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SIGNS AND ARCHITECTURE: AN ECOSYSTEM OF VISIBILITY

by Gabriel Cira

Things submitted to the public realm enter an ecosystem of visibility that molds the social image of buildings, institutions, heritage, etc. It has nowadays become convenient, even necessary, to think about these objects as congealed clumps of transmediation between subjects, rather than things-in-themselves—objects are not just mediated, they are media. “Quasi-objects,” as Bruno Latour would say.¹ This is only a way of hinting at the fundamental incompleteness of communication in which objects take part, and the fundamentally multi-channel network by which they relate to each other.

Obedient architectural objects are supposed to communicate about themselves. For example, a door registers with your previous ideas about entrances/exits or passage from room to room. The International Building Code, with a perfect example of a “common” authorless injunction (common as in common sense), states: “Doors shall be readily distinguishable from the adjacent construction and finishes such that the doors are easily recognizable as doors.”² What should doors look like? Doors need to look like doors!

What about signage? “ENTER HERE,” or “ENTER AROUND THE RIGHT SIDE, UP THE YELLOW STAIRS” or, even better, “THIS IS A DOOR,” and “THIS IS NOT A DOOR.” Can these accomplish the same task, or fulfill the same communicative requirement? Both object and text are only modes of communication. A classically classic (classicist or even classist) critique asks: “Where’s the front door?”, code for: How should I gain information about your zippy new building if it’s not in some way similar to classical architecture? One might summarize the entire history of the built environment into two phases: 1) orientation via form and order (the premodern) and 2) orientation via signs (the postmodern). Signs no longer point in the actual direction of an object or destination, they point to the first step of a process that will eventually lead you to your object. One does not need to understand the mechanics of highway cloverleaf and overpass to use them effectively, just follow the signs and you are guaranteed to succeed.

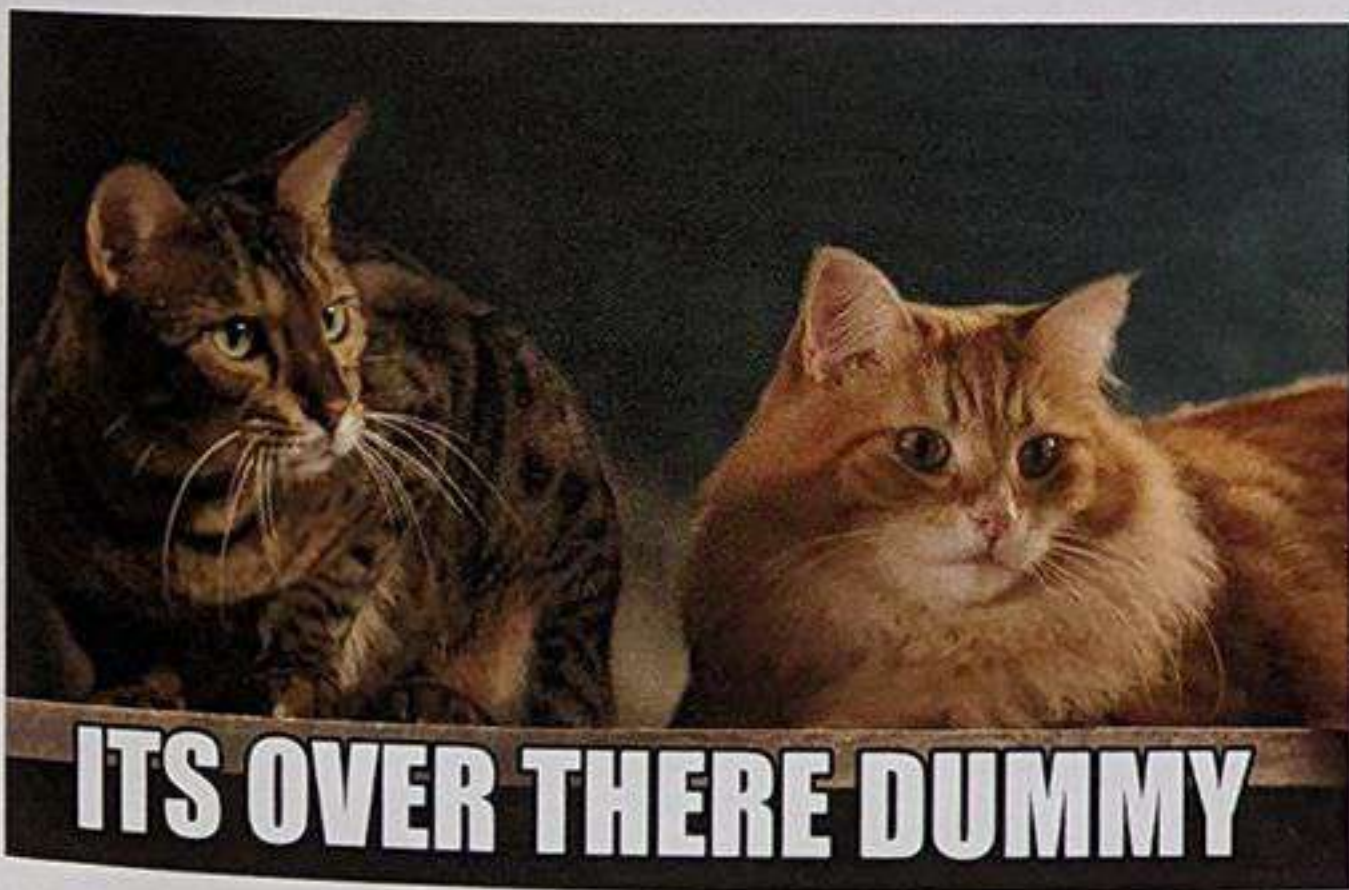
“Signs no longer point in the actual direction of an object or destination, they point to the first step of a process that will eventually lead you to your object.”



René Magritte, *La Victoire (The Victory)*, 1939. This is not a door, etc.



Bruce Price, *Travis van Buren House*, 1885. The entrance is easily recognizable as such because it's a giant dark hole in the center of the front of the building.



Gabriel Ciria, *Proposal for an Entrance*, 2017. One undeniably classical way of symbolizing an entrance is placing statues of big cats on either side of it. Images of cats, clearly the internet age's preferred form of communication, are inherently architectural, and always have been.

Tomás Maldonado and other high postmodernists asked, "Is architecture a text?" as a way of mapping meaning to the historiographical modes of citational literary criticism, without much concern for the *accessibility* of that text.³ For buildings, we think of accessibility as the Americans with Disabilities Act or "ADA-compliant" wheelchair ramp, the simplest machine to accomplish that task. Instead, we should ask "Is text architecture?" The inherent answer to these rhetorical questions is "Yes"—therefore thought, craftsmanship, and judgment of meaning should be given to the full set of tools for architectural communication. So perhaps there is a third historical era for the built environment where there is beautiful form and order to communication without nostalgia for a classical simplicity of index that (reductively) defines form and order.

¹Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 51-55.

²*International Building Code*, 2015 edition, section 1008.1.0.

³Tomás Maldonado, "Is Architecture a Text?," *Casabella* 560 (September 1989): 60-61. (As cited by Robert Venturi, Reyner Banham, etc.)