Sophia Psarra's
Architecture and Narrative
The formation of space and cultural meaning
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Architecture and Narrative: the formation of space and cultural meaning, looks at how meaning is constructed in buildings and how it is communicated to the viewer. It does so by studying narrative through a series of contrasting studies, framing the question of narrative slightly differently in each study. This gives the opportunity to study narrative not only from different perspectives, but in different historical periods. The book is not, however, a historical study of narrative in architecture but focuses on modernity - a limitation that seems to mostly have been for the better. It further focuses primarily on cultural buildings, and more specifically on museums. In a sense, this makes it a continuation of the discussions in Thomas A. Marcus Buildings & Power, which leaves off at the end of the 19th century. Nevertheless, Psarra's point of departure takes on the broad sweep of history. Thus, the first part of the book consists of a study of the Parthenon and the Erectheon, followed by an investigation of Mies' Barcelona Pavilion; the second part deals with architecture and narrative in literature through two chapters focusing on literary works of the 20th century by the Argentinean author Jean Luis Borges; the third part studies narrative in museums of history and art in a more or less chronological order; ending up with the fourth part which constitutes a theoretical synthesis and conclusion.

Throughout, Psarra builds on space syntax theory and methods in order to trace narratives, at times also expanding the tools in intriguing ways. She does so from the perspective of space syntax analysis, capturing embodied experience of vision and movement through architectural space, questions around which nearly all of the analyses circulate. Thus order and sequence become important, as do open and controlled structures, but also contingency, contradictions, reflections, and a constant return to the tension between the conceptual and the material, or conceived and lived space. Here, Psarra has deliberately chosen to use the same terms as Lefebvre - a tension that she uses not to separate product from concept, but as a vehicle to discuss how architectural intent is communicated and translated by experience. We get a thorough discussion of how conceived geometry translates to
perceived and lived narratives, and how in many of the greater works studied they interact with one another in a sort of dialogue of contrasts, opening up a wider set of interpretations than if were they the same.

Another important part of Psarra's work is her engagement with broader architecture theory and philosophy, not separately but together with the space syntax analyses. This commends the book to a wider architectural audience on the one hand, and on the other shows how the different discourses can support and evolve in relation to one another. This is a strength of the work that at times can feel a bit curtailed, similarly to how the discussion of other theories of narrative can, at times, leave the reader wishing for more, both because the subject is interesting and because its handling by the author sometimes feels a bit rushed. Perhaps this is most noticeable in some of the museum studies, where we are given a summary of museum discourse rather than the thorough discussion that Psarra elsewhere handles so well. This problem of feeling cut short may stem from the fact that the book is largely built on a series of papers (presented at for instance Space Syntax symposia), with the constraints in length that flow from this, which is a pity as the portions where the discussions are allowed to come through are some of the highlights of the book. It must be said, however, that the highlights outweigh the abovementioned issues by far, and that a less sequential and more configurative reading - connecting the different short discussions spread throughout the volume into more cohesive ones - give a different and more complete picture, although this requires more of the reader.

Another slight shortcoming is the consistent use of comparison of pairs, which at times makes the study a bit too dichotomized, presenting works as either this or that. Psarra addresses this herself in the conclusion, and points out how she has made consistent efforts to nuance this throughout, but there still lingers the feeling that further nuance may have been gained by adding a third case in one or two of the studies, which potentially could have driven the discussion even further.

These minor shortcomings, however, do not mean that Psarra's work is not excellent. On the contrary, she provides a thorough and inventive analysis and discussion of narrative in architecture, as well as a thorough study of how properties of visibility and accessibility, directly and configuratively, participate in its conception and construction, and how this shifts between different architectural ideas and ideals. She also works thoroughly with space syntax analysis as a means to understand situated experience as embodied beings moving through space - a potential that sometimes gets lost in discussions of networks and flows or utility-centered applications. It posits this experience in relation to geometry, such as in the study of Mies' pavilion, suggesting lived symmetries may exist where geometric symmetries are hard to find, giving another angle from which to understand this modernist masterpiece. On top of this, her book also engages in a discussion of what architecture is, working with the idea that architecture is a process of configurative innovation. In summary, this richness of subjects and questions, together with the way they are discussed in depth and breadth, makes Psarra's book just as rewarding for a wider architectural audience as it is for the space syntax focused reader.
Notes


