

The Riddle and Architecture

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The act of posing a riddle prefigures or instigates a crisis. As it is motivated and deliberate, it stages a crisis. Riddles thwart culturally defined significances. In this state, the terms of the riddle become suddenly arbitrary. They become signs without fixed referents. This condition manifests itself in a tension, which arises with an opening of a space whereby a limited set of referents is suddenly expanded to include, not just another variation on a theme, but a referent whose inclusion has the affect of re-defining the fundamental terms.

Similar to riddling, the practice of design operates to pose questions that attempt to challenge normative values toward broadening the scope of being. For example, with the introduction of a radical chair design the whole class of chairs is changed and as a consequence through them our being, in the sense that that our being is in part defined in relationship to that piece of "necessary equipment" to use a term of Heidegger's.

Design therefore, as a process, involves the hypothetical implementation of strategies to imagine how new forms, uses and objects become available.

It is interesting that this suspension of the norm can only be momentary. This seems to suggest that the momentum of the norm is so great that any resistance can be achieved only with great force and can be sustained only for a limited duration. This seems supported by the fact that the epiphany that allows the riddle to be answered comes as a flash of insight that must be suddenly grasped or else irretrievably lost.

In the interest of broadening the concept of design and architecture, we can see it as a discipline of thought and an approach to problem solving, less the specialist activity of designing buildings. Maybe we could see the architecture as the thought process itself. Here, the real architecture is that which, in an odd way, is most concealed by it; namely, the underlying presuppositions for it to be just the way it is and no other way.

Often these pre-suppositions or foundations are not met by the same rigorous scrutiny as formulations, which are founded on them but instead are conceived in the spirit of common sense, normative values and a distinct bias toward getting on with it to preclude the possibility or unraveling things too far. In a sense, these presuppositions perform as a foundation of what is tolerable in the status quo.

Architecture should be an activity which, in the spirit of innovation, is most driven to willfully undermine its own foundations, to overturn precedent so as to reveal again and again the restraining content of the presuppositions that at once allow it to be while preventing it from being more fully.

The interest in Derrida in relation to architecture revolves around this notion of the repressed content of all thought; the notion that

one cannot hope to say anything without saying all that you didn't intend to say in order to say it. I disagree that this should promote or lead to a situation of valueless-ness. On the contrary, it is precisely because of this situation that underlying values can be recognized and therefore debated. Another way to look at the situation would be to see the predicament as the mechanism for values to become the prominent issue instead of a situation where values are meaningless.

As architects and generalists, we are trained to think about the world this way and the riddle or question we pose is the tool by which we attempt to strike at the core of those presuppositions. The riddle is an act of destruction or deconstruction and a necessary precursor to every truly constructive, as in "foundational" act.