The Strive to Capture the Elusive

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This paper traces back to the origin of design as a conceptual activity and its relationship to time and technology. It is based on an alternative definition of design, that of schedio, (the Greek word for design) that instead of pointing towards the future to where design is supposed to be materialized, it strangely points backwards in time where primitive archetypes are forgotten and await to be discovered. This reversion follows a pre-Socratic philosophical position that claims that “nothing comes out of nothing and nothing disappears into nothing” indirectly negating the existence of novelty, innovation, or invention, concepts upon which modernism and technology are based. In this paper a critical standpoint is developed that seeks to assess the value of origin, archetype, and memory as it relates to technology in design.

**Keywords:** Design, etymology, modernism

Etymological Traces of Design

It can be argued that the theme of this conference “Communicating space(s)” is implicitly about an old primordial problem that may seem strange, puzzling, or perhaps paradoxical; that is, to connect the notion of space with that of time. It is about an attempt to create space(s) that can be used to describe, imprint, facilitate, or even predict events that occur over time. However, this involves an apparent contradiction: while time is defined as a non-spatial continuum, space is defined as a non-temporal boundless extend. It appears therefore that the thesis of this conference is that this antithesis is negotiable, reconcilable, or perhaps solvable within the context of technological advancements. Such an attempt becomes even more problematic when it is applied to the world of architecture, a profession founded on the notion of stasis.

Etymologically, the verb “design” is derived from the prefix de- and the Latin verb signare, which means to mark, mark out, or sign. The prefix de- is used not in the derogatory sense of opposition or reversal but in the constructive sense of derivation, deduction, or inference. In that context, the word design is about the derivation of something that suggests the presence or existence of a fact, condition, or quality. In Greek, the word design is σχέδιο (pron. schedio), which is derived from the root σχεδόν (pron. schedon), which means nearly, almost, about, or approximately. Thus, by its Greek definition, design is about incompleteness, indefiniteness, or imperfection, yet it is also about likelihood, expectation, or anticipation. In its largest sense, design signifies not only the vague, intangible, or ambiguous, but also the strive to capture the elusive¹.

Traveling further back into the origin of the Greek word σχεδόν (pron. schedon) one may find that it is
derived from the word έσχειν (pron. eschein)\(^2\) which is the past tense of the word έχω (pron. echo) which in English means to have, hold, or possess. Translating the etymological context into English, it can be said that design is about something we once had, but have no longer. The past tense in the Greek language is referred to as indefinite (αόριστος) and, as such, it is about an event that did occur at an unspecified time in the past, hence it could have happened anytime between a fraction of a second and years ago. So, according to the Greeks, design is linked indirectly to a loss of possession and a search into an oblivious state of memory. This linguistic connection reveals an antithetical attitude towards design one that, in the Western culture at least, is about stepping into the future, a search for new entities, processes, and forms, frequently expressed by the terms novelty or innovation. Before adventuring any further into this Greek paradox, it may be useful to examine the notion of innovation and novelty within the context of design, and specifically architectural design.

**Innovation**

Innovation is a term amply used in association with the process or products of design. It is defined as “the act of beginning or introducing something for, or as if for, the first time”. Surprisingly, there is something strange about the definition. It appears to be a semantic twist within the definition of innovation itself. It involves the conjugation “as if” which means literally “in the same way that it would be if” asserting the possibility of an equivalence between existence and the perception of existence. While the adjective “for” is a definite indicator that connects an object, aim, or purpose to an action or activity, the conjugation “as if” involves a hypothetical conjecture posed over the truthfulness of the statement. Such a definition is, to say the least, paradoxical, contradictory, and problematic in the sense that while the definition itself is supposed to lead towards a definite assertion, yet it involves also the possibility of negating the same assertion; if the assertion is that innovation is indeed about the first time then it is contradictory to also assume that such a uniqueness can also be perceived as such, because then it implies that something that may not be first may also be assumed, presented, or perceived as first, which is an apparent contradiction. In other words, the definition of innovation involves a possibility of a deliberate, unintentional, or accidental flaw: if something is perceived as such then it must be such. This syllogism brings up an important hypothesis about perception: that it is possible that something can be constructed to appear as such or that an audience may be conditioned to perceive something as such. In either case, the definition of innovation seems to suffer from the lack of two of the most fundamental principles of every definition: clarity and truthfulness.

In architectural design, the notion of innovation has been a founding, axiomatic, and guiding principle. Within the modernist tradition of novelty, the search for innovation may have become a misleading rather than a guiding factor in design. While the shock of the new may have provided in the early twentieth-century an escape from the traditions of the past, its constant use in the world of fashion today and the everlasting struggle to introduce something new for, or as if for, the first time defies its original purpose. Novelty is a primordial fascination of the human mind, yet its perception seems to be highly illusory, conditioned, and influenced. As Wes Jones points out, “we believe that newer is better. Not because it is a fact in each individual case, but because it is an inevitability in general.” While many theorists are concerned with the value of newness, it may also be useful to explore the question of “what is new?” Just because something appears to be new or is labeled as new, it does not mean that it is essentially new. Like a magician’s show, the appearance or disappearance of objects in a scene generates a primordial fascination from the viewpoint of the audience; yet not from the magician’s viewpoint\(^3\). Novelty requires more than just appearance. As in the case of innovation versus originality, novelty is usually about the striking, different, or unusual but
it can also be about the first, seminal, or original. A
difference in appearance does not necessarily justify
novelty. If something is seen from a different angle,
is rotated upside down, or a piece is added that does
not mean that the result is new, yet it may appear to
be as if new. In contrast, an original concept involves
newness in a productive, seminal, and influential
way.

As mentioned earlier, the notion of design, ac-
cording to the Greeks, is associated with the past
instead of the future. Such an assumption appears
almost antithetical to the predominant notion of de-
sign as a process that leads towards the derivation
of novelty. How can the past be of such a signifi-
cant importance, especially as a recollection of past
lost thoughts? If, according to the Greeks, design is
about something that we had but do not have any
more, hence it is lost somewhere in the past, what is
its connection to something that is about to become
into the future, i.e. a novelty? Why would they bring
up such an unexpected and obscure relationship? Is
it possible that novelty in the sense that we under-
stand it today, according to the Greeks does not exist
per se and anything new is just an illusion?

The Nature of Novelty

If we look deeper into pre-Socratic philosophers
such as Xenophanes, Parmenides, or Zeno, one of
the common agreements between them was the
assumption that nothing comes out of nothing and
nothing disappears into nothing; nothing can just
pop up or vanishes without a trace. Such an assump-
tion is very important to understand their reluctance
to conceive, accept, or understand the concept of
novelty in its modern sense. If everything is inde-
structible then change is nothing but a transforma-
tion from one state into another; the appearance or
disappearance of parts is only phenomenal; nothing
is added or subtracted. Therefore, if something emer-
gences, appears, or claims to be new, then it must be
nothing but an illusion, because if it is not, then it
would contradict the initial premise of preservation.

Such logic, while it may appear to be simplistic or
absolute, is also very powerful because it does not
allow thoughts to be affected by sensory phenom-
enas. What is most significant about this logic is that it
sets a paradigm in which knowledge about reality is
based upon reason and therefore strives to be truth-
ful, while human opinion of appearance is based
upon our senses, which are not only unreliable but
also misleading. According to this logic, design as a
mental process of creation, can be seen as bounded
by the limits of preservation: any newly conceived
thought, process, or form is nothing but a reorder-
ing of previous ones. However, if we consider this
possibility, then we are confronted with the problem
of origin: as every “new” idea is depended on its pre-
vious one, then there must be an origin, a starting
point, a root or roots out of which everything spurs,
tangles, and multiplies offering glimpses of what ap-
pears occasionally to be “new”. Hence, we are led to
the conclusion that the origin, like its material coun-
terpart, must be fixed, eternal, and indestructible.
And since novelty involves the negation of existence
(i.e. something that did not exist before), novelty is
impossible. It is only a sensory illusion.

In English, the word existence is derived from
the prefix ex- (i.e. forth) and the verb sistere, which
in Latin means to cause to stand up or come to a
stop. Thus, etymologically the meaning of the word
existence can be associated with the action of ap-
pearance or arising. In Greek, the word existence is
ύπαρξη which is derived from the prefix υπο- (hypo-)
i.e. under, below, or beneath and the noun αρχή
(arche) i.e. beginning, start, or origin. Thus, similarly
to design, existence is not only about the distant
past, the beginning of things but also even further,
as it involves a step beyond, below, or beneath the
starting point. But how is that possible? How can
something lay beyond the beginning? Wouldn’t that
result in a new beginning which then should be dis-
placed again ad infinitum? Such a train of thoughts
may appear paradoxical because it is interpreted as
a sequential linkage in the context of a beginning
and an ending point. As established earlier, in the
pre-Socratic spirit, the notion of a beginning must be rejected (as well as that of an end). Things exist before their phenomenal starting point and therefore the use of the prefix hypo-declares the framework, structure, or platform out of which starting points can be observed. Similar to a river, its origin is not the spring itself but rather lies far beyond, beneath, or below its phenomenal emergence.

The verb to become is used in English to denote the action of coming into existence, emerging, or appearing. In language, as opposed to formal logic, existence is a predicate rather than a quantifier, and the passage from copulative to existential can be misleading. The action of coming-to-be or becoming does not necessarily have to be associated with creation, beginning, or emergence, but rather may denote a process of derivation, transformation, or transition from one state into another. Transition is indeed an act of becoming except its connotation is problematic because as Evans points out “whatever is subject to the transformation must already be complete in all its parts” a notion antithetical to the traditional view of design as an accumulative process. For example, the subtraction of one point from a square may result in a triangle that, in turn, can be perceived as an action in which “a square became a triangle”. In this case, the action of becoming results from an operation of subtraction. Furthermore, the action of subtraction itself is also an action of becoming where “a point became nothing”. Such an action involves the existential operation of instant becoming. The pre-Socratic philosophers rejected such notion as absurd, because nothing can just come into being or suddenly cease to exist. As they rejected traditional explanations for the phenomena they saw around them in favor of more rational explanations, they also set the limits of human imagination. According to Parmenides, if something came into being, it is not (εί γάρ εγέντ', ουκ ἔστιν), i.e. something that pops out of nothing, cannot really exist. Not surprisingly, even today, there is no word in the English or, for that matter, Greek language that can denote the instant becoming of an object out of nothing. While the verb “become” is the closest one, it implies a moment of time in order to originate. The same is true for the terms emergence, genesis, birth, rise, derivation, start, or beginning where time is always involved. Similarly, the word appearance cannot be equivalent to the word “become” because it involves the subjective interpretation of the existence of an object. Appearance is about the visual interpretation of the existence of something that is coming into sight. Surprisingly, the most common word used by people to denote sudden appearance or disappearance is the word “magic”, but this also carries an illusionary, unreal, perhaps deceptive connotation. A connotation associated with the belief that it is the result of a supernatural event.

It can be argued that “coolness”, fashion, style, the unapologetically fashionable, desirable, and ephemeral are not about the new but instead are deceptive obfuscating methods of establishing an authority on art, architecture, and design without offering the means to truly lead towards novelty. In contrast, theories, experiments, or technologies that point out the potential limits of the human mind, seek to identify novelty as a quality that exists beyond the limits of the human mind. If there is novelty, in the existential sense, it must be sought beyond, below, or beneath its phenomenal appearances as an already existing entity that is out of human knowledge.

Novelty therefore must be the result of discovery. While knowledge about the lack of existence is impossible, the lack of knowledge about existence is possible. In other words, the discovery of the existence of something is indeed new, as it pertains to the body of knowledge that it adds to. It is about the existence of something that was, until it was discovered, out of the set of human knowledge. Unlike mere compositional rearrangement of existing elements into seemingly new entities, a discovery is a revelation of something that existed before but was not known.

Discovery is the act of encountering, for the first time, something that already existed. In contrast, invention is defined as the act of causing something to
exist by the use of ingenuity or imagination; it is an artificial human creation. Both discovery and invention are about the origin of ideas and their existence in the context of human understanding. These two intellectual mechanisms result from a logic, which tends to argue whether the existence of certain ideas, notions, or processes is one of the following: either a human creation or simply a glimpse of an already existing universe regardless of the presence of humans. The most paradigmatic example of this polemic is that of geometry itself: the existence of geometry can be regarded as either a descriptive revelation of properties, measurements, and relationships of existing forms or as an arbitrary, postulate-based mental structure that exists only in the human mind. For instance, Euclidean geometry was developed originally to measure distances on the surface of earth and yet, in Euclidean geometry, platonic primitive shapes, such as squares, circles, or triangles, do not exist per se in nature yet they represent idealized approximations of natural objects. Likewise, architecture can be regarded as either a simulation of the laws and structure of nature or as a world of fantasy and imagination.

**Origin and Memory**

The notion of an origin is important when discussing the process of design. Because of its investigative nature design is always associated with a starting point, a pivot, out of which style, fashion, or mannerisms result. That starting point is important for at least two reasons: first, and most obvious, it serves as a pivotal point of reference that identifies, categorizes, and determines a wide range of similar products. Second, and less obvious, is the fact that an origin belongs to the distant past and as such it involves the reminiscence of something that was once lost but whose consequences are still present. While memory is usually about mundane, common, and ordinary past events, it is also about that which is lost in the distant past, the primordial, archaic, and primitive. The origin, as such, is elusive, evasive, and indefinite yet it is always present in the form of a sign that points out at the increasingly distant past. While the struggle to seek for the latest new new thing may be fascinating, seductive, or thrilling, it is only because it builds upon a primordial human weakness, that of the vulnerable nature of the senses. In contrast, the search for original, universal, and ideal forms of existence which serve as prototypes, archetypes, or models is a glimpse into an already existing world whose rules abide to entirely different principles of those that govern the world of senses.

Thus, in searching for the origin one is challenged to seek the basic, archaic, and primitive qualities of the first encounter. The process of recollection is a search for the truth, whereas the act of concealing will eventually lead to false assumptions. The search for truth leads to facts that will be remembered for a long time while falsity leads to facts that, while impressive at the moment, will pass into oblivion. Memory is an associative mechanism for reproducing past experiences and in its primitive neural level it is governed by logical operations. Yet, while the primitive connections that reproduce a past event may be logical, the higher level entities that are to be remembered are not necessarily so.

Memory relies on a concept called feedback, that is, the output of something being fed back into itself as input. The minimal definition of a feedback involves at least two consecutive moments of time as a measure of comparison is established so that an event can be locked and therefore be “remembered”. In electronics, the basic element for storing binary information is termed as a flip-flop. It is composed of two cross-coupled NOR gates, as shown in Figure 1. If R and S are opposites of one another, then Qa follows S and Qb is the inverse of Qa. However, if both R and S are switched to 0 simultaneously, then the circuit will return what was previously presented on R and S. Hence this simple logical circuit constitutes a memory element, or a flip-flop that locks or “remembers” which of the two inputs S and R was most recently equal to.

Time is therefore “captured” by reversing its or-
Symbolically, according to the Greeks, it was Chronos (time) who ruled first and what was produced, the children of Time, were devoured by time. It was only when Time was conquered and an origin was set to its passing. That origin, the origin of human thinking, was established out of the emergence of two newly acquired fundamental abilities: that of memory (attributed to Epimetheus) and that of prediction (attributed to Prometheus). As a consequence, it was the realization of the inevitability of death that initiated history, i.e. the preservation of memory and the explanation of time as a passing phenomenon. The ability to make logical syllogisms, i.e. to see the connection between the notions of before and after is one of the main characteristics that distinguish intellectually humans from animals. Without logic there is no ability to foresee events and therefore make sense out of time. One moment has meaning only in its relation to other moments: otherwise they are just fragments deprived of meaning if they are not related to other fragments. As the distinction between the emotional and logical side of the human mind started to become clearer, humans started to differentiate their nature from that of animals. Hybrid creatures that exist in various mythologies such as the Minotaur, Sphinx, Centaur, or Medusa, represent a symbolic struggle to identify, differentiate, and demarcate human nature from that of animal’s establishing its superiority through slaughter. George Bataille in his work Le Labyrinthe offers a deeply existential interpretation of the dialectical couple man/animal and the desire to set free man’s animality. According to Hollier’s interpretation, Bataille in Lascaux’s caves sees as the origin of painting the desire of man to represent his triumph over the animal and not as a Narcissian pictorial urge. Similarly, in Aesthetics Hegel interprets Oedipus’ answer to Sphinx’s riddle as man’s answer that eliminates any trace of animality, an answer that makes “know thyself” the unique and differen-

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**Figure 1**
A flip-flop

**Figure 2**
Truth table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>Qa</th>
<th>Qb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>1/0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 3**
Feedback (below) and a cross-coupled zigzag path (above)
tiating principle that identifies the human species. Parmenides’ distinction between truth and opinion is both evangelism and warning as it sets a departing point away from the animal logic and identifies a new path of truth but at the same time warns that this newly discovered world will be hunted by the other logic it leaves behind.

The primitive, eternal, and universal nature of archetypes serves not only as a point of departure but also as a point of reference. Aldo Rossi refers to this nature as archaic, unexpressed, and analogical. Yet, he also made a distinction between history and collective memory. As the relationship between form and function erodes over time there is a disjunction in meaning that results in a twist in the flow of history: where history ends, memory begins. The form empty of meaning engulfs its own individuality and stands alone, away, orphaned, and rootless. Yet, it is then that remembrance becomes the only way back. Ironically, souvenir is about the act of remembering and yet, it is only by forgetting that one can see again things as they really are; the act of forgetting is not a submersion into oblivion but rather the erasure of false connections and the return back to the umbilical origin.

Endnotes

1 Precisely, the root of σχέδον (pron. schedon) is derived from σχέειν (pron. eschein), which is the past tense of the verb σχεί (pron. eho), that is, to have. Therefore, design literally is about the reminiscence of a past possession at an indefinite state and at an uncertain time. Similarly, the word scheme, from the Greek σχήμα, means shape and is also derived from the root σχεδόν.

2 σχέειν (pron. eschein) is also the root of the English word scheme.

3 Similarly, in the game of peek-a-boo a baby is mysteriously fascinated by an appearing/disappearing face.

4 The Socratic analogy to shadows in a cave illustrates the illusion-prone nature of the senses and the inability to distinguish reality (light) from its representation (shadow). The feeling of sensory illusion is so comfortable that attempts to reveal their deceptive nature is met with fierce resistance (Republic, book VII). While in Plato’s dialogue Parmenides there is a clear distinction between the Socratic theory of ideas and Parmenides’ existential philosophy, both are in agreement on the deceptive nature of the senses.

5 To paraphrase a paradox by Zeno, a student of Parmenides, it can be argued that novelty resembles an arrow moving forward in time and as a moving arrow either it is where it is or it is where it is not yet. If it is where it is, then it must be standing still, and if it is where it is not, then it can’t be there; thus, it cannot change position. Of course, the paradox is just a symbol of the inability to achieve something out of nothing, i.e. to create something new.

6 Alternative versions of the word ύπαρξη (i.e. existence) in Greek are υπόσταση, which is equivalent to ex-sistere and το ωντι, which literally means, this which is. Όν (pron. on) which is the root of the word ontology, is the present participle of the verb ειμί (i.e. I am).

7 See Evans R. 1985 “Not to be used for wrapping purposes” AA Files vol. 10 p.70. In this article Evans makes an elegant distinction between design as an accumulative process and transformation as a different type of design where only relations alter.

8 Along the line of pre-Socratic thought, the prefixes a-, un- or in-, when used in the sense of negation, opposition, or contrast to reality, are absurd, confusing, and pointless. Either something exists or not. The preposterousness that is inherent into the negation of existence is very apparent in two linguistic constructions namely the words unknown and unreal. Both are terms that while they exist as words yet they are both preposterous.

9 Beginnings and endings represents change and transitions such as the progression of past to future, of one condition to another, of one vision to another, and of one universe to another. New or old do not have existence of their own but rather are seen
as transitions from one state to another.

Perault, the architect of the peristyle of the Louvre, argued that architecture is a fantastic art of pure invention. He asserted that architecture really exists in the mind of the designer and that there is no connection to the natural world. In addition, architecture as an imaginative art, obeys its own rules which are internal and personal to each designer, and that is why most creators are vaguely aware of the rules of nature and yet produce excellent pieces of art. A similar point is also argued by Giovanni Battista Vico. In his work The New Science (1744), Vico argues that one can know only by imagining. The twisting of language and meaning can lead one to discover new worlds of fantasy. He argued that one can know only what one makes. Only God can understand nature, because it is his creation. Humans, on the other hand, can understand civilization, because they made it. The world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and its principles are therefore to be found within the modification of our own human mind.

In Greek the word false is λάθος (pron. lathos) which is derived from the word λήθη which means oblivion. In contrast, the word truth is αλήθεια (pron. aletheia) which is derived from the negating prefix α- and the word λήθη, therefore denoting the negation to forget. Thus, the connection is that truth is unforgettable and falsity is oblivious; or rather that truth leads to facts that will be remembered for a long time while falsity leads to facts that, while impressive at the moment, will pass into oblivion. The word λήθη is translated by Heidegger as concealment therefore reinterpreting the act of forgetting as one “sunk away into concealedness”. See Heidegger M. Parmenides, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 71.


See Bataille G. Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939, A. Stoekl 1985 (ed.) University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 171-7. See also Hol-