My Home Is My Symptom: A Psychoanalytic Plea for Flawed Architecture

Johannes Binotto

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My Home Is My Symptom

A Psychoanalytic Plea for Flawed Architecture

Johannes Binotto

We suffer from metaphors. In his seminal paper "*Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse*" from 1953 Jacques Lacan argues "metaphor [is] but a synonym for the symbolic displacement brought into play in the symptom."[1] And four years later in his essay "*L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient*" the psychoanalyst will state apodictically: "The symptom is a metaphor, whether one likes to admit it or not."[2]

The metaphor is a symptom

On first sight the equation of metaphor and neurotic symptom may seem rather far fetched. But in fact, the analyst did nothing else than take the classic definition of metaphor as proposed by Russian linguist Roman Jakobson seriously. In his essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," Jakobson defines metaphor as a paradigmatical *exchange* of signs (in contrast to metonymy, which is defined as a syntagmatical *combination* of signs).[3] In analogy with the metaphor where one sign stands for the other, the neurotic symptom functions as a stand-in for something else. Thus, the symptom is to be regarded as a metaphor for an unconscious psychic conflict.

However, what needs to be stressed here is the very unique meaning the term symptom has in psychoanalysis, one, which sets it apart from most of the other sciences, most notably medicine. In medicine a symptom

1 | Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil 1966, p. 260

2 | Ibid., p. 528

3 | Jakobson, Roman, *Selected Writings II: Word and Language*, The Hague: Mouton 1971, pp. 239-59

is usually regarded as an indexical sign, which – according to the definition by semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce – is "physically connected with its object."[4] As in Peirce's famous example the "veering of a weathercock" is a direct result of and therefore an index for the blowing wind[5] so does the physician takes a medical symptom as a direct expression of certain medical conditions. As indexes their meanings can be learned in medical school and be looked up in the respective handbooks. However, in psychoanalysis – and this may be a reason for its bad reputation among medical scientists – the symptom is never as unequivocal as Pierce's weathercock but rather resembles a (Saussurian) signifier which is not naturally but only *arbitrarily* linked to the signified. The symptom in psychoanalysis is not an index, but always remains an ambiguous metaphor. And as the poet creates new metaphors whose meaning cannot be looked up in a dictionary, so too does the unconscious. Similar to the literary critic who has to decipher metaphors on the basis of the very text in which they appear, so too in psychoanalysis the symptoms need to be interpreted via the patient's discourse and nothing else. In contrast to medical science there is no manual, no standard key for deciphering the symptoms. Rather, the analyst faces the predicament that in the discourse of neurosis anything can be a symptom but isn't necessarily one. A signifier, which for one patient may be a crucial symptomatic metaphor for his suffering, most certainly will have no symptomatic value at all for any other patient. This is precisely why Freud insisted so much on the fact that the science of psychoanalysis cannot simply be taught but needs in fact to be re-invented by every analyst and for each and every patient anew.

Thus, from a psychoanalytic point of view speaking about metaphors also means speaking about symptoms. It follows that the discussion of the intersections between metaphor and architecture will also inevitably entail a discussion of the relation between symptom and architecture. Curiously enough, architectural theory is already more than familiar with such a discussion. Considering architecture symptomatically has in fact a well-known tradition which is probably as old as the earliest writings on

4 | Peirce, Charles Sanders, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 2: 1893-1913, Ed. The Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1998, p. 9

5 | Ibid., p. 274

architecture. It is Vitruvius who in his *De Architectura libri decem* compares dwellings with human bodies, thus implying that both are prone to similar harms and diseases. Alberti in the third book of his *On the Art of Building* further develops this comparison by proposing that the architect "with every type of vault, [...] should imitate nature throughout, that is, bind together the bones and interweave flesh with nerves running across every possible section."[6] By identifying buildings with human bodies, architecture thus becomes almost a matter of life and death which also becomes obvious when looking at way we still talk about buildings. Architectural critics will argue that walls 'need to breathe' or one talks about a building's 'healthy structure.' As architecture is supposed to be modelled after the image of the human body, conversely its aberrations are taken as forebodings of bodily harm. On a larger scale, the whole city was and still is widely believed to reveal symptomatically the malfunctions of society. Famous examples which spring to mind here may be Friedrich Engels "The Condition of the Working Class in England"[7] or Jane Jacobs influential study *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.[8]

Probably the most notorious example of such a symptomatic reading of the city is of course to be found in Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme* from 1925 where the architect considers the development of urban architecture in general, and of Paris in particular, as indicating nothing less than the degeneration of mankind as a whole. "Man strides forward in a straight line because he has a goal; he knows where he is going [...] The donkey walks in zigzag line, takes a little nap, dumb from the heat and distracted [...] The donkey has left his mark in all the cities of the continent, in Paris too, sadly enough."[9] Such are the famous opening lines of the first chapter entitled "Le chemin des ânes. Le chemin des hommes" – "The path of the donkey. The path of man." In contrast to authors such as Franz Hessel or Walter Benjamin, Le Corbusier sees no advantage in an urban architecture that forces its inhabitants to wander around as "flaneurs." On the contrary:

6 | Alberti, Leon Battista, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, Transl. J. Rykwert, N. Leach & R. Tavernor, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1991, p. 86

7 | Engels, Friedrich, "Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England," in *Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels*, Werke. Band 2, Berlin: Dietz 1957, pp. 225-506

8 | Jacobs, Janet, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage 1992

9 | Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, Paris: Arthaud 1980, pp. 5-6

to him the curved streets of the old Paris and its labyrinthine spaces are nothing but the traces of a brutish society. For Le Corbusier, Paris is not a city made by humans but by donkeys.

His notion of an *imbrutement* of architecture rather uncannily foreshadows the notion of "entartete Kunst" – "degenerate art" that the Nazis will deploy only few years later. The utter brutality of Le Corbusier's analysis becomes even clearer by looking at the illustrations in his book. Particularly the aerial shots of old Paris in the fifteenth chapter are revealing since in the captions Le Corbusier compares the sight of old Paris with a view of Dante's hell: the old parts of French capital are nothing than an abhorrent and revolting sight/site. However, what seems even more significant is the very position from which these pictures are taken, since it is the point of view a bomber pilot takes in military attack. The very perspective of the images reveal what the caption can only insinuate: It would be preferable to radically erase the existing architecture and its history, to give way to a homogeneous, uniformed urban space.

Le Corbusier is thus picking up on a thought that Descartes already proposes in his *Discours de la méthode* where he argues: "those ancient cities which, from being at first only villages, have become, in course of time, large towns, are usually but ill laid out compared with the regularly constructed towns which a professional architect has freely planned on an open plain [...] when one observes their indiscriminate juxtaposition, there a large one and here a small, and the consequent crookedness and irregularity of the streets, one is disposed to allege that chance rather than any human will guided by reason must have led to such an arrangement."[10]

Problematic as the Cartesian ideal may already seem, Le Corbusiers plan to turn the philosophers abstract and only textual utopia into an actual city becomes all the more frightening. Who would seriously want to live in a city cleansed of all its contradictions and devoid of all symptoms? The very lack of any symptomatic disturbance becomes the sign of an even more dangerous sickness.

10 | Descartes, René, *Discourse on the Method*, Transl. J. Veitch, New York: Cosimo 2008, p. 7

Image 6: Le Corbusier, Urbanisme, 1925

Est-ce une vue du septième cercle de l'Enfer de Dante? Non. Hélas, c'est le gîte effroyable de centaines de mille d'habitants. La Ville de Paris ne possède pas ces documents photographiques dénonciateurs. Cette vue d'ensemble est comme un coup de massue. Quand dans nos promenades, nous suivons le dédale des rues, nos yeux sont ravis par le pittoresque de ces paysages escarpés, les évocations du passé surgissent..... La tuberculose, la démoralisation, la misère, la honte triomphent sataniquement. La « Commission du Vieux Paris » collationne les fers forgés.

Le Corbusier wants to cut away the symptomatic excess of the city like a surgeon. However, from a psychoanalytic point of view it becomes clear how fatal such an operation would be, as for the analyst the symptom is not to be erased but rather to be preserved.

In his late teachings and most prominently in his 1975 seminar entitled "*Le sinthome*"[11] Lacan suggests a radical new reading and eventually a valorization of the symptom. On the one hand the symptom encapsulates

11 | Lacan, Jacques, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXIII: Le sinthome*, Paris: Seuil 2005

the patient's suffering. The symptom is – as was already pointed out – a metaphor for his pain, a representation for everything that does not function properly. However, without the symptom, things would become even more problematic. The symptom, as Lacan stresses continuously, is not the psychic dysfunction itself but rather a way to deal with this very dysfunction. Or to put it differently: The symptom is nothing else than a way to make things work.

This ambivalence of the symptom may best be seen in the hallucinations and delusions of psychosis. The delusion, being a symptom of psychosis must not be mistaken for the psychotic breakdown as such. Rather it is a way to make sense – although a strange and twisted one – of the psychotic breakdown itself. The conspiracy theories psychotic patients grow convinced of, or the instructions they believe to be given by hallucinated voices – all these symptoms are in fact protective shields against the frightening abyss of pure psychosis, an abyss of utter nothingness and nonsense. Thus the symptom has a double function: it is both a sign *for* but also a safeguard *against* psychic breakdown. It thus becomes all the more problematic if the analyst aims for a complete removal of all symptoms. In fact, erasing all symptoms will not result in mental health but destroy it. Perfection as such is ultimately psychotic. At least, that is how Lacan sees it when he characterizes the absence of any symptom as a characteristic of paranoia.[12] This would also explain why this striving for perfection and the removal of all symptomatic flaws in both Le Corbusier's *Plan voisin* for Paris from 1925 and Descartes' radical philosophy it is based on, seem so terrifying and paranoid to us. But how then should one deal with the symptom?

The symptom is a knot

In his seminar "*Le sinthome*" Lacan proposes to think of the symptom as a knot, which holds together what otherwise would fall apart. Although the analyst may be tempted to remove and untie all the symptoms of his patient it is crucial that certain symptomatic knots remain.[13] Similar to what Freud called "the navel of the dream" – the knotted detail in the dream text which resists interpretation, but which is also its kernel[14] – the mysterious knot of

12 | Ibid., p. 53

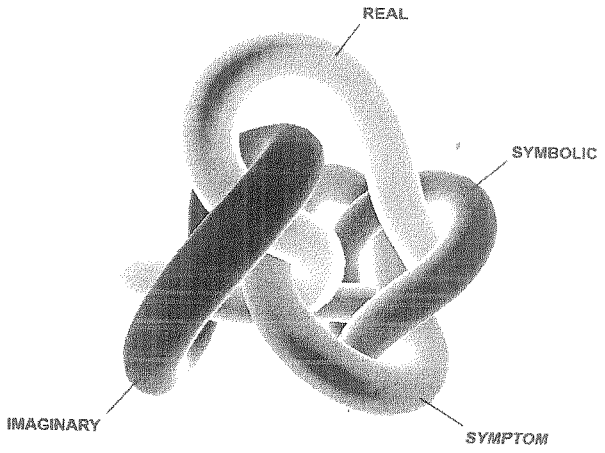
13 | Ibid., pp. 45-57

14 | Freud, Sigmund, "Die Traumdeutung," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. II/III, London: Imago 1942, p. 530

the symptom haunts the subject. Nontheless, it is this very enigmatic detail that guarantees the sanity of the subject. By posing a kind of irresolvable problem it keeps the subject "on its toes" so to speak.

In order to fully understand the importance of the notion of the knot for Lacan, we have to be reminded that for psychoanalysis the psyche is never understood as one coherent whole but as consisting of different elements and registers which are at odds with each other. Freud described these contradictory aspects with his model of the psychic apparatus consisting of the consciousness, the preconscious and the unconscious. However, at a later stage he will replace this first model by a second model of the Ego, the Super-Ego and the Id. Lacan then will supplement the Freudian model with his famous triad of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the the Real. While in Freud one could be tempted to understand the three registers of the psyche as separate areas, Lacan insists that Symbolic, Imaginary and Real are always implicated in one another. Not only because in the psyche these three registers are intertwined and interlinked but also because every act of the subject has at the same time a symbolic, an imaginary and real aspect to it.

Image 7: Borromean knot with four rings, representing the Lacanian subject



However, in the knotted subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis the interlinking of the three registers is never perfect. The knot of the subject is never a

neat and tidy one but more or less unsafe. As the word trauma indicates, meaning literally "to open a wound" or "a hole," the knot of every subject is loosened and damaged to some extent by traumatic experiences. This is where the symptom as both result and remedy of trauma comes into play. The symptom functions as a fourth element which serves to bind and repair the faulty knot of Symbolic, Imaginary and Real.

Image 8: Borromean knot with four rings, cutting of the ring of the symptom

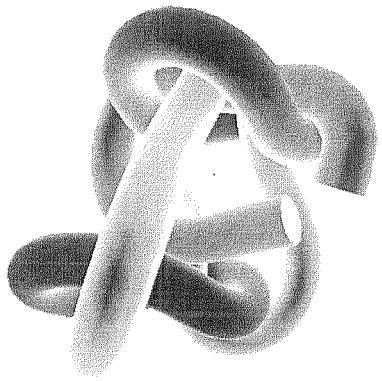
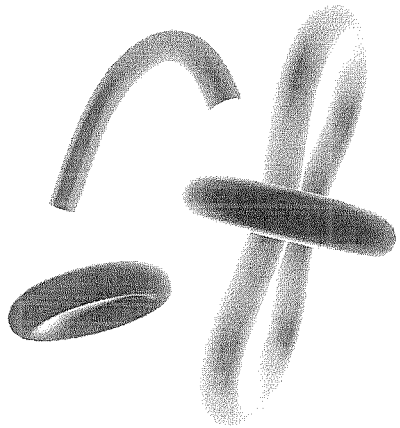


Image 9: Borromean knot with four rings, complete dissolution of the knot



Although the symptom renders the knot of the psyche all the more complex and convoluted it also guarantees its safety. In contrast to that, by cutting off the symptom, the three remaining registers would fall apart and the subject as a whole would disintegrate.

Complete cure thus becomes destruction. That is an insight already Freud hinted at in one of his last essays, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" where he – rather pessimistically – argued that any analytical cure can never be completely finished but has to stop pre-ultimately. Final analysis on the other hand could only be disastrous.[15]

Considering the symptom as a knot makes the term all the more attractive for architecture. As the knot brings into play the question of stability, cohesion and enclosure it can be regarded itself as an allegory, a metaphor for architectural construction. Furthermore, one could read the three registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real in analogy to the three axes of three-dimensional space. However, in contrast to the Euclidian space with its three dimension of length, width, and depth, the space of psychoanalysis is a topologically warped and folded one – a knotted space. The symptom then is built both within this warped psychic space but at the same time enwrapping it, giving it consistency.

This spatial aspect to the symptom is also consistent with the observation that dwellings so often function as shelter against neurotic anxiety, most prominently in the case of agoraphobia. This example shows once again the duplicity of the symptom: the enclosing space of the house or room in which the agoraphobic retreats is both prison and refuge. The symptomatic space of the shelter is at the same time constraining and enabling. As the psychoanalyst Patrick de Neuter has argued, the castles by Ludwig of Bavaria could be regarded as probably the most extravagant examples of such a symptomatically knotted architecture.[16] As we know, Ludwig of Bavaria obsessively built a whole series of castles of which Neuschwanenstein is only the most famous "castle-prothesis" as de Neuter puts it. Furthermore, when Ludwig died he left a huge collection of plans and designs for castles that were never erected. De Neuter then argues

15 | Freud, Sigmund, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 16, London: Imago 1950, pp. 57-99

16 | Patrick de Neuter: "Die verrückten Leidenschaften Ludwigs II. von Bayern. Bauen, um zu überleben," in *RISS. Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, Heft 50, 2001/I, pp. 51-74

quite convincingly that planning and constructing buildings was the king's strategy to hold a mental breakdown at bay. It seems safe to say that it is this very duplicity that makes the fantasy architecture of Ludwig's castles so haunting until today: as much as they seem to reveal the mental instability of its builder they obviously function as shelters against insanity. It does not come as a surprise that it was precisely when Ludwig was hindered to pursuit his architectural obsession – not the least because he spent all the tax incomes on his castles –, that his illness became apparent.

The knot is a knob

A less obvious but certainly equally poignant example for such an architectural symptom can be found in Frank Capra's famous Christmas movie *It's a Wonderful Life* of 1946 – a movie which should be mandatory viewing for any young architect. It seems this classic has never ever been considered as being of much significance for architectural theory, which is all the more surprising since the protagonist of the film is actually an ambitious architect with high hopes. In an early scene of the film we see our protagonist, young George Bailey, standing in front of an old, derelict house, talking to his high school sweetheart Mary about his big plans which seem rather prototypical for a future architect. First, he claims, he will

Image 10: Frank Capra, It's a Wonderful Life, 1946

study the masters. "I'm gonna see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon... the Coliseum." Then he wants to "build things" as he puts it. "I'm gonna build air fields. I'm gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'mgonna build bridges a mile long." Knowingly or not George Bailey presents himself as a new Le Corbusier, who, as we know from his travel diaries was so much enthralled as an architect by the sight of the Parthenon.[17]

But, as the audience knows from the very beginning of the movie, all these dreams will never be achieved. Instead of skyscrapers for the big companies, George Bailey will construct one-family dwellings for the working poor and instead of building a new city à la Le Corbusier, he ends up staying in the crummy little town he was so eager to leave. Furthermore, the derelict house he used to mock and whose windows he used to smash in will eventually become his own home. As the movie progresses Capra shows us in a short montage sequence how the couple, after getting married, try to make a living. While Mary eagerly revamps the house, the exhausted George comes home from work and as he goes upstairs he holds on to a knob at the end of the banister, which then comes loose. Thoughtfully George stares at the piece of wood in his hand. Obviously enough, the loose knob is proof for how bad of shape the house is still in.

Image 11: Frank Capra, It's a Wonderful Life, 1946

17 | Zaknic, Ivan (ed.), *Le Corbusier. Journey to the East*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987

As the movie progresses, the derelict house will eventually turn into a happy and cozy home. However, the knob will never be fixed. Several years later on Christmas Eve 1946 a distressed and frustrated George, whose building and loan firm has just lost all the savings of their clients, comes home and takes his despair out on his family. Going up the stairs once again the knob at the end of the banister comes loose. Angrily and disgusted he slams it back to its place.

The loose knob becomes a symptom for all those dreams that didn't come true, a constant reminder of all those flaws that hinders the home and life of George Bailey from being perfect.

In the course of that same Christmas evening George's frustration about his situation becomes so unbearable that he grows convinced all would be better if he had never been born. However, when attempting to commit suicide, God sends an angel down to earth to show George how life would have been, if he hadn't been born. The crummy house George lived in would still be a ruin and his family wouldn't even exist. His brother Harry would be dead, since George was not around to save him from an accident when they were children. Consequently, all the soldiers Harry had saved in the Second World War would also have perished. His mother is shown to have become a lonely, embittered widow running a boarding house, and George's wife Mary would have become a spinster librarian. Shocked by this vision George calls upon God to let him live again. When his prayer is answered George storms home. He runs up the stairs to embrace his family and while hanging on to the banister one more time the knob falls off. But this time George is not so much irritated but elated. He actually kisses the knob in a moment of sheer relief because the lose knob is proof that everything has gone "back to normal."

The symptomatic knot/knob is ultimately acknowledged not as something to get rid of but as something to be cherished. As a symptom it still points to everything that is unhomely within one's own home, revealing all those flaws which render any kind of perfection impossible. However and as George has seen in his vision: without those flaws, things would be even worse. Thus the lesson Frank Capra teaches us is surprisingly akin to that which Lacanian psychoanalysis has in store for us: One can either have a flawed home or no home at all. To have something to live for entails that there are certain things you have (k)not. One either accepts the symptom or one will lose everything.

Image 12: Frank Capra, It's a Wonderful Life, 1946

Lacan would even go so far as to claim that once a patient has understood the symptom and no longer is simply subjected to it but can put it at a minimal distance, he or she ultimately has to identify with it:

"In what does [...] an analysis consist? Would it, or would it not be to identify with the symptom, albeit with every guarantee of a kind of distance? To know how to handle, to take care of, to manipulate ... to know what to do with the symptom, that is the end of analysis."[18]

And that is exactly what George Bailey does in the end: He "handles" in both a concrete and metaphorical sense the knot/knob of his symptom.

Having this in mind, Rem Koolhaas' essay "Toward the Contemporary City" from 1989 will take on a new poignancy. As Koolhaas argues there is a tendency in modernist architecture, which prefers the plan to the actual building.[19] This tendency has even increased since the time Koolhaas wrote his text. One only needs to consider the many architecture competitions in which not even the winning projects will ever be built. More than ever

18 | As quoted in Verhaeghe, Paul, Declerq, Frédéric, "Lacan's Analytic Goal: Le sinthome or the Feminine Way," in Thurston, Luke (ed.), *Re-Inventing the Symptom. Essays on the Final Lacan*, New York: Other Press 2002. p. 59-82; here: p. 65

19 | Koolhaas, Rem, "Toward the Contemporary City" [1989], in Nesbitt, Kate (ed.), Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture. An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995, New York: Princeton Architectural Press 1996, p. 328

contemporary architecture happens mostly on paper and in computers, never turning into an actual building but remaining a plan. This tendency actually is in accordance with the idealist strive for flawless architecture as it is only in the state of planning that pure perfection is even possible. But – as Koolhaas insists – in contrast to the modernist's ideal and therefore paranoid utopias the true realm of architecture must still be the actual, geographical site. In the strategies Koolhaas outlines one should be able to "confront the buildings of this period and the different types of space – something that was impermissible in the pure doctrine of modernism. From them one can also learn to play with a substrata, mixing the built with the ideal project. This is a situation comparable to one or which the nineteenth century was much criticized, when in Milan, Paris, or Naples the strategy of remodelling without destroying the preexisting city was applied."[20]

Acknowledging the history, the limits and boundaries, even the ugliness of a given place and finding a way to deal with all these flaws that is according to Koolhaas the true task of contemporary architecture. Or to put it in Lacanian terms, the architect has to identify with the symptom, accepting it less as a weakness but rather as the very basis of every creation. In other words: We don't need more Le Corbusiers, we need more George Baileys!

20 | Ibid., p. 329

Metaphors in Architecture – a Metaphor?

GERNOT BÖHME

Architecture as language

It was the architectural theorist Charles Jencks, in his writing about post-modern architecture, who underscored the importance of metaphors for architecture. While recognizing in the architecture of his time a lack of the acknowledgement of the importance of metaphor, he thought that that would change, because "metaphor plays a predominant role in the public's acceptance or rejection of buildings."[1] Now it can be said, that Jencks himself was caught up in the fashionable theoretical trends of the time, looking at everything through the lenses of semiotics. His proclamation of a new epoch for architecture, that of Postmodernism, has to be seen in relation to its understanding of architecture as language. The understanding of architecture through the metaphors of another art/discipline – in this case literature – arises because of the quite strange, but at the same time classic embarrassment to state what architecture should be as discipline in its own terms.[2] A discussion about a work of architecture is often conducted through references, comparing it to a sculpture, a painting, a musical composition, for example a fugue, or a poem. This should be questioned given the common knowledge that architecture is mainly a spatial art. But one hesitates to state this quite simple truth and to use it in the description because space alone does not communicate what one associates with architectural space that is the aesthetic qualities and the emotional emanation of

1 | Jencks, Charles, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1977, p. 60

2 | See my article "Atmosphere as the Subject Matter of Architecture," in Ursprung Philipp (Ed.), *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural history*, Montreal: Canadian Center of Architecture; Lars Müller Publishers, 2002, pp. 398-406

Andri Gerber, Brent Patterson (eds.)

Metaphors in Architecture and Urbanism

An Introduction

[transcript]

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