MODULE TITLE: Cultural Context of Architecture VI

MODULE CODE: ARC 711B1

HAND OUT No: 22

Reading:
There are many books on language
Barthes R, Elements of Semiology, New York, Hill and Wang, 1968
De Saussure F, (1915), Course in General Linguistics, Duckworth, 1983
Hawkes T, Structuralism and Semiotics, London, Routledge, 1992
Guiraud P, Semiology, London;Henley;Boston, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1978
Peirce C S, 1931, Elements of Logic – Collected Papers Vol II, Belnap Press, Massachusetts, 1960
and several linking language to architecture
Jencks C, 1977, The Language of Post Modern Architecture, Academy Editions, London
Lavin S, Quatremere de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture, MIT Press, 1992
Lawson B, The Language of Space, Architectural Press, 2001
Summerson J, The Classical Language of Architecture, London, Thames Hudson, 1980

<u>Language</u>

It will be important for you to realize that most of the subjects we deal with in this module as a whole are large enough to keep several universities in business for centuries. For this reason you must not try to read your way through the reading material in total, save that for later years. Try instead to master some of the major concepts, seminal components and architectural interest.

Although frowned upon by scholars [because entries can be faulty] Wikipedia is a useful tool for busy students so long as you remain critical of entries and look out for the obvious warnings given by Wikipedia when entries are in need of 'weeding'.

Looking up *language* in Google will get you this, amongst other things
<u>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language</u>

it suggests that language commenced around 500BC. Since human beings probably communicated prior to 500BC [we have been around in some form for 4 million years] we may assume that language is a special kind of communication that considerably aids spatial and social interactions.

A language must be thought of as a system of symbols and the rules used to manipulate them. Symbols or signs are important in language and the 'science of signs' is termed 'SEMIOLOGY'.

<<u>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotics</u>> note the clean up note!

Signs are specifically the intrinsic links between a signifier and a signified, this has been described as the finger [signifier] that points at the moon [signified]. Obviously the finger is not the moon. Less obviously the moon is not the moon either but what we can perceive the moon to be.

For architecture this last point has been lost to us for some time. The reason for this is that the way semiotics went was towards the sign as mental or visual image, for which of course the moon is very much the moon we perceive. In the world of the visual image the moon is associated with romance, madness, wolves, and so on. One of the most seminal influences in much of that sort of semiotics was Roland Barthes
<u>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Barthes</u>

However for environmental and architectural applications the work of semiotics has tended to shift more towards cognitive mapping with its links to behaviour causally related to space.

Cognitive Mapping

Cognitive mapping responds to the values of semiology, the signifier and signified having intrinsic links in a sign or symbol, whilst linking the sign to behaviour relating location to a system of social scripts and movements. Thus we see claims such as "cognitive mapping concerns how we think about space" [1] – obviously exciting for architecture if true.

The originator of the cognitive map was Tolman [2]. Kevin Lynch added to our architectural armoury with the concept of the five elements of mapping our knowledge of cities, path, node, boundary, area, landmark [3]. Much of Tolman's work has ended up linked to Geographic Information Systems because in the same way that language ended (often) with structure, systems and thus 'structural-ISM' [4] linked mostly with Claude Levi-Strauss < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_L%C3%A9vi-Strauss> so mapping linked with spatial geography and demographics.

From our needs as architects it is easy to understand how we might welcome the idea that there is a system that has a structure linking human behaviour and understanding (meaning) to signs so that we can 'read' buildings just as we can read books, read cities as if they are autobiographies, read societies as if they are scripted characters in a series on television. For us the problem is that this kind of analogy is correct in some situations and the problem is that it is not correct in other situations. It is particularly not correct when we are creative. Unfortunately if it makes sense we tend to believe it.

Two major controversies mark the end of structuralist hegemony. The first was the 'Hull v Tollman' < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_C._Tolman> and the second the 'Skinner v Chomsky' < http://www.chomsky.info/articles/1967----.htm> . The arguments are articulated very well in a book - **Aitchison J, 1989, The Articulate Mammal, Routledge, 1996** and in a more useful but more complex way in **Anderson J A, 1996, Communication Theory, New York, The Guilford Press**.

The major conceptual argument we have to cope with is that of the acquisition of linguistic structures. We know they can exist because they have been examined in some detail within societies and they are culturally reinforced in various ways so that people learn to 'read and write' appropriately. However there is very little agreement about exactly **how** this happens and of course the disagreement extends to the claim that it does not happen at all in the way structuralists were wont to suggest because as always the causal chain of effect stretches out to infinity unless we provide it with a beginning and an end of our own – the synchronic and diachronic boundaries of identity in fact.

Language can be seen as an extension of decision making and social interaction by allowing transitional relationships to exist between that of metabolism in its basic condition of living off the land or living in the world and the normative conditions in which we behave towards the world in such a way as to call it a system. Language may then be thought of as a distinctly human form of development that allows us to be infinitely subtler than simply behaving in space and ultimately warring over spatial claims that remain intrinsic to an immediate need unless we introduce plans and also descriptions of alternatives to that need and that immediacy. We can plan imaginatively and even talk about such plans thus removing us from the reduced possibilities presented by what we have and introducing us to the enriched possibilities of what we can make for ourselves.

[1]   **Kitchen R Freundschuh S** (eds), Cognitive Mapping, Routledge, 2000, p.1.
[2]   **Tolman E C**, Purposeful Behaviour in Animals and Men, Appleton Century, New York, 1932
[3]   **Lynch K**, The Image of the City, Cambridge USA, MIT Press, 1960
[4]   **Piaget J**, (1968), Structuralism, London, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1971