

Semiotics in Architectural Design

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Abstract: Symbols are given new meaning when linguistics is applied to other disciplines,. And in the academic world of architecture, the meaning of architecture can be described symbolically through semiotics. Linguistic theory has a great influence on postmodernist architectural design. Semiotics , since its use in architectural design, has enriched and deepened the study of architectural symbolism.

Keywords: Semiotics; Architectural design; Architectural semiotics

Architecture has always occupied a pivotal position in the design world, and all kinds of famous and classic buildings have endured through the years, the reasons for which lie not only in the value of the buildings themselves, but also the deep meaning endowed by culture and history, which has sublimated the buildings. Behind this sublimation, it is closely related to the symbolic meaning of the building.

1. About Semiotics

Semiotics arose in the 1960s as an emerging discipline that branched out from modern linguistics. Semiotics, based on linguistics, combined with structuralism, which was popular at the time, to explore the deeper meaning of the humanities. It was first introduced by Swiss linguist Saussure, who put forward the concepts of “signifier” and “signified” and considered the combination of the two as the sign itself. “Signifier” is simply the phonetic, alphabetic form of a word, like the words we say every day. For example, when we talk about “mirror”, its signifier refers to the word “mirror” itself, without any other meaning. And “signified” is the entity of “mirror”. The combination of word meaning and entity is symbol. Therefore, the symbol is not a simple word or an object, but more like the essence of the thing.

For instance, the architecture of ancient Chinese gardens blends with the poetry and painting in traditional Chinese culture. It is combined with multiple factors such as the geography, culture, customs, and economy of the era, which create the uniqueness of Chinese gardens. If any of these factors had changed, it would not be the garden architecture we know today. This illustrates that symbols can be created with different contexts, but we must consider the applicability of the symbols. Just as in today’s age of novelty and difference, new words are emerging from the Internet, some of which are even puzzling.

2. Architectural semiotics

Due to the flexible relationship between “signifier” and “signified” of semiotics, semiotics has been gradually applied to human society and science. In the middle of the last century, the Western design community used semiotics in architectural design practice. As the modernist architectural style has widely influenced various design fields in different regions of the world, it has evolved into the “internationalist style”. However, the proliferation of the cold, monotonous, impersonal and formal internationalist style caused architecture to lose its sense of place in the environment. At that time, a group of scholars seriously raised the issue of the “crisis of meaning” of architecture from a theoretical perspective, which was a very important starting point for the theoretical study of architectural semiotics.

Architectural semiotics studies architecture as a language, so the architectural structure corresponds to the structure in linguistics. Different types of architecture are considered as different symbols, which are composed of different words and phrases. Windows, doors, and furniture are like words that can be pieced together, rewritten, or reorganized into different forms of architecture. Under the study of architectural semiotics, architecture is no longer superficial, but pushed to a deeper level. Architectural semiotics pays more attention to the inner meaning of the “text” conveyed by architecture, and considers this “text” as communicable. The communicator of an architectural work’s “text” is the designer, and the one who receives the message is the general public. Perhaps a good architectural work means the ideas of the designer can be received by the public.

Roland Barthes, whose work *Mythology* is an important influence in semiotics, breaks down symbols into three levels of meaning: referential meaning, implicational meaning and myth. The referential meaning of symbols is equivalent to Saussure’s “enlightenment”, i.e., the direct meaning of symbols. The implicational meaning of symbols refers to the implication of symbols in specific environments, contexts and cultural backgrounds, reminding people of things other than the symbols themselves, which is compared to the design technique of “metaphor”. For example, in order to express the damage caused to the Jewish people after the massacre of Jews by the German Nazis, the overall wall of Berlin Jewish Memorial, designed by architect Daniel Libeskind, is gray, and the choice of color of which sets a serious and heavy atmosphere. The folded lines on the wall are just like scars cut by sharp tools on smooth skin, thus alluding to the “scars” on the Jewish mind and spirit. “Myth” is the most important part of the symbol. If symbol is considered as a person, then “myth” is the heart. For an architectural work, its referential meaning lies in its function, which is for people to live or use; the implicational meaning can be reflected in the material, style and characteristics of the building; while

the “myth” embodies the meaning of an era, such as the world-famous Notre Dame de Paris. As the first Gothic church in the world, its status and historical value are unparalleled.

3. The practice of architectural semiotics

Today, many architectural designs no longer express the related cultural and ideological messages properly; local traditional aesthetics are ignored, considerations of locality are left behind, and their environments have even become meaningless places. In this case, many scholars believe that we should not only pay attention to the functional meaning of architecture, but also study the symbolic meaning of architecture.

Architectural semiotics can be explored from two aspects, one is to consider architecture as a sign of language. Deconstructionism, one of the main forces of postmodernism, believes that symbols are not concrete under its idea of breaking structure. In other words, there is no designated meaning in any language. Like reading a novel, each person perceives different emotions in it; so language itself does not have a real meaning, the real meaning is given by people. The same is true in design, where architecture needs to have a deep inner meaning in order not to be accused of being superficial and meaningless. Second, as a language, the symbol of architecture can be communicated. Empathy often arises spontaneously from excellent design works, which is actually the communication with the design language. Chinese architect Wang Shu, as the first Chinese who won the Pritzker Prize, has a unique language in his works. His proper use of traditional building materials in his architectural design is not only a consideration and respect for the local history, but also to people’s needs for architecture.

Architect Wang Shu designed the building of Xiangshan Campus of China Academy of Art, which is located in the beautiful environment of the campus and complements itself with its natural surroundings. Surrounded by fields originally under the mountain and adjacent to a small lake, the symbols of the building itself create a dialogue with the environment. The overall style of the building adopts the traditional architectural style of the local village, but the construction structure is very different from that of traditional buildings. The ingenuity of the building is to express the uniqueness of the elements of the traditional architecture in a new way. When people walk into a building, the dialogue starts, for example, the building in Xiangshan Campus mentioned above is a product of traditional Chinese culture at first glance. Although it uses novel design techniques, it conveys the connotation of the unity of heaven and man in traditional Chinese architecture. Therefore, semiotics can not only be an analytical tool to derive and analyze symbols in architecture, but also a carrier of culture.

China is in the midst of rapid development. The accelerated pace of urbanization has provided unprecedented development opportunities for architectural design as well as unprecedented challenges in urban planning and design. Therefore, designers should not only pay attention to the practicality of the design works, but also to the symbols of the works themselves to avoid the design symbols being useless and empty.

4. Conclusion

The use of semiotics in architectural design is not a specific design approach, but rather a focus on the inner meaning conveyed by architectural “symbols”. The debate on design forms never stops. No matter how new the design form is, the only design works that can really touch people’s hearts and have a lasting impact are those that convey culture and history. Therefore, the use of semiotics in architectural design is to better explore its cultural connotation and contemporary meaning.

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