

## Design as Metaphor

### Metafor Olarak Tasarım

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#### ABSTRACT

In the scope of the 2013 IDA Congress Istanbul, which was cancelled due to "force majeure", it was proclaimed that the Organizing Committee preferred to write the theme of the congress, that is "design dialects", within quotation marks since it was used as a metaphor. Following this remark, the Committee alluded to the legend of Babel and how human beings came to speak different languages. The legend had it that, wrote the Committee, the Babylonians set out to construct a great tower since they shared a common language enabling them to do, make and produce without limitations. Afterwards, the God, being displeased by such endeavour, impaired human beings' ability to create by destroying their common tongue and turned it into multiple, incomprehensible dialects. This shattering of one single language into several different ones, confused Babylonians and paralyzed their purpose. Even though not being an argumentative person myself, I would like to open the topic of 2013 IDA Congress Istanbul as a discussion in three interrelated parts. Firstly, I will propose employing "design as metaphor" rather than "design dialects" as the title of the paper suggests. Secondly, I will discuss Kojin Karatani's phrase "architecture as metaphor" whilst juxtaposing it with that of "design" aided by Bruno Latour's insights on the concept of design. Relating the first and the second moves to each other, I finally will suggest that "design dialects as a metaphor" still stays within the limits of "architecture as metaphor" but not that of "design". I will introduce Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a means to understand and analyse the human-centeredness of both "design dialects" and "architecture" as metaphors.

**Keywords:** Design as metaphor, architecture as metaphor, ANT (Actor-Network Theory), modern epistemology, foundationalism.

#### ÖZET

2013 yılında IDA (Uluslararası Tasarım Birliği) tarafından İstanbul'da düzenlenmesi planlanan ancak "mücbir sebepler"den dolayı iptal edilen uluslararası tasarım kongresinin kapsamında, Organizasyon Komitesi, kongrenin teması olarak belirlenen "tasarım lehçeleri"ni özellikle tırnak içinde yazmayı tercih ettiğini çünkü bu ifadenin bir metafor olarak kullanıldığı beyan etmiş ve bu uyarının ardından, insanların nasıl olup da farklı diller konuşmaya başladığını dile getiren Babil efsanesini anlatmaya girişmişti. Efsaneye göre, demişti Komite, Babil halkı görkemli bir kule inşa etmeye girişti çünkü kullandıkları ortak dil onları sınırsızca edip eylemeye ve üretmeye muktedir kılmaktaydı. Babil halkının bu girişiminden hoşlanmayan Tanrı, insanoğlunun yaratma yetisini, sahip oldukları bu ortak dili bozup çok sayıda, anlaşılmaz lehçeye ayırarak bozguna uğrattı. Tek bir dilin pek çok farklı dile parçalanması Babillilerin kafasını karıştırdı ve amaçlarını felce uğrattı. Her ne kadar münakaşa etmekten hoşlanan biri olmasam da, kongre temasını birbiriyle ilişkili üç bölüm halinde tartışmaya açacağım. İlk olarak, metnin başlığından da anlaşılacağı gibi metafor olarak "tasarım lehçeleri" yerine metafor olarak "tasarım"ı önereceğim. İkinci olarak, Bruno Latour'un tasarım kavramına ilişkin öngörüsünden yararlanarak "metafor olarak tasarım" kavramını, Kojin Karatani'nin "metafor olarak mimarlık" kavramı ile yanyana getirerek tartışmaya açacağım. Son olarak ise, ilk iki hareketi birbiriyle ilişkilendirerek "metafor olarak tasarım lehçeleri"nin hala daha "metafor olarak mimarlık" kavrayışının içinde yer aldığını göstereceğim. Her iki metafor da söz konusu olan insan-merkezçiliği anlamak ve çözümlmek adına Aktör-Network Teorisi'ni (ANT) devreye sokacağım.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Metafor olarak Tasarım, Metafor olarak Mimarlık, ANT (Aktör-Network Teorisi), modern epistemoloji, temellendirmecilik.

## Architecture As Metaphor

The statement "design as metaphor", although being related to "design dialects as metaphor", is first and foremost connected to Kojin Karatani's book entitled *Architecture as Metaphor* –which was originally written in Japanese in 1983, translated into English in 1995 and several other languages including Turkish in the following years.

In *Architecture as Metaphor*, Karatani juxtaposes the notion of "architecture" with that of "construction" and states that after 1960's, with the rise of post-modern movements such as deconstruction and post-structuralism, the traditional metaphor of thinking –that is architecture– started to be questioned. According to Karatani (1995: xxxi), these movements, even though still "remain as necessarily trapped"<sup>1</sup> in the architectural way of thinking, achieved to open the twin concepts of "construction" and "structure" into discussion by means of revealing their connection with what is called "the metaphysics of presence". Such metaphysics directly goes back to Greeks and especially to Plato to whom Karatani pays a special attention both at the beginning of the text and in the preface of the English translation.

Karatani (1995: xxxi-ii) claims that Plato, in his endeavour to answer the question "who is a philosopher?" uses architecture as a metaphor and portrays philosophers as similar to architects since a philosopher, for Plato, is someone who looks for *an ideal foundation or architectonic* upon which he can construct his philosophical ideas.<sup>2</sup> In other respects, Plato was not the only one in likening the philosopher to the architect since "philosophers since Plato have returned over and again to architectural figures and metaphors as a way of grounding and stabilizing their otherwise unstable philosophical systems" (Karatani, 1995: 5-6).

Architecture, being "a figure of philosophy par excellence" (Karatani, 1995: 6), is put to use especially in the times of crisis. Within this context, the second philosopher Karatani mentions is Descartes as expected, since Descartes shows up when the Western philosophy faces with another crisis called "modernity".

Descartes, said to be the father or the founder of modern philosophy, explicitly uses the metaphor of architecture so as to describe his philosophical methodology.

He remarks that,

Throughout my writings I have made it clear that my method imitates that of the architect. When an architect wants to build a house which is stable on ground where there is a sandy topsoil over underlying rock, or clay, or some other firm base, he begins by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand, and anything resting on or mixed in with the sand, so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil. (In Newman, 2010: 12)

In *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1690), Descartes eliminates a great range of candidates for lacking the quality of being the foundation of what he is looking for, that is, certain knowledge. After removing the "sandy topsoil" referring to what is doubtful in contrast to certainty, he eventually comes across an "underlying firm base" upon which his philosophical system can be securely built. The reliable base Descartes seeks out is called *ego cogito* of his famous phrase "*ego cogito ergo sum*" which translates as "I think therefore I am" (West, 2010: 14-5).

Descartes' methodological doubt depends primarily on demolishing everything currently at hand and then constructing something unprecedented out of trustworthy foundations. This method, for the

<sup>1</sup> At this point, I enjoyed to remember the way Heidegger remarks on Nietzsche's struggle with metaphysics: "As a mere countermovement, it necessarily remains trapped, like everything anti-, in the essence of what it is challenging (Heidegger, 2002: 162).

<sup>2</sup> For Plato, this foundation was something developed in our "legendary" Babel: Mathematics.

most part, is considered to be "foundationalist" since it simply implies "organiz(ing) knowledge in the manner of a well-structured, architectural edifice (that) owes its structural integrity to two kinds of features: A firm *foundation* and a *superstructure* of support beams firmly anchored to the foundation" (Newman, 2010: 13-6).

Along with this foundationalist philosophy representing the dawn of modern thinking, "mind" as a faculty belonging solely to human beings becomes isolated from "body" resulting in a duality between mental and material, human and non-human spheres. We can call this separation of mind from the rest of the world as "the modern paradigm of thinking" echoing Kuhn's famous notion "paradigm" which denotes a conceptual framework characterizing the way reality is experienced.

Paradigms, however, as we all know, shift. If we call this particular shift from modernity as "post-modernity" and, in a similar vein, if we describe post-modernity which is when we started to figure out that "we have never been modern" as the French thinker Bruno Latour (1993) notably remarks, then we have to accept that what started to shift in the post-modern period is "architecture as metaphor" as well. A critical question nonetheless stays still: It shifted into what?

### Design As Metaphor

Latour, in his article *A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design* (which was presented in *Design History Society* meeting in Cornwall UK in 2008) claims that the meaning of what is called "design" has broadened enormously and is still extending its borders in a continuous way.

Latour notes that the term "design" was set off to be associated with the details of daily products, whereas reached to a level that concerns "cities, landscapes, nations, cultures, bodies, genes and nature itself" (2008: 2). Currently, everything from the most trivial to the most pharaonic ones, from the most tangible to the most abstract ones are all considered to be a matter of design. As the cleverly shot introduction video of the 2013 IDA Congress Istanbul (figure 1) simply sets forth<sup>3</sup>, hereafter everyone is a designer and everything is a design since, according to Latour, what has been designed today cannot be distinguished from "what has been planned, calculated, arrayed, arranged, packed, packaged, defined, projected, tinkered, written down in code, disposed of and so on" (2008: 2).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This video still can be found on YouTube under the title of "2013 IDA Congress Istanbul".

<sup>4</sup> Such portrayal of design brings Heidegger's coinage *Ge-stell* to mind which denotes the essence of modern technology and the way it reveals itself in the modern age. *Ge-stell*, with a dash in between, is made up of the combination of German prefix *Ge-* meaning "reunion, gathering, collecting and reassembling" and the verb *stellen* meaning broadly "set, put, place, stand, provide and order". Besides that, there is a great range of verbs that are stemmed from the verb-root *stellen*: *Aufstellen* (establish), *bestellen* (order), *darstellen* (represent), *herstellen* (produce, make, manufacture), *heraufstellen* (display), *nachstellen* (adjust, change), *sicherstellen* (ensure, guarantee), *verstellen* (block, disguise) and finally *vorstellen* (design, present) etc. Thus *Ge-stell* connotes the sum total meaning of all these verbs together. *Gestell*, without a dash in between, on the other hand, highly refers to structural compositions such as "skeleton, frame or shelf" while *Untergestell* refers to "chassis and infrastructure" as in the case of foundation (Ciborra & Hanseth, 1998: 318). Nevertheless, Latour by no means relates design to *Ge-stell*, firstly because Heidegger (2007: 340) assigns *Ge-stell* a quite negative meaning associated with "extreme danger" and secondly –and more importantly– because Heidegger seems to relate *Ge-stell* with construction and structure which, for Latour, is totally unacceptable since he attributes the term "design" a meaning quite the contrary of anything related with construction and structure.



Figure 1: Snapshots from the video. Taşkın the Shopkeeper, Fikri the Neon sign maker, Latif the Ice cream seller and Aziz the Dolmuş driver are all defined as designers with different "design accents".

Latour (2005: 2-3) candidly affirms the extension of the concept of "design" and considers it as an opportunity to understand and therefore change the old patterns of thinking which are essentially harmonious with Karatani's "architecture as metaphor". Latour states that design is "one of the terms that has replaced the word 'revolution!'" since if something is designed and re-designed, it is no longer needed to be "revolutionized" or "modernized". Therefore, whilst suggesting the word "design" or "design as metaphor" as I prefer to say, Latour requests to replace the modern paradigm of thinking with a non-modern one as he links non-modern thinking to the concept of design.<sup>5</sup>

In order to elaborate this view, Latour (2005: 3) recalls a figure from Greek mythology, that is Prometheus, so as to illustrate the modern way of action. The heroic depiction of a revolutionary Prometheus –as the supporters of modernity like to portray him– roars in a hubristic manner and declares to "go forward" and "break radically with the past" without paying heed to the consequences. Latour, without any hesitation, associates this old and Promethean way of action with "building, constructing, destroying and radically overhauling" and advocates a new way of action. The non-modern way of action Latour supports has a lot to do with design and design, for Latour, is related with humbleness in contrast to the hubris of a Promethean style.

Characterizing design by attentiveness to details, being careful, responsible and, as the title of his paper suggests, being cautious, he states that,

...there is always some *modesty* in claiming design something anew. In design there is nothing *foundational*. It seems to me that to say you plan to design something, does not carry the same risk of *hubris* as saying one is going to build something. (Latour, 2005: 3)

At this point, it is better to recall the founder of modern philosophy once more since it would become easier to figure out what Latour, being a supporter of non-modernity, is criticizing for.

<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, in its opposition to modernity's proximity to "building and construction".

To begin with, earlier in this text it is stated that Descartes' methodology is a foundationalist one which implies construction right from the foundations after a complete demolition. This proposal denotes "a radical break with the past" and manifests that Descartes' philosophical endeavour is a Promethean kind of action par excellence. Second of all, Descartes designates the foundation of his philosophy as *ego cogito*, namely "the thinking I", which favours "mind" over "non-mind" or, as Latour prefers to understand it, "humans" over "non-humans".

Latour contests to the centralization of human beings via a theory abbreviated as ANT. Actor-Network Theory, as it is called, is at odds with the modern paradigm of thinking as it refuses the exaltation of mind and the isolation of it from the rest of the world. According to ANT, non-humans such as cats, tables, stars, rainbows, Istanbul, dirt, satellites, governmental regulations, touch screens, texts and taxes are not essentially different or separated from humans. Rather, they all are united in a continuous flow of multifarious interactions. ANT names all entities whether human or non-human as an "actor" (or "actant") and the continuous flow in between these actors as a "network".

Thus, ANT aims at challenging the traditional framework of how we experience reality by carrying "all entities on exactly the same ontological footing" (Harman, 2009: 14) and therefore initiating a possibility to overcome the dichotomous structure that defines the conjunctions between humans and non-humans, mind and body, mental and material. One more yet still critical question remains: Has the ongoing shift from "architecture as metaphor" to that of "design" arrived to the field of design? Or rather, are we, the ones claiming to be "a designer", still acting within the confines of a rather worn-out paradigm?

### **Design Dialects As Metaphor?**

In the scope of the 2013 IDA Congress Istanbul, it is pronounced that "design dialects" is written deliberately within quotation marks so as to express its metaphoric position. Following that, the legend of Babel is shortly introduced to be able to highlight the Babylonians' endeavour to build up a great tower enabling them to create devoid of limits thanks to a shared language. After touching upon the feeling of discontent regarding the structure planned to erect, it is noted how God diminishes human being's competence to create via shattering their unified language into numerous dialects. The breaking of one single language into several different ones, says the legend and writes the Committee, generates confusion among the people of Babylon and paralyzes their purpose ([www.idacongress.com/2013istanbul](http://www.idacongress.com/2013istanbul)).

The myth of Babel narrated in the scope of the congress' leaflet sets forth a quite "human-centered" point of view towards what we do, that is "to design". Proposing human-centeredness into anything including designing depends principally on the primacy of mind (which, as it is stated earlier, belongs solely to human beings apart from God) and its isolation from the rest of the world: The for-so-long ignored gathering of non-human actors, or the "missing masses" as Latour (1992: 152) prefers to call in his article titled as *Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts*.

I believe that the overemphasis on the Babylonians and the way language is defined (as a tool of communication) in the leaflet simply reveals the presence of the modern rift between human subjects and non-human objects in the field of design. It seems that the modern epistemological split has shaped our perception of reality for so long that we ended up accepting such bifurcation as a "natural" occurrence. Even the frequency of the words "subject" and "object" used in daily life or design-related issues is sufficient to reflect the enormous impact of Cartesian determination on us. Nevertheless, Rorty in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* gives notice to the artificiality of this conceptual framework while claiming that the way we think rests simply on an invention made by Descartes in his quest for the certainty of knowledge (1979: 2-3).

However, it is vital to note that, it is from Descartes on that the subject as *cogito* takes hold of the role of primary existence and confines, or rather, narrows the meaning of it. Previously, the concept of "subject", as in the form of "substance", was amount to *every entity* whether human or non-human (Carr, 2002: 272-3). As mentioned earlier, Latour develops a theory to compete with such kind of

reductionism. ANT pictures, actually *motion* pictures, actors *acting* in an interactive platform called "network" with an ultimate aim to embrace humans and non-humans together without drawing a distinction between them. A discussion related with the future implications of Latour's proposal and its possible effects on the area of design are beyond the limits of this paper. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that Latour's insights have and probably will keep on having a significant impact on design thinking since the way we think *designs* how we perceive and evaluate ourselves and our environment in conjunction with what, how and why we design.

Thus, I believe that "design dialects as metaphor" still stays within the limits of "architecture as metaphor" and it is time for us to pay regard to what "design as metaphor" evokes at least within the scope of design. I also believe that Latour and the other ANT theorists deserve to be paid attention due to two interconnected respects. On the one hand, they suggest focusing our attention to the concept of "design" so as to promote alternatives to the modern paradigm of thinking, and on the other, their fresh proposal may enable us –the dwellers or inhabitants of the planet Earth– to create a chance to regain what we have lost ecologically, which –among certain other effects– is an unmistakable consequence of our old patterns of thinking. It is obvious that the habit of placing the knowing subject, the *cogito*, at the centre of everything resulted in a worldwide ecological crisis. And perhaps, a much more humble understanding that cherishes togetherness rather than separation may lead mankind toward a peaceful and more favourable future.

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