

# Chronotopic architecture

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Comentarios

In a recent lecture aired on French radio this June<sup>1</sup>, Paul Virilio speaks about space and time as they relate to the built environment and emptiness. According to him, it would seem that governments, through architects and urban designers, are able to manage space (the physical aspects of cities, neighbourhoods and buildings), but not necessarily the deployment of these projects in space-time. He goes on to say (I am paraphrasing) that what is needed is a ministry of space-time, a ‘chronotopic’ ministry. Architects are not well versed in this type of expertise because they act in space, not in time. “*Ils font dans l’espace et non le temps.*” To a certain extent this is true. But the comment struck me for omitting the entire discourse about architecture as a process as opposed to a product, a discourse with roots deeply grounded in Lefebvre’s “*The Production of Space*”.

Since architecture as a process necessarily inscribes itself in time, it can be thought of as a ‘chronotope’. A chronotope is a set of spatio-temporal aspects represented in a project<sup>2</sup>. It is an intersection of spatial and temporal sequences and as such can become a unit of analysis that does not fix representation but rather multiplies it. The chronotopes of a project are thus multiple and constantly produced and re-produced. We can thus speak of the chronotopes of the architectural process as particular aspects of space-time affecting the process of ‘producing space’.

But apart from these theoretical ideas, Virilio’s comment raises the question of the practice of architecture. It would be, as an example, relevant to think about the intersecting chronotopes of different people and organisations acting in a project: the clients, the designers, the builders, the users. These all call for a different conception of the space-time contingent on very real constraints specific to each. Also, anybody who has worked in an architecture firm might agree that a large part of the practice deals with temporal aspects. Phasing, cost estimates, use projections, feasibility studies, networking, construction, etc.

Are architects, as Virilio implies, indeed not fully able to “act in time”? Is the discourse on architecture as process addressing this particular issue theoretically and in practice? And if so, could we not speak of chronotopic architecture?

1-Les jeudis de l’architecture, ‘À propos du vide avec Paul Virilio’, aired 2 June 2011.

2-See M. M. Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’ in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981.

The phrase “chronotopic architecture” is an example of tautology, for architecture could not possibly take place but in space and time. Also, one can easily reverse Virilio’s argument: the emphasis on spatial planning is progressively giving way to the prevalence of temporal structures. The “form of the city” à la 60s and 70s (Italy, Colin Rowe) is no longer an issue, as everybody now speaks about objectives to be met *in time*. Thus, revisiting past attempts to literally manage time through urban form (Maki, Smithsons) becomes urgent.

To Bakhtin, the most interesting approach to the term *chronotope* lies in its reference to the inseparability of space and time. Somehow this could be an object of investigation in art and architecture during the first part of Twentieth Century.

As we know today, time is a concept that possesses too many faces. An aspect to discuss could be the inseparability of time and space itself depending on whether we are focussed on the design process or on the inhabited work of architecture.

Paul Valéry desarrolla, a partir de su concepción de la poesía simbolista, sus estudios sobre teoría renacentista del arte y sus ideas acerca de la arquitectura; una visión muy próxima a la de Virilio. *Eupalinos*, o sus ensayos sobre poesía y música; fundamentales. Para Valéry lo importante en la poesía, igual que en la música, es la declamación. *Work in progress*. La construcción, no el edificio construido.

El debate sobre Arquitectura y Tiempo se suele explicar como una sucesión de hechos a través del tiempo... pero que siempre llega tarde. Recordemos la profecía de Banham en “Teoría y Diseño en la Primera Era de la Máquina” sobre la incompatibilidad que muestra el arquitecto para seguir el paso a la rápida tecnología.

Este matiz, común también en Lefebvre y Virilio, anima a que el autor de esta HipoTesis conteste a sus preguntas finales.

Aragüez  
Form in time? Or time  
in form?

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Jordivernis  
Work in progress

SARQ  
Diaronía espacial