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Research Article

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher:* Thoughts on an Architecture of Terror

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Abstract

The present study is part of a research field that lies at the intersection of architecture and narratology. It is our, the authors', shared belief that spatial metaphor in the textual realm plays a significant role in the construction of meaning. In certain literary works, the spatial background of the story is designed with great care, functioning as a dynamic matrix that organizes the plot, adding to or emphasizing the meaning of the narrative. This practice, which we refer to as textual architecture, could be extremely valuable to architects because it offers up a treasure-trove of design methods able to generate meaning through space.

The present study offers a way of understanding such spatiality in the context of architectural epistemology. It does so by contemplating the literature in which textual space is delineated. The outcome of this process is an original method of mapping textual architecture based on what we describe as spatial figures. We chose to apply this method to highlight an interesting narrative strategy within the literary genre of horror. We believe that certain writers have used space not to create an atmosphere of terror but to generate terror itself. The products of such endeavours form part of a genealogy that sees textual architecture as a means of generating a feeling of terror. We term this genealogy the architecture of terror. The present study also aims to highlight what we regard as a seminal point in the development of the above-mentioned strategy - the publication in 1839 of Edgar Allan Poe's short story The Fall of the House of Usher. We examine the spatial figures of this work and their semantic function.

Introduction

The present study attempts to identify the articulation of space in literary texts, herein referred to as textual architecture. Our research lies at the epistemological intersection of architecture and narratology. We employ a structural-functional model to combine the two fields, not to identify an external relationship between them but to reveal how each intervenes in the constitution of the other, thereby addressing the question, "What is the role that space or architecture assumes within the narrative?" [1].

Underlying the present study is the strong belief that architecture functions in literature as a meta-language of meaning, a privileged operator that aids and enhances the meaning that the author seeks to deliver [2]. Textual architecture is of interest to architects because it participates actively in the construction of meaning. Through its rules and formations, we can identify patterns that directly link the design process to the creation of atmosphere. Just as architecture provides literature with narrative structure, literature can help architecture to comprehend - on a structural level - the world of lived experience, or the lebenswelt, to use Husserl's term Husserl [3]. In other words, it is possible to discover the conditions that turn space into place. In the present study, we attempt to analyze textual architecture and show how it produces meaning. Guided by 20th-century avant-garde literature, Frank (1991) describes how modernists use space to construct the narrative around it - by schematizing what he calls "spatial form" (p. 10). Hamon highlights the development of then-premodern spatial metaphor in the 19th century. We adopt a similar approach, thematizing the textual architecture of Edgar Allan Poe's horror stories.

The horror genre is ideal for our research because it requires the creation of an intense and dense atmosphere. We attempt to highlight a point in the literature of horror where textual architecture ceases to be a secondary element, the background to the action. The configurations we are primarily interested in are the products of a technology of place-making that participates in the creation of atmosphere, in the organization of the macabre event, and even in the production of horror itself. We outline the genealogy of this mechanism, which we call the architecture of terror. We chose as a starting point Poe's short story *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) to highlight the central importance of place within it. We present an original way of navigating textual space and deciphering its semantic meaning, including design tools and tricks that show how Poe uses space to reflect on meaning. We believe that our method of analysis has important implications both for literature and architecture.

Constructing a Method of Reading Textual Architecture

Research terrain

While acknowledging Frank's [4] work on the significance of spatial perception in literature, we employ Genette's [5] distinction between narrative and story. We understand narrative to mean the narrative text, the signifier, the utterance. By story, we mean the set of events we narrate, that is, the signified [a]. Narrated events take place in a complex world, with its own spatial and temporal rules and configurations determined by the scope of meaning of the author. We refer to this world, which is essentially the Bakhtinian chronotope [6], as the story world, and it provides the framework for our research. For Zoran [7], the story world comprises two levels, one spatial and one temporal. The topographical level, that is, space as a static entity, is constructed by units of place. Place can be a point, a surface, or a volume characterized by continuity and having distinct boundaries. The chronotopic level is a structure imposed on space through events and movements, constructed by zones of action defined by the internal coherence of the events they describe, ignoring topographical boundaries [b]. Hamon (1992) illuminates the connection between the shaping of the story world and meaning through the "topological level." This

refers to abstract logical poles, fundamental themes, and the operations and rhythms that organize them (p. 34).

Hamon's [2] idea of architecture as a meta-language that enhances the meaning of the plot (pp. 25 & 37) is based on the connection between the topological and the topographical levels, including the places and dwellings of the story world and the movements or rituals effected by the actors in the text (the syntagmatic dimension; p. 34) [c]. Hamon also identifies the ways textual architecture acquires semantic status by formulating three central semantic categorizations. Hermeneutical status is associated with the ability of architecture to create layers in spatial configurations, façades, crypts, and so on. It is correlated with the strategies of the actors to extract information, that is, their search for truth (Hamon, 1992, p. 26). Discriminating status is expressed as the manipulation of proximities between actors through architectural elements (doors, windows, and so on) and the management of relations and strategies concerning desire. Finally, hierarchical status is related to the ability of architecture to produce articulated systems and relations between parts and the totality they assemble. This allows for the installation of strategies concerning the skills of the characters in the plot [2].

A method of reading textual space based on spatial figures

In this section, we describe our approach towards the study of textual architecture and spatial metaphor. We base our analysis on three distinct levels inspired by the work of Hamon [2] and Zoran [7]: the topological, topographical, and chronotopic. We present an innovative and elaborate structure at the topographical level and focus on its connection with the topological level. We demonstrate how certain plot themes can be schematized through textual architecture. We also believe that the actions and movements of the actors (the chronotopic level) are determined by the structure of the space they are called upon to develop. In Poe's work, space precedes action.

Schematization of Meaning – The Topological Level

By connecting the topological level with textual architecture, the latter acquires charges of meaning, semantic content, and therefore narrative value. We start from Genette's position that any narrative can be considered a development of a simple verbal form [5]. Having identified this verbal form, we isolate individual themes that are used to construct the narrative. We observe that those themes (and especially the verbal form) provide initial schemas that are incorporated into the story world through spatial metaphor. After organizing diagrammatically the topological level, we enter the story world and pinpoint and mark internal connections between all three levels.

Creating Meaningful Places - The Topographical Level

We propose a constructive organization of the topographical level involving three kinds of individual elements: places, architectural objects, and connectivity operators. When combined, they produce spatial figures, advanced elements of spatial perception that carry semantic meaning.

Places

Places are the individual units of spaces in which the actors of the text are contained in the narrative. They are assigned the characteristics of form, shape (e.g., a square room), scale and size (large or high, e.g., ceilings), materials, and colours (dark, bright). An example of such a place is the eponymous character's studio.

Architectural objects

Architectural objects are individual elements found in the above places. They work as signs in the sense that - at least in the parts of the narrative that we analyze at any given point - they are not inhabited. A window or a door can be considered an object, as can a mansion viewed from a great distance in a landscape. The characterization of an architectural object is thus relevant to the perception and the presence of an inhabitant. The architectural object differs from other objects in the narrative in their assemblage and organic connection to individual places. Architectural objects are also attributed properties of form, scale, and material [d].

Through intensified description, architectural objects possess properties they often transfer to adjacent elements. Because they occupy a good deal of narrative space, they are actively involved in the transfer of meaning to the story world; they are privileged meaning manipulators. We classify the latter into two categories: active and passive. An active manipulator is an object whose properties affect other objects or places by intensifying the impression they create. In this way, it plays an increased and multiple role in the creation of atmosphere. It also directly influences the chronotopic level, that is, the development of the action. A passive manipulator is an object whose characteristics enhance the constitution of a general atmosphere or a certain architectural style without intertwining with other elements on the topographic level. They give detail to an otherwise vague, spatial background. For example, the description of a Gothic window framing a room is a passive manipulator of meaning, while a Gothic window of red glass casting crimson hues into an interior is an active manipulator of meaning.

Connectivity operators

Connectivity operators (COs) are not objects but descriptions of the relationship between individual elements at the topographic level. There are three types of COs, according to the kind of elements they correlate with.

Relationships between places (P-P) These are interconnectivity operators. They describe how two different places are connected, how close or far apart they are within complex spatial constructions, and more generally, their adjacency and articulation. In architectural terms, they describe the interconnectivity and the terms of syntactic composition. For example, the vault was immediately beneath the room.

Place-object relationships (P-O) These indicate the relationship between one or more architectural objects and the place in which they are situated. Objects located on the boundaries of a place, such as doors and windows, have special significance. The height of a window from the floor or its position on a wall is such an example.

Relationships between architectural objects (O-O) These refer to the ways different objects relate to or communicate with each other; they may belong to the same or different types, for example, the relationship between windows in a room or the relationship between a window and a door.

Connectivity operators are extremely valuable elements in the architectural articulation of textual space. Compositions with intensively processed COs imply the advanced application of spatial metaphor. In such cases, the action of the actors in the text - and consequently, the structure of the narrative - is guided by the textual space.

Spatial figures and semantic structure

The combinations of these elements of the topographical plane produce complex, meticulously designed entities we call spatial figures. A spatial figure can be produced from individual places and the topological operators between them, from architectural objects and places and the relationships between them (in special cases as an articulation of objects), or from all of the above.

Spatial figures may constitute larger units of spatial figures, or second-degree spatial figures, with the entire topographical plane considered as such a super-unit. Spatial figures concentrate all the power of our arguments concerning textual architecture and its role in the narrative. Their appearance in a text signifies the introduction to advanced spatial metaphor. The spatial figure, having meaning embedded within it is a carrier of cultural, political, and psychological content. Spatial figures are designed units of space with a clear semantic purpose.

The semantic content identified by Hamon (1992), that is, hermeneutic, separative, and hierarchical as well as any others we may identify in the future - can only be attributed to spatial figures because they are created by the correlations and contacts of the individual elements of the topographical level. A unity of places (e.g., rooms) can create an order that can be used in the narrative to describe the search for truth. A single place or two disconnected ones cannot do this. Similarly, an architectural object such as a window needs to interface with places so it can create discriminating content. In sum, only spatial figures can and do have semantic status.

Reading the *Fall of the House of Usher* through Spatial Metaphor

The plot of Poe's story is built around an unnamed narrator, who answers an invitation to visit an old and fragile friend, Rodrick Usher, in his family mansion. After spending some days with Usher, the narrator helps him bury his twin sister, Lady Madeline, after being informed that she has died. A few days later, on a stormy night, Lady Madeleine rises from her grave. She confronts her brother and kills him. The narrator flees and looks back only to see the house crumbling into the tarn.

Poles of Meaning – Topological Level

The structure of the story is built around some simple narrative themes. The story starts with the visit of an old friend of Roderick Usher, who introduces the perspective of the narrative. The verbal form of the story might be expressed as the House of Usher falls. We follow the final act in the story of an old family, which has fallen into decline through genetic degeneration. Already from the beginning of the narrative, there is a strong identification of the house and the "House," the family and the house that the family built, which at one point begins in turn to build the family's destiny. The merger of the house and the House is aided by the family's inability to branch out.

A series of figures appear that are transferred, as we shall see, in multiple ways to both the chronotopic - but most importantly - the topographical level. The line of the Usher genealogy, the twilight of the ancient lineage, carries with it a sense of its impending end and marks a contrast between the family's lineage and the consequences of the genetic degeneration of its individual members. The temporal dimension of the family, aided by the verbal form (i.e., the fall), schematizes a vertical shape that is transmitted in the textual architecture of the story.

Mapping the topographical level of the house of usher using spatial figures

We have identified five main spatial figures in the story. These construct the spatial metaphor and organize the plot, leading to the final horrific events.

The Landscape

The first spatial figure that we encounter is the landscape, as the narrator arrives at the mansion. While it is within a static place, the house functions as an architectural object, a point that directs the narrator's zone of action. Two other architectural objects, or rather an object and a group of objects, the tarn and different plants, are also located in the landscape. The locus of the latter is extremely broad; its boundaries are also those of our perspective on the story world. The CO between the objects of the house and the black tarn – they are close to each other so the black water reflects the façade - is important. Turning now to a closer description of the objects, the plants, which comprise "a few rank sedges and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees" [8], reflect the themes of degeneration and impending end and help to create atmosphere.

The tarn itself is black and lurid, and as such transfers directly the themes of the topological level into properties of form. However, the object of the tarn is elevated over the other elements of the landscape to that of an active manipulator. The tarn transfers its properties to the house through reflection. The house, which is mediated by the lake, gives an even more profound, repulsive, and thrilling impression [8]. The house, as a sign, is another active manipulator because it directs the narrator's action.

It could be said that with the dense atmosphere it creates, the spatial figure of the landscape acquires hermeneutic semantic status as it creates a surface that needs to be penetrated by the narrator and the narrative itself. The deeper theme of the story that lies within the spatial figure of the house can then be reached [e] (Figure 1).
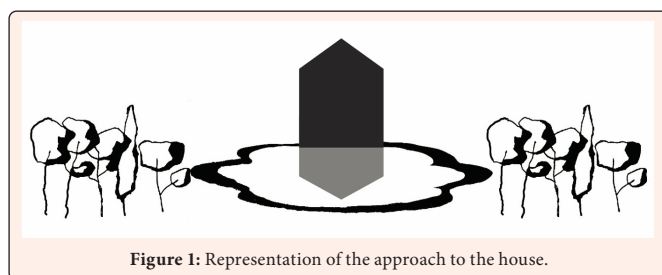

Figure 1: Representation of the approach to the house.

The External Shell - the Façade

The spatial form of the external shell, revealed to us through the façade, embodies in a structural way direct metaphors of the topological level. It constitutes a boundary between the landscape (exterior) and the interior of the house, though it is undeniably part of the latter. It is articulated through individual architectural objects, as well as the connectivity operators (O-O) that define the relationships between them. Beyond simplistic metaphors concerning the architectural objects of the empty eye-like windows that are passive manipulators and the building's antiquity along with its dull grey colour, certain descriptions of individual objects merit special attention. These objects are noticed by the narrator upon his entry but are also referred to by Usher, who believes that they are responsible for the development of a certain "sentience of

the house" [8]. In Usher's mind, this is how the house gained control over the family members and determined their fate.

This sentience is important to us as it confirms our argument regarding the characteristics of the architecture of terror, namely

a) the materials with which the house was constructed, that is, the stonework, an architectural object that is old and lacking in solidity
b) the fungi that cover the entire structure
c) the method of collocation of the stones and the order they are arranged in (a CO)
d) the many years that the structure has held up (thus transferring the ancient lineage of Usher to its material expression).
e) the reflection of this structure in the dark waters of the tarn.

The stonework and fungi are active manipulators because they actively participate, at least as it seems to Usher, in the shaping of the wearing power of the house. The flimsy stones fit together well, however, and no part of the building looks rickety. This conveys in space the contrast between the family's longevity with the genetic degeneration of its members. It is worth mentioning the heightened intensity that the object of the pond offers as an active manipulator, as it does not reflect the house as a sign but the articulated spatial form of the shell.

Finally, the narrator spots an object - a barely perceptible zigzag-shaped vertical fissure running from the roof of the house to the ground, then disappearing into the tarn [8]. This crack reflects the vertical shape of the topological level in the topographic plane. Its embedding on the wall, exploiting the merger of House and house, makes the sense of the imminent end tangible. It is through this fissure that the house collapses at the end of the tale, as the full moon is revealed (Figure 2).
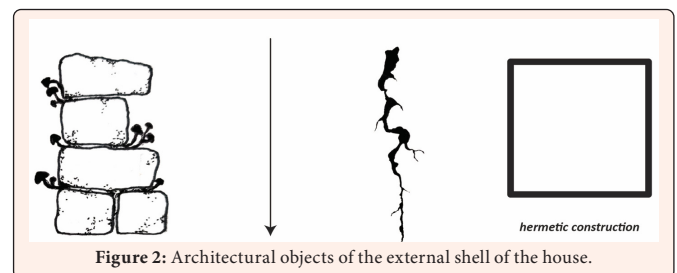

hermetic construction

Figure 2: Architectural objects of the external shell of the house.

The detailed and carefully designed description of the spatial form of the shell, as well as its particular marginal position, gives it a double semantic meaning. Following the narrator's direction of approach (internal), it acquires hermeneutic status as a façade, a surface between spatial forms. It provides another layer to approach the theme that lies within.

In the opposite direction (external), it acquires an intense discriminating status. The external shell almost completely cuts the inside off from the outside, making their boundaries clear. In this way, the central spatial figure of the narrative, the House of Usher - comprising of the shell and the set of (second-degree) internal figures - constitutes a hermetic construction that is achieved by the strict control of the discriminating semantic status.

The Vast Intermediate Space

As the narrator enters the house, we are confronted with the spatial figure of the intermediate space, delineated by the figure of the shell and the defined figures that follow. It displays the characteristics of a vast area filled with a series of wondrous (and terrifying) architectural objects and places. The entrance hall (i.e., a place), with its Gothic arches, is directly connected (P-P) to a deliberately obscured labyrinth of corridors (spaces) between the sites of action. The carvings, the ceilings, the sombre tapestries on the walls, and the black ebony floors (architectural objects) show no structural functionality in terms of the plot, yet they fill the vast intermediate space as materialities that participate - as passive manipulators - in the creation of atmosphere. The narrator then meets the departing doctor: "On one of the staircases I met the physician of the family" [8]. The vast intermediate form is thus enriched with staircases (places) and transfers to the entire form the property of verticality, which, as we have seen is a direct transcription from the topological plane. It is also implied in the burial of Lady Madeline, that the vertical structure continues to a basement with several vaults (places) (Figure 3).
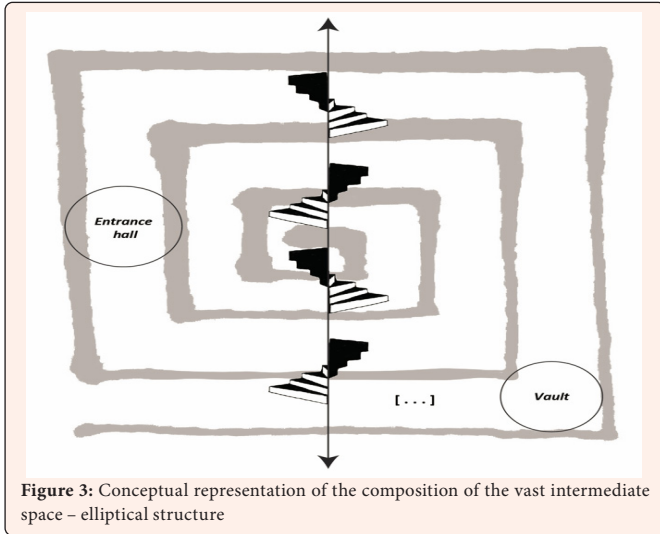
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Figure 3: Conceptual representation of the composition of the vast intermediate space – elliptical structure

The spatial figure of the vast intermediate space acquires a hierarchical semantic status as it organizes the internal relations of the individual forms within the house. It also imbues the above- mentioned central spatial figure with an elliptical attribute; that is, the figure - despite the descriptions of individual places and the intermediate spaces of transition between them - remains vague, a maze. This impression is achieved by implying a large area with little oversight and an overemphasis of the fragmentary nature of literary space.

The Studio - The Spatial Figure of Roderick Usher

The studio is an elaborate spatial figure, as is evident in its exposition. The space of the room is first described using scale: the hall is large and lofty. It has a domed form and a dark oak floor. Inside the room are some architectural objects. The ceiling, vaulted and in relief, is high (which helps to establish its relation to place [P-O]). It is a passive operator because it helps to create atmosphere.

The windows (architectural objects) are of great interest. In terms of form, they are long, narrow, pointed, and protected by iron bars. They are active operators that transfer properties to the place of the room, colouring it with "feeble gleams of encrimsoned light" [8], thus generating atmosphere. Their most noteworthy element lies in the CO that describes their relationship with the place in which they are enclosed (P-O). Their distance from the oak floor makes it impossible to reach them from within. Crimson, iron-barred, and out of reach of the actors, they are unable to illuminate the entire space (which is, in any case, vast), so the far corners of the room and the dents in the relief ceiling are in darkness. The windows shape the atmosphere and create a sense of discrimination through which the hermetic quality of the central spatial form of the house is reinforced (Figure 4).
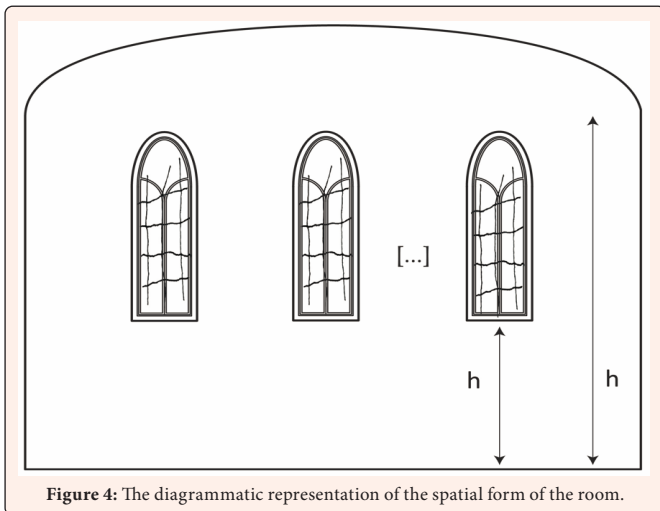

Figure 4: The diagrammatic representation of the spatial form of the room.

It is worth pointing out two more of Poe's manipulations. First, his attack on visual accessibility: the eye struggles to comprehend the full breadth of space and ultimately fails. Second, he uses the darkness of the place in combination with crimson light as a tool to enhance the sense of horror.

The Vault-Room Cluster

The spatial figure formed between the vault (place) in which Lady Madeline is entombed and the chambers (place) where the narrator sleeps is the most important in the story because it is used to orchestrate the horrific subsequent events. On a stormy night following the lady's death and her entombment in a vault inside the house, her brother enters the narrator's chambers in great distress. The narrator starts to read a fictional story to calm him as the storm rages outside. In it, a series of events occur that are accompanied by certain sounds. These are reflected in the story world as well. They represent Lady Madeline's attempt to free herself and attack her brother. As she enters the room, she falls on him, and they both die. A second fall follows that of the house, as described by the narrator. The vault appears small, damp, and deep below the ground floor of the house. It includes a copper-sheathed floor and a massive iron door that makes a sharp grating sound [8]. The narrator's room includes two active manipulators (i.e., architectural objects). The casement, which Usher opens, allows the storm to enter the room. This is the first and only time after the narrator's arrival that a spatial form has semantic significance in that it contradicts the hermetic construction of the house. The double doors through which Lady Madeline enters the room offer an internal example.

The two places are interconnected by a CO (P-P), as the vault lies "immediately beneath the portion of the building" of the narrator's room [8]. This interconnectivity operator reflects the vertical shape in the topographical plane. This vertical shape is illustrated, with an artful reversal of direction (from bottom to top, ascending instead of falling), in the zone of action of Lady Madeline, taking form in the staircase that connects the room with the vault.

The spatial figure of the cluster acquires hermeneutic semantic content; it is expressed through the series of individual places (i.e., the vault, staircase, and room) in the vertical plane. It also has discriminating status in that it allows (albeit intermediated by the active manipulators of the door and the window) the entrance of Lady Madeline and the storm. It is worth emphasizing here that the action, which is the climax of the narrative and therefore the production of the feeling of terror, is staged in spatial form (the room-vault), with the chronotopic level constructed on the topographical (Figure 5).
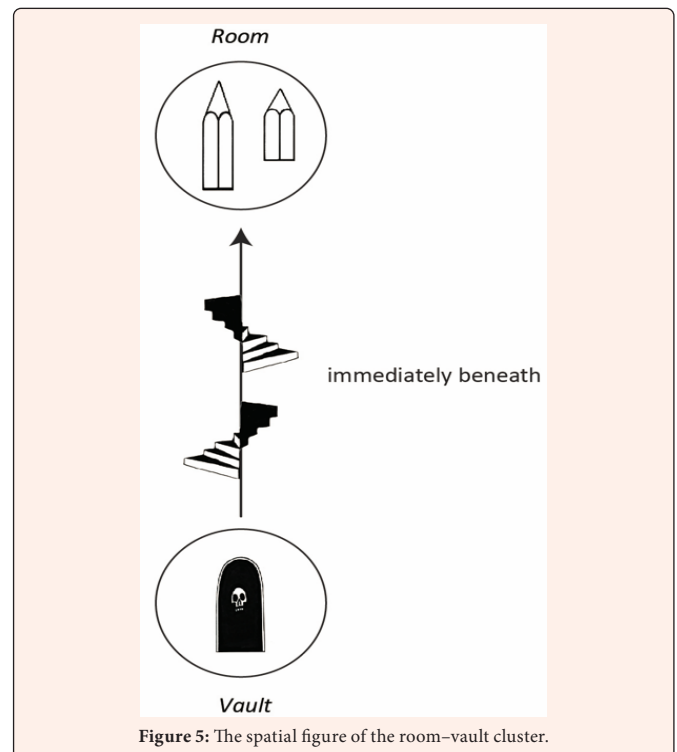

Figure 5: The spatial figure of the room–vault cluster.

The Reconstruction of the Meaningful Place of the House of Usher

The real meaning of Poe's work cannot be found in the individual themes that comprise the plot but in the production of the feeling of terror. The spatial figure enables the indirect and suggestive approach to the production of the feeling of terror. The energy of the narrative shifts from a horrific element that intrudes into the story world to the meticulous design of a grid and generates horror across its entire length, inside of which the actors are introduced and with which they are invited to interact. Poe embeds in space the central meaning of his work, which in this case is none other than the aesthetic impression of a feeling of terror. This strategy marks what we have referred to as the architecture of terror. We have shown that the author's design is, complex, and constantly striving for semantic content. The elaborate contrast between the hermetic structure and the elliptical labyrinth (the spatial figures of the shell and the intermediate space), the restriction of the eye's capacity to take in the entire internal panorama (Usher's studio), and the staging of the final horrific events to the accompaniment of acoustic stimuli is achieved using COs and the construction of a meta-language of meaning.

We have summarized below the central features of the spatial forms of Poe's tale in the form of a diagram. Due to the nature of the story world, these spatial forms have the character of fragments that - as part of an attempt to organize complex spatial entities capable of conveying meaning - have the capacity to contribute to the architectural discourse (Figure 6).
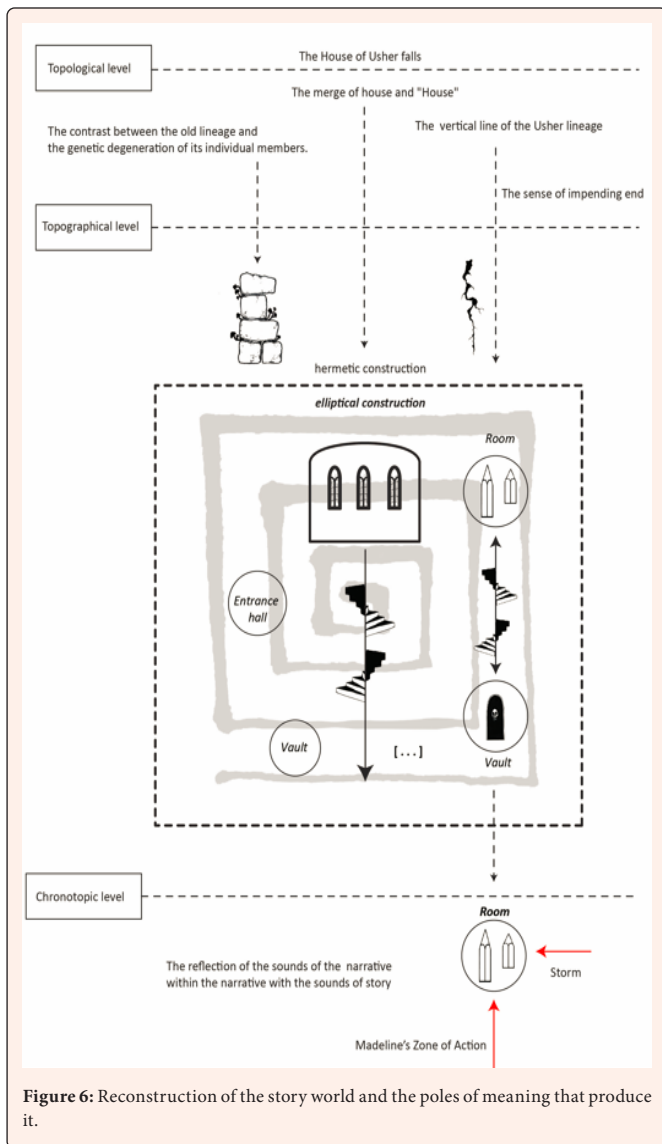

Figure 6: Reconstruction of the story world and the poles of meaning that produce it.

Conclusion

We have shown that the design process of textual architecture is realized on multiple levels. The conceptual centres (the topological level) are carried both in abstract operations concerning general properties of the generated space, in the relationships between individual spatial entities, COs and detailed descriptions of individual architectural objects, and their functions in the overall spatial matrix. This multiple approach to the production of space reflects the two dimensions of architecture as described by Bernard Tschumi (1999). Space can be approached first as a construction of the mind, with the organization of central ideas and manipulations around the design (scale, rhythm, and so on) - that is, as a conceptual structure. At the same time, it can be perceived as a perceptual experience, a dimension that denotes the ways and terms of the internal interconnectedness of spaces, materialities, and so on (cited in Psarra, 2009, pp. 4 & 5).

The essence of the fragments of architectural discourse constituted by spatial figures is found neither in the characteristics of form nor of functionality, but in semantic value. We may wonder about the possibilities of introducing this primary material, detached from the context of their story world, into the realm of architectural theory. Architectural configurations based on fragments of spatial forms, assembled around their semantic edge, could provide the axis for the constitution of a contemporary architectural, critical discourse capable of creating meaningful spaces.

Endnotes

a) This distinction inevitably leads to the distinction between two different tenses of the narrative act. The time of the story is the narrated time - the temporality of the micro-world created by the author and the time of the narrative (Genette, 1980). The relationship between the two tenses, that is, the story and narrative (the tense of story [TS] and the tense of narration [TN]), is extremely important because it determines how we come into contact with the world of the story.

b) Finally, Zoran (1984) introduces the textual level imposed on space by stating that it is expressed in the context of the written word (p. 315) and is constructed by fields of vision; the glimpses of the world described in the text are provided by narrative. The field of vision is a complex unit that interweaves places and movements, constituting the presence of the text on both temporal and spatial levels. The textual level intersects mostly with the field of narrative and is not of concern in the present study.

c) Hamon (1992) outlines a system of five levels through which architecture intersects with literature (topological-topographical-topical-typographical-typological) and discriminates two dimensions on each level: the paradigmatic, which specifies lists of manipulated items, and the syntagmatic, which accounts for the syntax of those items. As architects, we are primarily interested in the topological and the topographical.

d) It is worth mentioning here the possibility of the fusion of place and architectural object. This distinction is to some extent clarified by the narrative, in the way it approaches the individual elements of a place. Just as the description of a sign acquires greater length in the space of the narrative, that sign tends to detach itself from the rough contours of the place that contains it and begins to acquire status as an architectural object in its own right. Of course, classifying the individual types of the topographical plane is ultimately the responsibility of the individual researcher.

e) To be truly rigorous, we should stress the use of the word tarn, rather than lake or pond, to emphasize its hermeneutic status. A tarn is a small mountain lake in a hollow area surrounded by steep slopes and is therefore another layer to penetrate.

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