

Presentation of “Architecture and Narrativity”

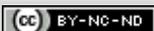
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Presentation of “Architecture and Narrativity”

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This ERRS issue opens with an article by Paul Ricœur entitled “Architecture and Narrativity.” It is the text of a lecture given in Paris in 1996 and entitled: “De la mémoire.” Delivered to the ‘Groupe de réflexion des architectes,’ this event was organized by the ‘Direction de l’architecture et du patrimoine’ – now included in the ‘Direction générale des patrimoines.’ This text was first published in 1998 in the magazine *Urbanisme*.¹ Although Ricœur did not usually make architecture an object of study, the philosopher often integrated it into a thought which eventually defined itself as a philosophical anthropology by elaborating a hermeneutics that takes the long route. Paul Ricœur was able to place architecture in *History and Truth* in particular, either as a “world” inserted in the world” or as a mode of the “incorporation” of “images of man which make up the whole reality of culture.”² The period that stretches out from *Time and Narrative* (1983-1985) to *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000) continues to develop the philosophy of narrative, and sometimes extends the use of concepts coined in a first context to other areas of thought. This opening article can be relocated in this context. Architecture is a field which, in general, lies outside the topics explicitly studied by the philosopher. However, and this is what makes this text interesting, Ricœur proposes to apply to architecture the paradigm elaborated in *Time and Narrative*.

Ricœur considers that the common ground between narrative or narrativity and inhabited space or architecture is *time*. In this context, he intends to rediscover in architecture the three stages of his *Triple Mimesis*, namely *prefiguration*, *configuration* and *refiguration*. Thus, “prefiguration” will be related to “the act of inhabiting”; “configuration” refers more directly to “the act of building”; and “refiguration” institutes a level of exchange between the “act of inhabiting” and the “act of building,” generally through an opposition of the first *vis-à-vis* the second. But in so far as the question of space is not entirely that of time, *differences in the modalities of this implementation are inevitable*. It is remarkable that Ricœur includes at the “configuration” level *several nuances or elements of complexity* which have precisely to do with the different schemes of temporality that are then set up between “building” and “inhabiting.”

A first point developed by the philosopher, in a manner that speaks volumes about his attention to the urban landscape, shows how the city is defined by its “intertextuality,” by strong contrasts, by oppositions that may even make its “intelligibility” complicated. It is noteworthy that, in *Critique and Conviction*, Ricœur also refers to the city in order to explain the multiplicity of expressive forms in contemporary art: “Everything can be brought together, just as in our big cities a Roman Catholic church and a skyscraper can exist side by side, or a Gothic cathedral next to the Georges Pompidou Center.”³ However, the notion of narrativity, applied in this area of architecture, will allow the categories of “concordance-discordance” and “temporal synthesis of the heterogeneous” to be put into play so that, by analogy, “built space” also becomes “condensed time”. It is thus well within the framework of a “space-time” where narrative-related and architecture-related categories can be exchanged. It even becomes possible to speak of an

"architectural narrativity." Nevertheless, a relationship to tradition turns out to be more prevalent within the historicity specific to a thought of both building and inhabiting the urban space: construction never ceases to think of itself in relation to a possible destruction, and "the violence of history" itself constitutes a "threat" that affects the historical dimension of architecture.

Within the framework of the developed analogy, we may be better able to grasp the theoretical divergences occurring in the field of architecture and urbanism. These could originate from the gap between "the act of building" and "the act of inhabiting." It would thus distinguish a formalist, modernist approach, sure of itself, and an approach more focused on the "needs of the populations" and the tradition. Thus, according to Ricœur, one can understand the desire that some architects have to avoid certain historical and ideological constraints, in order to implement all the potentialities of their art. The philosopher then draws a parallel with the theorists of the new novel who wished to give free rein to "the celebration of language." If this comparison may be understood within the framework of the analogy implemented, can we affirm, as Ricœur does, that "narrativity and architecture follow [...] similar historical courses"? The social and political anchoring of architecture and urbanism could pose a limit to this comparison.

In this contribution, Ricœur refers finally to the notion of a "place of memory." In this regard, he insists on the idea of a "reconstruction-memory" preferring it to the simple "repetition-memory." Similarly, he opposes the "work of memory" which, in its actuality, presupposes the creative act of the architect, to the simple "duty of memory." Such themes will be taken up, as we know, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Moreover, the concluding reference to Walter Benjamin, on the theme of the "*flâneurs (wanderers)* of places of memory," prefigures the reflections developed in this book.⁴ The relationship between the level of "refiguration" and that of "configuration" is only possible insofar as a lived, proven link is maintained between the way of living, of occupying a place, and being oneself a possible *flâneur*, that is, making the city a place of aesthetic experience and broadening it to memory, history and also politics.

Samuel Lelièvre and Yvon Inizan

- ¹ Paul Ricœur, "Architecture et narrativité," *Urbanisme*, 303, (November-December 1998), 44-51. This text partly reproduces a text in Italian entitled, "Architettura e narratività," published in *Identità, differenze, Triennale di Milano XIX Esposizione Internazionale. Integrazione e pluralità nelle forme del nostro tempo. Le culture tra effimero e duraturo*, (Milano: Elemond Editori Associati, 1996), 64-72. It was also published in Spanish: "Arquitectura y narratividad," *Arquitectonics*, 4 (2003), 9-30.
- ² Paul Ricœur writes that "works of art, monuments, liturgies, books on culture, spirituality, and ethics form a 'world' within the world and provide us with stepping-stones similar to objects or things outside ourselves" (in *History and Truth*, (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 2007 [1965]), 83-4 [an article of 1951]), or that "this quest for mutual esteem is pursued through images of man ; and these images of man constitute the reality that is culture. By this I understand customs, morals, law, literature, and the arts. And these manifold images of man which are conveyed by culture are embodied in monuments, various styles, and works of art" in *History and Truth*, 118-9 (an article of 1960). In a general way, we can say that one encounters architecture through the long detour through the signs and the symbols of a Ricœurian hermeneutics [that is] putting itself in place.
- ³ Paul Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 176.
- ⁴ Paul Ricœur also refers to this theme in "Propos d'un flâneur," *Diagonal*, 141 (2000); in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Ricœur emphasizes his interest in Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* through his famous description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) *Memory, History, Forgetting*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 499-500.