

Giuseppina Scavuzzo
Architecture and narration: the architect as *storyteller*?

Abstract

Since we are deeply involved in the era of communication, the interest in the relationship between architecture and forms of narration is not surprising. Amongst the many declinations in which the relationship can be interpreted, it's successful to combine architecture with a concept of contemporary communication: *storytelling*. Architecture and narration maintain, however, a deeper bond if we consider them in terms of the boundaries they create between humans and the real world. The common hermeneutic tension of construction and narration/poetize can be fully understood in the work of the architect-poet, or those architects whose work also includes poetic composition. The issue is how the application of contemporary techniques of *storytelling* influences the sense of hermeneutic narrative of the architecture, considering that the effectiveness of storytelling seems to reside more in explanatory simplification than in problematic complexity

Parole Chiave

Storytelling — Narration — Narrative — Ricoeur

1. Architecture and narration.

There seem to be motives in common between the two activities of construction and narrative, since both put themselves between – *inter* or *intra* – humans and the world. In this perspective, Architecture and narrative, seemingly distant in the materials with which they operate – stone and words, space and time, the heaviness of the one and the lightness of the other – do share various significant similarities.

Research and studies in the two disciplines of architecture and the human sciences have extensively analysed the associations between literary texts and the architectural imagery contained therein or, vice versa, between architectural texts and the literary imagery that inspired it.

But, beyond the resultant mutual influence or even the structural analogy, it is interesting to check the potential connexion of two actions, construction and narrative, which are also two forms of interpretive experiences.

Cultural psychologists, anthropologists, semiologists, and linguists have described, in several ways, the very human approach to organizing experience in a narrative form to build collective meaning. A sort of irreducible predisposition is recognized based on the very human need to bring shape and meaning to reality and personal actions, to communicate the meanings perceived in experience by correlating the past, present and future¹ transforming whatever has happened into a story.

In this dimension of interpretive, hermeneutic experience, narrative is not so distant from architecture, in the sense that it is an activity which humans have always carried out when building shelters: lessening the indeterminacy of their places by imposing a measure of the body's material needs, with forms that reflect a sense attributed to this being in the world,

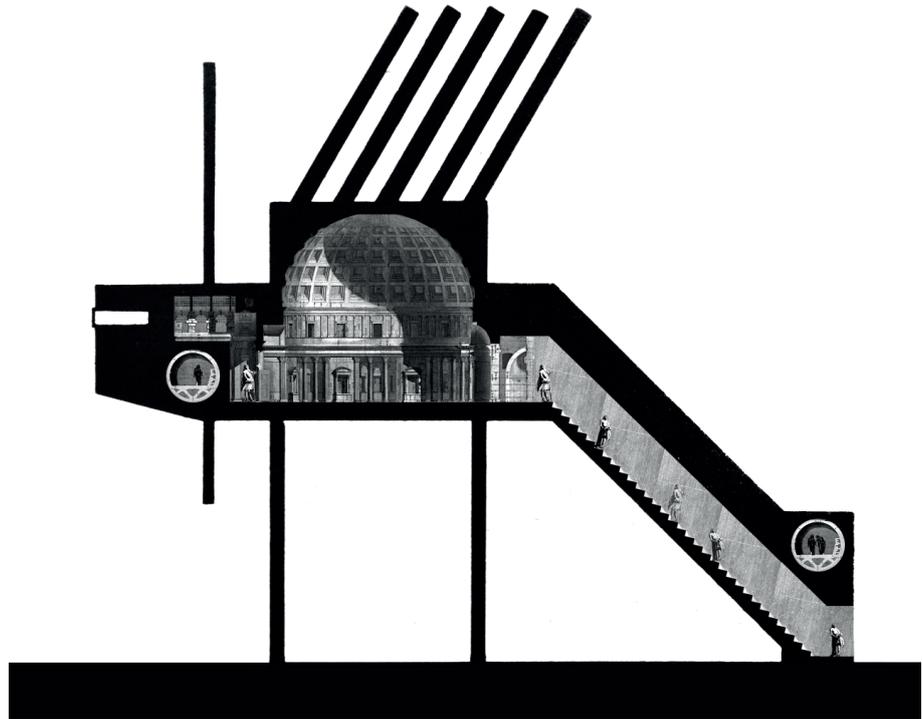


Fig. 1

Piranesian Security. Collage based on John Hejduk's 'Security' project and interior. Illustrations by Piranesi. Student: Matthew Darmour-Paul, Iowa State University - Department of Architecture.

to the gesture of inhabiting the Earth.

The way in which narrative operates on time and construction on space are analogous since, as Paul Ricoeur wrote, 'narrative and construction bring about a similar kind of inscription, the one in the endurance of time and the other in the enduringness of materials.'² The 'logical abyss' between time told and space constructed is progressively reduced if one considers that space and time are both twofold: there is geometric space (which can be defined in terms of Cartesian coordinates) and the space of the places of life (which surround the human body), just as there is chronological time measured by clocks and time spent. The space of places lived becomes time and memory, just as a story gains space in narrative: 'The story of life unfolds in a space of life.' According to Ricoeur, both the act of narrative and the architectural act represent a 'provisional victory over the ephemeral': the first subtracts an event from the flow of time to become a memory, the second embodies the requirements and functions of inhabiting adapting them through construction operations. Each building is a living memory (and story) of its being built, the way in which it translated inhabiting into construction.

Ricoeur very clearly defined the singular relationship between construction and narrative in *Architecture and Narrativity*.³ This essay was presented at the 19th International Exhibition of the Milan Triennale in 1994 dedicated to 'Identity and Differences', which hosted, along with Ricoeur, Jean-François Lyotard. Called to reflect upon the crisis of the certainties of modernity and the city that represents the outcome, both indicated narrative know-how as an option. Lyotard referred to a post-modernist narrativity, by then on the wane, that questioned the very legitimacy of the project, seen as the expression of a rationality that presented itself as totalizing since it opted for a form that defied otherness. Instead, Ricoeur referred to a hermeneutic narrative in which architectural design, after the fall of the Modern Movement dogmas, could again experience legitimacy in its potential narrative sense with respect to the human need to inhabit⁴.

In *Architecture e Narrativity*, starting from the parallel inscription in a mixed time and space (chronological and lived time/geometric space and place) a correspondence is established between construction and narrative by transposing onto the architectural plane categories already explained in his work *Time and Narrative*, and applied to the art of narrative: *prefiguration*, *configuration* and *refiguration*.

The ‘prefiguration’ of narrative is the phase in which the story is inserted into everyday life, in conversation, and has not yet been formalized in literature. The ‘prefiguration’ of the architectural act would coincide with the idea of inhabiting (in a declared resonance of Heidegger⁵), with the need for shelter that defines the internal space of the dwelling.

Instead, construction would be the equivalent space of narrative ‘configuration’, which takes place through the construction of a weft, or a plot, in which facts find order and coherence.

In the third phase, ‘refiguration’, which for narrative is produced through reading (with the expectations and reactions of the reader), for architecture is still achieved through inhabiting. In the first phase, inhabiting is the presupposition of the building, in the third it is the consequent and resultant condition. This is a reflective inhabiting that replicates the building and is a memory of it.

This sensible parallel reveals a profound analogy between narrative and construction in the relationship that both entertain with life, of rooting and elevation at the same time. The rooting consists in the existential need that leads humans to speak and live, the elevation consists in the raising of that need through the form assumed by the word and inhabiting, becoming respectively literature and architecture.

The reflective inhabiting of the third stage is one hoped-for, which Ricoeur called architecture to return to, recovering the hermeneutic value of the project, its adherence – at least as much as narrative – to a vital level of existence, is ‘an act of a human being already alive.’

In this adherence to life, word and architecture come to synonymy and eventually coincide.

In *Stanzas*⁶, Giorgio Agamben described Western thought as being split between philosophy and poetry, between *thinking-word* and *poetic-word*. A division brought about by a misunderstanding, since every philosophy is, like poetry, an aspiration to joy and every poem is a tool for knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct the broken word.

The unit of the poem, Agamben reminds us, is the “stanza” which in Italian means room. The stanza is the portion or verse of a poetic composition, just as the room is the minimum unit of the interior of a work of architecture.

This Italian coincidence of significance is also present in other languages: in Arabic *bayt* means home, tent, but also verse, even indicating the main verse of a poem.

The Italian poets of the 13th century called ‘stanza’ the essential core of their poetry because in the poet’s ‘stanza’, understood as his room, desire was translated into words, into verse. The room is an ideal space in which it is possible to take possession, in the form of a vision and a word, of what the subject could not possess merely through the *thinking-word*, through philosophy. It is the place where the fissure between desire and its elusive object, which is also self-knowledge, comes to heal.

Thus, the room/stanza contains three different dimensions: it is the environment to which the poet retires, that accommodates and makes possible the relationship between the poet and his desire; it is the inner space from

which the poetic-word flows; finally, it is the form assumed, resulting in writing, the verse through which existential experience communicates. The *stanza* as the unit of poetry and the *room* of architecture are the concretization and representation – in some way the (poetic) narrative – of the opportunity for self-possession.

The possible structural analogies between architecture and poetic tale emerge in many texts of poets who have described the compositional process as construction, often using architecture as a metaphor for composition. Edgar Allan Poe, in *The Philosophy of Composition* describes the method he used to write his most famous poem *The Raven* as a matter of calculation and exactitude, a construction in which no detail could be explained by chance or intuition.⁷

Analogously, Paul Valéry describes the genesis of the greatest of his *Charmes*, *The Graveyard by the Sea*, with its abstract rhythmic figure, later transformed into a metrical structure, the decasyllable verse, and in the end ‘clad’ in words. The poetic root is indicated in an original act of construction as an expression of the human condition prior to writing.⁸ This construction/poetic act aspires to bring the arbitrary disorder of the world to a need for form and measure, which is that extreme bid to live that poetry ultimately urges.⁹

In *Eupalinos*, the same attempt is expressly asserted as a vital tension to construct works of architecture.¹⁰ The outcome is not taken for granted, the attempt is always teetering on the brink of failure, the tension never placated, driving relentlessly towards a deeper awareness in things. In architecture’s disquietude dwells the forever unrequited Eros of poetry.

The common hermeneutic tension of construction and narrating/poetize can be fully understood in the work of a specific type of poet, the architect-poet, or those architects whose work also includes poetic composition. It includes it because poetic expression exceeds the personal existential horizon, blends with the architect’s work, brings form in a different material to the research into the human condition and its meaning.

Le Corbusier, who on the ID documents obtained with his acquisition of French nationality in 1930, asked to be defined a ‘man of letters’, for eight years worked on composing his own poetic work, *Le poème de l’angle droit*¹¹. This book, which consists of verses and drawings, was published in 1955 in a limited number of copies, signed by the author and featuring original lithographs.

The poem is divided into seven zones (all of which have a title and a corresponding colour, and are in turn subdivided into chapters) summarized at the beginning of the text in a diagram of the divisions that the author named *Iconostasis*.

This is a structure that can be paralleled with the arrangement of a typical Le Corbusier-style work of architecture given by the superimposition of free floors in a multi-storey building made possible by a load-bearing frame.¹²

Some of the lithographs for the poem represent the fundamental principles of the Swiss-French master’s architecture: the 24-hour solar day cycle, the Unité d’habitation system, and the *Modulor*, culminating in the representation of one of his best-known emblems, a monument built at Chandigarh, *The Open Hand*.

However, apart from the structural analogy and the inclusion of architectural references, it is the sense of the work that makes it an integral part of the ‘Patient Search’ carried out through architecture.

The meaning of the poem is condensed in the title of the work: the condi-

tion of man in the world defined by the right angle that his vertical body forms with the horizontality of the ground line. The increasing and decreasing curve of the solar cycle meanders along this line, with time being marked by day and night, and the seasons. Symbolically, the right angle is destined to revolve upon death.

The task of humans is to reach full awareness of this condition inscribing it in space and time: only a profound self-awareness can elevate humans from to a superior condition, from rooting to elevation, coming back to Ricoeur. This is demonstrated by the reference to the iconostasis, the historiated screen that in churches separates the nave from the altar, shielding the Eucharistic rites that only priests and initiates can attend, but whose images represent and reveal the path of salvation to the faithful. Similarly, the poem promises in a symbolic, cryptic form, a path towards salvation, not in the afterlife, but attainable through a struggle that must occur internally within humans: the freeing of awareness, the alchemical process that the verses of the poem refer to, is a poetic metaphor: “Mistaking too many mediate causes/mistaking our lives (...) Thus do not condemn those/who wish to take their share of/risks in life. Tolerate/the fusion of metals/the alchemies in any case commit you to nothing (...) A new time has begun/a phase a limit a transition/And thus we shall not/have mistaken our lives”.¹³ Another architect-poet was John Hejduk whose poems were published in the two collections *Such Places as Memory: Poems 1953-1996*¹⁴ and *Lines No Fire Could Burn*.¹⁵

Also in Hejduk’s poems it is possible to trace the structural similarities with his architectural compositions, in particular, the repetition and seriality that characterize the series of geometric and compositional experiments of the *Texas Houses*, *Diamond Houses* and *Wall Houses*, like the infinite zoomorphic variations of his small-scale ‘vagabond architecture’.¹⁶ In the last of the poems in *Such Places as Memory*, entitled *Sentences on the House and Other Sentences*, we find, in a long series of personifications of the house (the *Sentences on the House* number 150), the continuous reference to the home as a place of life and death (in the remaining 82 *Other Sentences* Death is the protagonist) defined by the verticality or horizontality of a passage on the threshold of the house.

As in Le Corbusier’s “right angle”, verticality and horizontality define in an extreme synthesis the relationship between, *inter*, man and his presence on earth: “The height of a door of a house is for man’s entry/the width of a door of a house is for man’s exit: one dimension for life/the other dimension for death.”¹⁷

Everything that takes place in the house is a liminal ritual,¹⁸ its meaning suspended between life and death. The same liminal ritual became architecture in the *Wall House* series of projects, fulfilling in the passage from the Past (as Hejduk called the service spaces of the house) to the Future (the ‘spaces served’) via the Present, the wall-threshold.

Here, the full inscription of construction and narrative is realized, returning to Ricoeur, the one in the substance of the other, the one in the enduringness of the material, and the other in the endurance of time.

Hejduk often subverted the conventional relationship between the project and the theoretical text that accompanied it for comparison and reciprocal verification. In his projects animated by personages who each bear their own story (the titles alone evoke this: *The House of the Twins* and their *Mother’s House*, *The House of the Inhabitant Who Refused to Participate*, *The House of the Suicide* and *The House of the Mother of the Suicide*, etc.)

the literary practice is directly incorporated in the architectural practice. As highlighted by Stan Allen, the fact that various works of architecture designed by Hejduk came to be realized by students or other architects reveals a new relationship between author/architect accentuating the distance of the architect from the execution of the work¹⁹. As for a literary work, whether theatrical or musical, the authenticity of these works of architecture is guaranteed by the text/drawing, which means that they can be carried out at a distance of time and space and told even without the physical presence of the author.

To renew and to be told each time is the question of sense of which these architectures are, just like Hejduk's poems, "Silent Witnesses"²⁰, a question posed to each of us so that "we shall not have mistaken our lives", as Le Corbusier would say.

2. The architect as storyteller?

Given this interpretation, which establishes a parallel between architecture and narrative/poetry as hermeneutical experiences, the call, of which this number of FAM is the outcome, contained a provocation or at least raised a doubt, expressed by the interrogative form of the title.

In the era of communication in which we are deeply involved, amongst the many declinations in which the relationship between architecture and forms of narration can be interpreted, it seems to be very successful the idea of linking architecture to a form or, better, a technique of narration, which is key to contemporary communication: storytelling.

To explain what issues and perplexities this approach can produce, we proceed in an inferential form starting from two premises.

The first premise is that, as we have tried to describe above, the narrative and the architecture share the answer to primary needs, including that of interpreting the meaning and describing the reality of man's being in the world.

The second premise is that, during the twentieth century, the structures, the narrative plans, the languages of the different narrative forms were unveiled, dismantled and reassembled. This allowed the practice of telling stories to become a strategy of persuasive communication. This allowed the practice of telling stories to become a persuasive communication strategy in political, economic and business area.

This is in fact the most common meaning of the term storytelling in Italy (and here we assume it in this sense) unlike the English-speaking countries where it literally and generically means tell stories.

In these different fields the figure of "storytelling managers" has been affirmed: professionals of the narration at the service of the interests of their clients, who can tell stories so well that often understanding what is true becomes difficult.

Given the two premises, the question is: if his traveling companion, the narrative, has gone to meet this destiny, successful but also compromising (at least compared to the hypothesized hermeneutical purpose), what happens to architecture?

Storytelling, after spreading in other area, today comes to be proposed as a useful tool for the architect. Web sites for architects and even different professional orders promote storytelling courses for their members.

This seems to suggest that the architect should not only update his tools to manage communication with the agents involved with him in the transformation of the physical context (public administrators, private clients, citizenship) but become a storytelling manager himself, able to communicate,

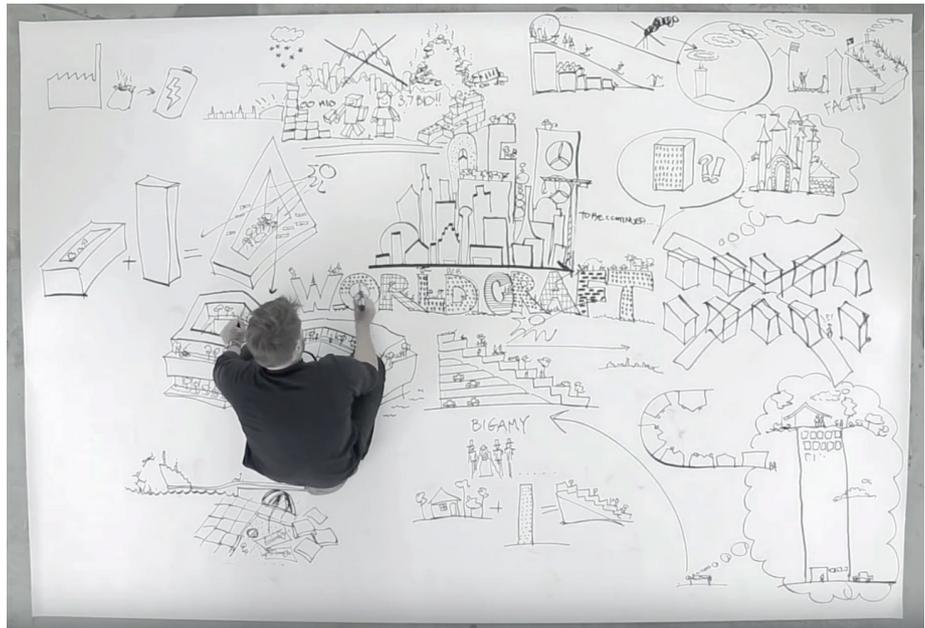


Fig. 2

Bjarke Ingels' "World Craft" explains how architecture can turn fiction into reality.

disseminate, explain and market his project.

The question that should arise is if and how the application of contemporary techniques of storytelling influences the sense of hermeneutic narrative of the architecture linked to the human attitude to living. A narrative that, as seen, mainly asks questions, making architecture a potentially critical practice towards the given conditions, while the effectiveness of storytelling seems to reside more in explanatory simplification than in problematic complexity.

The "active readers" of the FAM, those who in addition to reading the magazine propose their position by answering the call, apart from some exceptions, have dribbled provocation, often avoiding the contemporary and recalling *ante litteram* examples of storytelling in architecture. This is the case of the ideas of a Mediterranean home, of the holiday home, of the Italian house with its "*conforto*" told by a master of storytelling *ante litteram*: Giò Ponti, about which Lucia Miodini's article talks about.

Summarizing one can recognize here at least three ways to decline the relationship between architecture and narrative.

A group of authors has described architecture itself as a text, as a story. This is the case of the reading of some Le Corbusier's works made by Alïoscia Mozzato, of the narratological analysis applied by Filippo Bricolo to the architecture of Carlo Scarpa, of *La Scarzuola* by Tomaso Buzzzi, interpreted as an architectural/autobiographical tale by Gregorio Froio, and of the intervention on the existing architecture, described by Chiara Barbieri as an exercise in rewriting architecture, between pre-text and con-text.

Another group of articles deals with ways in which architecture can be told. The authors recognize the value of a project to these stories, not only because they are interpretations and re-elaborations (like any story) but because through selection and sometimes transfiguration, these stories provide material for other, different projects.

This is the case of the architectural description, a literary genre very common in the past, of which Francesca Belloni deals, while, crossing architecture as a story and story on architecture, Anna Conzatti deals with the analogy between story and architecture in their position between space and time.

Within this group, the text of Ausias Gonzalez Lisorge occupies a place

in itself. In addition to telling stories, there is the tale of History. The way History is told makes History.

This of course would lead us to dramatically expand the text to more strictly historical issues. But the article by Gonzalez Lisorge considers the history, or rather different, famous, histories of modern architecture, from a peculiar point of view, that of the way in which the building's resistant structure was told, confronting structure in a formal sense, structure as a result of linguistic structuralism and structure as a resistant part. The way in which architects tell the structure (intended as a resistant or supporting structure), its evolution in relation to the evolution of the formal structure, affects the role that the resistant structure continues to have in conformation of architecture. Conversely, the use of terms and concepts inherent in structuralism affects the way in which architects describe the very form of architecture as a formal structure, as a system of signs, a code of languages. A third group of articles describes the tale as a form itself of the architect's project: it is the case of Superstudio's tales, which Giovanni de Flego deals with, which become autonomous and alternative to building, linguistic objects capable of prefiguring reality; it is the case of the text of Zisis Kotionis described by Fabiano Micocci as an assemblage, and it is also the case of the counter-story of the territorial project in some experiments of the twentieth century in which Marco Moro analyzes the role of narration. Gianluca Burgio's article, instead, deals with the contemporary use of storytelling, and describes the widening of the discursive strategies available to the architect (also the comic book, just to give an example) that allows complex reading able to reflect the status of multiplicity of architecture.

Finally, Kostas Tsiambaos proposes to us a real fantastic story that aims to make us think about how a part of storytelling of the architects involves the construction of their biography and how the influential role of the architectures is indebted to a persuasive technique that is not limited to telling architecture but often places it in exceptional biographies.

An emblematic case is that of Le Corbusier but the same happens for contemporaries like Rem Koohaas or Bjarke Ingels. The architect as a great storyteller, even of himself. To the extent that the self-narration is (as described by Tsiambaos) also self-construction, self-formation, *Bildung*, then this storytelling maintains the link with the original construction as a hermeneutical experience, as a research project.

Here is a trajectory, an itinerary, a wandering of the project's own discourse. It is produced, in that discursive field that measures the tension between architecture and narration, between architecture and storytelling, the figure of the "itinerancy" already suggested by Ricoeur.

Notes

¹ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990)

² Paul Ricoeur, *La memoria, la storia, l'oblio* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2003)

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Architettura e narritività*, in *Identità e differenze* (Milan: Electa, 1996, vol. 1) reprinted in *Leggere la Città: Quattro testi di Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by Franco Riva (Rome: Castelvechi, 2013)

⁴ Franco Riva, *Decostruzione e narrazione*, in *Leggere la città: Quattro testi di Paul Ricoeur*, op. cit.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Costruire abitare pensare", in *Saggi e discorsi*, edited by G. Vattimo, Mursia, Milan 1980.

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006).

⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', first ed. in *Graham's Magazine* (April 1846).

⁸ Paul Valéry, *Le Cimetière marin* (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, 1920).

⁹ 'Le vent se lève ... Il faut tenter de vivre!' Paul Valéry, *Le Cimetière marin*, op. cit.

¹⁰ 'I am the act. You are the matter, you are the force, you are the desire, but you are separate.' Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos ou l'Architecte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1921).

¹¹ Le Corbusier, *Le poème de l'angle droit* (Paris: Edition Verve, 1955).

¹² An attempt to rediscover correspondences between the structure of a poem and a specific work of architecture, the Governor's Palace of Chandigarh, was made in my PhD thesis, published as Giuseppina Scavuzzo, 'Iconostasi: la forma e i segni', in *Memoria, ascesi, rivoluzione: studi sulla rappresentazione simbolica in architettura*, ed. by L. Semerani (Venice: Marsilio, 2006).

¹³ trans. by Hylton, Kenneth, in 'Le Poème de l'angle droit': Le Corbusier', in *Le Corbusier and the Architecture of Reinvention*, ed. by Mohsen Mostafavi (London: AA Print Studio, 2003).

¹⁴ John Hejduk, *Such Places as Memory*, with a preface by David Shapiro (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998). This is the first collection of poems by Hejduk published outside the architectural writings in which many examples were included. Forty of his poems had already appeared in a limited edition from 1980 entitled *The Silent Witnesses and Other Poems* (New York: The Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies, 1980).

¹⁵ John Hejduk, *Lines No Fire Could Burn* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).

¹⁶ See the definition given by Anthony Vidler, 'Vagabond Architecture', in *the Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1992).

¹⁷ John Hejduk, *Such Places as Memory*, op. cit., p.125.

¹⁸ 'These last prose sequences of personified houses constitute a liminal ritual that any anthropologist would wish to prolong.' David Shapiro, *John Hejduk: Poetry as Architecture, Architecture as Poetry*, foreword in *Such Places as Memory*, op. cit. *Liminal* is defined in anthropology as the central phase of suspension between two different conditions in the rites of passage that, in various cultures, mark fundamental discontinuities in individuals' existence.

¹⁹ Stan Allen, "Nothing but Architecture" in *Hejduk's Chronotope*, edited by K. Michael Hays, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

²⁰ From the mid-1970s Hejduk worked on several projects under the title "Silent Witnesses" developed in both architecture and poetry: *Silent Witnesses*, exhibited in Venice in 1976, is a project consisting of five parts, with five distinct models. Each model is the representation of a period of one hundred and twenty years: "They are all part of one single model, as if time zoomed back into space. The model is a representation of the abstract concepts of time and thought." John Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa: Works 1947-1983*, ed. by Kim Shkapich (New York: Rizzoli, 1985).

The Silent Witnesses is the title of the photo-essay published in 1976 in a volume of the journal *Parametro* dedicated to the 50-year anniversary of the final issue of the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau*, edited by Le Corbusier. John Hejduk, 'The Silent Witnesses', in *Parametro*, 49-50 (1976). *Silent Witnesses* returned in poetry, in 1980, when Hejduk published *The Silent Witness and Other Poems*, op. cit.

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