

Words before and after Works

Commentary

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Abstract

As a counterpoint to the publication of “Ardeth” Issue 12, this reflective addition supplements the previous issue’s theme, key words, with the support of a built-research work, “A House from Another House” (2022-2023).¹ The piece draws attention towards a potential category mistake between the occurrences of words before they are related to specific architectural works and words after they are related to specific architectural works. With a contained focus on the sequence and proximity of their occurrences, we might be able to suggest that words before and after works actually exist quite differently and give something quite different in experience for those concerned with them.

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DOI:

10.17454/ARDETH13.13

ARDETH #13

1 – This piece and the built-research work that informed it was put together by the author following an invitation from the “Ardeth” editors.

Several things happen when words are put in relation to architectural works, as many authors do throughout “Ardeth” Issue 12. (When I say that several things happen, I am considering architects in particular.) As merely one way of following the relationship between words and works, I want to focus on the sequence and proximity of words and works to ask if this changes what is given in experience. Within this focus, I suspect that words and works can exist quite differently depending on their relative occurrences, and I want to ask if we are taking enough care in how we relate to them accordingly.

We need to do a few things before we begin. First, we need to agree that a subset of those of us concerned with the architectural project consider that there is something at stake in words, architectural works, and their relationships. Words might even be similar but distinct from the bird described below by Bruno Latour and various architects may be similar but distinct from the biologist and the ethnologist. Birds are not words, of course, and architects are not biologists or ethnologists; there is deformation required:

It is because the bird [word] endures in its existence that another interpretation, *proper to the biologist [architect]* interested in the extent of this duration, can be made. In this new version, biologists [architects] add their own grain of salt to the broth—but only as long as there is a bird [word]. The ethnologist [another architect or even an engineer, perhaps] is not destroying the romantic, superficial, and superfluous poetry of the singing bird [or poetic word] by substituting for them cold facts [or other ‘content’]. She [the architect or engineer] is *allowed* by the poet [another user of the word] to look for what in the bird [word] *responds* when interrogated in *another* way (Latour, 2005: 231, Latour’s emphasis).

Like and unlike the bird, I want to ask if there is something in the existence of words in relation to architectural works that endures to support *another interpretation* of them *proper to the architect*? Can this lead to the words responding to the architect when interrogated in *another* way? To follow these questions, I have chosen to use the three words that were the focus of Issue 12 – *beautiful*, *sustainable*, and *together* – as a starting point, expanding out to other words. There is no intention to match or test a correspondence between words and architecture or explore if an architectural work *is* words or if any words *are* architecture – I will return to this notion later. We also need to constrain our focus to make what I am drawing attention to make sense in the space available.

I want to focus on the relation between a built architectural work and words, such that there are (1) words that exist *before* they are related to (or are yet to be concerned with) specific architectural works and (2) words that exist *after* they are related to (or are yet to be concerned with) specific architectural works. The specific architectural work, “A House

from Another House” (2022-2023), and related occurrences of words have informed these notions of 1 and 2, as I will clarify. There are many implications related to claiming that there are words before (1) and words after (2) works. I do not consider that there is any simple binary division of 1 such that 1 has no proximity to an architectural work and 2 has *complete* proximity. Words can also exist before they are related to a specific architectural work, and architectural works can exist before words. Architectural works and words also exist as both one and many things; they are a momentary stability, never complete while existing in the making. For me, these notions, alongside others, do not cause too many problems in talking about 1 and 2. I hope I can start without a more extensive list of implications and the need to reconcile such a list here.

This focus on words before (1) and words after (2) works acknowledges that words and works are used, related, and situated in a context that includes their relative occurrences in time. This use-time context of words and works is related to their particularity. This is why I have chosen to demonstrate particular words, a particular architectural work, and their particular and relative sequences. There are sympathies between this and notions associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose quote frames “Ardeh” #12. One example is his warning in relation to generality and his emphasis on the problems we have and had with the particular case (Wittgenstein, 2007 [1958]: 17-19). There are also some connections with others with associations to Wittgenstein’s contributions, such as J. L. Austin (Austin, 1962). This piece, however, is most indebted to an ontological pluralism and radical empiricism presented by Latour (2011, 2018) through his engagements with William James, Étienne Souriau, Alfred North Whitehead, and others.

My aim here is to warn against a potential category mistake that appears when we guess at and then follow words before (1) and words after works (2). This is because, if we agree, for a moment, that 1 and 2 exist differently for those of us concerned with them, then we should also take care in demarcating them as distinct and relate to them as such, and not relate to them as though they are the same. This potential category mistake, in place of another potential category mistake, is akin to the different ontological categories emphasised in Gilbert Ryle’s example of John Doe, Richard Roe, and the *Average Taxpayer*. John or Richard *can be* a *relative, friend, enemy* or *stranger* to John or Richard, while John or Richard *cannot be* a *relative, friend, enemy* or *stranger* to the *Average Taxpayer*; John can speak about and easily conceive of the *Average Taxpayer*, but he cannot come across the *Average Taxpayer* in the street like he can Richard (Ryle, 2009 [1949]: 7-8). Like John and Richard and their relations to one another and the *Average Taxpayer*, the possible relations between words before (1) and words after (2) works may be quite different, and we may not want to be caught making the mistake that they are actually similar.

Let us take the three keywords of Issue 12 (*beautiful, sustainable, and together*), which can exist *before* they are related to specific architectural works (1) or after (2). If we pulled these words from the *New European Bauhaus (NEB) Compass* document (New European Bauhaus, 2022), and we did not, or could not, engage with the *exemplary NEB projects*, they would be something close to what I am calling 1. If the words occurred after specific exemplary NEB projects and fulfilled the requirement of proximity, then they could be close to what I am calling 2. Depending on when the architectural works in the exemplary NEB project pages occurred, when the words were put in relation to these works, and how they were related, they are words before (1) or words after works (2). As we know, words can be severed (this would be close to 1), and new or the *same* words can be related to an architectural work after it exists (this would be close to 2). In their particular occurrences, we can quite easily conceive of words that can exist as either 1 or 2 and 1 and 2 at the same time. Throughout Issue 12, you will find examples of such occurrences, not just in relation to the three keywords. Many of the authors in Issue 12 address *beautiful, sustainable, and together* (as words) by addressing other words. It is as if following these words leads the authors on paths away from these words, although they are indebted to these words in particular. Moving beyond these three words, however, does not mean we have to take them away from their use-time context.

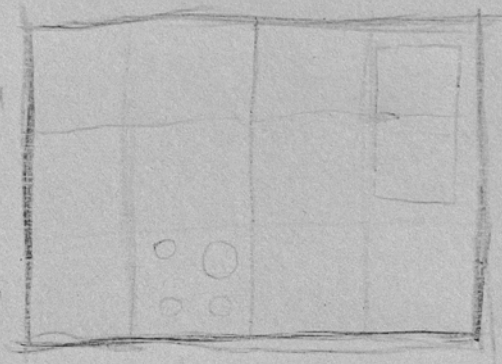
Now, take these words (Figure 1): (a) “new whole or new parts of a whole”, (b) “no room names; rooms with equipment”, and (c) “living-bench-stove-sink”. Today, these words are sitting collected within my project file for a work that is now built and occupied, “A House from Another House” (2022-2023). I have chosen to separate them according to their bullet points, not as separate words or as a subset of certain words within the bullet points. These words do not form complete sentences, and they do not follow several grammatical conventions. The first (a) is an approach of sorts, the second (b) a rule of sorts, and the third (c) seems to suggest a thing that is not made of pre-formed, pre-categorised, pre-delineated *things*. As they occur to you now, these words are close to what I have been calling 1. They are words with a distant proximity to specific architectural works. Although distant, they already oblige, inform, and associate themselves with one another, other words, and distant works; their proximity to other words and works is not zero. The words are indebted to and relate to previous words and works. They are caught up with other words and formed from innumerable associations and dependencies to exist as they do here. For me, they are not less connected or gathered merely because they are not linked or tied to a specific architectural work, as they would be if they existed as closer to 2.

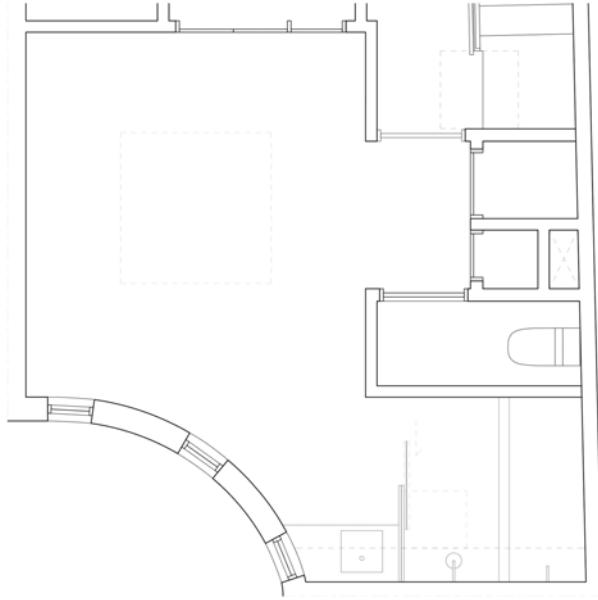
Fig. 1 - Words on loose paper in the “A House from Another House” (2022-2023) project file written by the author in approximately January or February 2022.

Fig. 2 - Pencil drawing on loose paper in the same project file drawn by the author in April 2022.

In the same project file, there is also this pencil drawing (Figure 2). Some of the words seem relevant, most explicitly “living-bench-stove-sink” (c).

- near whole or near parts of a whole
- no room names; rooms with equipment
- "living-bench-stove-stalk"







The stove and sink are, in one *thing*, an *island* of sorts that is approximately 4:3 and comprised of 12 units. In this pencil drawing, there is not much implication of expression, colour, height, details, contractors, orientation, or placement, nor much implied in terms of this thing's relationship to existing and modified conditions of the house, which are also parts of the thing. Also in the file is this plan (Figure 3) of another part of the house. A room with no name has its entrance modified. An existing bathroom becomes something more like a sink, shower, and bath within the modified and reincorporated extents of the existing room now with no name. The words in Figure 1 have some proximity here, especially “no room names; rooms with equipment” (b). Looking at the photograph (Figure 4), also in the same project file, reconciling or correlating the words (Figure 1) seems difficult with our contained focus. Things seem quite different once the words-drawing thing – Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 – starts to be what it is on site. Even now, looking at Figure 1 through to Figure 4, we can grasp that there are many things with many existences, not one, or a notion of one – a building, for instance – that is yet to become that one.

This photograph (Figure 5) is more recent than Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4, taken the day the contractor handed the keys back to the

Fig. 3 - Digital drawing in the same project file drawn by the author in May 2022.

Fig. 4 - Photograph in the same project file taken by the author in January 2023.

Fig. 5 - Photograph in the same project file taken by the author in May 2023.

owner. Like Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4, this photograph captures only a partial aspect of the architectural work. It does, however, let us now follow 1 and 2. That sink there is equipment (b), and it is in a room not labelled or named a laundry – which is not really a laundry, despite also having a washing machine. The floor and walls shown in the frame of the photograph are not part of this architectural work; they belong to the previous architectural work but were refinished as part of this work. These *new parts* have a relationship to the previous *whole* (a) of the existing house, as much as the cupboards' grain and colour have a relationship to the framing throughout the existing house. The built work has a version of the “living-bench-stove-sink” (c) sketched in Figure 2, but it may relate to words more like “living-bench-sink and a nearby stove.” However, remember, as tempting as this may be, I do not want to track the correlations between these words and this work. I want to convince us to ask ourselves quite seriously: do the words in Figure 1 *before* Figure 5 (words *before* works, or 1) and Figure 1 *after* Figure 5 (words *after* works, or 2) exist differently to us? Does 1 give something different to experience than 2? Can we already answer with something closer to yes than no?

For those for whom this still seems strange, further examples might be helpful. While some disciplines may have words that are mostly 1 or 2, architecture seems to have established portions of 1 and 2. At the risk of considering words more generally, we can say that when the words in Pierre Jeanneret's and Le Corbusier's “Five Points of Architecture” (1971 [1926]) occurred, they were and are still pretty different from those that occurred in Albena Yaneva's (2009, 2017) ethnographies. The obvious distinctions are not my point. Within our contained focus, we might say that the former is closer to 1, and the latter is closer to 2. Similarly, an off-the-plan apartment marketing description and a good building review exist differently and give something quite different to experience; the words of the former are more 1, and the words of the latter are more 2. Antonio Sant' Elia's “Manifesto of Futurist Architecture” (2006 [1914]) is also unlike Robin Evan's “Figures, Doors and Passages” (1997 [1978]). Again, the former seems closer to 1, and the latter seems closer to 2. What we can say and do with 1 and 2 is quite different. Occurrences of 1 seem to exist through an incorporated assumption that words – and their words in particular – can be linked to, connected to, related to, and be caught up with specific yet-to-be architectural works. Words before (1) do not seem to need to bring as much back to us as words after (2); this might suggest they *respond* quite differently to our interrogations. Speculation is also seemingly more at home in the occurrences of 1 and less so in the cases of 2. While there are already more agreed ways to split up or not split up words – some may say that 1 and 2 are both just instances of words or that 1 and 2 are different genres of words – I still think we need to ask if such categorisations take care of whatever is in words *proper* to the architect concerned with them.

Without being convinced of everything said about words before (1) and words after works (2), we might still agree that the notions of 1 and 2 help to raise some suspicion. After all, caring for the different existences of 1 and 2 may help us dissolve seemingly sensible but irreconcilable questions about words and works. Questions such as, I am looking for the words that *are* an architectural work; where can I find them? Or these words do not *correspond* to this work; can you find me the ones that do? Even if we merely suspect that 1 and 2 exist differently, then we should probably avoid asking questions that follow 1 and 2 as if they are the same. Even with more particular cases beyond those introduced in relation to “A House from Another House” (2022-2023), such questions *may never be able to care* for 1’s and 2’s different existences. Dissolving these questions is then about acknowledging the flaws in the assumption that 1 and 2 are comparable in the ways these questions imply. Therefore, 1 and 2 should not be thought of as two components or parts of one thing for us; we can relate to them as two quite different existing things that endure differently for those of us concerned with them. This could also mean that we pave the way for many more existences, as Latour hopes we can (Latour, 2011). Remember Ryle’s warning that John Doe or Richard Roe should not be considered as able to bump into the *Average Taxpayer* in the street as they might with one another. Their different existences mean we should follow them distinctly and accordingly. If we do so, and if we are ontologically prepared to do so, we might shift our attention towards questions such as: how are words before works (1) and words after works (2) actually *incomparable* and *incompatible*? Such a shift might help us read “Ardeth” Issue 12 differently – as an additional difference that can add further to the contributions of the authors.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands I live and work, the people of the Kulin Nation; “A House from Another House” (2022-2023) is on Wurundjeri Country. I would also like to acknowledge the innumerable others who have worked on the architectural work that informed this piece, as well as the larger project of architecture that is inseparable from this smaller one.

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