

# Semiotics, interpretation and political resistance in architecture

Michael Chapman, Michael J. Ostwald and Chris Tucker

University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia

**ABSTRACT:** Strategies for analysing and interpreting architecture and the city based on its association with an abstract conception of language have been an important component of recent debate in architecture, town planning and urban geography. The origins of this kind of approach to the built environment can be found in the work of early linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce who pioneered the study of semiology and semiotics respectively. Within these two distinct but related strategies is embodied a political relationship that links the sign, its meaning and its interpretation. Charles Jencks, in the 1960s introduced this triad to architecture, promoting a new mode of observing, interpreting and then making architecture. This strategy, based on a model of scientific observation and logic, has profound political implications for architecture in the way that it inscribes a political value to interpretation. It is this aspect of structuralist readings of space that has become contentious to a number of post-modern thinkers on architecture, and necessitated a new post-modern semiotics that challenges the foundations of linguistics.

This paper will look at the political themes implicit in the work of Saussure, Peirce and Jencks. In particular it will look at the way that these observational systems allow political resistance through the opportunities for "misreading the city". This has been a recent trend in semiotic analyses of the city, pioneered by French thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. These writers have criticised semiotic theory for its totalising political systems proposing new models of political agency that destabilise the inherent power structures embodied within the language of the city.

Conference theme: Social and political issues in architecture

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## INTRODUCTION

Scientific strategies for objectively analysing and interpreting the city through its built form have been an important component of recent debate in architecture, town planning and urban geography. Models for "syntactic" readings of built form, such as those proposed by Lynch (1960), Hillier (1996) and Hanson (1984) in the 1970s and 1980s weave cognition and spatial syntax into a linguistic system of codification that surmounts the more historical "semantic" readings of space. What these systems have in common is a faith in a universal "grammar" of space which metaphorically posits architecture and urban form as a language encoded with meaning thus allowing the individual to "read" the city. Such semiotic systems, whether "syntactic" or "semantic" have profound political implications for the individual and their relationship to urban space.

One of the first advocates for a more "legible" urban environment was the American urban theorist Kevin Lynch whose widely influential book *The Image of the City* (1960) predated by several years the formal introduction of semiotic theory to architectural discourse (generally marked by George Baird's "La Dimension Amoureuse in Architecture" from 1967). Lynch proselytised a slightly melodramatic attitude towards the urban experience of disorientation that, whilst generally rare, was associated with anxiety, dread and even raw terror. For Lynch (1960, 3) the "very word 'lost' in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of utter disaster." Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that Lynch urged an

attitude towards urbanism that would provide a greater sense of orientation for the individual within the built environment, to be achieved through the creation of stereotypical orientation devices or what he called *nodes*. This was based on the way that Lynch perceived people navigated in the city, by recognising familiar elements, regardless of their geographic location—"an American can always spot the corner drugstore, however indistinguishable it might be to a Bushman." Lynch referred to this as the "imageability" of the city, which he famously concluded "can conveniently be classified into five types of elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks." These five elements are codifying devices that respond, in a semiotic sense, to the way that an individual reads the city. Despite his widespread influence in urban planning, even today, Lynch's systematic approach has been widely criticised for necessitating an oversimplification of urban experience and tending towards a "tourist-oriented" built environment at the expense of the more regular users of the city. By reducing urban experience to a purely visual relationship, Lynch also neglects the role of symbolism and "connotation" in providing deeper social and cultural readings of the city. For this reason, Lynch's work, as Gottdeiner and Lagopoulos (1986) suggest, is more satisfactory as a branch of cognitive geography, than as semiotics as such.

Despite the undeniable importance of Lynch's treatise and its influence on architecture and urban design, it promotes an attitude of orientation and organization that tends to marginalise the opportunities for individual emancipation within the city. Several recent French writers have challenged these kind of semiotic models of

reading the city. The French author Michel de Certeau has written of the importance of discursive practices for disrupting latent power structures and working against the embedded orthodoxies of urban life. In a similar vein the Marxist-inspired Henri Lefebvre (1974) calls for a "textural" rather than "textual" reading of the city, seeing semiotics as a threat to the spontaneous forces of the urban environment. This requires a new way of viewing the power relationships within the city. The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, for instance, has argued for a new model of political resistance that, rather than associating itself with the mob overcoming the Bastille, is based more on the masses innate tendency to consume. This creates a vacuous spatial paradigm where signs, rather than denoting power as in the Bastille, have become effectively devoid of meaning, saturated by a profusion of signs and the infinite dissemination of information. He cites the Pompidou Centre in Paris by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano as the most visible of a number of possible examples.

Paul De Man, one of the most impenetrable writers of the century, makes the distinction between "literal" meaning and "figural" meaning, concluding that much language can rely only on "figural" meaning which is inherently imprecise. De Man's style uses multiple viewpoints to consider fragments of text, destabilising intrinsic meanings and blurring the relationship between signifier and signified. De Man's writing makes use of "tropes", a discursive, or non-direct way of conveying meaning which disrupts the sometimes simplistic semiotic triad. The existence of tropes has direct influence on architectural theory as it highlights the inherent instability in semiotic readings of the city and allows a means of architectural opposition to the forces of language.

These writers have criticised semiotic theory for its totalising political systems proposing new models of political agency, which destabilise the inherent power structures embodied within the language of the city. The city, like language, presents itself as an infinite and irrefutable system. The immutability of the "sign" which Saussure himself was at pains to point out, failed to account for the vagaries of history (semiotic usage remained predominantly unchanged despite the drastic social changes that occurred in say, the last five hundred years) or place (in the twentieth century regional differences have become far more dramatic than linguistic ones as a result of the predominance of the English language as a universal means of communication). What many post-structuralist writers have suggested is that this language is highly conditioned by those who are reading it. This act of reading or misreading in many ways surpasses the physical or aesthetic content of the city. More important is the way that this content is revealed to the observer.

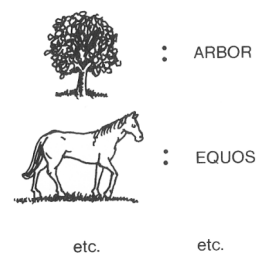
Hannah Arendt's (1968) important work *Men in Dark Times* describes Lessing's fascination with the observer as the seat of political agency within an aesthetic environment. Lessing argued that artwork could only be assessed by its relationship on the viewer (the artwork itself is irrelevant). The observation of the results of an aesthetic transaction rather than the object itself is consistent with Arendt's own strategy for interpreting social environments. Both thinkers privilege the role of the observer and the political agency that they embody. Arendt's work provides new modes of viewing semiotic appraisals of the city, and in particular prompts a revisiting of the important and often underrated work of the scientific philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

This paper will present a general overview of three key models for reading space and look at the political

structures inscribed within them. Firstly it will look at the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss-French linguist who pioneered the study of "semiology" in his posthumously published book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). De Saussure provides a model of understanding how meaning is disseminated through signs. Saussure's linguistics is based on the duality that exists between a sign and the concept it represents. There is little room within Saussure's work for interpretation. Secondly it will look at the work of Saussure's American contemporary Charles Sanders Peirce who explored "semiotics" in turn providing a triangular rather than linear model of understanding signs. As well as the concept and its sign, Peirce introduced the "interpretant" into the equation, suggesting that meaning is mediated by the viewer, or person interpreting the information. Within this structure is the capacity for the kind of liberating practices described by Lefebvre and de Certeau. The final model to be examined will be that proposed by the architectural theorist Charles Jencks in 1969, which mediates between the objective model of Saussure and the subjective model of Peirce. As well as specifically introducing architecture into the theory of semiotics, Jencks's diagram is an enduring image of architectural thinking and, like Peirce's work provides opportunities for individual emancipation and interaction within the discourse of linguistics.

### Ferdinand de Saussure and the principles of semiology

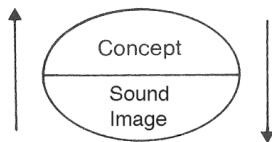
Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a Swiss linguist who was highly concerned with the way that signs operated. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1959), originally published in 1916, is widely considered as the foundation of modern linguistics and certainly the seminal work in the field of semiology. Saussure used the term "semiology" to cover the study of signs and signification, developing the sign as the primary model for which to interpret language. Fundamental to Saussure's linguistics was a duality that comprised all signs and that was characteristic to all signification: the existence of a *signifier* (the sign) and the *signified* (its relative meaning). Whilst Saussure's analysis of semiology is concerned primarily with philology and the historical comparison of languages it does make a few important points that have been influential in Twentieth Century architectural theory. Language, for Saussure, is a system of categorisation, reliant not on the actual terms chosen, but on the differences that exist between them. He maintained that the "sign" was very different to merely a "name" bearing a psychological connection to the concept that was central to the earliest foundations of language. The "sign", according to Saussure can be broken down into two primary components—the *signified* (concept) and the *signifier* (sound-image). These two components were a fundamental characteristic of any linguistic sign.



Source: Saussure 1959:65

Figure 1: Ferdinand de Saussure, *The Nature of the Linguistic Sign* (1916)

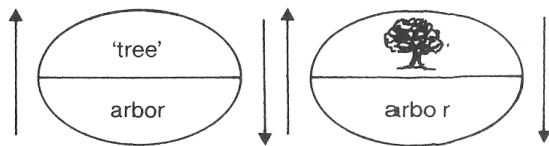
Saussure illustrates this phenomenon in a diagrammatic sense by showing the distinction that exists between a visual object from its written identifier, in this case the Latin words for tree (*arbor*) and horse (*equus*): Figure 1. Saussure maintained that both the visual image and the word were psychological imprints that became connected in language. For Saussure the nature of signification was much deeper than just a naming process that observed events in nature. It was a deeper intellectual connection that was embedded in the structure of language. Saussure (1959, 66) writes, "the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image." Saussure illustrates this principle diagrammatically as



Source: Saussure 1959:67

**Figure 2:** Ferdinand de Saussure, *Concept/Sound-Pattern* (1916)

Saussure was aware that the "concept" existed before the evolution of its sound-image and that it could take a number of forms. It was also not confined to sounds, as the name suggested but also words, images, texts and thoughts. The inflexibility of this diagram was demonstrated in the following diagram which shows the way that a "sound-image" can have both visual and textual meaning.



Source: Saussure 1959:67

**Figure 3:** Ferdinand de Saussure, *Concept/Sound-Pattern* (1916)

For Saussure the terminology of "concept" and "sound-image" was too clumsy, as it didn't allow for the diverse array of interpretations that were suggested by the concept. A deeper dissection of the linguistic sign was required which necessitated a new terminology. It was for this reason that he proposed his new terminology, which remains his most important legacy in the discipline. Saussure (1959, 66) writes

I propose to retain the word sign (*signe*) to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified (*signifié*) and signifier (*signifiant*); the last two terms have the advantage of indicating, the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. As regards sign, if I am satisfied with it, this is simply because I do not know of any word to replace it, the ordinary language suggesting no other.

Saussure's theory of signs, as it evolves from this principle, contained a number of important aspects that have been central to its appropriation into architecture. The first, and one of the central components of his understanding of signs, is that the relationship between the signified (concept) and its signifier (sound-image) is entirely arbitrary. With the rare exception of onomatopoeia, there is no inherent relationship between a concept and its word-image. There is nothing particularly "ox-like" about the English word to describe an ox. It is chosen arbitrarily as a convenient "signifier" for that animal, so that, when agreed upon by a society,

it comes to represent that animal. (This accounts for the development of different languages, which generally adopt their own signifiers for the concept of "ox".) Most importantly, it is the *difference* between "signifiers" (or words), rather than their relationship to the "signified" that, allows communication to function. An "ox" is *not* a "cow" or a "horse" as much as it *is* an "ox". It is only because signs are different that they become meaningful. For Saussure this central underlying principle is fundamental to how languages operate and was central to the emergence of structuralism.

Another important characteristic of de Saussure's theory of signs is that once a signifier becomes associated with a signified it cannot be varied. This is what Saussure refers to as "the immutability of the linguistic sign". Saussure refers to the "linguistic community" (those who speak the language) who require consistency in the use of signs within a language for the language to continue to operate. Whilst the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, once established, it is fixed. Architectural writers on semiotics refer to this agreement in a language as a "social contract" that exists among members speaking the language (see for example Broadbent (1969)). This has been one of the most problematic aspects of the introduction of semiology into architecture as it is difficult (if not impossible) to determine a "social contract" which exists within the built environment.

Saussure's theory of signs has enormous implications for architectural theory and interpretation, particularly by establishing an "immutable" system of signs. Saussure's theory is essentially based on dualities and pairings and implies a very direct relationship between a sign and its interpretation. Once a linguistic sign is attached to a concept it is irrefutable in Saussure's theory and immune from changes over time, place and perspective. For this reason it has particular political consequences, enforcing a predominant system of linguistic reading and mitigating against marginal ones. Signs become inflexible and highly regimented elements of a profoundly objective system. The capacity for subjective interpretation or embellishment is refuted.

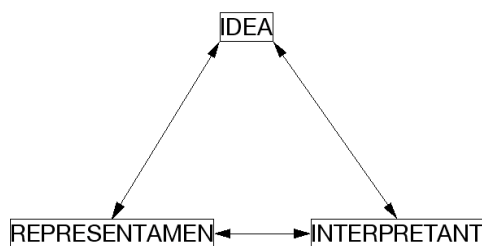
One of the concessions that Saussure does make to individual subjectivity is in his conception of *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* and *parole* are related to the broad social agreement that allows language to operate. *Langue* refers to the natural or vernacular nature of language (as it exists within a population). *Parole* refers to the peculiar idiosyncrasies that an individual speaker brings to a language. These two aspects of speech have been enormously influential in the intellectual tradition known as structuralism, and have been deployed by key French thinkers such as Roland Barthes (1990) and Claude Levi Strauss and were introduced into architectural discourse by George Baird (1967) in his seminal essay "'La Dimension Amoureuse' in Architecture". They are also related to the existence of "denotative" (objective or universal) and "connotative" (subjective or individual) meanings. This was one of the key themes in the semiotic debate on architecture that took place in the 60s and 70s and will be discussed further in the section on Jencks's semiological triangle. *Langue* exerts a powerful influence over language. For Saussure, we inherit language, rather than actively create it, and the capacity for individual invention (*parole*) is limited. Once a signifier is associated with a specific concept, it becomes fixed. It can never be altered or replaced. For Saussure (1959, 68) "[n]o individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made; and what is more, the community itself cannot control so much as

a single word; it is bound to the existing language." The sense of inevitability that accompanies Saussure's analysis of language, even given his observation of parole, jeopardises the individual's capacity for interpretation, individual embellishment and, as a result, political emancipation. His is a complete system of language. The opportunities of interpretation or exchange within that system are limited.

### Charles Peirce and the principles of semiotics

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was an American philosopher who was a near contemporary of Saussure. Peirce is renowned for his formulation of a pragmatic approach to philosophy that valued highly the pre-eminence of science and logic. Peirce used scientific observation and reason to undermine metaphysical or artistic modes of thought. He wrote widely on logic, mathematics and physics but failed to publish a single book in his lifetime. His eight volume collected works were not published until more than forty years after his death (Peirce (1955)).

At the same time as Saussure was pioneering the study of "semiology" in Europe, Peirce was elaborating his theory of "semiotics", also defined as the study of signs and signification. Whilst semiology and semiotics are today mutually interchangeable concepts, they still can be traced to their earlier exponents: Saussure enthusiasts typically preferring *semiology*, while their American counterparts often opt for *semiotics*. As well as the obvious difference in terminology, the important differentiation between the two theories is that the sign has an added dimension in Peirce's semiotics: the duality of Saussure has become a triad. In Peirce's semiotics the sign has become the *representamen* that represents an *idea* to an *interpretant*. There is no longer a direct relationship between the concept and sound-image. It is now conditioned by the third component—the individual processing the information. This relationship can be described by the following diagram:



Source: Authors 2004

Figure 4: Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Semiotic Triad* (1914)

The "idea" is roughly equivalent to the "signified" in Saussure's theory, while the "representamen" approximates the "signifier". What is new is the "interpretant", which is not taken into account in Saussure's system. The "interpretant" introduces perspective to the logic of signs and implies an act of individual interpretation. As a result the *representamen* in Peirce's theory does not carry universal meaning, but is related to the individual who interprets this. This dramatically undermines what Saussure considered the "immutability" of the linguistic sign and allows for a vast and infinite network of meanings and interpretations.

A large part of Peirce's work is devoted to defining and cataloguing the various kinds of signs that exist within our culture. Peirce's exhaustive taxonomy covers a seemingly endless array of signs from weathercocks (the "dicent sinsign") to diagrams (the "iconic sinsign") and

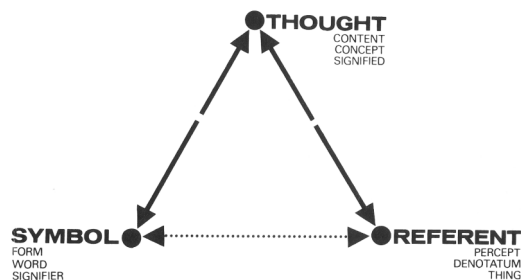
even specific emotions (the "qualisign"). Peirce's work looks at signs as an intellectual transaction and is more concerned with the way that ideas and objects are exchanged than with a universal system of signification. His semiotics is the result of intense scientific observation and logic and is an infinite and ever-expanding apparatus that remains, even today, largely unexplored.

What can be detected in Peirce's semiotics as opposed to Saussurean semiology is a new kind of subjectivity and the emergence of an observer, or individual (the interpretant). This introduces a new political structure that is enabling rather than static. The interpretant has the capacity to undermine the inherent political structures of language and potentially introduce a new mode of political opposition. In Saussure's work, subjectivity is reduced to the communicator (through parole) and never the listener. The listener or receiver is always imprisoned by the existing language and its inherited structures and, most profoundly the duality of the signifier and signified. Peirce's work undermines the strict duality of Saussure and introduces a model of resistance to the overwriting structures of language. The interpretant, as well as structuring Peirce's own scientific discourse on signs, has particular relevance in the emergence of what might be termed a "post-modern semiotics", valuing interpretation over structure and diversity over simplicity. As a result a re-examination of Peirce's work may provide the link to post-structuralism that Saussure's work provided for the structuralist tradition and its leading proponents Levi Strauss and Barthes. It was the innate capacity within language to exert a universal and fixed domination over society through communication that was particularly influential in the post-structuralist movement, which saw the structuralist fascination with language as totalising and constraining. The concerns of Peirce, which potentially politicised language by preferencing the subject over the object and perspective over impartiality, can be seen as implicit in the later work of de Certeau, Lefebvre and Foucault.

### Charles Jencks and the semiotic triangle

Whilst often confused, there is a profound difference at work in the origins of semiology and semiotics which has peculiar implications for its application to architecture. Both Saussure's and Peirce's respective theories were relatively obscure during their lifetime, in each case published posthumously after the author's death. The real resurgence in semiotic theory occurred after the Second World War as a result of the intellectual stream that became known as structuralism. Structuralism exerted an enormous influence over the French intellectual landscape for several decades, effectively replacing existentialism as the predominant philosophical paradigm. Structuralism, and in particular Roland Barthes, prompted a return to the theories of Saussure (translated into English in the 1950s) and, to a lesser extent Peirce, popularising their message and incorporating it into the canon of French intellectual tradition. Whilst typically preoccupied with linguistics and semiotics, structuralism also embodies a diverse range of social theories that attempt to establish systems or modes of structural interpretation outside of semiotics. One of the central principles of structuralism is the attempt to learn from the inbuilt structures of society (language, class, gender), rather than transform or recreate them. This necessitates a broader and more inclusive view of philosophical knowledge, and was developed in the disciplines of anthropology (Claude Levi-Strauss), social theory (Foucault, Althusser) and

psychology (Lacan) as well as philosophy (Barthes). Two figures in particular were responsible for the formal introduction of "structuralism" into architecture: George Baird, by drawing the theoretical connection between the work of Saussure and architecture, and Charles Jencks who was actively involved in the dissemination and popularisation of this appropriation. George Baird's 1967 essay "'La Dimension Amoureuse' in Architecture" was the first work to formally introduce the theory of semiotics into architecture, extending the metaphorical association with language to the built environment. Baird created a new way of reading and interpreting architecture that was immediately influential. Two years later the volume edited by Jencks and Baird (1969) titled *Meaning in Architecture* was one of the first forums for discussion of the role of semiotics in architecture and its highly interactive format (allowing writers to comment on other authors work in the margins) provoked and even fuelled intellectual debate for the next decade. Baird provides a very close reading of Saussure's work and one that is problematic for some of the authors in the book (especially the primary antagonist against structuralism Geoffrey Broadbent). However it is Jencks's essay "Semiology and Architecture" that provides the most enduring model of semiotic analysis in architecture—the semiotic triangle (Figure 5). Jencks, unlike Baird, is less devoted to Saussure's work and his model of semiotics, whether consciously or not, incorporates aspects of both Peirce and Saussure's theories. Interestingly he refers to "semiology" in the title, but his diagram for analysis is much closer to Peirce's triad than Saussure's duality.



Source: Jencks and Baird 1969:15

Figure 5: Charles Jencks, *The Semiotic Triangle* (1969)

The points of Jencks's triangle are "symbol", "thought" and "referent". Jencks's semiotic triangle can be seen as a combination of both Peirce and Saussure. Specifically it can be seen as the evolution of the two dualities that are embodied in Saussure's diagrammatic explanation of the sound-image (Figure 3). The referent is a term originally coined by Saussure to refer to the "real" or non-linguistic aspect of a sign—the "mental-image" which it conjures. Despite its dependence on Saussurean terminology, Jencks's triangle considerably diversifies Saussure's semiology. What it introduces is the practice of interpretation itself (the act of thinking about something). This is different to the "interpretant" of Peirce. It is not an individual but the act that Jencks is concerned with. This allows for the description (or interpretation) of architecture as well as its creation and inhabitation.

The introduction of the referent to the analysis of semiotics allows for a creative and engaging model of making architecture—involving the architect in the act of communication in the same way that Peirce's model involves the observer. Baird, in the margin to Jencks's essay (1969, 16) describes the triangle as "a brilliant construction, in the way that it accommodates and

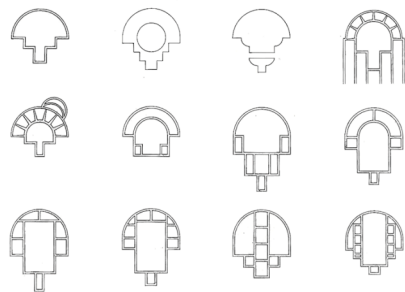
explains so many historical positions so clearly". What it does do is conflate the two diagrams of both Peirce and Saussure in a much more accessible and less "immutable" context. It also mediates between abstract thought and an experiential mode of thought: between the abstract and the real. The three elements of the triangle are equivalent but open to manipulation. Jencks (1969, 16) writes "[e]ach semiologist points the arrows in the direction he believes in, but, as the diagram shows, the relations are always two-way, never absolute." This concession by Jencks is an important one as it destabilises the legitimacy of semiotic readings of space and allows for discursive practices to occur. Two important examples of this are the twin concepts of connotation and denotation first developed by Saussure, which form an important component of Jencks's semiotics. Denotation, like *langue*, can be seen as an objective conveyance of meaning, or the "dictionary definition" of a word or symbol. Connotation refers to the peculiar or idiosyncratic meanings that can be attached by the individual to a word or symbol based on their own personal experience. In this sense connotation is a fundamentally subjective interpretation of meaning while denotation is its objective equivalent. Connotation and denotation are important concepts in architectural semiotics. Umberto Eco (1980) discusses them at length in his important essay "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture". For Eco both connotation and denotation are related to the function of an object or architectural element. Thus a stair denotes going up and a throne denotes a place to sit. Connotation is related to the nature of this function, so a throne connotes dignity and "regalness". In this sense the connotation is more important than denotation as it is the primary function of a throne. Eco's approach to semiotics, which is based largely on the way that individuals interpret signs, promotes a functionalism within architecture like that witnessed during the modern period (the antithesis of much semiotic theorising).

Jencks takes issue with a large part of Eco's thesis and in particular its dependence on functionalism. He illustrates the way that a urinal, while a symbol of pristine functionalism to modernist designers and artists such as Le Corbusier and Marcel Duchamp, was subjected to a wide range of unpredictable functions by different cultures across the world (from fireplaces to a place for washing clothes). Jencks (1969) writes, "one man's *denotation* is another man's *connotation*". The indeterminate approach to semiotic theorising that Jencks promotes allows an open-ended approach to both design and interpretation. This provides an emancipatory role for both the architect and inhabitant of the building, creating the opportunity for discursive practices in both the design and interpretation of buildings. Connotation in this context takes on a political role, in a manner similar to the role of the interpretant in Peirce's triad. This promotes a creative, and less didactic role for the architect in the process, and one that has been exploited by a number of avant-garde architects, including Jencks himself.

Jencks's architectural work, most notably his "Elemental House" and "Thematic House" from the early 80s, provides an orgy of meaning through architectural codification. While broadly representative of many of the themes of post-modernity that were to become quickly disseminated in commercial American architecture, Jencks's houses embody an extremist attitude towards signification which approximates folly and, through its unfashionable lack of architectural sensibility, has been left largely ignored in analyses on the subject. The

"Elemental House" in California, uses the themes of earth, fire, water and air to construct an architectural vocabulary which can give order and legitimacy to architectural form as well as responding to broader cosmic orientation devices. Here the pool becomes a crack in the ground (symbolically split by seismic forces) filled with water around which a series of follies are organised. The follies, as well as symbolising the various elements, also respond to notions of time (summer, winter etc) and space (north, south etc). A Grecian theme is used to connect the various cultural references, inspiring statues, inscriptions and murals that are all given contemporary contexts. The house is dependent almost entirely on connotative meanings and a highly non-linear interpretive process. Without the detailed explanation that Jencks provides of the various meanings embedded within the layout, it would be virtually impossible to unravel any of the architectural messages being transmitted. Form and function are almost incidental in the Elemental House having been heavily laden beneath a vale of ornamental meaning. This is not a didactic architecture, in the sense of Saussure, but a more interpretive architecture, much more related to the model of Peirce.

The "Thematic House" in London, Jencks's own residence, takes this obsession with connotative meaning to new levels. Here Jencks proposes his own vocabulary (the "Jencksiana"—an apparent derivative of the Renaissance "Serliana") which becomes the grammatical device which structures the ornamentation (Figure 6). Throughout the house this recurring model appears, in a variety of forms as an abstract device which allows the observer to decode the house as one might translate a foreign language.



Source: Jencks 1985:55

Figure 6: Charles Jencks, *The Jencksiana* (1985)

Here Jencks, rather than relating his work to a universal or "immutable" system is developing his own highly idiosyncratic language which, through its obscurity, prevents a "denotative" framework for analysis. The Thematic House, like the Elemental House, is based on cosmic themes. The ground level of the house is organised around a central "solar stair" which, with 52 stairs each subdivided into seven bands allowing a total of 365 stages, simulates one calendar year. This theme is continued in the rooms that collect around the stair, organised sequentially along the themes of summer, autumn, winter and spring. Again, like the Elemental House, the Thematic house is loaded with abstracted references to a range of historical or cultural phenomena which, unless specifically decoded, become profoundly obtuse. One example is the cupboards in the autumnal room which are adorned with three identical cruciform symbols with an oval hovering above each. Jencks, in his description, explains that this is indicative of the autumn ritual of women in African countries who collect grapes and carry the large containers on their heads.

This kind of association would not be made by many visitors to the house ignorant of Jencks's writing.

Jencks's architectural work, despite its obvious self-indulgence and tendency towards the absurd, represents one model of privileging the interpretant over any universal or linear dissemination of meaning. It marginalizes to some extent the denotative function of signs by shrouding them in a highly individualistic vale where the subjective *parole* vastly overshadows the coherence of a discernible *langue*. This approach Mario Gandelsonas considers semantic (concerned with the meaning rather than the structure of language) and, as well as finding its form in Jencks's bizarre housing types, is also intrinsic to the work of a number of post-modernist architects such as Michael Graves, Robert Stern and even Philip Johnson. Gandelsonas however also sees another means with which architecture can refute the totalising forms of language, most notably through "syntactic" design methodologies (which privilege grammar or structure over content). These models, familiar to the Deconstructivist movement go beyond questioning the relationship between the "sign" and "signified" to destabilising language in its entirety.

The architect who has become most associated with "tropological" or discursive readings of semiotic theory is Peter Eisenman, whose work bluntly challenges linguistic theory. Eisenman's early work borrows heavily from Derrida and his theory of Deconstruction, attempting to subvert simplistic readings of space and introduce a new complexity to architectural semiotics. Eisenman's work challenges the relationship between sign and function (first postulated by Eco) by providing signs of architectural elements, which serve no functional or structural purpose. The most advanced exploration of this is Eisenman's House VI where the programme of the house is almost incidental. The highly complex spatial composition which plays with architectural elements and their organization within a system provides a new architectural organization which is outside of the conventional model of semiotic analysis. Eisenman's house is replete with non-structural columns, discontinuous stairs and artificial or symbolic doorways. These traditionally functional components also serve to disrupt other functional aspects of the house, such as in the bedroom where a column literally splits the bed, and another one splices through the dining room. Here, rather than reinforcing, in a structuralist sense, the relationship between signified and signifier, Eisenman has all but destroyed any connection, undermining the language of architecture in the same way that Derrida deconstructed the written text. Such complexity implicates the viewer or observer of the building, and, rather than communicating with them, in a literal sense, challenges them to unravel the complex syntax of the building in the search of the illusive *jouissance* or intellectual orgasm.

Eisenman's work provides an interpretive model of meaning, rather than a linear one which, possibly more than any other, challenges the interpretant and the "immutability" of language. By separating the programme of the building from its architectural language, Eisenman offers a radical model of architecture and one that has been enduring, most notably in the latest work from Rem Koolhaas's firm OMA which uses programme as a means of questioning embodied power relations and destabilising the inherent immutability of architectural form. Programme, in this form, takes on a liberating, rather than didactic, role in the construction of architecture. It is this model which is most closely related to the work of de Certeau, Lefebvre and Foucault.

## CONCLUSION

The value of Jencks's model from a theoretical point of view is not only the introduction of semiotic theory to architecture, but the importance it places on the act of interpretation. This releases semiotics from the realm of abstract theory and allows an open-ended and engaging attitude towards both the creation and interpretation of architecture. It also has political implications for the individual suggesting new opportunities for engaging with the city. This can be seen as an evolution beyond the theories of both Saussure and Peirce. The dualism of Saussure's semiology, with its dependence upon the signified/signifier pairing, denies any mode of interpretation either in the creation or interpretation of language. The role of the individual is surrendered to the immutability of language. Peirce's semiotics introduces the interpretant as a conditioning mechanism that links the sign with the signifier. This has important implications for semiotics and its relationship to architecture suggesting modes of rethinking dormant power structures and undermining established orthodoxies. Jencks's triangle surpasses both models by focussing not on an all-powerful interpretant as the subjective element, but the act of interpretation itself, thus opening semiotics to both the writer (architect) and the reader (inhabitant).

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