

# The Poetic Narrative: Language, Syntax and Design Practice

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## Abstract:

This paper attempts to illustrate the importance of the conceptual initiative in the design process and how, through the development of a poetic narrative, it can inform the process of creative design and manufacture. The argument outlined proposes the adoption of a poetic narrative as a mechanism for defining and clarifying the designers' intention with the use of metaphorical associations advocated as a means of exploiting our innate ability for intuitive extrapolation.

Our approach gives emphasis to the conceptual corollary or intellectual process that underpins all considered design work and challenges the traditionally accepted methods of project development where this phase of the process is seen as having a pre-prescribed beginning and end. The paper is also intended as a statement of intent that celebrates the unique nature of our interdisciplinary working practices and, as a contextualising document that posits a realistic and contemporary vision for the future of collaborative endeavours. We illustrate how, through the adherence to a philosophy of creative realism and by the establishment of legitimate, ephemeral collectives; we can effectively instigate and address opportunities in many areas at any given time. In the paper we actively promote an expansive and creative engagement with the dynamics of project inception, development and control as a means of realising our collective aspirations and of ensuring project ownership in the widest sense. The paper discusses creatively critical architectural and new media projects that attempt to subvert a number of modern orthodoxies by supplanting them with an affective internal logic.

## THE FUTURE OF DESIGN PRACTICE

*“Historically, technology has been dominantly projected as a human-directed tool created to tame, exploit or re-fashion ‘nature’. What is now becoming clearer is that it also acts to reshape its maker and user as much as, and perhaps more than, that which it is presented as making.”*

*(Fry 1999)*

The world is changing and changing fast. Fuelled by the fusion of technology with information, a melding that has bound technological liberation to the cognitive core of our collective culture; the rapid and continual metamorphosis of global environments has elicited a paradigm shift in the perceptions of the creative community. This realignment of contemporary thinking has led to the re-evaluation and re-definition of traditionally accepted *modus operandi* and offers unparalleled opportunity for creative engagement in the global arena.

As Michael Speaks illustrates when he says:

*“...architecture should no longer recoil from the degraded world of business and managerial thinking. On the contrary, it should aggressively seek to transform itself into a research-based business. This sober assessment has become the primary motivator for a fleet-footed generation of architects and urbanists who today must develop design strategies which are soft and flexible enough to compete in a constantly changing global marketplace.”*

*(Speaks 2000)*

Our work exhibits an unconscious synergy with this contemporary perspective. The projects we have undertaken illustrate an adherence to a philosophy of *creative realism* and show how, through the establishment of legitimate, ephemeral collectives; creative individuals possessing a panoply of multidisciplinary skills can commune to effectively instigate and address opportunities in many areas at any given time.

These project-specific ‘*appropriate collectives*’ actively promote an expansive engagement with the dynamics of project inception, development and control as a means of realising our collective aspirations and of ensuring project *ownership* in the widest sense. Within the context of each group’s remit entrepreneurial creativity is promoted through a motivational synergy to allow for the generation of novel ideas with which we can secure new opportunities.

As Michael Speaks again illustrates, this approach uncannily parallels the emerging vision of contemporary architects and designers:

*“Dutch architects Ben Van Berkel and Caroline Bos declared on the eve of the new millennium that architects would soon become the fashion designers of the future. Architects, they proposed should form alliances with marketing consultants, engineers, marketing specialists and other ‘creatives’ to become change managers in a world where change is the only constant.”*

*(Speaks 2000)*

The inclusive nature of our activities has led to the establishment of diverse yet interlinked creative communities and has facilitated interaction between individuals from a wide range of creative disciplines. This in turn has led to the development of a richly nuanced design philosophy informed and shaped by the creative exchange of divergent, discipline-defined perspectives.

Our collaborative strategy embraces the idea of ‘value in diversity’ and promotes the combination of unique perspectives in order to evolve exceptionally creative strategies and solutions. In addition to redefining the nature of ‘specialist’ input to the design process, our culture of *full immersion* allows for an innovative, unfettered approach to be taken to the ‘architectural structure’ of our collaborative endeavours. This in turn has allowed us to investigate alternatives to traditionally accepted and ingrained, arcane practices (with their traditional cycles of growth and decay) and has fostered the creation of impermanent bodies that alternate between their *dormant* and *active* states.

These loosely defined collaborative bodies are ‘low dependency’, allowing us to be more broadly exploratory. In addition to this, the intermittent nature of each

collective's active state allows for a more selective and *sustainable* approach to project engagement.

Musician Richard Hell echoes our thinking with regard to this when he says:

*"It's not a linear thing, it's trying a lot of different things and trying to figure out how to do various things well."*

(Hell 2002)

Where a degree of dissonance may exist between some contemporary commentators and ourselves is with regard to the influence and role of theory in design practice.

Michael Speaks again states:

*"Theory, or what little theory there is left of it today, remains resolutely critical and resistant to the emergent commercial reality driven by the forces of globalisation. Weighed down by its historical attachment to philosophy, theory has not been free or quick enough to deal with the blur of e-commerce and networked, open systems. Ultimately, Theory and the avant-garde work it supported, has proven inadequate to the vicissitudes of the contemporary world. And so today we stand at the end of a historical period..."*

(Speaks 2000)

We however, regard the theoretical underpinning of any conceptual initiative as intrinsic to the validity and success of our endeavours. For us, this underpinning takes the form of a *poetic narrative*.

## MEANING AND METAPHOR

For us the poetic narrative cannot be readily defined in the sense of a tangible or quantifiable essence. Rather it should be regarded as a descriptor for an attitude, a mode of thought which at a meta-level represents a *worldview* but which can also provide a structure for the process of creative investigation.

In short it is a framework for creativity.

If the design process can be seen as an unrelenting quest for certainty, it is undoubtedly designers who are most acutely aware of the conflicts inherent in what M. Merleau Ponty refers to as '*sense experience*'. For it is our passive association with fabric of the *real* world which represents the '*intentional tissue which the effort to know will try to take apart*'. (Merleau Ponty 1996)

In design, innovation and insight are ultimately only possible through an understanding and acknowledgement of and, a necessary disassociation from, the *known* and the *familiar*.

Paradoxically it is designers, who through process of creative investigation and construction, both confirm and deny the *actuality* of the 'here and now' by simultaneously defining the present whilst alluding to the *possible*.

It is the act of creative synthesis that allows for the realisation of indefinite possibilities by revealing the potential for transition.

Here the narrative is used to provide a clear, overriding conceptual framework within which metaphor is utilised to elucidate the mind's interaction with the world.

It is a mechanism that invites metaphorical allusions to help define and clarify the designer's intention and to give interpretable expression to any resultant context for,

in harnessing the power of metaphorical association, designers can reveal a conceptual corollary and simultaneously present opportunities for further exploration. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, natural language presumes and expresses conceptual meanings represented in basic metaphors (*Lakoff and Johnson 1980*). Their standpoint indicates an innate human understanding of linguistic and one postulates, visual metaphoric triggers.

Sir Richard MacCormac adds:

*“The potency of the metaphorical image lies in its ambiguity, because, not being one thing it can be many. It is neither literal nor abstract”.*

(*MacCormac 1996*)

Here, contemporary juxtapositions can provide new meaning whilst elusive lexicons of visual hieroglyphics and the rhetoric of detail can be employed as discrete (or overt) referential mechanisms.

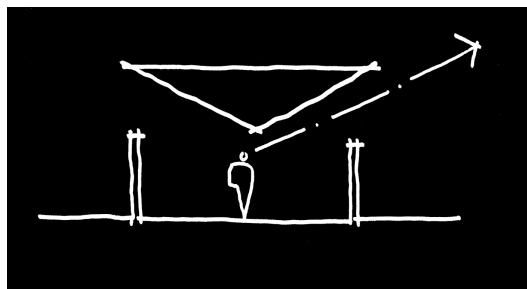
This can allow the designer to formulate an approach or approaches unconstrained by unnecessary limitations or restrictive assumptions, and can facilitate the manifestation in built form of an interpretable, metaphor-based, matrix of information that will elicit intuitive and phenomenal understanding.

Within any piece of work the component parts can be used to convey language and syntax, a language derived from and expressive of, a clear and overriding intention. Any resultant work or piece then has the potential to be both memorable and immediately intelligible.

Whereas much of current architecture is defined by an obsessive concern with it's own construction character – a reductiveness brought about by an often myopic process of verifiable making – the poetic narrative assists in developing, sustaining and crystallising the conceptual initiative.

This is illustrated in a small school extension designed by the Hurd Rolland Partnership. The practices' intention with the project was to always allow children within the building to have a visual link with the outside world and in particular, a view of the sky.

The underside of the roof plane was seen as representing an extension of the sky. The narrative was then formalised and defined as the *artificial sky*. (*Figure 1*)



*Figure 1*

The adopted narrative determined the approach to the structural resolution, material, surface, detail, junction and surface colour. Particular attention was necessarily given

to the junctions between glazing cill, the clerestory glazing and, the extending blue coloured soffit to ensure a seamless visual plane. (Figures 2-3)



Figure 2

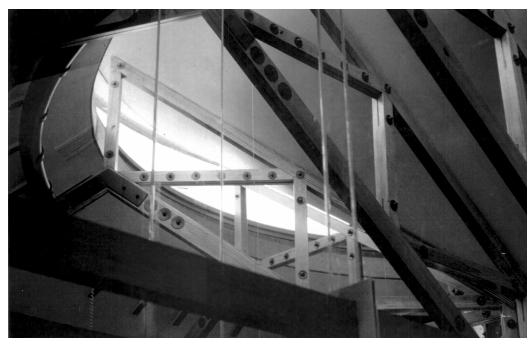


Figure 3

This narrative stream offers legibility and legitimacy yet has the potential to imbue work with a sense of *otherness*, a latent potential that does not preclude any instance of the possible.

If adopted, the narrative allows you to immediately supplant the initial concern of what something *is* and how it works with a desire to explore *what it can be*.

Within any overriding narrative, sub-narratives further inform the process of detail design, resulting in meaningful expression. In this way projects appear the same overall and in detail.

Throughout this process of investigation the narrative has direct relevance to each definable instance and to the totality of the endeavour.

In adhering to the narrative the component parts of any piece of work will necessarily display an inevitability, which will contribute to the understanding of the project as a whole.

The exploration of the narrative is undertaken as a continuous investigation, it both informs and is informed by simple diagrams.

Generative ideograms are to Hutton “a form of visual thinking that represent a value-based theoretical position.” (Hutton 2000)

These illustrate the imposition of certain conditions determined by an individually prescribed hierarchy.

Within this hierarchy, degrees of primacy are attributed in accordance with the designer’s experience and particular value system.

These are exploratory diagrams constructed over a backdrop of credible analysis.

Here, the *poetic* is characterised by metaphorical association and emotional syntax.

It is a representational mechanism that clarifies and guides creative intention and is embodied in a *thoughtstream* robust and rich enough to invite continual re-interpretation when applied to any new *condition* or *instance*.

Ultimately, the reading and true understanding of any piece of work, is not solely the result of intellectual analysis or the reading of implied meaning but the revelation of the organisational structure of the piece itself, what Hutton refers to as the *hidden order* of any design.

Here the narrative stream allows for a transparent reading of any given instance and of a project as a whole.

It makes apparent the infinite possibilities for transition whilst illustrating a conceptual lineage linking each instance to its antecedents.

As discussed, the initiatives we have undertaken attempt to investigate the potential of *design as intention*. In combining the apparently irreconcilable roles of project initiator, designer and *maker* we have attempted to illustrate the importance of the conceptual initiative in design by allowing for continual investigation throughout the process of creative design and manufacture.

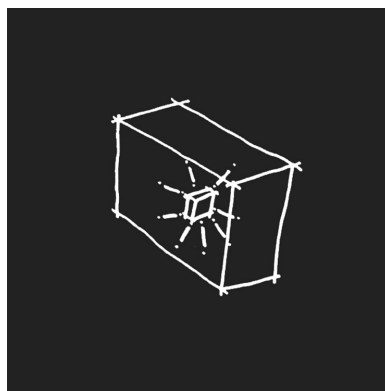
## **AN ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT**

The architectural project discussed is an intervention in an existing residential property.

Throughout the project the design process was seen as a *continual* part of project advancement, necessarily underpinned by a poetic narrative and afforded an *extended moment* within a malleable, company-defined timeframe.

### **The Jewel Box**

The project is a small-scale incision in an existing building fabric and as such, immediately presented us with an opportunity to explore the potential for transformation, counterpoint and discovery. (*Figure 4*)



*Figure 4*

The volume we intended to create was conceptually defined as a *jewel box*.

These objects possess for us a mysterious and mesmeric quality, the magical potential to enthrall and for me personally, an ill-defined redolence of childhood and the past.

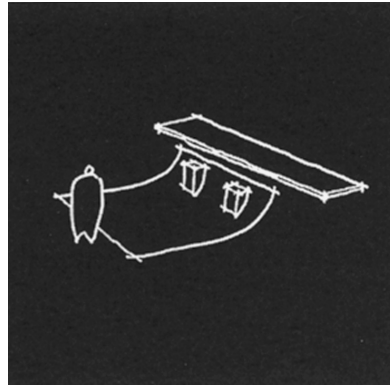
In accordance with the developed - and continually developing - narrative, the spaces and objects created had to necessarily possess a phenomenological potency and, in

direct contrast to the surrounding areas, offer a rich and *discovered* sensorial experience.

This was especially desirable, as the intervention would form an internal volume. Equally important was the desire to enrich - both functionally and conceptually - any associated space.

Here the narrative was developed into one of an *afterglow*, an essence that would emanate from the newly opened jewel case.

The project was primarily concerned with the twin themes *discovery* and *mystery*. (Figures 5- 6)



*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*

This was achieved using a number of devices:

- The substantial double doors are excessively scaled, beech-veneered on the inner surface (as are the worktops and box fronts) and they open outwards from the newly created volume (yet are narrow enough not to contravene regulations). This allows the interior - like the rich velvet interior of the jewel box - to be *revealed*.

- The new incision and the adjacent hallway then become two associated and mutually dependent zones whose characteristics are distinct and different. Counterpoint is maximised through material transition and by contrasting the obvious symmetry of the existing hall with the asymmetry of the new volume. The completeness of the new space is only revealed on entering, when the obvious balance in the compositional arrangement of elements becomes clear.
- The floor covering (Black Altro Mondopave) is used as a recognisable element to connect the existing and the new. It provides the interior of the jewel case with the necessary degree of mystery and *otherness* as it moves between the two zones sweeping up to the underside of the apparently ‘floating’ worktop whilst appearing to suspend the projecting boxes within it’s midst.
- In direct contrast to all other areas, the new space and its *gewgaws* are rich in colour. This lustrous interior exudes an almost hypnotic glow (an *afterglow*) that seeps out into the adjacent space.  
Here, discovery of the new space becomes a *revelation*.

Our direct engagement with the financial dynamics of the project allowed us to make immediate and informed decisions about the feasibility and *achievability* of our design aspirations.

Adaptation was narrative-driven *and* represented a creative response to financial concerns rather than being the result of enforced compromise.

## NEW MEDIA

The multimedia piece ‘Count’ was constructed in order to promote the work of our multimedia collective. Again, metaphorical association within an omnipresent conceptual framework or narrative determined the development of the short interactive piece; in this particular instance the underpinning narrative was defined as ‘The Infinite’.

In the piece the supergraphics are visible only fleetingly yet loop in a potentially endless cycle of numerals from 1 through to 6.

The use of colour coding on the animation was based upon the numerical value of each component colour when individually placed upon a black picture plane.

By utilising this relationship of primary and secondary colours - a relationship adhering to the *golden section* - a layering of spatial field was achieved. The picture plane appears to have infinite depth.

The large numerals are never seen in their totality and are used to spatially stretch the picture plane by alluding to infinite space beyond the visible area. (*Figures 7-8*)



*Figure 7*



*Figure 8*

By synchronising the intensely colourful visual sequence with a ‘high-octane’ soundtrack an immediate sensory overload is created which refutes passive engagement.

Observers almost involuntarily, complete the numerals and register them as recognisable and meaningful shapes in an understandable and ordered sequence.

They are forced to search for familiarity in the unfamiliar.

To finish the looping sequence, the word *seven* appears in response to a *mouse down* command, providing a counterpoint to the numerical representations of the preceding sequence. (*Figure 9*)



*Figure 9*

## **SUMMATION**

*“Cultural history is rarely straightforward. It’s discontinuities, misdirections and contradictions are all compounded by contacts between cultures.”*

*(Tashjian 1995)*

Through our collaborative working practices we attempt to elicit new perspectives through a fusion of creative cultures *and* an expansive engagement with commercial dynamics.

To this end we are engaged in an alchemic process that also provides the ‘creatives’ involved with *complete ownership* of their work.

The approach outlined also highlights our reliance upon a guiding narrative to inform and structure the process of design.

In the emerging global environments where the often-unenlightened application of current and continually emerging technologies is instigating social change by forcing a break with certain categories of the past, it is vital that everyday associations held to be 'deeply known' within the collective subconscious, are treated as a reservoir of catalysts for any new situation.

If, as Alejandro Zaera Polo believes we “*no longer live in a single world...but a world made of worlds, each governed by its own set of conjectures about the truth*” (Speaks 2000), then the displacement of innately understood signifiers (metaphors) from traditional contexts to new associations will lend them an abstracted sense of the contextual and provide any new situation with a resonance of the 'strangely familiar'. (Rattray and Hutton 2000)

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