

**ARCHITECTURE & PHILOSOPHY:  
THOUGHTS ON BUILDING**

Dr.-Ing. Markus Breitschmid, Architect, S.I.A.  
Assistant Professor of Architecture  
School of Architecture + Design  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University  
201 Cowgill Hall  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061-0205  
United States of America  
breitschmid@vt.edu

## **Abstract**

It is a legitimate assertion that most major figures who have shaped the course of architecture can be described as “theoreticians who build.” What distinguishes these architects from their architect colleagues of lesser status is the philosophical apparatus they have apprehended and made subject to their disposition. Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Peter Eisenman, Jacques Herzog & Pierre De Meuron, Rem Koolhaas, to name an incomplete list of important architects of the last forty years and fit the description of “theoretician who builds” particularly well, have been weaving philosophical and architectural thought with their built work. Idea and object are two sides of the same coin. In other words, good architects are in full intellectual command of what they are designing.

Curricula in most architecture schools establish the architectural studio as the largely unquestioned pillar in which architecture is coalesced by the student. There is a belief at work that suggests that the individual student is guided by inspiration as soon as s/he enters architecture school: The student sits at his or her desk and is waiting for a supernatural force to move their hands in such a manner that the sketch they produce will contain the germs of the next masterpiece. This approach to architectural education, practiced most naively in the USA in particular, is subject to the assumption that the students are geniuses. But how many of us are geniuses? And what does it mean to be a genius in the first place?

Therefore, architecture education should not be based on inspiration but on a rational discourse with the major concepts that make architecture. Architecture students have to encounter a discourse with the major concepts of architecture not in their graduate studies but in the beginning year of their architectural education because without that basic knowledge any more thorough understanding of architecture is not possible. Why would one wait to learn the intellectual basis of architecture until graduate school?

The course “Architecture & Philosophy: Thoughts on Building” examines not examples of contemporary architectural production but rather intellectual constructs from which they have arisen. The objective is to reveal the linguistic richness and semantic complexity of the language used in the discipline of architecture. Among the “key words” in the vocabulary of architecture are: abstract, aesthetics, art, avant-garde, beauty, building, construction, critique, deconstruction, form, function, genius, history, landscape, language, mimetic, modern, nature, phenomena, postmodern, program, representation, theory, topology, truth, typology, sublime, space, structure, style, system, world.

The students explore the revolutions of these “key words” in architecture and learn to understand their shifting motivations, considering the work of theoretical reflections, writings, manifestos, treatises in the disciplines of philosophy, art, and architecture.

The aim is to erect an intellectual scaffolding for knowledge in architecture and have available an apparatus to respond to the question *What is architecture?* from the outset of the student’s architectural studies.

**Keywords:**

Architecture  
Philosophy  
Architectural Theory  
Inspiration vs. Rational Discourse  
Knowledge

## **ARCHITECTURE & PHILOSOPHY: THOUGHTS ON BUILDING**

### **Wanted: “Theoreticians Who Build”**

It is a legitimate assertion that most major figures who have shaped the course of architecture can be described as “theoreticians who build.” What distinguishes these architects from their architect colleagues of lesser status is the philosophical apparatus they have apprehended and made subject to their disposition. Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Peter Eisenman, Jacques Herzog & Pierre De Meuron, Rem Koolhaas, to name an incomplete list of important architects of the last forty years who fit the description of “theoretician who builds” particularly well, have been weaving philosophical and architectural thought with their built work. Who can imagine the Vanna Venturi House in Chesnut Hill, Pennsylvania built in 1962 by Robert Venturi or the San Cataldo Cemetery in Modena built in the mid-1970s by Aldo Rossi without their respective landmark treatises “Complexity and Contradiction” and “Architettura della Citta”, both published 1966? While it does not seem to matter whether the built structure or the written manifest appeared first, we can assert that idea and object are two sides of the same coin. In other words, good architects are in full intellectual command of what they are designing and what they are distilling in writing or in speech.

It would be too much of a generalization to claim that the best architects of each generation –those few architects of every generation who are able to capture the world by means of buildings in such a distinct and powerful manner that the spaces and shapes of these buildings cause repercussions in the souls of men and women of that generation– also happen to be the best educated architects. No, as architects we would not want to make such a claim because we are aware that intellectual capacity and encyclopedic knowledge cannot conveniently be multiplied for the making of an architect who subsequently can stir the imagination of people.

Having issued this disclaimer, the argument of this presentation points to the problem that this disclaimer just stated above, namely

that there exists a hardly describable spectrum of “ingredients” that make for a good architect, has unduly “muddied the waters” in the sense that there now exists a deep distrust towards the necessary intellectual capacity of an architect. Voices in architectural education are shouting of an “intellectualization” of the architect’s education. On one hand this distrust against an “intellectualization” in architectural education can be supported. There exists a swathe of approaches towards architecture through extra-architectural means. For example, studying the architectural theories of the past forty years demonstrate a proclivity to argue models of approach to architecture in close proximity to linguistic formulations. Its key characteristic is the translation of one form of expression into another one, and the one major criterion for a renewal of any kind of meaning is the ability to express it in explicit linguistic terms. Architecture, though, is in its essence a syntactic totality of forms and spaces. The recent emphasis of forcing architecture into a linguistic system, as has been witnessed more recently, is to create an intellectual phantom out of architecture, an art form that clearly is not limited to be understood only linguistically. The rather dogmatic view of recent hermeneutic theories that poses that architecture ought to be accessed through linguistic means, serves as one example that unduly restricts the totality of what architecture is. The “linguistic turn” is one plausible example why there exists a certain distrust within architectural education against extra-architectural concepts. There are many more that might have less validity: architecture and questions of gender, architecture and questions of ecology, architecture and questions of political nature.

This paper argues that despite a justifiable skepticism against such “waves” of extra-architectural concepts that infiltrate the discipline of architecture, that for the most part, architecture and the education of architects is actually rather “anti-intellectual.” While it certainly can be asserted that talking and writing about architecture is talking and writing about something that really speaks for itself, architects also like to reflect on what they do in order to come closer to understanding the mystery of things. To arrive at an understanding of their own work, architects need tools that allow them to discuss architecture in general and their own architectural work specifically in intelligible terms.

Participation in architectural design reviews demonstrates that many students of architecture have significant problems to discuss their own work, not to speak of architecture in principal terms. Curricula in most architecture schools establish the architectural studio as the largely unquestioned pillar in which architecture is coalesced by the student. In only slightly exaggerated terms, a view into the halls of architectural education presents the image that there is a belief at work that suggests that the individual student is guided by inspiration as soon as s/he enters architecture school: the students sits at their desks and are waiting for a pending supernatural force to move their hands in such a manner that the sketch they produce will contain the germs of the next masterpiece. This approach to architectural education, and architectural design specifically, is practiced most naively in the USA in particular. It is subject to a perpetuation of the “architecture students as genius.” But how many of us are geniuses? How many of these students are geniuses? And does architectural education do architecture a “favor” if it celebrates the notion that it good architecture can be conceived by anyone if you just wait long enough until some God guides the architect’s hand in the “right way”?

This is not an argument that denies the existence and the importance of talent in the individual architect. It is a reasonable argument to make that a great intellect, great knowledge, and superb dedication to architecture will not necessarily bring forward desirable architecture whatever the persuasion of that architecture might be. The argument of this paper is more in line with the cautious position of the philosopher Friedrich Schelling. Schelling is without much doubt the one thinker who attributed more to the effect of genial inspiration than any other of his colleagues. Despite this valuation to the power of genius, Schelling stated with much certainty that only a small fraction of what makes the totality of the work of art is subject to genius: what constitutes the aspect of “art” in the work of art, for Schelling, to use his words, “is subject to skill, practice, and imitation.”<sup>1</sup>

## **The Teaching of Philosophical and Architectural Thought in the Beginning Year of Architectural Education**

Architecture education should attempt to balance of how it weighs inspiration and how it weighs knowledge that is subject to a rational discourse with the major concepts that make architecture. Architecture students ought to encounter a discourse with the major concepts of architecture not only –if at all– in their graduate studies but in the beginning year of their architectural education because without that basic knowledge of architectural concepts any more thorough understanding of architecture is not possible. Why would one wait to learn the intellectual basis of architecture until graduate school as the curricula of many architecture schools prescribes?

One example that quite convincingly demonstrates the necessity to be familiar with a conceptual architectural framework is the Goetz Gallery built by Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron in Munich in 1992. Other examples could display the same point that is intent to be demonstrated with this example, namely, the specificity of architectural concepts and how they are used in architecture. This example is not only depicting the necessity to understand concepts but it also focuses on the shifting nature of these concepts over time.

The essay “Architectural Constructs” describes the Herzog & de Meuron’s work as follows: “The architecture office of Herzog & de Meuron entered the profession of architecture with conceptually pregnant projects that sought to expound on concepts of contemporary fine arts. Their work, beginning with their very first building, introduced a dialogue with problems of representation. On one hand, their architecture emphasizes the façade with seemingly familiar materials and techniques that participate in an epistemological quest in which these materials and techniques become the vehicle that puts the onlooker into a state of soft unsettlement in order to assess its value for a new interpretation in that onlooker’s mind –Herzog states, ‘the strength of our buildings is the immediate, visceral impact they have on the visitor’– on the other hand, Herzog & de Meuron look for an autonomous quality of the individual building that is achieved by means of a curious,

almost monumental distance that is constructed between the building and the surrounding space and allows Herzog to amplify, 'A building is a building.' These states of continued ambivalence are also present internally by means of an array of interlocking spaces that negate the distinction between served and serving rooms.”<sup>ii</sup>

The essay “Architectural Constructs” continues to explain that the Goetz Gallery, among many other qualities it also possesses, is an example of the rediscovery of the famous credo of the “symbolization of construction” that Gottfried Semper advocated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to distinguish an artful architecture from utilitarian civil engineering. The Goetz Gallery considers this credo of the “symbolization of construction” again and radicalizes it in the sense that constructive language of a building does not have to follow its function or construction but has to mediate only a comprehensible idea of the apparent construction, a “*construction apparante*.” This position set forth by Herzog & de Meuron is counter to the older approach that had much currency up until the 1970s, namely, that in the foreground stood a constructive grammar that was recognized as a positivism of a constructive declaration of measures, in other words, a conscious and methodical representation of joining that occupied the place of a metaphorical act for the concept of “*Struktur*.”

Furthermore, the Goetz Gallery, semiotically speaking, also renounces the semantic dimension of architecture: the referential relationship between the signifier and the signified is broken up. This fracturing of the traditional functional and semantic context was necessary because it allowed for a new and unprejudiced view into the architectural material. The Goetz Gallery stands for a renunciation of mimetic elements and extra-pictorial influences of all kinds, but material's matter is emancipated to being sensual evidence that encompasses the sum total of its qualities. Surfaces as boundaries of volumes are treated for their own semantic value that leads to an emphasis of textural qualities and the seemingly laying open of structural elements. Other devices to attach a direct ornamental expression, in order to achieve their own aesthetic meaning, are the use of transparency of surfaces in order to emphasize spatiality, the use of color, the use of glaze, and perhaps

most importantly the techniques of displacement, in the sense that materials are applied in entirely uncommon ways. This emphasis on surfaces, appearance, and perception also triggered the exchange of geometry as the mathematical discipline of guidance for architecture with a so-called territorial topology. This topology is a hardly describable *Gestalt* that relates architecture less to the measured and carefully composed Renaissance or Neo-Classicism but more to a relationship with Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Late Baroque of Central Europe, where the totality of the object is in the foreground. This paradigm shift is necessary because it allows the discussing of the characteristics of surfaces and architectural figures without definition of its concrete form. The consequences of such employed techniques is the generalization of form and a generalization of construction. The aim of such generalizations is an emphasis of the architectural element itself, a demonstration, so to speak, that they are actual, that they are not metaphorical offerings that stand in reference to something else beyond, above, or within.

A relatively short description of the Goetz Gallery reveals a number of concepts, for example the concept of “art,” the concept of “abstraction,” the concept of “form,” the concept of “construction,” the concept of “function”, the concept of “representation”, the concept of “topology”, the concept of “mimetic”, the concept of “structure.”

How does a young student of architecture access such a description full of loaded conceptual terminology? Can he or she understand them at all? Or will the student of architecture completely misunderstand Herzog & de Meuron’s architecture?

Some of the meanings of these concepts applied at the Goetz Gallery have already been described in the preceding section. But is it clear, for example, what is meant by the word “art”, as it is used by these contemporary architects? The call for an artistic approach to architecture as advocated by Herzog & de Meuron is not to be understood as a turn towards an emphasis of architecture as expressive gestures, as one customarily might think, but as a rigorous “laying open of principle characteristics of the design,” as concrete manifestation of the “means of itself.” In other words, if

these architects advocate a “strong form,” to make yet another example, they do not argue for formalistic freedoms of forms and shapes but, to the contrary, for a voluntary renunciation of such formalistic freedoms of forms and an emphasis of an architecture as a system of immanent rules.

In order to not to arrive in a state of complete confusion, the individual student of architecture has to aim to erect an intellectual scaffolding for knowledge in architecture. He requires an apparatus to not only solve the “riddle” of the Goetz Gallery but more all-encompassing to intelligently respond to the question *What is architecture?* The student requires such an apparatus perhaps less so for a historical understanding but more so for an understanding of his or her own design work. It is this emphasis to understand his or her own design work that necessitates the dealing with architectural concepts from the very outset of his or her studies. While some of these concepts demand sophisticated philosophical and theoretical studies and that might easily be labeled as “too difficult for first year architecture students,” the discourse of such concepts cannot be declared as optional.

The kernel of such a discourse is the “Thinking about Architecture” in the sense of an intellectual discourse with architecture. Such a discourse must discuss the general principles of building and the reasoning on architecture through the analysis of texts and the reflection of the contextual history of ideas as it is found in treatises and other sources of theories of the arts and architecture from the past and the present. From such analysis of texts and reflections of the context of cultural ideas and concepts, this discourse must reconstruct a 'building of thought' of architecture and discusses historic building thoughts and contemporary design concepts. It is also important to recognize that the discourse ought not to be an unlimited exploration into the liberal arts –not because this is undesirable– but because the education in architecture is concerned to create a consciousness for the autonomy of architecture in the sense of an independent intellectual discourse with the fundamental problems of building. It is also noteworthy that the study of architectural treatises and other texts on architecture will reveal a range that often goes far beyond the support of practical building considerations. Such a discourse

means more than the quest for immediate rules of design or the writing of commentaries regarding one's own project. In the foreground stands the quest for the conceptual and ideal presupposition of building towards a systematic foundation of architecture. With such an aim, the discourse on architecture often touches the discipline of philosophy and the theory of art. It also brings to the fore the often opaque relationship between aesthetics and ethics. This dimension demands of the architect more than the mere fulfillment of private interests of function or the realization of individual representations of form but responsible urbane acting.

In order to aid the beginning of a subsequent holistic architecture-theoretical understanding, the first-year architecture student ought to be introduced to a basic apparatus of architectural terminology. The course "Architecture & Philosophy: Thoughts on Building" examines not examples of contemporary architectural production but rather intellectual constructs from which they have arisen.<sup>iii</sup> The objective is to reveal the linguistic richness and semantic complexity of the language used in the discipline of architecture. Among the "key words" in the vocabulary of architecture are: abstract, aesthetics, art, avant-garde, beauty, building, construction, critique, deconstruction, form, function, genius, history, landscape, language, mimetic, modern, nature, phenomena, postmodern, program, representation, theory, topology, truth, typology, sublime, space, structure, style, system, world.

The students explore the revolutions of these "key words" in architecture and learn to understand their shifting motivations, considering the work of theoretical reflections, writings, manifestos, treatises in the disciplines of philosophy, art, and architecture. A basic understanding of these concepts is a part of a solid education of every architect. An understanding of various design concepts and expression of architectural language without that basic knowledge is very difficult if not impossible.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Hammermeister, Kai. 2002, p.71.

<sup>ii</sup> Breitschmid, Markus. “Architectural Constructs”. in: Markus Breitschmid. *Three Architects in Switzerland*. 2008, p.158-161.

<sup>iii</sup> Breitschmid, Markus. *Thoughts on Building*. 2008, p. 9-90.

## References

Breitschmid, Markus. *Thoughts on Building*. Zürich: Corporis Publisher for Architecture, Art, and Photography 2008

Breitschmid, Markus. *Three Architects in Switzerland. Beat Consoni – Morger & Degelo – Valerio Olgiati*. Lucerne: Quart Publishers 2008

Hammermeister, Kai. *The German Aesthetic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002