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Lost in Translation: Words and Buildings

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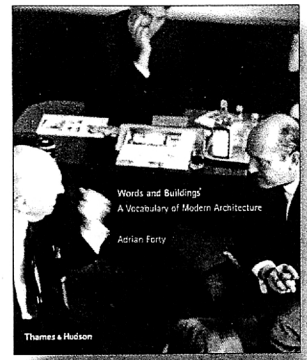
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Lost in Translation
Words & Buildings – A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture

By Adrian Forty

Review by Noel Brady

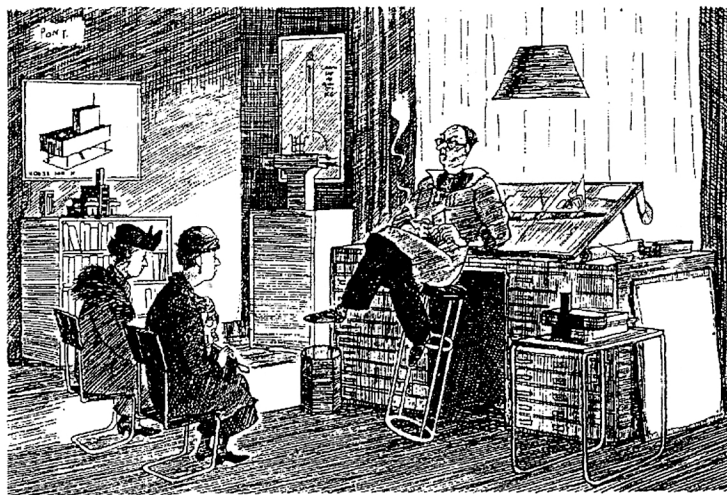


The book is divided into two parts (though these are not equal), with concepts that are reasonably explored in the first part returned for a more clinical examination in the second. The first part is a comprehensive historical review of the use of language in relation to architecture. It is explored through a series of thematic sections such as "The Language of Modernism", "Language and Drawing" and "Language Metaphors". The second part focuses on specific words used in the modern era (1800 to 2000). These 18 key words, concepts and formulations of ideas are unthreaded from sources as far back as Aristotle. The title therefore misleads a little, as it is impossible to divest contemporary language from all that is gone before. This is both the beauty of language and its burden, the breath of influence and yet the immediacy of use. Presented in alphabetical order, this list is a device that tends towards overlap.

The material is fundamentally different from that presented in books like Tom Porter's *Archispeak: An Illustrated Guide to Architectural Terms*, 2004. While the latter is an attempt to demystify words used throughout schools of architecture and in magazines, such as *Parti*, *Collage* and *Deconstruction*, the former, our subject, weaves a complex history of meaning, double meaning, confusion and downright subterfuge.

In this book we are taken on an etymological journey, where we are confronted with how we think about architecture and the meagre means we have at our disposal to illuminate it. As an introduction to theories of architecture this lens of language is very useful. While this might not have been Forty's objective, it is certainly its achievement, opening as it does numerous new avenues of thought and investigation. Woven as it is with the threads of words and their shifting meaning through time, the modernist project often disappears and reappears.

While the interpretation, reinter-pretation and misuse of language (namely English, German, French and Italian) is exposed here in substantial detail, with its rich bibliography, so too are the prejudices of each architectural movement along with their sometimes illogical explanations (*expectations*). This book alone should be capable of demolishing the belief in some form of canon uniting the multiple strands of architectural activity. Moreover, English is shown to be a poor cousin to German in some instances where subtlety of meaning is lost in translation. One key example is the use of *sachlich* in German, approximated to *thingness*, which carried various nuances in the original, whereas in translation it appears as "practical", "material", "factual", "matter of fact", "artless". Even with these terms superimposed we are still no nearer to an understanding of the word, the concepts it is meant to portray or the context in which it could be applied to architecture.



"Did I really understand you, Miss Wilson, to use the expression, 'A cosy nook' in connection with the house you wish me to design for you?"

We should be thankful to Forty for laying bare the difficulty we have in describing what, to paraphrase Massimo Scolari, appears to be certain and real (building) becomes difficult when we begin to speak about it. However, we come to see that this ambiguous nature of language has been useful as a platform for other interpretations or inspiration. It may be that it is because of these synaptic gaps that language is propelled and architecture as a consequence follows along.

Inevitably in such a broad field that touches upon architecture, its mechanics and its ideas, philosophy, linguistics, sociology and history there should be gaps.

Each chapter could have been in itself a book exploring the ideas more thoroughly. The breath of scholarship required of the author is considerable and, as such, the qualified success of the book is no mere achievement. It is,

however, of Western Civilisation, it is probably alien to Japanese thought for instance, where the conceptualisation of the world through language takes on a different form. Nonetheless, it places major emphasis on the use of language as part and parcel of the necessary development of architecture. Though the Mies dictum "build don't talk" introduces the book, an architecture untrammelled by such discourse is absent. As a result, the book seems to favour the development of ideas through dialogue, rather than action.

Sassure is quoted as saying that "in language there are only differences" and in the case of architecture this might also be true.

At some time the scaffolding must come down to reveal the actuality of the structure in its unsupported existence. If architecture is to have any meaning, it will not be solely because of language.

Even with the use of confusing reference nomenclature, the absence of an alternative position and the presence of some repetition, it is a book worthy of both the attention of architects and students of architecture. It may help to dispel some myths about the nature of the discipline. It would also be useful for those outside of this realm to understand the baggage that comes with the use of certain ideas; moreover it may explain why architects sometimes make more sense when they build than when they speak.

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 Adrian Forty
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