University of Calgary Press
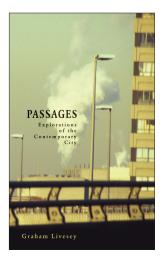
PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY
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ISBN 978-1-55238-675-0

3 NARRATIVE: the HEURISTIC JOURNEY

This essay will explore potential linkages between narrative theory, which emanates primarily from literature and philosophy, and contemporary architecture and urbanism to gain a greater understanding of the reciprocal relationship between human actions and design. Paul Ricoeur, a leading authority on narrative, points out that "life has to do with narration."[1] A narrative may be defined as a structured sequence of events configured by a plot; narratives are stories. Narrative modes include myths, novels, biographies, histories, gossip, and dreams. The constitutive element of a narrative is an event, a significant occurrence that can contribute to the formation of a plot. Emplotment is the creative act of drawing events together into a narrative. Our lives, individually and collectively, are defined by narrative structures. Architecture and cities can be understood as works of human making, which are designed, constructed, inhabited and interpreted. Ultimately, architecture and cities shape spaces in which human actions unfold. Narrative theory contributes to understanding these unfoldings.

Ricoeur states in the preface to the first volume of *Time and Narrative* that "whereas metaphorical description

reigns in the field of sensory, emotional, aesthetic, and axiological values, which make the world a habitable world, the mimetic function of plots [or narrative] takes place by preference in the field of action and its temporal values."[2] In his earlier text, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur explores metaphor in rhetorical, structural, and hermeneutical terms, moving from the figural aspects of metaphor contained in a discussion of Aristotle to the existential implications of metaphor and the "the power to 'redescribe' reality."[3] It is with metaphor that architecture and cities are more typically associated. Ricoeur's work on narrative primarily addresses questions of time with reference to discourse and texts. In his writings there is little discussion of the world or those human works that contribute to the shaping of the world.

In *Time and Narrative* Paul Ricoeur presents his theory of emplotment, based largely on a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* and Augustine's *Confessions*. In the text he introduces the notion that the work of a poet is to make plots. To imitate human actions, to make a plot is "to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic."[4] Ricoeur also introduces the core of his monumental exploration of narrative and time, his notion of a "threefold" understanding of mimesis in which the idea of figuration is fundamental.

The first part of the model Ricoeur labels mimesis$_1$; he writes that the "composition of the plot is grounded in

a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character."[5] This refers to the practical world of everyday action, which Ricoeur describes as the realm in which stories or narratives are prefigured. Narratives are based on actions that have motives, agents, and take place in the world and in time. As Ricoeur implies, architecture and spatiality can be considered as part of the world that prefigures narratives, as both meaningful structure and as symbolic systems. This pre-narrative condition is affirmed when he writes that "literature would be incomprehensible if it did not give a configuration to what was already a figure in human action."[6] This statement, which concludes his discussion of the prefigurational aspect of narrative, confirms that action is figural and points forward to his discussion of the second, and central, part of his model.

Mimesis$_2$, the configurational aspect of Ricoeur's theory of emplotment, functions in three ways. Firstly, it mediates between individual events and a story or narrative as a whole; it gives shape to a succession of events. Secondly, "emplotment brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results."[7] Thirdly, it unites the temporal characteristics of the plot. The configurational role of emplotment is the "grasping together" of heterogeneous factors into a meaningful story that possesses shape (or figure) and a "sense of ending." In Ricoeur's

model this is the action of the poet, and also the aspect that coincides most closely with other forms of creative production such as design.

Mimesis$_3$ completes the circular nature of the model and "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader."[8] This third part of the model is the interpretative aspect, which reaffirms Ricoeur's ongoing exploration of hermeneutics and the "conflict of interpretations." We, as readers, gain understanding of our lives and of our world by engaging in what a work (text, artifact, building, or city) reveals; that which is prefigured and configured is refigured. The act of interpretation reveals worlds that might be inhabited and contributes to our inhabitation of the material world. This does not apply only to reading, but also to our physical engagement with the world.

Anthony Paul Kerby sums up Ricoeur's model of emplotment and his use of various modes of figuration in the following:

> Emplotment, in histories and fictions, takes a prefigured world of events and actions and draws out or proposes a configuration that serves to organize worldly events into meaningful sequences and purposes. This textual structure is in turn the mediating cause of the reader refiguring his or her own world in light of the possibilities offered by experiencing the world of the text [work].[9]

Many of the ideas alluded to above are suggested in a quotation by the British architect Nigel Coates, who describes the use of various narrative strategies in the design of a large urban project for the Isle of Dogs area of London:

> The first [narrative] is drawn out of the place itself – its barren landscapes, broken buildings and empty docks. Then a video narrative, explores the possible mixing up of work and home without ever referring to buildings directly. Thirdly, each piece of the island ... develops its own industrial process to mark a narrative of movement, process and sequence. The final narrative occurs when the experience of the place – living on the island, riding the bus, settling into the work/home landscape – puts all these layers together.[10]

Coates' description closely matches the mimetic model employed by Ricoeur as the architect gives shape to form based on an interpretation of the context and by creating narratives. From this comes a potential for the emergence of new, unforeseen, narratives. I would like to briefly extend Ricoeur's three stages of mimesis: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. The cyclical and continuous nature of the model presents a vital and timely way of considering human creativity and production.

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When an architect or urban designer is asked to design a project, usually by a client, the practical world of everyday action shapes, to one degree or another, the project that will emerge. Design takes place within a dense cultural context, or web of constraints, which determines methods of construction, uses of space, symbolic systems, economic parameters, and languages of architecture. For an architect this world is also shaped by already existing structures that define the site or context. The design of a building, and its subsequent inhabitation, are also predetermined to a degree by program (the design brief or functional requirements), the budget, legal restrictions, building practices, and numerous other factors and forces. This coincides with Ricoeur's proposition that the world is prefigured by narrative, that stories are latent in the world and that narration and life are intertwined. It can be suggested that architecture and cities are both part of and emerge from a prefigured world.

In a series of essays that examine the role and structure of novels, the French writer Michel Butor affirms the ideas that Ricoeur has examined philosophically. He explores narrative structure, temporal discontinuities, space, and the role of the book. Butor argues that the novel is the "laboratory of narrative,"[11] and he suggests that all novels are about journeys in time and space. He utilizes the idea of the "trajectory" as a description for

narrative structure or plot and unites this with notions of space, both architectural and urban.[12] The trajectory is a "temporal movement through space";[13] it is a line drawn in space, a figure, or a narrative. This notion is similar to the central role of "figure" in Ricoeur's model. Butor, like Ricoeur, is also interested in the relationship between the text and the reader, or a union of trajectories. In a departure from Ricoeur's linear definition of narrative structures, Butor posits the notion of narrative webs or networks. He writes that narration "is no longer a line, but a surface on which we isolate a certain number of lines, of points, or of remarkable groupings."[14] Butor notes that contemporary space differs from traditionally defined space in that locations in space are networked together in more complicated ways. He writes that every site "is the focal point of a horizon of other sites, the point of origin of a series of possible routes passing through other more or less determined regions."[15] This affirms the vitality of Ricoeur's model and the prefigured nature of narratives, and that complex environments, like cities, are defined by narratives. Beyond the interconnection of all points in an environment or territory, there is also the notion put forward by Butor that narrative trajectories are distorted or shaped by objects or structures, such as architecture, that define and modify space.[16]

The configurational aspect that is proposed in the second part of Ricoeur's model is also vital, as it is the intentional shaping of, or giving of structure to, the

narrative. This is akin to the process undertaken by architects in the design and execution of a work of architecture (both in drawings and in actual construction), or by urban designers considering a project. Normally this is a collective activity that takes some time to accomplish. The giving of architectural form or structure to a disparate range of elements and requirements is like Ricoeur's description of narrative emplotment. Out of this heterogeneous wealth of factors a project emerges, or is "grasped" together: the poetic act of the "productive imagination." The events (meetings, decisions, and discoveries) that configure the design of a project have a structure in time very similar to Ricoeur's notion of emplotment. It is a grasping together of the significant events or decisions into a comprehensible work; it is the poetic act.

Peter G. Rowe, in his book *Design Thinking*, has used accounts of design projects by a number of architects as one form of evidence for understanding the workings of design. He maintains that the design process "assumes a distinctly episodic structure, which we might characterize as a series of skirmishes with various aspects of the problem at hand."[17] Rowe is describing a process analogous to Ricoeur's notions of configuration as described in the second part of his mimetic model. A figure gradually emerges out of what may begin as a random series of events or episodes. This is not necessarily a linear, sequential, or continuous activity, but usually has

a structure based on the prefigured context. However, Ricoeur's model challenges the primacy of originality within creative acts, firmly re-establishing that making is part of a historical and cultural context; creativity is to a large extent an interpretation of that which is given, or prefigured.

The third part of Ricoeur's mimetic model addresses what happens to a work when it is given to the world to be read, interpreted, or inhabited. Examining the relationship between the world of a work and that of a reader, Ricoeur proposes that "hermeneutics takes hold of the hinge between the (internal) configuration of a work and the (external) refiguration of a life."[18] Architecture and urban design, like any other creative work, contain an intentional world that emerges from that which is prefigured (given) and that which is configured (the poetic act). All works participate in this "fusion of horizons" that occurs between the world of the work and the world of the reader or inhabitant. The relationship between building and inhabiting is reciprocal as architecture exists as part of the context which prefigures narrative and architecture itself.

Michel de Certeau has provocatively described how the actions of those living in cities (or buildings) create narratives; in particular, he has written about the activities of those who walk in urban spaces:

> In the technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space.[19]

De Certeau also describes the disjunction that can arise between a text and a reader, and between a user and space, what he describes as "indeterminate trajectories" which do not "cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move."[20]He extends the narrative model into ways of inhabiting space when he argues that it is the paths and patterns of movement in and through a space that define that space.[21] The act of walking is like speech; it is a narrative strategy. This appropriates space, it acts out the space, and it defines relations among "differentiated positions"[22] in a manner similar to those defined by Ricoeur and Butor.

Through spatial and narrative engagement architectural and urban spaces are defined; some spaces are activated, others are negated. This is an evolving condition that often does not correspond with the intentions of the designer.[23] Thus, any space, geometric, technical, or bureaucratic, is rendered human through time and action. These alternative or subversive readings allude to Ricoeur's "conflict of interpretations," or the multiplicity of interpretations any work can produce. These readings can come often from the languages and actions of the disenfranchised or dispossessed. The techniques

of inhabitation employed by overlooked subcultures can provide renewal to seemingly abandoned or hopeless environments. De Certeau shows how the narrative structures prescribed by urban designers, engineers, and planning authorities are often appropriated by the users or inhabitants (consumers) to their own ends, producing counter or alternative narratives.

Human actions trace out figures or trajectories, series of movements that can be comprehended, reinforcing the notion that "each human life traces out a complex figure that necessarily intersects and interacts with the figures of others."[24] This statement affirms that our movements or journeys in the world, and in time, are figural and carry the latent potential, through intersections with other figures, for contributing to a plot. The patterns, or figures, we make in space and time as we inhabit the world are potentially metaphorical and narrative. A figurative intersection occurs between a figural definition of space, as determined by architecture, and the figural actions of human engagement with the world.

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Architecture and cities exist in time, as do narratives; therefore, interpretations will necessarily alter over time and according to who undertakes the reading. A work, whether a building or text, is subject to changing interpretations. The pervasiveness of narratives is not

immediately evident to architects and urban designers. Architects do, on occasion, engage the prefigured aspects of narrative in their work, but normally revert to architectural means (drawing, models, and construction) to execute the configurational aspects of design. The refigurative aspects of design are not as carefully studied by architects and urban designers as they should be. Nevertheless, the relationship between narrative processes and design has been explored by a number of contemporary architects and urban designers who have focused on the event – the constitutive element of a narrative – and the correlation between movements and spaces. Noteworthy examples include Aldo Rossi, Nigel Coates, Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, John Hedjuk, and Peter Eisenman.

There is much in Ricoeur's "threefold" mimetic model that lends itself to a renewed understanding of the design and inhabitation of buildings. The figurative, as Ricoeur suggests, is prefigured in our symbolic systems, the multiplicity of languages that we comprehend, configured by our productive or poetic tendencies and refigured through interpretation and inhabitation. The figural qualities of form and human action, and their relationship to the spatial world and narrative, are vital sources of thinking for architects. The question remains as to what is the nature of the figures or trajectories being described, whether the references are abstract, anthropomorphic, mechanistic, textual, or informational.

While Ricoeur falls short of stating that we write our own life stories, he affirms that narrative is essential to our human existence in time and space. I would suggest that architects tend to concentrate on the configurational aspects of design, neglecting a rigorous exploration of that which is prefigured and how their work allows for refiguration. By using Ricoeur's discussion of metaphor as figural discourse and the figurational aspects of emplotment in the structuring of human narratives, it can be concluded that design is both metaphorical and participates in narrative. Architecture and cities figure the spaces in which we dwell or move. Our actions trace figures that can be retold in the narrative ordering of our life stories. Intersections between humans and their world, between each other and with ourselves, create the events that plot our journeys in time and space. Narrative engagements with architecture and cities also include the distortion of trajectories by objects and events, and the subversive strategies described by Michel de Certeau.

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