Speculations on Basic Design and Time: Narrative Time and Architectural Drawing

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This paper is intended to accompany a presentation. It does not reproduce the presentation or its conclusions, rather, it provides a preliminary theoretical background for the presentation of first year architecture assignments based on the theme of temporality.[i]

The unwritten premise of this paper is that our concept of time is not fixed, but rather, that it is historically conditioned;[ii] and furthermore, that the concept of time has not been significantly addressed in the theory of basic design education since Maholy-Nagy.[iii] Yet, with developments in philosophy and new techniques of representation it is increasingly more important to revisit our presumptions about the relationship between architecture and time. Contemporary concerns for animated visualizations, performance, adaptive use and reuse, four dimensional modeling, even facilities management all share a common root in their interpretation of time. For those of us invested in the theory of basic design education, this poses a problem: Is there a contemporary concept of time that requires an appropriate revision to basic design instruction? Furthermore, does this require the abandonment of traditional technologies and media?

This paper is an attempt to outline one of many possible answers. Here the concept of time is approached through Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutic of narrative time.[iv] The plan of the paper is threefold: 1. to illustrate an architectural analogy to Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative time and therein to establish a critical vocabulary; 2. to link Ricoeur's ideas of narrative time to the analysis of the art of architectural drawing and the idea of "facture" in the writings of Marco Frascari;[v] and 3. to speculate on the evaluative potential that this brings to basic design education.

1.

In order to establish some basic vocabulary, try to imagine this situation: Imagine walking into a restaurant that has only three tables.[vi] Looking at the first table you see that it is carefully set with a full complement of dinner service; its tableware and glassware are carefully laid out within the reasonable limits of typical geometries and proportions. The second table (fig. 01) is covered with the ruins of a meal just finished, or perhaps finished hours ago, it's hard to say; but nevertheless, we imagine that the traces of the water, wine and coffee make sense as part of some sequence of events that once happened here. The third table (fig. 02) is the hardest to see because it lies hidden behind the lively and absorbing activity of a group of people enjoying the meal and the conversation. Certainly the table is the same physical shape and size in all of these observations, and yet it has been articulated into three different kinds (or qualities) of experience.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur teaches that these different experiences reflect the different experiences we have of time in a narrative. The first, the experience of the table in anticipation, is what he calls "prefiguration" (mimesis$_1$).

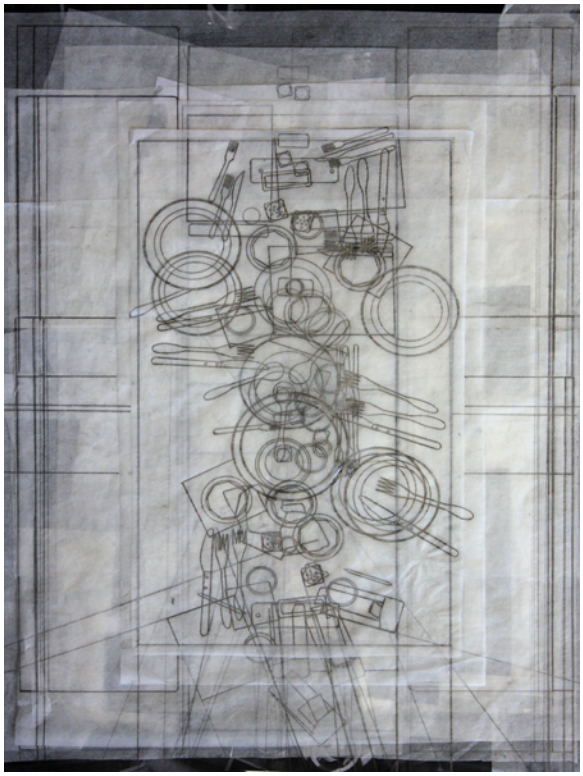

Fig. A: Ria Bennett

The second, where we collect the traces of events into an Aristotelian whole - with a beginning (water) a middle (wine) and an end (coffee) - he calls "emplotment" ($mimesis_2$). The third is more subtle; this is where our experience of a plot (the product of emplotment) is integrated into the actions of our lived experience, helping us to evaluate how we live with others; this is what Ricoeur calls "reconfiguration" ($mimesis_3$). (Ricoeur, 169-190) The temporality of a narrative, Ricoeur argues, is continuous and cyclical, yet articulated (like the continuity of the human body which is articulated by its joints).

This analogy of the dining table and the narrative extends to the terms of architecture as well. What Ricoeur calls prefiguration aligns with the architectural concept of a type; emplotment aligns with the concept of a plan; and reconfiguration, with the concept of a space. Here is another table, for our reference:

$mimesis_1$	$mimesis_2$	$mimesis_3$
prefiguration	configuration	refiguration
to anticipate	to plot	to reflect
the typical	the plan	the spatial
$facture_1$	$facture_2$	$facture_3$

2.

Marco Frascari employs this same structure of time and narrative in his analysis of architectural drawing.[vii] In *Eleven exercises in the art of architectural drawing*, he distinguishes between at least two different experiences of time in the art of architectural drawing: Chronos (linear time), and Kairos (chance or opportunity). "Astounding drawings," he writes, "materialize when these two aspects of time cross or merge since drawing is based on the right timing." Not only are drawings based on the "right," "proper," or "opportune" time, but they are based on an understanding of time beyond its instrumentalization as a "chronological sequence." For example, instead of saying "we have three months to complete this project," he asks us to exclaim that "now is our window of opportunity." (Frascari, 69) For Frascari, architectural drawing is linked to a deeper understanding of a more articulated concept of temporality; first from the level of the now, which is different from Chronos, but deeper still to a kind of time that reaches back to our earliest memories and forward to our most distant futures.

The key to understanding Frascari's concept of time in architectural drawing is his use of the term "facture." Facture means "to make" or "to do," and it derives from the same root as the term "fact," which can be defined as something which is "evidently done." Referencing the art historian David Summers, he writes that "to consider an artifact the same way as its facture is to consider it as a record of its having been made. Architectural drawings don't just represent

something - they are something in their own right." (Frascari, 10) When Frascari uses the term facture, he does so in three ways, corresponding with Ricoeur's analysis of narrative time.

In the first sense of the term facture (analogous to mimesis$_1$ or prefiguration), drawings reckon with time; marks express the events that occur between the hand, the paper, and the graphite; they are drawn only for so far, only for so long, only for so deep. It is such limits that make more abstract calculations even possible, should they be required. Following a drawing at this level requires only a basic pre-understanding of what it is to make marks and the most basic anticipation or expectation of what it is to continue making them. For the most part, we tend to treat this either according to a semiotics of the indexical or simply just to take it for granted.

Now, insofar as facture refers to things that are done, it also refers to the notion that drawings grasp together marks into "advancing formation[s] of meaning"; which, Frascari tells us, are "captivating [to both] makers and readers". (Frascari, 71) This is an important articulation of facture (mimesis$_2$ or configuration) because it refers to mediation. It refers to the meaning of facture that we understand when we talk about bringing the disparate actions or events of a drawing together into a (mostly) complete and integrated pattern or whole. In Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, this is the role of "compartition," that is, planning. Ricoeur calls this level of mimesis emplotment, which is a configuration that can give rise to a "thought." The nature of this level of facture is involved with the pattern, the plot or the plan, and as a prelude to a thought it aligns with Vitruvius's idea of "ichnographia." Frascari writes that "the idea of architecture is not a building, for architecture to exist in human consciousness someone has to draft a story… In order for a fairytale to exist, someone must write a plot."

In *De Pictura*,[viii] Alberti discusses this in terms of "historia," which is the notion that "all [of] the

Fig. B: Anna Barr

bodies [in a painting] should conform in size and function to the subject of the action"; furthermore, Alberti remarks that he prefers there to be "someone in the historia who tells the [observer] (spectatores) what is going on … Everything the people in the painting do among themselves, or perform in relation to the [observer], must fit together..." In the best examples of historia, according to Alberti, there is recognition of something more than the bringing together of past events as characters, there is also an understanding of something beyond and before the painting – the observer – who looks back into the historia of the painting. (Alberti, 1435, 77-83) This looking back is indicative of how a plot or a plan is comprehended: by looking back to observe the beginning which is in the end. This looking back is a repetition – a recollection – of lines, events, and characters, but it is also a recollection of the most basic potentialities that are found at any origin. It is the aspect of memory that is latent in what Frascari calls the "cosmopoetic" genesis of drawings: He

writes that "architectural cosmopoeisis encompasses the different ways architects have thought about the world in their architectural conceiving. In cosmopoeisis, we store the memories of our daily inhabiting and create systems through which we understand the existence of the phenomenal world and our existence within it. Cosmopoeisis offers us a plan, a perception of our existence and where we are, [it] tells us why we are here and, most often, where we are going." (Frascari, 2)

Finally, facture (mimesis$_3$ or refiguration) is also a way of intersecting and evaluating the world as we now understand it, that is, with a better understanding. Drawings aid in making "good determinations", based on practical knowledge (or phronesis) which is a kind of ethical deliberation, and this is ultimately what grants architectural drawings their non-trivial status: "Non-trivial drawings are the place where architectural ethics occur because in the drawings architects considered the mode of action to deliver change, especially to enhance the quality of life..." (Frascari, 7) It is the intersection of the world as interpreted with the world as lived, as far as one can take this within an architectural drawing

3.

Frascari's analysis of drawing aligns with Ricoeur's analysis of narrative time; like narratives, architectural drawings make (facture) different experiences of time. To return to a previous metaphor, the same articulation of the dining table occurs on the drafting table, except it is a very different form of conversation that absorbs someone at work on a plan. But for Frascari, the value of architectural drawing is ultimately how it enables self-understanding; he considers drawing essential to how "consciousness, memory, and our sense of "self" come about within a built environment." This is significant to all of us who, as educators, are intricately involved with the self-understanding of our students. For Ricoeur, the answer to the question "Who?," such as "Who am I?," is always a narrative. So to the extent that we sense the narrativity of drawing, then perhaps we could agree with Frascari that drawings can support a larger inquiry into one's self. This thesis seems utterly untestable, but it provides a reference for considering and evaluating the differences between media, for example, the differences between hand and digital drafting. If drawing is a story, then, do hand drawings and digital drawings meet the same conditions of a narrative and/or a self-narrative? If not, to what extent could their distinction be rendered by the idea of narrativity? In any case, it seems to me that good plans, in any media, like good plots, are those that are worth recounting.

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[i] At the School of Architecture at Mississippi State University the sequence of first year assignments is modular: Module 1 is dedicated to drawing as a critical and self-reflective practice; Module 2 is dedicated to architecture as a representation of spatiality; and Module 3, addressed in this paper, is a more speculative and investigatory inquiry into temporality, which might be defined as *the sense of time*. Admittedly, I am using this paper as an excuse to initiate the theorization of these ideas rather than to describe or assess them.

[ii] For a good summary of this problem in architecture, see: Carl, Peter. "Architecture and Time: A Prolegomena," *AA Files*, 22 (Autumn 1991), pp. 48-65.

[iii] I am thinking here of: Moholy-Nagy, László. *Vision in motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1947).

[iv] For a good introduction to Ricoeur's theory, see: Ricoeur, Paul. "Narrative Time," *Critical Inquiry*, 7/1 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 169-190.

[v] Frascari, Marco. *Eleven Exercises In the Art of Architectural Drawing* (New York, Routledge, 2011).

[vi] I owe this metaphor to discussions with Prof. David Leatherbarrow at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design.

[vii] This portion of the paper on Frascari is based in large part on a presentation at the March 2014 Frascari symposium.

[viii] Alberti, Leon Battista. *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*. translated by Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972).