

Session 4

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Reflections from One Field Leading to Creativity in Another

Some architects may wonder about the validity of placing a practice as material and public as architecture alongside an entity as elusive and symbolic as the unconscious. Architecture is swayed by conscious thought and rational discourse and continues to be seen as a reflection of the client's expectations, rather than an intervention into the field of their unconscious desire, whereas psychoanalysis operates under the premise that human experience is not limited to consciousness and that key aspects of our everyday life are profoundly affected by unconscious processes. Every time we touch a doorknob and open a door, we make physical contact with the architecture, and many people touch that same doorknob, while the unconscious is only accessible to the person in question, if at all, and perhaps also their psychoanalyst. The same object, the doorknob, manifests differently in architecture and psychoanalysis.

Picture this:

The session is almost over, my patient and I are about to say goodbye. We both walk towards the door and suddenly he says to me: "By the way..." and tells me something worrying. It could be anything from "I've decided to stop taking my medications" to "I just met this woman and we're getting married!" Why didn't he tell me at the beginning of the session? I only have a few minutes to go to the bathroom and get a drink of water before starting my next session and so there isn't the space to sit back and talk about the bomb that just landed in my hands. So, what to do? On occasions, significant information is shared as the patient's hand is on the doorknob because it is charged with unconscious burden. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein coined the term "doorknob comments" to alert the clinician and the patient about the elusive nature of such communication. It has been made tangible in the contact with the doorknob and can be talked about at a later point.

There is still work to be done to bring together what largely amounts to a series of independent voices into a discourse that is greater than the sum of its parts, particularly regarding the relationship of the unconscious to the design, perception and understanding of architecture. More than a formal presentation, I propose a conversation with the attendees in which some of the principles that make up my psychoanalytic practice can be put at the service of addressing questions such as: How are architecture and the unconscious related? How does architecture speak to the unconscious? How can unconscious processes be incorporated into architectural design? More explicitly, how can architecture appeal to a broader scope of human experience? I will invite participants to reflect on their own practices, and the potential impact that their own unconscious may have on the practice, particularly in those instances where the issue at hand seemed to have eluded the practitioner's conscious awareness and it only manifested indirectly through failed actions, resistance, or misunderstanding. I hope to share some examples. Coming full circle, I sustain that architecture can provide the tools to map the unconscious and help the architect integrate that knowledge into his or her practice in the same way that my interest in architecture has nourished my practice as a psychoanalyst.

Starting from this model of translatability can perhaps invite us to consider other ways of building bridges with different disciplines and integrating experience in a more organic way.