Theory of the Fictive and Its Architectural Significance with Richard Neutra's Residential Architecture as a Case Study

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Abstract

This paper discusses the fictive performance of architecture in reference to the re-description of human conditions. First, following Paul Ricoeur's notion of the fictive, the paper illuminates one's engagement with a setting from the perspective of dialectics between the subjectivity of the perceiver and the infinite potentials of the setting that can never be fully predicted by tools of architectural representations. What is real is not so much in the objective properties of the elements of a setting as in the elements' mutual correspondence and reflectivity of which the perceiver is already part. Second, the paper takes as a case study Richard Neutra's residential architecture to demonstrate the fictive nature of a setting that re-describes human conditions. Of particular interest is how Neutra established the relationship among fire, wind and water, and how he conjoined this dialectical ensemble of the primary elements of cosmos with a daybed operating dualistically both as the place of burning erotic love and the place of unperturbed death. The paper finally demonstrates how the significance of the setting was predicated upon the elements' mutual correspondence in the process of which what Neutra called the primary Gestalt of human living, or life and death, is re-described.

Keywords: fictive; situated-ness; dialectic of differences; Richard Neutra; fire/wind/water

1. Introduction

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) once recommended an architect not to make the model of a building too beautiful (Alberti, 1994). How shall we understand this recommendation that is contradictory to the conventional process of architectural design? Alberti's recommendation should be apprehended in reference to the intriguing relationship between the representational and the real. His comment reminds us of the deceptive role of the beauty of a representation. The perfect beauty of an image or a model is narcissistic. It leads one to disparage the practical performance of a building that often comes undesirably with imperfections such as water leakage, misalignment of joints, unfit corners and so forth. However, there is another layer that I would like to emphasize in reference to the theme of this paper. Alberti's comment cautions an architect that the real, or one's perceptual engagement with a constructed setting, can never be fully predicted by architectural representations such as the plan, elevation, section, model and simulation, however much they look real. What would actually happen, once constructed, is often a mystery, emancipating the real from the mechanism of prediction in favor of plausibility and anticipation.

Partially inspired by the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2015), who illuminated the function of the fictive in the shaping of the real, the theme of this paper is to explore the nature of the real beyond prediction. The phenomenological performance of architecture transcends absolute objectivism that the realized setting is the exact replica of the representation, as well as distorted subjective fabrication, in which the significance of the setting exists only and completely within the incommunicable deep psyche of the perceiver. In concretizing the argument about the fictive nature of architectural perceptions and the way one engages with a setting, the paper investigates Richard Neutra's (1892-1970) residential works such as the Beard House (1934) in Altadena, California and Miller Residence (1937) in Palm Springs, California. The paper demonstrates the fictive character of Neutra's settings and their ensuing situational performances. Of particular interest is how Neutra set a relationship among fire, wind and water, focusing on its situational relationship with that which it is not,

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such as wind and water. In addition, the paper further elucidates how this mutuality and reciprocity between primary elements of the cosmos comes to be coalesced with human conditions, in particular existential conditions, so as to refresh the hackneyed familiar, as Ricoeur argued.

This paper thus comprises two sections. The first part is theoretical. Being entitled "Neither Literal, Nor Fictitious," this part explores the fictive nature of architectural perception and situatedness at the level of theory. The second part conducts a case study. Being entitled "The Fictive and the Anchorage of the Human Soul in Richard Neutra's Architecture," this part explores the fictive character of Neutra's settings by analyzing two residential works and unpublished manuscripts.

2. Neither Literal, nor Fictitious

Reality is not so much in the objective physical properties of individual elements of a setting. Rather, it is in the encounter among the elements and their situational appearance in mutual correspondence and reflectivity. It is, I believe, in this sense that Michael Benedikt wrote in his For an Architecture of Reality that "the world is perceived afresh after a rain as the sun glistens on the streets and windows catch a departing cloud" (Benedikt, 1987). The real is less in the rain, the sun, the street, the windows and the cloud than in their mutual reciprocity. The appearance of each element in this mutual reflectivity breaks off its self-enclosed substantialistic core, challenging the Democritian, atomistic tradition that conceives a thing as equipped with substantiality and as identifiable with a fixed point in space, on one hand, and, on the other, the Aristotelian tradition that takes a thing "as a normative subject of a sentence" that "bears its contents and determinations as predicates" (Ogawa, 1998).

"What is' thus lies in 'how it appears in a situation,' sublimating itself into the phenomenal appearance. At this moment, the depth of the thing is filled with appearance.

That the real emerges from the appearance of things, not from their substantiality that is presumed to exist even without the acknowledgment of the participating perceiver, refreshes the fundamental condition of the human being: one is situated and intertwined within the world of infinite potentialities. The perceiver in the place of situational appearance is not the one who deciphers and associates with, nor the one who ceaselessly roams around for material attention. Instead, this perceiver is the one who co-emerges in his or her identity with that which appears. The perceiver is not at the outside of the unfolding situation, but is within it, and becomes infected by the real. The place is thus conjoined with an unprecedented sense of intimacy in which the semiotic search for the significance of an object and its inexhaustible sensuousness are transcended and there is no such thing as a self-sufficient and self-enclosed object that confronts the perceiver. When one sees a concrete wall that appears resplendent for its interaction with sunlight through its smooth surface, the perceiver to whom the wall appears as if gilded, is already within, and saturated in, the emerging situation. The real embraces the subject and the gilded concrete wall into one.

To be sure, the appearance under discussion differs from the appearance as the antinomy of essence that arouses a series of negative connotations such as fake, false, superficiality or mask. The situational appearance rejects such a dichotomy. The appearance surfaces only in a situation of which the subject is a part, while the appearance in opposition to essence comes into being in the dualistic framework between the subject of disengagement and the object to be deciphered. The former is a fictive appearance in which the substantial core of a thing becomes emptied to uphold a situational wholeness, and the seer is intertwined in the same situational fabric with the seen; the latter is a fictitious appearance in the world where indifference, unrelatedness and self-sufficiency prevail.

The perceiver's situated-ness is the source of the fictive engagement with a setting. Situated-ness rejects essentialism in that meaning lies not in the depth of a thing, but in its relationship with the surrounding. Extending this argument to the level of architecture, a quality a setting seeks to embody is not complete until it engages with what it is not, or its opposite. Accordingly, situated-ness is not a source of servile imitation of a given context, but a source of dynamic creations of mutually opposing differences. This interdependent network of opposites defines the meaning of an element to be fictive, as the meaning is never fixed but is dialectically open. This dialectics in which opposites correspond to each other for mutual identification and reinforcement (A=not A) breaks off a moment in which trite perceptual experience defined by the transparency of the formal logic (A=A) dominates. In shattering the formal logic, this dialectics is subversive. It fashions a defamiliarized space where the fictive is injected into the fabricated familiarity of the everyday reality. It yields what Paul Ricoeur called "epoché of the real," so that "new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world" may be ventured (Ricoeur, 1991). Rather than being a replica of the given, the fictive in a dialectical manner confirms what Ricoeur defined as a productive manner of bringing the unreal to the real in order to "augment reality" and to "re-describe reality" (Ricoeur, 1991). In this manner, the fictive leads Dasein to rediscover the world afresh. As Ricoeur stated,

[It] is no longer the world of manipulable objects, but the world into which we have been thrown by birth and within which we try to orient ourselves by projecting our innermost possibilities upon it, in order that we dwell there (Ricoeur, 1991).
3. The Fictive and the Anchorage of the Human Soul in Richard Neutra's Architecture

I would like to concretize the argument on the fictive and situated-ness as a source of dynamic creations of mutually opposing differences to a certain degree by introducing Richard Neutra's (1892-1970) architecture. Of course, Neutra the architect did not reflect upon the theoretical meaning of the fictive. He did however reflect upon the nature of the real, in which different qualities are not isolated, but rather, intertwined with each other. The name he gave to this mutual reciprocity was "stereognosis." Neutra wrote,

"It should again be emphasized that none of the... responses occurs truly independent of each other. On the contrary, they are tightly woven together in what is called stereognosis. We have spoken of incorrectly field sense reports; but, generally, the stereognostic cross-filing system of the many co-ordinated senses is a miracle, worth all study" (Neutra, 1954).

The collaborative and transformative working amid the visual, tactile, audible and odoriferous, or the phenomenon of stereognosis, gives rise to such concrete corporeal experience that can only be expressed linguistically with metaphorical twists, such as thick voice, velvety sound and yellow fragrance. Architecture is the actualization of multi-sensorial reality, and not a mere representation. Neutra's task as an architect was in a sense to bring this series of interconnected sensorial phenomena to the occupant.

In consideration of Neutra's position on stereognosis, what initially attracts one's attention in his residential practice is its joining of fundamental elements of cosmos in both Greek and ancient Asian thinking such as fire, wind, and water. For instance, in his Beard House (1934), the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room open laterally [Fig.1].

The wind brings in the smell of the nearby wild flowers, defining the perceptual experience in the living room not only as a visual aesthetic appreciation, but as that of a multi-sensorial totality, or what Neutra called the phenomenon of stereognosis (Neutra, 1954). Along with this experience of synaesthesia, what is also important in the introduction of wind is the moment in which it is brought to an encounter with the fire burning on the other side of the living room. The wind, as the supplier of air fundamental for burning activity, gives life to the fire. As a result, a matrix of transformation ensues from air to flame, then to gases, and from a log to heat, then to earth (Fernandez-Galiano, 2000; Okakura, 1956).

This joining of fire and wind is partly a result of Neutra's integration between the anthropological symbolism of the cave warmed up by fire, on one hand, and on the other, a modern frame construction. In this unique version of the cave, the thermal comfort of the primitive cave continues to be present thanks to the fireplace in the living room. While providing this thermal comfort of protection, Neutra's cave is open through thin layers of adjustability to invite wind. What is carried out through this opening of the cave is this: The occupant is anchored in a spot of cosmos moored to the burning fire, while witnessing the drama of the cosmological transformation from being to becoming, or from air to flame, then to gases. Each act of the occupant to adjust the configuration of the floor-to-ceiling windows in the Beard House, 'a foreign insert into nature's landscape' (Neutra, undated 1), thus marks a paradoxical synthesis between anchorage in the cosmos to be "at home at one point of the universe" (Neutra, undated 2) and participation in its transformative process.

All these observations on Neutra's architecture further pertain to his idea of the womb space. For Neutra, the womb was the place where the initial multi-sensorial capacity of the human being was nurtured (Neutra, 1954). Curiously, this womb had to be broken. Despite the trauma of birth, the birth had the significance of perfecting the fledgling sensorial capacity of the fetus in the womb, which is characterized by "muffled acoustics, pitch darkness, no smells and no taste except the salinity of the uterine fluid" (Neutra, undated 3). Furthermore, with birth, the fetus' circulatory floating in the liquid is reconfigured into a situated coordination. The baby gradually finds the horizon, standing in a vertical posture supported by the tacit presence of the platform, platform as the abstraction of the terra firma, or the solid earth. This discovery of the horizon and the earth already means, as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) argued, that the baby is with other mortals (Heidegger, 1977), however much a bleak landscape of a desert romanticizes solitude. Psychoanalysis argued that what comes with the development of the vertical posture is the exposure of the genital area to initiate covering (Freud, 1961). Following Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939)
interpretation of space-making as creating a substitute for mother's womb, residential architecture was seen as the transference object to cope with the trauma of birth. Otto Rank (1884-1939), Freud's subversive pupil, interpreted the trauma as the etiology of anxiety in all other subsequent experiences of separation. Although it came with an indelible trauma, the birth was the heroic act of the ego-possessed infant to become an independent human being, leaving behind the comfortable and protective vessel. From this perspective, house-making is defined as treating the painful memory not by retrogressing into another artificial womb but by accommodating the movement from the inside to the outside that reconfirms the original heroic will of the infant. This movement was a kind of rebirth; it releases one from the painful memory to become a fully autonomous being of independence (Lavin, 1997). The spatial continuity between the inside and outside is seen as nullifying the difference between the object-like character of the house and its spatial continuity with the outside infinity. The free-plan, a tenet of modernism, that smoothens and invalidates the traditional distinction between space and object is considered "as a therapeutic technique, rather than as a creed of form and space." (Lavin, 1997)

Be that as it may, what also comes with vertical standing and movement is the gift of 'facing' the mother and the father, and other fellow citizens even beyond the domain of the immediate domestic space. Birth extends the physical and instinctual intimacy enveloping the fetus in the womb to different levels of the human relationship: filial, pedagogical, erotic and potentially of agape. In this context, Neutra once wrote:

In a way a house is the successor of the womb. But after leaving the womb, social interaction starts; the 'post-womb shelter expert' shelters more than an individual, even if that individual is a bachelor-and he himself never works alone nor with his bare hands (Neutra, undated 4).

Likewise, the cave, which was considered a version of the womb with the umbilical chord of the fire as the source of energy and transformation had to be broken. The enclosed centrality of the cave is now joined with the periphery of the horizon. As a result of this contradictory joining between center and periphery, the fire comes to be fused with the wind traveling from miles away.

Neutra's joining of fire with wind is given another interesting twist in his Miller House (1937). After a series of studies, Neutra's final scheme presents a reflecting pool which wraps around the South-East corner of the house [Fig.2]. The pool adjoins the southern tip of the fireplace finished with brick masonry, the only trace of the primitive cave in the entire structure. Between the tip of the fireplace and the edge of the corner is a window composed of two layers [Fig.3]. The bottom layer is fixed, and the upper layer is again composed of three vertical units out of which the two units closer to the edge are operable for the admission of wind. Neutra completes this careful articulation of the relationship among fire, water, and wind by placing a raised daybed in the corner. The bed occupies a strategic point where the occupant observes the presence of fire, water and wind, and their interaction.

Applying what David Leatherbarrow discussed regarding proportion in his The Roots of Architectural Invention: Site, Enclosure, Materials, what is achieved in the Miller House is the proportional balance of different values (Leatherbarrow, 1993). To a certain degree, what the juxtaposition of fire, wind and water presents is a formula, like 'the fire set between wind and water,' bringing about two contrasting moments of potentiality: first, the fire going wild for the wind with its abundant provision of air and, second, the fire going to extinction for the water with its unlimited power.
of bringing things down. What kind of perceptual moment did Neutra have in mind when he created this juxtaposition of fire, wind and water? Here, I would like to remind the reader of Neutra's comments concerning empathy, or what he called "in-feeling." Neutra wrote,

Communication [. . .] because you and I look out of the same window and the same feelings come to us. We look at the dynamic flames and sparks in a fireplace beyond our noses – and what happens to you and me flows from one to another, the way music sounds in our parents' living room (Neutra, undated 5).

Despite the fact that Neutra still adopted the term empathy, the type of communication he sought to explain in this quote was indeed something else. One key passage is "the same feelings come to us." In other words, it is not that, as in the theory of empathy, one projects a feeling into the other as if he or she were the center and the point of origination, but that both one and the other are penetrated by the same feeling. Before there is a projection, there is an atmosphere first that embraces both one and the other. This is the way in which "what happens to you and me flows from one to another." The atmosphere captures one and the other and embraces them as one, and flows freely from one heart to another, as if the atmosphere itself has its own life and way of penetrating human hearts. If empathy is a self-centered communication, what Neutra wrote of was a self-less communication, or a communication that takes place before the formation of the consciousness of the self. In this theory of communication that reminds one of an East Asian notion of no-self (muga), one appears as an empty capacity to be imbued by the atmosphere (Nishida, 1973).

This new theory of communication is effective in explicating the nature of the perceptual experience in the living room of the Miller House. When one looks at the thrusting flames and sparks of the fire, one is imbued by its warmth with constant vertical mobility [Fig.4.]. The flame crushes the ego layer of the perceiver, and the vibrant verticality of the living energy flows into the perceiver through the eyes, nose, and skin. When the fire is gone, the thrusting flames and sparks calm down to turn flat in accordance with the platform. The deep calmness of the ashes, the death of the fire in horizontal stillness, approaches the ideal flatness of the platform and that of the reflecting pool. One's unconditional acceptance of this calmness is coupled with a chiasmic, or co-determining, identity of inverse correspondence to result in a reflexive sense of how alive I am in constant restlessness and toiling. As much as the bed in a strategic location interacts with the fire deftly set between wind and water, its performance emerges in accordance with the spectrum between vibrant life and calm peace, a spectrum established by the sensorial and postural matrix of the fire. This spectrum does not exact a static choice of unfailing certainty, since neither life nor death is a choice, but a given. In contrast, the spectrum awakens in the perceiver the primary Gestalt of human experience conditioned by life and death, the two insurmountable ultimate opposites of human living. The bed discovered in this spectrum is now the place of potentialities between, for instance, its role as the place for a burning desire of an erotic love and its role as the place of death with the promise of absolute peace.

Fig.4. Miller House, 1937, Living Room with Built-In Seating (© J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with Permission. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute (2004. R.10)

Lastly, in reference to this interpretation, it is worthwhile to introduce Neutra's comment on the problem of contemporary residential architecture and its solution as manifested in the Miller House. According to Neutra, a foghorn blowing its two base notes 'produces' an acoustical "Gestalt" [. . .] over the irregular noise chaos of sea and forest' (Neutra, April 7, 1954). The two base notes, 'these lawful audible shapes are an anchorage for the consciousness and guidance through the uncertain and the bewildering, [. . .] appeasing the soul in the changing weather and turmoil of life' (Neutra, April 7, 1954). Likewise, the presence of the fire set between wind and water in the Miller House resonates the two base notes of human living, life and death, in order to appease the soul in the turmoil of human survival driven by the competition of egos. For Neutra, like the ladies' hat business, residential architecture became a matter of business for changing tastes. This degradation of the house was a partial reason for the dominance of "quick turn-over marriages and the high divorce rate" (Neutra, 1961). While people worry about parking spots for their yearly changing models of cars, claimed Neutra, they have "no parking place . . . for their soul" (Neutra,
In this context, Neutra's placement of fire, joining it with wind and water, and the placement of a daybed at the strategic spot marks his effort to redefine the house not as a commodity but as an anchorage of the soul.

4. Conclusion

This article has explored the notion of the fictive by referring to Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics. The fictive is neither objectively literal, nor subjectively fictitious. The meaning of a thing is neither in the thing itself, as in Democritian essentialism, nor in the interiority of the perceiver. Rather, it is in the dialectical relationship between the perceiver and the thing. Extending this argument to the level of architecture, what is real is not so much in the collection of objective properties of involved elements of a setting. Rather, it is in the elements' mutual correspondence and reflectivity of which the perceiver is already a part. Accordingly, one's engagement with a setting unfolds along a path that is neither literal, nor fictitious. Rather, the engagement is fictive, meaning that the appearance of a setting is a dialectical product between the subjectivity of the perceiver – his memory, capacity and prejudices positive as well as negative – and the infinite potentials of the setting that can never be fully predicted by representational tools.

One architect who understood this sense of the setting and its dialectical nature was Neutra. For him, not individual elements but their mutual relationship was primary. Fire alone fails to survive, as wind is deficient. However, the exclusive combination of fire and wind in particular in the context of a desert is also dangerous, occasioning a need to introduce water into the formula. In this manner, the significance of his setting is dialectically and constantly open, rather than being pre-determined and fixed. The encounters between fire and wind, and between fire and water were not esoteric formal plays, but were coalesced with primary human conditions in order, borrowing Ricoeur's phrase again, to re-describe what is hackneyed. As a matter of fact, Neutra's continual effort to set up a right relationship among the fireplace, the window and the reflecting pool included another element of a human abode, i.e., a daybed – the place of love and death – as best represented by the living room in the Miller House.

Neutra's dialectical setting predicated upon a proportional coordination among fire, wind and water defines itself to be an inter-dependent network of mutually opposing differences. The formation of this fictive network gives a hint at the nature of a cultural creation, which is distinctive both from naturalism that nature should be left untouched and from civilization that instrumentalizes nature as the storehouse of exploitable resources. Distancing itself from these two extremes, the shaping of a dialectical network runs a middle path. This cultural creation respects what is given in the natural such as heat and dryness – the qualities of fire – abundant in the desert, yet installs what is lacking in the natural simultaneously such as the calming power of water. The coordination of the balance between different qualities in reference to human affairs was the key for Neutra.

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