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The Demiourgos and the Paradox of Writing

Author(s): Arata Isozaki

Source: *ANY: Architecture New York*, *Writing in Architecture* (May/June 1993), pp. 14-15

Published by: [Anyone Corporation](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41845548>

Accessed: 26-12-2015 08:04 UTC

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Arata Isozaki: At this moment we are at the end of a period of writing that began almost two centuries ago. Most people who speak about écriture or writing point out that this idea began in architecture in the 18th century, at about the time of the French Revolution. Until then architects had followed the principles of architecture as laid down by classicism, and writing was not possible. But with the crisis of classicism came the moment of cutting with tradition. No longer was it possible merely to follow rules, since the break with tradition made it impossible to sustain the classical idea of the architect's language with its given codes and signs. Rather, architects had to invent writing as a specific idea of architecture; they had to write a new language for their own time. This writing needed to be understood as a work of architecture, or a work of art, in order to announce the new architecture. This idea of writing reversed the situation of classicism as architects now were forced to write their own discourse instead of following what was already written.

The best example of this is in Gottfried Semper's book "Der Stil," published in 1863. Semper does not talk about a style per se but rather proposes a kind of modern functionalist or materialist approach to architecture. While his theoretical writing was important, his production in design was not very interesting. This was the contradiction of Semper: the writing became more important than the production of architecture. In this sense Semper is different from his classical predecessors. Alberti, Palladio, and Blondel tried to structure their ideas based on classicism in order to legitimate their work. Their work depended on a prior writing. But by the beginning of the 19th century, classicism was no longer valid as a unitary and unified system. Already a pluralistic condition of styles had emerged, including neo-Gothic, neo-Renaissance, and neoromantic. Until the late 1700s, there was generally one dominating style of the time, but with pluralism there was no dominating style and writing became important. Architectural theory before Semper had aimed at completing classicism. This attempt at the closure of theory recalls Derrida's concept of the book. The book, i.e., the classical, is always theoretically and metaphorically closed; it is not open to writing. Semper's theory itself ironically is not closed, as the third volume of "Der Stil" was left unfinished. We do not know whether he intended to make his writing open or not, as Flaubert does in literature or Manet in art, but his writing ended up playing a similar role. Since Semper, the important writings in architecture have tried to dismantle or escape from the canon of classicism. The question is, what role does writing have in this new condition of openness?

Writing is a concept with a historical date. It is deeply concerned with the problematic in art that has become widespread since the middle of the 18th century, when the artist as subject established and presented concrete forms. This opened writing to the possibilities of various forms of expression. In architecture, these could be concept, hand drawing, building idea, project, and so forth, including theory. Mies van der Rohe's Glass Skyscraper drawing, Le Corbusier's "Vers une architecture," Mart Stum's Pipe Chair, Leonidov's Ministry of Heavy Industry project — all of these are writing. Today the world of architecture, indeed the entire world, is very fragile; there are no complete theories. Each time we are asked to stimulate or accelerate an architectural

concept or program it becomes more difficult to do without a theoretical discourse or writing on which architecture has become dependent. In the universities, the dependency of architecture on theory has become corrupt. In every case the important thing to be asked of the architects or the artists (or the writers) is how is it possible to make something different. Every proposal must have some creative distance from previous proposals and from the past. Writing in architecture can help make such distinctions clear. But if this is true for writing in architecture, then writing must have some deep relationship to the concepts of architecture itself. This is a difficult point, perhaps best elaborated by Roman Jakobson, who, at the time of Russian Formalism, said that the purpose of the study of poetics is to find the special language that makes literature; in other words, that the way building becomes architecture is to find a particular writing that makes it architecture.

Because architects always work on paper and use specific materials in building, paper and the writing of words on paper are the same as the materials for building on a specific site. It is the way in which architecture is conceptualized or how we relate these things that is at issue. That is why that at this moment I am interested in the allegory of the demiourgos as a way of coming back to theory, of driving writing into the field of architecture. The demiourgos is a theory in history. When Plato wrote the "Timaeus" he presented the idea of demiourgos as a kind of god to create this world. On the other hand, the Gnostics believed the demiourgos to be the other of god. At many points in history the demiourgos has been recalled and has come back in different roles, but primarily as the idea of the creative artist. At this moment I recall the demiourgos to legitimate or to create architecture.

This means the abandoning of previous writing and thus the end of some period, for the demiourgos is a substitute for writing.

For me writing is important. Its connection to the concept of architecture is in some sense completely new, apart from the past. At the same time, to recall the demiourgos is one way to connect writing and architecture, for the role of writing in architecture and the role of the demiourgos are related.

Even with the end of the avant-garde idea of utopia, we still need some motivation to drive in a specific direction. In history, the utopian ideal has been a goal, and avant-garde movements have always used this idea of utopia to forge their directions. But if this idea has come to an end we need to find a new way to continue. I propose to use the demiourgos as a motivation to find some specific direction. Paradoxically, the idea of the demiourgos is to confuse, to not give any specific direction. This too is the paradox of writing today. If one needs to have a path to follow and the demiourgos does not make it clear, why should one take up the demiourgos?

Any goal is always a hypothesis. When we propose something it is always tentative. If it works, it is alright; if it does not work, we forget it. That is the only possible way we can go ahead. So every time we must make mistakes, we must take risks. Thus writing is also held at risk because writing itself is hypothesis; to propose tentative things is always writing. There is never any certainty in writing, never any truth.

Arata Isozaki's projects include *The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles*, the *Gunma Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts and Art Tower Mito in Japan*.