

ARKITEKTONISK KVALITET

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'Architectural quality as signifier, discursive element and aesthetic judgment: summary, conclusions and discussion

In Denmark, the dispersion and extensive discursive circulation of the term 'architectural quality' can primarily be related to the initiation of *architectural politics* as part of cultural politics in the mid 1990's. From this initial context of cultural and architectural politics and debate, the term has spread, e.g. to discourses of national economics, legislation, public management and research. These contexts seem to demand a semantic precision and conceptual fixation, which the term, seemingly a mere idiom of everyday language, does not comply with. The aim of this thesis, however, is not to establish a definition or to operationalize the idiom, but to investigate the conditions of possibilities for an operationalization.

Hence this thesis thematizes architectural quality as an object of research from two ontologically and methodologically different and complementary perspectives, which both and in quite different ways, instead of intending an elimination of the term's semantic instability and conceptual unclearness, is intended to investigate *as such* the inherent contradictions, potential conflicts of meaning and dissociations of conceptions, as well as divergences of evaluative practices and experiences of architectural quality.

The first of these two perspectives is discursive – and in this sense a *nominalist* perspective – where 'architectural quality' is considered as a linguistic, twosided sign, i.e. an occurring *signifier*, whose *signified*, semantic and discursive function and effect can be investigated by

describing and analyzing discursive examples of usage in mutual relation with their social, political and historical contexts.

In this way, the conditions and possibilities of an operationalization is sought clarified by performing a systematic description and analysis of the discursive practices, structures and contexts of meaning in which 'architectural quality' is constitutive as well as constituted.

The second perspective mentioned above, is experiential and cognitive - and in these senses a *realist* perspective - where 'architectural quality' is considered as a predicate for something people actually experience and evaluate, but potentially experience and evaluate quite differently, due to differences of unconscious cognitive and evaluative embodied strategies. While the first perspective methodologically considered 'architectural quality' as a two-sided, Saussurean sign, the term is considered as a three-sided sign in the second perspective, i.e. a sign that apart from having a signifying form and a signified, conceptual content, also implies a reference. In this perspective the possibilities and conditions for an operationalization is sought clarified by investigating the degree of relative similarity and difference in preconscious cognitive strategies as these are neurofunctionally embodied in architects and non-architects.

In the introductory first part of the thesis, these two perspectives are presented and compared to other possible methodological strategies. A number of exemplifying historical and recent conflicts and contradictions in relation to diverging architectural normativities and usages of the term 'architectural quality' is then presented and discussed - conflicts and contradictions that will be described and analyzed further and more systematically in the two following parts of the thesis. Following this, the actual relevance of the subject matter and its thematization is discussed in a broader contemporary societal and cultural political context. Finally in the introduction, the methodology and research questions are presented in a more elaborated form, and the overall structure and content of the thesis are presented.

The second part of the thesis, where 'architectural quality' is considered and investigated as a linguistic, two-sided sign, is based on presentations, descriptions and analyses of primarily Danish texts selected representatively from various agents, discursive practices, genres etc.; texts that somehow deal with, focus on, or contain the term 'architectural quality'. This analysis indicates a number of linguistically inherent contradictions in usage and conception of the expression or signifier 'architectural quality', and, due to this semantic and discursive variability, the expression is identified as what is labelled *empty* and *floating*

signifiers in structural anthropology, continental semiology, as well as in recent post-structuralist discourse theory; i.e. signs, where the circulation and centrality of the signifier is determined by its empty or floating status, by which individual language users and discursive formations can fill in almost any signified relevant to a given context and communicative intention.

As an empty signifier, 'architectural quality' is on one side demonstrated to facilitate communication and to have a conflict eliminating or moderating effect, precisely because of the lacking, vague, or contradictory character of the signified. Due to this empty or fluid status, the signifier was central and effective in fulfilling the ambition of architectural politics in the 1990's, which was to establish or recreate a positive public attention towards architecture and the architectural profession and community, which had faced severe accusations in public debate of being responsible for what was conceived as a profound lack of 'quality' in the architectural, urban and infrastructural manifestations of modern society.

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On the other side, when 'architectural quality' is incorporated in discourses of legislation, public management and research, and hence is intended to become semantically fixated, it becomes conceptually reinvested with social and power relational conflicts and antagonisms, more or less identical to the antagonisms the expression was an important element in eliminating.

These conflicts, which the expression 'architectural quality' as an empty signifier is demonstrated to partially eliminate or at least suspend momentarily, seem to reoccur and almost to be reproduced by attempts at semantic or conceptual fixation, and the analysis indicates that the conflicts in general were and still are related to dissociations in aesthetic-normative attitudes towards a modernist formal repertoire.

This indicates that normative ideas and antagonisms about architecture are in fact both reflected by and influenced by discursive practices – but only partially so, since the same conflicts or normative dissociations, even if more latently so, seem to reoccur.

In the third part of the thesis questions of the level or status of these normative dissociations are hence put forth. The questions are whether the aesthetic normative dissociations that are identified and discussed in the second part of the thesis are merely found at an institutional and discursive level of cultural politics in a broad sense, or whether they have a cognitive or mental reality, i.e. whether these dissociations can be inferred as differential cognitive structures, embodied as neurofunctional

dispositions in the organism, and, if so, whether or to what extent social, discursive and cognitive structures has some sort of systematic relation or covariation.

The empirical/experimental basis of this part of the thesis is an *fMRI* or *functional neuro-imaging* study, performed in 2005-2006 in collaboration with researchers from University College London, University of Copenhagen, and Copenhagen University Hospital in Hvidovre. In this study, two groups of subjects, architects and non-architects, have seen and evaluated a range of photographic images of buildings, while an MR scanner recorded functional data of their brain activity. Following the scanning sessions, neurofunctional data was used to perform statistical calculations and to create images of brain activity, in order to infer systematic differences in activation of neural networks between the two groups, and thus create a basis for possible interpretations of the character of preconscious evaluative cognitive strategies, and how they might differ as a function of education or acquired architectural expertise. As an introduction to the presentation of this study and its results, a short account of cognitive neuroscience and its historical, theoretical, heuristic and methodological basis is presented, and its recent applications in fields traditionally associated with disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities are discussed.

Following this, a number of relevant neurofunctional studies of processes of visual integration, object selectivity and of processes involved in evaluation, and integration of impulses with self-monitoring, autobiographical memory and long term habituation are discussed as a basis for questions, hypotheses and experimental design of the fMRI study.

Finally the performed fMRI study is presented. This study indicates a significant difference in preconscious evaluative strategies between the two groups. Put shortly, the non-architects are relatively different, and the architects are relatively similar; i.e. the preconscious cognitive strategies recruited by nonarchitects are neurofunctionally dispersed and individually variable, and the strategies recruited by architects are relatively homogenous and functionally and anatomically concentrated. Furthermore, the study interpretatively indicates that architects do indeed have a cognitive competence in terms of evaluating architecture that non-architects do not have – in the sense that only the architects had parametrically modulated activity in two brain areas frequently associated with aesthetic judgments, i.e. increasing and decreasing neural activity correlating with increase and decrease of declarative judgments. This, however trivial to mention, does not mean in any way or by any possible interpretation that the architects' judgments are better or more valid than the non-architects; it only means that architects unconsciously

tend to use relatively similar and constant evaluative strategies, and non-architects do not.

As mentioned initially, this thesis refrains from any attempt at establishing an abstract normative definition or operationalization of the term 'architectural quality', but aims merely to clarify the conditions and possibilities of such.

In this regard, the thesis concludes that an abstract normative definition or an operationalization, i.e. a restraining specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for correct applications of the term 'architectural quality', is neither beneficial nor practically possible.

Firstly, the thesis demonstrates that all attempts at semantic fixations tend to reproduce the same conflicts that the term, qua its initial semantic and conceptual openness and status as empty or floating signifier, was a central element in suspending. Secondly, any potential normative definition, regardless of any possible rationally, scientifically or legislatively authorized conceptual status, would most likely not be thoroughly acknowledged, accepted and internalized by language users in general, where the term already "floats" and circulates and seem to function quite well semantically, despite or exactly because of its lack of semantic fixation.

More generally 'architecture' is presumably a cultural domain that naturally demands, functions by and is characterized by an unstable and highly variable and flexible semantics and a discursive plurality, which also the analysis in this thesis of the term 'architectural quality' indicates. Hence there is reason for the architectural profession and community to refrain from insisting on imposing definitions and operationalizations, and to be highly cautious about being too "offensive in developing conceptions of what architectural quality can and should encompass" (Thau, 1994, p65-66). On the contrary, the architectural community could beneficially notice that it is as an *empty* signifier that the term has had and, to some extent, still has a positive communicative effect, and that an open, flexible and un-fixated semantics in certain regards and within certain domains is natural and has significant communicative and creative advantages.

On basis of this thesis, however, a tentative recommendation regarding the usage and meaning of the term could be to avoid fixations, which seem to be disadvantageous in architectural and cultural politics, and in contexts of legislation and public management tend to invest the term with contingent normative conceptions reflecting only preferences of certain groups and agents. In the latter context, i.e. public management, the thesis demonstrates that the term is used more or less explicitly for

purposes of social segregation, by naturalizing and essentializing 'architectural quality' as legitimation and foundation of aesthetical rules in local building restrictions favouring economical and aesthetical preferences of only certain groups in society.

However, to maintain or reconstitute 'architectural quality' as a sign with an empty or open signified is presumably problematic for the architectural community, due to the tendentious semantic sliding of the term, as discussed in the end of the second part of the thesis. A normative architectural discourse containing 'architectural quality' as a nodal point, will to some extent almost necessarily remain critically insufficient or inabile, since the term eventually has been semantically absorbed and dominated by discourses it was and is in opposition to.

If 'architectural quality' is to be understood and intended, both as its semantic and discursive function and as its conceptual content, however vague and diffuse, as a kind of opposition to prevalent tendencies of marketization and economization of architectural discourse, it might be more appropriate and favourable to concentrate a normative architectural discourse around other terms.

Regardless of what terms could be considered most appropriate as nodal points in a discursive formation and expression of abstract and general architectural and cultural ideals, and regardless that 'architectural quality', due to its tendentious semantic sliding towards an economical and technocratic-positivist direction, has become somewhat insufficient or inabile, the need to communicate and discuss such architectural and cultural political intentions and ideals still exist.

In this regard it seems appropriate and expectable that the architectural community still claims, not a restraining discursive power, but a semantic dominance and initiative in such a communicative project. No suggestions of specific terms or wordings should be put forth here, but the thesis could, however, implicitly indicate or at least establish a base for a discussion of, two possible strategies, that are not mutually exclusive, but presumably supportive for each other.

The first strategy could be called a political-hegemonical strategy, and connects merely to the discursive and communicative:

When speaking or speaking *of* architectural quality in a more general or abstract sense than a singular architectural experience, and regardless of whether other words are chosen for the same conceptual content, this 'speech' is inevitably (cultural) political, and should not be invested with ambitions of essentially or transcendently naturalizing or fixating any meaning or concept; it is illegitimate and basically incompatible with a

liberal democratic society to transpose the doxa of a field to orthodoxy imposed on society as a whole, and thus neither ethically appropriate nor pragmatically beneficial, as far as political power in a democracy is hegemonic, and hegemony is driven by and constructed around the opposite of defined and operationalized terms, viz. empty signifiers! If the architectural community wishes to promote or maintain a positive public attention, and promote its communication and cultural political influence, it is necessary to mobilize and practise a cautious reflexivity and self-monitoring when uttering ideals and intentions as a community, profession and authority.

This could be accomplished by an instrumentalization, or as Norman Fairclough coins it, a “technologization” of discourse – which, in a political context, is equivalent to the intellectual basis of *spin* – and demands merely a sharpening and reflexive revision of what the community and profession have already intended and partially accomplished through its architectural-political campaign in the 1990’s.

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The other strategy could be called professional-ethical, and is also connected to the discursive and communicative, but primarily to an underlying professional ethos, and to cognitive and practical aspects of this:

The highly consensual, but somewhat esoteric character of the “expert language” in the evaluation of architectural quality as part of a housing evaluation project conducted by the Danish Institute of Building Research, indicates consistently with the results of the neuro-functional fMRI study that a kind of professionally consensual concept of ‘architectural quality’ and a professional evaluative competence in fact do exist, inasmuch as this can be inferred from a certain congruity in discursive as well as cognitive, i.e. neurofunctional structures. This, however, does not mean in any sense that architects’ judgments are more “objective” or valid than others’, but that architects, when judging or conceiving architecture normatively, do not merely mobilize and refer to their architectural competence as a means of differentiation and distinction of themselves as a privileged community and part of a cultural elite, but as a matter of fact do evaluate differently, with an aesthetic register that, due to education, acquired experience and discipline, is modified. Architects should thus understand that their understanding of architecture is different, and employ this understanding in a cautious and reflexive way.

To liberate an appreciative confidence in the value of architecture from fetishist collective belief, does not mean to dissolve, neglect or deny an architectural *illusio*, but merely deliberately to make it an enlightened or *lucid illusio* (Albertsen & Diken, 2004), to keep it clear of any instrumentalization of or confusion with symbolic violence and the

maintenance of social hierarchies and structures of power and dominance. This implies that architects as a community, as a profession and as a cultural and social function communicating and practicing explicit values and ideals, do not merely take into account, but acknowledge, accept and invest an emphatic (though not necessarily empathic) *interest* in the fact that architecture can be conceived of quite differently. A wider mobilization of such a reflexive interest presumably demands a critical attention towards architectural education; not as to establish a basis for a thorough restructuring or deconstruction of architectural education, expertise and identity, but as a strengthening and widening of professional identity through an increased reflexive awareness of one self, and of the surrounding society. It seems that a critical research in architecture, and not least a research in architectural critique, could inform and stimulate such a process.

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