

Beyond The Problem

“Drop the *The*.”

— Justin Timberlake as Shawn Parker, *The Social Network* [2010]

ANDREW ATWOOD

University of California, Berkeley

The chairs for this session did an excellent job in their brief description of part of their title. “Problem”, as they point out, offers a structure for working that operates synchronically along historical, technological and representational axes. I appreciate their examples and subsequent claims of the habitual and reflexive ways in which we often use the word “problem” in architecture, and I remain sympathetic to their desire to use this forum to raise awareness of this problem with problems.

But before I get to my problem, “Beyond The Problem,” as I have called it, I wonder about the other parts of their title. I am referring to the “The” and the “.” (the full stop). And to add emphasis, as if it was needed, “problem” is singular—“The Problem.”—as if there were only one. To be sure, I checked the other session topics. If we include the “Open” session, there are 22 sessions as part of this convention, and none uses a full stop other than this one. There are three question marks, which makes sense; six colons, which makes even more sense; and a variety of commas and even one ellipsis. I also checked on “the”. There are seven. In two other cases, “the” is the first word, and in both cases they share with this session the same enthusiasm for the word they modify: “The Articulate Object” and “The Environmental Schism”. There is also one “the Real” as part of a title but none of these titles follows up with a full stop. “The Problem.” stands alone in its singularity and emphasis on its topic.

In the productive spirit of this session, I have decided to have a problem with “The Problem.” How might we use the simple coupling of these two words in combination with the world’s most basic symbol as a discursive device? How might different forms of emphasis change our readings of the session title? What conversations might we discover?

Placing an emphasis on “the” seems an obvious place to start. It’s the first word but easy to overlook. The full stop is far more conspicuous by comparison. If,

as a discipline, we have made a habit of adding “problem” to things we would like to talk about, the use of the definitive article is beyond a habit, extending into our collective subconscious as a kind of disciplinary tic we blurt out when we are anxious or insecure about the importance of something. It asks that we take the word that follows seriously. The Digital, The Awkward, The Parametric, The Absurd, The Everyday, The Real.... And while it implies specificity it maintains generic aspects related to a category or group of something. “The computer changed the world” refers to a category of tools but is generic with respect to type within that larger category. By comparison, “A computer changed the world” is much more specific. The ability to compound simultaneously generic and specific qualities into something produces an ambiguity that begs to be discussed. In this way, “the” is the most powerful discursive device we have. Adding one almost guarantees a movement or style or discourse or at the very least a symposium—or in this case, an ACSA panel.

At first glance, “problem” in the singular seems weird. As previously stated, I see no problems with the sessions chairs’ definition of problem, but the count appears contradictory to what follows in the session’s brief. “‘The Corner Problem,’ ‘The Plan Problem,’ ‘The Problem Villa,’ ‘Architecture’s Image Problem,’ amongst others” does not just imply a plural but is plural. Why not just say “The Problems.” if a few lines down there are, in fact, more than one of these things? There are a few possibilities. We could suspect that the whole session is a ruse. If we look at this list there is one glaring exception, an exclusion so obvious it must have been intentional. “The Nine Square Grid Problem” is by some accounts the original “problem” . For some people it is, in fact, The Problem. Could this be their intent? To propose a session and make a list of things that surround and in some cases even set up the most obvious example but never mention it, in the hopes that the majority of papers will take the bait? That that “problem” is the first in a series of breadcrumbs that will lead us all to write about Rowe and Hejduk and Eisenman? And celebrate the agency and projective possibilities of this simple diagram? Another possibility is related to an issue mentioned in the last paragraph. When coupled with “The,” a singular noun does not necessarily refer to a specific case. “The Problem” could be understood as a prompt to discuss a problem, one, but does not assume a single solution to the problem of the prompt. This seems to fit with the quote that introduces the session brief and the open-ended nature of their definition of “problem”. In other words, the singular “problem” coupled with “the” presents a problem, which has a series of solutions but not a single correct one. “A Problem(.)” or “The Problems(.)” would not pose the same problem as “The Problem(.)” does.

Of all the elements of the title, the full stop is the most conspicuous. Unlike “problem” or “the”, its function in the title operates outside of custom and habit. It does not conform to any of the established usages of the mark. The title is not a complete sentence. It is not an abbreviation for anything or an acronym. It does not imply a mathematical or numerical use as a decimal point, and it’s not part of a file naming convention used for computing. It’s none of those things. As noted, it also does not conform to the conventions of this convention’s session topics titles. No one else felt the need to finalize his or her title in this way. By comparison, there are other forms of punctuation that would more commonly follow a title and, in some cases, are found in other session titles. Exclamation points, question marks and ellipses are all more common. A question mark produces a curiosity, an exclamation mark produces excitement, and an ellipsis produces an expectation of continuation and progress. In each case, the effect is the same,

to lead the reader into the text. A full stop does none of those things. A quick look at basic copy editing standards confirms this. “Avoid putting full stops at the end of your titles” or some variation thereof is a common refrain in various writing manuals and blogs on titling standards. Full stops imply a break, or at least a pause before continuing. Unlike the other forms of punctuation that invite one to keep reading, the full stop forces a delay. Its function is to place a barrier between what you have just read and what you will read next. This coupled with its unconventional use in a title produces a difficulty we are forced to reconcile, a “wait, what?” moment. If what precedes the full stop is habitual and customary, this last final oddity is what forces us to pause and question the title in the first place. In short, the full stop is the device that makes this title into such a huge problem.

Astute readers will notice there is still one feature of the title that I have not addressed. There is a space between “The” and “Problem”. Of all the elements of the title this is the most customary. While some poetry and certain file naming conventions in computing have explored the consequences of removing the blank space between words, these examples are far less common. Nonetheless, it is not written “TheProblem.” and it is for this reason that we have one last aspect of the title to discuss. Of course, some will argue that there is a lot of space before “The”, but it’s not written “the” as one would if “the” were in the middle of a title. The capital “T” clearly indicates the beginning of something. The full stop, as discussed, also closes the title, problematically of course, but it does more than enough to remove even the possibility of a subtitle, much less an additional word to the main title. The title is not written “the Problem .” So, as architects, it’s hard not to ask one final question: how might we use that space? The list of sample problems mentioned in the session brief offers us one productive possibility. If we consider the different readings each problem might have by changing the placement of the word “problem”, the space becomes much more important. Consider, for instance, “The Corner Problem” versus “The Problem Corner”. When “problem” is the noun, it’s modified by “the”, meaning it’s singular. When it’s the adjective, it may be singular or it may point to a multiplicity of problems. The Corner Problem refers to a single problem with the potential for many corners. The Problem Corner refers to a single corner with the potential for many problems. The space in the center of the title as opposed to the periphery of the title indicates a preference for problems of architecture that operate in the space provided by its center. Imagine if we had “The Problem Plan” or “The Problem Image” instead of the reverse. Architecture would be much less interesting.

To this point, I have been discussing only one title, the title of the session topic. While imitations, copies and reproductions currently occupy a sizable portion of contemporary architectural discourse; they are not a topic of this paper. As such, I have added one word: “Beyond”. Of the 22 Session topics, “Beyond” is the only word used with the same frequency as “The” as the first word in the title. And if we count “Way Beyond...” minus the adverb “way”, “beyond” is the word used most frequently in the beginning of titles for this convention. To provide some context, only one other word is used more than once: “Architecture”.