition B, my success, the state I intended to achieve, is R. Being suitable for something as outlined so far, serves as a general frame for the sign conception on which our concept of architecture will be based. Additionally, what Eco refers to as secondary functions can be explained within the same semiotic framework. The primary functions of buildings are the reason why they are considered a kind of tool. Offering shelter from rain belongs among the primary functions of typical houses. Secondary functions are dispositions concerning how recipients are intended to react to buildings, which will be explained in the following section.

Being a sign as a disposition

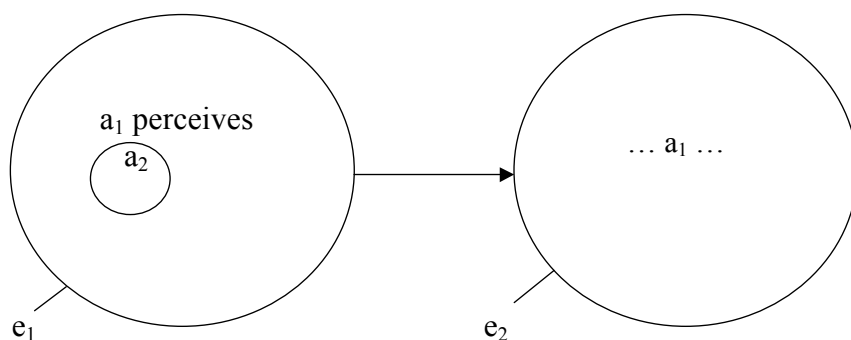
It is important to emphasize that characterizing architecture in semiotic terms does not mean that architectural objects are communicative or that they have a meaning. As Eco says in agreement with Goodman (1985), »most architectural objects do not communicate (and are not desired to communicate), but function« (Eco 1980:12). That’s why we focus on function here. (The results will suggest that no architecture has ever been ›functionalistic‹, cf. Schlaberg 2012b).

In order to introduce the concept of sign let’s take as an example:

a sign with a dog as a recipient:



The following diagram is meant to visualize what happens:



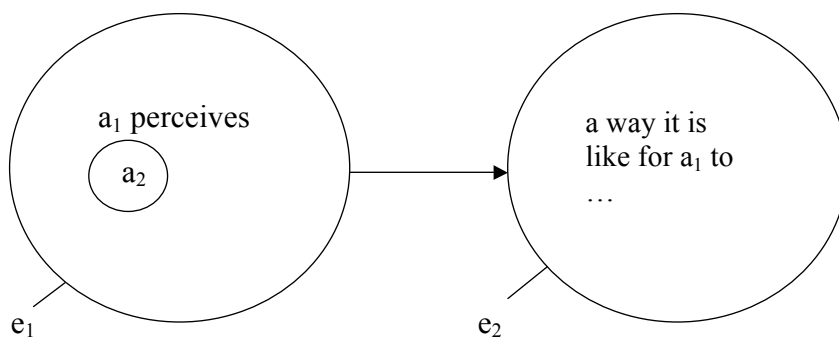
Very different kinds of reaction are possible in e_2 (the position that Peirce referred to as the »interpretant«), for example: running away, running to his owner, being quiet. Taking images as signs and people as recipients into account, we will consider seeing something else, the sujet, in a_2 . Thus, reactions which are not observable to others come into play. This is even more obvious when we consider the effects of linguistic signs on people's minds.

The above diagram shows the most elementary constituents of sign processes: a recipient a_1 perceives the sign a_2 which causes some kind of reaction of a_1 , be it an internal one or an external one (Posner 1993, Schlaberg 2012a). The main relations we have to deal with in order to understand what sign processes consist in are perception, on the one hand, and causing a reaction, especially with regard to internal reactions, on the other hand. As far as perception is concerned we have to take into account how the category »perception« is bound together by family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1967:48) and includes the way an amoeba reacts to something as well as the processing of information during reading a text. What sensory organs do and how nervous systems (or similar things) deal with what sensory organs do within the same organism are of concern here. (And what does it mean that the whole processing takes place in one and the same organism?)

Being a piece of architecture

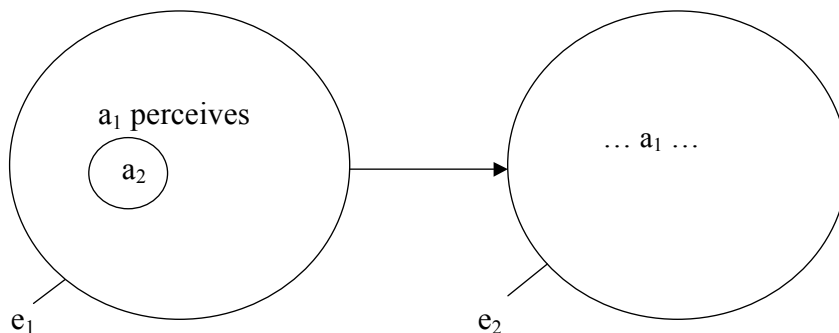
Additionally, we must not fail to notice that changes of perspective can be involved in sign processes as sketched so far: The above diagram may be translated in a verbal description using verbs in the third person: The dog hears the bell ring, and he runs to the kitchen – we might say: expecting his food. If I hear the bell ring and if I know what that means, I run into the kitchen expecting my food. My expectation of getting a meal is something I know in the first person perspective. Others who describe my behavior and processes taking place in me physiologically stick to descriptions in the

third person perspective. Both perspectives are often mixed in descriptions of sign processes. Although the author of a description can use the grammatical third person to describe my expectation of a meal, for example when she says »He expects to get a meal« she is referring to how I experience my expectation – let’s say, in Nagel’s words: She refers to what it is like for me to expect a meal (Nagel 1974, Jackson 1982, criticism in Hacker 2002, defense in Burley 2007) provided that expectation is a mental state, a state as experienced by the one whose state it is.



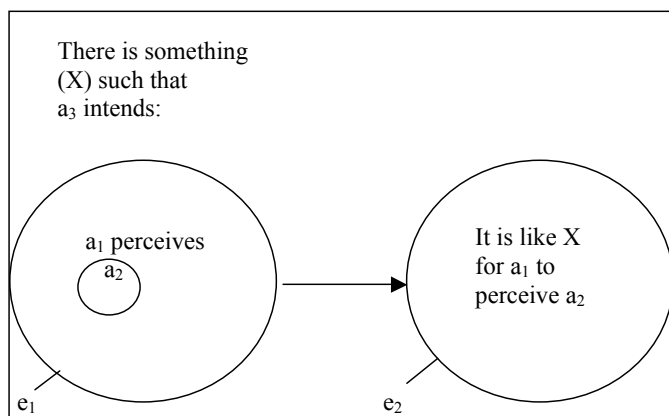
We can add to the sign conception, which we have outlined thus far, the additional factor of the sender who intends a sign process – in other words, who intends a recipient to react in a particular manner (cf. Posner 1993:230):

a₃ intends:



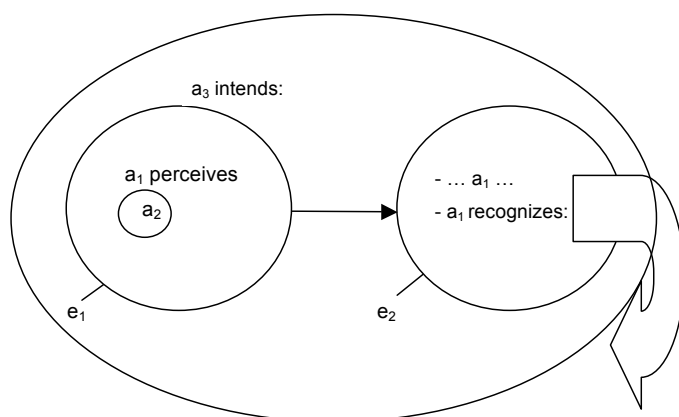
Here, the first person perspective is involved again insofar as a physiologist would not find a₃’s intention if she is doing research on what is going on within a₃. (At most, she would find a correlating physiological event or characteristics of physiological events correlating to intentions.) All in all, it does not suffice to treat typical sign processes as purely physiological processes, because when they intend to cause internal reactions, what senders refer to in their intention is an experience, something it is like to ... for the recipient. Perhaps we assume an intention to be describable in the third person, if we have enough knowledge about what happens in

the brain of someone who has the intention. What the sender's intention refers to as an internal reaction in the recipient is, nevertheless, an experience, the way it feels! Evoking the way it is for recipients to experience a building is exactly what characterizes architectural pieces of art as such: Usually, they are tools as well as pieces of art. So they have primary as well as secondary functions.



Communication by means of architecture

Communication is based upon sender sign processes, as we have outlined thus far. Grice (1957) was the first to offer an explication of »to mean« as used in »By uttering ›Shut the door!‹ S meant that you were to shut the door« (Schiffer 1988:2). Communication includes the sender a_3 intending the addressee to recognize the sender's intention:



Indeed the addressee is meant to shut the door upon realizing that S intends her to shut the door (Meggler 1993 and 1997:101 ff., Posner 1993)! There is no room here to go into the details. Let me just mention that there are communicative signs in architecture, too, in the sense that Grice, Schiffer, and others explicate. When architectural semioticians are expected to argue that pieces of architecture communicate, one should keep in mind that it is

not necessary for architectural communication to be descriptive or figurative. There are architectural forms of quotation that fulfill the conditions required by Grice and his followers. Take typical post-modern works as an example, for example, Moore's Piazza d'Italia which quotes Corinthian columns more than simply using them, thereby depending on the common knowledge of recipients, who are expected to be acquainted with the contexts within which Corinthian columns usually belong. Such quotations work as long as they are understood as quotations. And while there may be no communicative intention (in the Gricean sense) involved in a piece of architecture, it is nevertheless typical of architecture to have at least an intended effect upon recipients – that is to say: to serve as a sender sign, whether communicative or not.

Architectural pieces of art are expected to impress recipients – to leave a lasting effect on them. Such effects – ways it is like for recipients to experience them – are no reactions of the kind intended to be brought about by means of communication. In other words: They belong to those effects which are intended manipulatively, in such a manner that the sender does not intend the recipient to realize the sender's intention in order to bring about the effects. In general, lack of communication characterizes art, particularly architectural art, as such (cf. Schlaberg 2011:239–264).

As some of you may have noticed, the concept of the architectural sign outlined above resembles the central focus of the aesthetics of reception. Indeed, the aesthetics of reception, which has provided essential contributions to literary theory, has recently been applied to the theory of architecture (Lippert-Vieira 2008). Finally, let me return to the question of how deeply does a building belong to the center of architecture as a category. The answer is: It depends on how ambitious the intentions of the architect are concerning what it is like for recipients to experience it – visually, acoustically, kinaesthetically –, not only concerning its character as a tool.

Biographical Notes

Ph. D. in semiotics (2011, with a work in pictorial semiotics, offering explanations of basic concepts, introducing the concept of manipulative images as relevant especially to fine arts, advisers: Roland Posner and Klaus Robering). Educated as a teacher in primary and in secondary schools at the Technische Universität Berlin. Currently working as an assistant of handicapped children in school. Offering guided tours in Otto Haesler's housing estates Georgsgarten and Blumläger Feld in Celle.

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Recommended Quotation

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