Through the Other Side of the Looking Glass
In Search of Meaning in the Language of Design

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In the introduction to his book *Does Writing have a Future?*, Vilém Flusser makes a provocative assertion: it is only a matter of time before writing, that is, building sequences of letters and numbers, is supplanted by other, more efficient systems of communication (Flusser, 2011, 3). Design is undoubtedly the discipline that, while having contributed enormously to the development of the characters we use to record speech, has already seen some success in supplanting them using various visual languages. It would seem in this context that the focus this text brings to the language of design—that is, the words with which we write about design—is at the very least somewhat unusual, if not downright archaic.

At the same time, we need to be wary that by focusing on researching the language of design we can quickly end up on shaky ground. Lewis Carroll illustrates this point wonderfully in his children's novel *Through the Looking Glass*. In a conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, which takes place on her journey through the looking glass, the author also touches, entirely casually, on the flexible nature of language. In the conversation, Humpty Dumpty uses words in unusual contexts. In response to Alice's bewilderment, he proclaims the words to mean something completely different than what we are used to. "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less," Humpty Dumpty explains (Carroll, 1994, 61). It is on this—shall we say—sophist, foundation that we might have an easier time understanding Alan Badiou's claim that "philosophy is always the breaking of a mirror [the looking glass]. This mirror is the surface of language, on which the sophist sets everything that philosophy treats in its act. If the philosopher claims to contemplate himself on this sole surface, he sees his double, the sophist, suddenly springs forth from it and can thus take himself for the sophist" (Badiou, 1999, 143–144).

In this text I will explore the field of the language of design to investigate how wide of a gulf separates signification and acting, what the relationship is between—in the words of Badiou—the void and the real. To quote Ernesto Laclau: "Even the most purely constative of assertions has a performative dimension, and, conversely, there is no action that is not embedded in signification" (Laclau, 2009, 71). Laclau would have us go further still, adding to the words and actions the dimension of *effects* as the third "part of an interdependent network" (ibid.). Moreover, in his view all three dimensions, "if properly theorized—cease to belong to a regional discipline and come to define relations operating in the very terrain of a general ontology" (ibid., 72).

Before attempting to find an answer to the dilemma, we need to return to the starting topic—searching for meaning in the language of design. The latter is an analogy to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. If what Proust sought to express in his book *In Search of Lost Time* is that it is only the creation of art that can save us from our impermanence and give our lives some form of meaning, then the subtitle of this essay has to do with searching for meaning in the language that, in turn, gives meaning to design. This leaves open the question: why does it matter what language we use to build the language of design? An excellent answer is provided by Jacques Rancière, whose thesis on politics also obliquely enters the field of design:

> **"(P)olitics is an activity that reframes the mode of visibility of the common. It is the configuration of a space and a form of temporality in which some affairs are seen as common affairs and subjects are given the capacity for dealing with those affairs. This also means that politics is a conflictual process in which the very meaning of the words is at issue" (Rancière, 2016).**

Rancière is not interested in proposing a concept explaining what politics is. He is interested in:

> **"...examining words whose meaning is at issue in situations where the identification of politics is itself at issue. From that point of view, words that are worth examining to rethink politics might be words that have two characteristics: first, they are not specific to politics but they designate alterations in the visibility of what is normally thought to be the stage of the political; second, they link the question of the common with matters of time and space" (ibid.).**

Rancière's quote on politics holds largely true for design, too: design is an activity that entails constantly transforming our way of seeing, our way of recognising the common. In design, as in politics, there is a configuration of space and a form of temporality in which some affairs are seen as common affairs, with subjects given the capacity for dealing with those affairs. In design, as in politics, the words that design uses in its speech often reveal much more than the design that is manifested in practice. From this perspective, the words that the language of design uses to speak and write are worthy of study. In the words of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: "It is reasonable enough to assume that words alone don't change reality. But changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2001, 132).

In my research, my main interest was therefore how (if at all) these theories manifested during the development of design as a discipline. For the purposes of this text, I will shed light upon a selected—seemingly inconsequential—example in the field of the language of design. This example, despite its seemingly insignificant and cursory nature, will help us answer the following questions: What do we even mean by the language of design? How does the context of nature manifest in the language of design? The reason that these two questions are so critical is that they transport us back to the 19th century, which was when the foundations of design as a professional discipline were being

laid. At the same time, the answers to these questions provide a framework for the fundamental ideas in the design of the 20th century and continue to echo in the language of design in the 21st century.

Let us now stop at the first question—what do we mean when writing about the language of design? This is where Wittgenstein's theory of language as a form of life (Wittgenstein, 2014, 15) can help us frame our thinking. Wittgenstein claims that words are not learned "as sterile, theoretical names for objects", which are only later "assembled into language as a whole; language is learned as a form of life of a particular community, and this pragmatic technique eventually facilitates knowledge of individual words in their relation to external things and abstract notions" (Simoniti, 2014, 263). Likewise, words for new conceptualisations are in most cases not generated in a theoretically sterile manner (Gložančev, 2009, 13–15). We can simplify this to say that the meaning of words is implicit in the way they are used, not in what they represent.

There is another important aspect, however—one derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory by Jure Simoniti. Whenever we are faced with something new, we interpret it using existing patterns. It is therefore the case that as a new discipline develops, its language emerges along the way, arising out of "convenience" (Simoniti, 2014, 274). Starting with the Wittgensteinian context of language as a form of life, we therefore seek to understand how the nascent discipline of design wove itself into the language of the community, eventually forming new words, or giving new meanings to existing ones—meanings that testify to new ways of acting and/or new or additional uses of words. So, what was it that became the foundation of the language of design?

All of the above is important; despite the aforementioned convenience of drawing upon existing patterns, choosing among the many different patterns within the existent is a dilemma that the scribes of the emergent face over and over again. This can be seen in our chosen example: the writings of John Ruskin, the Victorian art critic and thinker, on architecture and design. In a time of burgeoning industrialisation, Ruskin stood on the crossroads between the new and the old. He could sense that a new discipline was emerging, but in making sense of it, instead of drawing on the language of progress and the pragmatic convenience of industrialisation, he chose to stand against the so-called technological breakthroughs of that time by seeking inspiration in nature.

We can find a brilliant example of this in Ruskin's *The Nature of Gothic,* a work of profound importance for the field of design. In his description of the method he uses to analyse gothic architecture,

Ruskin proposes that the act of describing design and architecture is to be compared to the efforts of a chemist tasked with describing a rough mineral. He felt that, when analysing an object or a product, we should, like the chemist, determine both the internal and external structure of the object of analysis, while at the same time be keenly aware that it is only the union of all the parts that makes a soundly designed whole—with the important addition that the individual parts only form a balanced whole when certain conditions are met. Despite the emphasis on the chemist analogy, however, the analytical principle does not transfer to the field of design and architecture in a literal sense. Ruskin writes:

> **"We have; then, the Gothic character submitted to our analysis, just as the rough mineral is submitted to that of the chemist, entangled with many other foreign substances, itself perhaps in no place pure, or ever to be obtained or seen in purity for more than an instant; but nevertheless a thing of definite and separate nature; however inextricable or confused in appearance. Now observe: the chemist defines his mineral by two separate kinds of character; one external, its crystalline form, hardness, lustre, etc., the other internal, the proportions and nature of its constituent atoms. Exactly in the same manner, we shall find that Gothic architecture has external forms and internal elements. Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of richness, and such others. Its external forms are pointed arches, vaulted roofs, etc. And unless both the elements and the forms are there, we have no right to call the style Gothic. It is not enough that it has the Form, if it have not also the power and life. It is not enough that it has the Power, if it have not the form. We must therefore inquire into each of these characters successively; and determine first, what is the Mental Expression, and secondly, what the Material Form of Gothic architecture, properly so called" (Ruskin, 1997, 78–79).**

A couple of sentences later Ruskin elaborates on the idea further:

> **"Let us go back for a moment to our chemistry, and note that, in defining a mineral by its constituent parts, it is not one nor another of them, that can make up the mineral, but the union of all: for instance, it is neither in charcoal nor in oxygen, not in lime, that there is the making of chalk, but in the combination of all three in certain measures; they are all found in very different**

> **things from chalk, and there is nothing like chalk either in charcoal or oxygen but they are nevertheless necessary to its existence. So in the various mental characters which make up the soul of Gothic. It is not one nor another that produces it; but their union in certain measures" (ibid.).[1]**

It is fascinating to be able to trace this brief—most would say perfunctory—description[2] of the approach to design analysis as it seeps through the numerous transformations during the development of the professional and scientific language of design, i.e. design theory, which would only be professionalised, in the formal sense, in the 1970s. We will take a brief look at an assortment of the most conspicuous transformations of Ruskin's thought, but let us first address another important aspect of his aforementioned observation—that of correlation. An aspect that Quentin Meillassoux argues is the "central notion of modern philosophy ever since Kant", since for him "it is a characteristic of correlationism that it disqualifies all efforts to consider the spheres of subjectivity and objectivity independently from one another" (Meillassoux, 2011, 18). Whereas objectivity deals with the properties of the object in-itself, subjectivity concerns itself with these properties in relation to the observer, whereby, Meillassoux continues, "we cannot know anything that would be beyond our relation to the world. Consequently, the mathematical properties of the object cannot be exempted from the subjectivation that is the precondition for secondary properties" (ibid., 17). When referring to a "veritable chemical formula", we are therefore talking of "co-givenness, of co-relation, of the co-originary, of co-presence" (ibid., 19).

The question being asked is therefore which is the proper correlate, not which is the proper substrate. And this is precisely what John Ruskin sought to convey with the aforementioned description. In analysing design and architecture, we analyse the co-relation of two types of qualities. Qualities that Badiou defined in the previously mentioned relation between the void and the real, and which Martin Heidegger captured in his deliberation on the nature of things, using a jug as an example. Heidegger asks himself if what defines the jug is its base and sides, or is it the cavity they form, which is what facilitates the jug's function by permitting filling (or pouring out)? This cavity, this void, therefore defines not only the jug itself, but also the work of the designer

1 Ruskin adds the caveat that in architecture and design, these measures, or proportions, are not as fixed. In these fields, a certain amount of deviation from the ideal is permitted when balancing the individual constituent elements.

2 Ruskin does not mention the analytical work of the chemist again in the text.

who designs and makes the jug. The essence of the jug is in the captured void, the usually overlooked nothing that allows the liquid (or air) to fill or vacate the jug. So, even if the jug appears to be something tangible made out of clay, this appearance is only significant insofar as it permits the filling and subsequently containing of its potential contents. Even if that content, in the case of an empty jug, is nothing (Heidegger, 1967). Indeed, it is precisely by showing, using a jug as an example, that it is the nothing that is the essence, that Heidegger manages to refute the thesis that nothing is nothing. To the contrary—it is obvious that nothing is, in fact, something. And, as Ruskin shows, one of our tasks is this: to reveal and name this void, this seeming "nothingness" that is in fact the essence we are looking for. As Badiou writes in his *Manifesto for Philosophy:*

> **»It is thus quite simply false that whereof one cannot speak (in the sense of 'there is nothing to say about it that specifies it and grants it separating properties'), thereof one must be silent. It must on the contrary be named. It must be discerned as indiscernible. We are no longer held, if we accept to be within the effects of the mathematical condition, to choose between the nameable and the unthinkable. We are no longer suspended between something whereof there is an elucidation within language, and something whereof there is but an ineffable, indeed unbearable 'experience', unravelling the mind. For the indiscernible, even though it breaks down the separating powers of language, is nonetheless proposed to the concept, which can demonstratively pass legislation on its existence« (Badiou, 1999, 95).**

Ruskin recognised the latter in the power and life of internal elements, while warning that this must always be understood within the context of their co-dependent relation to the external form. Francis Wolff defines this as follows: "Everything is inside because in order to think anything whatsoever, it is necessary to 'be able to be conscious of it', it is necessary to say it, and so we are locked up in language or in consciousness without being able to get out. In this sense, they have no outside. But in another sense, they are entirely turned towards the outside; they are the world's window: for to be conscious is always to be conscious of something, to speak is necessarily to speak about something" (Wolff, 1997, 11–12). Wolff depicts this in a tangible way using as a tree as an example:

"To be conscious of the tree is to be conscious of the tree itself, and not the idea of the tree; to speak about the tree is not just to utter a word but to speak about the thing" (ibid.). In this way, Ruskin's original theory establishes the possibility of having cognizance of design

despite never using the word "design". We will see below that this cognizance is given to all theorists and practitioners in the field of design, even if they may not be aware of it.

This brings us to Frank Lloyd Wright and the collection of the most visible, most conspicuous transformations (or *effects*, to use Laclau's word) of Ruskin's thought. In his texts, Frank Lloyd Wright (a great proponent of the ideas of John Ruskin and his successor William Morris) elaborated on Ruskin's originatory thought with the term *organic architecture*. He first used the term in 1910 in the introduction of the German edition of a book on his work. He would continue using and expounding upon it in his texts throughout his professional career. In *The Natural House* he explains:

> **"So here I stand before you preaching organic architecture: declaring organic architecture to be the modern ideal and the teaching so much needed if we are to see the whole of life, and to now serve the whole of life, holding no 'traditions' essential to the great TRADITION. Nor cherishing any preconceived form fixing upon us either past, present or future, but—instead—exalting the simple laws of common sense—or of super-sense if you prefer—determining form by way of the nature of materials" (Wright, 1954, 3).**

Wright additionally emphasises the following:

> **"(T)he ideal of an organic architecture [...] a sentient, rational building that would owe its 'style' to the integrity with which it was individually fashioned to serve its particular purpose—a 'thinking' as well as 'feeling' process" (Wright, 1992, 28).**

Wright's work clearly contains an echo of Ruskin's logic of analysing architecture and design according to the principle of analysing a mineral: on the one hand, he constantly emphasises the necessity of balancing the individual parts and the whole, while one the other hand, the thought remains ever present in the context of the understanding of the external form that indisputably follows the internal structure—that is, the search for a relationship between the nature of the material and the sensory process. It should be emphasised that what Wright considers the internal structure of an object does not consist solely of the interior and the individual pieces of design; it also includes—and here Wright, in his own singular manner, echoes Ruskin—the perspective on and interest in the life that is lived within the building. According to

Wright, this life must grow into the physical object, because "the source of this unity is not the act of building within that environment but the life that is lived therein, or more accurately, from the inside out" (Rogers, 2004, 381). The latter also recalls a thought of the second director of the Bauhaus School, Hannes Meyer, who, in his 1928 text entitled *Building*, shifts design and architecture out of the field of the aesthetic process and into the field of the biological process. With this shift he is making the point that our task is not in perfecting artistic expression but in organising the processes of life that manifest as societal, technical, economic and psychological processes (Meyer, 1971, 117–120). Although at first glance this reads like a technical note, Meyer's reflection focuses precisely on what Ruskin calls *life* and *power*. More than that, he sees them as the only possible motive for designing a building (ibid.).

The direct transfer of the term organic architecture to the field of design occurs with Eliot F. Noyes[3] in 1940, when he took up the position of a curator at a new department of industrial design in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As his first project (which was also the first design project in the Museum of Modern Art–MoMA) he organised a competition and an exhibition in 1940–1941, entitled *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*. A catalogue was printed to accompany the exhibition; in the introduction, Noyes submits the following explanation of the term *organic design*:

> **"A design may be called organic when there is a harmonious organization of the parts within the whole, according to structure, material, and purpose. Within this definition there can be no vain ornamentation or superfluity, but the part of beauty is none the less great — in ideal choice of material, in visual refinement, and in the rational elegance of things intended for use" (Noyes, 1941, [1]).**

It is a definition that would become literal dogma in the practice of modernist design for a few decades. If viewed through the prism of Ruskin's thought, with Noyes (as with Wright and Meyer), Ruskin's analysis of the internal structure of the object is understood as use—an intention. What is added is the function, which, in line with all the previous theories, is understood as *life*. The Slovenian designer Niko Kralj—once again in the manner of Ruskin—would add: "The forms of the products must attend to all demands and follow them, and if even one of those demands changes, then the forms of the products change with it as well" (Kralj, [1971]).

3 His mentor and later an associate was Walter Gropius, the first headmaster of the Bauhaus school and later a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (1937–1952).

Niko Kralj had no influence on the international development of design theory; nevertheless, he represents an excellent example of the practical interplay of ideas derived from the traditions of Ruskin, Wright, Meyer and Noyes. He also built both his theory and practice on a sophisticated understanding of how nature works. Kralj believed that relying on clear insights from nature can greatly accelerate the development of design. By relying—like Ruskin before him—on an analytical understanding of the workings of nature and its description, Kralj actually, in his own way, explains designers' ability to achieve quality in their work: "The designer consciously seeks to imitate natural evolution, in which everything superfluous dies off and in which nothing emerges without a cause. Synthetic morphology and the method of discovering evolutionary phenomena that result from contradictions help the designer take the shortest route to technical perfection and new forms that have no past precedent" (Kralj, 1960). Kralj, like Meyer, sees products as biological processes. He sees them as living, heavily interlinked organisms. He continues: "The good form of a product cannot be merely a sheath, the product's external image; rather, it is a living organism linked by many ties to what is inside. This organism must be a balanced whole, to which we cannot add anything to make it better or more beautiful and form which we cannot subtract anything without impairing it" (Kralj, [1971]). Kralj sees the same thing as the prerequisite for quality design as the predecessors: a holistic approach. An approach that strives towards equilibrium in a rapidly changing environment.

Accordingly, Kralj sees the process of designing our environment—again taking biology as an example—as evolutionary stages that, with each technological or non-technological change, newly acquired knowledge or a shift in use, influence the future (re)design of the product. He sees them in a way that recalls the 1960s writings of the world-renowned architect and design theorist Christopher Alexander. In his work *Synthesis of Form*, Alexander describes a design problem as "an effort to achieve fitness between two entities: the form in question and its context. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem" (Alexander, 1964, 15). Later in the text, he explains this further by way of precisely-defined conditions akin to Ruskin's: "The form is a part of the world over which we have control, and which we decide to shape while leaving the rest of the world as it is. The context is that part of the world which puts demands on this form; anything in the world that makes demands of the form is context" (ibid., 18–19). With an important addition: whenever a new form emerges in the world as it is, the context changes also. It changes due to the necessity of adaptation and the effects of the new form on the original context.

There are many similar examples in which the effects of Ruskin's idea can be identified (whether or not this transfer of thought is deliberate). It keeps tangling itself into the language of design, so it's no wonder that we still hear it echo in the thinking of the design profession today. The only thing that changes—as is evident in the observations of Arturo Escobar—is the understanding of what the totality of the design approach is understood to be. Whereas Ruskin saw the whole as consisting of the internal and external structure of the analysed object, Escobar, in the 21th century (with Alexander's broadened understanding of context as the starting point), sees it as a pluriverse, in which the context of design now comprises at least three universes: the social, the environmental and the technological.

> **"This is a key feature of both biological and social or cultural autonomy; systems can undergo structural changes and adopt various structures in response to interactions with the environment, but they have to maintain a basic organization in order to remain as the units they are. [...] This eventually leads to the coordination of behaviour, communication, and social phenomena through co-ontogenies [co-morphogenesis], resulting in all kinds of complex units (codesign); in humans, this process takes place through language" (Escobar, 2018, 180).**

Here it is crucial to understand that

> **"...the environment does not dictate the relation; rather, it is the organization of the unit (its basic system of relations) that determines its interaction with the environment" (ibid.).**

Despite this expansion of the field and changes in perspective, the essence remains quintessentially Ruskin's. Returning to his original thought, we can see that in 1853, Ruskin bequeathed the nascent discipline an idea that has remained relevant to this day. By applying to the field of architecture and design the approach of a chemist analysing a mineral, and in doing so establishing the concept of correlation—declaring the need to analyse the external and internal structure of the object in search of the relationship between the form and the life, while acknowledging that it is only the sum of all parts that forms the whole, and only under certain conditions—he appears to have struck at the heart of the understanding of design. He managed, as Badiou would put it, to create the "concepts and rules of thinking" that make it possible to represent our time "as the time in which *this event of thought*

has taken place. An event never having taken place before and which is henceforth the shared lot of everyone, whether they know it or not, since a philosophy has constituted for everyone the common shelter of this 'having-taken-place'" (Badiou, 1999, 88).

With this though, we have come full circle back to the beginning of this text. This confirms, in practice, the statement by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson quoted in the introduction: "It is reasonable enough to assume that words alone don't change reality. But changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2001, 132). Heeding this assertion, as well as the one by Badiou, a rhetorical question arises: Is the way we see the world of design not a direct result of Ruskin's insightful choice of a 19th century chemist thoroughly analysing a mineral as an analogy? Or, even more importantly: Would the language of design be different if Ruskin, at a time when the discipline of design was in its infancy, hadn't proposed a correlationist approach to the critical analysis of designed objects? Not neglecting, of course, the necessity of seeking and establishing a relationship to the life that is hidden—in the object is worth analysing at all—alongside the mathematical properties, no matter how ubiquitous, of objects.

If anything, Ruskin's impact has vindicated beyond doubt Laclau's assertion that it is not enough to focus on words and actions, we also need to focus on their effects. The examples we selected are interrelated with very tangible webs of mutual dependence. Yet at the same time, in the interplay of the theory and practice of design, both still evolving, we can actively observe this process even today. The chosen example, so minor at first glance, demonstrates the considerable influence Ruskin's thought has had on assigning meaning to and further development of the language in the field of theory of design, as well as design discipline in the broader context of its practice. Moreover, Ruskin showed in a very tangible way that without natural language "it is impossible to discover new paths", as it is the natural language that "drives imagination" (Jakobson, 1970, 312). And this holds true no matter which side of the looking glass we are on. We just need to take care not to be satisfied with the surface reflection.

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