

Gianluca Burgio

Words for Buildings. The narrative space, the build words

Abstract

The aim of this article is to understand the complex, sometimes problematic relationship that exists between words and concepts, on the one hand, and architectures, on the other. This relationship must be deepened and critically problematized to understand - and possibly avoid - a phenomenon that is quite typical of our time: it seems that words and things have moved away. In some cases, the subtle and ineffable connection that linked the evanescent sound of the word and the material consistency of the building seems to have disappeared.

Keywords

Embodied storie — Architecture — Metaphor

Introduction

The issue of relationship between storytelling and architecture is very fascinating and full of fruitful implications. The word and the architecture move on two different levels and, often, very far away: however, the so-called architectural *ékphrasis* exists thanks to the skilful combination of a discourse that must be coherent with the architecture itself. In this sense, on at least two occasions and through two very intelligent essays, *Forme dell'intenzione* (2000) and *Parole per le immagini* (2009), Michael Baxandall has opened a possible way of reading the relationships established between words and artworks. In short, the British art historian directs a reasoning about narrative language (whether understood as a description or as an explanation) that is generated from a work of art. Obviously, the reasoning, *mutatis mutandis*, can be easily transferred to architectural works, with all the implications that also derive from the social dimension and civil function that architecture plays in the human consortium. From this perspective, the key issue becomes understanding the complex and sometimes problematic, relationship between words and concepts, on the one hand, and architectures, on the other. This relationship must be deepened and critically problematized to understand, and possibly avoid, a phenomenon that is quite typical of our time: words and things seem to have separated from each other and, in some cases, the subtle and ineffable connection that related the words and the buildings seem to have disappeared.

A famous tale speaks of the non-existent clothing of an emperor, who had allowed himself to be convinced of his real existence. In fact, the narration that he had heard of his lying tailors had worked and, therefore, the em-

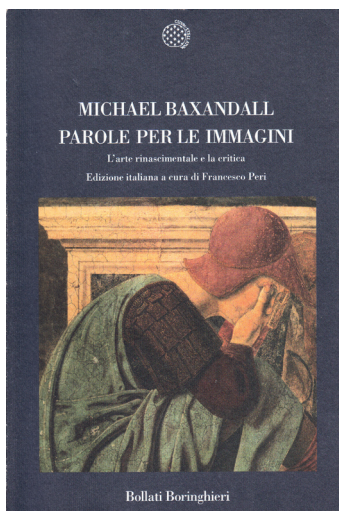


Fig. 1
Parole per le immagini book cover

peror believed that he wore a beautiful clothing; those who had not heard the narration of this story perceived reality in a very different way. Here, therefore, a case *ante litteram* of storytelling in which it is demonstrated that an insurmountable abyss between architecture and narration can be opened. In fact, the narrative can be very far from the physical, social and civil reality of the built space. Architecture has an unavoidable material and social dimension and, in addition, very concrete and not very abstract. It would be easy to construct an ideological discourse in which the narrative, as fiction, is presented as actually foreign to the discourse of architecture and as Roscellino di Compiègne said, the concepts are reduced to *flatus vocis*, that is, a simple emission of a sound. However, man exists because he is the object of a narrative (Gargani, 1999); the life of all of us is made up of stories. The architect who goes beyond the pure instrumentality of architecture, injects in his works a vision of the world and, therefore, also a complex interrelation of stories. After all, architectures, especially good architectures, are embodied stories, or works made from stories that, in turn, build a story.

Today we are immersed in an era that has changed its cultural reference paradigm: modernity and its *grands récits* are in crisis, and now we have to reconstruct thought through the remains of a cultural and theoretical shipwreck. Perhaps we can cling to the pieces of ships that are no longer recognizable as such; and dispersed in the immense sea of liquid theories of our time, we can try to build a “story”. These words are “pieces” of stories, small metaphorical vessels that allow us to navigate at sight to build a horizon of plausible meaning. Leaving aside, for once, the architect’s lenses, often too caught up in their disciplinary language - and changing them with new ones - perhaps we can discover a reality made up of concrete and coherent words with architecture. Perhaps we will discover a world of live metaphors (Lakoff, Johnson, 2007) that produce a meaning and contribute to multiply and increase the dimensions of architecture, recovering another depth in the things and space in which we live.

Adequatio rei et intellectus

The relationship between words, narration and things is very complex, due to the essence of the elements. The nature of words and the nature of reality are ontologically different; these two entities differ in time and space. In fact, while the events of reality (and in architecture, in our case ...) are multiple and synchronous, their representative description can only be linear and diachronic, like the words that are one behind the other, in a straight line of a sheet of two-dimensional paper. This insurmountable limit between these different entities has been the subject of debate for many centuries. The drama of man fallen from Eden is that words and things are no longer totally coincident; the unbridgeable hiatus between them has always been the fault of man – earthly and material being – who is not always able to “seize” the meaning of reality completely. Thomas Aquinas was one of the first to speak of the *adequatio rei et intellectus*, that is, of the adhesion of ideas to reality, or of the correspondence between the real object and its linguistic and conceptual representation.

Obviously, since we are not philosophers or semioticians who, with a propensity sometimes analytical and other continental, aim to give a more or less certain answer to the subject, we remain on the edge of this fascinating battlefield. However, from this battle we try at least to understand the

consequences and the effects it implies on the representation – critical and theoretical – of the world of architecture. The architects move in a field that needs to be very close to reality. The excessive “philosophical” abstraction, which sometimes we do not know how to handle, makes us build a theoretical castle that is only the pale reflection of the architectural and urban reality. In this sense, the lesson of Michael Baxandall is illuminating and is, in a way, a model that we can partially apply to architecture. The objective would be that the world of words that speak of architecture does not remain completely distorted and deprived of meaning.

The Baxandall's method

It is very fascinating and intriguing the system of reading works of art developed by Michael Baxandall that, as we have already widely anticipated, can be applied, in a kind of “disciplinary” transfer, to the architectural narrative. The sixth chapter of *Parole per immagini*, in which the British art historian deals with the Laocoon described by Jacopo Sadoletto, is exemplary. In it Baxandall raises a series of questions that are summarized in the last pages of this text dense and that, in our opinion, it is worth mentioning here: «What do our descriptions of a work of art cover? Evidently experience of the work rather than, directly, the work itself. But how far is it the narrative of an experience in progress and how far the map of a state of mind after having had an experience?» (Baxandall, 2009, p.136).

Further on, Baxandall says: «How to control slippages between interpretation and ekphrasis – that is, between the object treated as present to the reader and the object treated as absent – when its real availability to the reader is unstable?[...] In our time this seems very much a problem about the half-presence or pseudo-presence of objects in degraded or miniaturized or diapositive reproduction» (Baxandall, 2009, p.136).

The observations of Michael Baxandall, even in his brevity, open the doors to a universe of ideas that in itself deserves an essay. However, we try to focus our thoughts on the issues that seem inevitable to us and we try, therefore, to reformulate the Baxandallian questions. We could replace the term “works of art” with the expression “architectural works” and focus our attention on the main theme that is behind all our reasoning, that is, the narrative of architecture.

We could ask ourselves: what do our narrations of architectural works describe? First, like Jacopo Sadoletto, the critical/descriptive narrative around the architectural work is displaced – in time and in space – in comparison to the work itself: it was born afterwards and was born to define a direct or mediated spatial experience (through objects miniaturized or diapositive reproduction, Baxandall would say ...). Verbal language has an eye and body experience, but it also includes other narrative experiences that history often refers to. Hence, the comparative “games” that, however, run the risk of getting away from work: they intertwine with each other and combine with certain agility, since they are homologous languages. As we said before, in fact, grammars and compositional structures govern the linguistic system of work itself and the verbal system, including irreducible ones.

From these considerations arises the second question, also generated on the basis of Baxandall thought: how is it possible to control the deviations between the field of interpretation and that of the description (which is “simply” the verbal representation of the architectural work)? Here, the terrain begins to be slippery. Narrative fragments are often introduced

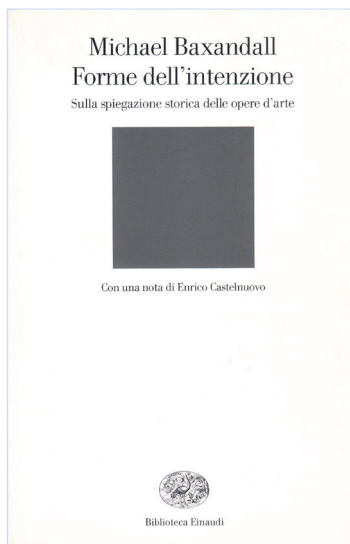


Fig. 2
Forme dell'intenzione book cover

into *ékphrasis*, causing an inhomogeneous representation. From our point of view, however, the Baxandallian theory has consequences that can be almost nihilistic, since they could lead us to the conclusion that the work of art is almost “unspeakable”. In this way, the verbal language that represents the work could not capture the deepest essence of the works to which it approaches. On the other hand, the same Baxandall in the essay dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ by Piero della Francesca, towards the end of his fascinating reading of the painting, seems to withdraw from the battle to declare a kind of renunciation of interpretation, rather than a defeat.

“This adds up to rather little one can actually say, all of it obvious but even so not all verifiable in a way that would prevent art historians from pursing their lips” (Baxandall, 2009, p. 190).

Micro-récits

The narrative, in our opinion, can offer an escape and opening to other modes of representation that allow the construction of various descriptive and cognitive models of architecture and the city. Here, therefore, the role of the architect as the narrator can be central. In fact, he may be able to configure the physical space, but also to mold the collective imagination. Narration is a fundamental act of the human being, which exists also through history. Architecture, especially in recent decades, has not escaped this narrative condition. In fact, having experienced dramatically, like other disciplines, the decline of the so-called *grands récits*, architecture has gradually abandoned global theoretical systems. The monolithic theoretical *corpora* have gradually disintegrated, even to become *micro-récits* (small stories), fragments of stories or even minimal narrative that try to agglutinate around specific themes. The great theoretical frameworks give way to short narratives. Moreover, these narratives allow, in our opinion, to go beyond the obstacle posed by Baxandall. The micro-stories allow us to build an area in which these verbal concepts also become stories and metaphors.

In this sense, a few years ago, in the Sunday supplement of “Il Sole24ore”, a good review of a book by Hans Blumenberg (2011) appeared, which explained how the reality that surrounds us cannot be narrated only through conceptual and verbal constructions, because concepts are devices that allow objectifying something that is not present immediately for sensitive perception. This conceptual objectification becomes necessary in social communication: «But it is not realistic, warns Blumenberg, because by reducing reality in concepts, we believe in clarifying it. Instead, we lose a large number of non-transformable elements in concepts that are part of the “totality” in which we live. The philosopher recounts his difficulty when, in 1972, he was invited to scientifically explain his concept of “world”» (Li Vigni, 2011). Blumenberg maintains that the expression “world” is so vast that it can only be used metaphorically. All the reality that surrounds us is “absolute metaphor”, and only partially lends itself to conceptualization: this is what the German philosopher defines as the triumph of inconception.

Li Vigni says: «In the perception, representation and communication of life, the concept and the metaphor play, therefore, complementary roles. The analogical power and the figurative capacity of metaphor are the basis of linguistic creativity [...]. Copernicus would never have imagined his solar system if he had used the concepts available at that time and would not

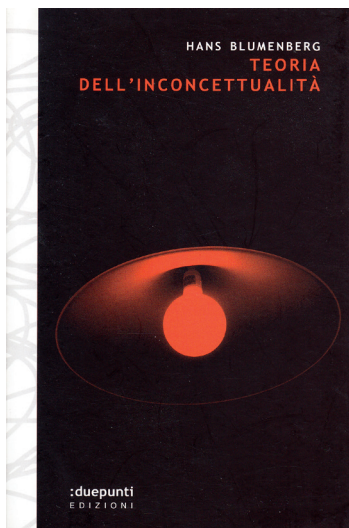


Fig. 3
Teorie dell'inconcettualità book cover

have dared, metaphorically, to unthinkable situations» (Li Vigni, 2011). Narration as a tool to describe, define, represent and theorize architecture, has a strong heuristic function, because it allows us to build a cognitive and representative system that is more open, less rigid, and more suitable for constructing metaphors that are closer to the essence of the works. Stories have the ability, in comparison with linear descriptions, to move through the pattern of correspondences. The linear and progressive discourse always places us clearly, through spatio-temporal coordinates, in a place or in a sequence of times and places arranged linearly. However, reality moves in many places at the same time, its complexity is intertwined and highlighted and cannot be reduced to simplifying schemes. The narrative contributes, on the other hand, to the construction of the multiple and «it is so that the discourse, the history and tragedy multiply the energies of thought, moving the subject in the path of the unconscious» (Rella, 1987, p.18).

The unity of place, action and time of Aristotelian origin, forces linear representations that reduce the scope of architectural reality. Stories that overlap, diverge towards other stories and explore even different territories. These stories allow us to open new horizons, since they have a much stronger heuristic load. A linear representation, guided by a clear central idea (the main tone of the composition) already knows where to get: it is a deterministic development, based on secure elements.

To explore, even in architectural criticism of contiguous domains, to move towards different registers (artistic, aesthetic, socioanthropological, economic, etc.) allows a holistic vision. Because architecture is not built by one hand.

Rem Koolhaas: the lesson of a storyteller...

Those who had the opportunity to have Rem Koolhaas' books in their hands will have realized the enormous difference that exists between them and most other architecture books. In particular, *S, M, L, XL* (1995) is a true explosion of narrations coming from completely different fields: from travel notes, comics, to a dictionary that meets the most different definitions and yet maintains a relationship with the world of architecture. The book, written in collaboration with Canadian designer Bruce Mau, is a "wild" cocktail of pixelated xerographies, homemade comics, pop quotes and extravagant typographic characters that challenge the dominant pomposity of the architect's profession.

However, although presented in this seemingly superficial way, Rem Koolhaas tells stories that surpass what – with snobbery – someone could define as the quintessence of a pop culture. It is a very far away from the pompous theorizations of the 60s and 70s. Koolhaas breaks that system and proposes an equally sophisticated one: a system in which narration is often the absolute protagonist. The psycho-narration of "Manhattanism" by Delirious New York (1978) is a clear example: even today, four decades later, that book constructs a story that, by adding fragments of other stories and pieces from other disciplinary worlds, opens towards a multiple and complex reading of an urban, economic and social phenomenon, such as New York. Koolhaas offers stories (in the narrative sense of the term) with which you can agree more or less. However, these stories allow us to reconstruct a new horizon of meaning, if we accept the narrative pact that Koolhaas stipulates with the reader. It is a different and distant dimension of classical theorization and representation; it is a narrative dimension, in

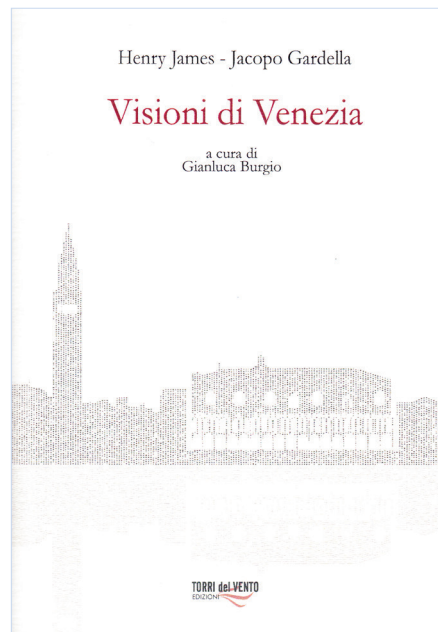


Fig. 4
Visioni di Venezia book cover

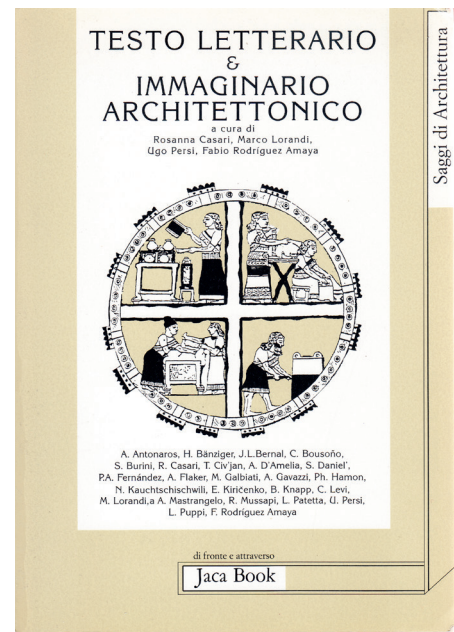


Fig. 5
Testo letterario e immaginario architettonico book cover

fact, in which the sophisticated game of references, metaphors and quotes is part of the flow of architecture that is, in itself, an open system composed of many questions and themes.

An example is clearly represented by a comic drawn inside the book *S, M, L, XL*. The issue addressed by Koolhaas is that of the relationship between investors and architects. Instead of writing a complex text that defines the balance of power between these two key players in the world of construction, the Dutch architect prefers to be represented in a comic as a kind of Hulk fighting against investors. Beyond the doubts that these modes of representation can be generated, the fact that we are in front of a very different narrative strategy. Moreover, this strategy has had a great echo and a great influence in the world of architecture: it is not a case, in fact, that the book on the evolution of modern architecture of the Danish studio Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), *Yes is more* (2011), is built as a comic story.

The narrative construction of architecture

To conclude, let's try to understand what role narrative can play in the disciplinary field of architecture.

The compositional structures of architecture, despite their profound difference, have a certain analogical relationship with the structures of the narrative. Narrative strategies, therefore, are adequate for the critical and theoretical formalization of architecture, which often, to be explained and understood, must go beyond the narrow margins of the usual communications.

We have seen, from the ideas of Michael Baxandall, that it is difficult to maintain a direct correspondence between language and reality; this consideration helps to redefine the "classical" representations and forces the practice to a new awareness of reality: the idea of a constructive dimension of interpretations and praxis begins to open the way. The truths lose their absolute character to acquire the value of «principle of articulation and structuring of experience» (Gargani, p.132).

We can say that the contemporary architect behaves like a kind of sense-maker: he constructs systems of meaning, in which there are some non-absolute truths; but they have a «constructive and historical-temporal character, therefore discontinuous and heterogeneous» (Gargani p.113).

Probably, this is the task of a critique and a theory of architecture that wants to follow the thousand streams into which the discipline is divided. The storytelling, although it has to follow a linear system because this is the order of the words, allows a complex, varied and open reading, which takes charge of the multiplicity of the architecture that moves between the thousand plateaus of reality in which is.

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Gianluca Burgio. Architect and PhD, is Assistant Professor in Architectural Design at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture of the University of Enna “Kore”. From 2005 to 2010, he taught at the Vallès School of Architecture (ETSAV-UPC). Author of researches and studies on the recycle and reuse of the modern architecture, he has published several articles and books. He collaborates with foreign universities, including the *Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya* and the *Illinois School of Architecture*.