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Fone/Fax: (11) 3670-8085
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Structures of Belief: Pragmatism and the Architectures of Self and Idea

Estruturas da Crença: Pragmatismo e as Arquiteturas do Self e Ideia

Steven Skaggs
Program Head, Communication Art & Design
University of Louisville
s.skaggs@louisville.edu

Abstract: A model is developed that arrays architecture types according to a building's focus on self (utility toward work and life function) and idea (intellectual concept). An argument is made that between a focus on self or on idea, some architecture takes the form of a pose, a pretense that it is something other than its purpose would suggest, but without attempting to impose an idea. This creates a dynamic along two axes, physical/mental and irony/sincerity. The resulting arc presents a structural model by which architecture's belief profile can be mapped.

Key words: Design. Architecture. Belief. Pragmatism. Peirce. Propaganda. Modernism. Postmodernism.

Resumo: *Um modelo é desenvolvido que dispõe tipos de matrizes de arquitetura de acordo com o foco de um edifício em si (utilitário para o trabalho e função vida) e ideia (conceito intelectual). Um argumento é apresentado que entre o foco no self ou na ideia, alguma arquitetura toma a forma de uma pose, uma pretensão que é algo diferente do que seu propósito poderia sugerir, mas sem pretender impor uma ideia. Isso cria uma dinâmica ao longo de dois eixos, físico/mental e ironia/sinceridade. O arco resultante apresenta um modelo estrutural pelo qual o perfil da crença da arquitetura pode ser mapeado.*

Palavras-chave: *Design. Arquitetura. Crença. Pragmatismo. Peirce. Propaganda. Modernismo. Pós-modernismo.*

In this article, I will place two subjects in front of you, and then draw some connections between them, connections that may serve to illumine and expand both subjects. The first subject is one with which many of you will be familiar: Charles Peirce's notion of how one arrives at a settled opinion, put forward in 1878 in an article in *Popular Science Monthly*, "The Fixation of Belief" – an essay that is one of the fundamental texts in pragmatist studies.[1] The second subject that I want to place before you is architecture.

1 PEIRCE, C. S. "The Fixation of Belief", in CP 5.358-387.

1.

The term "belief" could require a series of books to explore in detail, and it is not my intention to offer here an argument for or against a particular treatment. However, in order to make it clear how I will use the term in this article, allow me to offer the following example.

In my country, at this moment, we are experiencing a nearly revolutionary struggle – certainly the most radical disjunction in any of my countrymen's lifetimes – between two very different belief systems. Both of these belief systems use the word "liberty" or derivations thereof, to describe what they are about – however, what they are about are two very different views of the idea of liberty. On the one hand, liberals favor a strong state that acts as an agent in promoting a general improvement of society as a collective whole. On the other hand, libertarians favor complete autonomy for the individual, which entails a disempowerment of the state. Whereas the former position requires a large federal government and the relinquishing by the individual of certain freedoms in favor of a common benefit, the latter position requires the shrinking of the federal government to a very small role in society, essentially reducing its function to the waging of armed conflict and the construction of highways.

Now, I raise this example simply to make the point that the two positions represent two very different ideas. The holding of these core ideas manifests itself in beliefs as represented through these two diametrically opposed courses of action. By way of extension, then, for the purposes of this essay, let us presume that the word "belief" be used to represent ideas upon which someone is prepared to act. This is a position Peirce ascribed to Alexander Bain[2] and one that Peirce reiterated on many occasions during his life. It is, in large measure, a restatement of the pragmatist theme, implying that the condition of holding a belief predisposes one toward certain actions and conversely, by action one may infer the underlying set of beliefs.

2.

In "The Fixation of Belief," Charles Peirce devoted most of his attention to the four different methods in which a person might adhere to a belief. One may hold a belief simply because one is simply tenacious, or because of authority, or because of the apparent common sense reasonableness of something, or finally, through a method of scientific reasoning. But I am interested in looking not at how one adheres to a belief, but rather at how one moves from one belief to another. So let's say that I am a liberal, and then at some subsequent time I become a libertarian. I have moved from one moment in time in which I have held belief one, to another moment in some subsequent time in which I hold belief two. Somewhere in between belief number one and belief number two I have undergone a change of mind. What transpires in the duration of that change of mind? One would scarcely imagine that architecture could assist us in answering that question, but that is what I'd like to suggest.

2 CP 5.12.

3.

A few years ago I paid a visit to the Creation Museum in Petersburg Kentucky. Operated by an organization called Answers In Genesis, the Creation Museum promotes the view that the universe was created in six days, according to a literal understanding of the description provided in the King James version of the Bible. Other than being derided as "the biggest collection of kitsch in God's entire world,"[3] the remarkable thing about touring the Creation Museum is that, as you inhabit it, the physical building seems to disappear, to become progressively diminished and ultimately totally overcome; the physical edifice is absorbed into the particular idea that it promotes. A more pure example of propagandistic architecture has surely never been erected. No mere suggestion through symbol and form nor subtle reference to ideology, it is a sustained attempt to impose an idea and every ounce of the building's structure is marshaled to serve that purpose.

Allow me to give a brief description of the tour through Creation Museum. Approaching from the parking lot, the Creation Museum appears to be a civic building, it is certainly secular in its vocabulary. Upon entering there are a few unusual sights: for example, a velociraptor and a cave girl stand at the same stream, tour guides are dressed in khaki African safari uniforms to take tickets. But in every way, the early experience is the same that one would have walking into a museum of natural history. The first room presents a familiar sort of display: a re-creation of a dig site in which two paleontologists work to preserve a hadrosaur fossil. We are told through text that

one of the paleontologists is a secular scientist and the other is a "creation scientist." They both do the same kind of work, we are told, they just happen to have different beliefs: man's story of a 5 billion year-old earth and God's story of a 6000 year-old earth (which would you choose to believe, man or God?).

As the viewer moves to other rooms, the argument continues to unfold. In rationalistic terms we are informed that what we see in the geological record can be logically deduced to be evidence of the deluge as recounted in the Bible. In these early rooms, we are still aware of the building's structure around us, we see walls, ceiling and hallways etc., but then we turn a corner and we step literally into the story of Genesis. At this point, the ceiling seems to drop away into the sky there is lavish plant life and running streams, the sound of a rain forest or perhaps jungle. From this point on, the lighting, mannequins, scenic arrangement make it impossible to notice the presence of the building that we inhabit. Instead, the physical structure of the building is replaced in our perception by increasing layers of video, audio, and static images.

3 GILL, A. A. "Roll Over Charles Darwin!" Vanity Fair, February, 2010

We walk through the stories of the fall of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's construction of the ark, and so on for the rest of Genesis. In what seems to be an increasing pace, the visitor is shuttled through scenes of modern society's failings, from drugs and pornography to war, ascribing all of these failures to the disbelief in the literal interpretation of the Bible. The scenes are now accompanied by dozens of multimedia screens and video loops. These create a process of constant repetition, disorienting spatial perspective, simultaneous layers of information resulting in a complete blindness to the physical structure of the building. What is left is only idea. The imposition of the idea is constant, unrelenting, so that when one emerges – into an improbable cabana somewhere (Jerusalem?) in the Middle East – the effect is one of decompression, relief, exhalation.

The entire edifice becomes a device to inculcate belief, and most of the tools of the propaganda trade are expertly deployed. The architecture has become a typography in a syllogism, moving toward an inevitable conclusion. Just as book typography becomes invisible (as shape and form) to the reader, so in this propagandistic architecture, the physical building becomes invisible to the occupant. To push the metaphor further: like typography, such propagandistic architecture directly serves, not the function of life's labor, but the function of thought. What predominates in architecture as propaganda is not the physical manifestation of the building, but the abstract intellectual concept – the solitary golden idea. This is an architecture constructed to initially instill doubt, and then, through the methods of reiterative tenacity and authority, to fix a particular replacement idea as a belief.

4.

Charles Peirce, in a second Popular Science Monthly Article, "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," says, "what then, is belief? It is the demi-cadence which closes the musical phrase in the Symphony of our intellectual life. We have seen that it has just three properties: First, It is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, a habit. As it appeases the irritation of doubt which is the motive for thinking, thought relaxes, and comes to rest for a moment when belief is reached."[4]

If we take Peirce's point that attaining belief is a point of rest of the intellect, then an interesting phenomenon occurs. When one is entertaining an idea there is restlessness of the intellect, and energetic disposition of mind. But when one attains the belief and reaches this demi-cadence, the restlessness of the idea recedes. One simply seems to be acting in accordance to certain habitual behaviors. One is simply "being oneself."

And so, returning to architecture, what does an architecture look like which is a manifestation – but not a promulgation – of belief?

There is an architecture that plays the same role as simply being itself. While this architecture may be interpreted (as can anything) as an exemplification[5] of certain

4 CP 5.397.

5 GOODMAN, Nelson. *The Languages of Art.* Hackett: Indianapolis, 1976. In Nelson Goodman's aesthetic system, the word "exemplification" has special significance, being a particular mode of expression found in works of art (See especially pages 52-57). I

qualities, or as a reflection of societal habits, its functional role is simply to do the "living-work" of day-to-day life. This kind of architecture is known as vernacular architecture. Vernacular structures house, shelter, store, provide privacy, and assist, by their fitness to purpose, the performance of activities that fix attention to the work of living. Vernacular architecture does not consciously promote, persuade, or inculcate ideas. Vernacular architecture simply allows human beings to live efficiently. This is an architecture that has the flavor of simply being itself, in its physicality, in its appropriateness for the living functions that it houses, in its requisite form well-suited in every respect for what we are doing as we engage life through it.

Take for example a rural barn. Its proportions, size, shape and form are all determined by the work it is asked to do as storage shed for equipment, tool for hoisting, shelter for livestock, hay, supplies and equipment. Barns, and other examples of the vernacular, are products of oral tradition, established practice in a given region of the country, often raised by a community of neighbors who know the standard form and framework of the structure. A barn uses local materials, blends into the countryside it inhabits, becomes part of the overall environment's context even as the environment provides context for it. Although a scholar might perform a semiotic or cultural analysis of a barn, relating it to conceptions the culture espouses, its primary voice simply says, "Here I am and this is what I do." What predominates in vernacular structures is not the abstract intellectual idea but the physical individual–the self.

5.

So, let's pause here and consider this dynamic: we have a self that is placidly following the demi-cadence habit of certain beliefs. On the other hand, and in a potentially confrontational position to the self, we have ideas – some of which are not held by that self – and which initiate the irritation of doubt. What is the state that constitutes this in-between period, this "gap" between two beliefs that Peirce calls "doubt." What

wish to make a distinction between an object's possible interpretative fecundity and its purposed social role.

is the status of this gap? From this in-between place, is neither belief being held?[6] Is there perhaps some belief number three (or 1.5?) being held? But if a belief is necessary in order for us to be prepared to act, then some additional belief would seem to be required in order to make the action of moving from a prior to a latter belief system.

I would like to suggest that this inter-belief space represents a kind of quasi-belief called "posing." This word, "pose", derives from the Latin *pausare*. Ironically, the word in Latin means to pause, and indeed, the pose can be imagined to be a kind of pause between two states of relative confidence. But this is not the tranquil pause of self found in the demi-cadence, nor that of an idea buttressed by rational argument, but rather a temporary position that one assumes; it is an unstable state. In English, "to pose" means to assume a particular foreign attitude or stance, to be an actor, that is, to present oneself insincerely. So, posing is a cessation of the habituated idea, and the adoption not of another idea directly, but rather the adoption of the stance of another idea. This stance is taken so that another idea, a foreign idea, can be assumed temporarily in a kind of playful, artificial or ironic game. In posing, there is a tentative trying-on of what "idea number two" would entail if it were adopted as a belief. The pose does not really adopt the idea into one's self, but rather pretends to do so.

6.

It turns out that there is an architecture of the pose, and to some extent this variety of architecture is becoming increasingly prevalent. As an example, I will choose the Walt Disney World resorts in Florida. Consider the Yacht and Beach Club Resorts. The Yacht and Beach Club Resorts are a grouping of hotels, shops, swimming areas and lounges with the theme of early 20th century seaside luxury all encircling a lagoon. This environment however, is a complete pose. The lagoon is not a lagoon, the granite boulders are painted concrete, the ship that is wrecked at the beach of the lagoon is a hollow façade, the pennants which appear to flap in the breeze atop the roofs are actually made of metal. This entire built environment invites its occupants to pretend, to occupy a stage set, to become characters in a real–time world of fantasy. One might point to other examples of fully-themed environments as cases where the occupant is similarly a character in an elaborate set. We leave our normal lives behind in such environments, and pretend, in a sense, to be characters in some story. We are being insincere, pausing in our normal, habituated lives – we pretend to be living in a new world.

At first, the pose would seem to have something in common with the propaganda architecture of the Creation Museum, in which one is similarly ensconced in a constructed world. Yet this is not the same as the propaganda situation. We are not having an argument imposed upon us, we are not really adopting a new set of ideas to live by, we are for a time inserted into a parallel and temporary world, and it is understood by the inhabitants and the project's managers alike, that this experience is to be a temporary one, to some extent an "unserious" playful one.

6 Such would beg the question of the nature of the interpretant that is existing in that state.

So now, having suggested that posing occupies an intermediate position between self and idea, I would like to show a little diagram of this spectrum.

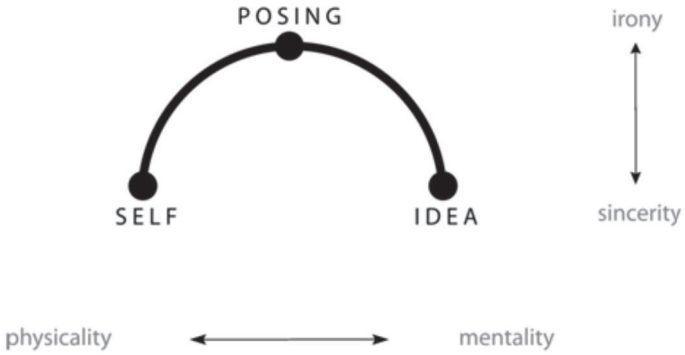
Although the pose occupies an intermediate position between self and idea, self and idea share a quality that the pose utterly lacks. In what I have said so far, both the self and the idea are in some way *authentic*. The self, in holding ideas and believing them, uses belief to habituate action. The idea, a concept that maintains an autonomy and a sense of identity, also has an authenticity and sincerity inherent to it. The pose however, as we have seen, is inherently inauthentic and ironic. Whereas both the self and idea want to regulate themselves for permanence, the pose is by nature unstable and fugitive. Therefore, what we are confronted with in the dynamic between adhering to an idea and doubting that idea, are two separate spectra that can be seen in the following diagram. One axis defines a region between the self and idea, manifested through focus on structurally useful physicality or ideational mentality, while the other axis defines a kind of "tonal range" between sincerity and irony, in which self and idea are united in opposition to posing. Now, when self, pose, and idea, are placed along a range according to these two axes, they describe an arc. We might call this arc the "arc of belief."

The architecture that we have discussed can be seen as occupying positions along this arc of belief, and therefore represent a reflection, a physical representation, of a

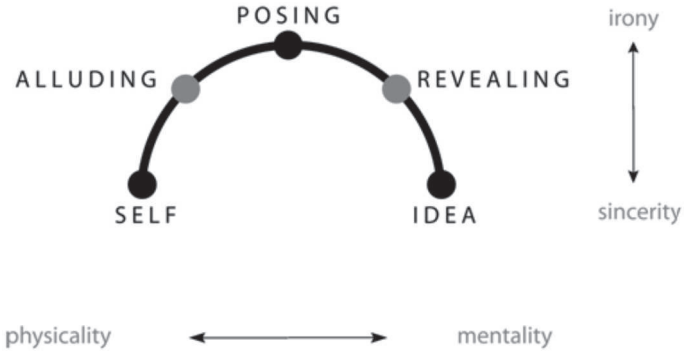
culture's dynamic interplay within this pragmatic system that is the fixation of belief.

7.

Now, having sketched this structure, I'd like to simply place a couple more mileposts along the arc, before finishing with some concluding observations. The arc is a spectrum upon which innumerable locations could be described, but I will simply mention two more: alluding and revealing.



Midway between the physical manifestation being oneself and the ironic stance of the pose is architecture in which allusion plays an important role. Such architecture is metaphorical without assuming a completely ironic role as happens in the pose. An example is the Costco chain of retail stores in the United States. Here, there is a clear metaphor that is being symbolized: that of the distribution warehouse. Costco alludes to something it is not. Its front doors are styled to appear to be a loading dock, its interior shelving appears to be industrial shelving, the lighting is halogen industrial lamps, the floor concrete, and the large quantities of products that are stacked upon the shelves suggest one has entered the warehouse of a wholesaler. Its cavernous interior is punctuated by the repeated rhythms of products. There is no stock room



separated from the retail section, instead there are simply higher shelves giving the illusion that we, the customers, have been allowed into a wholesale outlet where the entire building is essentially a large stock room. This allusion of special privilege is reinforced by having to purchase a Costco membership that gives one the sense being allowed to take part part in a special behind-the-scenes opportunity.

Everything in a Costco store is bundled in large quantities. All these attributes, some of them admittedly not purely of an architectural nature, make use of metaphor in an iconic, representationalist manner. Yet, if a Costco can be said to allude to something it is not, it still falls short of the complete masquerade of the pose. The move away from the complete integrity of simply "usefully being oneself" toward

telling a story through figurative analogies is a significant departure, and it marks the break between what is considered modernist and what is considered postmodern, on which I'll have further comment in my concluding remarks.

8.

The other milestone that I wish to describe is the midpoint between the pose and the idea. Architecture found at this place features idea, but stops short of complete

immersion in or imposition of the idea. It is architecture that exists to reveal an idea. There is no question that such architecture, to a greater or lesser extent, becomes implicated in the information it delivers, is never "objective" or "unsullied" by the stance it assumes as an independent objective revealer. Yet, there is a distinction between such architecture and complete propaganda. Architecture that reveals never gets lost or disappears into its message, even if its structural form may recede somewhat in service to that message. More importantly, rather than hide its source of authority, or treat the authority as an unassailable given, the revealing building is transparent in indexing this power structure while also allowing it to be called into question. We will take as an example of this kind of architecture, the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, Scotland.

The Hunterian is the earliest example of a natural history museum in Scotland. Assembled from the collections of William Hunter in the 18th century, its manner of representation has not changed a great deal in the past hundred years. Housed on the campus of the University of Glasgow, its exhibits reside in rows of wood and glass curio cases. The exhibits are actual items or products of the taxidermist's art. But this is a verbo-centric world, with plenty of labels and the language of the humanist scholar. The structure of the building, the presence of which is never denied by its engulfment of the exhibits within, is that of the basilica, the cathedral. The exhibits tell the story of evolution and the natural history of the world. This is quite literally, the enlightenment finding shelter within the church. The architecture sends a very clear message: God has given man this capacity of reason with which to understand creation. So we see that it is the inverse of the Creation Museum, which, though housed in a secular shell, warns man never to trust reason. While the architecture of the Hunterian is designed to recede somewhat in deference to its exhibits, the idea is never imposed upon the viewer. In and through this architecture, ideas are revealed. There is no question that the information is presented as truth, but it is a tentative truth always open to revision. Though the ideas are foregrounded, they are not instilled

or injected into the audience. The audience is permitted a kind of breathing room in which to consider the information that is disclosed, and in this breathing room, there is still some place left for the self to hold to an oppositional belief.

9.

In presenting some concluding remarks, I'd like to simply make a few observations. First, I would like to stress that this framework that I have introduced, this arc of belief, with its five demarcated mileposts, represents an idealized situation; few buildings are purely architecture of self or idea or pose. Most occupy some position in between, suggested by the mediate markers of alluding and revealing.

It is interesting to note that architecture, as soon as it moves away from the vernacular, always represents, to some degree, a projection of belief. Such architecture, self-conscious architecture, is the architecture of the Academy. The architect is learning about architectures in other parts of the world and other centuries as well. Therefore, the architect is working with an awareness of the built environment as something inserted into a system, a cultural matrix, a language.

Some buildings have parts that occupy different positions on the arc, sending mixed messages. This general problem of unfocused or multiple meanings might be called "semantic dispersal." Semantic dispersal across the belief arc results in buildings that are conspicuously fragmented in their semantic stance and compromised in attaining gestalt or wholeness. It might be expected that this lack of integrity toward a belief posture can be just as damaging to a building's aesthetic power as disunity of form.

One of the products of experimenting with this model is that the tension between various styles of architecture, such as that between modernism and postmodernism, can be easily seen in terms of their position on the arc. Modernist architecture tends to be very close to the pole of self, so it is not surprising that the archetypal vernacular of Shaker[7] architecture was often held up as an ideal by the modernists. In both, function and self are reflected through form.

7 The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, or "Shakers," was founded in England in the 18th century and spread to the United States, where, in the 19th century they started dozens of utopian communities based upon the virtue of simplicity.

Postmodernists, meanwhile, make abundant use of metaphor, representationalism and irony. Here, the form not only serves the life function of the building, but just as emphatically, its communication function. Although idea is present in modernist architecture, it gets a much more prominent role in Postmodernist architecture, with its foregrounding of metaphor and in its allusions.

Postmodernism, and its alluding nature, was the dominant architecture of the last generation and has to one degree or another, represented the foregrounding and projection of beliefs. But if we reflect on the prevalence of buildings today that are themed, that appropriate stylistic motifs from disparate cultures and virtual reality tropes, or that harken to a mixture of pasts, or self-consciously work within an appropriated idiomatic stylistic language, we discover that now, well into the 21st century, one is tempted to say that it is becoming the norm for serious architecture to make a complete disavowal of self, that is, to adopt the pose. Before our present time, this has been the place of Carnival. It is the self being placed aside, the donning of the festival mask, the acceptance of pretense.

The continuing crisis of self is a hallmark of our age – so say the existentialists. If what I have noted is true, and our built environment moves increasingly toward the pose, perhaps our contemporary architecture is a physical record, an indexical mark scraped across our world, tracing a path in concrete and brick through our existential dilemma – a dilemma defined by the pragmatist's interplay between self and idea, doubt and the fixation of belief.

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Endereço/ *Address*

Steven Skaggs
8116 Wolf Pen Branch Road
Prospect, Kentucky 40059
USA

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