

## Reflection of Semiotic Ideas in the Reading of Architecture: Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Approaches

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### ABSTRACT

The need to explain architecture semiotics based on the theoretical concepts of architecture and alignment with linguistic and semiotic ideas is evident. This study analyzes the relationship between architecture and semiotics. Each social text (e.g., architecture) carries a series of messages by which codes and intertextual relationships are transmitted to the audience. These signs are encoded by the creator, and then the reader (or audience) attempts to decode and define the text (architecture) based on social contracts, mental impressions, and personal points of view. Semiotics deals with two perspectives, namely, structuralist and post-structuralist. Structuralist semioticians perceive a direct relationship between text and meaning. By contrast, post-structuralist semioticians consider an indirect relationship between text and meaning and seek implicit meaning and intertextual relationships. This study compares architecture reading (text) based on the abovementioned perspectives after considering the theories of semioticians. The architecture is composed of several layers of meaning. The meanings float within the layers of design and are metaphoric, ironic, reflective, and non-finite. The reading of the architecture semiotics seeks to reproduce the design based on the relationship between the layers and audience's impressions.

**KEYWORDS:** Semiotic of Architecture; reading of architecture; text; structuralist semiotics; poststructuralist semiotics

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### INTRODUCTION

Today, several theories deal with product formation and the reading of architecture. Humanities has been the basis of the formation of these theories. Linguistic studies found their place in the field of art, and semiotics was used as a branch of linguistics in the criticism and reading of art texts in the 1970s. Architecture as a text associates a world of design ideas and values to the audience and has the language within it to speak to its audience. Since the beginning of architectural history, the signification and expression of architecture that emerged included religious ideas, adoption of myths, nature, and natural elements in the form of shapes, symbols, signs, and faces that carry unique ideas and thoughts. Many changes in the form of architectural text have occurred in the past three decades; such changes were caused by human attitude toward art and architecture aside from the introduction of new technology. The emergence of each artwork is viewed as a way to produce a text, which carries a set of values, ideas, and traditions. The production of any text is based on the idea context and culture of its own source society. According to Chandler (2009, p. 3), "Any text that carries an independent message from the sender and receiver entails a set of signs. Such signs are encrypted by the author and then the audience decodes them referring to the contracts and through the media relations." Any text (such as architecture) is the product of a process shaped by the interaction of ideas, values, fields, and environmental knowledge of the author so that the audience that is reading attempts to comprehend the text message, process, and read the text according to his mental doctrines. Therefore, the science of semiotics attempts to reflect the ideas expressed in the text between the lines of each art text (including architecture). Thus, it is read with reference to such method and the theories of architectural semiotics.

#### Theoretical framework

Our intended statement that would serve as the guide, creator, and foundation of this research has remained relatively unknown in today's architecture literature. Some modern architecture scholars have suggested that architecture cannot be recognized without relying on its universal environment. Some semiotics theorists such as Charles Sanders Peirce believe that "we think only in signs." Semiotics concepts and motifs must be given attention and reflected on to investigate the reading of architecture. Therefore, this architecture knowledge can be perceived as "a spatial text within a multiple range of the surrounding social environment" with regard to the analysis using the ideas and concepts of linguistics and semioticians.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

The search for recognition of local human identities based on their language and linguistics is conducted by scientists and leaves lasting effects. "Language" shows the spirit of nations in some places, whereas the link between "language," "thought," and "truth" is discussed elsewhere. Scientists such as Terrier have dealt with issues related to the links between linguistics and a set of certain social events that have influenced human environmental behavior. Linguistics entered a new phase in which scientists such as Chomsky proposed the theory of generative grammar. Reconsidering the syntax, he regards language foundation as an inherent human concept since birth as well as looks at language rationally. In the 1970s, linguistics resulted in the semantics of discourse foundation. The main basis is the attitude of sociological studies and a deep interest in the cultural context that surrounds the language. Context is mentioned as the most important element in semantics, and a sentence is a dependent unit that must always be studied within the text.

Modern linguists, as reported by Hudson in the book *Sociolinguistics*, have worked on grasping the meaning and semantics of language. Given the range of inter-knowledge and penetration of linguistics concepts in other sciences, a question that arises is as follows: "Can architecture be regarded like language as the result of intra-language contracts and relationships?" The books *Semiotics and Architecture*, which was authored by Agrest and Gandelson (1995, 42–50) and *Introduction to the Signs Theory in Architecture*, which was authored by Broadbent, state that architecture does not have an inherent and internal meaning and is defined by the social and cultural contracts of the meaning. Signs cannot be recognized as an ineffective object from their surroundings. Accordingly, architecture semiotics is not a category that can be recognized unidirectionally, that is, only at the identifier's will and intention. Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco are popular semioticians who, according to the theory of semiotics in architecture, believed that architecture is a layer-like text and has original links to its social and cultural context.

## METHODOLOGY

Semiotics is primarily a way of reading text (i.e., verbal, visual, and auditory). This study analytically considers linguistic and semiotic concepts as well as refers to information and opinions obtained from the analyses to use semiotics as a science and method to read architecture. Therefore, this study descriptively investigates the concepts and theories of semiotic ideas, analytically establishes a relationship between these theories to perform text reading with the help of semiotics through the structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, and finally conducts architecture reading. Structuralist semiotics considers the relationship between the textual signs (architecture) and achieves its structural logics. "Structuralist semiotics analysis deals with the recognition of constituent units of a system of signs and determination of the relationships between these units (semantic and logical relationships)" (Sojoodi, 2003, p. 70). Post-structuralist semiotics attempts to show the characteristics in the text (architecture space) that do not have a single signification and challenges logic that was simply assumed to be clear. This method rereads the concepts through the deconstruction mechanism. The interactions of the base signs are challenges in deconstruction, and the text (architecture space) is redefined within its contemporary context.

### **Semiotics: a method of reading text**

We produce and reinvent a text in any social action and relationship. Architecture also expresses itself as an interdisciplinary knowledge in the process of human relationships in society. Each social text (e.g., architecture) carries a series of messages and/or a set of codes that are transmitted to the audience through signification and intertextual relationships. Therefore, the audience also attempts to comprehend, decode, and derive meaning for the text based on the network that forms the text and layers, intertextual relationships, social, and cultural contracts, mental impressions, and personal points of view. Thus, any text opens a signification system to the audience, and each constituent is defined along with other intersystem constituents. Each constituent is a sign that invites the audience to produce and reproduce a text. Any text is a network of signs. As mentioned earlier, every sign does not have a certain meaning in abstract terms and finds its signification and identity in the text structure. Therefore, semiotics emerged to recognize, interpret, and comprehend the textual meaning. One of the most common definitions of semiotics was provided by Eco, who stated that "semiotics deals with anything that can be regarded as a sign" (Eco, 1976, p. 7). "Semiotics not only includes the study of the things that we call them sign in daily conversations but also entails the study of anything that refers to other thing" (Chandler, 2009, p. 20). "Semiotics explores the meaning by discovering deeper layers of the text" (Martin and Ringham, 2000, p. 118). "Semiotics is one of the methods of the text analysis. Other approaches include the rhetorical, discourse, and content analysis. In content analysis, quantitative methods are employed to analyze the content of a text; however, semiotics seeks for the texts as the structured generals and the connotation and hidden meanings" (Chandler, 2009, p. 20). The structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives exist in semiotics. Structuralist semioticians, such as Saussure, Jakobson, and Strauss, linguistically see a direct relationship between the text and its meaning and attempt to decode and discover the textual codes. Post-structuralist semioticians, such as Peirce, Eco, Barthes, and Derrida, perceive an indirect relationship between

the text and meaning, and focus on diverse aspects, inner layers of the text, intertextuality, and delayed process of the meaning.

**Study of semioticians’ theories in text semiotics**

**Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics**

Saussure offered a dyadic or two-part sign model. He defined a sign as being composed of a “signifier” (sound pattern) and a “signified” (the concept it represents). Saussure believed that a linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name but between a concept and a sound pattern. A sign is the result of the adaptation of these two elements, that is, the signifier and the signified. A signifier is not possible without a signified or a signified without a signifier for its signification would be impossible. Both scenarios are understandable and recognizable with each other (Figure 1). Saussure believed that any text is composed of a number of signs, and each sign has two relationships within and outside the sign. His conception of sign meaning within a system is structural and based on relations, that is, primacy is given to relationships rather than to things. “Signs refer primarily to each other. Within the language system, everything depends on relations” (Saussure 1983, p. 121). “No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs. Both the signifier and signified is mutual concepts and based their relations and positions with other entities” (Saussure 1983, p. 118). Saussure refers to a concept as the sign “value.” “The value of a sign depends on its relations with other signs within the system. A sign has no absolute value independent of this context” (Saussure 1983, p. 80). Saussure distinguishes what happens within the sign, that is, the signification and value concept (i.e., the relationship of the signs within a system). He emphasized the differences between signs.



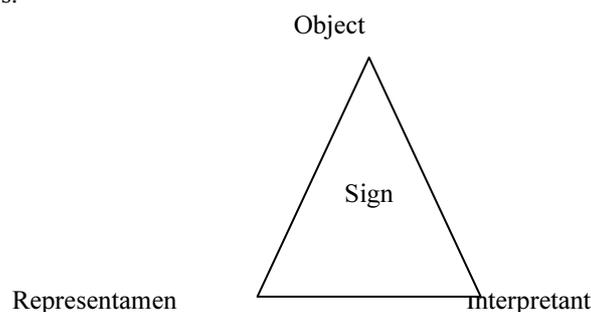
**Figure 1: Sign and its internal relationships from Saussure’s perspective**

**Dialectic sign of negation and affirmation**

Based on the above discussion, a sign involves an internal signification process and an external differential process. On the one hand, a sign differentiates the scope of its signification by negating other signs and a differential trend as well as creating a system. On the other hand, it has an affirmative signification within a domain that has been defined in a negative mode (Sojoodi, 2009, p. 51). “Although, both meaning (signified) and form (signifier) are purely differential and negative (negation) when considered separately, the sign in which they are combined is a positive event (affirmative)” (Saussure, 1983, p. 115). Any sign achieves its value from its position within the system. “Meaning is a concept that is extracted from a semiotic structure and a sign does not have a meaning alone and a meaningful text is produced in relation to other signs” (Zeimaran, 2003, p. 42).

**Sign according to Charles Sanders Peirce**

Peirce introduced a triadic model that comprises a representamen, an interpretant, and an object. The representamen is the form that the sign takes and has a representative function. It is interpretable but not necessarily material. An interpretant is not an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign. An object is something to which the sign refers to and possibly think of. A sign sits in the place of an object and is interpreted by an interpreter in this triadic relationship (Figure 2). Peirce refers to the interaction between the representamen, object, and interpretant as “semiosis.” He added that the “meaning of a representation may be nothing but another representation.” Any initial interpretation can be re-interpreted. A signified itself appears with the role of a signifier. The interpretation process can be continued to infinity and becomes the basis of post-structuralist semiotics.



**Figure 2: Peirce’s semiotic triangle**

### **Umberto Eco's semiotics**

Eco distinguishes between communication and signification. Communication semiotics differs from signification semiotics in his view. Eco sees the communicative process as the signal transmission from a source through a sender and a canal to a certain destination. However, the signification process occurs when the destination is a person. Eco believed that such a process is impossible unless a set of codes connects the present entities to the absent units. This condition is a signification system. Eco defines the codes in four different phenomena:

a) A set of signals has internal combinatory rules that govern them. These rules can send different sets of messages (concepts) about different things and stimulate a different set of reactions. This set is called a "syntactic system."

b) A set of different states transforms to a set of meaningful communicative messages (contents). This set of messages produces a "semantic system."

c) A set of behavioral reactions of the audience is independent of the system (b) and is called a "behavioral system."

d) A rule connects the elements of system (a) to the elements of system (b). The relationship between the first three systems is called a "legal system."

Eco calls the link between the signifier and signified as the sign role from the observer and audience's point of view. "When the codes allocate the elements of the transmitter system to the transmitted elements, the first becomes the expression of the second and the second becomes the expression of the first. The sign plays a role when an expression relates to the content and in fact both elements links together" (Eco, 1979, p. 57). A sign plays a role when two players of expression and content achieve a bi-directional correlated relationship together.

### **Barthes's view of textual semiotics**

Barthes believes that a text is shaped by its certain language, whereas its reading is shaped by its language. The textual reading issue attempts to discover the textual language. He speaks of the transition and substitution of a sign with a new concept called text and believes that the text focuses on the element of the sign authenticity. The sign represents the aesthetic value. The former is a phenomenon, whereas the latter shows depth and richness. A sign is obtained by textual analysis that allows it to connect to the mental world of the author. Barthes believed that the life and world of the text are important in reading the text in relation to the author's life. Some landscapes of sociologic ideas are seen in any text. "Any text provides a scope of the meaning for the audience. Textual reading does not look for discovering the reality and meaning; however, it produces a semiotic structure" (Barthes, 1972, p. 49). "When the sign is identified, the society can well make it re-work and speak of it as if it has been an object that has been built for utilization" (Barthes, 1972, p. 55).

### **Semiotics: a method of interpreting and reading architecture**

Semiotics is a type of knowledge that understands real-world phenomena, which can be achieved by reading signs in any phenomenon. "Semiotics includes all readings related to decoding the phenomena" (Johansen, et al., 2002, p. 3). Semiotics in visual art domains, such as architecture, looks for visual signifiers and reads and discovers appropriate signifieds in the society and reference culture of each artwork. Art and architecture semiotics are types of aesthetic attitudes that presume the artwork as a text, and its meaning is produced and understood in a semiosis process. Architecture semiotics from other texts relates to the spatial nature of architecture. Architecture is a space-like text and has several themes and meanings within its codes.

Architecture semiotics reads the space with regard to sociocultural-civil relationships as a text from it. The audience that faces the architecture space reproduces the space according to his mental images and perceptions of the space and codes. The audience derives meaning for the design with respect to his social and cultural status as well as the cultural context of the architecture design. The architecture semiotics deals with the reinforced space in addition to the following entities:

- Dimensional-proportional entities (where the material plays with the architecture from the exterior face),
- Pictorial-visual entities,
- Mythological entities (where local, climatic, and ideational symbols are discussed) (Falamaki, 2013, p. 383).

### **Reading a text from a structuralism point of view**

Structuralism is a method of studying and reading social phenomena. As mentioned earlier, experts such as Saussure, Jakobson, and Strauss have influenced the formation of this method. "In structuralist's reading of the text (architecture), both the structure and grammar of the text must be identified and the signs must be comprehended synchronously. Indeed, both signification and meaning must be perceived synchronously" (Ahmadi, 2001, p. 187). Any text in this attitude is a system formed by following a structural model rather than semantic contents. Thus, the form of the textual elements and their relationships are more important than the content of sub-structures and/or textual meaning. The main founders of structuralism based their ideas on the

superiority of form over content. The following cases must be considered in structuralist reading of any text (such as the architectural space):

- 1) The links between the elements in the text build a general systematic structure and make up the fundamental textual system
- 2) Each text has its own codes and its structure provides coherence to these codes .
- 3) The audience discovers the intra-structural relationships and rules in the text and re-reads the text according to these relationships and rules.
- 4) The text message is transmitted to the audience by decoding these codes.

#### **Architecture reading through structuralist semiotics**

Structuralist semiotics in architecture studies the relationship between the signs of an architecture space and obtains its structural logic. The structuralist approach to architecture considers the building as a text that can be analyzed based only on the study of its structure and linguistic rules that shape it. Any architectural part is a sign that is understandable in relation to the entire language, and vice versa. Therefore, any architecture design is composed of a set of signs, where each sign has two key levels: a signifier and a signified. Any architecture work at the first stage has elements that, according to Saussure, produce architecture as a single body by selecting the substitution as adjacent elements. The signifier refers to each framework design, whereas the signified signifies the design concept. The interaction between the form and content is considered at this point. Pierce said that the relationship between the signifier (i.e., the elements of the architecture, form, and whatever refers to the architecture framework) and the signified (i.e., the spirit, concepts, meaning, and values carrying the architecture work) is completely conventional and related to the original culture of the architecture work. The signs are considered in relation to the cultural and humans relationships. "Semiotics views the things and actions in a culture as a sign so that it intends to recognize the rules, which the members in that culture accepted them consciously or unconsciously and give meaning to them" (Culler, 2001, p. 35). Barthes mentioned that architecture becomes the new mediator for implicit cultural aspects. The structuralist approach to architecture searches for signs of the architecture text and then selects a certain concept (signified) against each sign (signifier) within its theoretical texts. The architecture has only one interpretation and the way to several readings is closed based on the said approach. Thus, the post-structuralist approach must be used to read the implicit and architecture layers.

#### **Reading a text from a post-structuralism point of view**

This approach challenges the ideas of the axis structure, and the text becomes a territory where meanings can be played. The text is a multi-layer concept in which an audience achieves meanings and derives textual meanings according to the time of reading, social status, state of mind, measurement quality, and access to internal signs. Post-structuralist thinkers, such as Heidegger, Kristeva, Derrida, and Barthes, investigated text in relation to other recognizable texts and considered the intertextual relationships so that the audience encounters several layers in reading each text. Barthes believes that a text is a product of specific social, cultural, and historical forces, so its essence can be found through special attention to its context and its relationship with other texts (Zeimaran, 2003, p. 174). Derrida believes that the text must be split unconsciously to achieve the textual meaning (Zeimaran, 1998, p. 395). Any text does not exist independent of other texts, associates with previous texts, and is an introduction to other texts. A text has a multidimensional structure composed of the coordination of "ideas and thoughts," "formal elements," and "interpersonal relationships." Any text derives a meaning according to its stance within its surrounding context. Given intertextual relationships, any text relates to other texts, and the process of textual meaning-making is conducted in this manner.

#### **Architecture reading through post-structuralism semiotics**

Post-structuralist semiotics attempts to show the characteristics in the text that do not have a single signification. It challenges logics that have been simply assumed to be clear. In an interview with Julia Kristeva, Derrida accepted that concepts such as signs and structures could not be discarded. He remarked that "Undoubtedly, to transform the concepts of semiotics, move them, apply them against their presupposition, re-presume them in other chains, gradually change the domain of work, and so generate new configurations are among more necessary things to do" (Haqiqi, 1995, p. 281). Derrida also said that exploring the occult realm of the signs to interpret each phenomenon is necessary. Access to aesthetic, semantic, and functional criteria in every place and time of any architecture design is inevitable to interpret the signs. The designer encodes any architecture design and text according to the contracts and realm of his society's literature. The audience derives meaning through deliberation in several design layers (i.e., functional, economic, aesthetic, social-cultural, and hermeneutics layers) and understanding of relationships. The hermeneutic layers of the architecture form the design meaning through the codes in the design and according to the depth and level of understanding. Each hermeneutic layer is formed from multiple sub-layers. The meaning runs from each layer to another layer and simmers in an uncertain and fluid flow. Thus, the architecture reading attends to the structural layers of design

and derives meaning according to the adjacent layers, which always delay the meaning. The meaning has always existed in the absence of the sign, spread in a continuum of the signifiers, and escapes from the audience in a fluid and delayed way so that the audience still has to search for it. Therefore, the meaning of any sign in any design indicates what the sign is not about. This condition is the start of the deconstruction mechanism.

### Conclusion

We investigated semioticians' theories and linguistics, identified a close relationship between these concepts (i.e., text, architectural text, semiotics, interpretation, and reading), and then tested the approaches in architecture reading. Any architecture design is considered a text in which an audience attempts to make meaning and interpret it. Semiotics is primarily a way to read the text (i.e., verbal, visual, and auditory). Semiotics is a method that interprets and reads text that refers to the signification process. Any architecture design is considered a text that speaks with the audience. The audience also attempts to read the text and discover the meaning to establish a relationship with architecture. From the structuralist perspective, The text is regarded as a part of the context so that the context has a major stance and the text is considered a member of its set. Consequently, the text is viewed as the focus of meaning, and context is considered closed and the background for reading the text. According to the structuralist approach, architecture designs such as language are shaped by different design constituents and elements because the words, give that they have values and separate roles, transfer a general concept to the audience who then attempts to discover these themes. However, from the post-structuralist perspective, the reality of a text is recognized within the context. The context creates the text continuously, that is, the context is a structure formed by several texts and the meaning of each text is understandable according to its stance within the context and in relation to other texts. The interpreter derives meaning through scrutiny and deliberation in multiple design layers and by understanding the text-like design relationships. In other words, according to the structuralist perspective's perception, the audience attempts to discover the pure meaning of the text, whereas in the post-structuralist perspective, the interpreter believes the fluid meaning and text meaning-making. The architecture design of the structuralist and post-structuralist views are compared in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of readings architecture in structuralist and poststructuralist approaches

Indicators of reading in structuralist and poststructuralist approaches	The architecture reading through structuralism approach	The architecture reading through poststructuralism approach
Nature of architectural design	absolute nature	Comparative nature
Approach to architectural design	Reading the existing location following the trends in presence plan	Methodological approach, Considering the manufacturing process and Readings following the trends in absentia plan
Possession of the plan	(architect is base) Author	(Interpretation is base) Audience
Structure of the Plan	Juxtaposition of different sequences	Juxtaposition of different layers
The Form and position of plan	Linear, Linear relationship between the elements, limited to locations	Plexus,  of locations Independent
Perception and essence	Single meaning	Flowing meaning,  effectiveness of existing signifiers
Subjectivism of the plan	Functional	Reproduction and deconstruction of the plan
Text approach of the plan	Fixed and firm textuary	Multiple textuary Intertextuality

Semiotics is a science that can be used to read architecture because architecture, like any other social tool, attempts to convey a message and communicate with its audience. Structuralist semiotics views any architectural design with a single and certain meaning. It calls upon the audience to discover the puzzle intended by the author and accepted by society. Post-structuralist semiotics regards architecture, like writing, as containing inherent and implicit meanings and hypertext ideas. Thus, the audience faces a textual design and derives meaning and signs. The audience not only encounters a single text but also multi-textual phenomenon. Thus, the textual codes invite the audience to search its depth and discover its hidden layer. Architecture, as a functional nature with systematic layers, seeks a response to human needs. It also covers content and concepts such as a halo because of its meta-architecture and symbolic nature. The design invites the audience to play with signs, codes, and motifs; attempts to discover their meanings; attempts to explore new layers of meaning based

on direct references to the design, indirect significations, functional layers, and the reflection and transformation characteristics; and reads the architecture terminologically. These functions are possible through the semiotics approach.

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