

**Correspondence** | the Absence of Différance

**Abstract**

This research considers the philosophies of identity politics, linguistics and aesthetic theory using inquiry as a method. It addresses two key questions. One, what constitutes architecture in professional practice as well as the academy where architects are trained? And two, how are those who practice architecture identified?

This presentation gives voice to the identity of the architect and the value of meaning derived from the exploration of architectural ideas. Many scholars have focused on identity and difference regarding building types and historic surveys of period styles. However, there exists a gap in the scholarly literature regarding the identity of an architect and the identification of architects apart from professional licensure.

Discussions among architects suggest that practice must address how it is situated. This study initiates and invites a discussion about what it means to be an architect as well as the very nature of architecture itself.

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## Introduction

“What we are now exposing is addressed to those who shall wish to read it.” (DA, 9)

The purpose of this paper is to consider an architect as student rather than professional. It does not attempt to explain flamboyant, sculptural structures of architects known to some. Nor does it rationalize the work of lesser-known figures as something more than assemblies of technique. Additionally, I'll avoid alternate trajectories exploring epistemology, phenomenology or gender even though they can contribute to an understanding of différance. This inquiry focuses on the construction of identity. The question is not what is architecture. The better question: who is an architect? A corresponding question: where do we find architects? This investigation will locate that which is architecture through the identification of the writings of architects.

To answer these questions, we must do more than speak of writing that expands and informs the text of architecture. We must contemplate writing text that is primary to interpreting meanings inherent to made articles. The relationship of writing as a process to the expanse of meanings that not only allows makers to document, catalogue and exchange conceptions, but also is the design object itself. If one is to understand the **correspondence** of writing text to making in contemporary societies, one must address the production of cultures that seeks to undermine writing within the realm of made objects. The culture in question is the one that promotes the artifact of physical means and technique to primary status while sponsoring the production of **absence**, which reinforces the existence of **différance**.

“Now this principle of différance, as the condition of signification, affects the totality of the sign, that is the sign as both signified and signifier.” (JD, 10)

Architecture, as currently constituted within the academy, contains the totality of architecture because the academic studio is where architects are found. The studio is the primary site where the thing-in-itself is generated, justified and explained. The things generated in architecture studios are not buildings. The things fashioned in studios are ideas bound to identifiable media that are in themselves not architecture. The media or text exists to exist. Buildings, however, exist in part for shelter and to facilitate the flow (drive) of capital.

By contextualizing the term “text” within a framework derived from Jacques Derrida's abstract différance, we can identify architecture as a conceptual expression. Texts are defined as something, such as a cultural product, regarded as an object of critical analysis. If texts are understood to be cultural products then buildings and ideas can also be regarded as cultural products. It is difficult to articulate a concise

definition of architecture. This difficulty has historically stemmed from the fluidity of the term architecture. The term always seems to correspond to some notion of realizing something delightful and sturdy. The appearances of buildings are not important. However, it is vital that we realize that buildings are re-representations of ideas. Buildings typically do not correspond to that which is idealized in text because they need not do so.

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## I. Correspondence

The concept of correspondence is derived from the poetic work of Charles Baudelaire, regarding the sign and signified. In the case of his poetry the text was the sign. Baudelaire used poetry to incite sensory response or synaesthesia. Synaesthesia— hearing a word to elicit the perception of color—is used to provoke the imagination of readers. The agreement between the text and the imagination of the readers is the correspondence, which is the presence of meaning.

Steven Holl, a contemporary architect, writes about architecture as a type of synaesthesia because he is interested in the phenomena associated with movement through buildings. Holl's work consists of drawings, sketches, watercolors, and models that attempt to convey ideas about humans' potential response in a given constructed environment. Through the use of recognized media, Holl uses watercolor to interpret that which he imagines. Watercolor is the primary media through which he interprets and crafts text that represents the signified (meaning content) of architecture. The meaning content associated with the work is identified as the media. The media allows for the signifier (written mark) of architecture to be recognized as architecture.

The work of architects becomes identifiable through exhibits and monographs because exhibits and monographs expose the meaning content of architectural ideas. The media recognized as architecture becomes the text from which architects are identifiable. This media is also that which is carefully crafted so that it may be exhibited in galleries as the work of architects. The work of architects such as Holl is exhibited in galleries as the work produced from ideas. Architects exhibit work produced in the studio because it allows them to be identified with the thing for-itself. The exhibited drawings, sketches, watercolors, and models are representations of ideas interpreted as things imaged. This reveals a model of practice based on ideals production.

If this is an accurate depiction of some practices, then ideas are produced in practice as the text or the work product of architects. The work of architects such, as Holl are representations of ideas, which are

acts of writing text not building buildings. The meaning content of architectural text corresponds to that which is imaged while buildings mark the presence of absence.

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## II. Différance

"Now the word *différance* (with an e) can never refer either to *différer* as temporization or to *différends* as polemos. Thus the word *différance* (with an a) is to compensate—economically—this loss of meaning, for *différance* can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings." (JD, 8)

The contingent signifier positions architecture as the loss of meaning because buildings represent the presence of *différance*. *Différance* in the case of architecture always and never refers to a building. Meanings derived from ideology are assigned to buildings — not inherent in them. Ideology as defined by Terry Eagleton is, "the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life." (TE, 2) The production of meanings (ideology as defined by Eagleton) supersedes meanings production (meaning content) that locates works of architecture. Buildings, as the sign, locate difference (with an e) between architecture, as the work of architects, and buildings as the product of dominant social groups. Dominant social groups, which control the flow of capital, control the production of buildings as markers legitimizing privilege. Meaning regarding buildings is derived from the ideas of particular social groups and meaning content of architecture, as the text of architects derives its meaning from the ideas of architects. If meanings of buildings and architecture are derived from two distinct sources then it is plausible that architecture and buildings can be considered markedly different. One could suggest that meanings assigned are in addition to meanings inscribed. Inscribed meaning refers to conceptual content. The problem with this argument is that buildings as constructed have virtually no inscribed meaning.

Conceptual content of architecture has to be traced through the architect because the meaning content only exists as a residue of the architect's thought. This structure of thought requires knowledge of the sign as linguistic element. In the context of architecture the sign (anything that can be construed as having a meaning) is the idea of the architect. The idea has meaning because it is the representation and interpretation of the architect's imagination. The architect is the symbol (representing something else beyond it) from which the sign emerges. The sign emerges from the architect's mind, therefore that which represents the thought associated with the imagined object is the sign while the symbol, which is beyond representation, is the imagined object. The imagined object is the architect and the architect is the imagined object.

The imagined object is not a representation but the source from which all else becomes architectural. For Emmanuel Kant representation held no affiliation to the object:

“...the representation is thereby related not to the object, but solely to the subject, and the pleasure can express nothing but its suitability to the cognitive faculties that are in play in the reflecting power of judgment, insofar as they are in play, and thus merely a subjective formal purposiveness of the object.” (KU 5: 189-90, 75-76)

Representation is not directed toward an object but instead at the subject. In the case of architecture the subject is the individual architect. The objects of architecture exist so that architects can contemplate and re-craft thoughts. But what are the objects of architecture that exist so that architects can ponder? Based on thoughts herein, the objects of architecture are the drawings, sketches, watercolors and models. that are produced in the studio and exhibited. The exhibited objects have inherent meaning not inscribed meaning. Unlike buildings, the text of architects conveys thoughts of architecture without dislocation. The conceptual content marks the absence of *différance* of the text because meaning of the objects is always directed at the architect because they are conceptually indifferent. This is, the text is a representation of the imagination that is bound to the being from which ideas emanate. If representation is directed at the subject of architect and not buildings, then buildings as a representation of architectural technique have no inherent conceptual content. Through this line of thought it could be argued that buildings always represent the temporal spacing of *différance* because they are never the subject or object of architecture.

Buildings are re-representations of architecture because they are not objects of architecture but merely technical re-representations of the architectural text. Architecture, when recognized solely as buildings, is the re-representations of ideas. The term ‘*différance*’, as expressed by Jacques Derrida, reveals the absence or deferral of architecture as a means to access the temporal spacing of means assigned within a given social structure.

What does it mean to “defer” or to “differ” in the context of architecture? I posit that architecture, as a state-sponsored ideal, conceals a binary split from which the practicing or professional architect is recognizable. The recognized professional architect is situated in opposition to the unknown academic architect. Architects are identifiable or known because the state sanctions the existence of practice through institutions organized to produce, to regulate and to survey the citizenry of the professional practice. I contend that the play of difference between the academy and practice is merely time-contingent or temporal traces from which the origin of practice can be traced through the academy.

"The signified is the concept, the ideal meaning; and the signifier is what Saussure calls the 'image,' the 'psychical imprint' of the material, physical—for example, acoustical—phenomenon." (Derrida 10)

Différance can assist our understanding of the academy as the source or origin of architects and ideas. If the academy were the location of the production of architects then it would also be the site where architectural ideas originate. Ideas originate wherever the architect is located, the site of the architect production. This is the place where one locates oneself as the signified or identifiable architect. In order to be recognized as an architect one must recognize one's own work as architectural. When one completes a course of study in the academy, one graduates into the realm of professionals and is recognized as an unlicensed architect. With or without licensure, one is recognized as a member once study is complete. Individuals can practice architecture without license indefinitely. If this is an accurate understanding of architecture, then the academy produces architects along with the ideas that allow architects to be recognized. Architects are recognized through the ideas they produce in the academy because that is what is produced in the academy. So, if the charge of the academy is to produce architects and architects imagine ideas, then what is a building? Is a building an idea or is an idea a building?

When does one become an architect? This question presupposes the existence of systems and symbolic language that prescribe assignments. I assert the systems in question impose assignments because the ones being assigned the value are active. Just as architects engage in the practice of architecture, students engage in the practice of becoming architects through the actualization of ideas.

A student exists within the space of différance because the student differs not only from the professor but differs from, as well defers to, the professional architect. Within this arrangement, the student is both different and deferred. This arrangement of architectural actors produces the absence of the student architect within a space and that is surveyed by the state. The identity of student architects is secured through the Internship Development Program or IDP, but remains unstable.

The charge of the academy is to produce architects. Architects assume an identifiable existence based upon the ideas produced in the academy. When does one become an architect? Once enrolled in a design studio within the academy, one engages in ideals production. Ideals, as a conceptual construct means an imaginary object or essence from which things are made. One becomes an architect the moment one produces any ideal within the academy and anything produced within the academy is, in form, ideal.

The practice of architecture conceals ideal production in order to promote the production of ideas. Within this paradigm the production of ideas is the process of building buildings. The production of ideas differs in that a building is merely a re-representation (the signifier) while the ideal is the conceptual component (signified). The ideal is an attempt to realize the thing-in-itself or essential elements of the

imagination unlike the idea, which seeks to produce the impression or knowledge of something. The impression produced via practice seeks the economy of technique as an end in itself. Within the practice of architecture ideal production is limited to a privileged few who see ideas as the ends of architecture in themselves.

“The relation of the finite individual to the whole state in which he/she lives was investigated in Bosanquet's *Philosophical Theory of the State* (London, 1899). In this book, he ‘...argued that the state is the real individual and that individual persons are unreal by comparison with it.’” (Bosanquet)

The practice of architecture as recognized is not based upon the ideal production. The practice is sanctioned by the state in order to control and maintain the built environment through the implementation of techniques of bi-power. The state regulates the academy via sponsoring agencies such as NCARB, IDP, ACSA and the AIA. These bodies have been created to control and order members in order to re-produce the state. Production of the state is accomplished through legislation that controls and monitors the built environment through the production of buildings. If the process of making buildings is regulated by the state then the state controls the production of ideas. By controlling regulations regarding membership as well as building practices, the state controls the practice. Licensure allows one to practice within limits established by the state in order to maintain an environment crafted by state regulations. This being the case, then licensure does not exceed state control but merely allows for the continued production of state – sponsored building practices.

In the context of Derrida's *différance*, idea (temporal spacing) represents the absence of architecture. The conceptual absence of architecture is a parcel of the meaning, which is situated through the identification organized to recognize technique not the ideal. When architecture is recognized through building objects then architecture becomes unidentifiable in that buildings re-represent and contain no meaning content. Re-representation is a term used to register the recognition of signifier or material that conveys meaning. Within this context buildings are not architecture in that architecture is the signified (conceptual meaning content) that is a derivative of ideals production.

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### III. Conclusion

The question is who – not what – is architecture?

Architecture, as a generative practice to justify and explain ideas, exists in the academic studio. Within the academy, students explore the potential of their ideas for the sake of ideas—not for standardized building practices. The idea is what situates works of architecture. So the pursuit of the ideal by those who

become the idea through the production of architectural objects allows a natural correspondence to emerge. Heidegger states that the work is the origin of the artist. Similarly, the architect is the origin of the ideals through which the text of architecture becomes. A correspondence between ideas and students emerges in the studio environment where the dearth of practitioners of technique and buildings allows students to enjoy the absence of différance.