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From: Nicholas Bruhn  
Date: 3-17-2004  
Subject: Field discourse

Enclosed is a report on discourse in the field of architecture. As required this report describes different methods of communication both within an architecture office and in an academic setting.

REPORT ON DISCOURSE IN THE FIELD OF ARCHITECTURE

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English 320

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Prepared for  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>METHODS.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Document analysis.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>8</b>

## **ABSTRACT**

This report covers some of the various ways that architects communicate. Discourse within an architecture office is discussed and analyzed, as well as communication in an academic setting, NDSU. Ron Ramsay was interviewed to provide an emic view towards the problem. Also discussed in this report are the different methods of research used, and the results.

## INTRODUCTION

I find myself in the third year of schooling to become an architect, and yet I know very little about what it means to be an architect. Not just design like one, but to live the life, walk in the shoes, breathe the air. One of the primary concerns in any group, being as broad in breadth as the entire field of architecture, or as narrow as a bimonthly stamp collecting club, is communication. Discourse is the binding force in any situation, without communication there would be no groups, no clubs or societies. The world would be a chaotic series of disjointed situations, never amounting to anything, meaning nothing, save to the person who experienced it. So if I am to better understand the word “architect” I must first understand his methods of discourse, in so doing I will gain a better grasp on the environment of architecture.

To understand discourse within my field I will employ several methods of research. An important part of doing this research is admitting that I am still an outsider; thusly I should take an objective, ettic, approach to studying the problem. I chose to focus the scope of my research to how people communicate within an architecture office and as academics within a university setting. A few of the subjects this report will explore are as follows: How is interpersonal communication affected by rank or status in an office? What are the general communication practices in an office setting, what seems to be the most efficient? How is communication between academics different than between people who actually practice architecture? I will also analyze a sample document from an architecture office.

## **METHODS**

It is difficult as an ettic to look ahead to the final culmination of all the research and see the end product, so, in the beginning, it's hard to make a list of research methods that will be used. So the method I used was to choose one type of research and call it the start, without knowing where it would take me. I chose to first search the web to get a broad view of architecture discourse. I searched through the American Institute of architecture website and its regional affiliates. I also looked at a few correspondence letters between offices. The internet was useful in that it provided a very wide view of the communication methods. It showed me the level of formality that is taken when dealing with these communications. As a comparison I searched through some fields that I thought were as far from architecture as I could find; I looked at a writer's guild website and mathematician society site, and I did find the formality was very different than that of the architecture sites I visited. Basically with this comparison I wanted to prove to myself that it wasn't simply the nature of the internet which governed the level of formality in the communications I found, but was actually the discourse practices within the field which determined how these documents came across.

After the internet I had a better idea of what direction to take my research. I first devised a list of questions I had about architectural discourse. I then took those questions and went looking for someone within the field of architecture that could give me a better understanding of what really goes on. Since I knew I wanted to find out not only how someone that works in an architecture office communicates, but also how someone who has studied architecture extensively but doesn't necessarily design buildings communicates, I decided I would try to find someone who did both. I found and

interviewed this emic and filed my findings away. The last part of my research was to simply search through library files and read the provided literature on discourse, communication, and analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

There are many different ways which architects communicate within an office. “Most of the time [architects] pass notes; the office is much less formal than you’d think” (Ron Ramsay, Personal communication, March 11, 20004). Communication within an office is often done with informal notes, a quick message scrawled on a sheet of paper then attached to a drawing; “‘these need to be red-lined by Wednesday’ or something to that effect” (Ron Ramsay, Personal communication, March 11, 20004). These differ from most other written discourse in that there is often no context to the message; it is simply a request to take some sort of action. I’ve found that the effectiveness of this type of discourse relies heavily on ethos. Unless the note is threatening, “You’re in hot water if these drawings aren’t done ASAP!” it is basically emotionless. Because of this I can conclude that the note does not appeal to pathos. Also, because there is no context, the recipient often doesn’t know why the drawings need to be done, where they’re going, what will become of them later? This lack of context means that an informal discourse of this type does not appeal to logos either. So we are left with ethos; one piece of information the recipient of this note will know is who it came from. Most often it would come from someone’s boss. The effectiveness of the note relies greatly on the recipient trusting the writer. If there was no previous trusting relationship, the note might not be taken seriously. This ethos doesn’t necessarily depend on a friendly trusting relationship,

it could also be an authoritative relationship, in that the recipient understands that the writer knows the correct course of action, and will then comply to see this action through.

Another type of discourse in an office would be spoken. I wanted to investigate the affect of status on the type of spoken discourse. While a written document may seem this best course of action, it is often a slow communication process. Because of this it is often much more time effective to simply walk up and talk to someone. I've found that within an architecture office, rank plays a large part in how people talk. Going back to the note, if someone had actually just walked up and said, "Make sure these drawings are red-lined by Wednesday" what actually happens to those drawings is determined by status, another facet of ethos. If it was your cubicle neighbor who poked his head over the wall and handed you the drawings, probably nothing would happen, you might just toss them back over and say, "Do it yourself". But because of ethos, which comes mostly from charisma, certain people are more effective in getting things done. An authority figure has a natural air of power about them, and most subordinates are naturally (and usually subconsciously) envious of their status. Because of this feeling we want to be like them, so we trust them and do as they say in order to get closer to being them. This is ethos, implied trust.

This spoken communication could also be classified as appealing to pathos. Fear could be called an emotion; if this is the case then spoken communication between a subordinate and a boss would be governed by pathos. The fear of being punished would make you comply with the request. This type of discourse is probably the most common communication method in a professional office because architecture is generally limited to a small group, making larger scale discourse unnecessary.



## **DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

Along with the rest of my research I looked at an actual communication document to get a better idea of how real architects talk, an analysis follows. The document I analyzed is a request for information form. This form is used after a project has gotten underway if there are more than one architect working separately. If someone has a question, they can fill out this form and send it to the principal architect and he'll answer it and send it back. This specific RFI form is from an architect named Michael Weller concerning a minor league baseball stadium being built in Florida. The biggest thing someone would notice when analyzing this document is that it is incomplete. These forms become so common on a job that the architects and contractors will just fill out the information they know the other will need and send it off. The formality of this document is very casual; the principal architect who responded to Michael's question didn't even bother to sign his name at the bottom. Michael is a subordinate, he knows who the principal is, and the principal knows he knows this. This shows that the main architect is aware that he is the boss; he doesn't need to explain his position.

This RFI document also shows how convoluted modern communication has become. Because of liability and various other money related concerns, the number of forms people have to fill out has gone through the roof. It would be infinitely easier to simply call someone with a question, or email them, but in certain parts of the United States, these RFI forms are required.

The audience of this document is clear. This form is meant to be seen by the principal architect and no one else. So the language is specified towards him, the wording can be personal because it's going to only one person.

All these discourse types are limited to the professional architecture office. But that is not the only facet of architecture. Actually, my field can be broken roughly in half, the world of the professional, and the world of the academic.

There are a few key differences in how these two communicate. As far as spoken discourse goes, I found that self preservation is a major concern in academia. "For the first ten years of my life [at NDSU] I was afraid to speak my mind" (Ron Ramsay, Personal communication, March 11, 20004). Discourse between people with tenure and without is very different. The fear of not getting tenure creates a veil of formality around most types of discourse. There is a constant feeling that you need to be agreeable.

An architecture specific discourse type is drawing. Because architecture is a largely visual field, most architects use schematics to communicate a subject. The only adage, 'those who can't, teach' holds true in architecture. The skill of drawing is refined so much in an office that it is no longer just a type of discourse, but the discourse under which many subcategories are formed. This isn't the case in academia, often the skill of drawing hasn't progressed past the initial sketching stages. So to get a point across someone might sketch out a picture while also speaking. I've found that this type of discourse can best be described as appealing to pathos. I could describe to you in words how beautiful I. M. Pei's glass pyramids outside the Louvre are, but most likely you won't get excited unless you can see it. So sketching appeals to pathos in that it gets the audience excited about the subject. When someone can see what something looks like

they can better formulate questions and comments, this is all conducive to more effective communication.

One more subtle difference between professional and academic discourse is the sense of urgency. In an architecture office there is always a deadline. A project has a set date that it needs to be ready, if not people will lose money. So all types of discourse have some sort of timeframe attached to them. Those drawings need to be red-lined by Wednesday; if they aren't done it will cost someone. In a university environment there isn't the same sense of urgency. The whole point is to spend your life gaining more knowledge. It's impossible to say, learn about post-modern architecture by Wednesday. So discourse in academia isn't urgent, if a written memo does have a timeframe attached it's generally not the case that someone will lose money if it isn't met.

## **CONCLUSION**

Architecture is a large and varied field. Communication occurs on many levels and has many different effects. Discourse is vital to accomplishing any task, without it people wouldn't understand deadlines, wouldn't learn about new developments, and wouldn't be able to answer questions. Because of the nature of architecture, visual communication takes precedent. Anyone who has studied architecture has to know how to read drawings and sketches, so they become very important in communicating ideas. I've learned that status plays a large role in spoken communication; it also determines the effectiveness of written discourse in an office. Overall there are many important types of communication within architecture.

## REFERENCES

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American Institute of Architects. (2004). Retrieved March 8, 2004, from

[Http://www2.aia.org/myaia/communities/community.asp?UserID=2&CommunityID=200](http://www2.aia.org/myaia/communities/community.asp?UserID=2&CommunityID=200)

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# REQUEST FOR INFORMATION



All RFI's must be submitted to Mortenson by 10:00 a.m., 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, March 11, 2004. Written and verbal responses will be given 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. respectively on the same day.

PROJECT NAME: **Minor League Baseball Stadium** ARCHITECT: **Mortenson / HOK**

PROJECT NO: **ASC-AGC 2004 Nation - Orlando, Florida**

FROM: **Michael Weller**

SUBJECT: **Stadium question**

DWG / SPEC REFERENCE: \_\_\_\_\_

**DESCRIPTION:**

The drawings don't show any sort of support over the main entrance. Is it too early to know what that is, or aren't these the right drawings

**RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION:**

**SKETCHES INCLUDED:** \_\_\_\_\_

Michael Weller

Submitted By - Please Print

Initials

Date / Time

CC: \_\_\_\_\_

**MORTENSON / HOK RESPONSE:**

**MAM /HOK RFI NO. :** \_\_\_\_\_

Sorry, the set that got sent to you wasn't finished, don't worry about the entrance they're OWSJ, haven't been sized yet so just wait for the drawings

Responded By - Please Print

Initials

Date

CC: RFI LOG, POSTING, ALL CONTRACTORS