

# The architectural theory of semiotics



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This essay will examine the architectural theory of semiotics and its relationship to the built work of Peter Eisenman, specifically his project titled House VI. This essay will define the theory of semiotics from Saussure through to Chomsky. It will then go on to describe how Peter Eisenman, influenced by the writings of Noam Chomsky would apply semiotic linguistic principles to his design process namely those of deep structure and also syntactic transformational; expression. In doing so Peter Eisenman would set architecture on the path towards breaking free from drawing as the main vehicle for design.

Semiotics in architecture is the search for a deeper discourse with the built environment, a way of understanding the rich array of metaphor, ambiguity, rhetorical nuance and metonymy that can occur in architectural meaning. A meaning that does not change and evolve over time dependant on specific context, convention or simple accidents.[1]It is the attempt at better understanding of just how a building communicates.

The general study of signs was known as semiology in Europe and semiotics in the United States, it is these theories that have been applied to graphic and visual communication. Both the theories of semiology and semiotics appeared around the same time in the early 1900's. This new scientific approach to language and signs was proposed in Europe by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and parallel to this in the United States by Charles Sander Peirce (1839-1914). Both were looking at the fundamental building blocks and structure of language, and the necessary conditions for language to exist.[2]

Ferdinand de Saussure theorised the synchronic approach, that language should not only be looked at in its historical context but also in how it relates to a specific moment independent of its developmental context.

[3]Differentiating between language as a system of enabling communication and the way language is used by individuals through speech. Saussure sought to discover and better understand the underlying principles of language, the structure and signs that all languages share.[4]

Both Saussure and Peirce sought to understand the structure of signs, looking at the structure would facilitate a better understanding of how meaning was extracted from a sign.

Peirce looked at the relationships of the structures as a way of categorising the signs.[5]The categories that Peirce divided signs into were Icon, Index and Symbol. An Icon bears a physical resemblance to the thing it represents, an Index represents a direct link between sign and object, and a Symbol relies purely upon the reader of the sign having learnt the connection to the meaning.

Saussure determined the meaning of a sign by using what he called ‘value’. What was important for Saussure was the relationship between signs in the same system. He took a positive versus negative approach judging a sign by not only what it means but what it doesn’t mean in relation to something else. For example a book is not a magazine or film.[6]

Semiotics looks at the oppositional relationship of things as key to communication and cognition, understanding something by understanding what it is not.[7]This signification helps to categorise reality so we can

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understand it. However Saussure was only concerned with language at not the part of the reader of language in the process, which contrasts with Peirce who believed that the sign is affected by the person who is reading the sign.

It would be Roland Barthes in the 1960's who would take this theoretical idea forward. Barthes saw the science of signs as encompassing a much broader range of systems than just language. Barthes linked semiotics to any system of signs no matter the content or limits of that system. Semiotic meaning can be derived from images, sounds, gestures and objects. The system of signification could cover many forms of social and ritual convention.[8]The semiotic theories would also start to link with architecture. Architecture being similar to language in that it too is system of signs. A very obvious example of this would be to compare a house to a hospital, both buildings give off different signs as to their function and purpose. Our ability to read this purpose occurs much in the same way as a book is read and understood. [9]

*“ To distinguish architecture from building requires an intentional sign which suggests that a wall is doing something more than literally sheltering, supporting, enclosing; it must embody a significance which projects and sustains the idea of “ wallness” beyond mere use, function, or extrinsic allusion. Thus its paradoxical nature: the sign must overcome use and extrinsic significance to be admitted as architecture; but on the other hand, without use, function, and the existence of extrinsic meaning there would be no conditions which would require such an intentional act of overcoming.”*

[10]

The crossover of linguistic semiotic theory with architecture would occur more thoroughly around 1966 when Peter Eisenman began looking at the work of Noam Chomsky.[11] Eisenman at the time viewed both language and architecture and being made up of three semiotic categories, these being semantics, pragmatics and syntactics. These three categories contain similarities to Peirce and his division of signs into icon, index and symbol. Semantics refers to the relationship between form and icon, pragmatics – form to function and syntactics the relationship of physical form to conceptual space.[12] Eisenman was also interested in another idea closely related to the early theories of semiotics, that of structuralism. Using structuralist principles to go beyond function in architecture to discover the innate order of things, subverting simplistic readings of space by adding complexity through architectural semiotics.[13]

It was through the reading of Noam Chomsky that the idea of deep structure became apparent to Eisenman as a useful means of investigating architecture. This syntactical opposition of line, plane and volume generated a physical architecture from a series of abstract rules. The essence of Eisenman's theoretical musings at this time would be distilled into his Houses project. The most thorough exploration of this would occur in House VI.

House VI was commissioned by Suzanne and Dick Frank. A small building, it would be one of Peter Eisenman's first built works. Construction would take place between 1972 and 1975.[14] The building acts as a record of the abstract series of rules used in the process of design, with the Chomsky influenced theories of syntax and deep structure crucial to the

transformative process. The building would become the manifestation of a system of relationships, with the system acting as generator of both form and meaning. The semantic generator of form is replaced by the syntactic. [15]The axonometric drawings don't just represent the house they become the house. As Eisenman states " The diagrams for House VI are symbiotic with its reality; the house is not an object in the traditional sense – that is the result of a process-but more accurately a record of a process." [16]

The priority of the drawings in considering the house remove the pressure placed upon a finished building to deliver complete meaning. The building forms only a part of the conversation, as technical drawings are used to enhance the experience. Drawings and finished building-the entire process-should be viewed holistically, each providing an important summation of the architectural intent.[17]

The axonometric drawings reveal the starting point for the design of House VI and the syntactic structure that these would form. The starting point is a cube divided by a four square and nine square grid. Eisenman then starts a series of simple movements of this grid in the process creating two centres. The hierarchy of these overlaid patterns develops the expressive interrelationship.[18]However rather than a further refining of this relationship, instead Eisenman materialises the expressions of the inherent geometries through axonometric sketches which turn the competing axes of the four and nine square grid into walls or voids cutting through the building. [19]

In House VI Eisenman attempts to move away from the idea of function as the driving narrative of design, and along with this the overarching human scale design considerations which restrict architecture. This moves Eisenman towards an autonomous architecture, a conceptual matrix[20] that fragments the relationship between concept and percept. House VI seeks to place the viewer not at the end point of design but instead engaged actively in continual interpretation and reinterpretation of process.

This engagement with the viewer enables a reanimation of the process, a conversation between the viewer and the building that undermines the physicality of House VI as an object instead making it an active part of its surroundings. The concept at odds with the viewer's historical perception of a general solidity normally associated with building.[21]

Eisenman attempted to introduce an architectural system free of external reference, autonomous, not restricted by function and the classical notion of architecture as referential to the human body. Eisenman saw traditional architecture's primary concerns being semantic through the linking of physical indicators to the external meaning, form and function. He viewed the possibilities of a semantic architecture as having been exhausted by both modernist and classical architecture. To unlock new variations in architecture the syntactic dimension needed to be played with. Semantic architecture sought solutions to problems and was dependent on preconceived external requirements.[22] Through his exploration of linguistic theory the semantic became absorbed by the syntactic.

It was Eisenman's interest in Noam Chomsky – as mentioned earlier – that gave him the knowledge base to theorise a generation of form previously undiscovered by both classicist and modernist architecture. Form in its syntactic nature led to an antifunctionalism that enclosed any meaning generated by the form back within itself, creating an interplay of oppositions and empty positions.[23]

House VI can almost be seen as design itself, with the rules of the transformational process inscribed within the final object. What these explorations into syntax sought to achieve was a design not limited by cultural preconceptions of function. These preconceptions Eisenman theorised were limiting the developmental possibilities of architecture. How could a design be achieved without being slave to the aesthetic experiences of the architect? Removing ego would allow for an exploration into multiple manipulations never previously conceived.

Eisenman's work is driven by the continual process of thinking and rethinking both philosophy and architecture. It is an attempt to broaden the critical search for inspiration away from the architectural precedent by incorporating other fields of inquiry into the discussion. This reactivation of architectural dislocation moves it away from the complacent relationship of tradition, extending the possible search parameters of occupiable form.[24] The architectural development of Eisenman as an architect can be seen as a continued battle against complacency in the profession.

Eisenman sees House VI as still having the ability to provide shelter, the main driving function of the house. However this need is not pushed to the



point of romanticism and nostalgia. The living room does not require the need to have a beautiful view, columns in the dining area do not hinder any activity in that area nor do they aid functionally or decoratively the area. The design of House VI is not driven by the need to accommodate every whim of its occupants, it is driven by the syntactic rules set out at the project start.

[25]

Critics of Eisenman's work suggest that his writings describing his theories do not describe his design process in a concise manner, that they deliberately ambiguous in order to allow Eisenman to close a critical examination. It is suggested that Eisenman uses jargon and rhetoric as a way to control the critical debate, to conduct it on his own terms. Eisenman can be seen as distancing himself from his own work, through the claims of an autonomous design process, the object is separated from creator.[26]

Mark David Major and Nicholas Sarris criticise Eisenman's theoretical writings and the objects they refer to by suggesting that the theories aren't quite of the analytical quality that Eisenman would have us believe, and the objects express more traditional notion than Eisenman would like. This is their 'cloak and dagger' theory of Eisenman and his architecture. They describe Eisenman of using theories that cannot be objectively used to discuss other architecture, perpetuating a myth of Eisenman as 'architectural genius'.

Major and Sarris go on to describe Eisenman's writings of House VI as being closer to what is the architectural ideal rather than pursuing an analytical discourse. They suggest that Eisenman is doing both architecture and himself an injustice because rather than seeking to expose the application of

the elegant and simple rules of composition used in the design of House VI he instead obscures them with rhetoric. Finally they put forward that the rules that Eisenman has laid out for himself do not strictly limit the architectural possibilities open to him and that aesthetic and tradition considerations could still subconsciously influence the design.[27]

House VI acts as a commentary on architectural form, the principles of composition and the processes involved. Eisenman uses House VI to highlight the historical failures of architectural composition by highlighting drawings hold over the profession, but in doing this he limits the scope of his critique to traditional drawing based architecture.[28]The problem with drawing being in its ability to describe or show process. A finished architectural drawing becomes an object rather than an act of design. What Eisenman was attempting to achieve with House VI was the display of the design process, however paradoxically by displaying the process he in turn made it an image. The images can be reanimated through writing but the process itself is doomed to ambiguity.

Eisenman used House VI to push at the boundaries between process driven design and drawing, but was ultimately limited at this time due to drawing being his primary medium of communication.[29]Eisenman saw the reliance on drawing as stumbling block in his search to free architecture from its emphasis on form and function. What he achieved with House VI however was for the first time to bring the industries reliance on drawing into question.

House VI with its grids used a traditional method of architectural practice common since the Renaissance, but he managed to turn that process in upon itself revealing a infinite possibilities in turn made form utterly meaningless. The shifting priorities of design were brought forward with House VI and in doing so Eisenman shifted the future of architectural practice.

Eisenman through his study and introduction of semiotics sought to not only break free from the not only the cultural practices of his profession but also its limiting historical traditions. Drawings role in the design process reached a visibility not seen before in architecture. House VI helped to define the limitations of drawing on the design process, by using an approach such as semiotics and applying it to the design process, drawing was held up in the spotlight. This led to the questioning of the role of drawing and attempts to seek other modes of representation. What Eisenman achieved with House VI was to pave the way for computational design, this was by no means the original intent with the idea of using computers not even thought of at this stage.[30]But in opening the architectural discipline up through the science of semiotics and the syntactic approach of House VI he enabled and eased of that future possibility to take place. Eisenman's buildings encourage exploration in architecture through the non-traditional means not as the only course of action but instead as an important alternative.

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[1](Mallgrave and Goodman 2011)

[2](Crow 2010)p7

[3](Mitrovic 2011)p148

[4](Crow 2010)p15

[5](Crow 2010)p30

[6](Crow 2010)p41

[7](Hattenhauer 1984)p72

[8](Crow 2010)p54

[9](Davies 2011)p24

[10](Patin 1993)p88

[11](Patin 1993)p91

[12](Patin 1993)p88

[13](Chapman, Ostwald and Tucker 2004)p389

[14](Luce 2010)

[15](Patin 1993)

[16](Luscombe 2014)p560

[17](Luscombe 2014)

[18](Luce 2010)p127

[19](Luce 2010)p129

[20](Luscombe 2014)

[21](Luce 2010)p132

[22](Patin 1993)p89

[23](Patin 1993)p91

[24](Benjamin 1989)p50

[25](Benjamin 1989)p51

[26](Major and Sarris 1999)p20. 2

[27](Major and Sarris 1999)p20. 4

[28](Luce 2010)p132

[29](Luce 2010)p132

[30](Luce 2010)p134

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