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# Translating Architecture of Walls into the Architecture of Words

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## Abstract:

The authors begin this research with the story of the Tower of Babel, taking it not as a narrative demonstrating a divide, but as a parable of a modern construction project where people work together in a universal language with the aim to build a massive structure. While the mythological story sets the foundations for the rise of multilingualism, from the architectural point of view, it explains the incessant desire of the human kind to construct projects that will last forever. Building on George Steiner's argument stated in his seminal work *After Babel* (1975) that "even substantive remains such as buildings and historical sites must be 'read', i.e. located in a context of verbal recognition and placement, before they assume real presence", the authors embark on the exploration of literary works (such as *The Bridge on the Drina* by Ivo Andrić, a Nobel laureate, or *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles) which translate the architecture of bridges or walls into the architecture of words. The foundation for this kind of study is set in Paul Ricoeur's essay *Architecture and Narrative*, in which he compares "the configuration of time in literary narrative" to "the configuration of space by the architectural project." The authors investigate the ways in which writing stories in time overlaps with building stories in space.

**Keywords:** architecture, fiction, translation, construction projects, bridges, walls.

## 1. Introduction

Analogies between building and storytelling have been drawn since the ancient times, the parable of the Tower of Babel being the most prominent one because of its biblical and mythological significance. Despite the fact that this parable is often seen as a narrative demonstrating a divide, it may easily be perceived as a parable of any modern construction project such as those carried out in China, Dubai, or Qatar. These mega projects

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epitomize the incessant desire of human kind to construct projects that will last forever. If we look at the biblical story, we see that people who worked together on a building project and spoke a universal language were suddenly scattered, relocated, and resettled by the wrath of God. Therefore, in linguistic history, this mythological story sets (at least metaphorically) the foundations for the rise of multilingualism. However, from the architectural point of view, we see a large number of people, builders, masons, and bricklayers who are united in their aim to construct a mighty city “with its top in the heavens” (Genesis 11: 4). Even when God confused the language of the workers so that they could no longer understand one another, the construction itself still resembled contemporary architectural projects with multi-billion dollar budgets (such as international airports in Dubai or Beijing) where workers and building experts from all over the world join forces to build structures of unimaginable size, design, quality, and performance despite speaking various languages. In the modern context, multilingualism cannot be seen as an obstacle for reaching “the heavens”.

One of the twentieth-century theoreticians who has underlined the inalienable links between buildings and literary works is George Steiner. In his seminal work *After Babel* (1975), he exposes the argument that “even substantive remains such as buildings and historical sites must be ‘read’, i.e. located in a context of verbal recognition and placement, before they assume real presence” (Steiner 1977: 29). According to Steiner, the context in architecture makes the meaning and this can be seen as a strong common denominator between architecture and translation, where any effort is futile without respecting context. Many translato-logists<sup>3</sup> deny any possibility of meaning without understanding the given context, be it linguistic, cultural, or political. Furthermore, Steiner defines translation as communication taken at its broadest meaning: “Any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance. No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify exactly the same things, to send identical signals of valuation and inference.” (*Ibid*: 45) In Steiner’s opinion,

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Nida, E.A. 1964. *Toward a Science of Translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, p. 59.; Newmark, P. 1981. *Approaches to Translation*, Oxford & New York: Pergamon, p. 63.; Hatim, B. 2001. *Teaching and Researching Translation*, Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., p. 33.

time periods, spaces, as well as people communicate in such a way that every communication-related act is unique and individual. The aim of this paper is to investigate the ways in which literature and architecture communicate, or in which writing stories in time overlap with building stories in space, hence how the architecture of walls can be translated into the architecture of words. At the time when the doctrine of modern architecture started to be challenged, Bernard Tschumi's *Questions of Space* was published (1990). Investigating into the relationship between literary narrative and architecture, Tschumi claims that "the unfolding of events in a literary context inevitably suggests parallels to the unfolding of events in architecture" (Tschumi 1990: 92). His argument revealed, once again, the multiplicity of spatial contents and the need to explore architecture as the venue of narratives. In 2004 an original study *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* by Adrian Forty was published. It thoroughly examined the relationship between architecture and language. In six chapters, the author discusses the topics of the language of modernism, language and drawing, 'masculine and feminine' architecture, language metaphors, science in architecture, and the social properties of architecture. The book also includes a vocabulary of key terms such as history, space, and form. When *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature, and the City* was published in May 2020, it only confirmed and affirmed knowledge and understanding of the multiple relations between literature and architecture. The book opened a door to interdisciplinary research which points to the interdependency of the two forms of art.

## **2. Architecture of walls versus architecture of words**

In his essay "Architecture and Narrativity" French philosopher Paul Ricoeur draws a parallel between architecture and narrativity as "architecture would be to space what narrative is to time" (Ricoeur 2016: 31). He perceives configuration of space as a process parallel to the configuration of time; hence architecture can be described as spatial storytelling. According to Ricoeur, the architectural project aims to create objects in which units of space, massive forms, and the boundary surfaces can find an adequate unity (*Ibid.*: 36), while literary works bring together events, points of view, causes, motives, and chance occurrences (*Ibid.*: 36).

Ricoeur's analysis of the parallelism between building and writing is based on three notions – prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. A stage of prefiguration is linked to the idea (*Ibid.*: 32), configuration is an interventionist stage (the act of building), and refiguration refers to the context-based reading and rereading (*Ibid.*: 33). The similarity between the practice of time (as Ricoeur refers to literature) and the practice of space (as Ricoeur refers to architecture) in the first stage of prefiguration is “quite remarkable”: in architecture, the need for building comes hand-in-hand with the vital need to inhabit (*Ibid.*: 33), while in literature the inscription of action and marking the event space happens in *a life space* (*Ibid.*: 34). In the second phase, the configuration, the narrative techniques are employed in the process of literary writing (*Ibid.*: 34). According to Ricoeur, writing can be a good guide to the interpretation of the configuration of space by the architectural project because it displays its temporal and narrative dimension (*Ibid.*: 36). It represents such manifestations of space and time that narrative and architectural values are exchanged for one another to the point that it becomes legitimate to speak of ‘architectural narrativity’ (*Ibid.*: 36). For instance, narrative lends its temporality to the act of building – the process of configuring space takes time. For Ricoeur, constructed space is condensed time (*Ibid.*: 36). The parallel can also be drawn between the architectural intelligence and the intelligence of the narrator, as both kinds of intelligence have the intention to provide coherence to the structures they make (*Ibid.*: 36) – the inscription of a building, as well as a narrative, lasts thanks to its cohesion. In this way, duration, durability (in time), makes another common ground. Ricoeur also underlines *historicity* as inevitable in configuration. Contextualizing a new building into the existing surrounding resembles the phenomenon of intertextuality in literature (*Ibid.*: 37). Another interesting dimension, both in architecture and narrative, is the relation between innovation and tradition; every architect (same as storyteller) makes up their mind “with regards to an established tradition” (*Ibid.*: 37). The final common level Ricoeur mentions in the configuration phase is destruction and rebuilding; both buildings and narratives are vulnerable to destruction through (cultural) hatred, carelessness, contempt, and ignorance (*Ibid.*: 37). Lastly, in the refiguration process, the expectations of the readers meet with the intentions of the writer in a similar

way of the expectations of the inhabitants (dwellers) and the creation of an architect. (*Ibid.*: 39) The reception of a literary text thus resembles the rereading of the urban environment. In sum, both literary and architectural works, in Ricoeur's view, are compositions of space and time exposed to plural reading.

Building on his notion that "the architectural project [is] inscribed in stone, or any other hard material" (*Ibid.*: 32) while literary narrativity is "inscribed in language," the authors of this paper try to investigate two literary works in which (architectural) spatiality and (narrative) temporality are entangled in the Ricoeurian context of visibility and reading (*Ibid.*: 32). The term architectural narrativity is whole-heartedly used in this text to describe inextricable concordances between literature and architecture.

### 3. Bridges that separate

*The Bridge on the Drina* (1945), written by Ivo Andric (1892–1975), a Yugoslav author who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1961, is actually his most renowned novel. The novel provides a vivid description of nearly four centuries of the history of suffering of Bosnian people starting from 1516 (when the bridge was built by the Ottoman Empire) to the beginning of the First World War. Because of its colourful setting and vivid descriptions of culture, many Westerners see this book as a reliable guide to Bosnian people and history. Andric began to develop the metaphor of the bridge as the most important symbol of his work in his earlier essay *Bridges*, published in 1933. In his prose, the *bridge* represents the meeting-place of the East and West, not only as a historical and geographical fact, but as a daily experience. At first sight, in Andric's writing, the bridge as a metaphorical link between people from various cultural communities indicates that a blend of European and Oriental attitudes could grow. Nevertheless, in his acceptance speech at the Swedish Academy he states: "My homeland is truly a small country *between worlds*." (Hawkesworth 1984: 13, italics used by authors for emphasis) In his novels, the divide between the East and West, between 'here' and 'there' is extremely difficult to overcome and it becomes clear that the bridge is the physical manifestation of this divide, rather than a link between two worlds.



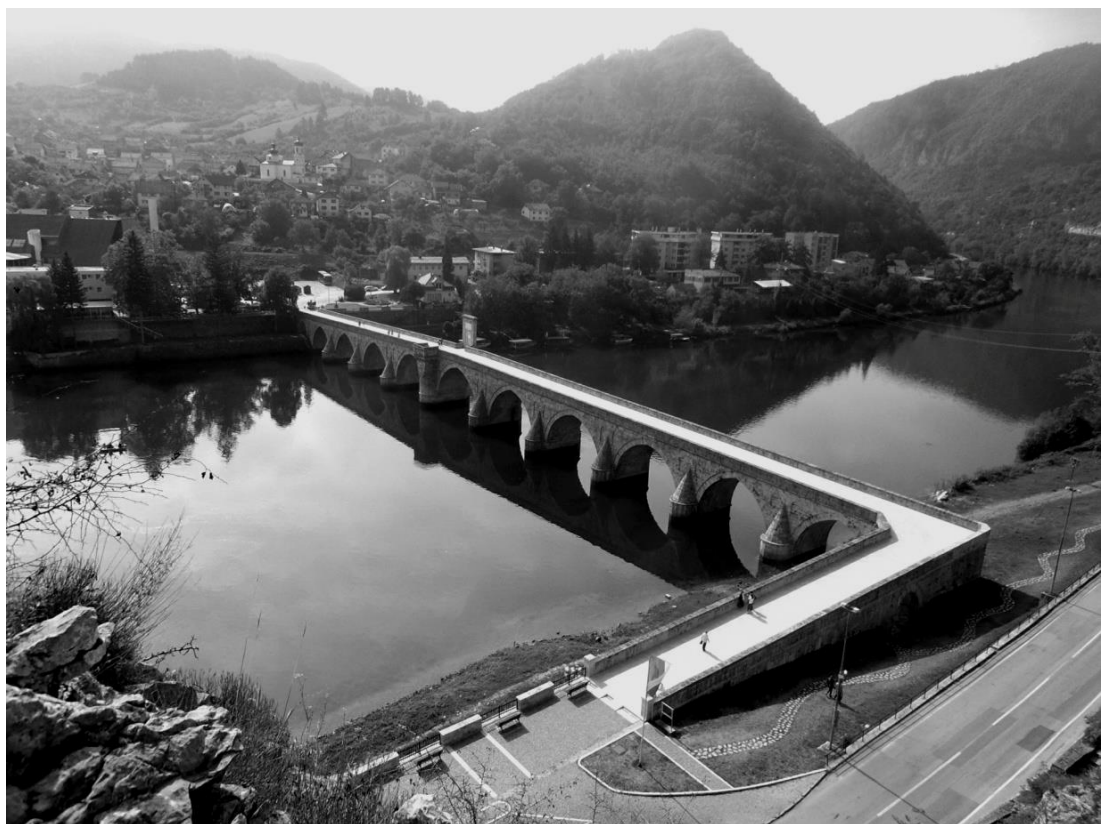
In building science and philosophy, bridges are seen not only through their physical potential to connect and bring access to “the services and the relationships upon which society depends” (Helbig et al. 2021: 3), but as “a focal point that is both physical and *emotional*” (*Ibid*: 3, italics used by authors for emphasis). Attributing such a profound meaning to something that can otherwise be interpreted as a functional piece of engineering allowing “people and goods to pass quickly and safely” (*Ibid*: 6) shows that bridges can be identified with the sense of place, history, and culture. Viewed as a mixture of emotion, art, and science, the bridge can (or cannot) fit perfectly into its physical and cultural context.

Clearly, “bridges in public spaces are usually built for a long service life” (*Ibid*: 6). Accordingly, the architectural motif in Andric’s novel is not restricted only to the building of the bridge, but it pervades through every single chapter of the book, particularly in the centuries when the bridge became the hub of economic, social, and cultural life of the people in this region. For instance, Andric describes how the bridge attracted more and more inhabitants to the expanding town, how the infrastructure was developed (e.g. water supply system) as the “true value of infrastructure only becomes clear over time” (Helbig et al. 2021: 4), how the bridge was maintained, or when its maintenance was poor in certain periods in which turbulent historical events took priority (Radojević 2020: 257). Very soon it becomes obvious to the reader that the destinies of the people are interlaced with the destiny of the bridge, which in the story becomes much more than a stone construction. It becomes a witness to the way technology is handled and “manifest the state of development of a civilization” (Helbig et al. 2021: 8). If bridges are “structures that significantly shape their local landscape and have been planned with foresight” (*Ibid*.: 6), they can be used for a long period of time. In Andric’s novel, the bridge has become a mark of durability, endurance, and stability: “This small town lived from the bridge, it has grown out of it, as if it bloomed from its root.” (Andric 1981: 10)<sup>4</sup>. The lives of people are bound by this grand structure. The bridge has definitely become a meeting place, a place where the East and the West meet despite different languages, traditions, and religions (Oriental Turkish, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish). For Andric, as well as for architects, the

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by the authors of the paper.

bridge is “an essential catalyst of economic developments and civilizing processes” (*Ibid.*: 9). Simultaneously, the bridge is a solid, timeless symbol of multifaceted Bosnian society and hence, its role is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Turks constructed it to show their imperial glory in the Balkans, however, on the other hand, the damage the bridge undergoes at the end of the novel signifies the deconstruction of the metaphor of unity. Its three-arched stone structure is a symbol of human endurance, but at the same time, it is a warning that the two river banks it separates are two different worlds. Thus, the role of the bridge as a peacemaker may easily change into the role of the bridge as a divider. Being an eminent historical marker of the time, the bridge which is the central point of Andric’s story leaves us with the impression that the three cultures chronicled by the novel – the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Jewish – will continue to live by the differences that seem to separate them. From the last chapter of the book describing the turbulent events in the town centered around the bridge at the beginning of the First World War (1914), after the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, and particularly from the last sentence in which one of the central characters Alihodža dies of a heart attack caused by the stressful bombing of the bridge which destroyed one of its pillars (Andric 1981: 391, 395), in the Ricoeurian process of refiguration, we get the premonition of the unbridgeable gaps among the Bosnian inhabitants. Decades after the publication of the novel and death of its author, the 1990s war in Bosnia would be a testimony of the centuries-long cultural and religious enmity that had existed “between worlds,” as Andric put it. In this sense, the bridge which still stands on the Drina is a historic structure, historical monument, and identity-defining symbol (*Picture 1*). If we closely examine the architectural narrativity through the lens provided by Andric’s novel, we perceive that in terms of building culture, the bridge of the emblematic design concurrently represents artistic, scientific, and cultural heritage. In architecture, it is believed that history of bridges is marked by brilliance of some exceptional people (Bennett 2000: 175). The creativity of writing is there to conserve these histories in time by telling about the experiences which would otherwise be forgotten.



*Picture 1. The bridge on the Drina (photo by M. Radojević, 2019)*

#### **4. Walls that connect**

The novel *A Gentleman in Moscow* (2016) written by Amor Towles, an American fiction writer, has failed to receive similar critical acclaim to Andric's novel, but was still enthusiastically received by millions of readers all over the world. The novel follows the life of Count Rostov, an aristocrat in Tsarist Russia, who in 1922 (after the Red Revolution), is sentenced by the new Bolshevik government to spend the rest of his life under house arrest in Moscow's Metropol Hotel (instead of being shot). His crime is that he was born privileged, a member of a Russian upper-class family with ties to the royal dynasty. Still, his life is saved because he is supposed to have written a poem with revolutionary undertones when Russia was ruled by the monarchs. In the days after the sentencing, Count Rostov feels restless, purposeless, and spends most of his days reading. However, in the years and

decades of his confinement in the small attic room, Count Rostov learns a lot about living a big life in a small space, confined to the limits of his room's and hotel's walls. He understands that even one step into the outside world would mean instant imprisonment and death in the Siberian gulags. What makes this novel amazing is the way Count Rostov manages his indoor living and makes the most of it, aided by the hotel staff, or even some of the hotel guests. The Metropol hotel is (shoulder to shoulder with Count Rostov) *the* main character of the book. It becomes Count's home for the next thirty-two years. Exploring the indoors of the hotel leads the Count to learn some of the hotel's best-kept secrets and helps him accept and master the terms of his circumstances. As the Count says, "If one does not master one's circumstances, one is bound to be mastered by them" (Towles 2016). Not at a single moment does the Count feel entrapped by the walls and inability to go outside of them. In his gilded cage, still owning a few elegant pieces of furniture and a handful of other family possessions, he makes survival in the years under Stalin a grand adventure. As the literary critic of the *Wall Street Journal* puts it, "the novel buzzes with the energy of numerous adventures, love affairs, twists of fate." The protagonist's embracement of what walls metaphorically represent can be seen as a reflection of what happens on the macro plan in the Soviet society (See: Acharya 2021). In this way, Count Rostov's personal history, easily characterized as marginal, becomes an alternative history of inner liberation, free will, and counterculture (*Ibid.*: 155).

Thinking about the architectural narrativity of Towles' novel, one cannot miss the striking metaphor of walls. First, the hotel walls are seen as a restriction for Count Rostov's movement. Later, as the plot develops, they become the cornerstones of his emotional and intellectual life. In architecture, the wall makes one of the three basic building elements (alongside the beam and the pillar) with a two-fold function – to support and to divide spaces (Rakočević 2003: 63, 79)<sup>5</sup>. It separates outer and inner spaces, directs movement, and sets limitations of the rooms, while supporting the building structure (*Ibid.*: 79). Nevertheless, architects like to say that there are no walls in Eden, meaning that wall-less space is considered to be idyllic. For instance, open-air office spaces have become a

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<sup>5</sup> All citations from this book are translated by the authors of the paper.

standard in recent times, and in the years after the pandemic open-air, outdoor offices are expected to become more and more popular, climate permitting. Similarly, from the very moment when Count Rostov breaks the wall behind his closet and covers the hole with the closet, thus gaining more space of his tiny attic room, he symbolically shows the insignificance of the walls separating him from the outer world. In this context, the fairest thing to say about Count Rostov is – if he cannot go out into the world, the world will come to him. An interesting understanding of the concept of space can be seen in Count’s description of the room and his life in it: “It was, without question, the smallest room that he had occupied in his life; yet somehow, within those four walls the world had come and gone” (Towles 2016). Not once in this book does the reader get the sense that the walls of the Hotel Metropol have not only ears, but *feelings*, and that they become keen participants of human relationships.

Another added value of this book is the serendipity of writing about someone being confined to a single space just before the time when mankind would experience similar confinement during the lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 global pandemic in 2020. This only points to the writer’s great sense of timing and his grand understanding of the contemporary world in which the conceptualization of space has changed. Nowadays, there are emerging trends for housing models that shrink living spaces. They are termed “micro-living” because they provide living space at below minimum space standards. Count Rostov’s attic room’s total surface would easily correspond to these modern ‘self-contained living spaces’ as defined by Harris and Nowicki (2020: 591). The authors argue that micro-living is not a new concept and that there is a long-standing tradition of living in small spaces (*Ibid.*: 593). In this context, Count Rostov’s change of circumstances from living in luxurious, aristocratic housing space to moving to the enclosed space of the hotel can be perceived as what Harris and Nowicki call “anti-capitalist reimagining of home” (*Ibid.*: 594). Similar to the urban population who suffers from high housing costs, for him, too, the micro space located at the hotel attic becomes a desirable housing model (particularly when compared to the alternative of being sent to the gulag).

## **5. Conclusion**

Bridges and walls are frequent and permanent symbols in literature. In architecture, they reflect “the values and the spirit of the times” (Helbig et al. 2021: 6). As shown in this paper, both artistic forms can provide these two symbols with the ability to connect an individual or people to the rest of the world or divide them from it. The importance of architecture to fiction writers such as Andric or Towles lies in the fact that architecture is the concrete base, the believable reality of the fiction. We argue that it forms the foundation on which readers can imagine the stories, visualize the characters, and understand their actions.

The architectural narrativity is achieved through architectural descriptions in fiction. It gives readers a clear idea of the period, the technology that must be available, the styles, the personalities, the commute systems that might be required, and most importantly, the positioning of different areas and the characters within them. It explains how meaning is constructed in buildings or spaces and how this meaning is communicated to the reader. By examples of Andric’s bridge on the Drina and Towles’ walls of the Moscow Metropol hotel, we have contended that the poetics of literary work is enlivened through the poetics of architectural structure. Our interdisciplinary approach underlines the importance of exploring events and narratives in architecture in line with Ricoeur’s, Tschumi’s, and Forty’s research on the correlation of the language, narrative, literature, and architecture. Our focus on the construction of spatial narration in both novels has led to the following conclusions: (1) Narratives can be presented in architectural spaces and can be conveyed by architectural elements; (2) Architectural space can provide a scenic setting for the narrative; (3) Architectural narratives can convey historical contexts; (4) Spatial narration has both architectural and literary qualities.

The intertwining of the architectural and literary creation should be further researched and investigated because it can allow a critical stance towards foundation, identity, and context of both artistic forms. The architectural narrative’s value, impact, and command should be carefully studied in order to provide a framework for transcending the limit(ation)s of each of the two forms and for their interpretation by the users (readers).

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