Understanding Architecture as Inessential

Carolyn Fahey, Newcastle, United Kingdom

carolyn.fahey@ncl.ac.uk

Those versed in the architectural discipline will likely agree that architecture, as a whole and in its parts, is driven by a set of established rules, reasons and conventions – whatever they may be. From the Ancient Egyptian Pyramids to Modern housing blocks to the blobs of Greg Lynn, each adheres to some very particular sets of rules and reasons which effectively represents what they as an individual or culture take to *be* architecture. Yet when considering what architecture *is* across the boundaries of time, culture, or individual theories, the definition becomes abstract or reduced to metaphysical explanations in an effort to encompass all the eventualities of 'architecture'; in order to reach its said 'essence'. It is this description of the natural and the conventional as given by new Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell in his text *The Claim of Reason*, that frees us from the mazes left in the wake of metaphysics and the beyond vague abstract in its finding the essence both meaningless and ultimately unattainable. This reading, I will argue, shifts our understanding of architecture towards the inessential.

The point of relevance when considering the new Wittgensteinian reading in relation to architecture is its epistemology, radical by both today's and yesterday's standards. It is this epistemology which is inherently inessential in its refusal to allow knowledge to be defined absolutely: "universals are neither necessary nor even useful in explaining how words and concepts apply to different things" (Cavell, 188). Whilst steadfastly avoiding accusations of relativism: "I *know* no more about the application of a word or concept then the explanations I can give, so that no universal or definition would, as it were, *represent* my knowledge […] once we see all this, the idea of a universal no longer has its *obvious* appeal, it no longer carries a *sense* of explaining something profound" (Cavell, 188). With this, the new Wittgenstein allows for new ontologies within philosophical circles, although this possibility has not yet been explored in architecture. This paper extends this ontological shift to the architectural discipline by reinforcing the significance of the natural and conventional in architecture practice.

Founded on Cavell's account of what counts for us as being something (see Chapter Five "Natural and Conventional"), it becomes clear that our understanding of what architecture may be, is not so much defined by textbook definitions or other such apparent authorities on the subject, but upon what we have learned through experience as having count as architecture. Given that an object counts as a particular object only when we recognise it as counting as that object, this deviates quite drastically from common methods of identifying what architecture is. For instance, an object of the built environment only counts as architecture as it fits our criteria for knowing architecture, not what the writer of the dictionary definition counts as being architecture. So, whilst what counts as architecture for me is determined by what I have learned to count as architecture in tandem with my experiences of what I hold to be architecture, this may be entirely different for every person. Yet, the striking thing is that, whilst it seems that we can never nor could we ever come to hold a common notion of architecture or at least notions which resemble one another in some way (see Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance) we do actually have notions which resemble one another, which sometimes suggest commonalities.[1]

Nevertheless, the implications of the complexity of difference seem to suggest that an architecture or even an architectural instance is unique in so far as the particular conception of architecture is unique (and that, according to the above will always be the case). For instance, Wittgenstein's house, the Palais Stonborough or the Kundmanngasse, is clearly what counts as architecture for Wittgenstein; it is the closest thing we have to a manifestation of Wittgenstein's conception of architecture.[2] And although this may not count as such for me or for someone of another form of life, and unless I am somehow disempowered (via political or other forms of oppression) I will maintain a different conception from Wittgenstein's of what architecture is. That is to say, I will maintain somewhat different criteria for knowing what architecture is. Unless I somehow accept Wittgenstein's house as being architecture with the exact same criteria for knowing architecture as Wittgenstein himself held, I and others outside of his conception of it will maintain the difference in our own individual conceptions.

Clearly though, this paradigm of the 'other' architecture is all the more apparent when considering groups of people that have entirely different experiences in learning what counts as architecture and for which those objects that count as architecture are entirely different. The architectures, for instance, of the Japanese people one hundred years ago in contrast with the architectures of the plains tribes of North American bear little to no resemblance to one another, and so it is easy to conclude that their very conceptions of what 'architecture' is are entirely different (if we can grant them the benefit of the doubt in having held identifiable, in Western terms, a concept for 'architecture').

In our search for an inessential understanding of architecture and in light of this anecdote, it seems that we should consider multiple architectures simultaneously. However, this is no more than paradoxical. Paradoxical because their (the Japanese and the Arapahoe) conceptions of what architecture is are founded on distinctly different criteria sets, where little to no congruencies amongst them can be expected. That is, other than their both being human and having had human experiences.

Yet, when considering the possibility of an architectural essence (amongst either a single group with resembling criteria or two or more groups with unique criteria sets), our particular conceptions of what is natural or what is held to be conventional amongst a particular group of people – or 'form of life' in Wittgensteinian terms – with

[1] The phrase 'common notions' refers to the similarities between our conceptions of things, whether a concept of a pencil or something of greater import such as a religious figure.

[2] Whilst semiology conflicts with the new Wittgenstein epistemology, one could argue that the notion of architecture as comprised of symbols does resonant with Cavell's account of the criteria for knowing. That what a semiologist would call a symbol, a new Wittgenstein would refer to as something known relating to a particular criterion.

regards to architecture practice is, nor could it ever be held as being, as absolutely true for all people in all instances, despite the belief and rhetoric that might support it otherwise. Accordingly, this paper considers what the implications of knowing architecture in this manner might be. That is to say, what does it mean to say that architecture is inessential? Does this mean that the few truths we have of architecture in the form of theses, doctrines, and theories are not absolutely true?

The very conception of an architecture based upon an inessential epistemology seems to go against common notions of what architecture *is*; what we in the western world, in England, at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, professedly take architecture to be. This is maybe unsurprising for vernacularists or even historians of architecture. That for example, for the normal person living in remote isolated Russia, what is architecture goes no further than their understanding of the buildings which surround them day to day. The person, supposedly of the same form of life in St. Petersburg would, with some of the most extravagant examples of architecture present as a part of their everyday life, conceive of architecture differently than someone who has never seen or experienced in any other way the wonders of St. Petersburg. Likewise, two persons living in St. Petersburg will not have identical conceptions of architecture either as they will not have learned or experienced the architecture there in exactly the same way. As such, the inessential goes against an agreed notion of architecture within a form of life, which is further yet than the historian or vernacularist will likely agree to. It appears at surface level that the only way one would or could come to know it without reverting back to a conception of the essence, would be to literally experience, to learn about, to hear architecture described in, a different manner than they are used to.

To understand the 'other' architecture, we have to bring into our own way of life this other form of life – we have to agree with the other as it were. And if we choose to agree with the other, we simply take a step towards being a part of the other. And if we choose to disagree with the other, we simply reject the other form of life in favour of our own. Our agreeing taking in or rejecting our instances or eventualities of architecture affects our knowing of architecture. But we cannot have agreed with two ways of doings things can we? We cannot have multiple notions of architecture? Conflicting notions of architecture, can we? As an architect, how is one to practice?

Yet we are not so conflicted. We somehow resolve these differences by synthesising to some degree the experiences we have into a (hopefully) coherent conception of architecture. We may, for instance, agree to qualities of both French and Indian architecture. Given the chance to create a piece of architecture would project some design which incorporates both in some form or fashion. Le Corbusier for instance is said to have been greatly affected by the architecture of India and China, so one may argue that this influence in addition to his being trained as an artist, not an architect, were amongst the reasons why his architecture was such an innovative and unique architecture in comparison to other architects during the same period. But if synthesis is indeed the result of having experience many architectures, it is not inessential. We have not transgressed the boundaries of one architecture into a new *per se*. We have created a new eventuality or instance in it by making reference to some aspects of the old architecture and some aspects of the new architecture. Our attempt at the inessential becomes no more than a mutation of the parent architectures.[3]

What is revealed here is that the inessential in architecture *cannot* be achieved in a literal sense, by coming to know many purported essences of architecture via knowing many architectures, but by knowing the limitations or boundaries of our everyday understanding of architecture as it is. That for instance, each participant of a form of life holds a unique conception of architecture and furthermore that each form of life has a unique collective conception of architecture. It has been argued accordingly that we could never come to know every eventuality in architecture from which to come to some essence of it in that way. Rather, the implications of this reading of architecture are simply that an essence of something, in this case of architecture, can never be found due to the vast complexity and varieties of criteria for knowing.

The work of Oskari Kuusela seems to speak to this point when he states: "the situation assumes the appearance that something is directly perceived, as if one simply *saw* in the example the inner most essence of the things it exemplifies and did not use the example as a mode of presentation" (Kuusela, 106). This implies that there is not *an* essence to be seen in the object that is architecture, that the differences and/or commonalities we see in an architectural object speak more to the *mode* of presentation or the everyday rules, reasons, and conventions employed than to any preconceived definition of architecture.

And whilst the current definition of architecture as "architecture" stands in direct conflict as it is inherently essentialist in its being (a definition), to understand architecture differently is to re-conceive of the very notion 'architecture' as is purportedly captured in such definitions. Whilst it may only superficially appear that an inessential notion of architecture would literally require knowing many essences, this has been shown not to be the case. Reconception does not actually transgress the boundaries of a said architecture essence, but locates the *limitations of its localised notion* in the everyday.

Hence, the description of this alternative image of architecture is not attempting to provide an *alternative* image of architecture but a *description* of the ontological shift in our understanding of architecture where, "the grasping of a universal cannot perform the function it is imagined to have" (Cavell, 188). In other words, an essence of something, in this case architecture, does not exist as such. Rather 'architecture' as is conventionally defined and talked about is in and of itself an *ideal* notion whatever its context. Thus, our sense of architecture arrived at through our experiences of it, based upon our criteria for knowing architecture, tells us what architecture *is*. Phenomenal still is that there seems to exist amongst all humans some conception – some criteria for knowing – an architecture of some sort, as if it truly is one very basic and fundamental aspect of human existence.

[3] This is the case when considering the way in which we create architecture, something Cavell calls the 'invitation to projective imagination'. Furthermore, the possibility of understanding architecture as inessential means accepting it as being defined by its relevant form of life, whether of another foreign culture or of a micro culture within Western culture. This view clearly, if given due attention via philosophical analysis, has strong implications on the political.

Literature

Cavell, S. (1979) *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crary, A. and Read, R. (eds.) (2000) *The New Wittgenstein.* London and New York: Routledge.

Eldridge, R. (1986) 'The Normal and the Normative: Wittgenstein's Legacy, Kripke, and Cavell', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 46, (4), pp. 555-75.

Kuusela, O. (2008) *The Struggle Against Dogmatism: Wittgenstein and the Concept of Philosophy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.