

Envisioning Architectural Narratives



Edited by
Danilo Di Mascio

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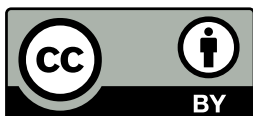
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Tropological Research in Envisioning Architectural Narratives

Introduction

This paper arises from a pedagogical experience based on the development of a methodology for research in the field of construction of research problems in architecture. The experience was addressed to students in the fifth and final year of the architecture career at the National University of La Matanza, in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The main objective was an introduction to the broad and complex field of academic research as a pre-thesis exercise.

The hypothesis that sustained the experience was to understand *tropology* as a tool for the figuration (Haraway, 1992; Braidotti, 2019) of epistemic and heuristic problems. The methodology used consisted in developing an apparatus that generates research problems from the recognition of a *topos* – a topic or epistemic commonplace belonging to the disciplinary field of the career – and its relationship with a *tropos* – a figuration–. On the one hand, the *topos* was chosen by each one of the students according to their socio-cultural problems and according to their specific living situations within the framework of architecture and urbanism. On the other hand, the *tropos* emerged from an exercise of figurative displacement that made it possible to account for the predicative rather than denominative potential of the *tropos*. From the semantic crossing between the *topos* and the *tropos*, the students constituted their own syntagm that also served as the future title and tagline of the research project. This syntagma had the characteristic of being a hybrid, a space of signification generated by the displacement of the topic towards the creation of the new place, of fictional character, which had to be narrated and described according to its own logic and which functioned as an inhabited threshold between the topic and the u-topic, a place that is installed beyond the topical, the tropical.

Topoi

Research often takes as its starting point one or more preconceptions, which we usually refer to as research assumptions. These assumptions exist in all fields of knowledge and at all academic levels, although most of the time they are not explicit, as Alvesson and Sandberg have shown (2011; 2014). In the case of students at their first experiences in the formulation of research projects, this is accentuated and we find that the vast majority of the topics of interest derive in commonplaces that function as tacit assumptions or explicit hypotheses.

Logically, these commonplaces cause the research and its results to have a high degree of obviousness and therefore lack of interest, even for the researchers themselves.

Our interest in working with commonplaces stems from this phenomenon, and from the need to generate displacements or estrangements that lead to new approaches and new questions:

In the “rhetorical machine” what is introduced at the beginning, barely emerging from native aphasia, are the raw fragments of reasoning, facts, a “theme”; what is found at the end is a complete, structured discourse, constructed entirely for persuasion. (Barthes, 1997, pp. 120-121, our translation)

A *topos* (from Greek τόπος, “place” from *topos koinós*, “common place”; plural, *topoi*, and in Latin *locus* from *locus communis*) refers, in the context of classical Greek rhetoric, to a systematized method of constructing or treating a theme or argument so that the speaker can win the support of his audience. The *topos* has gradually designated, by extension, all recurring themes, situations, circumstances or sources of the arts. In this regard, the semiotician Umberto Eco pointed out that the *topos* is prefixed, and therefore reflects a pre-existing order to the work. Thus, a *topos* turned into something banal and repetitive, becomes a commonplace in a broad sense, something close to a *cliché* or stereotype. Nevertheless, *topoi* are commonplaces, in all the polysemic breadth of the concept, cultural, social and linguistic constructions based on a certain consensus on certain propositions or linguistic constructs. *Topoi* are based on tacit agreements of a speaking community. These restrictions that language imposes on the construction of meaning are constantly learned and internalized, as a pre-established consensus, a condition of verisimilitude or presumption of what is possible, as a shared and socially legitimized premise. Language can be plausible because it has been produced in a group. Group discourse is the imaginary production of the group. The truth of the discourse and the reality of the group rest on the same support: consensus. Aristotle says we know that public opinion rests on clichés, on commonplaces. The plausible topic captures all the language (it is inscribed in the places where the consensus on which the conditions of truth rest is produced).

The topic, in its Aristotelian origin, is the part of rhetoric that contains the repertoire of ideas or arguments with which the speaker organizes her/his thought and also prepares to persuade his audience –rhetoric– or convince an opponent –dialectic–. It is a set of topics used to develop arguments –*ars inveniendi*–. Its purpose is to establish the contents of the discourse. The noun *inventio* (from the Latin *invenire*, which means “finding”) is used here because the speaker must find, in a prefixed repertoire of topics, those that are the most appropriate for his presentation. Following Aristotle, we can define the topic as the commonplace that ancient rhetoric turned into formulas or clichés fixed and admitted in formal or conceptual schemes frequently used by writers. Thus, the topic is a set of

commonplaces, *topoi* or *loci* i.e., ideas susceptible of being used in discourse.

The next theoretical framework for understanding *topoi* comes from the Theory of Argumentation within Language (TAL), as Oswald Ducrot called it. It has had a long development that originated in the 1970s. Jean-Claude Anscombe is the author who, for the longest time, worked with Ducrot in its elaboration. However, numerous scholars have been involved in the evolution, analysis and application of this linguistic theory. At present, Marion Carel is the main co-author in TAL.

According to Ducrot (1993) one can speak of argumentative analysis from a linguistic point of view, considering that the argumentative is an intrinsic characteristic of language, that the order of discourse is not rational, vague, imprecise, fragile, as *logos* is thought to be, but that it is a completely original order:

Our central hypothesis is that some sentences, at least, of a language possess an argumentative force or value (I have said “some” out of prudence; actually, I would like to say “all”, a fact that is not yet possible because I would have had to have constructed a broader concept of argumentation and to have introduced the notion of *topos*). (Oswald, 1995, p. 148, our translation)

Ducrot’s theoretical approach rests on the assumption that there are discursive sequences –the so-called chaining– whose articulation cannot be foreseen on the sole basis of the informative contents:

This implies that the interpretation (...) resorts to an implicit ideological principle. (...) These are ideological principles, shared by a more or less extensive linguistic community, which, although they serve for the arbitrary construction of ideological representations, are presented as if they were external to the speaker. (...) The *topos* constructs the argument/conclusion microsystem while enunciating the passage from one to the other. That is why it is presented as the elongation, the discursive expansion of a point of view, and not as the orderly evolution of a logical chain. (Anscombe, 1995, pp. 190-191)

Finally, the French semiotician Roland Barthes deals exactly with the meaning of the spatial metaphor to speak of those “empty forms” and “stereotypes” – clichés–, the commonplaces to which we resort to produce any discourse, clarifying that this meaning is not the one Aristotle gave to the concept. This stereotypical conception, of the *topos* as cliché, corresponds more to a sophistic and post-Aristotelian vision.

Like Barthes in his *This Semiotic Challenge* we can ask: what is a place? Aristotle wrote that is what in which a plurality of oratorical reasonings coincide. In the same perspective Port-Royal wrote that are certain general statements to which one can refer all the proofs one makes use of in the various matters one

deals with. But why place? Still following Aristotle, to remember things it is enough to remember the place in which they are found. In this regard, the place is the element of an association of ideas, of a conditioning, of a training, of a comparison. Places are, therefore, not the arguments per se but the compartments where they are arranged. Places are the toolboxes where anyone can go to take the matter of a discourse and arguments on all kinds of subjects. In scholastic logic they are compared to a label indicating the contents of a container (*pyxudum indices*). For Cicero the arguments, coming from the loci, present themselves to the cause which it corresponds to treat: like the letters for the words which it is necessary to write. The loci form, then, that very particular stock which constitutes the alphabet: a body of forms deprived of sense in themselves, but which concur in sense by selection, combination, actualization. In relation to the locus, what is topicality? It seems possible to distinguish three successive definitions continues Cicero. Topicality is, or has been: a method; a pigeonhole of empty forms; and a reservoir of filled forms.

It should also be clarified that we should not confuse the concept of *topos* with the well-known *argumentum ad populum*. While *topoi* are general and shared by the totality of the interlocutors, *argumentum ad populum* is a sophism that consists of adducing the supposedly generalized opinion that people have about something, instead of the argument itself.

Tropoi

As we have seen, *topoi* are the commonplaces of signification as characterized by the rhetorical tradition. They constitute privileged sites of dispute and creation, of struggle and discursive transformation. According to Donna Haraway (1992) *topoi* are also always, and at the same time, *tropoi*, that is, discursive figurations, tropes. Figuration is understood as the operation of the production of meaning that makes of the world that which language figures. In this sense, figuration implies dissolving the stagnations and ideologies that consolidate the relationship between form and content by making visible that there is no content independent of the form that figures it.

Understanding signification as a relationship between a form and a content by means of an operation of figuration, allows, affirmatively, to think in terms of a performativity of knowledge with which it is possible to denaturalize the epistemic relations incorporated and narcotised by use. It is thus a matter of playing an active role in the epistemic search in action, of occupying a place that escapes from the familiarity of the possible networks of signification in order to observe them from a significant distance and thus discover the codes of ordering and subway figuration. In the *Preface* to his work *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1989) Michel Foucault states that:

[It is necessary to find a] *common locus*, like the umbrella and the sewing-machine on the operating table; startling though their propinquity may be, it

is nevertheless warranted by that *and*, by that *in*, by that *on* whose solidity provides proof of the possibility of juxtaposition. (...) On what ‘table’, according to what grid of identities, similitudes, analogies, have we become accustomed to sort out so many different and similar things? What is this coherence – which, as is immediately apparent, is neither determined by an a priori and necessary concatenation, nor imposed on us by immediately perceptible contents? (Foucault, 1989, pp. xvii-xviii)

Language, our access to the world, can function as that dissecting table where we find the possibility of naming the part, the figure, the trope, and thus fictionalize the presentation of the whole, of the topic. This means that, strictly speaking, there is no discursive possibility that limits figuration; rather, the construction of the real always arises from a performative operation, a figuration that replaces a logic of the true and the false with one of the plausible. The plausible makes, figuratively, the real; and the rhetorical figures known as synecdoche, metonymy and metaphor are three turns that make our languages, that is, three of the possible tropes on which language can semantically turn and transform itself.

The concept of trope, derived from the Greek *tropos* meaning “turn”, makes visible the transformations that are incorporated in the rhetoric of everyday life and its consequences in social and cultural interaction. The *tropos* is a semantic turn that allows that the meaning, even of those words –and here we can add those images– that seem to have died of literalism, can always be activated to become a tool of transformation. Words and images can, as tropes, take a position with respect to what they represent and semantically turn around themselves in order to avoid the univocity of the referential experience of the commonplace. Far from enabling a mechanistic conception between the conditions of production and the product that has become, it is rather a question of moving on to a denaturalization of these relations, in the sense of recognizing a turn in the nature of the link between these elements. In order to do so, we must leave behind or, rather, illuminate the decline of rhetoric recognized by Paul Ricoeur (1975) –based on Gerard Genette’s reflections on tropology– with respect to an imposition of the determinative function over the predicative function of signification.

Ricoeur distinguishes between the features of a signification in comparison, as a determinative function, and a metaphorical signification, as a predicative, performative function. In this latter sense, it makes the plausible:

connection between metaphor and simile – in which metaphor is the more important of the two only because it contains, in summary form, the attribution (Achilles is a lion) that simile spells out as if in a logical argument (Achilles is like a lion). The difference between metaphor and comparison or simile, therefore, is the difference between two forms of predication: ‘to be’ and ‘to be like.’ This is why metaphor is the more powerful: the direct attribution causes surprise, whereas simile dissipates this surprise. At the same time,

the operation that consists in giving one thing's name to another reveals how closely related it is to the predicative operation. (Ricoeur, 1975, p. 55)

Tropoi construct a predicative space rather than a substitutive space in signification. This space of tensions, of transformations, can perform in the field of a research problem for the understanding of a concrete topic and the consequent search in another epistemic figuration to derive that meaning. The logic of the trope is, first of all, that of a meaningful predication that performs a connection between the object and the predicate and, moreover, comprises the consequences of this performance.

Tropology, from this perspective, is not a kind of universalizing research but activates the dynamic role of the particular tropes at stake by anchoring itself in the fieldwork in the specific research situation. If the interweaving of a *topos* with a *tropos* in relation to a research problem reveals a certain kinship with predicative operations, these operations will emerge from a link of resemblance, passing from a “being like” to a “being”. It is thus a predicative operation that is pragmatic, the performance of a concrete and incisive research experience arising from the surprising and direct attribution of the *tropos* to the *topos*: resembling an enigma, topological figuration in a research problem claims more a theory of tension than a theory of substitution.

Results

In this section concerning the analysis of results, we will take the work of two students who represent the full use of the methodology and the intermediate mode, where the topological displacement is not completed. Each of these two positions represents approximately 50% of the total number of exercises. These students, whom we will call student 1 and student 2, started their research project from a *topos* that moved them personally: public transportation in one case and sustainability as a problem of architectural practice. student 1 related the *topos*, public transportation, to the trope of the modernization of human behaviour and its relation to the modernization of animal behaviour; while student 2 worked on the *topos* of sustainability with the figuration of an ailing architecture.



Fig. 01 and Fig. 02. student 1's topos and tropes.

Source: student 1 production for the course.



"Insinúa que (el arnitorrinco) no está hecho de pedazos de otros animales, sino que los demás animales han sido hechos con pedazos suyos"
 (Eco, 1997, p. 12)

*¿Cómo nos cambiamos a este nuevo tipo?
 Partamos de un antecedente que nos ayudó a construir su imagen: el arnitorrinco. La palabra arnitorrinco está conformado por la palabra griega ὄρνις, que significa ornis / pájaro y la palabra ρομφος, cuya traducción es rhinchos y significa pico. Se refiere de este modo a un mamífero que tiene un pico similar al de los patos.*

*Ahora bien, ¿por cuáles palabras está conformado nuestro tipo?
 Primeramente, la cualidad que más se destaca en nuestro nuevo personaje es que pertenece ámbito del transporte público: por ello, podemos considerar las palabras motus (mover), ferre (llevar, producir) o bien trans (trasladar). Por otro lado, nuestro tipo está conformado por tres figuras, formica (hormigas), rattus (ratas) y vacca o waka (vacas), que se agrupan en el reino de los animales o de los alis según su etimología en Latín. Las posibilidades lingüísticas para nombrar este tipo son varias, pero el desafío reside en encontrar aquel sintagma que pueda nombrarlo.*

Podríamos pensar en "formirawaka" pero estaríamos excluyendo los verbos que dotan de sentido a las acciones que realiza nuestro tipo. Motusalisformirawaka sería algo así como animal que se mueve y que es rata, vaca y hormiga. Pero sería aún más complicado de recordar que la palabra arnitorrinco la primera vez que nos topamos con ella. Por ende, acortar el sintagma a "Motusalis" nos podría liberar de las figuras animales que le dio sentido al tipo, despojándolo de imágenes reconocidas como son la rata, la vaca y la hormiga para solamente focalizar en el verbo y la categoría que lo engloba: es un animal (alis) que se mueve (motus).

*¿Por qué nuestro tipo es distinto a los demás animales que también se mueven?
 Una posible respuesta es que nace de la sensación de viajar en tren y subte, tal fue el indicio proyectual que derivó en este ensayo. Entonces, de la misma forma que el biólogo que nombró al arnitorrinco no pudo desligar de su nombre la figura de su pico, no se puede negar su naturaleza férrea. "Motusferralis" podría ser un nombre digno para esta nueva criatura del tipo cognitivo que a lo largo de todo el ensayo se buscó alcanzar y que podrá llegar a empatizar con las personas que también se sienten arnitorrinco a motusferralis al final de sus días.*

Fig. 03. The performative fiction of student 1's topos.

Source: student 1 production for the course.

In the case of student 1's proposal (Fig. 01 and Fig. 02) we can observe how the installation of the *topos*, the predicative operation, its semantic twist, entails the construction of a figuration capable of performing a series of narrative fictionalizations. Thus, the student arrived at the design of three types of public transport users based on interpretative habits and hybrid figurations between the human animal and the non-human animal: cows as the passengers who travel by train from the peripheries to the urban centre of Buenos Aires; ants who use with convenience all means of surface transport in the city of Buenos Aires; and, finally, rats as the passengers who use the subway services. Finally, it should be noted that the displacement of the topic towards the u-topic led the student to the construction of a fictional user type with both linguistic research for the nomenclature of the new prototype based on the characteristics associated with the experience in public transportation (Fig. 03).

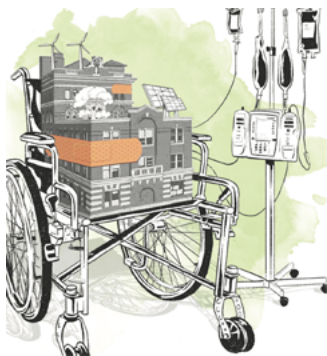


Fig. 04 and Fig. 05. student 1's topos and tropos.

Source: student 1 production for the course.

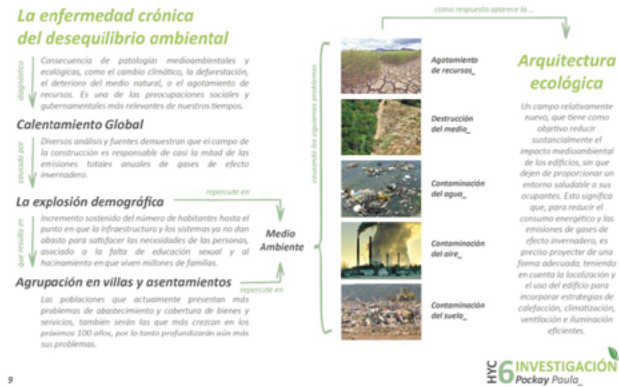


Fig. 06. The performative fiction of student 2's topos.

Source: student 2 production for the course.

In the second case, student 2 was not able to turn the trope completely and remained more in an operation of similarity where the fictional character is narcotized by the analogies and the consolidated figurations both in the figurative dimension (Fig. 04 and Fig. 05) and in the research proposal (Fig. 06). As mentioned above, this type of result constitutes approximately 50% of the cases. We understand that this difficulty for the tropological displacement is due to several factors, among which are the strength of the *tropei* consolidated as *topoi* by the current cultural hegemony, as well as a certain propensity to not take risks and to work from “the correct” in the university environment –which refers to the previous point–, and obviously the need to optimize the methodology to unlock the automatism and to know how to detect the *topoi* condition of some second-order *tropei*.

Conclusion and final discussion

The tropological construction of the research object opens the figurative potentiality of the research field for the construction of a fictional space. This space is tensive rather than substitutive since the interweaving of a *topos* with a *tropos* in relation to a research problem reveals a certain kinship with predicative operations, operations based not so much on the terms of a resemblance, of a “being like”. This predicative operation is pragmatic, performance of a concrete and incisive research experience since the direct attribution of the *tropos* to the *topos* creates a surprise: resembling an enigma, figuration claims more a theory of tension than a theory of substitution. Once the syntagm has been obtained, the writing and graphic languages have served as a support for the arguments of the research problem, propitiating the emergence of counter-intuitive hypotheses. Thanks to an analysis of the tensional dimensions between the chosen research problem and the figures –dimensions such as scale, ordering and distance of analysis, among others– the students were able to have a concrete research experience that covered both heuristic and epistemic issues.

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