Design and the Constitution of Semantic or Conceptual Meaning

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Abstract: The main argument of the essay is that elements of design often contribute to the constitution of meaning in design objects even when that meaning is strictly of the type we typically think of as independent of stylistic considerations: the kind of meaning which is that of words, concepts, and statements. We focus in particular on the work and thought of the architect Robert Venturi. A subsidiary argument, aimed to secure the findings of the main argument, concerns the widespread postmodern line of thought that meaning in general is necessarily indeterminate and unreliable. We argue that this idea itself in fact makes equal room for the opposite conclusion: that (in this context) the meanings which design objects present are often fully the genuine meanings of the objects or the other signifieds they express.

Keywords: design, meaning, craft, Robert Venturi, architecture, postmodernism

We want to show that the elements of design often contribute to the production of meaning in design objects even when that meaning is strictly of the type that we typically think of as independent of stylistic or presentational considerations. This is what we shall call semantic meaning: the meaning we associate centrally with that of words, concepts, and statements. It is easy to think of this kind of meaning as independent of stylistic or presentational considerations, since in its home territory its core content appears to be unaffected by, say, its particular place in a sentence or the features of its context. For example, the content of "ball" seems the same in "the girl kicked the red ball" and "the blue ball was kicked by the boy." We want to show, however, that this independence of style and meaning is often not the case, with respect both to purely verbal contexts and to craft objects.

Craft and other material design objects sometimes also express semantic meanings through their materials and can incorporate verbal symbols as well. As we will suggest, however, some kinds of purely verbal constructions are themselves also design objects.

We will begin by showing that the elements of style often contribute to the constitution of semantic meanings even in the apparently unlikely case of words, concepts, and statements themselves. We will show this first with respect to poetry and then with respect to some strategies of everyday communication. While these strategies are purely verbal and also evanescent, we suggest that they are nonetheless forms of craft object, having the analogy to poetry that, say, household mugs have to sculptures. Next, we will turn to material craft and design objects and the relation between their design features and semantic meanings. In particular, we will look at the work and sympathetic thought of the architect Robert Venturi, with the complex expression of semantic meaning through design that his work displays.

While not always the case, it is typically true of material design objects that their stylistic features already express their semantic meaning directly and immediately of themselves. Similarly, in the context of verbal constructions, a stylistic feature of voice such as sonority can directly express, say, gravity; or bold capitals in typeface can directly express shocking import. In these cases, of course,

our thesis has nothing novel to say. Here, style and constitution of semantic meaning are one. But for this, and in fact also for the other contexts where our thesis does hopefully contribute, we want to add a subsidiary thesis.

There is a widespread postmodern current of thought that derives from the idea which we have also been implicitly proposing, that meaning is constituted by an interplay of features that are conceptually, and therefore essentially, different from each other. For example, meanings are constituted partly by their relations to and interactions with other meanings, partly by their roles in human activities, and partly by their contexts in social institutions. (For institutional contexts, consider, for instance, the meaning of "vote.") This postmodern current of thought concludes that, because this interplay between these fundamentally different kinds of features leaves room for thoroughgoing error in the effective connections of these features with each other, meaning in general is necessarily unreliably established and consequently always to some degree indeterminate. That is, meanings, and therefore the objects whose meanings they are, never really quite mean what they seem to mean, or are what they seem to be.

(This should not be confused with the pragmatist idea that meaning is a matter of what it does, with the consequence that it is localized to particular contexts of usage. In that perspective, meaning is still wholly determinate in each particular case.)

In order to secure our findings about meanings in design, we would like to show that this current of thought itself in fact equally makes room for the opposite conclusion. That is, in our context, the meanings which design objects present are often in fact fully the genuine meanings of the objects or the other signifieds they express, and they convey exactly what they appear to convey.

1. Words, Statements, and Purely Verbal Design Objects

The semantic meaning even of words, thoughts, and statements is often constituted partly by the design of the composition of their elements. These elements include both those which are inherently semantically meaningful and those which typically contribute only indirectly to semantic meaning, such as sound, shape, and sequence.

Design plays a role in the constitution of both semantic meaning as what is immediately expressed and also semantic meaning as it sustains legitimate inferences and other kinds of justification. The second case, that is, is semantic meaning as it sustains the establishing and expression of purported truth. Differently said, design plays a role not only in the expression of meaning or sense but also in actively *making* sense.

For an example of the constitution of meaning as what is immediately expressed, here is part of a poem by William Wordsworth. The speaker says of Lucy, whose death he is grieving:

> No motion has she now, no force;
> She neither hears nor sees;
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
> With rocks, and stones, and trees. (2004, 71)

Because the first two lines establish Lucy's inertly passive unresponsiveness, and the third links this passivity with that of all the fixed elements of the planet, the trees at the end partly convey the same meaning as the rocks and stones. Outside of this context, the two kinds of things would instead contrast in these same respects. They would register, for example, as animate versus inanimate, or perhaps as inhospitable versus refreshing. Given this context, however, even those otherwise-operative contrasts themselves, because of their unexpected irrelevance here, now contribute to the impact of the trees' signification as being just as relevantly unresponsive as the rocks and stones.

It is true that the same overall meaning could have been conveyed by placing the first two lines last. But then it would not have been the word "trees" which conveyed this inertness, since their bearing this meaning depends on their occurrence's being preceded by the emphasis on inertness as unre-

sponsiveness. Without that, "trees" would in fact have been a jarring element at that point in the reading of the poem: the meaning of inertness would have been expressed partly despite them and only very indirectly through them.

It is important here that the context the sequence provides does not only disambiguate potential alternative meanings of "trees." If the sequential context only disambiguated the potential meanings, the sequence, and therefore design, would not have played a role in constituting the relevant meaning *itself*. Instead, the sequence would simply have established that one *pre-existing* meaning rather than another was at issue. But here, the meaning of rock-like unresponsiveness is simply not part of the initial meaning of "trees" at all, as we would hear that meaning without unusual context or artifice. That is, it is not yet available as a potential alternative meaning to be disambiguated. That meaning needs to be catalyzed in the first place, established as a possible meaning for this term at all, rather than simply selected and discriminated among its already given meanings. The sequence here provides the artifice which does this catalyzing.

The mechanical simplicity of the last line's rhythm contributes to the same meaning, which again is not there without this kind of organizational device. This rhythm suggests an unvarying regularity of things, and this together with the rhythm's unnuanced simplicity evokes a pathetic absence of recourse. The effect is that what is happening is the inevitable way of things. Further, all this is resonant too in the heaviness of the line's and stanza's end on the monosyllable "trees." It is precisely because "trees" is the end of this movement that this word can and now does bear this pathetic meaning.

The role of design in constituting verbal semantic meaning is not restricted to fine art forms such as poetry. It also occurs in more craft-like design objects in everyday communication, to the extent, for example, that things that are difficult or tricky to convey need to be expressed. Articulacy is often a special kind of achievement, and part of what it requires can be the design of the composition of its elements.

For instance, when we offer a criticism of someone, if we express the criticism awkwardly and, before completing the criticism, interpolate a joke at our own expense, this combination of stylistic features helps to soften its character as a criticism. That is, its meaning now occurs as a gentler criticism, and it does so not simply in adding a soothing of the person's feelings to the criticism, but also in what is conveyed as the character of the criticism itself. Here, the stylistic or design features of the communication help to constitute the specific meaning itself of what is communicated.

With respect to the role that design plays in constituting meanings in the context of justification or in the activities of making sense, aphorisms offer a trivial example. Paradoxically, to present an inference in this form can be partly to communicate its questionable character and so require thought about it. The ear-catching, clever packaging raises the possibility that there may be less in other respects than meets the ear in this one! (Perhaps it "protests too much.") Although this does not help to establish the legitimacy of the inference being presented, it does, as part of presenting the inference, engage the protocols of truth-testing with respect to it.

Here is a more substantial example. Ludwig Wittgenstein comments in his *Tractatus* that, "Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical" (1961, prop. 6.45). In this statement, both the meaning of "the world as a limited whole" and the inference that it corresponds to the mystical depend on a previous argument: that reference to what is outside the world of facts cannot have sense (e.g., prop. 6.42). This argument delineates a limit to the sense of the world, and so establishes a particular and otherwise unavailable meaning of the idea of the entire world as limited. The prior argument also supports the inference that this newly meaningful idea corresponds to the mystical, since this idea involves the further idea of a boundary that characterizes sense or meaning as a whole and yet, as specifying a limit precisely to sense itself, cannot be made straightforwardly intelligible.

Just as with the meaning of "trees" in the Wordsworth example, the meaning of "limited world" here depends on the spatial precedence of the relevant argument. It is true that the inference can, instead, be explained after its being stated. But even then, the statement can still only be understood

after the explanation. The explanatory argument is therefore still prior logically. While the argument, then, can be placed spatially or temporally before or after the inference it explains, the understanding that the argument contributes must still be assimilated first before the inference can be understood. The argument remains prior in the order of meaning and so of logic. Design, then, is still crucial to the very meaning of the inference as an intelligible and so genuine inference, but here it is design in logical rather than physical space.

Still, the physical sequence, either way, does affect the meaning of the inference itself with respect to aspects of how that inference is conveyed in its communication. Putting the explanation before the inference presents it more clearly; while putting the inference before the explanation perhaps makes the inference intriguingly puzzling and so, for example, makes it more inherently motivating to be explored.

We have discussed the role of design in constituting the semantic meaning of purely verbal constructions, both in the fine art form of poetry and in the form of what we have argued are verbal craft objects. We turn now to the role of design in the constitution of semantic meaning in material craft objects.

2. Material Design Objects

In the case of material design objects, when they express what we have been calling semantic meanings, these meanings are already typically directly and entirely established by the stylistic elements, those which in verbal contexts contribute only indirectly to semantic meaning. These are elements such as sound, shape, material quality, and sequence.

So, for example, a soup tureen can express dignity, formality, or status through the sheer quantity and precision of its ornamentation, the heavy look and feel of its metal, or the simple elegance of its lines. Again, a cathedral spire can express devotion to heavenly grace by the long, swift, unmistakable pointing upward of its lines in permanent stone.

As we have noted, where the stylistic elements are themselves entirely the carriers of semantic meaning, our thesis has nothing to contribute. But we do have our subsidiary thesis in this context, and we will return to that below.

In addition, however, material design objects do also express semantic meanings in other ways to which the stylistic elements contribute indirectly, and material design objects can incorporate verbal meanings as well.
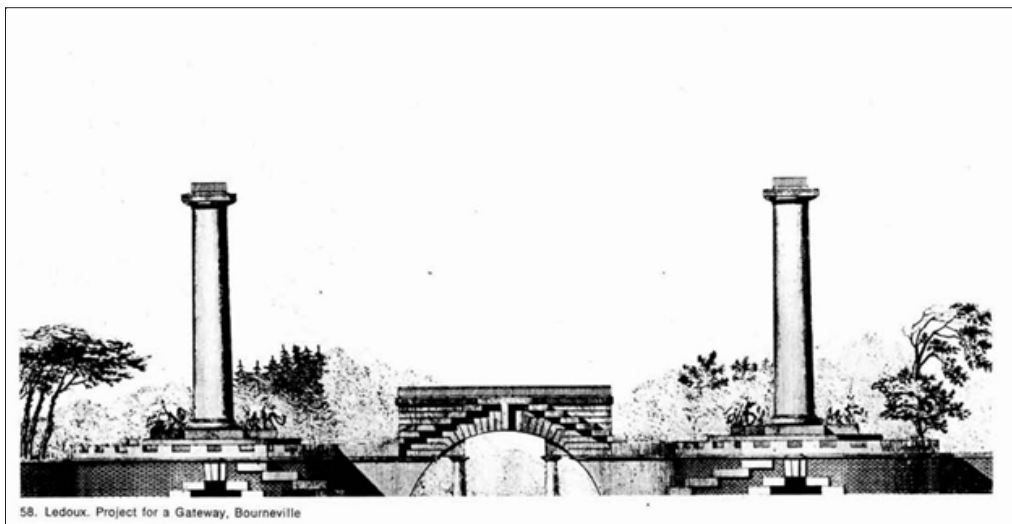

58. Ledoux. Project for a Gateway, Bourneville

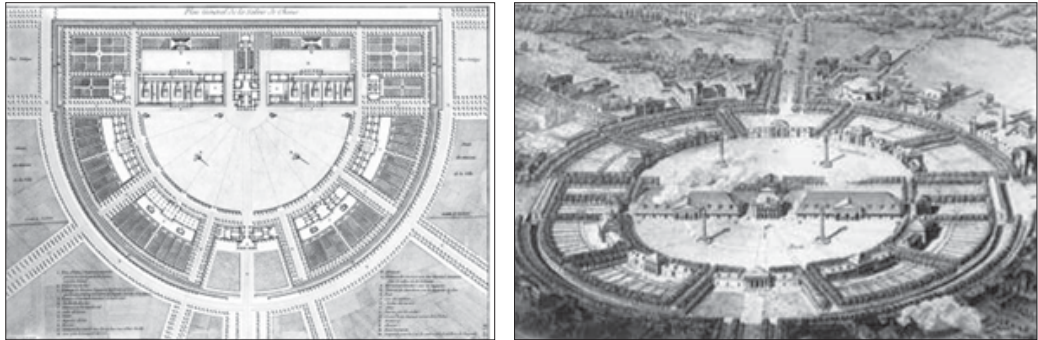**Figure 1.** Claude–Nicolas Ledoux, *Project for a Gateway Bourneville*

Figure 2. Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *Gateway Bourneville,* plan and perspective

One kind of case where the design features do not themselves always immediately constitute the meaning is that of rhetorical elements in architecture. For example, in a project for a gateway at Bourneville by the architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, there are very large columns that are structurally entirely redundant on either side of the gateway (Figures 1,2). There is a wide gap between each of them and the gateway, so that while they tower importantly, they very evidently serve no functional purpose. "Expressively, however," Robert Venturi (1977) writes, "they underscore the abstractness of the opening as a semicircle more than an arch, and they further define the opening as a gateway" (40). Given the mass and massiveness of these signifiers working to produce these meanings of "semicircle" and "gateway," both of the meanings are comically anticlimactic; and they are all the more semantic meanings for that.

In the next section, we will discuss the thought and work of Robert Venturi in some detail to illustrate other ways in which the stylistic elements of architectural design contribute indirectly to the expression of semantic meanings. Here, we may briefly mention some examples of design objects that incorporate verbal meanings, where the stylistic features contribute to the constitution of those meanings.

In menus, the spacing, typography, and quality of the paper and ink, for example, contribute to the meaning of the entries that they are of a high or else a negligible quality, and even that the dishes are prepared, say, with a particular fineness of care or should be received with a particular refinement of appreciation. In billboards, the garishness of the coloring and the size of the lettering, for instance, can suggest different degrees of crassness to the message that the words convey, and with it to the specifics of what that message is. And the subtlety or sensuousness of the art design of book covers can affect, say, the archness or blatant character of invitation of the book title and with that, again, can affect what specifically that book title communicates.

We turn now to the work and thought of the architect Robert Venturi, both of which are deeply sympathetic to our thesis.

3. Robert Venturi

The "duck" versus the "decorated shed" was a theory developed by architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in their book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, which argued that architects of the 1960s viewed their craft as pure and devoid of semantic meaning. Buildings were forms in light that express their function with honesty, while Venturi and Scott Brown argued that the 'messy vitality' of buildings with signs and other visual cues was more truthful as it represented how we live our lives and experience architecture (Venturi et al. 1968).

Rene Magritte's painting of 1929, entitled *The Treachery of Images*, has an image of a pipe with the title below proclaiming that it is not one. In a related approach, Venturi designs with an intention to challenge our preconceptions of what we are viewing. Using architectural elements in unconven-

tional ways enabled him to provoke new meanings for experiences within our built environment. The house he designed for his mother Vanna Venturi in 1962 (Figures 3, 4) challenged architects as custom designed homes were focused on modern ideals of function and aesthetics that often ignored history and social context. He said that the house "is both complex and simple, open and closed, big and little, some of its elements are good on one level and bad on another" (1977, 118).

Figure 3. Robert Venturi. *Vanna Venturi House,* 1962–4

Figure 4. *Robert Venturi. Vanna Venturi House interior, 1962–4*

His home for his mother presented meaning to the viewer by challenging our perceptions of what a home should look like with the use of basic components of style. It is as elemental as a child's drawing of what a house should be. It plays with scale in that same way as its front façade is an over-scaled pediment that is broken in the center. A chimney is deliberately over-scaled to make it seem unsophisticated and naïve. It is built with modern materials and modern windows but aims for simplicity in meaning versus sophistication in form. It has an oversized void at the center indicating a monumental entrance, when it is actually quite small. It has a pronounced lintel that binds the two sizes of the split façade to make equal sides appear balanced, yet the windows from side to side reflect interior functions and are not equal. Applied molding around the building suggests that it is at human scale until you stand next to it. The façade tells us that it is both a modern building and a traditional house, providing dual meanings without confusing the two. Returning to Magritte, Venturi's house is a sort of "This is not a pipe" idea in reverse or without the edge: it gives a message something like, "This is also a house after all!"

A more contemporary building was his Guild House home for the elderly of 1963. It is not an expensive building, nor in an elegant neighborhood. Its primary elevation alludes to multiple meanings beyond its functional characteristics, as it refers to both urban forms of signage and to the lifestyles of its elderly population. Venturi proposes honest communication in building meaning when he discusses overly designed objects versus ornamented sheds. The buildings tell us who they are through their signage and graphics, as this building does.

The red brick building is symmetrical with stylistic devices that provoke other interpretations. At its base is a white wall with a large text that proclaims its name. The white background to the oversized letters acts as a sign, and is divorced from the elevation above. It visually grabs the pass-erby, and announces itself to the street. Above the first floor sign are four floors of apartment balconies with flanking windows which act as monumental motif for the brick façade. Expressed concrete slabs and columns visually bind the façade and allude to the shape of a tree. The top floor contains a commons room that has an oversized arched glass window. Its shape and size cap the building and respond to the urban character and scale of its surroundings, giving civic significance to a room largely used for watching television. Above, the central axis of the façade culminates at the roof line with an oversized antenna. Its size and placement, exposed and steeple-like, allude satirically to the television watching habits of the elderly residents. The commons room with its oversized window and antenna are a statement about the quality of elderly life in 1960s America (1977, 116).

In his 1966 text on postmodernism, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.* Venturi argued that design gives meaning to the built environment. Within his work, the buildings use a series of architectural devices that act as signifiers. This enables complexities of comprehension that can work at dual scales, from the personal to the urban. "Both-and" is the term used by him to refer to elements that can be interpreted in more than one manner. The use of ambiguous meanings of the part to the whole is to produce "an architecture which includes varying levels of meaning that breeds ambiguity and tension" (1977 [1966], 23).

Venturi cites an example by architect Frank Furness in his main stair at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. The main stair is too large for the spaces around it, as the adjacent landings and wall openings are smaller and make it feel uncomfortable. However, the stair is not responding to its immediate functional use. It gets its proportional meaning from its connection between the large hall above and the scale of the street outside as it connects these two monumental spaces (1977, 25).

This tool is linked to his device of the 'double-functioning element". Venturi used elements that embodied double meaning, ones that can operate at the scale of the building, but also at the scale of the street. The "double functioning element" differs from "both-and" in that it is more specific to its architectural usage than a comparison of the parts to the whole. The example of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence shows that a bridge can be a building and a building can be a bridge. The building acts

as an extension of the neighborhoods to each side, with shops along the path, while at the same time bridging the Arno River, completing its basic function (1977, 34).

Contradiction as a design tool is both juxtaposed and adapted by Venturi in his quest for richness versus clarity. A "super adjacency" occurs when compositional elements are used in dissimilar locations that produce an almost violent reappraisal of its meaning. He gives the prime example of Le Corbusier's building in Ahmedabad that provides a diagonal orientation of vertical sun-shades in one direction while its entry ramp moves in the opposite, forcing a contradictory experience on the user (1977, 56). A Renaissance building façade may have elements which serve its functional purpose while also having dissimilar elements which address larger civic issues, such as the example of Michelangelo's Palazzo Farnese. This building has a central loggia on the upper floor that breaks the rhythm and scale of the façade, contradicting the visual order, while it responds to the scale of the city beyond. The major part of the building provides a restrained answer to its surroundings, while the over-scaled and open loggia breaks the order and announces it is a place where important events will happen, providing dual meanings within the same space (57).

Venturi's postmodern view involves a historical sense of inside versus outside spaces with an embrace of the contradictory. He values the historic European city form with its streetscapes of complex building facades that enclose interior private and public spaces that are hidden from easy view. He proposes form that allows the unexpected to occur, whether in a horizontal plan view, or in a vertical building elevation. Contradictory meanings between the experience of the sober streetscape and the playful spaces within allow for aesthetic experiences of joy and surprise.

The text ends by discussing the "obligation toward the difficult whole", which is defined by Venturi as "a multiplicity and diversity of elements in relationships that are inconsistent or among the weaker kinds perceptually" (1977, 88). Elements that bind as well as inflect are components of this difficult whole and produce further dualities in meaning and perception with examples ranging from chairs designed by Gaudi to the Berlin philharmonic hall by Scharoun, both of which defy modern orthodoxy by their fluidity in shape and configuration. The chairs of Gaudi are anthropomorphic in their forms alluding to the human body which will use them, while the orchestra hall of Scharoun has a sculptural roof line that mimics the crescendos of sound that it is to contain (1977, 102).

Venturi completes his text with a comparison of a historic urban form that is seen as orderly and serene, the campus at the University of Virginia designed by Thomas Jefferson. He juxtaposes that view of a designed ideal with an image of a typical commercial main street in any small city in America. The assemblage of signs, facades, traffic and lights creates a sense of disarray that is anything but serene. As a coda to his work, he suggests that our messy urban environments that seem chaotic are okay, as they provide meaning that reflects who we are. As he asks, "is not Main Street almost all right?" (1977, 104).

4. Postmodernism and the Genuineness of Meaning

We have been suggesting, as postmodernism also does, that semantic meaning is constituted by an interplay of features which are very different in nature from each other. As we have noted, there is a prominent postmodern current of thought which emphasizes that this interplay through fundamental differences leaves room for thoroughgoing error in the connections of these elements with each other, with the result that meanings in general are necessarily indeterminate and unreliable. That is, meanings, and therefore the objects or other signifieds whose meanings they are, never really quite mean what they seem to mean or are what they seem to be. This is a line of thought which is widely represented in philosophy in all its branches, as well as in aesthetics, literary theory, the social sciences, and political theory of many different relevancies.

We would like to show that this current of thought itself in fact makes equal room for the opposite conclusion. That is, in our context, the meanings which design objects present are often in fact fully

the genuine meanings of the objects or the other signifieds they express, and they convey exactly what they appear to convey.

Most purported Derrideans, for example, argue in the name of deconstruction that apparent meanings substitute illusory stability or fixity for fundamental indeterminacy. Most Lacanians argue, in Lacanian language, that meanings substitute an illusorily stable Imaginary for an always shifting Symbolic. And many purported Wittgensteinians argue that "meaning" has no consistent character to be constituted in the first place but that the understanding of meaning as something determinate is an illusory misunderstanding of what is in fact indeterminate "usage." We have been "bewitched by language" (Wittgenstein 1958, prop. 109: "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language").

In fact, postmodernism in general is a term so abused as to be multi-directionally contradictory in what it is taken to express. More essentially, however, postmodernism properly understood *does* make room for such contradictions, but not in ways in which they simply exclude each other. Consequently, the same resources on whose basis it is argued that meaning is necessarily indeterminate show equally and, what is more, equally of their original and authentic inspiration, that it is not necessarily so. So, for example, as we shall argue below, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Wittgenstein themselves all recognize and insist that "indeterminacy," "slippage of the signifier," and "usage" are not themselves fixed and stably determinate essences which can define meaning once and for all.

And what a very strange thing, especially for purveyors of such very subtle forms of thinking, it would have been for them to have thought otherwise!

Derrida, for his part, describes the movement of thought he is concerned with as a "movement of the trace that implies both its mark and its erasure" (1981a, 5), and he notes that, "I try to write the question: (what is) meaning to say? Therefore it is necessary . . . that writing literally mean nothing" (1981b, 14). Since it is exploring the nature of meaning, it must mean nothing, because otherwise it relies on and so prejudges what it is inquiring into, what meaning involves. "To risk meaning nothing," he explains, "is . . . to enter into the play of *différance"* (1981b, 14), or the play of being itself differing from itself. In other words, the indeterminacy of meaning runs so consistently and so deep, in Derrida's deconstructive thought, that it applies self-reflexively to his own meanings in expressing this indeterminacy itself. Consequently, the meaning of indeterminacy itself, in this context, is indeterminate. As a result, in the very act of characterizing meaning as indeterminate, indeterminacy itself, now also indeterminate, necessarily makes room for it not to have that character, and so not to be indeterminate.

A critical analysis of meaning in general, then, has the self-reflexive character of a Liar's Paradox. If one says, "I am lying," then, if one is lying, one is telling the truth, and if one is telling the truth, one is lying. This kind of statement reverses and negates its own values in the very act of affirming them and because it is successfully affirming them.

Lacan, although he constantly emphasizes the incessant slippage of signifiers in the Symbolic order, or world of language, that constitutes our being, nonetheless also recognizes that the stable Imaginary, or world of fixed images, is not simply an extrinsic "add-on" to the Symbolic. Instead, it is part of what makes the Symbolic what it is, and so is part of its, and so our, being. Just as in Derrida determinacy is part of what indeterminacy is and how it works, in Lacan the Imaginary is part of what the Symbolic is and how it works. Samuel Weber (1991) discusses the "metonymic" movement of constant shifting or displacement in the Symbolic, and argues that:

> If the metonymic movement may be said to constitute the symbolic function "proper," its "slippage" must in turn be held in check . . . if it is not to dissolve into sheer indeterminacy. In short, metonymic displacement must itself be dislocated and disfigured . . . in order to function at all. (109)

More specifically,

> Left to its own devices, the symbolic . . . would tend to dissolve and to displace the very determinations upon which it "itself" depends. In short, without the imaginary, the symbolic would self-destruct. It is therefore no less dependent on the imaginary than the imaginary is on it. (108)

As for Wittgenstein, he does not, in the first place, insist that meaning is necessarily a matter of usage. His famous proposal is that "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (1958, prop. 43). And, of course, it is not simply that he states it this way. One of his central arguments is that, as with the criteria for establishing rules, interpretations necessarily and appropriately come to an end at a certain point, so that, as Wittgenstein puts it, "my spade is turned" (prop. 217). For one thing, if everything were up for interpretation, we would not even be sure we were engaged in the activity of interpretation: the meanings of that activity would not be sure either. As a result, "any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning" (1958, prop. 198).

Again, "If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words, either" (1969, no. 114). Ultimately, even "the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (no. 115). The certainties are given, however, and they are given by the structures of meaning established by and as part of our ways of living in our forms of life.

Another of Wittgenstein's arguments in this connection is that, while in the case of an ambiguous picture it makes sense for me to say, "now I see at as this" and "now I see it as that," it makes no sense at all for me to talk about interpreting and seeing an unambiguous picture in this kind of way.

> It would have made as little sense for me to say "Now I am seeing it as . . ." as to say at the sight of a knife and fork "Now I am seeing this as a knife and fork." This expression would not be understood.—Any more than: "Now it's a fork" or "It can be a fork too."
> One doesn't "*take*" what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery . . .
> If you say "Now it's a face for me," we can ask; "What change are you alluding to?" (1958, 195e)

If, as Wittgenstein, suggests, we "*look and see*" (1958, prop. 66), it is clear that, most of the time, we do not have to interpret equivocal meanings but we simply register meanings directly as the meanings they simply and unequivocally are.

Finally, Eddy Zemach (1992), among others, points out an argument throughout the later Wittgenstein's work for "our *experience of meaning*" (28). Wittgenstein writes, for example, of "The familiar face of a word; the feeling that a word is as it were a picture of its meaning; that it has as it were taken its meaning up into itself . . . And how are these feelings expressed among us? By the way we choose and value words" (1980, no. 6). Zemach explains that "A word has the aroma of the things it denotes just as a face is seen *as* sad. We do not *interpret* a certain geometrical shape as expressive of sadness; we see the sadness in the face" (36).

As a result, it is a richly meant part of Wittgenstein's mature philosophy that, for example, "*Essence* [*Wesen*] is expressed by grammar" (1958, prop. 371).

To put all of this a little more concretely, although it is true that meanings are in general caught up in all sorts of complicating relationships with other meanings and with various features of their contexts, these relationships are not always and automatically relevant. In that case, the meanings at issue are insulated from their potential disturbance. The arguments for unfailing indeterminacy of meaning are built on a self-undermining logic that itself makes room for the failure of its own meaning, and so for this insulation of meanings from incongruent, "de-determining" other meanings. As a result, the logic of these arguments themselves makes room for the clear specification of meanings and so for the unequivocal specification of what other meanings and nuances of meaning are relevant to them.

So, for example, if we ask someone at dinner to pass the salt, and they ask us which of the culturally resonant literary significances of salt we mean, or which of the symbolic echoes of salt in our emo-

tional history we mean, or which of the language games in which salt could feature as an element we have in mind, they are being deliberately obtuse. They are setting aside what they themselves fully and unequivocally recognize as what we mean. Those other equivocity-producing considerations are simply not at issue in the immediate circumstances.

Similarly, if a building is a dark, uniform mass, enormous and looming, it successfully conveys, for example, the sense of being formidable or forbidding. Of course, there are many circumstances in which people might not register it that way, even the same people who sometimes do. But this has no bearing on the meaning the building conveys when it does convey that meaning. It is, on those occasions and in those immediate circumstances, plainly and simply forbidding or formidable. And if those occasions are frequent, we have a stable meaning we can reliably identify.

5. Conclusion

Design features often contribute to the constitution of even strictly semantic or conceptual meanings that design objects present. Despite the claims of a prevalent type of postmodernist thought, these and other meanings can be unequivocally the genuine meanings of the objects or relevant signifieds, truly expressing exactly what these objects or signifieds truly are. The architecture of Robert Venturi comprises a splendid, complex illustration of these claims.[1]

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Notes

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