The Rhetoric of an Architectural Presentation to a Client

Peter MEDWAY
Bob CLARKE
Department of Linguistics, Carleton University
gurduloo@sympatico.ca

Abstract:
In a small observational study in two Canadian architectural firms, the authors tracked the interactions (person-to-person, person with non-human sources such as documents) that took place during specific parts of the design process. This pilot study helped us to secure a grant which is currently allowing us to investigate the relationship between designing (in schools of architecture and architectural practice) and semiotic activity (processes of representation and communication).

In one firm the development of a preliminary elevation design for a proposed corporate laboratory facility was followed over three continuous days to the point at which it was ready to be presented at an internal team meeting. Some months later, a senior designer, in frequent interaction with other members of the firm, spent a day preparing a Powerpoint presentation in which the elevation would be presented and justified to a committee of the client organisation. We recorded the day's transactions–the main subject of our paper--with fieldnotes, audio recording and the collection of documents.

In making the transition from being a concept that circulated amongst the designers to one for external presentation, the design remained unchanged. However–and this is the point of the paper–the invisible ‘semiotic envelope' within which it had its meaning and was readable in a certain way had to undergo radical and arduous reconstruction.

The design process had been as much a matter of the collaborative building of an ‘envelope' of relevance criteria, intentions, values and associations as of the conceptual configuration of materials in space. It was in reference to this envelope that the design had a clear logic and meaning for the designers. But, unlike the drawings, sketches and models, the semiotic envelope could not be directly transmitted to the client participants, who would bring their own envelope of expectations and meanings to the meeting.

Specific rhetorical strategies had to be devised, therefore, to ensure that the design would be ‘read' correctly. This involved, for instance, a sort of fictional retrospective reconstruction of the design process in terms of choices between alternatives most of which were never actually entertained, and the conjuring up of ‘bad', ‘rejected' solutions for the sake of presenting the design as a desirable solution. It also involved the post-hoc identification of passages from the client's brief which could be cited as if they had directly governed the design process: ‘Look, we're simply following your requirements here.' The construction of a new justificatory envelope was partly informed by knowledge of the values, assumptions and perspectives (Aristotle's

pathos) that framed the client committee's perceptions, as revealed at a previous meeting.

In the paper we will briefly summarise our findings about the 'semiotic envelope' that evolved during the earlier design stage, and then deal more fully with the preparation of the presentation, particularly as it addressed issues of glazing and massing. We will draw on transcripts of our audio-recordings and on the slides and other artefacts produced during the day.

The Rhetoric of an Architectural Presentation to a Client

The subject of this paper is the profound difference we observed between the semiotically (mainly verbally) constructed context that emerges as a necessary element in the design of a building and the context that has to be created in order that the client may understand the design. We are in sympathy with two papers, presented at a recent design conference, which argued that the context of design is potentially infinite in its constituents, and that in order to start work the designer has to put together his or her own operative version of the context, through a particular selection and combination of relevant circumstances and considerations, and that this assemblage may be achieved through the use of words and other semiotic resources, such as sketching and gesture, in design discussions (Hekkert & van Dijk 2001, Glock 2001) [1].

Thus, out of all the possible factors that might be taken to have a bearing on the design, we suggest that a particular subset is 'marked' [2] as relevant for the job in hand. In another paper we have analysed the nature of this constructed 'context' in one design project (Medway & Clark 2001). We speak of an emerging 'envelope of coordinates' (183) and characterise its elements. In this paper we draw on later data from the same project, relating to the preparation of a presentation of the same design for an important client meeting. We proceed as follows: first we describe the nature of the research in which we were engaged; next we briefly review the characteristics and manner of emergence of the 'envelope' that got made by the designers alongside the 'design itself' (in the sense of the technical specifications of the building); third, in our most substantial section we describe the reconstruction that the senior designer found necessary in order that the client would be given an effective frame for understanding; and we finally propose some tentative conclusions of a more general nature.

1. The research

The larger (though still quite small) study from which we are drawing took place in two Canadian architects' firms, A and B. 45 hours of observation were carried out (three continuous days in each firm). Six hours of audio tape were recorded and four reporters' notepads filled with fieldnotes. We also had a long discussion on a different day with our key informant in Firm A, one of the senior designers. Documents generated or referred to by the participants were photocopied or collected. In addition, we returned to Firm A for a further day seven months later, and supplemented the above procedures with video recording. This paper is about Firm A, and draws considerably on that single day's observations.

In Firm A about six staff were to a greater or lesser extent involved in the design of a laboratory facility for a US corporate campus. What follows relates to one strand of the work, concerning the external elevations of the building's administration wing. The culmination of the work that Bob Clark observed between Tuesday and Thursday in one week in February was an elevation drawing to be presented at a team meeting on Friday. On his return visit to the firm in September, Joe, the senior designer [3], was preparing a Powerpoint presentation of the same elevation, in readiness for a meeting with client the next day.

2. 'Context' as constructed 'envelope' in the design process.

The answer to the question, 'What do architects make in designing?' is not as simple as 'The design', if by the design we mean 'the constructed-in-advance representation that will determine essential features of the eventually-to-be-constructed artefact' (Medway & Clark 1991: 169). If we regard architects as working primarily with signs – that is, as working *semiotically*, handling not concrete, bricks and steel but drawn lines, spoken words etc that *stand for* 'real things' – then what gets made is not confined to drawings, models, videos and written specifications. The latter are the more obviously durable products of certain kinds of semiotic activity, particularly acts of representation. But ephemeral semiotic acts may persist as memories that continue to exert a powerful formative influence on design; comments and the enacting of shapes with hands in the air are as much making as are drawing and modelling, and our understanding of what gets made in the office must include this cluster of mentally deposited ideas. What is there at the end of the design process, associated with or surrounding the design as its 'context', is a second construction, not visible in material form but fully real to the designers as an object of their cognition, an 'envelope' of ideas that are not dimensions, angles and indications of materials but that in some cases have had a powerful determining effect on those characteristics.

Over three days we closely observed the shaping of this construction alongside the construction of the design, although it was only afterwards, during analysis, that we came to this way of seeing what had happened. Here we instance some of the semiotic activities (often interactive – as in speech accompanied by gesture between two designers) that generated some of the different sorts of ideational elements (i.e. ideas, broadly conceived) that went into the 'envelope of coordinates within which the building must find its bearings' (Medway & Clark 2001: 183). We saw two main groups of elements coming into play: qualitative specifications (of a sort that do not get recorded in the documentation that passes to the contractor) and 'criteria and considerations' that are deemed important in the making of design decisions.

It was often the ideas of the Principal Architect, Rachel, that prevailed over those of Joe, the Senior Designer. The qualitative specifications that 'stuck' – i.e that continued to exert a constraining or enabling influence on the work – typically came from Rachel. First, she proposed what at first sight seem like simple descriptions of the look and feel she has in mind for the building's elevation. While shaping a piece of foam, she wonders "what would happen if we put a bit of a curve in it...(in order) to lighten the beast" -- the building as it stood being a "too rigid box." Thus 'curved' and 'light' emerge as qualitative specifications, but we note that both these terms implicitly invoke binary polarities: curved vs straight, and light vs heavy. Rachel is in fact making two successive sorts of selection, first of the binary opposition (or scalar dimension) that is relevant to the design (she doesn't select rough/smooth or dull/shiny), and second of the pole or position within that construct (curved *rather than* straight). Again, Rachel says she wants a

building that is "elegant (and) distinctive" but not "strident", thus implicitly *marking* a reference dimension of, perhaps, 'noticeability', that might run from the undesirable extreme of 'unremarkable' to a desirable mid-position of 'distinctive' and an opposite undesirable extreme of 'strident' (raucously seeking attention).

Very frequently, the designers resort to metaphor (cf Coyne, Snodgrass & Martin 1994, Coyne & Snodgrass 1995): 'strident' literally refers to sounds; the fridge (glimpsed in a newspaper ad) that provides inspiration for Rachel's proposed profile is not literally 'sculptural', nor does it have 'rounded shoulders'. As she goes on she hits on an existing form that provides an appropriate model, both formally (in terms of the shape she wants) and symbolically, that of a crucible. Thus through metaphorical allusion or more direct reference, objects that are not buildings – fridges and crucibles – enter the 'envelope' within which the design takes place, providing, along with the indication of value positions along scales or in binary oppositions, a repertoire of general qualitative characteristics that do not require immediate precise definition in drawing (which would demand a particular curve, particular dimensions and so on).

'Criteria and considerations' enter the envelope in ways that include the following. While Rachel is working on the form she comments that she wants to "play with the mass in three dimensions" and that her reference to the fridge is "tongue in cheek", thus 'putting on the table' not what the building is to be like but the sort of activity her current actions constitute, or what the process is for. Later, running with the idea of the crucible, she explains to Joe that she thinks "there's value in exploring (it)...to take a very rational thing and have it teeter a little, and also be a lot more fun," indicating the sort of criteria that might be applied to her work (judge it as *exploratory*) as well as qualities of the building that can't be translated directly into physical description (as 'curved' can). Another consideration brought in by Rachel is the need to avoid placing too much reliance on the quality of the contractor's work: she sees an elevation that is distinctive for its profile and massing (sculptural) rather than for its surface texture as more contractor-proof.

Evaluation – which involves both marking which values are relevant and applying them to yield a positive or negative or relative judgement of a particular act or artefact – contributes important elements to the envelope: attempting to follow Rachel's conception, Joe builds a model as best he can, but declares, to anyone within earshot (not Rachel) that it's 'ugly' and that "sometimes the boss is just wrong," and then embarks on what he regards as a preferable design which he assesses as "better than a bloody crucible".

In short, constructing the envelope which provides the bearings within which design can navigate involves putting in place semantic realities that do not relate directly to, or cannot be translated immediately into, the physical configuration of the building. Amongst the things identified and articulated or gestured toward have been principles according to which success should be measured, dimensions and polarities in terms of which the building's positioning is critical, and identifications of constraints (aesthetic, economic, functional, what Rachel wants, the limitations imposed by construction methods) and of affordances and opportunities.

3. Reconstructing the envelope for the client

During our one-day September visit Joe was preparing to present the current state of the design to a committee of the client corporation the following morning, using Powerpoint slides and an accompanying oral commentary. This process is obviously different from that of design, in

which a building is made that didn't exist before. In this case the building is there and it won't change by being presented. That is to say, it will not change in its material configuration, dimensions etc. It may, however, acquire an overlay of new meanings, an alternative overlay to that which constituted the envelope of design.

Let us consider Joe's treatment of issues that related to the elevation the development of which we have been describing. Joe's mode of working is most convenient for a researcher since he proceeds not only by operations on the computer – especially considering and selecting images and text passages – but also by conversing more or less continuously with his junior, Alan, whose job is to make the Powerpoint slides, dig out material and offer feedback.

The building, it has been determined, is to have glass over much of its frontage. In the design process, the decision to use glass more or less made itself – it was what the situation demanded; there was little need for the elaboration of an envelope within which this aspect of the design might proceed. However, Joe knew the committee and some of their concerns from a previous meeting at which an earlier, less resolved version of the design had been shown. They were worried that they were getting a *reflective* mirror building. He responds to this concern first by reformulating the architects' aims in more abstract terms. Taking the view that the audience have certain preconceptions about glass-faced buildings, he needs to move them away from the idea that it is glass that the designers like: rather, what is sought is a *quality*, transparency, the opposite of the reflective mirror effect. The use of glass is simply a means of achieving this quality; it's not that glass as a material is particularly desirable in itself. The thinking develops like this. At 9:48 Joe comments:

> they're concerned that it's reflective, which it's not, and we have to get some images of the ability to see through that curtain wall... that's the issue we're trying to portray, the transparency...

At 11:26 he says to Alan:

> it's about transparency, and the ability to understand what's going on inside... there's a quote in the Master Plan [a document supplied by the client describing the sort of building that is wanted] about the ability to display to the campus what it is you're doing in the building... We have to take the idea of glass away from being glass, and take it to being a concept -- it's not a material, it's a concept...

And a couple of minutes later, reviewing a sequence of images, Joe observes "glass is used not only functionally, but conceptually, OK?"

The point is, in the course of design it had never occurred to the designers that the glass wall would be anything but transparent; they have -- instinctively, we might almost say -- handled the glass in such a way that it would be. There had never been any occasion, explicitly at any rate, to invoke (that is, to include in the envelope) the contrastive construct *transparent/ reflective*; the possibility of 'reflective' was simply never entertained. But now Joe has to, as it were, backtrack to a lay person's way of thinking, a way long forgotten by him and his colleagues (probably since their first year or two of training). He can only address the client by turning those lay conceptions against themselves. What we see therefore is a highly rhetorical process, in the Aristotelian sense of rhetoric as a means of persuading an audience by such techniques as anticipating their responses and forestalling or exploiting them.

We can identify three strategies within Joe's rhetorical response to the communicative challenge he faces in justifying the large areas of glass on the building's frontage. The first is to

throw the client's own words back at them. Early in the day, at 9:39, Joe has found in the Master Plan and has read out to Alan a passage (mentioned by Joe in the later remark quoted above) that states: "The building should be designed as a figurative or literal showcase so the public has a clear sense the building is occupied and feels open." He instructs Alan to "put that in for the glass part," that is, include it in a slide. Later he explicitly makes the link between that demand and the concept of transparency.

Secondly, Joe selects an image that will clearly say 'transparency' rather than glass. He advises Alan (11:21), "I would include one at night, too... glazing at night makes the place feel occupied. I think that's an interesting way to spin it."

A third strategy, to drive home the relevance of the bipolar construct 'transparent/ reflective' and to say "*not* reflective", was to show the negative, the building the designers *didn't* want. At 3:55 Joe says to Alan:

> I think we should get a picture of a mirror glass building and put an X through it... They're thinking it's reflective, it's not. What we're doing is specifically designing large areas of glass that you can see through.

At 4:14 he asks Alan, "Did you find a bad mirrored glass building? [We'll put it] here with the glass stuff with an X through it." Then he adds, as if speaking now directly to the client and not to Alan, "We don't mean that, there's nothing to be worried about." Alan comes up with an image, eliciting the comment: "Yuck, I think that's a good one, Alan -- you know ugly when you see it." Joe then puts a stroke through it on the screen.

What makes the difference between the sort of envelope-making Joe was doing during design (often, as we saw, in conflict with Rachel) and what he is doing here is that the current exercise is demandingly *rhetorical*; and what makes the imagining of the presentation possible is Joe's strong sense of the virtual presence, there and then, of the following day's audience. So, often, when ostensibly talking to Alan, he seems really to be making the presentation: his real, present interlocutor functions as a stand-in for tomorrow's audience; or, put another way, his explanation for Alan is a *rehearsal*. Thus he uses language that he would not normally use with Alan, because it would imply Alan lacked basic architectural knowledge.

The preoccupation with the audience shows in three ways. First, as we saw, Joe addresses what he knows the audience thinks and how he expects they'll react. Second he uses the client's own written words as authoritative texts to justify the architectural decisions. Third, he incorporates into his own speech with Alan lay expressions that he remembers the clients using. So, in relation to another elevation issue, the massing, variety and articulation of elements, Joe recalled that the previous committee had found the facade excessively fussy or busy, and had used the phrase 'nooks and crannies'. He then keeps using this phrase himself, perhaps as a mnemonic to keep the attitude he has to counter in the forefront of his attention. And as in his treatment of the glazing issue, Joe looks for an image to represent the negative against which the firm's design will stand contrastively as the positive. He says to Alan, at 13:36:

> In light of the comment about nooks and crannies, that's about how you break up the mass of the building... What form is it, it's still a fairly blocky building, how do you come to terms with that? Well, you emphasize certain lines, you pull planes off, you give it detail, play materials against each other to give it a complexity that decreases the apparent mass of the building.

So he hunts for an early drawing that was produced simply to "block the massing" (and not

intended as an indication of the eventual appearance): I'm looking for something crude." When he finds the drawing he manipulates it, commenting that even the existing relatively crude drawing is still "too complex... I just want two boxes." Twenty minutes later Joe is saying, "I just want a box -- to make it look really stupid..." and later again, "Does this look ugly enough? It's supposed to be crude..." and "If we were to extrude the program, that would be it, a box. They wanted that to be a box all along and it looks pretty bloody awful." He devises a title for this section" "How do you make a big building look smaller?", and once again orally runs through the argument they had never really had to work through. On the manipulated 'crude' drawing he adds the caption, "Simple extrusion of the building creates a bulky mass overpowering the site on which it sits" – giving explicit articulation to knowledge that never has to be articulated within the office because it is in every architect's bones.

Note once again that Joe is not returning to possibilities that had once been entertained and then rejected: solutions such as that represented by the crude drawing would never have entered the heads of these architects in the first place. But it did enter the heads of the lay audience, forcing Joe artificially to come up with a bad solution *as if* it had been considered and rejected.

4. Concluding remarks

In preparing the presentation Joe isn't redesigning the building. But he is recontextualising certain of its features, locating them within constructs that hadn't been part of the original design envelope, except perhaps implicitly as tacit and taken-for-granted knowledge, contrasting those features with negatives that had never previously been entertained, and embedding them in a new justificatory framework.

There is an educational argument implicit in all this. To present a design is not simply to give narrative form to the arguments, considerations and decisions that constituted the design process, though the presentation may draw on these. It is to do something quite different, something rhetorical, that means addressing the nature of the audience, drawing on one's knowledge or best guesses about its expertise or lack of it and its insightfulness or prejudices, and then constructing something new for that purpose. In other words, the presentation is a design job in itself, with its own necessary envelope, and is perhaps a mode of communication that needs to be taught in architecture schools more deliberately and systematically than we have seen it to be.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada which made this research possible.

Notes

1. On the relationship between language and other semiotic modes employed in design see especially Forty (2000). For the authors' own discussions of the issue, in the References see works by Clark and Medway and by Medway and also the architecture chapters of Dias et al (1999) and Dias and Paré (2000).

2. 'Marked' forms in linguistics are ones that foreground some characteristic as significant; thus, 'officer' is an 'unmarked' term whereas 'waitress' 'marks' its referent as a special case, specific (because of sex) rather than universal.

3. In the interests of anonymity, architecture in Canada being a small world, we have assigned gender to participants on an arbitrary basis.

References

Coyne, R., Snodgrass, A., & Martin, D. (1994). Metaphors in the design studio. Journal of Architectural Education, 2, 113-125.

Coyne, R., & Snodgrass, A. (1995) Problem Setting within Prevalent Metaphors of Design, Design Issues, 11 (2), 31-61.

Dias, P. & Paré, A. (eds) (2000) Transitions: Writing in Academic and Workplace Settings, Hampton, Cresskill, NJ.

Dias, P., Freedman, A., Medway, P., & Paré, A. (1999) Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.

Forty, A. (2000) Words and Buildings: a Vocabulary of Modern Architecture, Thames & Hudson, London.

Glock, F. (2001). Design work in contexts -- contexts in design work. P. Lloyd, & H. Christiaans, Designing in Context: Proceedings of Design Thinking Research Symposium 5: Delft University of Technology, 18-20 December 2001, pp. 199-217. Delft: Delft University Press.

Hekkert, P., & van Dijk, M. (2001). Designing from context: foundations and applications of the ViP approach. P. Lloyd, & H. Christiaans, Designing in Context: Proceedings of Design Thinking Research Symposium 5: Delft University of Technology, 18-20 December 2001, pp. 383-394. Delft: Delft University Press.

Medway, P. (1994) The Language Component in Technological Capability: Lessons from Architecture, International Journal of Technology and Design Education, 4 (1), 85-107.

Medway, P. (1996a) Virtual and Material Buildings: Construction and Constructivism in Architecture and Writing, Written Communication, 13 (4), 473-514.

Medway, P. (1996b) Writing, Speaking, Drawing: the Distribution of Meaning in Architects' Communication, M. Sharples and van der Geest (eds) The New Writing Environment: Writers at Work in a World of Technology, pp. 25-42, Springer Verlag, London.

Medway, P., & Clark, B. (2001). The semiotics of design processes in architectural offices. P. Lloyd, & H. Christiaans, Designing in Context: Proceedings of Design Thinking Research Symposium 5: Delft University of Technology, 18-20 December 2001, pp. 169-186. Delft: Delft University Press.