

# THINGS AS COMPANIONS: A Peircean Approach to Urban Place

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Susann Vihma

The aim of this paper is to look at the representational features that are interpreted during various activities in built environments. The semiotic philosophy of Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) is chosen as a theoretical tool to the subject, and, accordingly, the interpretation is conceived as the analyses of references. According to the theoretical approach, reference relations are grounded and formed differently. This diversity seems to enable a study of representational qualities in their supposed complexity. Iconicity enables impressions and emotions to be studied as reference relations. An index, for its part, supposes an actual and causal connection between interpretation and its object of study. In this paper, the indexical connection conceives the concrete built environment and its products as hard facts. Intersubjective agreement functions as grounds for symbolic references, which then require a description of the context and explicit position of the one who carries out the interpretation. In this paper the position is the design point of view.

These modes of reference relations were discussed to a great extent by Peirce himself (e.g., *CP* 2.228–253, 2.275–2.296, 2.303–307) and the philosophical scrutiny of them has been vast since Peirce's times. However, I will not go deeper into presenting Peircean theory on signs.

The means of approach has supported my interpretation to consider the context of human action and the concrete qualities of the environment. The interaction between persons and things can be approached by studying reference relations in the Peircean way, which suggests ongoing interpretation (*ad infinitum*) instead of aiming at fixed qualities. From the method of analysis, it also follows that at least some interpretation must be done on the spot. The person (or a group of persons) interpreting concrete artefacts should actually be able to experience the use of, or actually use, these artefacts (as hard facts). He or she

should also have the possibility to experience them as a part of their environment, observe the milieu of the activity, and so on. Especially iconic references cannot be formed otherwise.

The second viewpoint for this study is design (i.e., the paper takes a deliberate design point of view in respect to interpretation). Therefore, the aim is not to present a generalised interpretation of the built environment, but rather to conceive environment as a designed artefact that can be reformed and redesigned when needed. The design viewpoint in the analyses of the product environment is implicitly a questioning and critical one – from its very beginnings. Designers look at how certain objects function and start to produce alternative ideas to improve interaction with the objects.

### **Semiotics and design**

The demand for concreteness within the Peircean semiotic analysis, which I have already mentioned, suits the design point of view well. Especially the demand for interpretation to proceed in actual context of use is well in agreement with designer thinking. User-centred design, for example, often emphasises test situations in which people actually try out models and prototypes (Säde 2001). Even since the mid-19th century, ergonomic planning has formed traditions for utilising this kind of approach (Giedion 1948). The height of a step, for example, is measured according to human motion and is aimed at optimising workload. The height of a table surface or a chair is deliberately designed with the help of anthropometric data and with a specific human activity in mind.

However, we also know that these human factors do not suffice for the design of a product or an environment. In addition to its concrete qualities, material and technical function, an artefact embodies representational features, which are interpreted. In spite of this well-known fact and its importance, very little research has been done on the topic in design. Ergonomics does not include interpretative features in its scope; they are not dealt with at all. In ergonomics, human and environmental interaction is foremost looked upon as workload optimisation from both a physical and mental point of view. The artefact is planned and adjusted to the requirements of the human body and information processing, and planning is conceived as a one-way activity. Measures are taken towards artefacts. Feedback means correcting, as, for example, lowering the step, heightening the table

and seat, and the like. In simplifying the topic a bit one may say that the artefact is passive and its position is conceived as subordinated to human action.

However, the demands for concreteness and ergonomics function as good starting points for a design process. They also support, in my view, the interpretative act and analyses of reference relations (which can be conceptualised and discussed by means of semiotic theory).

### **Interpretation**

When the interpretative features of design are being studied, the person–object relationship does not, however, necessarily function only one-way. It does not even have to be one-sided (i.e. emphasising human action towards the artefact). The things can be conceived as more than passive responses to various activities and the relation between people and things as reciprocal or mutual. The relationship becomes more interactive by giving the artefact a bigger role. The affordance<sup>1</sup> of the artefact is an example of such an a more interactive role. The thing affords human action. One may ask what kind of action it affords and *how* it represents affordances. It affords bodily movements and positions, and, in addition, it provokes mental responses, produces impressions, represents and exhibits qualities. People adjust to these affordances.

And, furthermore, one may ask what feelings it arouses and what qualities are experienced with it, and so on. When feelings become involved in interpretation, the analysis includes appreciation and evaluation, and it enters the realm of aesthetics. Following Peirce's thinking, such feelings supersede the ken, the range of knowledge of the person (Houser, Kloesel 1992: 282). However, they cannot be avoided. Appreciation or disapproval plays its role as subjective ingredients in interpretation.

### **The role of things (as companions)**

The formulation and heading of this paper, 'Things as Companions', can be deduced from the approach and frame of the ideas presented, which aim at combining experiences with the product environment and the design process. It may be more beneficial, from the design point of view, to look at the thing as being more than just something to be focused on. Qualities of the built environment

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<sup>1</sup> A term used by James J. Gibson (1977, 1979).

and its artefacts could rather be studied as functioning in mutual cooperation, as companions to people, and, accordingly, design can focus more on how they affect persons and human behaviour. Under such circumstances the artefact takes on a more prominent role in analyses and planning than it would normally.

How the artefact affects action is an important question. What kind of action does it permit or restrict, and why? How do people function in a certain milieu created by artefacts? What qualities do they impose on the user? What kind of atmosphere does the room or place transmit?

In my earlier studies along these lines, only single artefacts have been studied, although they were placed in the context of use and history. The next step was to broaden the focus of study and apply the approach to a complexity of artefacts, an interior. An example of that study dealt with the Helsinki ice stadium built in 1966 (Vihma 1996: 95–109). The methodological outcome of the study was the fact that complexity increased the need for preparatory work and required several perspectives and good knowledge of the context of its use, the subculture of the game played there, the architectural trend during the era in which it was built, and so on. In this case knowledge about Finnish architecture and building, especially in the 1960s, and the cultural situation at that time (i.e., the enthusiasm for the sport) seemed crucial.<sup>2</sup> The researcher's familiarity with such contextual aspects is, in my view, a prerequisite for meaningful interpretation that can be shared with others.

This example did not yet conceive, however, the relationship between people and an artefact as companionship. The artefact afforded functions, but, in my analysis, it did not direct or restrict action clearly enough. The interpretation was still too user-centred, even though environmental qualities were also described in detail.

The next example aims at looking at a public space and artefacts with a new perspective. The starting point is an interior, its furniture and its composition of artefacts.

The artefacts in Figure 1 afford human functions; they direct but limit movement. Because nothing in this interior seems superfluous, it is clear how a person can and should act properly: take a few steps, put belongings in the cupboard,

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<sup>2</sup> The material, such as memos, records, press cuttings, and pictures gathered by the architect of the stadium, were very helpful, as was an interview with him about both the planning and the building.



Figure 1] Bedroom in Alvar Aalto's home and office (1936), Riihitie 20, Helsinki (photo by Sami Ruotsalainen, 2001).

switch on the light, turn, sit and lay down, and so on. The point is that the artefacts in the room seem to guide action completely and leave almost no choices. Actions have to be fully adjusted to the arrangement. Consequently, the intriguing question concerns the qualities of these artefacts and how they affect human actions, thoughts and feelings, *how* could the artefacts interact, and, thereafter, from a design point of view, in what way should their influence be changed, if needed.

### The waiting room

For this paper, the example of a waiting room has been chosen. Many kinds of waiting rooms have been designed for various purposes, for example, small corners in a corridor and large halls. The nature of waiting as an activity also varies according to what someone is waiting for (i.e., in an office, a department store, a movie theatre's lobby, a hotel, a bank, a health centre or a bus station). Furniture is often chosen to meet the basic requirements of the waiting function and the architecture. The two Figures (2; 3) illustrate exemplary designed interiors as waiting rooms especially from the interior architectural point of view.



Figure 2] The Bio Rex Movie Theatre lobby in Helsinki (1935), renovated in 1998 (photo by Laura Maanavilja, 2001).



Figure 3] Lobby of the Hotel Vaakuna in Helsinki (1939–1952), renovated in 1995–1997 (photo by Eerika Malkki, 1997).

However, I would argue that waiting rooms are for the most part created without a thought of the context of waiting as an action accompanied with artefacts. And, under such circumstances, artefacts actually acquire much power in the relationship between the persons situated in the waiting room and the artefacts placed in the room.

The design of waiting rooms is perhaps not as easy a task as one would believe at first. Perhaps they are not really designed at all, but instead, result from the routine thinking of what people should do while waiting (i.e., nothing). Very often the radio or television is on, even though no one cares to listen or watch. The lighting is also often too bright and too even. The offered selection of reading is very limited. Standard works of art or kitsch hang on the walls.

Watching children's actions in such places provides one with an idea of what

a waiting room could look like, because children generally behave unexpectedly, and they do not care, for example, about the regular order of things. They even begin to rearrange and test artefacts according to their needs of action. They want to do things in the room, while the artefacts seem to prevent their actions and force them into limited positions or require them to stand still.

Instead of being reductive, waiting rooms (and the equipment in them) could actually function as spaces for impulses for reflection – they could afford inspiration and amusement rather than direct behaviour into very limited movements and postures, passivity and dullness. The forceful discipline, control and stiffness created by furniture can influence human action in a broader sense, as well, by dominating the process of waiting and, for example, a whole visit or journey. The waiting room can increase mental workload.

#### **A waiting area in a bus station**

In Lahti, a small town about 100 kilometres north of Helsinki, the bus station is located near the commercial centre of the city (Fig. 4).



Figure 4] The main entrance of the Lahti bus station (photo by author, 1997).

In the middle of the room there is a composition of four benches arranged around a palm tree, which reminds me of a saloon from the 19th century (Fig. 5). This arrangement requires that people sit with their backs to each other (and the palm tree) and look at the empty space around them or at the walls



some distance away. Someone sitting on one of the benches feels that another person is sitting close behind him/her without actually belonging to the same conversation group. The situation creates conflicting elements of intimacy and strangeness and increases discomfort and tension. A waiting area for many kinds of travellers should include flexible furniture that can be arranged according to changing needs and could even be viewed as companions.

This waiting area is, as they often are, highly disciplined. It seems to impose all its qualities on the visitors: cold and drafty atmosphere, isolation from other people and information, discomfort with respect to luggage. It does not call forth enthusiasm or satisfaction, even though it is highly recognisable.



Figure 5] The waiting area in the Lahti bus station (photo by author, 1997).

In the waiting area of the Helsinki bus station, built in 1832 (for other purposes originally, bus station from 1935, and renovated in 1994), similar benches are used, but their arrangement in the room (and the room) transmits a very different atmosphere (Fig. 6). The impression resembles that of the street with people continually passing the seated visitors in a hurry. The layout of the room increases such indexical signs as noise from the doors and traces of weather conditions (dirt, mud, water or snow), which for their part, support iconic impressions of street life. Both the Helsinki and Lahti waiting areas include, among other things, kiosks, timetables and an entrance to a cafeteria. These details bring various symbols (replicas of symbols) into the room and add colour and liveliness to the gray and dull tones.





Figure 6] The waiting area in the Helsinki bus station (photo by Ina Manninen, 1999).

Nevertheless, from a maintenance viewpoint, the waiting area in Lahti may function well in a bus station building – as a practical interior. But, does it really have to represent the kind of order and discipline that it does, then forcing it on human action and interpretation? From a design point of view the room offers a challenging task to create a pleasant atmosphere and support the use of public transport. The chosen conceptual frame of reference seems to encourage initiatives to improve people’s functioning in a built environment, which is the aim of design.

## References

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## Asjad kui kaaslased: Peirce'ilik lähenemine urbanistlikule kohale Kokkuvõte

Artikli eesmärgiks on vaadelda representatsiooni omadusi, mida interpreteeritakse ehitatud keskkonna põhjal. Teoreetiliseks lähteks on valitud Charles S. Peirce'i (1839–1914) semiootiline filosoofia; vastavalt sellele on interpretatsiooni käsitletud (*reference relations*) osutussuhete analüüsi kaudu. Taoline lähenemine võimaldab uurida näiteks inimtegevuse konteksti ning keskkonna konkreetseid omadusi. Inimeste ja asjade analüüs peirce'ilikus võtmes võimaldab pidevat (*ad infinitum*) interpretatsiooni omaduste lõpliku formuleerimise asemel.

Käesoleva uurimuse teine lähte koht on disain (s.t objekte interpreteeritakse nende disaini vaatenurgast). Lisaks oma konkreetsetele omadustele, materiaalsele ja tehnilisele funktsioonile kehastab disainitud artefakt ka representatsioonilisi omadusi. Hoolimata sellest, et taoliste omaduste tõlgendamise võimalikkus on üldtuntud ning oluline fakt, on sellesuunalisi käsitlusi disaini valdkonnas napilt – näiteks ergonoomika-alastes uurimustes tõlgendusliku küljega ei tegelda.

Nagu pealkiri osutab, püüab käesolev käsitus eritleda ühelt poolt tootekeskonnaga ja teisalt disainiprotsessiga seotud inimkogemust. Disaini vaatepunktist võib osutada kasulikumaks käsitleda artefakti kui vastastikusel koostöös toimivat asja, mitte pelgalt kui passiivset objekti.

Näiteks on valitud ooteruum linnakeskkonnas. Ooteruumi loomisel ei mõeldaks sellest tavaliselt ootamise kui asjadega seotud tegevuse kohast. Seetõttu kipuvad asjad domineerima ooteruumis viibivate inimeste omavaheliste suhete üle, aga ka inimeste suhete üle nendesamade asjadega. Lahti bussijaama ooteruum on väga korrastatud koht. See allutab külastaja ruumi omadustele: külm ja

tõmbetuuline atmosfäär, eraldatus teistest inimestest ja informatsioonist, ebamugavused seoses pagasi paigutamisega. Praktilise interjööriina bussijaama hoones võib see ruum hästi toimida. Kuid kas ta peab esindama säärast korda ja kontrolli, mis surub end peale ka inimlikule tegevusele ja tõlgendustele? Selle asemel, et olla reduktiivne, võiksid ruum ja selles olevad esemed anda impulsse mõtetele – pakkuda inspiratsiooni ja meelelahutust. Disaini vaatepunktist pakub ooteruum väljakutse atmosfääri loomiseks, mis vähendaks vaimset pingutust ning ühtlasi oleks toeks ühistranspordi kasutamisele.