

# The Coincidence of Fragments: Architecture, Poetry, Cubism, & Unexpected Endings

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## INTRODUCTION

My aim is to use this paper to unfold and investigate a suspicion I've held for many years, namely that creative work in architecture and in poetry are closely related -- as closely as, to use Dalibor Vesely's terms, the space of real possibilities and the space of possible realities. My approach will be to think about poetry and architecture and look for their shared creative workings. I intend to *existentialize* poetry and architecture -- that is, to consider them not as fields of objects and words extended in independent operative spaces, but rather as correlative fragments whose roles as fragments are established by the wholes which they constitute, in a latent existential world. And, I hope to disclose that it is only in this latent, everyday world where humanly-relevant creativity can take place. I will first attempt to establish an understanding of the creative act in poetry, and will then show the similarities that I see between that understanding and architecture. The hermeneutic connection between these two understandings, (or *modes of revealing*) will be the work of the Cubist painters.

## CREATIVITY AND THE COUPLING OF DISPARATE THINGS

The writing of the French poet and novelist Raymond Roussel first worked itself into my thinking when I was a graduate student, and it was after reading the following explanation of his creative thinking that I realized that he was going to be important to me, and encouraged me to think that there might be something architectural about the way he thinks. About creativity, he says,

"Creative work [is] based on the coupling of two words which are taken in two different senses... This procedure, in fact, is related to the use of rhyme. In both cases, the creative act is an unexpected one resulting from coincidences in the sounds of words. Such an approach is essentially poetic."<sup>1</sup>

In short, Roussel claims that the words of the poet are initially neutral in meaning and do not belong together in any intelligible way.<sup>2</sup> It is then the poet's project to show how those dissimilar words can be made to co-exist. To follow this thinking then, in the poem the poet forces together two unsympathetic words and connects them with a string of new words that in their creative coming-together provide a surprising intelligibility and consequently, legitimacy. And, as the coming-together compounds, even more unexpected realizations are created -- and at times creating their own internal referencing even beyond the control of the poet. When most productive, the coupling provides unstable and multiple (i.e., metaphorical) interpretations. This act of showing the similarity in disparate things by placing them together without pretext is creativity most fundamentally. Let's look at an example. In Robert Frost's poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, the poet begins with these four lines:

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

The words *know*, *though*, and *snow* do not immediately share much by way of their own meanings. But they do share a distinct phenomenon: to our ears they sound similar. Motivated by that phenomenon, the challenge set forth by the poet is

to remove these words from their neutral settings and couple them with a string of additional words between the rhymes. Once the rhyming words are in the presence of the new configuration of words, new meaning and intelligibility is established. The rhymes suddenly and unexpectedly *make sense* and belong together.

In this example, the first rhyming word, *know*, is joined with a configuration of predicate words that together describe something for the benefit of the reader: an experiencing-being who is situated in a specific setting: the woods. The words used to complete the couplet with the next rhyming word, *though*, further establish the latent background world with *house* and *village* as somewhere removed, thus further isolating the poetic setting of the experiencing-being. The word, *snow*, is the next primary element in the couplets, and the words, *He will not see me stopping here To watch his woods fill up with...*, complete the coupling and move the meaning of the poem to a new setting that is at the same time completed as well as remaining anticipatory and ready to be expanded further.

### REPRESENTING THE WORLD THE WAY IT REALLY IS

For years, I have stared at -- or more accurately, *into* the paintings and collages of the Cubists. And as my understanding of their art grew, I came to know that I was looking at real, lived spatiality being represented in the only way possible. Although we as architecture students were taught that our constructed, one-, two-, and three-point perspectives were optically accurate, they did not seem as 'real' to me as the Cubist paintings. They failed to capture the life and movement that was represented in the settings painted by Braque, Picasso, Gris, Duchamp, Le Corbusier, and Cézanne<sup>3</sup>. Whereas Braque's or Gris' still-life paintings were anything but still, our perspective drawings were mere frozen blinks into projected spaces.

Braque's paintings (Figure 1) encouraged, no *forced* me to move back and forth; in and out; as I attempted to grasp them. They caused me to tilt my head, or rotate my shoulders or whole body to better align myself with the different zones or spaces that seemed implicitly bounded. They turned the precisely measured height and width that made up my perspective drawings into an 'in-here' or 'over-there', or a "behind-that". The geometric depth in



Figure 1. G. Braque, *Violin and Candlestick*

my perspective drawings was replaced by experiential depth in Braque's paintings. What the Cubists were attempting to represent was a lived world -- a world not of people and objects extended in space, but an inconspicuous, transparent structure where humans operate and cope. As Heidegger describes it, a "round-about-us."<sup>4</sup> Their interest was not objects and space, but rather life and its spatiality, or the "subsisting things which our concern counts on."<sup>5</sup>

Cubism is often dramatically underestimated, when it is identified as an art whose intent is to represent the world as a kind of geometric construct. Any attempt to reconstruct or redraw even the simplest of the compositions is soon a very frustrating undertaking. The compositions of the paintings are far too Gordian to be easily redrawn, or even traced. What seems at first to be a simple geometric order is deceiving. The lines and planes quickly convolute and dissolve into shapes without definitive edges. The colors and shades meld and gradually distort anything that originally implies wholeness. (Figure 2). The 'objectivity' of the objects becomes irrelevant, as they merge and oscillate with the latency of their setting. The representation by the Cubists



Figure 2. J. Gris, *Bottle and Glass on Table*

is not of the object, as such, but of the latent world of everyday things that concern us in our everyday coping. Braque explains,

"It seems to me just as difficult to paint the spaces 'between' as the things themselves. The space 'between' seems to me to be as essential an element as what they call the object. The subject-matter consists precisely of the relationship between these objects and between the object and the intervening spaces. How can I say what the picture is 'of' when relationships are always things that change? What counts is this transformation"<sup>6</sup>

The Cubist painting acknowledges time and temporality. They not only require time to comprehend them, but they embody time as well. They represent not just an object or objects, but 'things in places' that imply a dependence upon movement in a dynamic realm. A viewer eventually sees the art-

ist in the painting -- moving through it, evoking its situatedness. And movement is made of time; and movement and time together invokes and affords a human narrative.

A generation before the Cubists, the Impressionists wanted to be thought of as representers of their own perceptions of particular settings; free of deceit; present and participating in their art, *in situ*. However, The Cubists were not convinced by the Impressionists. How could an artist claim to provide an honest representation of a scene and still leave out so much that was *really* there? By contrast, the goal of the Cubist painting was to show not only the objects and their settings and conditions only as they are perceived, but also strived to show it in a true, real way, from many orientations, and occurring over time and free of perceptions. In that sense, Cubism is an art with profound ethical dimensions. As Jacques Riviere explains,

"...the true purpose of painting is to represent objects as they really are, that is to say, differently from the way we see them. It tends always to give us their sensible essence, their presence; this is why the image it forms does not resemble their appearance."<sup>7</sup>

It is also no coincidence that for the most part, the Cubist's paintings depicted familiar objects in everyday scenes ready for engagement by someone. Most often the scene shows a family's objects in familiar settings, anticipating a lived narrative. The Cubist did not strive to show what is just present and perceived. They meant to represent the essence of the objects and their circumstances -- that which was not just 'there', but coming into being as the coming into being unfolded before the artist, over time. As optically accurate as it might be, the extended, occurrent space in my perspective drawings was not able to be encountered; whereas the space in the Cubist's paints is lived and humanly relevant; actualized by and embodied with movement and time; and establishing places where people, with their personal things, act out their own episodic existences. And, it is that kind of ethical setting that is necessary to provide a ground for the remainder of this study.

#### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PLACE PRECEDES ITSELF?

Although I was aware that Roussel was speaking of poetry in the passage above, I sensed nonetheless



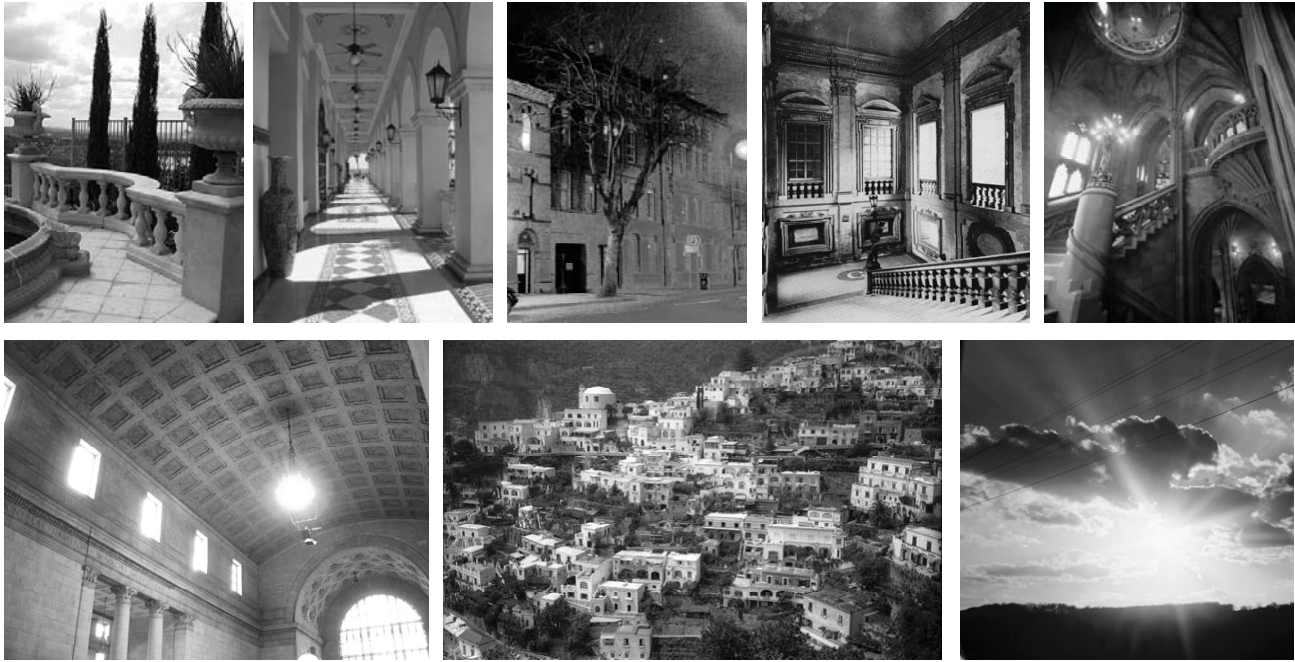


Figure 3. Images collected by students

that he could just as easily be writing about architecture. Architecture is, in Roussel's terms, essentially poetic. It is at its most basic level, nothing more than the unexpected result of a coupling of the fragments of greater wholes that until the coupling, don't belong together. But, in what ways is architecture a coupling of unrelated fragments? As earlier clarified, it is not enough to think about this coupling in an instrumental way. Creativity at that level does not drive us far enough into the problem at hand. What we are searching for must move us into a more profound understanding of creativity.

What follows next is an exposé of work that was created by first-year architecture students, where they experimented with cubism as a means to architecture. With a desire to make architecture that could be grounded in the fecundity of traditional culture and familiar situations and landscapes, but faced with the arbitrariness and sterile volumes and meaningless formal articulations that awaits them in extended physical space, a studio of architecture students experimented with the ideas of the Cubists in creative architectural settings.

In the beginning, the students were asked to create an archive of black and white photographic images of as many architectural elements and objects as they could find. No other selection criteria was pro-

vided and no indication was offered to them towards how the images would eventually be used. Left on their own, the students collected a wide range of image-types of architectural elements and settings. It became clear that without restraints otherwise placed on them, the students generally gravitated toward images of traditional architecture with deep and complex situational content. (Figure 3).

Following the collecting of images, the students were then asked to create new architectural situations by making scenic collages from their images. But, their initial results were not very successful. What was it about some collages that made them more potent, fun, and easier to read, while others seemed static and impenetrable? By first looking at an example of an unsuccessful collage we will understand several of its problems.

It became clear that making the collages required some care in dealing with the original fragments. In this example of a 'dead' collage (Figure 4), you can see that if the fragments are left in their most extreme states, that is to say, if too much of the original fragment's situation was taken away, or conversely if too much of the referential setting was left in the fragment, the collage 'shut down' and did not open itself up for interpretation. In the dead collage, one can see that no individual frag-



Figure 4. "Dead" collage

ment sought an interaction with another. Each of the original fragments either lost too much situatedness, or simply sat mutely in its intact, original referential setting and resisted letting-go.



After the initial round of working with their collages, it became clear to the students that there was more to creating a successful collage than randomly superimposing and conjoining the fragments *montage-like*. A more integrated relationship between the various fragments needed to be established. As the students became more experienced with the process and began developing more skills toward it, their collage techniques became quite successful. (Figure 5). What was the difference -- why did some collages fail while others seemed to spring to life? What was happening when fragments seemed to suddenly become emancipated from their original image and seemed to move freely and implicitly into their new shared settings?

What the students began to recognize was that their initial efforts were failing primarily because they had ignored the significance of the latent background in each fragment. Looking past the primary elements in the photo images, the students began to become aware of the everyday "betweenness" surrounding the principal elements -- which in its familiarity had laid inconspicuously in an existential background. The students ignored the significance of the primary elements in each fragment and instead concentrated on blending the spaces in-between them. As they did, the possible readings of the collages suddenly became much more activated and dynamic.



Figure 5. Student collages





Figure 6. Student collage

It is worth mentioning here that no architectural element ever exists independent of its referential totality. Doors are only doors because there are walls that need to be passed through. Walls call for floors and ceilings. Floors lay under rugs. Rugs provide a setting for furniture. Furniture invites human presence. Light and its shadows that fall upon things in a setting depends reminds us that there must be a source, which in turn points us towards a window or lamp. Sunlight and its shadows opens us to an even greater, cosmic orientation -- dividing North from South and even making everyday temporality something accessible to us in a situation.

Every image also shared another important latent and ever-present element -- each scene always contained a horizon. In each fragment and in each collage, the horizons established a familiarity of human orientation and occupancy. "Oh! The horizon -- of course!" proclaimed one student. "After all, we are still on Earth." The students realized that even if it wasn't always obvious, the horizons in each photo were always already there -- defining the optics and establishing limits, depth, and most notably, multiple visual perspectives. The horizons and their situating perspectives gave coherency

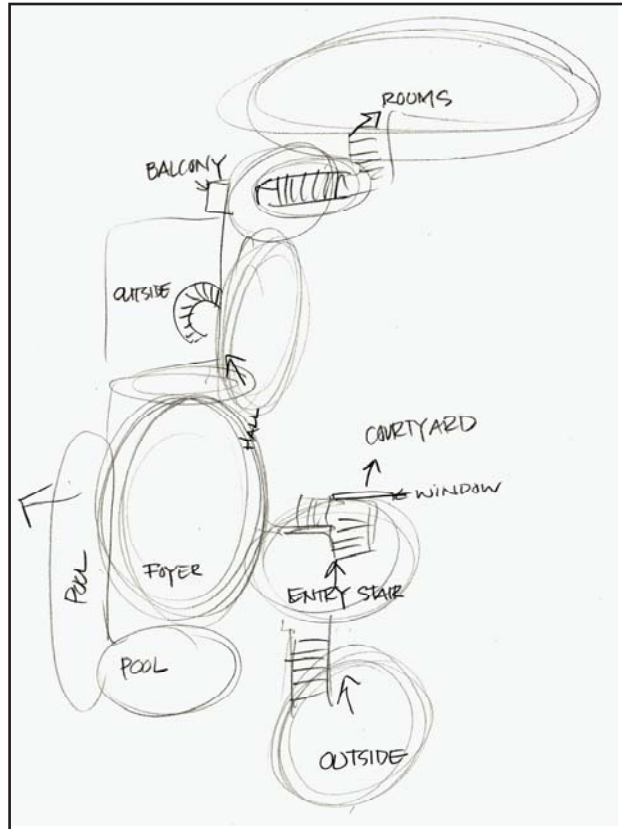


Figure 7. Student collage mapping

and established the entire visual structure of the new settings. The horizons were critical in gathering together the new relationships. As Vesely helps us understand,

"The relation of the visual organization of space to the horizon is most clearly demonstrated in perspective, where the horizon not only holds together but also [generates] the structure of [a] visual field."<sup>8</sup>

The students' awareness of the horizon also established a corresponding verticality and consequently the possibility of human engagement and livedness in each scene -- as the horizon closely corresponds to the human upright posture.

The students also discovered that the most successful collages never seemed to 'sit still' and allow a single, comprehensive interpretation. There was always an ambiguity in the various ways of comprehending them. The new situations seemed unstable. They were unpredictable and almost never completely "made sense". Some were 'scary-strange.' (Figure 6). This oscillation between the familiar and the new (or the actual and the possi-

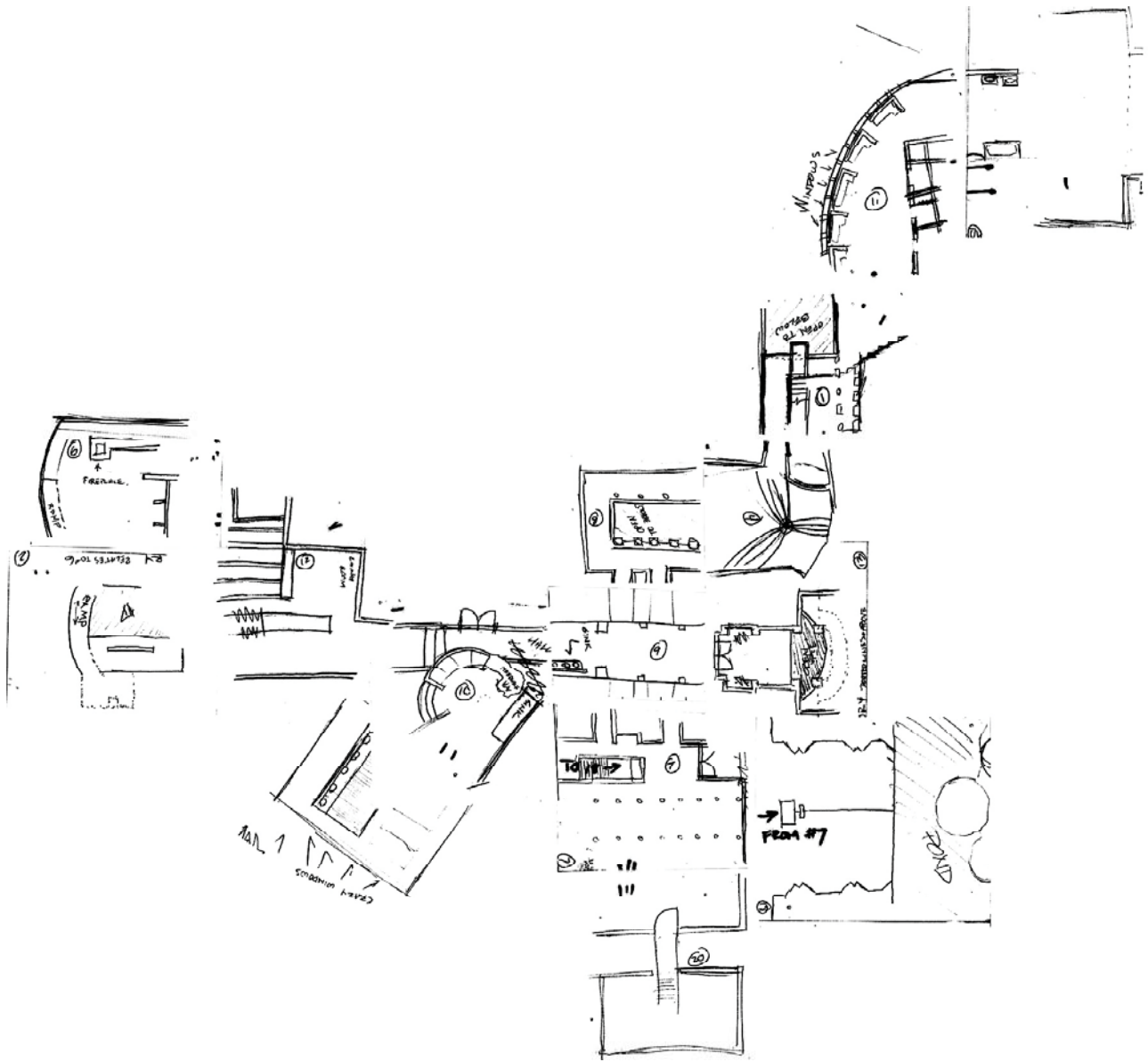


Figure 8. Student collage mapping

ble) is of course, the historic condition of architecture; and is closely related to our daily experience of the world, where our own awareness and coping with our daily affairs is always in an inaccessible but dynamic and constantly unstable flux.

The students were next asked to consider the possibility that their collages were in fact just fragments of an even larger, comprehensive architectural setting. The students were asked to interpret each of their collages and map the floor plans and record their interpretations and experiences as

they discovered them. As the students became more comfortable with the realization that their collages somehow belonged together in a yet unknown whole, they began moving from collage to collage, discovering numerous shared relationships between them. (Figure 7). A door in the first collage opened into a corridor in a second. A window in one collage allowed in the sunlight that flooded a room in another. The stairway leading up in one collage was the same stairway leading down in another. And, the ever-present horizons and their related perspectives and the optics of vanishing points al-

ways provided orientation, a confirming connect-  
edness between collage settings, and an earthly  
equilibrium. These interpretations created nearly  
countless interrelated adjacencies and increasingly  
complex orientations.

Eventually, some students found that they were  
trying to interpret and control as many as a doz-  
en different collages; each rich with ambiguity  
and each pointing toward multiple possibilities of  
relationships in other collages. As their creativity  
proliferated their mappings became almost incom-  
prehensibly complex. (Figure 8). So, in an attempt  
to account for and control the many chaotic pos-  
sibilities that confronted them, the students soon  
realized that they needed some way for organizing  
things in a more comprehensible way.

Finding that there really wasn't an easy way to store  
all of the experiences that they had been accumu-  
lating through their mapping process, the students  
began gradually moving their mapping into more  
formal, geometric diagrams. However, many were  
reluctant to do so, fearing the loss of too much of  
their work. But those who did found that as they  
made the move into a more abstract, theoretical  
ordering of their experiences, certain geometries  
that were always already there and which to this  
point seemed to have been laying dormant, began  
to be recognizable.

The delayed movement to a conceptual under-  
standing of their projects by the students allowed  
them to begin to find ways to move their architec-  
ture -- which is now pregnant with rich but physi-  
cally inaccessible "aroundness" of situation and la-  
tency -- into a more accessible and viable geomet-  
ric framework. Moreover, this movement from rich  
but inaccessible existential spatiality to the veiled  
but easily accessible geometric space allowed the  
possibility of an objective position in a real world.  
So, in trying to control the many possibilities that  
confronted them -- an authentic and personally re-  
warding geometric order began to disclose itself to  
the students.

It is an interesting diversion to follow the role of  
the abstract diagram in the students' process. In  
the final analysis, the diagram was both relegated  
and promoted: relegated in that its normal genera-  
tive design authority was completely stripped from  
it; and relegated further in its appearance in the

sequence of design. But it was also promoted -- by  
moving it away from a role of hypothetical, creative  
reflection; and into a mapping role invested in dis-  
covery, intuition, and mimesis. In its new role as  
a mapping of places that almost already are, the  
diagram situates itself as the interstitial movement  
between inaccessible existential spatiality and ac-  
cessible, geometric space.

In mimesis, the affinity between the students' work  
and this kind of poetics should be easy to see. The  
students bring together couplets of images of archi-  
tectural elements that are in neutral and previously  
unrelated settings -- just as does the poet as he  
gathers together his rhymes. The meaning for both  
is established by the merger of backgrounds -- or  
the 'in-betweenness' in the settings. When the focus  
is again on the primary elements, the latent world  
once again recedes into an inconspicuousness fa-  
miliarity that can then be implicitly shared, claimed,  
or reclaimed by the coupled images or words. In  
the moments of the sharing/claiming/reclaiming,  
the status of the collage remains in flux and the  
meaning taken away from it visually oscillates am-  
biguously and metaphorically, just as the world in  
the poem refuses to rest as a fixed and static set-  
ting. Once coupled and the unexpected meaning is  
acknowledged and reconciled, the latent world of  
betweenness receded again and quietly reassumed  
its place in the inconspicuous background between  
the main elements in the new settings.

## CONCLUSION

It should be clear that the unexpected opening-up  
of the fragments and the merging of their referen-  
tial backgrounds is effectively the poetic phenome-  
na that Roussel described. When the fragment and  
collage process no longer conceal architecture's mi-  
metic nature with the world, it points to its close re-  
lationship to poetics. The successful students were  
bringing together figures that prior to the act of  
making the collage -- did not belong together. And,  
although it was the principal figures (or objects) in  
the image that were initially being coupled, it was  
the latent, referential totality that laid between the  
principal figures that first opened-up and allowed  
the sharing and articulation between each of the  
fragments.

And in contrast, the poet uses words -- or language  
fragments -- in place of the image fragments that



are then forced together for reasons other than explicit ones. This coupling mirrors the work of the students, where they activated new architectural situations by forcing together neutral architectural elements and encouraging them to share their latent backgrounds. And it is at this point that Cubism and the fragment disclose their reciprocal relationship with poetry and language.

### POSTSCRIPT: ARCHITECTURE, MEMORY AND SHATTERED PICTURES

This abbreviated study does not allow a traverse into several interesting parallel studies. One that is most alluring is the affinity with memory and narrative time. It must be sufficient for now to end with these words by Rilke:

"As I recover it in recalling my child-wrought memories, it is no complete building; it is all broken up inside me; here a room, there a room, and here a piece of hallway that does not connect these two rooms but is preserved, as a fragment, by itself. In this way it is all dispersed within me -- the rooms, the stairways that descended with such ceremonious deliberation, and other narrow, spiral stairs in the obscurity of which one moved as blood does in the veins; the tower rooms, the high-hung balconies, the unexpected galleries onto which one was thrust out through a little door -- all that is still in me and will never cease to be in me. It is as though the picture of this house had fallen into me from an infinite height and had shattered against my very ground."<sup>9</sup>

### REFERENCES

- [1] Vesely, D. *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* The MIT Press, 2004.
- [2] Zurcher, B. *Georges Braque, Life and Work*. Translated by S. Nye. New York: Rizzoli, 1997.
- [3] Heidegger, M. *Being and Time* Translated by Macquarrie and Robinson, Harper and Row Publishers, 1962.
- [4] Roussel, R., *How I Wrote Certain of my Books* (1932) Trans. Trevor Winkfield.
- [5] Rilke, R., *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Translated by M.D. Herter. W. W. Norton & Co, 1949.
- [6] Frost, R., and Lanthem, E. C., *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, Henry Holt and Co., 1969.

### ENDNOTES

1. Roussel, R. *How I Wrote Certain of my Books*, Translated by Trevor Winkfield, Exact Change Publishing, 1995.
2. Keep in mind that just as two words that only sound alike share no other meaningful coupling, I argue that a window and a staircase, or a floor and a wall have just as little explicitly in common.
3. Although Cézanne is not often found on lists of Cubist painters, he is acknowledged to be their progenitor and principal inspiration.
4. Ibid., As Heidegger explains, "The regional orientation of the multiplicity of places belonging to the available goes to make up the aroundness -- the 'round-about-us' -- of those entities which we encounter as closest environmentally ... The 'above' is what is 'on the ceiling'; the 'below' is what is 'on the floor'; the 'behind' is what is 'at the door'; all 'wheres' are discovered and circumspectively interpreted as we go our ways in everyday dealings."
5. Ricouer, P., essay "Narrative Time", in *On Narrative*, W. J. T. Mitchell, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 160.
6. Georges Braque, As quoted by Bernard Zurcher in *Georges Braque, Life and Work*. Translated by S. Nye. Rizzoli 1988, p.150.
7. Riviere, Jacques, as quoted by Poggi, Christine. *In Defiance of Painting*, Yale University Press, 1993.
8. Vesely, D., *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, The MIT Press, 2004, p. 382.
9. Rilke, R. M., *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Translated by M.D. Herter, W. W. Norton & Co., 1949. pp. 30-31.