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Paper 3: An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Discourse in Architecture: Canary Wharf
Submitted: 22 January 1990
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***An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of
Discourse in Architecture: Canary Wharf***
A theoretical paper

***A paper written and published by
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“As events one analyzes them (discursive elements) according to the intelligibility of actions and responses, pressures and resistances, strategies and counter-strategies, in short, one analyzes them as Knowledge-Power.”

S.T. Roweis, 1988, p. 200

Preface

This paper was first submitted to The School of Architecture at Kingston Polytechnic, London, United Kingdom, (now Kingston University) in January 1990 as part of the submission requirement for the degree of Master of Art in Architecture: Design and Theory.

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Introduction

Roweis, in his paper on "Knowledge-Power and Professional Practice," (1988) takes the view that if we are to understand the 'real' nature of (design) professional practice, a third mode of analyzing knowledge, one that interrogates it strategically is necessary in addition to that of the epistemic and hermeneutic modes. (Roweis, 1988, p. 200) This investigation, he says, analyzes both the strategic and the tactical significance of knowledge rather than specific kinds of knowledge.

This is not to say that 'formal,' 'learned' or 'theoretical' knowledge of the type taught in schools and colleges is not an important element within practice, and is not therefore worthy of analysis, but it does take the view that this kind of knowledge does not affect practice in a 'direct' manner. For, once this 'expert' knowledge is used, that is to say made public, then it becomes part of a *discourse*.

'Expert knowledge,' he says, 'thus ceases to function according to its 'own' rules of construction and norms of validity. The other knowledge it encounters in *discourse* modifies it, imposes new requirements on it, transform its significances and implications and deny its scholarly autonomy.' At the same time however this gives it the "objective possibility of producing real effects in the social world." (Roweis, 1988, p 194)

In this paper my first intention is to analyze and make some general conclusions about the possible nature and effects of *discourse* in Architectural design and construction, and more particularly in construction of large commercial structures, or so called "Mega-buildings," as identified by the Architectural Design magazine. (AD vol.58, No.11/12, 1988)

In the process of the enquiry, answers ought to be more easily forthcoming to such important questions as: How is it that such structures come into being? What is it that determines the architectural result? What is it that causes a building's specific qualities to occur, such as its size, shape, massing, form, line, texture and colour? And how do these elements come together and affect the users of buildings and the body of human 'society' within which the building will ultimately reside?

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This of course assumes that an enquiry of this kind is not only valid, but that it is also capable of recognising the 'truth' or combination of truths about a given situation. So that secondly; I am also academically duty bound, as it were, to end this paper with some further conclusions which will involve the formulation of certain value judgements about the methodology, framework and assumptions of this analytical technique. For, as Rowe's acknowledges, "this is a terrain that remains virtually unexplored by analysts." (Rowe's, 1988, p. 200)

1. The Location of *Discourse* in the Discipline of Architecture

Before I can embark on such a study, it is of course necessary to describe what is involved. Short of reproducing Rowe's paper, a brief outline will, I hope, suffice.

As I have already stated, the primary concern is the investigation of strategic or the tactical significance of knowledge, which is to say its aims and objectives. Hence, Rowe's is at pains to state that it is not knowledge itself, or rather 'expert' knowledge, that should be investigated, but *discourse*, which he says, can and should be questioned strategically. Ultimately this means that in such a study the investigation will require an analysis of the way knowledge is used within *discourse* with respect to the aims and objectives of those participating within a particular situation. This approach depends upon the treatment of discursive elements as events, rather than ideas, triggered by, and triggering, specific dynamics in the situation at hand. "As events one analyzes them (within the context of power relations) according to the intelligibility of actions and responses, pressures and resistances, strategies and counter-strategies, in short, one analyzes them as *Knowledge-Power*." (Rowe's, 1988, p. 200)

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The term “*Knowledge-Power*” is fundamentally derived from the work of Michel Foucault. (Foucault himself uses the term “*Power-Knowledge*.”) Rowe claims that there is no knowledge without power and conversely no power without knowledge. Therefore “we must recognise them as mutually constitutive.” (Rowe, 1988, p. 192) Rowe then, defines *discourse* as the space in which, knowledge and power meet, or the system of relays (elsewhere called, “effective links” between elements of knowledge, or earthly human encounters or practices (Rowe, 1988, p. 186), which hooks knowledge and power in any ensemble of socio-cultural practices. (Rowe, 1988, p. 192) These practices will include such areas as legislation, governments, justice, administration, penal and other correctional treatments, education, philosophy, medicine, psychiatry and welfare. (Rowe, 1988, p. 186) Rowe explains that these are not only historically constituted but also always specific and shifting, and it is these that form *fields of use* in which elements of knowledge intermediate the production of power effects. (Rowe, 1988, p. 186) So that, with this in mind, Rowe also recommends the analysis of *fields of use* in addition to that of the discourse that occurs within these ‘fields.’

The construction of a building is an “effect of power.” Its very existence derives from a complex web of power-knowledge relations, which one can identify in the articulation of an overall discursive process, known only by those who participate within it. A building also generates “power effects.” For if it is understood as an “event” or even as a series of events within a particular type of discourse, or “architectural language,” it follows that it too generates a kind of knowledge-power, and thus induces or “triggers” its own dynamics. For example, an architect could create a design based on a form of narrative, using the language of story-telling to determine or generate a sequential relationship of some kind. This might be between the rooms of a work of architecture, so that they might literally become a series of ‘events’ through which a person must pass in order to move between one room and another. Thus, by the subtle manipulation of the movement of the body through space, by limiting the choice of direction open to the user, a growing awareness on the part of the user would lead, in time, to the development of a discourse between the person and the building. In short, a “power-knowledge” relationship would be established.

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It is clear that in such a situation the user is given the opportunity of interpreting a design via his understanding of the building as the effect of power through a deliberate tactical use of knowledge, employed within an overall strategy, and aimed at introducing power effects upon him and other users. And yet, this very understanding enables the user to act or, react in a considered way in his or her relation to the design, given the power that he now has as a result of this knowledge. How he acts or reacts will of course depend upon his overall strategy, aims and objectives. What these might be is, of course, a matter for the user alone. The users 'ultimate' understanding of a work of architecture may not be quite the same as that which was intended by the architect. For once a building has entered the realm of public discourse it becomes, by its built concrete presence, subject to the dynamics of public debate whether among a number of people or within the mind and body of the singular individual.

However this exchange of power-knowledge relations will change its form substantially when the user is allowed to enter the discursive processes at work within the designers mind. This occurs when the user of a building is the client.

2. The 'Rules' of Governing the Analysis of *Discourse* in General

Foucault identifies four rules governing a study of *discourse* in general. These are:

Firstly, one cannot separate the knowledge of a particular subject of investigation from the power exercised within it. This he calls "the rule of immanence."

The second rule is "the rule of continuous variations." Foucault suggests that knowledge-power relations are not exactly given forms of distribution but are rather "matrices of transformations" constantly moving and reshaping themselves.

The third rule is that of the "double-conditioning" of a strategy by both specific tactics, which are created by the specific aims and objectives of "local centres" of power - knowledge, and by tactics required by an overall strategy within a given overall context.

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Finally one should note “the rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses,” which is to say that “discourse is made up of a multiplicity of elements that intersect in a complex, unstable way, that act as both the instrument and effect of power.” Conversely, “discourse can also undermine, expose or even block power. An absence of power provides a ‘site’ for both power and resistance to it.” (Sheridan, 1980, p.185-6)

Within the context of this kind of analysis, one is obligated to understand *discourse* in a form that is, “neither uniform, nor stable in operation.” And agree with the notion that, there is no form of “accepted” discourse, nor a form of “excluded” discourse, and that finally there is neither a discourse of the “dominant” nor a discourse of the “dominated.” (Sheridan, 1980, p.186) Power-knowledge then, replaces ‘law with objective, prohibition with tactics, and sovereignty with a mobile multiplicity of power relations from which shifting strategies emerge.’ In short, “the model is military rather than legal.” (Sheridan, 1980, p.186)

3. A General Description of the Study Methodology of Architectural Discourse.

What then is it that constitutes *the form and content* of this kind of analysis, and how can one translate this into *Architectural Discourse*?

Foucault suggests that one begins any such study with the investigation of the immediate “local power relations” at work within the particular area of the discourse concerned. In this way one should seek the answers to the following questions: “How do power relations give rise to discourses? How do discourses use power (-knowledge) relations? What resistances occur as a result of these relations? What is the effect of these resistances on the overall configuration? And in what ways do these power relations link together to form the overall strategy?” (Sheridan, 1980, p.185)

In an analysis concerning architectural discourse the first task is the identification of the major participants. Perhaps the most important of these is **the client**. For without his economic input there can be no effective discourse, or at least a discourse that will ultimately lead to the production of concrete power effects.

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The client after some deliberation concerning his perceived 'needs' will approach the architect from whom he hopes to obtain certain perceived 'services,' which will meet those needs. Thus, the first power relationship within the discourse of architectural practice is formed. For, on the one hand the client, understood as a "consumer" has economic or purchasing power, whilst on the other, the architect has that power which results from his position as a "producer" of certain goods and services.

The form that this relationship takes will initially depend upon the 'hidden' strategies of the two parties. In the analysis one must start by identifying what these are, so that one can begin to obtain answers to certain key questions. How, for example, did these strategies evolve? On what theoretical or practical foundations do they rest? In short, what kind of logic has been operative?

In the course of such a study, certain similarities and differences between the two strategies will be revealed. How these are resolved through the *discourse* that will occur between the two and in relation to other exterior forces will depend upon their relative strengths and weaknesses as 'local centres' of power-knowledge, seen within the context of their dependency upon one another, as consumer and producer.

The activity of Architecture has many other important participants, and therefore power-relations. However, for the purpose of this paper, I shall focus on the relationship between the architect and the client in my choice of building study, by way of illustrating the method of structural analysis, as applied to the discourse of the discipline of Architecture.

4. A Brief Analysis of the Architect and Client Relationship at Canary Wharf.

The task of choosing such an illustration was difficult, precisely because architectural practice is subject to a vast range of socio-cultural practices, which exist beyond that of the ideal situation in which discourse occurs within the client-architect relationship alone. Such practices vary according to the scale of activity, and are also context specific in regard to the ever changing elements of place and time.

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With this problem in mind, I have chosen to direct my attention to a specific 'event' in the world of British Architecture: the redevelopment of the London Docklands, with particular reference to the Canary Wharf project with its centrepiece, the fifty storey office skyscraper, designed by Cesar Pelli and Associates of New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

This 'event' is almost unique in the history of modern British Architecture, precisely because it is a development which seems to have occurred within a kind local socio-cultural vacuum. The influences of local socio-cultural practices, (and even national, to certain degree) which are normally 'applied' to the practice of Architecture within the structures of current British society have either been significantly reduced or, in the specific case of Canary Wharf, virtually ignored. So that in some strange way it provides the analyst with an opportunity to consider the discourse of a particular kind of architecture, which is seemingly unhindered by context specific, socio-cultural variables and local power relations. (Although, as I have previously noted, Foucault suggests that even without discourse between two or more centres of local power relations, the very absence of discourse will, as I shall show later, provides a 'site' for both power and resistance to it.) In short, the "power-effect" that is the building, is one which appears to have been solely generated by the personal (architectural) strategy of the architect in relation to the personal strategy of the client. But what do I mean by this? And on what grounds can I make such a judgement?

In order to find concrete answers to these questions, one still has to reveal the totality of the system or structure within which the client and his architect operate as *local centres* of power-knowledge, or so it would seem.

(In the first instance this seems an impossible task. For our tendency as analysts, educated within the "scientific method," urges us to seek the truth through the collection of specific empirical evidence, from which, by a process of deduction, one can justify the pronouncement of universally applicable or objective truth. Clearly this is not really possible in this instance. For, the very nature of a system, as I have previously indicated, is such that it cannot be reducible to fixed ideas and absolute truth. This does not mean that a system, especially one that is man-made cannot fall victim to such notions. Indeed, a system may in fact demand that some or even all of its human actors behave in a manner that derives from the belief, or faith in certain absolute truths. So that, in structural analysis, the search for scientific truth takes on a rather different purpose.)

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What then, can one say about the system in which, and under which the Canary Wharf project and its office tower have come into being? My earlier account, which described the client as a consumer and the architect as a producer, gives one a clue. For this relationship is clearly a microcosm set within the macrocosm of the idea of global capitalism.

This system like all systems might be understood as historically constituted. It seems to find its meaning in the genealogy of the consumer-producer relationship, and the idea that the producer has continuously sought to control both the mind and the body of the consumer. This might be understood as follows:

In the feudal state, the needs of the body and the way in which these were met were determined and controlled through the combined power of the church and the state (in European culture). This was implemented by the collusion of power between parish church administrators and the lord of the manor. The power over the body by the church, rested upon discursive tactics aimed at the control of the soul, and through the soul, sought to control and limit the needs and desires of the body. This in turn enabled the church to generate an excess of production over needs for their own profit. Whilst the state, in permitting this to happen held ultimate control over both church and people through the threat and active use of violence.

In the agro-industrial state, the control of capital by the bourgeoisie enabled them to control the means of production, and hence determine what needs could be satisfied, and what needs could not. So that in this way, control over the body was established, enabling an even greater degree of control over production.

In the industrial state, the basic needs of society were met through the establishment of the welfare state. This was achieved through the unionisation of the workforce ('the shop or factory floor'), whose collective power found expression within the existing political apparatus. The equilibrium of power was then possible between the two forces of production and consumption.

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In the present post-industrial climate, these distinctions have become less evident. The sale of share holdings to a wider public, especially with regard to the sale of state owned industry, and the increasing sale of shares direct to the workforce has greatly democratised the means of production. But with democracy comes anonymity, so that directors of companies, faced with the problem of ensuring profitability for these anonymous share holders, in a society whose basic needs have been enshrined within law, is faced with the 'problem' of stimulating further demand. In short, industry now seeks to 'control' demand by the use of a highly stylised system of power-knowledge relations, which seeks to unbalance the equilibrium of needs to production by effectively 'inflating' the perceived 'needs' of the individual. Once again control over the body is sought through the creation of 'desire' within the medium of the soul.

Clearly, **communication** is of paramount importance to this process of coercion. The arts of advertising and marketing have become increasingly important within the realm of economic, social and political life. The range, sophistication and subtlety of these activities are matched only by the technology used in their employ. Telecommunications, satellite television, radio, newspapers, billboards, sports teams, buses, trains, taxis and Architecture have all been touched by this frantic scramble to attract the attention of the consumer.

Given this kind of relationship between the producer and the consumer perhaps commercial developments like Canary Wharf are inevitable. For in the same way that the producer is tied to the perceived dictates of the consumer, so too is the design of an architect subject to the concerns of his client and the forces acting upon the client. But if the purpose of architectural discourse in this kind of development is merely **advertising**, what, one should ask, is it selling? And can one really be so cynical?

Canary Wharf might be described as having the following key attributes:

a) It is a function of a global-economic strategy determined by a belief that world trade will become focused upon three great markets, S.E. Asia, America and Europe; each with its own financial capital and currency. Clearly the size of Canary Wharf anticipates a future need for office space, whilst additional facilities, such as transportation, retail, leisure and housing will provide an integral support system, which is needed to sustain the productive life of this new financial community.

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b) It is a business venture based upon a critical interpretation of future trends in the world financial market place. No such venture, however, can be a guaranteed success. Therefore, given the logic of the system, any strategy, which might lead to a reduction in business risk, would need to be applied.

c) In the context of the discipline of Architecture, this results in the primary need for a proven and successful architectural strategy which **reduces business risk** for the client.

The similarity of this project with 'the tried and tested' Battery Park City in New York, USA, developed under the same global economic strategy by the same client and architect, is unmistakable.

A second strategy is also one of urban assimilation that is to say it attempts to 'fit' within the existing urban fabric of the city of London. The use of classical detailing on most of its buildings, and the implementation of a kind of Georgian approach to town planning, with its crescents and circuses, suggest a deliberate attempt to seek some kind of contextual relationship.

Thirdly, and in connection with the second strategy, the developer has sort to appeal to the widest possible taste. Taste, however, is a subjective matter and a matter for the individual alone. So how is it possible to find just that which 'pleases' everyone? At Canary Wharf this paradox has clearly been 'solved' through a discursive tactic of "commentary," that is a commentary upon the primary texts of past styles of architecture, with which people are familiar and apparently secure. (Foucault might explain that this process tries to draw upon the multiple or hidden meanings attributed to a given primary text. So that in this way an architect will seek to justify what was articulated silently within the first text. 'Thus he repeats it, and repeats what has never been said.' (Sheridan, 1980, p.125))

5. A Conclusion on the Analysis of the Architectural Discourse of Canary Wharf

The above analysis the client / architect relationship at Canary Wharf depends entirely upon the acceptance of Architectural discourse as “event,” which implicitly states that there can be *no remainder*. In other words, there can be no meaning within the process of discourse, except that which is applicable to a given system in which it forms a “functional segment” in relation to others. (Foucault, 1973, p. xvii) However, it also follows that a given system must be context specific to (a real and present) time and place.

Canary Wharf is can never be a “functional segment” of Georgian England. As I have suggested, it seems to be more of a function of a particular kind of global business strategy and all that it entails. So that, in spite of the tactical use of these Georgian architectural effects, other effects which result directly from the more important global strategy may be said to have found their natural expression within the Architecture of Canary Wharf at a more basic and fundamental level.

The project's huge scale, its use of (primordial) symbolic forms, its overall unity and formality, the planned arrangement along a line of axis, its obsession with order and symmetry speak, I would argue, of a supreme “**will to power**,” that has not been so overtly expressed in Britain since the building of the cathedrals and monasteries in feudal times.

To find the reason for this astonishing reality, one must clearly look outside of the more limited relationship that exists between the Architect and his Client. In short, one must look at their combined relations to other centres of power-knowledge. In the construction process the most important power is **the Government of the land**.

At Canary Wharf, the activity of civil government has been much reduced. Therefore, the project could be interpreted as a logical reaction to a government which has withdrawn much of its restricting influence upon the processes of the free market. For the force of capitalism operates in relation to the force of government. Capitalism seems to act without self-restraint in a manner which, subject to the logic of supply and demand, seeks out new ways and new methods of accruing wealth and the power that accompanies it.

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With the establishment of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) in 1981, the British government 'elected' to remove both itself and the intransigent labour run local authorities and their planning committees from the arena of the redevelopment of the Docklands. This 'event' is of crucial importance, for it effectively excluded any chance of concrete discourse between the local population and the design team, through the medium of the local planning committees, which, for all their faults serve as the only means through which local views may be expressed. This discourse of "resistance" acts as a method by which design intentions can be adjusted to "fit" within the existing framework of real and present socio-cultural practices, which are always context-specific to place and time. So that one could describe the role of planning committees as a forum in which insensitive design is made sensitive to the specific, held as it is were, within the memory of a given population. For it is only in this way that design can become a meaningful event in the minds and memories of men.

Given this short and selected history, one might conclude that Canary Wharf, unrestrained by government and its democratic institutions is for the most part a bold experiment in 'pure' laissez-faire development economics.

And as with all experiments one can never be quite certain of the result.

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Conclusion

Much of what I had intended to say about the use of a 'Structural Analysis' of *discourse* in Architecture, and particularly its application to design and its effect upon building users remains unsaid.

However, I have indicated in the main body of the text, though a building design may seek to achieve certain kinds of power-effects, the degree to which it succeeds or not will ultimately depend upon the response by building users, and society at large. This can be notoriously difficult to predict.

In short, 'Structural Analysis' can only really identify patterns of behaviour *within* the discipline and profession of Architecture with any certainty. Just as the global capitalist is subject to unpredictable global events over which he has no control, so too is the architect subject to the unpredictable response of both the user and society to his completed design.

Nevertheless, a growing awareness and interest in the built environment within Britain seems to have occurred. A more precise *discourse* between a knowing society and its architects will perhaps enable the methodology of 'Structural Analysis' a greater opportunity of becoming more predictive.

END.

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