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# Noyori Conference Hall

## A Semiotician's View

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I have had the honour and pleasure of being a resident in the Noyori Conference Hall during January and February 2008. I was appointed as a Research Visitor for the Global COE Project in the School of Letters, gave a number of lectures on linguistics and semiotics, and took part in a conference held in the School (Feb. 9–10) on “Identity in Text Interpretation and Everyday Life”.

As a semiotician, or student of signs, I base my study of the visual texts of painting, architecture and sculpture on the Systemic-Functional linguistic model designed by M.A.K. Halliday which proposes that discourse in language, our primary human communication code, always fulfils three functions simultaneously: Experiential, Interpersonal and Textual.

- ❖ The Experiential function encodes in words and grammatical structures the content of what we mean to say or write: it reflects our experience of the real world around us (people, objects, processes and abstractions).
- ❖ The Interpersonal function encodes the nature of the relationship between speaker and hearer, or writer and reader. Through the choice of expressive words and of types of utterance (a statement, a question, a command, an exclamation), it reflects the often shifting power relations between interlocutors and the fact that all our utterances are dialogic, designed with a particular audience in mind. This is as true of public notices, newspaper articles and even novels as it is of face-to-face conversation.
- ❖ The Textual function enables us to construct coherent and contextually appropriate texts. By choosing initial position in a sentence (in English), or the Japanese particle *wa*, we indicate our “theme” (what we are going to talk about) and then we link words and clauses and sentences with cohesive words like conjunctions (*and, but, which, although*) and strings of nouns, verbs and adjectives which belong to similar fields of meaning.

In my book *The Language of Displayed Art* (London: Pinter Press, 1994) I tried to demonstrate that the visual arts of painting, sculpture and architecture also

communicate their meaning through comparable three functions.

- ❖ In architecture the Experiential function embodies the practical uses for which a building is designed: as a home, a school, a place of worship, an office block, or a conference hall. This includes its overall design, but also the designation of particular rooms and spaces, and even the practical furnishing and equipment of each room. Also such practical matters as the provision of light, heating, water and waste disposal.
- ❖ The Interpersonal function embodies the “face” (including the façade) that the building presents to a visitor and to the world and also the power relationships of rank and status among its users.
- ❖ The Textual function gives the building cohesion visually in its design and practically in its connectivities (halls, stairs, passageways, doorways) and reflects how it fits into its context (of neighbouring buildings, city areas, natural surroundings).

The designer of a building has to think first and foremost about its practical functions, what it is going to be used for. However, I will not start with the Experiential function of the Noyori Conference Hall, because since Le Corbusier made the slogan “Functionalism” fashionable in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century too much architectural commentary has focussed on a building’s display of its practical functions and has tended to take for granted the simpler issues of how it impacts Interpersonally on the viewer and how it constitutes a coherent visual “Text” fitting into a locational context.



Plate 1. Noyori Conference Hall and Residents' Entrance

Interpersonally, the Hall presents an exciting yet gentle façade to the world. Its gently curving glass walls invite one into its core, the white conference auditorium, suspended like the yolk of an egg inside a glass shell. However, the academic residents are obliged to negotiate the locked steel door, vertical liftshaft or external stairs to the

walkway bridge two floors up—where there are two more heavy steel doors to open before you get “home” to the rooftop patio around which the residents’ apartments are arranged:



Plate 2. The Residents’ Rooftop Patio and Apartments

If the heavily protected main entry for residents resembles a mediaeval castle—with CCTV door control and elevator in place of a drawbridge, and high walkway for a moat—the welcome one gets once one is on the patio (“battlements”?) is much friendlier. The apartments are faced with wood panelling and the large doors and windows allow for plenty of light and visitors. Inside, the wood panelling continues on the walls, and the floors, apart from the carpeted bedroom, are fine wood planking (Textual function). Three small spaces open off the high and spacious sitting-room: a cloakroom, a kitchen and a study, all well equipped with the latest aids to cooking, washing and academic creativity (Experiential function).



Plates 3, 4. Apartment lounge and kitchen

On the way upstairs (in the larger family apartments) to the spacious bedroom and bathroom we find what we might call a “signature” feature of the Noyori Hall:



Plate 5. Apartment stairs

Interpersonally, the softness and comfort of the wood panelling and furnishings is challenged by an industrial steel stair (albeit rubber-coated for sound damping) and a steel X-brace, complete with screw-ends, to tension the glass wall panel behind the blind.

This foregrounding of the technological structures underpinning the non-technical Experiential functions of the Noyori Hall is one of its most challenging, yet satisfying, Interpersonal dominants. It is architecturally in the tradition established by Richard Rogers, the British architect, who startled the world in the 1970s by designing the Pompidou Centre in Paris with all the technical functions (such

Experiential services as stairs, escalators, lifts, heating and plumbing ducts) on the outside, exposed to view, rather than concealed in walls and internal cavities. Thus, the purely Experiential becomes Interpersonal (a feature of the building's façade, or self-display) and Textual (part of the geometric patterning of both the outside and inside walls, which, being for the most part glass, enhance this functional paradox even more). Rogers continued this experiment with his Lloyds' Insurance Building in the City of London and has had many imitators all over the world.

This foregrounding of an Experiential technical feature as an element of the Interpersonal self-presentation and Textual geometry of the building is most interestingly incorporated into the main façade of the Noyori Conference Hall:



Plate 6. Noyori Façade: the Glass Shell

Large areas of glass forming walls require to be braced, so the architects of Noyori have made a virtue of necessity and turned the adjustable steel bracing into a delightful Textual rhythm and a piece of Interpersonal identity assertion. And while the bracing necessarily consists of straight steel struts, it sets up an elegant contrast with the curve of the building's overall shape, which is accentuated by the long curving row of doors at ground-level and the parallel curve of the balcony which surrounds the apartments two floors higher up (Plate 6). The Noyori Conference Hall shows up on the Nagoya University campus map as the only oval building on a campus dominated by rectilinear office and laboratory blocks, and the Conference Hall's nearest neighbour, the Noyori Materials Science Building is equally square-cut (though more distinguished architecturally than many of the other academic buildings in the vicinity):



Plate 7. The Noyori Material Sciences Building

I have not intended to suggest that the architects of the Noyori Conference Hall were slavishly following a recent architectural fad in foregrounding the technical functions of its structure in its façade and texture. On the contrary, the building was conceived as a tribute to Nagoya's famous winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, himself dedicated to the revelation of hidden structures. Moreover, the Hall is an unashamedly "prestige" building, representing the progressive aspirations of a prestigious and internationally recognized university. And the function of the building, after all, is to attract, gather together and house intellectuals from all over the world who are committed to exploring and communicating the hidden structures of our material and social lives (including semiotic ones!)



Plate 8. Façade and Entrance

To return once more to the Interpersonal functions of this venue for conferences, a view of the “front” of the Hall shows its main entrance off-set on the right of the curved façade, welcoming its conference delegates with wide-sliding automatic doors. (This section also forms a visual transition from the white stuccoed conference auditorium inside to the vertical lines of the dark raw concrete lift-shaft, stairs and notice-board to the right.) The central section of the façade at ground level consists of a continuous row of ten double doors tightly shut now (in February), but available to be opened so that conference participants can spill out from the café into the sunshine on the patio in front. The building’s Interpersonal “reception” functions are deliberately split. On the one hand, there is the permanent Reception Desk for the Hall’s management, which is recessed and almost hidden behind the main staircase:



Plate 9. Main Staircase and Reception

(Here we will again note the “industrial” look of the suspended steel staircase, which seems to belong in one of the plants of the Toyota car factory, but which performs its Textual function as a connector between sections of the Hall with an appropriate structural honesty.)

The other reception function is pushed to the front of the foyer area, near the main doors, where conference organisers can set up tables for signing in participants, distributing conference satchels and papers, and keeping people informed (Plate 10). This area also adjoins the café, which is a permanent feature of the Hall, just behind the opening doors to the patio, where delegates can meet informally to plan their programs and discuss the burning issues of their discipline (Plate 11).



Plates 10, 11. Conference Reception Area and Café

Now, do I have any criticisms of this building, which I admire very much and have enjoyed using? I have not been trained as an architect and use a semiotic model which may not appeal to all readers—or even all semioticians! I think the Noyori Conference Hall “works” splendidly in the Interpersonal function. The image it projects of its own uses and of its role in the University are both exciting and satisfying. Its transfer of functions from the Experiential to the Interpersonal and Textual, which I have discussed earlier, is both appropriate and elegant. My two modest criticisms relate to one Textual aspect and one Experiential aspect.

A shot of the skyline of the building reveals a very uneven, almost “serrated” upper edge. I likened this to “battlements” in my comparison of the Hall to a castle. Now, the roof shape has no ill effects on the spaces inside the apartments, which are well-proportioned for the double and single bedrooms shown in the photograph. Moreover, a very great many Japanese office blocks, hotels and department stores have “excrecences” above their roof-line for elevator and air-conditioning machinery. And that great creator of architectural tendencies, Le Corbusier, made *sculptures* of his roof structures in his Unite d’Habitation in Marseilles and elsewhere, so why does this skyline bother me? I just find the visual conflict between the smooth curve of the body of the building and the “gap-toothed” irregularity of the outline against the sky unharmonious. But then, I’m not Japanese; my preference for classical European

building outlines is probably old-fashioned; and visitors who are given such wonderful accommodation ought to be more polite!



Plate 12. The Noyori Skyline

My criticism of one aspect of the Experiential function may be harder to dismiss. Yes, this is a prestige building, with grand pretensions, and it does the University and Professor Noyori credit. But in a climate like that of Nagoya, with winter temperatures near zero and summer temperatures in the upper thirties (and humid), a glass-encased space three-stories high must cost a fortune to heat and air-condition.

Tactless of me to mention that, but then, I'm Australian...

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