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The designer as interpreter of the epidermis of buildings and liquid modernity.

Abstract

In the 21st century it is quite legitimate to interpret the concept of 'modern' as a metaphor for nowadays' fluidity, which conveys increased speed to reality transformations. Such an age, for being so fast, seems to reveal an individual who neither bounds to time nor settles in space, dissolving his longings onto immediate pleasure, gathering contentment from ephemeral solutions easily overthrown by different ones. 'Liquid' is the state of matter with no shape or form of its own, ever changing, flexible, and adopting the momentary container's form. Concerning design, to consider these metamorphoses translates into action towards society transformation instead of becoming a product of society. Considering design a production agent for the contemporaneous, design's manifestation redefines it and expands its territories. Hence the designer is an interpreter of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2005).

This paper addresses an approach to the designer as an interpreter of liquid reality regarding the epidermis of buildings whilst constituent of the city's vertical surface area. The body of the buildings is being dematerialized by liquidity, thus becoming a virtual presence, almost as a computer screen displaying an online catalogue open to semiotic ambiguity. Therefore, we are focused in the signifying logic operating in the making of the epidermis of buildings.

To support this action we retrieve Hegel's thinking, namely the absolute right to 'non-consciousness' in order to interpret the proposed use of historical symbols as mediators between the individual and the epidermis of buildings. The individual's right to 'non-consciousness' is subsequent to the Hegelian thesis that for the individual to transform, he must deny the *conscience* of his time, standing in denial of what *is* in his historical moment.

Hegel's thinking inspires the understanding of epidermis design action for the reason that by allowing dialectics, based on history – ever changing – it promotes the transformation of both context and individual, offering the choice of freedom.

To interpret the application of this model we will analyze the façade of the project from the Swiss company connected to Nature, Ricola, Herzog & de Meuron (see image), built in the 90s. The façade enhances the existing relationship between the building and its function, providing a sort of conceptual bonding between the building and its function. Even though regarding a building, this project can be interpreted as an exercise of design since there is a direct implementation and articulation of materials. Through the logic of consistent composition, the expressive and decorative semiotic values are toiled to perfect synthesis with the functional strategy of the building. Image strength and significance enables building's comprehension to be experienced and invented by the user.

In this paper we advocate the thesis that the designer, whilst interpreter of equipment scenarios, is able to toil the epidermis of the city as a semitransparent membrane, using a symbiotic technology and constructing a hybrid language. The user is granted with the renewal of sensations and interpretation experiences that consist of conscious self-knowledge experience.

Topic introduction

If one day it was possible to accept Bacon's proposal (1561-1624) to conceive the perfect building with two distinct sides, underlying the difference between the public and the private domains (a symmetrical façade which could connote, on one side, the social and public life – facing the outside, serving banquets, feasts and the celebration of great victories – and a asymmetrical side which could refer to the domestic life and to the private functions – the inner side facing the house), nowadays this proposal seems unattainable and bearer of simulacra and simulations (Baudrillard, 1994). This doesn't mean that Francis Bacon was wrong and Jean Baudrillard was right. It reveals two different realities whose contextualized functions should be the reason for architectural construction, contradicting the way of doing the built project that has architecture as a reference.

Nevertheless, presenting today a clarified and definitive definition of context is more complex than it seems. Etymologically, the term context derives from Latin and means "a union" between the crucial event and the environment, assuming that recognizing the importance of a context in an esthetic and cognitive experience means investigating how the context becomes a phenomenon. "The context is thus a frame (Goffman, 1974) that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation. The notion of context thus involves a fundamental juxtaposition of two entities: (1) a focal event; and (2) a field of action within which that event is embedded."(Duranti, Goodwin, 1992: 4).

In Design, is important to choose the definition of context that better suits the project. Therefore, the context can be interpreted as the environment that surrounds the organism we want to plan, the reality that expresses the designer's appropriation of the resources (physical, social and historical) that characterize the environment in which he or she is into, in order to be able to work.

The designer as interpreter of liquid modernity

In the history of the city, urban places represent scenarios of important events, ways of adaptation to public and private spaces and social and cultural manifestations.

Today, the metropolis looks like a complex and fluid object in the relations of appurtenance, of people, of goods, of information, becoming difficult sometimes to define and distinguish the boundaries between public and private. In the contemporary city, is either possible to plan an exterior spatial module in the public space (a micro-architecture) or to plan an interior spatial module in the public space (a Shopping Mole). If in some periods of the history of the city, like in the Ancient Greece, they clearly defined and elected, within the urban territory, the *agora* as one of the public spaces of collective appurtenance, in others, like for example in the European cities of the Medieval period, public circulation spaces, as streets or squares, suffered sometimes a disordered appropriation.

In the XXI century, the world presents itself in contrast with the modernity that preceded it. In Bauman's opinion, the transformation from solid modernity into liquid modernity created a new environment that surrounds new, complex and contradictory, organisms. A context without any references to individual actions (as speaking, building, living, thinking, and working), will confront the individuals with a series of challenges they have never faced before. Hegel's proposal seems to represent the right direction to deal with this changing reality, insofar, for Hegel, the reality is the transformation of the *being* into its opposite. This means that if the context belongs to the mutable and not permanent domain then the *being* is always different, is a mutable being.

Concerning the project in design, it is about planning immaterial bodies looking for a body that manifests their existence, organisms that become substance if they are guided by the project, gaining the shape of material container available. Specifically in the project of buildings surfaces, if the façade provides an image of the building function - a kind of structural truth - matter and technology development in the façade construction will only achieve a contemporary result if it is planned according to the new functions and with the new rituals of the XXI century city. It is about knowing how to associate liquid modernity to organisms. "The chilling and terrifying spectre of unsafe streets keeps people away from public spaces, restraining them from nurturing the necessary talent and qualities to take part to public life." (Bauman, 2005:103).¹ The designer planning the epidermis of buildings in liquid modernity stands out as an interpreter that uses interpretation as a method in alternative to the product-oriented traditional strategy of planning method. A process that, in order to establish relations between the contradiction and the complexity that characterize the current context, manifests itself by using several types of analysis, reflection and analogy. A process that not only emphasizes the whole and the parts but also the existence and the autonomy of the parts, the subsystems, the subprojects, the subcultures.

The designer, by choosing an open process and by taking advantages of the complexity of negative and positive factors that define the context, evaluates and rationalizes in order to be able to act and, eventually, to give a improved answer. The

¹ "Il raggelante e terrorizzante spettro delle strade insicure tiene la gente lontana dagli spazi pubblici e le impedisce di coltivare le doti e le qualità necessarie per partecipare alla vita pubblica." (Bauman, 2005:103).

designer puts history (that modifies itself) in the first place and not the being (that is substance) giving cultural symbols an important role due to the influence they have on the individual. “They exist for the purpose of providing us with knowledge: knowledge, for example, of our past feelings and experiences (Whitehead) and of absolute spirit itself (Hegel).” (Carter, 1986: 240).

Neither the designer nor the reality will be able to go back to what they were before, except as an individual and a world in constant mutation seeing themselves in each other. It would be possible to sense that this feature qualifies the designer with the virtues that Aristotle mentioned. The cautious designer thinking about the context transformed into phenomenon. The designer that, for being intelligent and prudent, thinks about a subject that already knows in order to emit afterwards a contextualized judgment. At the present moment, he is in the condition of becoming an interpreter of his time. The project answers of the virtuous designer will be interpreted within the complexity of the context, therefore, stored by parts whose final quality of the whole will depend on the strong connection that the parts establish with each other. Cyclic solutions that automatically renew themselves, interactive solutions with the user and, therefore, sustainable if the meaning of each part is the same of the meaning of the whole. In order to achieve this, the designer has to let liquid modernity *read* him, appealing to his negation, because the narrator in his story is the context and not him. “The consciousness of oneself can’t reach satisfaction either than in a different consciousness of oneself (...).” (Hegel cit in Papaiannou, 1970: 75)² - that at the end is the “non-consciousness”. This designer’s right to “non-consciousness” is the consequence of the Hegelian thesis that for the individual to transform, he must deny the *conscience* of his time, standing in denial of what he *is* in his historical moment. “This means that till the human being is not accomplishing, in the real history, all his substantial forces - that are the Concept – the conscience wouldn’t be able to catch the Concept that will be still inappropriate to conscience, hiding from itself.” (Papaiannou, 1970: 85).³

Adopting interpretation as a method in design is evaluated by the designer as an open process, a phenomenological choice that accepts the change as an inherent factor of time, explained by the technique of hermeneutics and through the nature of semiotics. The hermeneutical conjecture can be interpreted as project methodology, due to the fact that a hermeneutic cycle presents itself as a cyclic and sustainable alternative, becoming a hypothesis of knowledge about the nature of things (Soares, Pombo, 2010). Semiotics is interpreted as design competence, due to the fact that allows the practice of semiosis, the association of signs to other signs in a labyrinthine process (Barthes, 2007). This allows going forward, coming into being, becoming revolution and, finally, the right to freedom. A proposal of signs and images production that changes in context, making semiotics a hypothesis of intuition about how we feel things.

² “La coscienza di sé non può accedere alla soddisfazione che in una diversa coscienza di sé (...).” (Hegel cit in Papaiannou, 1970: 75)

³ “Ciò vuol dire che finché l’uomo non avrà realizzato nella storia reale la totalità delle sue forze sostanziali – e queste <sono il Concetto> - la coscienza non potrà afferrare il Concetto, che rimarrà inadeguato alla sua coscienza, nascosto a se stesso.” (Papaiannou, 1970: 85).

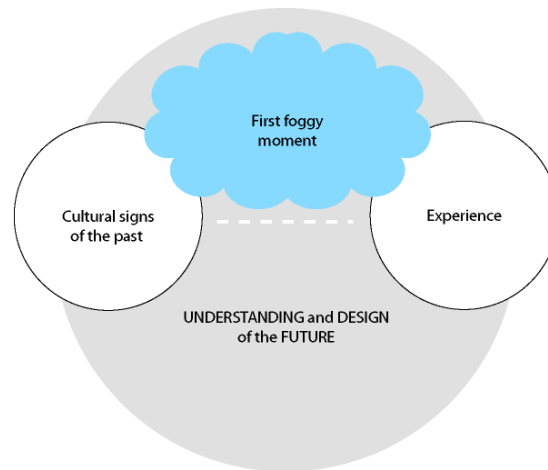


Fig. 1 –Interpretation as method in design in liquid modernity. Diagram by the authors.

The designer as interpreter of the epidermis of buildings

The wall project in the building planning can be seen as the essence of a project language, the starting point for a new experience, between what is inside and what is outside of a building, a moment in which the experience actually happens. The threshold, the almost being, the not coming back to the previous one without refusing completely the previous one (that in this case can be considered as the interior space) and the next one (exterior space), can be designated the threshold of the experience of ambiguity, interpreted as a phenomenon of understanding. When the process of perception of what happens in the threshold between the two spaces contemplates the cultural context, it is not an isolated act but an act of understanding of the ambiguity that takes into account a series of factors as culture and time. Therefore, the semiotic process presents different meanings about the experience of ambiguity in the wall project of buildings.

Transposing the Hegelian thought, for example, to architecture, Hegel considers architecture as the art of the external, studying the different ways in which architecture is used to work just as architecture, that is, uniquely as appearance without any possibility of dialectics. As William Maker writes, “yet as the most basic expression of Spirit, Hegel sees architecture as limited, incapable of adequately expressing in a fully reflective way its own fundamental character of being the art of the external.” (Maker, 2000: xx). For Hegel, architecture doesn’t represent anything but itself, stuck in a utilitarian dependence for other purposes, where there is no space neither for revolution (anti-thesis) nor for freedom⁴. For him, architecture has to go back over and use historical symbols as mediators (synthesis) between individual and reality. “Here the needs of enclosing anthropomorphic statuary and of coming and going between worship and public life precludes any upward striving; instead, the facade extends primarily in width, allowing the eye to take in the design without having to gaze upwards.” (Winfield, 2000: 106).

⁴ “La libertà significa la conciliazione del soggetto con il mondo diventato fonte di soddisfazione.” (Hegel cit in Papiannou, 1970: 75)

For Renato De Fusco: “A panel wall can set with one face a poorly signifying space and with the other face a highly suggestive space. Consequently, to the question: Exterior or interior space regarding what? We answer: regarding the semantic-positional values, the signifying function and the communication process. And we also consider that only the semiotic interpretation is able to answer to the age-old question of solving the several aporias emerged around the binomial interior/exterior space, taking into account its structural complexity and connecting it to the parameter of signification, that is, relating it to inaccessible factors to the non semantic spatial conception.”⁵

The idea of the wall-module project, framed in the interior/exterior logic, can be assimilated to a project and methodological connection, creating the premise for a symbiotic dialogue between the architecture project (seen as a whole) and the design project (seen as the parts). By accepting the affiliation of the two project activities and by going through the history of surfaces project, it is possible to review the questions that created this part/unity relation. This project’s dialogue should be seen according to the parameters that identify the housing project in the western context, since the Babylonian culture, like the Ishtar door, to the interventions of our time, as the Ricola’s project, by Herzog & de Meuron.

Epidermis can be considered then as a manifestation of an object in a public space, implying its acknowledgement as a separable entity, able to communicate to the observer, the history, the culture and the habits of a specific population in a socio-historical context. The individual has always worked the skin and the epidermis of buildings using a conventional system of signs, able not only to define or describe the context in which was in, but also to mark him out and to relate with other realities, either social or religious one. The semantic value that the membrane of the buildings stands out mingles many times with what is happening inside the buildings, as if architecture would borrow to literature the ability to tell a story. In this scenario, it seems that the relation between the inside and the outside has to be consequential. The exterior should be a prolongation of what was planned in the interior and not a communicational barrier. Based on this concept, Robert Venturi defends that “the contrast between interior and exterior can be the main manifestation of contradiction in architecture” (Venturi, Scott Brown in Vaccaro, 1995: 9).⁶ It can be a great opportunity for the design, insofar as the designer as an interpreter evaluates the complexity of the organisms, relating them with each other.

The analysis of this new and complex city has been, for many authors like Andrea Branzi (1975), the cause of the internal crisis of architecture. An investigation that, for Branzi, has never been taken into account by the architects themselves, a project

⁵ “una parete divisoria può con una sua faccia delimitare un’ambiente scarsamente significativo, e con l’altra faccia delimitare un’ambiente fortemente pregnante. Pertanto alla domanda: spazio esterno o interno rispetto a che cosa? Rispondiamo: rispetto alle valenze semantico-posizionali, alla funzione significativa, al processo di comunicazione. E riteniamo peraltro che solo l’interpretazione semiotica sia in grado di rispondere all’annoso quesito, di risolvere le varie aporie sorte intorno al binomio spazio interno/esterno, dando conto della sua complessità strutturale e legandolo al parametro della significazione, ossia di relazionarlo a fattori del tutto inaccessibili a una concezione spaziale asemantica.” (De Fusco, 2005: 163).

⁶ “il contrasto tra interno ed esterno può essere la principale manifestazione della contraddizione in architettura” (Venturi, Scott Brown in Vaccaro, 1995: 9).

that asks to be directed “toward the objective limits of the city as an instrument of life, toward the limits explored by a discipline that is experiencing a true historical contradiction, foreseeing the widest and deeper phenomena of cultural and social transformation.”⁷ From this reflection, we stand out two points that confirm the previously examined premises about interpretation as method in design:

1) It is crucial to give conjectural answers for new solutions that meet the current solicitations (time as truth). Jean Nouvel affirms that the project answer gave by architects in the construction of buildings in the city is still made through a kind of automatism, a lack of attention that has to be urgently solved. “If we want singular objects, then we’ll have to use various kinds of analysis, reflection, connotation; we’ll have to establish relationships among contradictory objects. In short, we’ll have to start thinking.” (Nouvel, 2005: 73).

2) The diagnosis of the complexity of factors is something that has to be done continually and not something that can or cannot be done. By talking about the project intervention in the city it is necessary, for historical and semiotic reasons, to start from architecture, but not to say that architecture solutions are a model of interpretation. Which architecture is a model for interpretation? If we refer to the intervention in which the interpretation of a space is the style and /or the language of a projector, as an answer that always think about the solution, then architecture can’t be the reference for the interpretation of the city. The intervention has to be done specifically in the subproject of the skin of buildings, as a project tool that characterizes the XXI century and the fleeting reality of people, more dynamic and ephemeral.

An ambiguous reality as the nature of design between conception and signification. It is important to think the singularity of the skin of buildings as an inspiring model of interpretation that starts from a basis concept that evaluates and reevaluates before giving an answer. The design of interpretation in the skin of buildings is, for this reason, hermeneutic and dialectic. The skin is one of the scenario components that interact with the individual.

⁷ “verso i limiti oggettivi della città come strumento di vita, verso limiti ormai esplorabili di una disciplina che vive una propria contraddizione storica e intravede la propria possibile morte naturale all’interno di più ampi e profondi fenomeni di trasformazione culturale e sociale.”

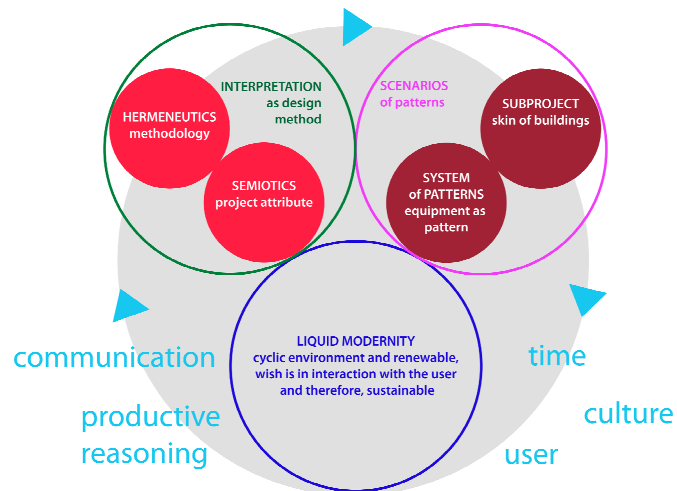


Fig. 2 – The designer as interpreter of the epidermis of buildings and liquid reality. Diagram by the authors.

Objects singularity in the city, as a space that asks to be interpreted, can be seen as a premise for our investigation about interpretation design in equipment scenarios, namely, in the skin of buildings. Since one of the functions of design is to be connotative and that semiotics, as the theory of signs, deals with communication and connotation, it is important to understand how semiotics manifests itself in design or, as Bruno Latour (2009) defends, to see how useful the semiotics competence in design is. We are interested in the space singularity referred by Jean Baudrillard (2005), as well as the meaning of localization, expression, construction, signification and not the architectural meaning of buildings. The relation that takes place between the projector and the citizen is essential to give and find meaning and not only as a communicational skill.

Case Study: Herzog & de Meuron and the epidermis of Ricola warehouse

The strength and the importance of the image are clear in Herzog & de Meuron works. Since the beginning of their professional work they use the image in its filmic and photographic components, as a careful and unusual analysis tool and, at the same time, as an alternative representation tool to the more traditional ones. Maybe because images “(...) their pictorial reality expresses things and acts that look real, so suddenly we found ourselves with a tool that would allow us to express our ideas on architecture in a contemporary form even without a concrete commission - and much more successfully than by using classical means of representations like models, plans and drawings.”(Herzog cit. in Herzog, Wall & Ursprung, 2004: 13). For Wilfried Wang, in the prologue of the first issue of the magazine *El Croquis*, dedicated to Herzog & de Meuron, there is a strong narrative component that is respected and perusal in all their works. “Herzog & de Meuron architecture combines the image and the structure in order to refer to the program, to the content, to the space and, finally, to the idea.” (Wang, 2000: 7).⁸ In the development of the work, particular attention is

⁸ “La arquitectura de Herzog & de Meuron combina la imagen y la estructura para aludir al programa, al contenido, al lugar y, en definitiva, a la idea.” (Wang, 2000: 7).

given to the façade, strengthening the existing relation between the building and its functions (function-construction, function-material, function-meaning).

Concerning the warehouse for the company Ricola, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, Wilfred Wang defines the project's surface as a conceptual connection that the building creates with its function. "The horizontal claddings of Eternit panels are a reference for the quarry compression and for the stratified storage of Ricola products. Through real materials, constructive language and tectonic composition parallelisms are established, creating bonds, connections and associations to the history of the place, to its current activity and to its almost banal matter." (Wang, 2000a: 11).⁹ The articulation and the implementation of materials take place in a direct way, through a compositional and coherent logic, working decorative and expressive semiotic values in a perfect synthesis with the functional essence of the building.

For Herzog & de Meuron the façade is constituted by the skin as membrane and by the epidermis as semi-transparent cuticle of this membrane. A membrane that, by means of the epidermis, is able to ensure a perfect interaction between the building and the exterior space, using a technology as a mean that allows the matter to give a better interaction between the part (building) and the whole (the surrounding space). As if the epidermis could automatically renew itself according to the environment where is in. In a clear semiotic manifestation, the epidermis of the building mingles with the product itself, communicating a message to the exterior made by several images moments of the referent. A reality that, at the end, is the reflection of the XXI century.

This action of Herzog & de Meuron is framed in a changing project process, in which the epidermis of the building is worked as a clear and semi-transparent membrane, by using a symbiotic technology and a hybrid language. The projector, using an open process to plan the epidermis of buildings in the liquid modernity, should work the façade of the building as well as of the city, in which innovations spread in the territory, in the interbreeding between local popular cultures and the mass culture (presumably universal) and in the easy and fast access to information and goods. Project wise, Herzog & de Meuron think the façade of a building as the definition of an intelligent surface that speaks (and this means reaching the Hegelian freedom) and that is in tune with the symbiotic technology and with the hybrid language that characterize our current context. It is a scenario that asks to be consumed, dressing itself, transforming itself uninterruptedly, renewing its epidermis, seducing the inhabitant that is always open to the change and at the same time, is wishful to reconquer commercial places and turn them into gathering places.

⁹ Las capas horizontales de los paneles de Eternit son una referencia a la compresión de la piedra de cantera y al almacenaje estratificado de los productos Ricola. Mediante materiales reales, lenguaje constructivo y composición tectónica se establecen unos paralelismos que crean vínculos, conexiones y asociaciones a la historia del lugar, a su actividad actual y a su materia casi banal." (Wang, 2000a: 11).



Fig. 3 - Herzog & de Meuron, "Ricola warehouse" (1992). In www.flickr.com , 16.09.2010

Conclusion

The reflection about a practice, which would explain the interpretation as method in design in the XXI century, underlies in this investigation the thesis of crossing several types of observations and connotations in order to be able to plan the surface of buildings.

The individual had always the need to translate in objects his impressions about the world. Things that could allow him or her understanding and relating with other things as well as with other individuals and consequently, being a *being* in his time. In this case, vertical surfaces of buildings can be denominated as cultural or knowledge things. Therefore, they can be interpreted by the design process. It is an acknowledgement of a design in transformation that is coming to being and that has a first foggy moment before becoming a cultural experience for the user. An action taking advantages of time fragmentation and searching in memory the cultural signs of the past which are capable of giving meaning to the user. Specifically, it means that the surface of buildings has a nature, a potential that asks to be listened in the moment. This potential of the essence of the building has to be seen in the fluidity and the transience that defines our time. A contradictory reality, where maybe there is no context, where nothing and everything were created, a moment that represents the idea of function and meaning rather than form. A surface with a potential of a blank space, with many appearances asking to be transformed in scenarios. We could maybe imagine the current reality as a theatre whose spectator/user is an active agent, therefore interacting with the space and with the scenes/surfaces.

Then, the surface of the building gets covered as a constantly moving screen of images, letting the user experiment it. The design takes care of architecture, protecting it, because, nowadays, protecting the exterior of an existing building and therefore, having an essence, a potential and multiple possibilities of manifestation, means thinking a skin able to exteriorize the building in the context of its time.

With this text we aim to broach the designer's profile as interpreter of the epidermis of buildings and liquid modernity. The designer broaches the epidermis of the skin of buildings as an experience embedded in the culture of the context in which takes place. The scenario becoming experience reveals itself through a sequence of images that alternate and relate with the users, ensuring them the right to be individuals in liquid modernity.

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