In search of meaning: Architecture between semiotics and biology
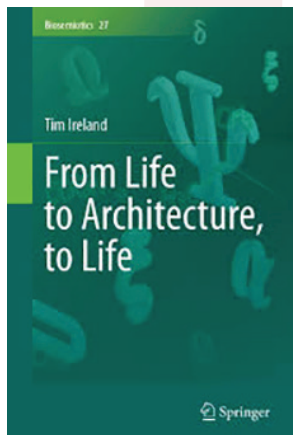
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Tim Ireland
From Life to Architecture, to Life

Computational tools have changed dramatically how we approach, produce, and understand architecture over the last 20 years. Among the many reasons behind this radical change is purely quantitative: the vast number of outcomes, forms, and experiments we can produce through these tools. However, while digital tools already had such a profound effect during the 2000s and 2010s, today's AI-powered tools are taking that proliferation of design outcomes to a whole new level. Not only can we generate an almost infinite number of variations, but we can do so in much less time and with much less effort. In fact, one can argue that AI-powered tools seem to threaten the architect's role.

In that admittedly disorienting condition, an 'old' concept seems to become relevant again: that of *meaning*. Lacking the criteria – and the ability – to decide within this abundance of computer or AI-generated variations, architects are forced to search for meaning within that field of possibilities to start making sense again. Of course, as Charles Jencks has explained in his famous 1969 article "Semiology and Architecture," whether explicitly or explicitly, architecture is always searching for a meaning to justify its production. According to him, architecture searches for and produces meaning, even in

the case of the radical avant-garde that purposefully tried to deny the existence of any meaning – producing meaning through its denial. The book under review, therefore, Tim Ireland's *From Life to Architecture, to Life* is, in principle, very relevant to the current condition described above because it tries precisely to approach meaning in architecture through the field of biosemiotics.

Architecture traditionally has approached its quest for meaning in two distinct and, in most cases, separate ways. One was looking at the inside; the second was looking at the outside. In other words, architecture was either trying to find meaning by looking at itself - its history, tradition, etc. - and therefore claim its autonomy, or by looking at other disciplines - sociology, mathematics, etc. - and thus find justification in the rules and principles of that external discipline. The starting point of *From Life to Architecture, to Life* then, is highly original because by looking at the relationship between architecture and biosemiotics, it brings together two concepts that – when examined separately - are following each one of those two opposite paths: Semiotics is one of the main tools that architecture employed in the 20th century to look at itself, its history of forms and symbols. An approach has been closely related to postmodernism in architecture (of which the article by Charles Jencks was an important part). However, biology is a field that architecture has been referencing consistently throughout its history – during the 20th century from Antonio Gaudi to Frei Otto and more recent computationally driven, biology-inspired approaches. Biology is a field that architecture uses – selectively – to find inspiration, design principles and rules, and ultimately, justification for its actions, forms, and operations. Therefore, meaning, according to the premise that Tim Ireland sets forward, can be found by looking simultaneously at the inside and the outside. At the same time, an equally important starting point for this research is the theories of Jakob von Uexküll, and more precisely, his 'Umwelt theory' that explores the relationship between a subject – or an organism – to its surroundings. A theory where space acquires meaning only through that organism and its ways of interpreting signs.

The central part of the book examines exhaustively the premises set at its start and, therefore, becomes a very useful reference point. It is structured in three parts, where the first two are, in a certain sense, a 'mirror' of one another. The first part starts with architecture and moves towards biosemiotics. It references many architects of the 20th century and their approach (Oskar Strand, Adolf Loos, Joseph Frank), with a focus on the idea of parts being connected in larger assemblies, and finds in Frederick Kiesler an early precursor to the application of biosemiotics in architecture (a theme to be resumed later). The reference to Kiesler and his concepts of the endless house and architecture as a field of forces serve as a great early example that renders the understanding of biosemiotics in architecture and the following chapters of the book easier to comprehend. At the same time, however, the analysis of Kiesler's work provides a very interesting approach to the work of the Austrian-American architect that can also stand independently from the rest of the book and is therefore valuable as such.

The book's second part follows the opposite direction and goes from biosemiotics to architecture. It begins with Charles Sanders Peirce, whose semiotic theory is the second main reference point after Uexküll and extends the semiotic analysis into the behavioral models of Charles Morris. Computation and algorithmic design take a more prominent place in these chapters and 'reveal' one of the main reference points of the study, which is the computational experimentations of the late '90s and the '00s and their often biologically inspired processes. Accordingly, it seems that the research presented began initially from an interest in biology and its relation to design and architecture. Semiotics seem to have entered the frame later and became the vehicle that ultimately provided the direction of the approach. Consequently, while semiotics and biology start on equal footing, as the books proceeds and the arguments are presented, their relationship is altered: Biology and life appear as the main subject, while semiotics are transformed into the lens through which that subject is examined. Semiotics serves as a tool through which the relationship between architecture and biology is studied. Therefore, the opportunity for a simultaneously internal and external approach to architecture is left on the sidelines. At the same time, however, a fascinating study of the relationship between architecture and biology emerges.

The book's second part concludes with an extended attempt to define the concept of space. After a brief reference to several thinkers (Lefebvre, Marcuse, etc.), space is defined through an interpretation of Jakob von Uexküll's definition of space (grafted with the work of Pierce and Bateson but without losing its main properties): a space that is operational, understood through the senses and defined by the organism that occupies it and perceives it. An organism-centered space that evolves around the concept of the Umwelt. A subjective universe, consisting of signs and therefore a universe where space is understood as information.

The book's third part is appropriately titled 'Architecture to Life,' emphasizing the book's focus. It utilizes the definition of space acquired through the worldview of Jakob von Uexküll in the previous chapters to conclude on the importance of the affect of space – and therefore of architecture and buildings – on the wellbeing of the humans that occupy it. This idea is developed from a similar concept set forth by Kiesler. It claims that the design of the space around us involves some profound ethical implications because it affects the health of the subjects that occupy it. While the concept of well-being forces a precise understanding of the analysis provided in the previous two chapters, that understanding is not exclusive. The book ultimately leaves the interpretation of the research exhaustively presented, open for the reader to interpret.

The text has a consistent Heideggerian undertone throughout that sometimes contradicts some of its positions. However, this is justified by Uexküll's – and the writer's – extensive use of the concept of the Umwelt, which Heidegger also took up in his work. After all, Jakob von Uexküll was not free of his contradictions. He is a controversial figure: On the one hand, he developed an extensive array of unique concepts and

ideas that remain relevant today and can provide the starting point for new ones. On the other hand, he held and expressed profoundly anti-democratic political views. He actively participated in the formation of the theoretical agenda of the National-Socialist Party in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s – albeit distancing himself when the party's antisemitic views came to the forefront (Schnödl & Sprenger 2022). His political views were not independent from his greater philosophical positions, so they can't be easily dismissed. However, the persistence of his ideas after all these years means that we have several different readings of his works at our disposal. In fact, his contradictions most probably enhance this pluralism. Therefore, next to Heidegger's use of the Umwelt, for example, we have Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's use of Uexküll's work in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Uexküll's reasoning helps them define their understanding of the body, to carry out the inversion of the dualism between object and subject, and to develop – in a radical re-reading – the concept of becoming-animal.

Similarly, *From Life to Architecture, to Life* lays out several concepts and ideas related to semiotics and – mainly – biology that can help us to produce methods and practices that will allow us to start making sense of the current state of the world; in other words, to help us outline meaning today. It achieves that without offering predefined solutions or, when it does, without letting them exclude alternative readings.

References

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