The path of donkeys: When the unintentional draws paths

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1. Introduction

In this article, rather than focusing on the limits of nID (non Intentionnel Design), we propose a more epistemological questioning aimed at redefining the perimeter of the concept of intentionality in the creative process of architectural and urban planning projects. Drawing on a phenomenological approach, we aim to demonstrate that intentionality is inherent in every act of architectural design, and that even when the design is the result of a certain serendipity (arising from the use and practices of urban spaces), different levels of intentionality can be detected. This postulate, which we take as the starting point for our thinking, may seem provocative, since it runs counter to the direction advocated by the symposium. However, it is based on Le Corbusier's famous phrase, "*The curved street is the donkey's path, the straight street the man's path*"[1].

To underpin our argument, we develop the article in three stages: first, we introduce a few definitional notions around intentionality drawn from the literature, so as to mobilize them conceptually in the exercise of architectural and urban design. Finally, we conclude with a comparative analysis of project activity in contrasting cases, and the different actionist postures and interpretative systems induced.

2. Intentionality and its contours

If we attempt to introduce a few definitions of the concept of intentionality, we come up against a multidimensional notion that presupposes an idea, a purpose, a project, ... intentionality was revealed by phenomenology and has taken on a certain value in recent years among neuroscience theorists. Pierre Jacob, in his book *L'intentionnalité ; problème de philosophie de l'esprit*[2] [1], gives a very good summary, in which he points out that phenomenology considers intentionality to be a polysemous notion and can, as a result, contain several semantic entries: it refers to action, to an aim, but also to reality, consciousness, etc.

Kersten Geers[3] considers that the concept of intention founds and structures the relationship that exists between reality and project, in other words, between what exists and what can be created.

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[1] "La rue courbe est le chemin des ânes, la rue droite le chemin des Hommes". Did you know that this famous phrase by Le Corbusier is taken from his book Urbanism? (1925)

[2] Pierre Jacob, (2004), *L'Intentionnalité : Problèmes de philosophie de l'esprit*, Odile Jacob

[3] Kersten Geers est un architecte et enseignant Belge né en 1975.

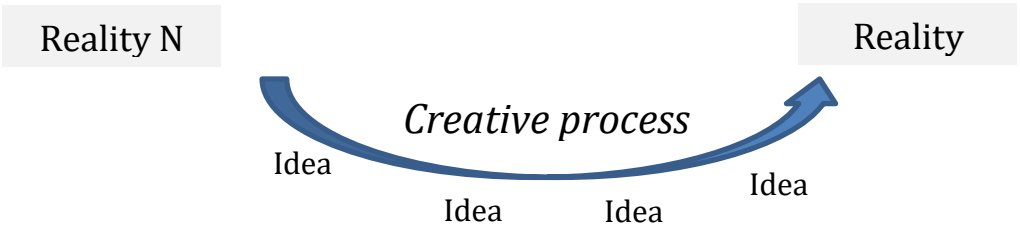

Figure 1: Intentionality in creation

3. Conceptual reflections on architectural practice

Designing architecture means using signs to produce, but also to invest; to invest materially and spiritually in order to mark a territory. Indeed, the architect (or man before architects existed) has always used the built form as a mark on the ground, with the intention of bringing order and meaning to the relationship between himself and his environment. Christian Norberg-Schulz [2] demonstrates this very well in his book *Meaning in Western Architecture*. He reviews all the major periods of architecture, carefully examining the different traces built, the context of their implantation in cities and how they were integrated. It shows that style and organization are not pure historical accidents, but intentions. He also stresses the importance of a holistic approach to living, which he sees as the goal of architecture. The subtitle chosen for Paysage, ambiance, architecture reinforces this requirement: "*Making architecture signifie visualizing the Genius loci: the architect's work lies in creating signifiant places that help man to live*" [3].

In other words, in addition to being useful and habitable, architecture is above all significant. Its components are the most telling traces of human civilization. So, whatever the hands that have traced them, they carry materialized, visible and meaningful intentions.

4. Architecture: a binary language

Man first drew a building object, an edifice, and then, by naming it, he created a system of signs that can be likened to an "architectural language". Theorists Claire and Michel Duplay [4] reinforce this connotation and consider architecture to be a language, combinatory like all languages, and autonomous, whose signs - binary - are of the following type : space (signified) / built element (signifier). It uses two signs that can be combined in multiple ways according to a limited number of organizational rules. Like a language, the language of the architectural trace is therefore made up of signs (signifier, signified) whose combinatorics is a syntax. Generally speaking, we can say that:

- the *signifier* is the building (support for the decision, for architectural expression, for constructive materiality),

- the *signified* is the space created by this building (support for functions).

In other words, all architectural traces are understood as a language, and are permeated by intentionality. The architectural artifact represents an expressive dimension, reflected in the style chosen by the designer, the morphology of the work, the message conveyed, etc., and thus precludes the presence of any kind of neutrality. In fact, architecture carries meanings that derive from its creator's sensibility, from the fact that it reflects a history, represents a living environment and recounts social practices. For example, on an urban facade, the diversity of porches in terms of height, width, ornamentation, etc., is a composition that signifies the recognition of a building, an era or a culture. In the same way, openings on a facade are signs of identification of a building, marking an era, a culture, even an appropriation and identification (the presence of gables on a facade is characteristic of the Flemish city. Their existence represents an architectural language specific to a region).

5. Architectural composition and contextualization

Architecture uses a morphological language expressed by combinatorial systems; the levels of language interlock so that a set of language elements at one level (intention) becomes the signifier of the next level. The city is thus structured like a language, according to a syntax and grammar orchestrating phonemes or monemes, depending on whether they are common places (square, street, etc.) or specific places, then lived, then to identify with. Since the first city layouts, the role of architecture has been to define the organization of the space of the city or district to be developed. Its aims are:

- to provide a harmonious overall composition,

- to lay down rules for the location, layout and development of successive building projects".

This is how Jean Paul Lacaze (1995) defines architectural composition in his book *Les méthodes de l'urbanisme* [5]. However, architecture does not aim for a finished object; change is the hallmark of the city, so it is inscribed in time. The quest for the mythical city, born of and for harmony, has constantly mobilized energies. To achieve this harmony, architecture must provide an image and produce a WHOLE, from this disparate whole, a complex interplay of references in which the weight of historical traditions and socio-cultural determinants mingle.

6. Architecture: signs and sense-making

The design process is not simply a process that provides a coherent, semantically valid response to a problem posed by the contracting owner. In fact, the intention underpins the project; it constitutes, by means of signs, a continual process of sense-making and meaning-making that underpins the creation of the work. It is the architect's intentions, then, that will help articulate the project, give it form and life... Nevertheless, for the project to succeed, the architect must deal not only with his intentions, but also with the reinterpretation of the fundamental components of architecture. In this way, intentions take shape through a process of sense-making of the components of architectural language and the various concepts they induce, which are ultimately translated through the architect's various interpretations. Architecture is therefore a combination of intentions and a mastery of architectural language, which, if correctly used, will make the project legible and identifiable. Similarly, if we probe several references in the literature (Figure 2) on the urban design process, we find that they all converge towards the same axiomatic: urban planning is also an intentional activity. For urban planners, intention is present and evident in the act of planning, organizing space and structuring it.

Figure 2: Intention beyond the building scale

Nevertheless, we must also emphasize a circular logic and a relationship of reciprocity and reflexivity between the intentions and the elements of the site and the program, in the same way as in literature, where the style, the way words are chosen and arranged, participate in the author's primary intentions, and can even transform them.

7. Project genesis: actionist posture and comparative analysis

Building works and their constituent elements (space/buildings) are the products of different architectures, which are themselves the result of a superposition and juxtaposition of intentions... It is these intentions that will guide the architect in his choices throughout the project. But the concept of intention in architecture cannot be thought independently of questions relating to the project process and architectural language. In other words, architecture is not there simply to solve a problem and meet the contracting owner's needs, but it is also:

- Expression
- Aesthetization
- Hierarchization
- Contextualization
- Projection

We can confirm this with the examples illustrated below, by the bird's nest in Pekin, or the four open books of the French National Library (BNF) in Paris.

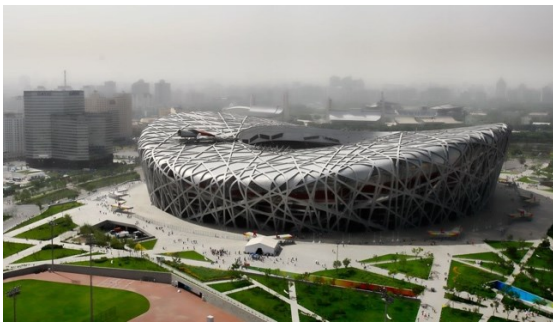

Figure 3: Pekin stadium (Bird's nest)[4]

Figure 4: BNF (Open books)[5]

Based on these examples, it may seem easy to define architecture, since everyone practices architecture on a daily basis; we all live in it, work in it, play in it, and so on. Yet very few theorists have ventured to conceptualize it. There are two major definitions. The first is by Boudon, who introduced the notion of *architecturology* and sees architecture as a certain way of thinking about

[4]https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/a-pekin-le-stade-du-nid-d-oiseau-sport-art-et-propagande-3398505

[5] https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/diaporama-7866-bnf-20-ans

space, and the second, already mentioned and defended by Duplay, who likens architecture to a language permeated by the intentionality of its authors, thus producing meaning through what it says about its program, its relationship to context and its era. Through the notions of intentions, interpretations and inventions, and their way of composing and transforming architectural language, we can also ascertain the question of the evolution of this space/building pair, the transformation of ideas and concepts, their diversification and enhancement. Moreover, in addition to being an inhabited heritage, as Jacques Derrida [6] puts it, the space/built pairing has undergone several mutations and gone through several ages, but remains impassive and unperturbed, characterized by invariants, constants that are fixed in stone as a trace and that inform us, that carry a design, a message of social space.

A number of invariants can be distinguished, reflecting a single postulate: architecture must have sense and meaning, it must present it and thereby signify. The signifying or symbolic value of this meaning must dictate the structure and syntax, the form and function of architecture.

8. Intention and its representational forms

Architecture is based on a principle, a foundation, a design, a purpose, even a transcendence. This crossed with the constraints of the context and the design situation, participates in having an architectural trace that contains several qualifiers such as quality, unexpected, uncommon, and intelligence of its author, thus *intentions*.

8.1 Sense-making

Intention in architecture refers first and foremost to sense-making. This is made possible by a certain universality due to spatial perception, of the meaning of all the elements that make up space and the specific meaning given to them by their arrangement and context: mastering these meanings makes it possible to translate ideas into architecture, to make a project legible in the eyes of those who experience it, and thus to participate in the evolution of designs in general. However, there is no single view of architecture, no single meaning, but rather many different sources of interpretation. On the one hand, there are those that come from the intra-subjective, or from individual experience, and which are constructed by a succession of schemas and experiential superimposition. On the other hand, there are those that are based on both the relative state of time of observation and the variation in meaning that we give to the use of an architecture, and which are constructed with others.

Its different states co-construct the representation of architecture, forcing us to attribute specific and different points of view to it each time, in order to enrich its sense and meaning.

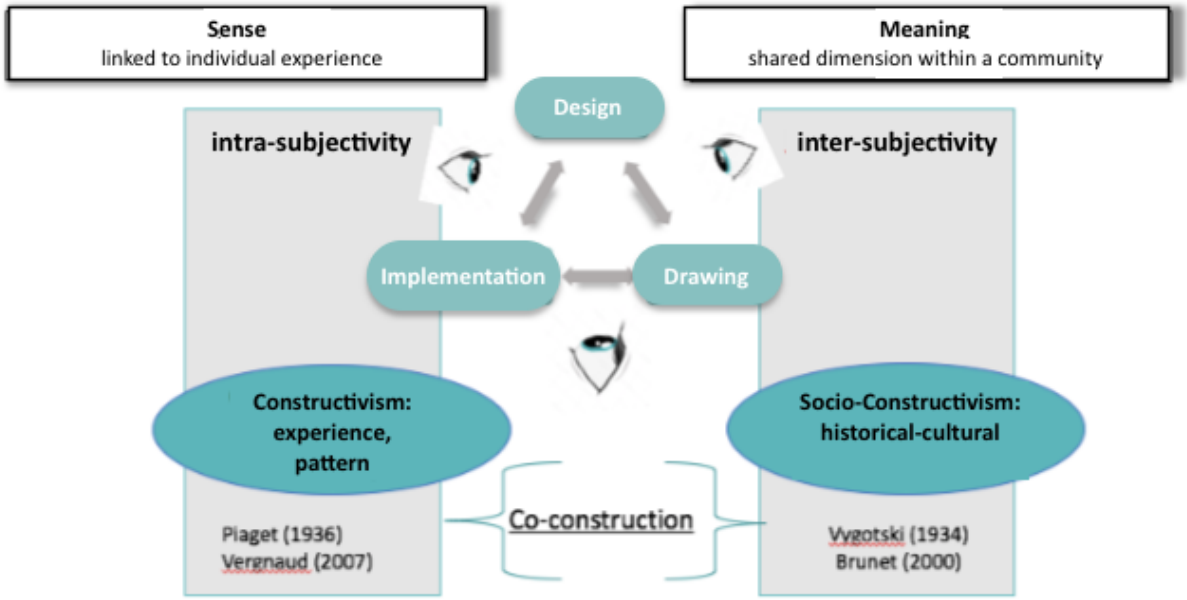

Figure 5 : Intention and its representational forms

And while there's no magic formula for successful architecture, we do know that sense is important. It is important for the transmission of knowledge about past uses, but it must also be present in the practice of architecture today. Every architect needs to question the validity and relevance of his project's meaning and sense-making. The design process is not simply a matter of reflex, but requires a great deal of thought, since every feature must be justified and argued for. If we take the example of the *Institut du Monde Arabe*, for which architect Jean Nouvel designed a façade composed of several elements that are present for two reasons: on the one hand, to allow lighting adjustment and reflect a shaded texture back into the building, and on the other, these small squares represent the moucharabieh inspired by oriental architecture. This project is a success, and in fact it's the project that put Jean Nouvel on the international scene, because it makes sense.

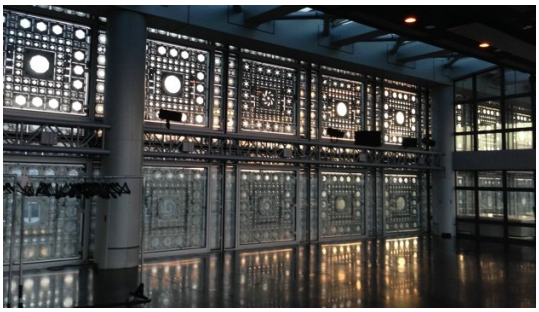

Figure 6 : Institut du Monde Arabe by Jean Nouvel[6]

8.2 Meaningful composition

Architecture is the fruit of intentions that the architectural language and its sensible use must make legible. It is therefore important to have a coherent graphic design, forming a balanced composition. What is composition? It's an arrangement of artifacts that form a homogeneous and complete whole, so that no part of the whole can claim to be self-sufficient, and if one component were to be removed, the balance would be lost. We have the example of the Louvre museum, with the pyramid project designed by architect Pei, which achieved balance and harmony despite an unexpected work, whether in terms of form or materials. It's a highly successful integration by contrast. Composition is a way of making intelligent and intentional use of resources that are directly present, but also those that are present accidentally.

[6]https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/culture-loisirs/les-moucharabiehs-de-l-institut-du-monde-arabe-renoves-depuis-courthezon-1506592631

Figure 7: The Louvre Pyramid[7]

8.3 Physical and temporal space

Architecture requires a base, a support represented by space. There is no architecture if there is no space to accommodate it. This space is not only the space where the drawing is activated (paper or screen), but also the physical space that enables a three-dimensional projection that takes into account the support, i.e. the site and its constraints, so that it can be integrated and adapted as best as possible.

In architect Frank Lloyd Wright's project, the intention was to compose with nature, and in particular with the waterfall. This was the major element around which and for which the project was designed. The contracting owner, who came to spend his picnics in this paradise-like environment, wanted to build his house here, and the architect came up with a sensible answer, with a perfect integration that put the project and its author on the map.

Figure 8 : The waterfall house[8]

On the contrary, disturbing architecture can sometimes need time to become part of the collective memory. When we think of the *Centre Beaubourg* (Centre Pompidou), we can't forget all the reservations about this building, a building that was likened to a metal monster when it was built, sending its guts outwards, a building that provoked the anger of local residents, who formed an association to denounce this "ugly" architecture, which was completely at odds with the surrounding Haussmannian environment... Yet today, this building is one of the most visited monuments in France, attracting Parisians for cultural events as well as tourists who come to admire the work of architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. The temporal dimension is therefore also important,

[7]https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramide_du_Louvre#/media/Fichier:Louvre_Museum_Wikimedia_Commons.jpg
[8]https://share.america.gov/fr/la-maison-sur-la-cascade-un-chef-doeuvre-darchitecture-americaine/

and architects can sometimes be ahead of their time. In other words, if a design is sometimes disturbing and its "emergence" from the ground disruptive, time must be allowed for a project to become part of the collective memory.

9. From intuition to intention

In the foregoing, we have mentioned two concepts: space and time, which we will use as the starting point for our conclusion, in an attempt to demonstrate, through logical reasoning in the philosophical sense, the transition from intuition to intention, or even intentionality. In other words, all design is intentional. There is no such thing as non-intentional design.

For our argument, we take up Kant[9], for whom time and space are not real properties of things, but forms of intuition that condition our perception of them. He uses a thought experiment to demonstrate this. We can imagine an empty space, in which every object that was ever present has been gradually removed. Conversely, we cannot imagine objects without space.

What can we deduce from this? Space is not an empirical concept, brought to us by experience. On the contrary, it's one of the *a priori* forms of our intuition that makes experience possible. This means that, in design (as experience), *volens nolens* (willy-nilly), space and time constitute a kind of pre-existing constraint that orients the intuition of the project to come, and thus, in a non-conscious/non-aware way, the project intention.

Edmond Husserl (1859-1938) [7], founder of phenomenology, continued Kantian reasoning on intuition, but freed himself from it. For the former, intuition is passive, "received" from our own sensibility. Unlike Kant, Husserl does not consider intuition to be "passive". It is a conscious intentional act; intentionality being the property of consciousness of being "aware of". All consciousness is therefore, without exception, intentional: there is no such thing as pure consciousness, independent of what it is aware of. All consciousness has an object: all consciousness is consciousness of something, which means that it does not exist as something that contains, but as an act of relating, or, as Emmanuel Levinas [8] would later write, intentionality is the act of giving meaning/sense (whether by capitalizing on past experience, or by the horizon of expectations towards which we tend). In layman's terms, this means that our sensory impressions only become intentional when they are organized through our expectations or memories. In other words, every thought or act we do is necessarily imbued with our experience and awareness of what we're doing, and therefore intentional.

Our thoughts and actions become intentional when we give them sense. And it is not always rationality (Kantian understanding, or Le Corbusier's straight line, that is, the rationalization of intuition) that produces sense. The donkey also traces its path, seemingly unintentionally, but ultimately the curved line it draws responds to the meaning it gives it (for example, following a path it already knows), and in this sense, this curved line is also intentional, even if this intentionality is not rationalized.

[9] https://materialisme-dialectique.com/kant-et-lespace-temps/

Hence the title of this contribution, *The path of donkeys: when the unintentional draws paths, all the same*.

10. Conclusion

Architecture bears external and internal signs. It also refers, through the arrangement of volumes, light, and so on, to formal expression laden with cultural and identity meanings. Every architectural work therefore carries a meaning, although this meaning may be more or less explicit or hidden, relatively unequivocal or ambiguous. It can evolve over time and with the substitution of interpretative reference models. Order and rigor, complexity and contradiction, symbolism and the ordinary are all integral parts of the range of possibilities with which the architect intentionally juggles, thereby provoking multiple and individual interpretations of the underlying sense-making of their forms, which decompose and recompose the urban environment.

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