

CLADDING AND REPRESENTATION: BETWEEN SCENOGRAPHY AND TECTONICS

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All the decorative elements attending to architecture ... all the artistic symbols, I say, owe their origin to the adornment of the body and, closely connected with it, to a few techniques of the most primitive family industries

Gottfried Semper, *On Architectural Style*

There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; ... they mold our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

INTRODUCTION

In recent propositions addressing the issue of representation, in relation to construction and building materials (Frampton 1995, 1990 & 1983; Harries 1988 & 1984; Vernooy 1992; von Meiss 1993), the question of cladding has become an implicit, yet serious, concern. In this way my title owes much to Kenneth Frampton's "Rappel à l'ordre: the case for the tectonic." And my argument stems in part from the distinction and the opposition he makes between tectonic and scenography: while tectonic is ontological, scenography is rather representational, in the sense of a "discourse predicated on the surface" (Frampton 1990, 20). Frampton's suggestion that a "built form is a presence rather than something standing for an absence" has been echoed by Andrew Vernooy in his "Crisis of figuration in contemporary architecture" (1992). The crisis, the author pretends, is due to a "devalued imagery" (the scenography of Frampton's argument) brought about by "devalued veneer," through a willful neglect or loss, on some architects's part, of ancient and traditional references.

I will, for my part, argue that cladding is by necessity representational, encompassing or involving, to different degree, both scenography and tectonic. In order to do so, I will rely on Gottfried Semper's contributions (for instance, his understanding of tectonics, along with his dressing and substitution of materials theories), as well as on Karsten Harries's thoughts about representation. This paper aims at retrieving, from our architectural history, intentions and clues that may prompt a reconsideration of thoughtful representation in architecture, through cladding and its important relation to clothing.

CLADDING

Contemporary architecture shows that architects are struggling in trying to appropriate the huge quantity of new cladding materials that the construction market offers, and whose very production is often taking place without their control, involvement, or even desire. Since cladding is now

being conceived of in terms of the attachment of different materials to a structure, one wonders about the possibility of an architecture of cladding independent of its structural frame, with regard to architecture's representative role. New building regulations (for instance, the economy of energy with its implicit respect for natural resources) have brought about a clear, definite and unprecedented separation of the building's envelope and structural frame. Layers of different functions, each one enacted by a specific material, compose technically speaking a very performant building envelope. However, they remain externally mute because they are comprehended only in section drawings. Together, to be sure, with the organization of space, the configuration of a building's envelope and the treatment of its cladding constitute a most important part of what is given to architects to reflect upon. Because the modern cladded envelope, by not taking part in the structural system of a building, is an «open work» (Leatherbarrow 1994, 69), it is an element for design and thought that offers a great deal of freedom to the architect. Sadly enough, it has become a place where the merely scenographic has been manifested most conspicuously.

Pierre von Meiss has argued that, since contemporary exigencies in terms of construction leads toward composite envelopes, Semper's theory of dressing may have a great deal of relevance, although, he is quick to point out, the constructive and decorative characteristics of a cladded architecture, are still to be developed for our time. Should one expect that these new exigencies will radically modify the appearance of our buildings, or is a culture's resistance to changes in form so strong as to encourage imitating and borrowing from ancient forms and materials? Von Meiss explains that there has always existed two types of cladding, each one defined by its relation to the space generated by the structure. The first somewhat sticks to the structure, follows it closely, or even exaggerates it a little, without modifying the space it creates; while the second denies it by producing "easy claddings" for scenographic spaces that mock their constructive reality (1993, 205). He therefore encourages us to refer to principles that value the architectural potential of dressing in its essential relationship with a structure seen as a body: cladding will thus be at its best if it knows what it dresses.

Considering that architecture always was, and is more literally so nowadays, an union of cladding and structure which aims at defining and bounding dwelling places, one realizes that we will have to situate ourselves with respect to the meaning of the very word structure. In order to do so, let's first inquire into the world and role of clothing.

CLOTHING THE BODY

Anthropologists and historians of ideas believe that the

human body can not be conceived of without some kind of intentional wrapping or marking added to it. Clothing takes part in the complete construction and understanding of the body: it makes “the image of man», “a form of self-perpetuating [...] fiction” (Hollander 1988, xv). Of all the reasons for wearing clothes (be it protection against nature’s threatening elements, modesty—which may rather be seen as a consequence of being clothed, sexual attraction, social status, or decoration), decoration constitutes the primordial one. Ornamenting and clothing the body enables it to distinguish itself from nature; to “bring the subject back from an unreflective enjoyment of the world and to realize his or her new and responsible place in it through the acute concentration on his body and its separateness” (Rykwert 1992, 102).

Human beings are the only livings that wear clothes. It is a situation that characterizes their everlasting confrontation with their original condition (Brun 1973, 12-4). By continuously making and re-making their being-in-the-world, human beings present and represent themselves: “in dressing up, man addresses himself, his fellows, and his world” (Schwarz 1979, 31). In this way, representation means reflection and interpretation, as it will be expressed in Gottfried Semper’s discussion about man’s cosmic instinct: an instinct which is manifested each time he adorns his own body. Decoration is thus proof of an artistic and reflective order that is being imagined and constructed by man. When the body is isolated from nature as “an object of attention,” it establishes “a context for its metaphorical interpretation;” and “what is true of the decorated body, if projected out into the surrounding world, must also be true of all other artifacts” (Rykwert 1992, 103). It is therefore true of architecture and its cladding (as an analogy to clothing).

Recent trends in art prove these last assertions right. In art galleries and museums, clothes are being put on display without a body; they stand by themselves as an ornament that serves no real physical bearer (Felshin 1995). In a rather paradoxical manner, these empty clothes either invite a careful onlooker to imagine, and wonder about, the body and the qualities of the absent wearer, or they encourage a careless beholder to completely disregard the very relevance of the absent body. This is also revealing of the situation that architecture now faces. These attitudes toward empty clothing may prompt a reconsideration of cladding in architecture, especially when we feel it is merely scenographic. Semper’s help will come in very handy.

GOTTFRIED SEMPER ON TECTONICS AND HIS DRESSING THEORY

“Tectonics, Semper explains, aims at creating space by means of motionless and heavy masses of material” (1856-1859, 220). Tectonics is thus equated with architecture and, with dance and music, is defined as a “cosmic art.” This means that, as a manifestation of order, tectonics is necessarily an adornment. It models itself after the rules by which nature exists and creates, and “deals with the product of human artistic skill, not with its utilitarian aspect but solely with that part that reveals a conscious attempt by the artisan to express cosmic laws and cosmic order when molding materials” (Ibid, 151).

We are well aware that tectonics has recently made a comeback in architectural discourses where it is being used profusely. Its use seems to have arisen in reaction to abstraction

and immaterial concepts in architecture. Consequently, it has prompted renewed and legitimate concerns for materials, their molding and arrangement. These concerns however span a wide and sometimes misleading range of interpretations. One such common interpretation puts emphasis either on the so-called nature of materials, on the expression or display of construction processes, or on stuff and rough materials. While it may constitute a reaction to mere scenography, this interpretation does not do justice to tectonics, be it in Frampton’s or in Semper’s understanding of the word. According to Frampton’s suggestion, tectonics focuses on the body’s topical situation, qualities and senses of knowledge as a genuine basis for building. It thus aims at discussing architecture from within.

Tectonics or architecture, Semper points out, makes cosmological and primordial ideas manifest. One finds a first architectural instance of that in the knot, as an expression of man’s desire to bind and to fasten, as does nature, in a rhythmical sequence of space and time movements. On this showing, one understands that “the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of the textile arts” (1860, 254), and that “most of the decorative symbols used in architecture have their origin and derivation from the textile arts” (ibid, 246). Of the four primordial ideas [the hearth, the enclosure, the terrace, and the roof] which Semper ascribes to architecture, two are the object of a more lengthy and thorough discussion. First the hearth, because it acts as the “moral element of architecture,” and second the enclosure which, enacted by textile artifacts, represents the origin of architecture (that is the visible, colorful, and sensible—in a word symbolic—boundary of space). Although the enclosure, terrace and roof are means to protect the hearth from nature’s harmful elements, the emphasis that is put on hearth and enclosure suggests that the protection required by the hearth is not primarily physical; rather, the enclosure represents the hearth.

Since the first architectural gesture—hence the origin of architecture—is to delimit a space around the hearth by hanging textile objects that enclose, protect and give form to this space of gathering, the technical problem of making these textiles stand up comes second for Semper. First there is a clothing or a dress, which defines and qualifies spaces for dwelling; second there is a solid wall or structure. It is usually admitted that Semper’s theory of dressing means that, as the dress is a garment to the body, so the cladding is a garment to the building’s structure. Is it fair however to think of structure literally, or rather materially? Semper’s own analogy with clothing and body may actually incline one to do so. The cladding/structure relationship in some way resembles that which a tablecloth entertains with a table; the latter being a material, real and built structure. What if, however, one was to look at the tablecloth—interestingly a woven artifact—as a clearly delimited space of conviviality, and the establishment of a culture beyond the reality of the table? Could it not be a question of metaphorical structure for which the hearth or the body not yet constructed, not yet clothed, stands?

The clothed or ornamented body constitutes, we have seen, the first intentional object of attention; the keystone for further metaphorical dwelling and building. Since, Semper explains, forms are that in which «fundamental ideas have been clothed» (1853, 11), that ideas «dwell» in forms (1860, 249), and that forms emerge from clothed ideas, it makes clear that what is clothed is one or all of the primordial ideas (hearth,

enclosure, and so on). It has nothing to do with mere material structure; which does not mean of course that it has nothing to do with materials. Dressing acts as a mask. In the case of the enclosure, it camouflages the solid wall's material presence. By analogy to the human body, which is constructed through clothing and adornment, the wall's spatial idea thus enhances its meaning as form. With time and through change in techniques, Semper continues, the dressing will carry the memory of the idea of enclosure (and its first manifestation through textile arts). Techniques may thus generate deliberate metaphors of this original idea by subjecting other materials to it.

KARSTEN HARRIES ON REPRESENTATION AND MATERIALS

At this point, I wish to discuss the works of the philosopher Karsten Harries ("On truth and lie in architecture" (1984), and "Representation and re-presentation in architecture" (1988)). This author's work is particularly interesting for my argument because, without referring to Semper at all, he stands very close to his ideas. Defining the role of architecture, beyond the provision of physical frames for human activities, as an interpretation to human beings of "their place in nature and society," Harries also points out that "this place needs to be established ever again." Architecture "is true to its own essence only when it contributes to such establishment" (1984, 51). He then goes on to argue that the distinction between architecture and mere building is grounded in the former's capacity for "representation," meaning that architecture is "building designed to say something about building [...] by representing it" (1988, 17-18).

Such a represented building is a construct of an ideal building, that is, "a creative reading and understanding of human situations," whose original characteristics tradition has endowed with the meaning of an ideal dwelling. In representing ideal buildings, "works of architecture at the same time represent themselves, drawing from the aura of the represented buildings a special significance for themselves" (1984, 57).

When it comes to transposing representation into the realm of materials, Harries continues, it is not necessary that their nature or identity be maintained, because representation implies an interpretation or a translation from one medium to another, according to the "ideal building" of human situations. Buildings obviously tell us about the materials they employ. In Harries's view, however, architecture is not buildings that merely "use up" materials (be it bricks, glass, and so on): architecture will reveal them in new and not-taken-for-granted ways. That would explain why, the philosopher argues, the history of architecture speaks many "lies" with respect to the so-called true usage or nature of materials (as it was upheld in different ways by Durand's nature of materials, by Lodoli's function and representation, by Ruskin's respect of the use of materials, and is still, closer to us, by the strong material and constructive bias that may be now ascribed to the word tectonics).

Architecture re-presents materials by making them conspicuous. Re-presentation makes materials appear "in truth," thus making explicit the metaphorical essence of architecture. Re-presentation is a celebration of materials, through a celebration or a memory of an ideal construct or dwelling place. Materials therefore "do not disappear into usefulness, but are lifted up into radiant self-prominence in their role as building

elements" (Oliver 1994, 171). "Lying" about the nature of materials, Harries concludes, is a prerequisite toward architecture.

SEMPER'S SUBSTITUTION OF MATERIALS THEORY

Harries's and Semper's ideas are useful in setting theoretical and practical limits within which either to appropriate or to reject altogether the new materials that often superficially resemble and imitate older or different materials without carrying along their tectonic (that is their lawful, ordering, and decorative) possibilities. I believe that they also have to be seen in relation to another of Semper's contributions: his substitution of materials theory. In a chapter of his "Style: the textile arts," entitled "Materials used metaphorically for monumental purposes," Semper discusses how the formal characteristics of an original building should carry through material changes (1860, 258-63), putting emphasis on the figurative potential of materials in view of keeping some "memory"—the original meaning of the word monumental—of the idea.

Even more so, Semper also believes, because a material has to be able to speak for itself, free to appear "undisguised in the shape and proportions found most suitable by experience and by science" (1834, 48), conditioned in "its own particular manner of formation by the properties that distinguish it from other materials and that demand a technical treatment appropriate to it" (1860, 258). Keeping in mind that the true and legitimate representation of the idea of enclosure (the conspicuous spatial divider protecting the hearth) was originally enacted by woven fabrics (man's cosmic instinct toward order and ornament would lead to the textile arts), Semper could argue that "the technique that was used as far as man can remember for the enclosure of space [...] must have had and retained the most lasting influence on the stylistic development of architecture" (1860, 258). While, as Leatherbarrow subtly notices, "it is possible to interpret this argument as one that overlooks the unique qualities of materials in favor of the repetition of visible shapes and patterns," it is rather a refusal, on Semper's part, "to abstract the comprehension of material qualities from human work and dwelling" (1993, 203-4). According to this view, materials are defined or presented "in truth," as Harries suggested, when they serve an original architectural idea. This way of service is metaphorical, as a memory of both the idea and its original technique of embodiment.

CONCLUSION

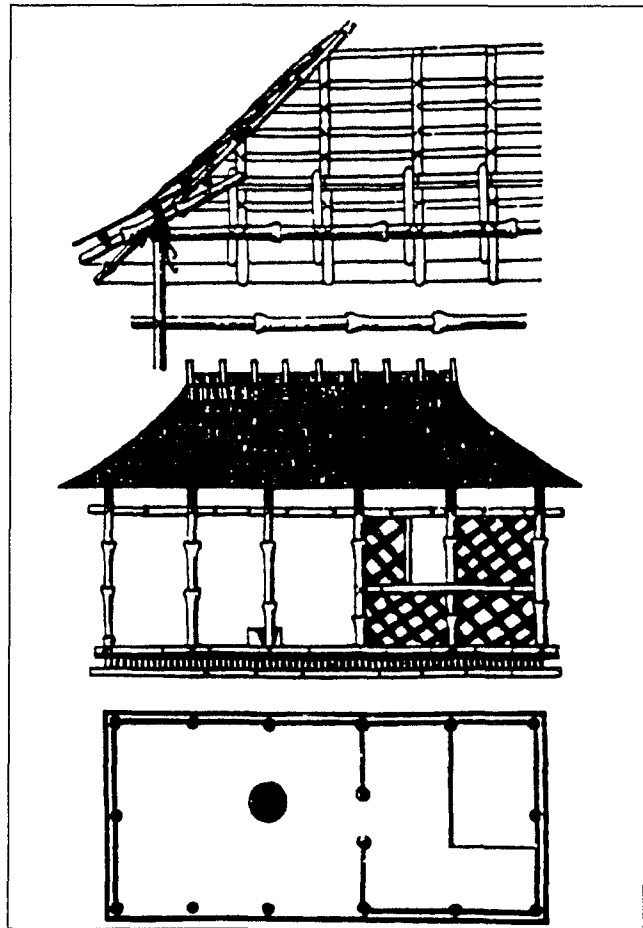
We seem to have come full circle, better equipped to envisage what it is we can now expect from our buildings. In order to rediscover the balance between representation and construction, and to discuss the architect's responsibility with respect to the cladding's representative role, we would do well to seriously reconsider Semper's and Harries's suggestions. They imply that one has to take into account, all at the same time, the manner (or technique), the materials, and their metaphorical references.

Since today's emphasis on tectonics seems to emerge as the result of a resistance to much abstraction and immateriality in architecture, a legitimate attitude (which many contemporary buildings actually display) would be an emulation of Wagner's manner. Contrary to Semper, who gave prominence to symbolic

cladding over structure, Wagner's interpretation of Semper's dressing theory acknowledges the importance of construction. In fact, Wagner reproached Semper of having stopped short of a true theory of construction. His works show cladding acting as a mark of the technology used in the construction process. To clearly show that a cladding is indeed a cladding, the point for Wagner was not so much to express how a cladding is attached to the structure, but rather the fact that it is attached. This implies that the onlooker has to travel back from the decoration system that the cladding and its fixation involve to the construction or structural system. True, structure is needed for the cladding to stand up at all. But architecture, according to Semper, takes on meaning through its cladding or dressing, and especially so, through cladding's metaphorical associations with clothing and its related techniques of embodiment. Cladding is the true divider and signifier of space.

It thus seems to me that we still have to work at moving closer to Semper's and Harries's ideas. Since our usual structural system—simple and economical frame indeed—very much resembles that of Semper's primitive hut, it is an incentive to reconsider and appreciate the importance of cladding, starting from the analogy with clothing and its role in our experience of our body. It may therefore be possible to rediscover for ourselves the meaning of the idea of an enclosure delimiting and making visible and tangible dwelling places. Only then can we go back again to a true representative cladding which works through the reconstruction of the human body. This obviously goes beyond the analogy to the body's skin, a new trend in architecture (Tzonis & Lefaivre 1996), which by its functional reference to skin is misleading and even reductive. It also precludes any contentions that any new material will save us by allowing cladding to act as a "backdrop for a corporate logo," or by "enabling us to judge architecture on the same terms as luxury cars," as it is argued in some fashionable magazines ("Smart cars vs. smart machines"). A constructed body, in order to be separated from its natural state and become an object of attention, needs ornamentation, otherwise it remains but an idea, not a form.

My argument is aimed at demonstrating that any constructive fact or built artifact, in order to be significant, needs to have metaphorical references through both the manner and the materials of its embodiment. These metaphorical references imply representation and re-presentation of an ideal dwelling, an invisible theme, a human construct, of a building endowed by tradition with a special aura: the clothed/ornamented body acting as the first of such buildings. With respect to materials—old and new, to their possible substitution, and to their use and development, bounds may thus be set that relate to manners and metaphorical references, according to the Semperian understanding of tectonics. For tectonics does not only consider how building materials are assembled, but also how they are modeled, fashioned or cut before any assemblage can occur which hopefully will carry a representation of original techniques. Finally, through manners or techniques, an architect's goal is not to demonstrate how things are built, but to consider how they may be truly built. The process of making—the manner—must have symbolical references which it represents every time the technique, or a memory of the technique, is represented. With regard to cladding, we need to be more careful of the original idea of enclosure in its relation to dwelling, and indeed look for it, so that what we think and build be intertwined, through technology.



The Indian Hut from Gottfried Semper, *Style in the technical and tectonic arts* (1860-3)

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