

## Narratives in Architecture- Dismantling the Structure of Architectural Discourse

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### Abstract

Education in architecture is a balanced synthesis of design and research. Research has become a fundamental and substantial part of education and curriculum. Available literary text and writings constitute major portion of research in the form literature study. Literature study in research involves selection, analysis and interpretation of written material. The paper attempts to dismantle the fabric of literary text in architecture and hence derive a matrix to read, understand, interpret and criticize architecture narratives. The matrix hence proposed shall serve as a constructive and systematic approach to understand architectural discourses resulting in sensitive and wholistic utilization of literary text. Versatility of the matrix renders it adaptable in the field of architecture theory and criticism, enriching the practices of architecture education.

**Keywords:** Architecture education, research, narratives, architecture theory, architecture criticism

## 1. Introduction

Architecture was always treated as a visual art, where the major objective of narration was oriented towards admiring the built environment for its aesthetic qualities. However contemporary architects like Rasmussen (1964) and Pallasmaa (2007) regard architecture as not merely a function of the eye, but product of multisensory experience of the space. This experience of the built is complex with layers of socio-cultural and technological settings influencing its design, construction, use and meaning. Architectural readings are subjected to these layers of complexity which renders it open for interpretation. Therefore, communication through writing and dialogue about the built plays a key role in just understanding of architecture. These writings enhance, modify and govern the readers perception. Good narration has the quality of virtually transporting the reader to the site. Role of narratives in architecture and architecture education therefore stands on the highest pedestal.

The objective of the paper is to explore various approaches, style and strategies of architectural narratives. The paper attempts to understand the variety and richness of description, analysis and interpretation in commenting on an architect's life, philosophy and works. For the purpose of research, the three pioneers of modern architecture i.e. Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier are selected. Established readings on the three architects are critically analysed to understand the *theme*, *grammar* and *voice* of narration.

## 2. Methodology

The paper aims to understand the style of narration that exist in documentation and analysis of an architect's life and work and hence understand the nature of architecture narratives in general. Different narratives on the architects (Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier) are selected for holistic understanding of their life and work.

Narratives in architecture varies depending upon the interest and expertise of the author. Traditional narratives deal with the documentation of architect's work, through design detailing and architectural drawings. The works could be further organised chronologically, alphabetically, or depending upon the typology of structure. Apart from them, narratives called Architectural Monograph tell the story of the architect chronologically, giving equal importance to the subject's life and career. There also exist narratives which are published by the architect's studio, aiming at sharing and displaying the studio's perspective and design process. Also, architectural critics have written about renowned architects, describing their philosophy, design ideas, and contribution towards architecture. Furthermore, first person narratives also exist in the form of autobiography and compilation of papers and articles which are written by the architect.

The readings on the selected architects are consciously chosen to cover a wide range of narrative styles, ranging from autobiography, bio-bibliography, monograph, conversations so on and so forth. These readings are analysed to understand the general structure and language in architectural writing. From these readings major influences shaping architectural discourses can be inferred as 'voice' of the narrator, 'objective' or 'theme' of narration, and 'grammar' or the 'thread' of narration. These influences are hence constituting the 'Determinants of Narration' for any architecture narrative in general.

### 3. Voice of Narration

Voice of narration refers to the context of the author or writer commenting upon the architect's work. A discourse cannot be isolated from the philosophical understanding of the author. Therefore, an architect's work though objective and measurable must be read through the lenses of socio cultural and architectural context of the writer. These architectural choices of the author not only shape the mood of narrative, but also designs the canvas to portray the subject. Voice of the author is analogous to 'person' in English language.

#### 3.1 First Person Narrative

*First person* narrative refers to the subject (architect) himself narrating the content. The architect is the writer and writes to describe his life, works, philosophy etc, in the text. Wright (1977) shares his journey of life through narrative called *an autobiography*. The discourse is divided into four chapters in the book, commencing with Frank's early learnings from childhood and family, followed by Fellowship, Work, philosophy of Organic architecture and Freedom (Thomson, 1999). Le Corbusier (2014) shares his philosophy of architecture in the book *Towards a new architecture*. Corbusier expresses the idea of mechanisation, utilitarian design, and standardisation of building elements through the writing. Also, in the book *The Modulor*, Le Corbusier (1961) further goes on to document the principles of standardisation, logic of measurement and proportions in all levels of design. Whereas in the book *When cathedrals were white*, Le Corbusier (1964) functions as a critic interpreting the built environment around. In first person narratives, the purpose, style and content of narration is the choice of the narrator (Subject architect) and therefore the content is objective owing to first-hand information from the source.

#### 3.2 Second Person Narrative

*Second person* narrative refers to documentation of conversations and dialogues of an architect. Nor is it the direct narration by the architect, nor an interpretation by a third party. *Talks with students* is a documentation of Louis Kahn's dialogues on architectural ideologies across three decades (Mohler and Papademetriou, 1969). On the same lines *Conversations with Mies van der Rohe* serves as a documentation of Mies's interviews, covering wide aspects of his life, philosophy, practice, and writings (Puente, 2008).

#### 3.3 Third Person Narrative

*Third person* narrative is the most traditional form of architectural discourse. In such discourses the writer usually an architectural critic, activist or historian comment upon an architect's work. One of the finest examples is the book *Mies van der Rohe, 1947* written by Philips Johnson. Accomplished architect and an extraordinary critic Johnson (1947) chronologically document the works of Mies, establishing his importance on the face of Modern architecture. Frampton (2001) narratives on Le Corbusier, Balkrishna Doshi by Curtis and Doshi (1988) are more such masterpieces. The level of subjectivity is maximum in third person narratives, as it expresses the writers view of the architect, which might not always be the true picture.

#### 4. Theme of Narration

Major objective or intention behind an author to write about an architect and his works serves as the theme of narration. It is the soul of narration and everything else like the tools, evidences and interpretation revolves around it. Such themes can range from description, scholarship, criticism, persuasion, and literature.

##### 4.1 Descriptive Narration

The objective of such discourses is to factually describe the subject in hand. Architect's work, life, philosophy is studied using primary sources like drawings, sketches and letters. The style and tools of such narration depend upon the objective of description. Johnson (1947) to spread the awareness of Mies's work pens down a book on the occasion of an exhibition at the museum of modern art. Johnson in the preface of the book states that "All the buildings and projects which Mies considers in any way important are illustrated in this volume, with the exception of a few buildings which were not executed according to his standards and some projects of the 1910-1914 period which were destroyed in the bombing of Berlin. In addition, all of Mies's writings, published or unpublished, are included with the exception of a few items considered repetitious or too topical to be of lasting interest" (Johnson, 1947: 7). He organises the works of Mies chronologically starting from 1886-1919, 1919-1925, 1925-1937 and so on. Although the narrative is intended as an overview of Mies's works and his contribution to architecture, Johnson also includes Writing by Mies in the end of the monograph, concluding it by brief chronology and listing of Mies built and unbuilt works. (Johnson, 1947). The narrative only aims to describe Mies work, objectively. The projects are described by architectural drawings, pictures supplemented by short description. However, Johnson's narrative is unbiased, and at no point does he attempt to interpret or evaluate Mies' works against his contemporaries. Unlike Johnson who utilises a combination of drawings and pictures, Iain Thompson in *Frank Lloyd Wright – A visual encyclopaedia, 2000* only uses pictures to describe the works of architect. Again, a case of unbiased description, his works are alphabetically arranged, and colour coded according to typology. The book offers a humble introduction by deriving Wright's basic principles of architecture as simplicity, multiple styles, sympathy with the environment, nature of materials etc. This introduction is followed by the visuals of the buildings arranged alphabetically. This coffee table book intended to only provide a glimpse of Wright's works, runs through the list of his projects with minimum details like typology, built up area, date and location of the project, and a two-line brief description. Highly objective, the narrative only states the facts, short and crisp. Samuel (2016) in *Le Corbusier in detail*, documents not the building as a whole but the smaller detail of parts designed by Le Corbusier, to trace the manifestation of his philosophy in the architectural details. The book covers how Le Corbusier minutely addressed the details of his buildings like structural frames, doors, windows, altar, dining room, stairs, columns in imparting character and conveying meanings. The book mainly sets to describe about the small details of the building so capable of adding up to the architectural experience. Therefore, although the objective of the all the above-mentioned narratives is to describe the work of an architect, but the content ranges from architectural projects to writings and details. Also, different tools of description are used ranging from drawings, pictures, letters, conversations, info

graphs etc. The advantage of such descriptive narratives is that it is unbiased and provides a wholistic information about the subject in hand.

#### 4.2 Scholarship

Such discourses are research-based narratives which not only aim at providing maximum information about the subject, but also bring out new perspective towards looking at the same. The objective is to bring out new, unidentified or undocumented information. Hence the validity of such discourses relies upon the newness in approach and knowledge. They sometimes also take a philosophical approach to interpret an architect work in a novel way. Curtis and Doshi (1988) in *Balkrishna Doshi: An Architecture for India*, first derives the eight design principles of Doshi and then interprets his major works through these design principles. The major contribution of Curtis is to establish a deeper understanding on Doshi, by deriving these design principles. These principles then become the theme of the book. A unique perspective to understand the philosophy of an architect is adopted by Neumeyer (1991) in *The Artless word*. The book attempts to explore the philosophy of Mies van der Rohe through his writings and articles. The narrative not only published previously unnoticed writings and articles, but also rendered successfully new ways of understanding and interpreting architect's philosophy. Le Corbusier (2014) in *Towards a New Architecture*, voices his opinion on the modern architecture, role of functionality, and purity of form in architecture. The writing still remains one of the critical sources for understanding architecture.

#### 4.3 Criticism

The objective of such narratives is to critically understand, analyse and interpret the subject (architect's work). The analysis is usually followed by subjective conclusions or opinions which are fashioned to judge the architect. Such narratives usually result in establishing new perspectives to understand the architect or shift existing perspectives. Since such narratives about the subject are written by a third person (critic), having liberal interpretations, and the subjectivity in opinions expressed in high. They supplement readers' understanding of the subject by posing new questions and inventive explorations. *The presence of Mies* edited by Detlef Mertins (2000) is a collection of essays by various architectural critics to explore Mies stand in practise and theory. "The Presence of Mies is an interdisciplinary collection of essays that take a fresh look at the work of this controversial architect on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Toronto-Dominion Centre. Unexpected perspectives have been brought to bear on Mies, opening up new ways of thinking about his work and new possibilities for extending it into contemporary architecture and cultural theory. The Presence of Mies is a timely re-evaluation of Mies's buildings, writings, and teaching in relation to issues of technology, image culture, philosophy, art, and education" (Mertins, 2000: 2). Birksted (2009) in *Le Corbusier and the Occult*, explores the inspirations behind Le Corbusier's work tracing back to early years of his life. He talks about how Corbusier's architecture drew inspiration from his childhood years at La- Chaux de fonds, early inspirations and theory of right angle. Although the narrative is descriptive on the whole, Birksted still manages to maintain ambiguity of facts and possibilities of further explorations, leaving interpretation to the visitor.

#### 4.4 Persuasion

More than description often discourses serve as platform to put forward opinion of the critic on the subject before the reader. Objective of persuasive narration is to convince or persuade the reader on believing an idea. Writers of such discourses could be activist critics, convincing the reader of the importance of certain historical monument, and hence the need for its preservation. Or it could be an account published by an architectural firm, advertising its works. Objectivity of such narratives should be carefully evaluated by the reader. Rattenbury (2000) in *A living architecture* starts of by describing Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural understanding, Taliesin and Taliesin fellowship. This brief introduction sets the background for remaining book emphasizing on the pioneering work of the studio, describing each and every project typology wise. The discourse is descriptive yet persuasive because Rattenbury succeeds in projecting Wright's work in bright light. Le Corbusier (2014) himself tries to persuade the readers and his peers in the profession about his architectural understanding through *Towards a new architecture*. Furthermore, Le Corbusier (1961) in *The Modulor*, attempts to establish a principle specific argument about the standards of measurement based on his 'modular man'. The narrative revolves around the details, use and value of the measuring system, and the beauty of resulting architectural compositions. Though not intentional, but Corbusier's affirmative tone develops bias amongst the readers towards his measurement system.

#### 4.5 Miscellaneous-

Apart from traditional objectives of narratives discussed above, there exist certain unique discourses which cannot be categorised. Writers have explored fictional narratives to talk about architecture and architects. (Rand, 1943) in *The Fountainhead*, explores the relationship between architecture and ornamentation, and purity of form by building up a story around the character Howard Roark. Architects often pen down their life journeys through autobiographies. Wright (1977) sets to describe the happening of his life in *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Autobiography*. He tours the reader on the journey of his life starting from family, fellowship, work and freedom. Doshi (2019) also narrates his life struggles and works through autobiography called *Paths Uncharted*. These narratives are unique in their kind, supplementing the traditional body of knowledge.

### 5. Grammar of narration

The objective (theme) of narration also decides the approach of discourse and material knowledges associated. The approach of narration is the thread which connects the objective to the voice, like grammar defines and rules language. Grammar of narration can be very broadly classified as –

#### 5.1 Factual –

The content mainly states the existing facts and figures. Material knowledges required is usually drawings, pictures, details and interviews. Highly objective and narration is weighed for the authenticity of information and source. In such cases the length and depth of information becomes primary important.

## 5.2 Narrative-

This discourse attempts to narrate a story and the piece of writing is intentionally fashioned in a particular style and sequence to create a storyline. Factual information is the key, but the analysis of these facts depends upon the plot and the skill of the writer.

## 5.3 Interpretative –

The voice of the narrator becomes the most important in argumentative or interpretative discourses. Set of material knowledges is used not only to state the fact but are also explored to support the hypothesis.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper critically analyses set of established narratives on architects and attempts at understanding the same through 'voice', 'theme' and 'grammar'. The primary objective of the paper is to understand the structure and nature of architecture narratives. This is done by analysing nature of the *narrative* and defining *structure* for the same. The paper analyses the narratives by establishing principles of categorisation namely voice, theme and grammar. It is the interplay of all the three that shape language of written discourse. All the three categories however co-exist and function together. Moreover, there exist no ideal combination of the three to establish an ideal argument. The use of grammar, theme and voice depends upon the intent and nature of argument. The matrix (Figure 1) hence proposed explores all the possible combinations that can be explored to establish an architectural discourse.

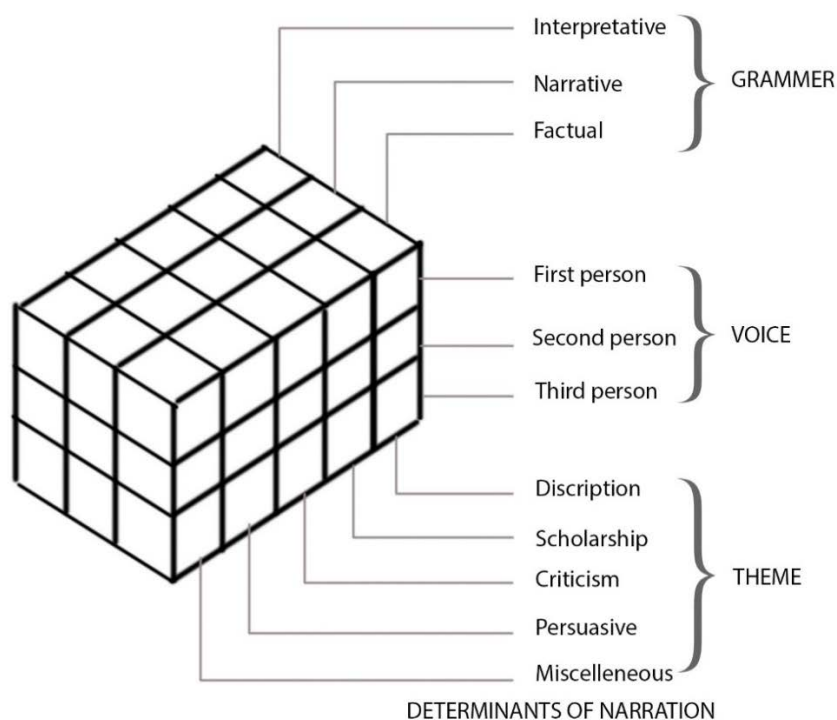


Figure 1. Determinants of architectural discourse

## 7. Use in research and education –

A few possible titles of research have been briefly projected to explore the possible combination of categories of grammar, theme and voice, in the same sequence to establish an appropriate narrative. Ar B V Doshi, Pritzker Prize winner 2018 is the test subject of case study, and various aspects of Doshi's works are stated as cases or problem statement. The cases help to explore one of the many possible ways to utilise the *determinants of narratives* proposed in the paper.

### *Aim – To understand cultural contextuality in Doshi's work*

#### *Case 1 – Scholarship – narrative – third person*

The objective is to understand the importance of cultural settings in Doshi's works. The research shall begin with an understanding of 'culture' and its transposition in architecture in general. The dismantling of culture would lead to deriving parameter to study manifestation of culture into built form. Selected projects can be studied and analysed against the derived parameters for to trace cultural manifestations in Doshi's work.

#### *Case 2 - Interpretative – Persuasion – third person*

The objective is to understand the need and importance of cultural settings in architecture, with reference to Doshi's work. The research shall begin with analysing, interpreting Doshi's work, in cultural context. Doshi's technique of addressing cultural values, would then be validated and defended to establish the same, holistically for the Indian context. The major theme of the narration is to persuade the reader about the importance of cultural interpretations in architecture, and hence to put forth standard strategies for the Indian cultural context.

#### *Case 3 - Descriptive – Factual – first person*

Doshi's research cell called VSF, decides to create awareness by bringing out in public the unique quality of cultural contextuality in Doshi's works. Such narrative will mostly be factual, describing Doshi's work through cultural lens. The discourse shall be highly objective, as it only aims to bring into public light Doshi's works and hence are devoid of any interpretations, arguments, or criticism.

Therefore, the same 'aim' of research can take different directions depending upon the combination of grammar, voice and theme selected. The selection of categories however purely depends upon the objective of narration. However, there is no one correct or ideal way to write about architects and architecture. In fact, all writers get it right their own way!

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.



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## Biography

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Maria Akhtar is an architect, academician, researcher and a passionate artist. Her research interest lies in the study of meaning of form in historic buildings, oral history and man-environment interaction. She has presented papers at various national and international conferences. Maria has completed her Bachelor of Architecture from Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, Nagpur in 2014 and M-Arch in Architecture education from Smt Manoramabai Mundle College of Architecture, Nagpur in 2017. Currently she is working as an Assistant Professor at Dayananda Sagar College of Architecture, Bangalore and Research Consultant at Innovature Research and Design Studio (IRDS), Bangalore.