

The dialectic of representation: the tension between the new and the familiar in post-liberation architecture

Heinrich Wolff

Partner Noero Wolff Architects,
Department of Architecture, University of Cape Town
Email: hwolff@global.co.za

The aim of this paper is to explore the dialectic of architectural representation within the context of post-liberation self-consciousness and to present some limits and opportunities that this debate offers. The tension between the new and the familiar is what will be mediated by the dialectic of representation. The concepts of reference, representation and precedent will be explored as attitudes towards the existing or previously existing world. Problems with the application of precedent will be discussed in the context of poorly documented histories and rapid socio-political change. Reference to the familiar world is offered as a supplement to the deficiencies of precedent. The pursuit of the new can be intentional and purposeful and can manifest itself as the negation of reference or as coexisting with the familiar. The bodily activity of design and the unfolding of the design process lead to understandings of the unpredictability of design outcomes. A critique of the tension between the new and the familiar will give further articulation to the dialectic.

Keywords: dialectic of representation, reference, precedent, familiar, newness, uncanny, cultural transformation, reciprocity, contestation, judgement, post-liberation, contemporary architecture

La dialectique de la représentation: la tension entre le nouveau et le familier dans l'architecture de l'après-libération

Le but de cet article est d'explorer la dialectique de la représentation architecturale dans le contexte de la conscience de soi de l'après-libération et de présenter certaines limites et possibilités offertes par ce débat. Le champ d'investigation sera ensuite limité à la tension entre le nouveau et le familier telle qu'elle s'applique à la représentation architecturale. Les concepts de référence, de représentation et de précédent seront explorés en tant qu'attitudes à l'égard du monde existant ou ayant existé. Les problèmes liés à l'application du précédent seront discutés dans le contexte des histoires aux sources écrites peu nombreuses et celui du changement socio-politique rapide. La référence au monde familier est proposée comme un complément aux insuffisances du précédent. La poursuite du nouveau peut être intentionnelle et ciblée et peut se manifester comme la négation de la référence ou comme coexistant avec le familier. L'activité corporelle du dessin et le déploiement du processus du dessin amènent à certains points de compréhension sur le caractère imprévisible des résultats du dessin.

Une critique de la tension entre le nouveau et le familier offrira ensuite un lien avec la dialectique.

Mots-clés: dialectique de la représentation, référence, précédent, familier, nouveauté, étrange, transformation culturelle, réciprocité, contestation, jugement, après-libération, architecture contemporaine

The position put forward in this paper is both analytical and propositional. As a practicing architect, this paper is the verbalisation of speculations around the work of my office. By developing these ideas in writing, they will hopefully strengthen and direct future design work.

The political liberation in South Africa of 1994 confronts architects with urgent questions about the meaning and relevance of contemporary architectural practice. This kind of enquiry is certainly not unique in history; on the contrary, these questions are typical in post-liberation contexts. The aim of this paper is to explore the dialectic of architectural representation within the context of post-liberation self-consciousness and to present some limits and opportunities that this debate offers. The tension between the new and the familiar is what will be mediated by the dialectic of representation.

The development of an exciting, socially engaged contemporary architecture is an urgent task of our generation. This paper attempts to contribute to understandings that will help us achieve this end.

Reference to the familiar

Architecture becomes intelligible through reference. Reference by definition is a cognitive link to the familiar world. Reference manifests itself in architecture as a resemblance to an existing or previously existing reality. The intelligible link that is set up serves a communicative purpose.

Architectural representation, in contrast, does not point to something outside itself. For Gadamer “representation does not imply that something merely stands in for something else as if it were a replacement or substitute that enjoys a less authentic, more indirect kind of existence. On the contrary what is represented is itself present in the only way available to it.”(1986: 35) In my view, architectural representation today operates in two primary modes. The first mode is ontological representation (expressing things for what they are) and the second, mimetic representation (enacting a role that allows symbolic content to emerge). These modes are not mutually exclusive. Both modes of representation can be informed by either the new or the familiar. For Dalibor Vesely (2004) the purpose of architectural representation is the construction of a communicative space that does not rely on the visible (aesthetic) alone.

Precedent in architecture is a kind of a reference except that it has a less casual relationship with its referent. If a referent is a precedent for an aspect of design, it is taken on by the architect for its ability to inform or justify a current decision. John Hancock (1986) has developed a theory of precedent that takes reference beyond arbitrary connections to things in the world, to a systematic method of selecting and analysing precedent to ensure conviction of choice, continuity of tradition and criticism within the tradition. Hancock’s theory of precedent holds that if an appropriate selection was made of portions of the past and rigorous analysis was applied in choosing how to use it effectively, it would regain some ground lost by the unself-conscious perpetuation of tradition. For Hancock, “a critically maintained continuity of precedents is regarded [...] as the only convincing grounds we have for valid action and belief, in design as in other fields” [my emphasis] (Hancock 1986: 68) As thorough as his proposed theory may be, precedent certainly does not offer the “only convincing grounds” for valid action in design. In architecture, as in law, there is always the scope for new formulations (invention) or ‘setting precedent’, but in architecture, unlike law, there is never a ‘binding precedent’¹. This criticism of Hancock’s theory of precedent reveals the heart of the current paper; as much as precedent or reference may be important in making connections to history, it can never act as a binding force or negate the will of every new generation to find its own representations. In other words, reference to the familiar and the desire for the new sit in tension or dialogue with each other. When the dialectic of reference is considered within the socio-political realities of a post-liberation context, new understandings about the dialectic emerge.

The ‘theory of precedent’ (i.e. the working method that uses aspects of the past as a validating force in the present) assumes the availability of potential sources of history. In the hypothetical absence of documented history the exercise of the ‘theory of precedent’ becomes near impossible. It is of course not entirely impossible since one can do primary research that could act as precedent. But as Hancock also admits, “the greater the initial choice the better the ultimate selection is likely to be.” (Hancock 1986: 67). In the context of South Africa, like so many ex-colonies, the history of indigenous architecture is poorly documented. As much as there may be sporadic occurrences of well documented history, it is the absence of a complete or unified architectural history that has a debilitating effect of the exercise of ‘the theory of precedent’. The acknowledgement of this problem would, on the one hand, point to the urgent need for writing such histories, and on the other, illustrate the predicament of contemporary architects who want to locate their work within a continuity of the past. Patronising colonial history writing about indigenous architecture and the radical change in living patterns, particularly

between rural and urban environments, exacerbate the problem. In the absence of a broad range of documented history and in the face of great social change, the focus of engagement with the world moves more towards the familiar, in other words what is presently around us.

The study of precedent is of course not confined to investigations into architectural characteristics alone but also into the human activity accommodated or prevented by buildings or cities. Considering the problems of precedent as described above, an increased focus on contemporary ways of living, building and expression begins to assume the role as supplement to historical understanding. Such a shift in focus to the actions of ordinary people in the conduct of their everyday lives or in the making of the extraordinary has an incredible corollary in the broad-based democratic process. For this reason the crisis of precedent might just be what we need to move contemporary architecture forward.

The architecture of Laurie Baker in India demonstrates the transformative power a bias toward contemporary indigenous practice can have. His work is informed by concerns of availability of local building materials, commonly used building techniques, climatic responses, living conditions of the poor and perceptions of the users. Although he also engaged with more distant traditions, his working method “thrive(d) on appropriate assimilation and adaptation” of what was around him. (Bhatia 1991:6) Baker not only observed contemporary ways of living and building around him, he accepted the ethical implications of these observations by making the architectural responses for the ordinary citizen (the poor in the case of India) the measure of all projects. “Then there is a firm unyielding belief that all this talk of ‘low-cost building’ should not be ‘for the poor’ but for all” (Laurie Baker quoted in Bhatia 1991: 18).

Reference to the world around us can be made to new understandings or inventions outside the field of architecture. Gottfried Semper’s research on weaving, knotting and clothing is one example. Semper’s genius was to make connections between new archaeological research on polychromatic Greek architecture and the architecture of the colonised world. Although Semper made reference to the past, his theoretical propositions were based on contemporary understandings that emerged at the time. Le Corbusier’s call to open our eyes to the grain silos, steamboats, motorcars and aeroplanes was not so much a gaze into the future as it was simply him looking around himself. What was pointed out in this case was a discrepancy between the thinking, techniques of construction and consequential appearances produced by engineers and the work of architects at the time. In spite of the attempts of early European Modernist architects to distance themselves from tradition, reference was still central to their mimetic strategies. It could be argued that Modernism in architecture made its most significant leaps forward by diminishing the extent of self-reference and by increasing reference to the world outside architecture. In hindsight we can acknowledge that reference to new machines, technologies and mass production was immensely productive at a time when appropriate expressions were sought for an architecture of a new era.

I believe that the use of reference offers productive opportunities for South African architects² today. Homi Bhabha said: “The time of liberation is...a time of cultural uncertainty, and, most crucially, of signifiatory or representational undecidability...” (Bhabha 1994: 35). To my mind, the cultural uncertainty of our post-liberation period calls for a new representations for a new society. This in turn requires understanding about the new and the dialogue it has with the familiar world.

The origin of the new

We cannot have cultural transformation in architecture without the new. According to Homi Bhabha (1994: 7):

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.

As I have argued elsewhere: "Newness in architecture is life-giving, it is a valuable component of beauty and it sensitises people to ideas that operate in the work. Newness, therefore, is purposeful and is not just created for its own sake." (Wolff 2007: 66) The radically new, that challenges our values and perceptions, remain a valuable part of how we move forward culturally. In creating the new we are concerned with the limitless world of the imagination and equally with assessing the present. As Adorno (1997: 6) said: "It lies in the nature of artworks to inquire after the essential and the necessary in them and to react against all superfluous elements."

The new comes into being as a product of accident or will. When Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, had to commission the design of the new capital city of the Punjab, he was clear on the necessity for the new. In the face of atrocious sectarian violence in the area, Nehru was keen to avoid reference to either Islamic or Hindu culture. Nehru proclaimed: "Let this be a new city unfettered by the traditions of the past, and a symbol of the nation's faith in the future." (Nehru quoted in Prakash 2002: 10). Whether Le Corbusier ever fulfilled the expectations of this brief or not is not of much relevance here. This example does show a typical post-liberation requirement for a break with the past to signify a new political order and a new nation.

The new is not always dependent on a break with the familiar. Hilde Heynen relates the ability of mimesis to conceal "something disruptive behind a seemingly perfect fitting of everyday requirements" (1999: 224) to Freud's definition of the uncanny. Heynen:

According to Freud, the most uncanny experience occurs in the environment that is most familiar to us, for the experience of the uncanny has to do with the intertwining of heimlich (what is of the house, but also what is hidden) and unheimlich (what is not of the house, what is therefore in a strange way unconcealed yet concealed)." (1999: 223).

The Freudian idea that an experience can be familiar and strange at the same time is therefore related to the nature of mimesis in architecture. "Thus, mimesis can bring about some experience of what is unheimlich, precisely by relying upon things that are proper and convenient." (Heynen 1999: 224)

As a product of accident or discovery, the new can be the consequence of the process of drawing and design. An "*architecture of discovery*" (Nuttall 1993: 12-16) for Roelof Uytendogaardt implied abandoning preconceived outcomes in favour of a design process that is open to the consequences of its own unfolding. This attitude concurs with William Kentridge's sense that the new cannot be anticipated or valued before the act of drawing:

There is an impurity in the impulse behind the first image, but which neither validates nor invalidates the image. All strategies for conjuring the image can only be assessed after the event. ([...] It is the physical act of their coming into being, and in the form they finally achieve, that they have to show their worth, and often things which start rather in the alleys and sluices of the mind, hold their own in the end) (Kentridge in Cameron *et al* 1999: 116).

Kentridge's suggestion is powerful: an original intention (reference or invention of whatever conviction) is valid only if, through the process of visualisation and the physical act of its execution in design, it can retain conviction. This may sound like the conclusion of an artist claiming freedom to express himself in whichever way he deems fit, but it may be a useful reminder at this point that Albert Einstein also claimed that physical and visual activity was central to his mechanism of thought, rather than language. (Vesely 2004: 70)

From this discussion we can conclude that the desire for the new can be intentional and purposeful. Sometimes the new manifests itself as the negation of reference, and at other times it is fused with the familiar. The new can be a consequence of the bodily exercise of design. The unpredictability of the new goes a long way towards explaining its almost consistent absence from discussions on precedent, discussions largely focussed on making a link between the pre-existing and the final design.

Tension between the new and the familiar

The socio-political realities of the post-liberation context demand both newness to move forward and a connection to the past in order to engage with repressed history and identity. The proposition put forward in this paper is that the cultural uncertainty of the post-liberation era opens up rare opportunities for creativity and interpretation of the inherited world. The opportunities for invention and interpretation at times like these are fundamentally different from those offered at times of socio-political stasis.

The sense of opportunity does not inform us on how this tension between the new and the familiar can or should play itself out. The dialectic of representation manifests itself, for Dalibor Vesely (2004:54), as the reciprocity “of the actual and the possible realities of space, where the possible stands for everything that can be achieved creatively in the sphere of human freedom. It is in the tension between the actual and possible reality of space that very urgent questions are currently being raised.” This tension or reciprocity can also manifest itself as more serious contestations. Louis Kahn was offered the commission for the new assembly building of Pakistan on the condition that it is more Islamic in its reference than the Dhaka assembly building. Kahn refused the commission. What is somewhat curious about this incident is that Kahn’s work is generally regarded as a powerful combination of the historical and the new. What constituted a valid reference to Kahn did not coincide with what constituted a valid reference for the Government of Pakistan. Culturally speaking, the world is not lived, claimed and appreciated homogeneously. At the same time, the definition of religious and national boundaries rarely coincides with the “territories of the imagination” (Curtis 1996: 492).

The tension between the new and the familiar is not simply magnetic poles that sit in opposition to each other. Within the context of an individual project and its specific demands, the new and the familiar may manifest itself as two sides of a sliding scale. Sometimes a calibrated judgement has to be made to respond to the particularities at hand. Opportunities and limitations emerge out of these judgements.

With architecture in the context of poverty, the architect often has to rely on conventional building materials and sequences of construction to meet the demands of limited resources. The demand for conventional construction is also brought on by sites far away from metropolitan areas and public forms of procurements, particularly if opportunities have to be created for unskilled people. These constraints certainly do not imply that innovation is impossible, but that innovation has to be achieved with at least some of these restrictions. If we consider the transformative power that new technologies such as steel and concrete had on early Modern architecture and we accept that sometimes newness has to be established without the transformative power of new materials or techniques, the tension between convention (or tradition) and innovation becomes clear.

Ultimately, the nature of the tension between the new and the familiar is not such that it has to be resolved. On the contrary, the dialectic of representation is informed by the tensions, reciprocities, contestations and judgements that constitute the engagement with the dialectic. I see the dialectic of representation as a productive tension that has enormous scope for informing

new directions in design. Without doubt, this optimistic view is informed by the necessary opportunism of a practising architect.

Limits of the argument

As much as the tension between the new and the familiar presents us with opportunity, the dialectic is equally informed by moments when the tension becomes unproductive. The critique of the tension is an integral part of the dialectic of representation. The limits explored here are not absolute ethical limits, but rather limits in the sense that the relevance of the argument becomes limited or that the consequences would be undesirable.

The first limit can be described as extreme newness. “With no connection to the familiar world, architecture runs the risk of being inaccessible, elitist and sitting uncomfortably with the people who use it” (Wolff 2007: 66). In countries such as South Africa an architect is sometimes required to do buildings in areas where all the surrounding buildings are constructed by people for themselves without architects ever being involved. In contexts such as these, the radically new, with no reference to its context, can equate to a condemnation of its place and the cultures of its people. Extending the possibilities of the familiar would go a long way towards mitigating this impact.

The second limit would be the negation of the new. With no faith in the present and with desperate attempts to recall and relive the past, the representation collapses into conservatism.

The third limit is the expression of self (the author) as the only source of the new. In work where the exclusive justification of form is attributed to the artistic will of the architect and particularly where this repeats itself in consecutive buildings by the same architect, it becomes a negation of the public nature of architecture and the capacity of architecture to reflect a view of the world, with multiplicities broader than just its author.

Subscription to a nationalist definition would be a fourth limit. Nationalism is a creation and not a natural state.³ (Kedorie 1996: 1; Anderson 1983: 15). There has always been a time before a nationalism came into being or even before the subject of the nationalism, be it language, borders or religion, existed. Nationalism is manufactured at the periphery of culture⁴ (Anderson 1983: 13) with the aim of establishing an ideological centre to a multiplicity of cultural aspects of a society. The subject of the nationalism aims to dominate competing (or contradictory) cultural phenomena or forms of identity formation. At the birth of a nationalism very creative work is done in establishing the defining features. With a nationalism having been defined, it requires subscription and perpetuation of its defining features. Having to reconfirm its basis, it forecloses innovation and can be dangerously exclusionary in its practices.

The observations of Georg Simmel (1997: 78), that personal culture does not coincide with the collective culture, set an important final limit to the validity of reference. What may be understood by a society in general is not necessarily understood by each individual. The deployment of reference, as commonly repeated as it may be, remains of unstable meaning as read by the individual. Reference could have one meaning to one group of people, and another (or none at all) to another group. The ability of reference to participate in exclusionary practices should be seriously considered. In the light of the above, the reliance on a single reference threatens the depth of appreciation of a project.

Notes

1. Binding precedent in law refers to precedent that must be followed.
2. Or by any architect who shares this scenario of a contemporary society.
3. According to Anderson (1983:15): “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist.”
4. According to Anderson (1983: 13) “nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind.” and “nationalism has to be understood by aligning it...with the large cultural system that precedes it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being.

Works cited

- Adorno, T.W. 1997. Functionalism today, in Leach, N (ed.) *Rethinking Architecture – A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities – Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bhabha, HK. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bhatia, G. 1991. *Laurie Baker: Life, Work & Writings*. Middlesex: Penguin Books
- Cameron, D. et al. 1999. *William Kentridge*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Curtis, W.J.R.1996. *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Gadamer, H.G. 1986. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by N. Walker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hancock. J.E. 1986. Between history and tradition: notes toward a theory of precedent, *Harvard Architectural Review*.
- Heynen, H. 1999. *Architecture and Modernity*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Kedorie, E. 1996. *Nationalism*. London: Blackwell Publishers.
- Nuttall, J.C. 1993. Roelof Uytendogaardt, *TIA Journal*: 12-17.
- Prakash, V. 2002. *Chandigarh’s le Corbusier: the Struggle for Modernity in Post-colonial India*. London: University of Washington Press
- Simmel, G. 1997. Leach, N. (ed.). *Rethinking Architecture – A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge: 66-79.
- Vesely, D. 2004. *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation – The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Heinrich Wolff an adjunct senior lecturer at UCT and is a partner in Noero Wolff Architects. With the practise he has won the following awards:

Lubetkin Prize from the RIBA for best building outside the EU for 2005 - 2006 – London – Red Location Museum of Struggle (2006)

DaimlerChrysler Award for Architecture (2007)

International Award from Chicago Athenaeum for Inkwenkwezi Secondary School (2009)

International Award from Chicago Athenaeum for Usasazo Secondary School (2007)

Award of Excellence - Red Location Museum of Struggle (2008)

Cityscapes International Award for Community Buildings (Dubai) – Inkwenkwezi Secondary School (2008)

South American Architecture Biennale (BAQ XVI) third prize international Social Habitat Category – Inkwenkwezi Secondary School (2008)

Nine Project Awards, eight Awards of Merit and a Steel Award in South Africa

His work has been exhibited in Sao Paolo, Berlin, Bayreuth, Venice, London, Chicago, Dubai, Ecuador, Florence and several venues in South Africa.

Heinrich Wolff has taught at universities in South Africa and in the USA in the fields of Design, Theory and Technology. His teaching and research has focussed on Modern and contemporary architecture in the Third World.