The Venice Variations

Dynamic intersections between generation and explanation

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Abstract/Summary of the Presentation

I will devote this presentation to the intersection between design and analysis. This does not mean that I consider each individually as less interesting or compelling, but that I simply believe that analytic and generative thought can reach their full potential in conjunction with each other. After many years of practice, design teaching and research, I drew the main focus of my work in my book Architecture and Narrative (2009) as a subject of two dimensions: on one hand the abstract space which we fill with drawings, diagrams, words and abstract relationships – the non-space of the mind; and on the other, the space we cannot capture through language – verbal or visual – the world of embodied experience. My purpose in the book was to describe how architecture constrains or generates meaning from the domain of the symbolic to the instrumental, including the social activities of movement and interaction.
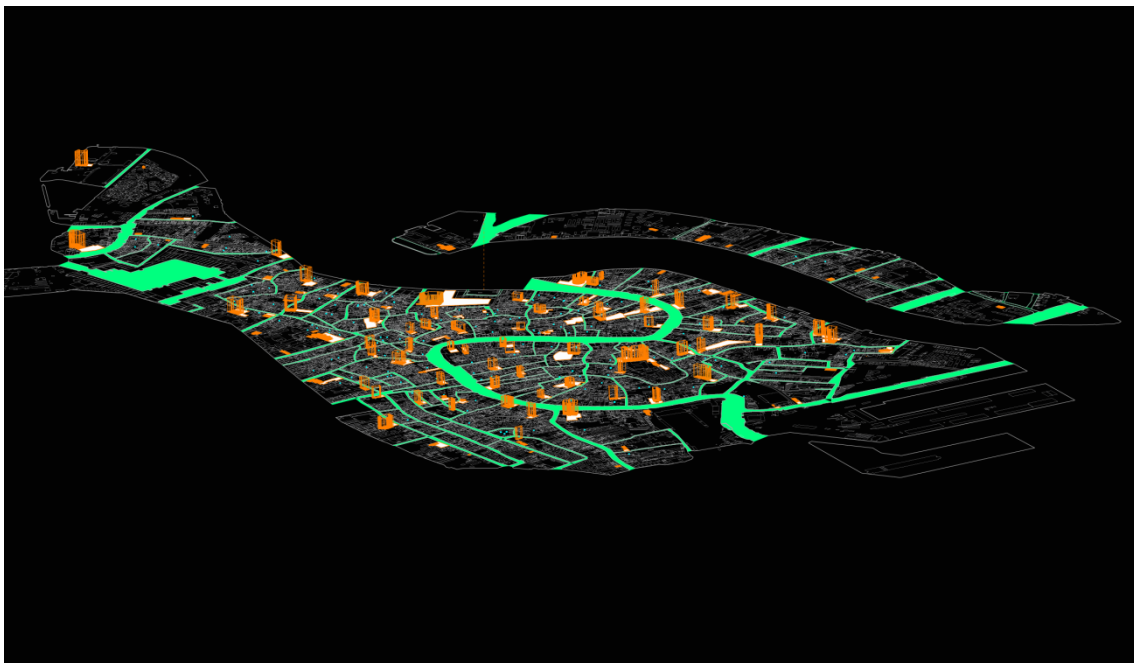
Figure 1: Venice, 3d analysis illustration.

In this talk I will reflect on wider dimensions of architectural knowledge than conceptual and the perceptual patterns, addressed in Architecture and Narrative. My intention is to explore meaning as dynamic potential

rather than as a fixed or static operation. I will discuss three artefacts in which we recognise dynamic generation of meaning and the condition of intersections of analytic thought with generative design. I will try to explain the importance of a theory and a discourse in dynamic processes of interaction and association aside to static spatial structures. Finally, I will show where I situate these ideas in relation to intellectual and design practices and how I project them in the future.
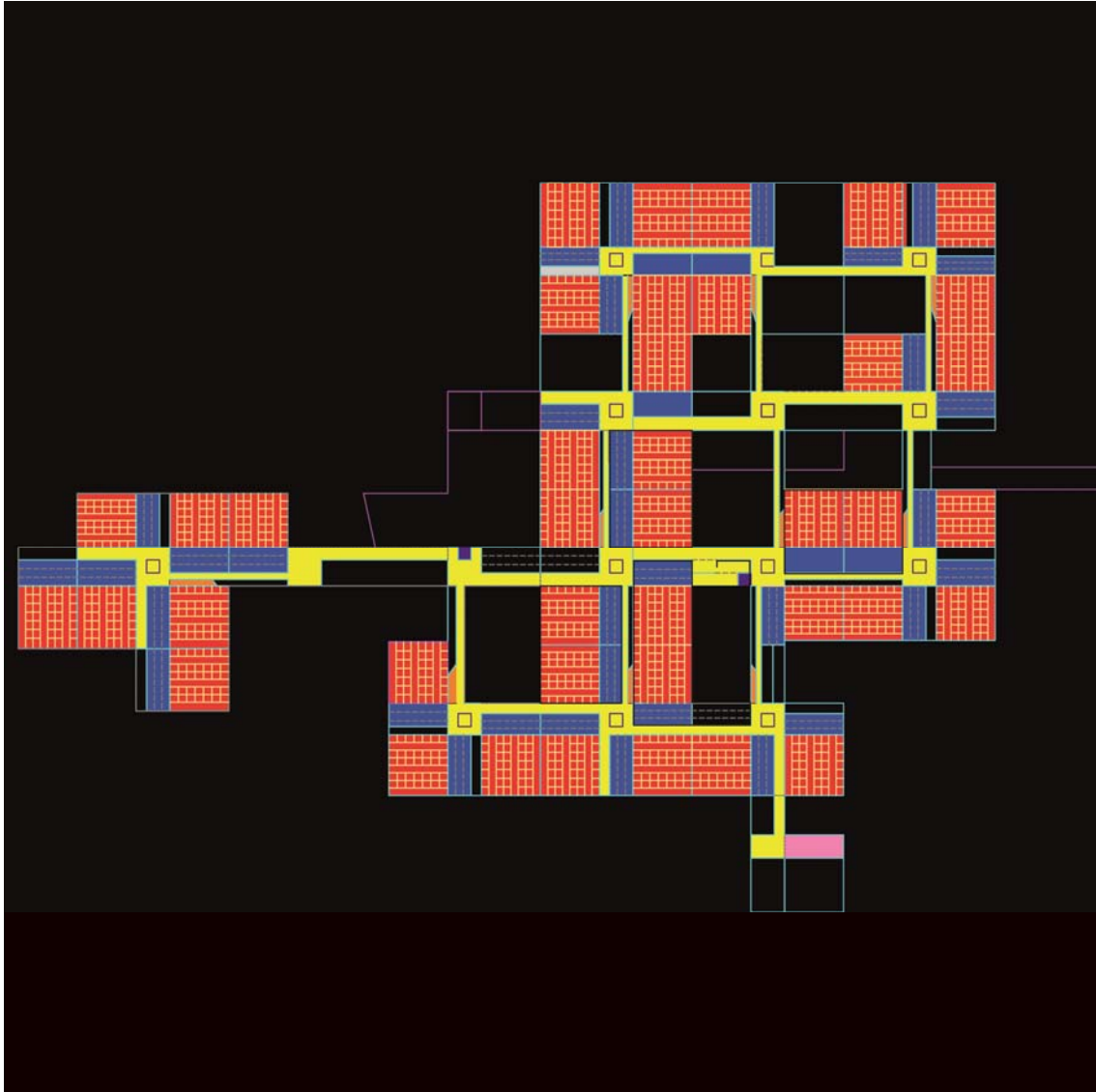

Figure 2: Venice Hospital, LeCorbusier (plan, analysis).

The three artefacts are: a city (Venice), a building (Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital), and a literary text (Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities). Venice is at the core of all these creations, but as the title suggests, it also denotes a theoretical space of permutations the possibility space of the imagination. I refer to Calvino's definition of the imagination as a fundamental instrument of knowledge, 'a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical, of what does not exist and has never existed, and perhaps will never exist but might have existed' (2009). The imagination, as Calvino puts it, is a kind of 'electronic machine' taking into account all possible combinations in order to choose the one that is appropriate to a particular purpose (ibid.). In contrast to the traditional idea that the creation of meaning is some mysterious inspiration caused by a random meeting of circumstances, bringing into architecture a fuzzy and deeply private experience of the world, this definition sees the creation of meaning as the output of definable processes and relationships. On the one hand, it links with the early Renaissance idea of ars combinatoria - the art of combination. On the other, it is associated with the late 20th and early 21st century developments in the area of information systems and computers.
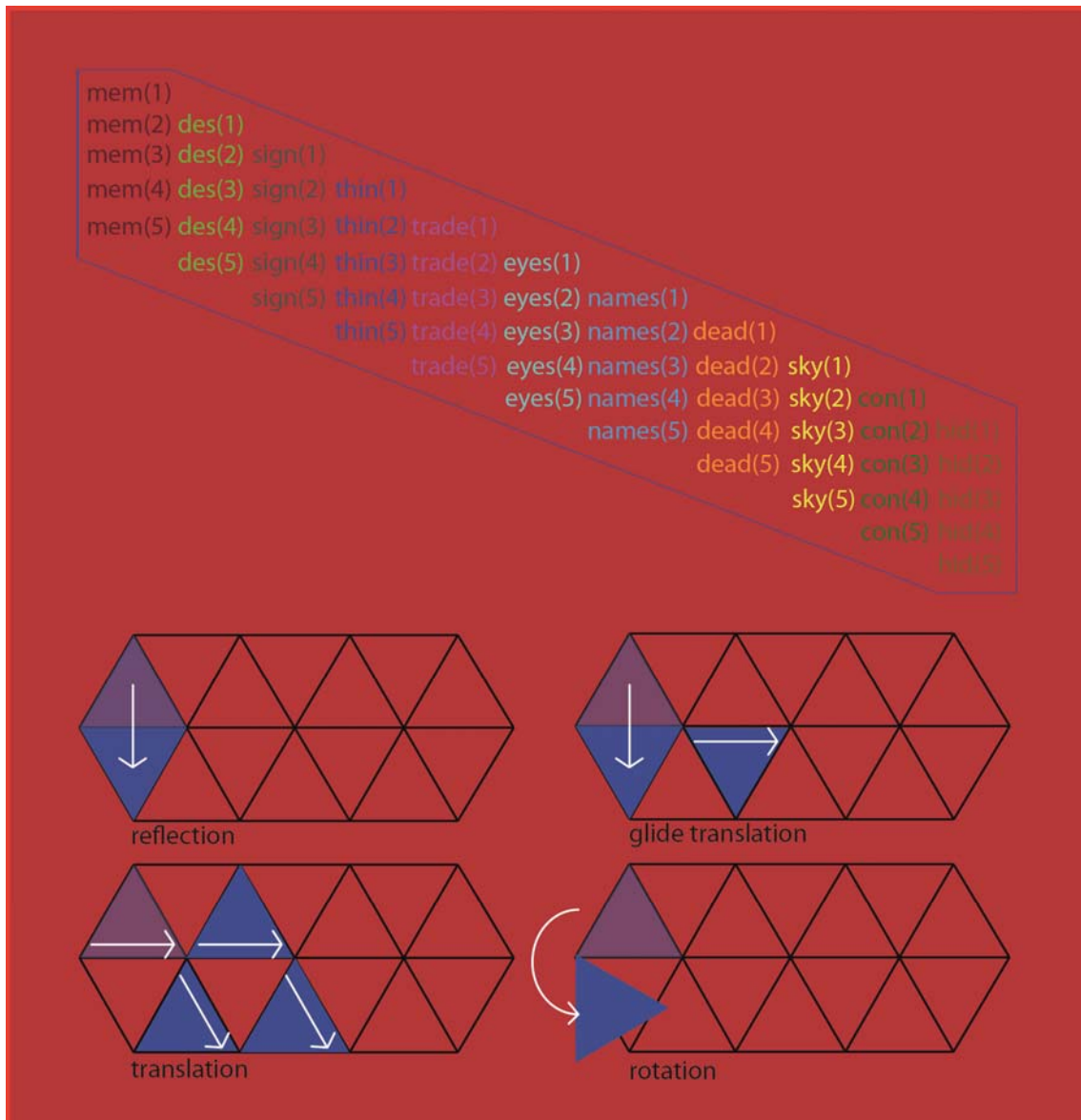
Figure 3: Top: the narrative structure of Calvino's *Invisible Cities.* Bottom: the four symmetries in a tessellation.

Through the discussion of the three artefacts I will suggest that the diversification of knowledge is the most basic condition for the intersection of analytical and generative thought and the dynamic generation of meaning. Analytic and generative knowledge allow access to worlds whose centres of reality are not permanent and fixed but shift dynamically with creative activity over time. Aside to theories of explanation we need theories of generation and their dynamic intersection, or a combined theory of freedom and necessity in architecture and design.

References
Psarra, Sophia. 2009. *Architecture and Narrative: the formation of space and cultural meaning.* London, New York: Routledge.
Calvino, Italo. 2009. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium.* London: Penguin Modern Classics.

Sophia Psarra is Reader of Architecture and Spatial Design at the Bartlett, UCL, and editor of the Journal of Space Syntax. She was previously Associate Professor at the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan (2005-2010) and Lecturer/Senior Lecturer at the Welsh School of Architecture in Cardiff University (1997-2004). Her research interests are in the area of conceptual and perceptual spatial characteristics and their relationship with patterns of movement, use and cultural content. Her activities in these areas have resulted in publications, (Architecture and Narrative –The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning, Routledge 2009), creative installations and design projects. She has collaborated with leading cultural institutions on layout design, exhibition narratives and visitors' experience (The Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, New York, The Natural History Museum, London, The Burrell Collection, Glasgow, The Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove, Glasgow, The Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh). As a practicing architect, she was part of a team that won first prizes in international architectural competitions (EUROPAN). Her work has been exhibited in Venice Biennale, the George Pompidou Centre, NAI Rotterdam, London, Berlin, Milan and Athens in Europe.