The Narrative Space: John Hejduk’s Angelic Architecture

Ellery Susa and Hui Zou

College of Design, Construction, and Planning, University of Florida

Hui Zou, School of Architecture

Abstract

Pragmatist modern architecture tends to dissociate mind and body and has been unable to dialogue with the human soul, but architectural educator John Hejduk challenged such an understanding of buildings as autonomous objects and strove for the soul of architecture, which had a direct connection to good humanity. This paper analyzes how Hejduk explored the design concept of “narrative space” to reflect on the predicament of meaninglessness in the built environment, implementing it through design to re-bridge human perceptual and emotional connection to the lost spiritual and cosmic world. The analysis focuses on his poems, experimental drawings, and the symbolism of angels to interpret the hermeneutic depth of historical meaning in his architecture and to define humanity as a poetical dwelling between heaven and earth. The paper discloses how Hejduk used the dialogue between poetical narrative and architectural geometrical form, the symbol of angels as divine messengers, the act of sketching as narrative composition, and the legacy of his architectural pedagogy to reinvent architecture as a more thoughtful design process toward the beauty of humanity. This paper demonstrates that Hejduk’s architectural approach generated a poetical resistance against Cartesian principles of modern architecture and established an expressive and critical design language, interweaving the multiple theoretical threads of memory, history, trauma, and poetical emotion into the production of marvelous space that can tell stories and inspire our passion for spiritual architecture.

Keywords: Narrative space, angel, poetry, drawing

Introduction

During the twentieth century, John Hejduk was influential as an architect, professor, and even a writer. Being a part of the New York Five, a group of architects that were featured in the 1972 novel Five Architects, he developed a postmodern critical reflection on how architecture should be understood today. His main approach followed the notion of “narrative architecture” in which the work he designed was guided by story and poetry, specifically from his poetical perception and imagination of present-day life. He explored the design concept of “narrative space” to address the predicament of meaninglessness in the built environment and implemented this spatial idea to redefine the emotional connection to the lost spiritual and cosmic world. His poetry writings helped to define the interrelationship between reality and imagination in the architectural design process, creating a spiritual link between what is physically present and the
meaning behind it. Hejduk’s architectural drawings tended to disclose the mystic symbolism of angels to understand the importance of historical meaning in architecture and to define humanity as the subtle threshold between heaven and earth.

Following Cartesian dualism, modern architecture tends to dissociate mind and body and overlook the spiritual soul, but Hejduk challenged the understanding of buildings as autonomous objects and emphasized the soul of architecture, which had a direct connection to good humanity. Through narrative designs and writings, Hejduk moved away from the modernist idea of “form follows function” towards an expressive and critical design language, as seen through the eyes of angels, to define what architecture could ultimately become (Cardani, 2016). His architectural meditation through mostly poetry and construction draws the multiple threads of memory, history, trauma, and poetical emotion and interweaves them into the production of marvelous spaces that can tell stories and inspire our passion for the spiritual home.

**The Dialogue between Narrative and Architectural Form**

The concept of the “narrative” is what John Hejduk used to challenge what could influence architectural design and therefore, reevaluate what architecture could potentially reflect in the future. His double identity as a poet and an architect made his work stand out from other architects that were more instrumental design-oriented, and treated buildings as mere objects for satisfying reductive functional needs. He attempted to redefine what architecture could be through the way the world could be reimagined in words, as seen with his designs that always had a direct link to “the constant search for the way of life” (Pérez-Gómez, 2016). There is a dialogue between the narrative and the architectural form in the way he approaches it, using his storytelling to imagine a building’s use and overall program. With many of his projects never being built, the idea of “the narrative” was the element that influenced his designs on a deeper level, and the overall effect he wanted them to have on viewers. It gave Hejduk infinite possibilities, even proposing architecture as both a written and visual “language” in this way (Hays, 1996). When he describes building elements such as doors, windows, or stairs, they are understood in more of an imaginative sense as narrative characters, observed through the eye of such as an ascending and descending angel or the movement of ghost shadows. “Windows are no longer mere openings in a façade but take on a De Chirico-esque sense of absence” (Hejduk and Hays, 2002). The use of these imaginative qualities allows for “uncertainty and doubt,” which is, for example, emphasized by the narrative created from the monumental public clock described as
“The Collapse of Time” (Hejduk, 1987). The provisional and non-absolute qualities presented in his architecture allow for the constant changing of how a narrative can describe a space or construction. Of his minimal constructions that were physically built, the narrative of the project “Wall House II” is composed of four main rooms, which relate to a cosmic program, through which the sky and the earth are symbolically united into a human poetical dwelling (Hejduk, 1973).

This idea of metaphorical representation of architecture through the narrative can also be seen through the fragmented sentences of Hejduk’s short essays. Though in his writings he discusses materials such as concrete, metal, stone, and geometries, they are described in an abstract but mystic way, rather than a literal, physical one (Hejduk and Shkapich, 1993). His writing allowed him to tell a story and use that story to describe the way one would approach the architecture he designed. For Hejduk, poetical writing gives an architect more imaginative power to design and describe the architecture that exists in the world as the mystic other aside from the built environment.

Hejduk’s work, in writing and design, is critical in a sense, where his projects question the traditional methods of approaching the design of a building. His work helped to transform what architecture could become, as he fully believed that architects should create forms that “embody values” and can redefine what life is for, which was done more in-depth with his writing (Hays, 1996). It creates a relationship between the social constructs that exist in our society and the future possibilities of the role they play in humankind as writing gave more freedom in understanding them. His work introduces new ideas that “wake us up to our humanity” and allows us to use a new method of describing how architecture can be formulated and described, being through words (Pérez-Gómez, 2016). This relationship to humanity in his work also relates the human body to the eye of the angel, which his narratives frequently present in a situational moment such as when a human body silently turns around a corner of a stone cathedral and disappears (Hejduk, 1999a). Through the angel’s eye, his work presents a type of juxtaposition, going back and forth between writing and architectural form, revealing the silence that exists in between. Hejduk’s writing helped to bring back the idea of poetry as a means of dwelling, and the origin of its existence from German philosopher, Martin Heidegger’s understanding. As a result, architectural historical meanings originate from a design process of hermeneutic interpretation and imagination that forcefully unfolds in Hejduk’s work.
Through the Angel’s Eyes

Hejduk’s work introduced the idea of the “angel”, being a fictional, almost “make-believe” character in the eyes of those that existed in “reality”. This idea of the angel relates directly to narrative details in his writing and design, as can be seen with the reference to angels in both his poems and his meditative sketches (Story, 2020). The perspective of the angel allowed Hejduk to explore how the narrative could be used with a more metaphorical imagination, to represent what architecture could potentially represent, especially with a perspectival understanding (Hays, 1996). In many drawings he did, he drew the angel to explore how this figure could ultimately be understood in the “literal” world as the connection between the visible and the invisible. The frequency of these figures represented how the secular world of architecture and the spiritual world of angels came together (Hejduk and Hays, 2002).

Through many of his projects, whether that is the Berlin Masque, the House of Suicide, or the Cathedral, he draws and sketches the overall idea through the understanding of an angel, and what the angel embodies, with many of the angel’s oblique wings being drawn towards the sky of heaven (Hejduk and Moneo, 1987). In doing this, he questions whether or not an architect should act as an angel (or Hermes) to translate the meeting between the divine world and the real world in order to open up the humanity of architecture. An angel floats between the invisible and visible, memory and reality, and the physical and metaphysical, taking in all aspects of what architecture can represent (Figure 1). Through his work, he wonders if architects should do the same. They are the messengers between both sides, allowing a middle threshold where architecture usually resides to encapsulate more than just “normal reality.” His theory of angelic architecture highlights the interactive relationship between the cognitive, actual being of architecture and the emotional essence it has, and allows for the idea of memory and the notion of angels to encapsulate that (Pérez-Gómez, 2016).
Through the angel’s eye, Hejduk’s architecture touches upon the uniqueness of the human spirit, and how rare it is in such a materialistic world. The angel’s eye composed through his architecture allows viewers to realize that architectural ideas are not always stable but rather there is a “greater void and infinite source” where all meaningful things begin. This recognition of the human spirit and its direct relationship to the lived world presents the power Hejduk’s work has in constantly introducing a “new” perspective, straying away from the modern mechanical and callous eye, expressing the pathos of life and death through vivid architectural forms (Pérez-Gómez, 2016).

Hejduk’s approach to angelic architecture also introduced the idea of “memory” and the juxtaposition of the past and the future (Hejduk, 1997). The angel acts as a way to connect the past and future along with it, focusing on all aspects of time and making sure each is presented. Hejduk questioned the modern mechanical understanding of cities, such as the idea of “form follows function,” which tended to forget the real humanistic understanding of things, i.e., the wholeness of the body, mind, and soul in temporality. He believes that through the imaginative
eye of the angel architecture can reunify these three aspects of human existence and dive deeper into what architecture can be approached (Figure 2). He thus proposes the concept of “incompleteness” as a way to break away from the objective totality and evoke poetical imagination to create a world where we may experience spiritual wholeness (Pérez-Gómez, 2016).

Figure 2. The sketch presents a floating and interweaving volume of fragments as seen from an angel’s constantly shifting eye without a focal point.

The angel’s eye in Hejduk’s architecture unfolds a dynamic atmospheric perspective, rather than the mechanical perspectival view, which can consist of a mood that is emotionally solitary, sad, or joyful, and lets humans have a direct relationship with it. It allows for the juxtaposition of the “world of language… and the ever-present more-than-human world,” being the embodiment of angels (Pérez-Gómez, 2016). It creates an opportunity for the world to be explored through the idea of primordial space (chora), with the visible on Earth and the invisible within the human spirit that can eventually be transformed (Pérez-Gómez, 2016). It goes back to Hejduk’s want for a poetic and theoretical approach to architecture in order for it to focus on its more symbolic aspect beyond realism. His belief in the mystic depth of architectural order, like a labyrinth, is what drives his passion and views in imagination. Hejduk thinks that the human spirit plays a rare role in the “materialistic world” that humans live in. We as humans all have similar questions about the world, with ones being some that cannot be answered, leaving them
to be a mystery. Emphasizing that architecture is never stable in meanings and should not be mechanized in forms, his architecture demonstrates that there will always be a void, the primordial space, where human spirits, or angels, love to dwell. The moving posture and eyes of the angel open up such a space for human spirits (Hejduk and Moneo, 1987).

The angel also has a close relationship with religion as the angel allows for the transformation of architectural work and embodiment through an emotional attachment, and not as dogma. There is a poetical emotion connected to the angel in this way. The composition of disorder in his fragmentary drawings relates to angels in a way that many of the angels in his sketches fly towards the sky, blurring the thresholds between the two. In a poem of his, he describes the dome in a Baroque church where an angel flies (a sculpture) and is mixed with the building detail surfaces (Hejduk and Shkapich, 1993). The angel’s body tarries on the borderline between the overhead of the dome and the underground of the dome, bringing the threshold of reality to the invisible. The symbolic dome in western architecture is not typical in eastern architecture where they have courtyards and high open ceilings of deep timber roofs instead of a dome. While the dome in western architecture receives light from an oculus or lantern towers overhead, light in eastern Buddhist temples comes from the reflecting ground, doors, and windows close to the ground (Zou). Although traditional eastern and western architecture differ in the roof and light structures, their common ground is the symbolism of angels, or “spirits” in eastern cosmologies, which Hejduk feels fascinated by.

This can also be seen in his project entitled Cathedral, where he used his angelic perspective to reflect on this religious building and how our spirits and bodies could be reunified (Hejduk and Hays, 2002). In the project, he focused much on the volumetric windows to receive and channel the angelic light, sound, and emotion. These windows are concrete tubes in different shapes and spatial postures inserted into the concrete wall and roof. He implemented a staircase to show the physical connection between these walls and this roof, creating them to mimic the religious ceremony procedure. The angel, for Hejduk, acts as a metaphor and drawing representation for thinking and imagining, guiding his poetical composition of architectural forms through the angel’s eyes (Pérez-Gómez, 1996).

**Architectural Sketches as Narrative Composition**

Hejduk’s work was always delivered in a way that was outside of the representational cliches of architecture, making it more personal with drawing and model-making. Each of his
works is never reproduced and therefore his drawings look very different from the way architecture is expressed today. It is imaginative and poetic but respectful in the sense that he uses the narrative to rewrite cultural traditions that we are used to (Pérez-Gómez, 2016). The close relationship between sketches and narrative is strongly demonstrated in his early project “Victims”. It is an example of how poetry and drawings come together to create “complex literary understandings” (Pérez-Gómez, 2016). In the project, it engages the inhabitants and visitors in a way where they can remember the events of the Holocaust, linking the past to the future through the present, as the solitary visitor encounters the sixty-seven narrative structures that recall memories of life and death (Figure 3). The composition of each structure is accompanied by a written narrative for drawing in deep sadness as well as the unforsaken hope for life (Hejduk, 1987).

![Figure 3. The sixty-seven narrative structures that recall memories of life and death with each figure as an individual story.](image)


Hejduk’s emphasis on narrative sketch and drawing lends a hand to not only the angelic presence of his architecture but also the deeper meaning of the architecture not yet built. The meaning of his work “inhabits the surface and depth of the work” as the meaning is the true medium of what he designs. His sketches are comparable to Giovanni-Battista Piranesi, an 18th-
century Italian architect, who used copperplate engravings as a way to fancy a metaphorical dwelling, and show how such images could only be relayed through non-perspectival drawings (Pérez-Gómez, 2016). Different from Piranesi’s deconstructive perspective drawings, Hejduk’s sketches create a poetical bond between body and soul, developing new ways to approach the unknown and disclose the ethical depth of humanity. His work inspires one to question what we may not realize we know and to find who we are as inhabitants of his architectural ideas. A deeper view of humanity emerges through the way he sketches and the narrative details he composes in each of his drawings. In his Cathedral project, he was able to specifically describe different forms and materials through linework (Hejduk and Davidson, 1998). The strange geometrical form with different volumetrically shaped windows shift, float, and join in various ways in his sketches. The use of his words and narratives helps to create a present-day atmosphere, in reality, to better understand the society that surrounds us. This literary imagination has allowed for the past understandings of architecture and writing to be transformed into a new way of realizing space. Space was implemented into each of his sketches to display architectural elements that tell stories, especially in unbuilt projects such as the “Cathedral” and “Victims”. The sketches draw on his imagination, dialogue with the unknown, and personal emotion through a shifting angel’s eyes into an emerging form that can unify body and soul.

The Pedagogy of Narrative Architecture

While he was the dean at the Cooper Union from 1975 – 2000, Hejduk preached that architectural design should not copy practice exactly but should be approached like poetry with thoughtful decisions and moves. He emphasizes how important it is to have that school education when improving that “process” of design. Hejduk believed that the realistic ideas had to be related to the poetic ones to find an in-between in creating architectural forms. His student’s work reflects this pedagogic emphasis on a poetical depth that differs from things that just look “pretty”. In the anthology of the Cooper Union student work entitled Education of an Architect: A Point of View (Hejduk, 1999b), Hejduk’s architectural pedagogy is so well demonstrated that students use an abstract geometrical approach to compose the critical narrative of modern spaces.

As a student of Hejduk, New York-based architect Daniel Libeskind continued his teacher’s design methods and understandings, creating a legacy for him. This can be seen through Libeskind’s student thesis with his collaged drawings in the Education of an Architect.
(Figure 4). Through his work, Libeskind writes about Hejduk’s drawings in a critical and poetic way. These methods of writing Libeskind later used to fully develop his architectural practice, as seen with the Jewish Museum in Berlin. His designs are a continuation of Hejduk’s narrative architecture from a phenomenological and theoretical perspective (Story, 2020). This can also be seen with architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez and the influence Hejduk had on him, especially in the former’s books “Timely Meditations: Volume One and Volume Two.” Pérez-Gómez wrote the invited preface for the 1999 edition of the “Education of an Architect: A Point of View” in which he applied the phenomenological theory to interpreting Hejduk’s architecture and pedagogy (Hejduk, 1999b). Following Pérez-Gómez’s phenomenological analysis in the preface, it can be argued that the “point of view” sought after in Hejduk and his students’ work is the very eye of the angel (Hejduk and Moneo, 1987).

Each one of his student’s work composes a critical meditation in writing to explain what story their geometry is intended for with depth meanings, never being an empty form that merely follows pragmatic functions. It is always about the story, but the story is never shallow and rather deep by exploring the unknown of its architectural meaning (Hejduk, 1999b). This specifically relates to the role of angels and how angels bring the divine to humans, being the message from the unknowing, which is embodied through narrative architecture for poetical depth. After
Hejduk’s passing, the Cooper Union published anthologies of his poetical writings and design work, carrying on his legacy as a consistent call for the divine.

**Conclusion**

In modern architecture, there has been a lack of historic meaning behind efficient structures and buildings, which devalues the overall nature of how people understand architecture. With the quick rise in our population and a need for more structures to accommodate housing or commercial uses, people are constantly producing homogeneous buildings and cities without historical memory and inspiration for the present and future. From a historical perspective, good humanity always exists with a deeper and more purposeful meaning in what is being built, which represents the value of a good life. In contrast, John Hejduk took on giving meaning to everything he built, and everything he designed on a deeper level. From the perspective of angels, he chased the shadows of memory and imagined what architecture could ecstatically become. Much of his work focuses on the meaningful depth of the “world-as-lived,” which relates architecture to the expression of our human emotion and spirit through each singularly composed architectural form and narrative (Hejduk and Davidson, 1998). “Angel come near, so I can look into your heavenly eyes” (Hejduk, 1999a). In this way, architectural expressive forms are thus composed through the angel’s eyes.

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**References**


