

The Spanglish Turn: The Production of Architectural Hybridities in Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT: The relevance of contemporary architectural design is intrinsically dependent upon it's being in-step with the aesthetic and spatial sensibilities of its time. Within Southern California, one of the most dramatic contemporary influences on aesthetic and spatial sensibilities is that of Latinization, in particular, Mexican/Chicano cultural practices. This research speculates on the emergence of an architectural hybridity autochthonous to Los Angeles informed by a theoretical framework termed the Spanglish Turn. The development of this framework begins with an analysis of visual arts, and material and popular culture in Los Angeles. Drawing upon a theory of language called systemic functional linguistic theory (or functional grammar), we adapt this system of analysis to work as a translating system to an architectural context. This strategy aims to 'stretch' the relationship between architecture and specific forms of popular and material culture by speculating on the behavior informing them. Then guided by a formulation of this emergent spatial logic, it looks for tangential inroads and alternative patterns to begin to articulate a new 'grammar of translation' for LA's popular and visual culture into the realm of architecture.

Keywords: Los Angeles, Hybridity, Immigration, Chicano/Popular Culture, Linguistics, Visual Art

INTRODUCTION

This research is about the production of Hybrid Architectures in contemporary Los Angeles as analyzed by the Spanglish Turn theoretical framework. It looks at the production of Architecture through the lens of cultural hybridity as manifested in visual arts, and popular and material culture. This theoretical framework uses a linguistic theory named systemic functional linguistic theory or 'functional grammar' as a translating system of culture and proposes a new architectural lexicon for the production of alternative architectures within the context of contemporary Los Angeles.

Today, in Los Angeles new emergent cultural hybridities are being created. These hybridities find innovative expressions in the visual arts, popular and material culture, contemporary urban practices, and architecture. The theoretical framework to situate and analyze these spatial and formal transformations is defined as the Spanglish Turn. The Spanglish Turn in Los Angeles is made up of parallel traditions, materials, scales, and visions, which coexist and co-mingle to create new urban and architectural forms. The Spanglish Turn is informed by the cultural connection between Los Angeles and Mexico City, a connection that has been intensified in the last few decades. This historical connection between people, beliefs, customs, and objects has facilitated the strong cultural flow between the two cities, joining the Latinization process occurring in Los Angeles and other major US cities. As such, the relationship between these two major cities has matured, establishing the high speed and dynamic cultural corridor where interchange and hybridity are second nature to a continually transitioning and emergent urban population.

1.0. Cultural Hybridity

In broad terms, this research centers on the study of culture, specifically it focusses its attention on cultural hybridity and its insertion into contemporary architectural discourse. Cultural hybridity has existed for very long time, and it is now seen as the main cultural symptom of our current globalized world. In Los Angeles, this cultural mixing is the result of particular and unique dynamics that has at its center Latino/Mexican culture. In Los Angeles, new sensibilities and mental cartographies are the reprogrammed "code," establishing the unique and emergent hybrid culture influencing the creative practices in LA, including current and future architecture in the city. Hybridity can happen and alter all different dimensions of culture: High and Low, Mainstream and Marginal, and Universal and Particular.

As the Latinization of the U.S. population continues, cultural hybridization will play an increasingly central role in the creation of space, architecture, aesthetics, and identity. In addition, the nuances of cultural context and the particularities of physical circumstances inform cultural mixing processes. Within the Spanglish Turn framework, hybridity is autochthonous to Los Angeles, closely tying recent Mexican immigration to this process of cultural mixing. As broader cultural processes in contemporary Los Angeles rapidly intertwine with other

Latino, Asian and other immigrant cultural dynamics, hybridity is rapidly becoming the force forging the future of the city.

In Los Angeles, cultural mixing occurs at different scales and intensities. The large scale of demographics and the landscape itself influences these dynamics. For instance, there is deep mixing that results in the creation of new and more enduring forms, and superficial and transitional mixing also occurs in the city, as well the various degrees of mixing between these two poles. Today mixing, from "light" mixing to the creation of enduring, more Creole-like cultural forms exist side-by-side and in various configurations across the city. Among these are also those forms that resist any mixing at all.

1.1. Three major cultural flows

Los Angeles is the place where an emergent hybrid culture is being forged. This cultural and spatial transformation is what I define as the Spanglish Turn. There are three major cultural flows that inform the Spanglish Turn: The Historical Progressive California ethos, the existing Mexican-American or Chicano culture, and Mexican/Latino Immigrant diaspora. These three dimensions work in a trialectical fashion and offer the capacity to produce new and innovative cultural hybrids that are essential for understanding and defining the spatial and formal expressions of contemporary Los Angeles. This set of three cultural flows aim to form the basis of a theoretical coordinates for the Spanglish Turn.

1.1.1. Historic California Progressive Culture

The historic progressive culture of California and Los Angeles and the variations of its geography, promoted acceptance of newness, difference, and innovation. This ethos of accepting newness and difference, and actually defining itself by these vary characteristics, is a big part of why the creation of so many hybridities has occurred on the scale that it has, and why this city is, at heart hybrid and more adaptive than many other metropolises.

In much of the twentieth-century in California, there was a non-rigidity in the cultural norms and practices that allowed for greater artistic and political experimentation. In California, artists, architects, and other creative practitioners participated in the 'place making' process; in their work, they were forming identity out of the surrounding spaces. In short, they were creating place out of space.

This was made possible also because of the fact that California is a frontier-type location and also contains the large metropolises of San Francisco and Los Angeles. These types of locations are particularly susceptible to change due to the fact that as frontiers, there exists within them a type of intersection between cultures, an 'interculture', so to speak.

As a major metropolis, Los Angeles has been home to large numbers of immigrants who push forward the development of cultural creolization, the development of new cultures that contain elements of existing cultures, together making one culture that is richer and more complex than the originals. In these situations, it is also frequently easier for people to accept newness, because they can easily take bits and pieces of what they like from other cultures without having to have any agreement about the meaning of what has been exchanged. Working misunderstandings then become a main ingredient in the creation of new, hybrid cultural forms.

1.1.2. Mexican-American or Chicana/o Culture

Another major influential cultural flow of the Spanglish Turn is the Mexican-American or Chicano culture in California. Chicano culture is a hybrid culture, a mix of Mexican and American traditions, customs and sensibilities. Chicano culture is based in an open cultural system that allows for absorption and incorporation of other cultural practices that it finds necessary for its own benefit. Since its beginning of its founding, Los Angeles has been influenced by Chicano or Mexican-American culture, this is evident in the name of streets, and neighborhoods, in popular music, food, lowrider culture, as well as in local politics, as demonstrated in 2005 when Antonio Villaraigosa became the first Mexican American mayor of the city of Los Angeles since its founding.

1.1.3. Latina/o and Mexican Immigrant Cultures

The third cultural flow is the current Mexican and Latino immigrant culture. Mexican immigrant cultures bring with them fresh formal and aesthetic sensibilities that tend to mix with existing ones creating new sensibilities that result in novel hybrid forms and aesthetics. They bring with them traditions and customs that are transforming the urban spaces of Los Angeles, affecting the dynamics of private and public space usage. One distinct tradition that has slipped into the Los Angeles urban dynamics is the use of public space. In Mexico City the distinction between private and public space is consistently blurred. It is in the public spaces that one can see an expression of a contemporary sensibility based on temporality, informality, adaptability, and

performativity. This state of continuous unpredictability includes a strategic disregard for potential disaster on the one hand, and a disinvestment in the notion of permanence on the other. This has led to a perspective that has greater investment in acts and aesthetic forms that are short lived, spectacular, exuberant, and fantastic. This hybrid sensibility has slipped into Los Angeles and is rapidly transforming its spatial dynamics, as is evidenced in today's urban physiognomy. These three separate cultural flows converge at different degrees of intensity to form the conceptual triad that form the core of the Spanglish Turn theory.

2.1. Visual Art and The Spanglish Turn

This research also looked at how the Spanglish Turn principles are manifested at the scale of individual perceptions and at the scale of cultural community. The individual perceptions were analyzed through the work of three visual artists: Ruben Ortiz-Torres, Salomon Huerta y Refugio Posadas. Their works shows the effects of cultural hybridity in the development of new forms and aesthetic principles. Collectively, the work of these three visual artists provide a formal analysis through examples of "paring down" or "stripping away" to get at the essentials of line, color, form, and movement, as well as the opposite, the display of the ornate, decorative and baroque. These trends exist separately and in juxtaposed proximity, creating tension, excitement and unease. The two trends are conflicting and complementary, relating to the different charged forces within the Spanglish Turn.

2.1.1. Case Study # 1: Ruben Ortiz Torres

In the work of Ortiz-Torres cultural and physical context are essential. Hybridity and customization are two concepts that are central to his artistic practice. In his work, hybridity is characterized as a 'trickled up' cultural phenomena. Based on multiple factions that come in constant (and intense) contact by their proximity, they have produced cultural forms that tend to be radical, malleable, wild, and bold. Another concept significant in his work is that of playfulness. For Ortiz Torres the qualities of playfulness, style and delight are paramount to his artistic practice and aesthetic approach. Playfulness in Ortiz-Torres's work serves a dual purpose: to disarm the viewer by making him or her laugh or experience humor, and then provoke a subtle form of critique on the conventions and relationships between "high culture," cultural identity, Chicano culture, and cultural representations.

2.2. Material and Popular Culture and The Spanglish Turn

The analysis of the effect of cultural hybridity at the cultural scale of the group community is discerned through a close analysis of popular culture (Day of the Death) and material culture (Lowriders and Taco Trucks). These community expressions show us how hybrid forms are configured as a result of collective actions, also they demonstrate how cultural hybridity is a process that works well in the interstices of the public and the private spheres and challenges traditional notions of what constitute private and public space. The rhythms of these popular cultural processes have similar qualities in the careful slowness of their preparation and the culmination of their efforts in a spectacular short-lived performance. In this sense, ritual, aesthetics, and meaning become interwoven. Through this mechanism, rituals provide an emotional groundedness for both individuals and social groups, complicating the relationship between culture/creativity and the forces of commodification, providing a necessary antidote to the forces of depersonalization.

2.2.1. Case Study # 4: Lowriders

Lowriders hold tremendous potential for the field of architecture in terms of both aesthetics and design principles. Lowriders are unique objects that express cultural value, but at the center of its value system is the aesthetic dimension. Form and performance are the two most important values in lowriders. Form is essential to the signification of the object; form rules the object, and it is through the sophistication of the formal aesthetic qualities that a lowrider obtains its value. Line, color, and painting special effects all combine to form a distinct object charged with aesthetic ingenuity an affective exuberance. It is in the surface of the object that lowriders most directly express their distinct sense of aesthetics and style. This hybrid neo-baroque aesthetics, that combine high and low notions of art, craft and art per se, decoration and ornamentation and design, are the product of long elaborated process of meticulous customization that has developed over many decades. Other important characteristics of lowriders are those of humor and pleasure. In the Chicano community, humor plays a major part in the community's character and culture. Chicano material culture, such in the case of lowriders, is charged with emotive and affective qualities that reveal a sense of belonging and pleasure.

3.0. Functional Linguistics of the Spanglish Turn in Architecture

In addition to conducting the case studies (visual arts, and popular and material culture), the Spanglish Turn is uncovered through conducting a spatial analysis. This spatial analysis has two parts:

1) consideration of the city's *Metafunctions* of space, and 2) the city's *Charged Fields*.

Drawing upon a theory of language called systemic functional linguistic theory (or functional grammar), we adapt this system of analysis to work within an architectural context.¹ This theory asserts that form and meaning are interwoven, or in this case, form and spatial affect. In other words, there is no affect without the structure to create it. We use this system to provide the system of analysis for Spanglish spaces and to measure degrees of Chicano and Latino/Mexican immigrant aesthetic influence upon architectural structures and spaces of the city. Functional grammar posits that all language is realized in a social context. The success of any lexical or organizational choice relates to its appropriateness for that given context—formal or informal, written or spoken. Within this framework, spoken language is viewed as a distinct mode of language that utilizes three components: one, the shared experience of participants—the manner in which gesture, prosody, and tone reference aspects of a shared environment; two, social interactiveness—the frequent back and forth exchange and the switching of roles between speaker and listener; and three, the complex “chaining” of specific ideas and linking between parts of a larger discourse. Analyzing architecture as a type of verbal exchange opens up many possibilities for the study of architecture and urbanism. From this perspective, we may view Los Angeles as a type of informal and dialogical verbal exchange, operating as a highly performative, dramatic, and ever changing temporal network, a type of free-style gossip so to speak. Architectural theorist, Robert Somol notes that the structure of gossip is the best format for guiding speculative architectural design.²

The application of this theory is like a lens where one can view the particularities of material culture, urban space and architecture. It is aimed at moving fast through the myriad of spoken words and spaces that make up the city. It focuses on explicit characterizations of space and form, inseparable from affect and architectural characteristics. More specifically, it sorts forms and processes by function, design, and affect, giving special attention to context to determine the significance of architectural characteristics.

This is a process-oriented approach based on studying fluid and informal interactions within specific conditions. It is intended to respond to constantly changing dynamics. This research utilizes an expanded definition of the term, *text*. Originating from Hypertext or Stretchtext, *text* is defined as an image, symbol, sound or movement. The flexibility of the term engenders complex plots or stories to be read from spatial or formal narratives. A text can be anything that has a “readable” organizational structure and is internally linked.³

3.1. Metafunctions of Space: Situatedness, Organization, and Elements

As mentioned above, this theory uses three Metafunctions, which are attributes of performance, object, and structure. They are referred to respectively as Situatedness, Organization, and Elements. Situatedness relates to the theatricality of space or object, sensibilities, and the relationship between intention, the experience of space/object, and behavior within that space. It is also attuned to the tone or level of formality in urban contexts such as the ambiance of a building, space, object or process. The concept of Organization refers to the nature of the placement, proximity, and size of various spatial elements within a given environment. It is also concerned with the manner in which elements are linked, such as the organization of space and an architectural program. The Metafunction of Elements refers to the basic concepts of line, color, movement and form. It also defines the architectural elements of space, from surface, volume, and boundaries, to openings, passageways, and interruptions over time.

3.2. Charged Fields of Place: Adulteration-Densification, Acceleration-Deceleration, and Aggression-Sedation.

In addition to the three categories listed above which are attributes of form, this analytical framework also contains sets of actions which define the nature of creative oppositional forces as they enact upon physical forms. These oppositional forces can be seen as ‘Charged Fields’, that is, spatial manifestations of the imagination arisen out of collective systems formed at the local level. These are the result of emergent systems that have come to dominate the look and feel of the landscape. They are “charged” in that they act as manifesting actions that express aesthetic and spatial sensibilities in customized ways and influence the manifestations of spatial Situatedness, Elements, and Organization.

The connected oppositional forces that constitute the Charged Fields are: 1) Adulteration – Densification, 2) Acceleration – Deceleration, and 3) Aggression – Sedation. Specific ways in which these processes affect form are numerous. For example, Adulteration can multiply, recycle, and stretch. Its opposite Densification can saturate, detail, and intensify. Acceleration may connect and blur while Deceleration may scatter and delineate. Aggression has the power to heat, make graphic, and embolden while Sedation can restrain, soften,

¹ Schleppegrell, Mary J., *The Language of Schooling: A Functional Linguistic Perspective*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 2004

² Somol, Robert. “Pass it on...,” in *Log 3: Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City*, New York, Anyone Corporation, Fall 2004

³Bernstein, Mark. “On Hypertext Narrative.” ACM Hypertext Conference 2009, Torino, Italy, 2009

become delicate, and disappear. The charged fields are tactical processes that resemble Bernard Tschumi's notion of the Space-Event in Architecture. Tschumi posits that the relationship between concept and context determines the process and production of new architectural forms. He sees form as a by-product of the complex interaction between an original idea (concept) and the specific conditions where the idea is projected (context). Tschumi defines this interaction the 'in-between zone,' which works as a negation of pure form or style. Together these processes result in a dynamic, local network of 'interstitial spaces.' Form becomes a derivative product of a critical idea in a particular context of place and time. Form is not universal; it is contingent to local conditions. In a similar manner to the Spanglish Turn, Tschumi advocates for strong context specificity and concrete locality for the projection of new architectural ideas that respond to the rhythms of today's complex cities.⁴

While these factors are specifically manifested in any object, environment or structure, the emphasis of one attribute or process over another, or the existence of simultaneous, contradictory influences, mark the hybrid logic of everyday Spanglish Turn aesthetics. By focusing on the formal and aesthetic properties of the material city, this spatial analysis attempts to delineate new cultural vectors that can inform future architectural practices and forms.

Under the influence of the Spanglish turn, an aesthetic spatial portrait emerges, seeping out into greater LA, from today's Chicano/Mexican immigrant Los Angeles. These are, for example, of baroque style, dense surfaces, and adulterated space. In addition, aesthetic sensibilities have come to inform everyday interactiveness, non-permanence, moods juxtaposing aggression with sedation, and the speed of spatial production from "fast and furious" to "low and slow."

These examples all demonstrate extreme uses of adaptability and continuous rapid and transient translations of space into altered functions, visual impressions, social interaction, and viewers' experiences. In other words, the architectural forms become hybrid in their daily visual and functional transformations and in their regular recycling of repurposed spatial elements.

4.0. Re-inscribing Cultural Studies into Architecture

One way of revealing cultural hybridity dynamics within contemporary architecture is through experimentation of architectural forms derived from cultural and spatial concepts.

Current preoccupations within theoretical discourse include considering contemporary architectural form as a repository of new technologically-based design sensibilities rather than a manifestation or response to the current conditions of our contemporary global/local cultural dynamics.

Often times overemphasis on technology neglects or even dismisses other approaches to architectural design that might lead us towards alternative forms of architectural experimentation. Past cultural approaches towards architectural ideas and forms, such as postmodernism, or critical regionalism are now seen as ideologically suspect or even disconnected from our current emphasis on pragmatism.

As a culture, we are obsessed with technology. The intent here is not to dismiss the significance and relevance of technology in architecture but to aim focus back into the realm of *critical cultural* analysis. This approach is based on the conviction that architecture serves us best when it is directly engaged with the dynamics of contemporary cultural production, in Los Angeles, such dynamics are heavily influenced by the Latinization process of the region.

One of the most dynamic, intriguing cultural and social trademarks today is the incessant contact and mixing of diverse cultures. Cultural mixing today is tied to (im)migrant communities. The recent conflation of time and space at a global scale has accelerated processes of cultural mixing in the last several decades. It is not doubt, that we are becoming more and more a hybrid culture society, a condition that will continue and become stronger in the next few decades.

5.0 Applicability of the Spanglish Turn method to other contexts/cities

The Spanglish Turn is the first iteration of a method of analysis that posits cultural hybridity at the center of the production of new architecture. This mode of analysis is context specific, it intimately engages the dynamics of cultural and spatial production of a specific place and time. As mentioned earlier, cultural hybridity is the sign of our times of our global (im)migrant cultures, and the more societies and cities evolve the dynamics of cultural hybridity will become more intensified and complex. Although the Spanglish Turn method is specific to Los Angeles, it could be applied to other cities that are going, or will go, through similar dynamics of cultural and social change. The first logical next step will be to test the Spanglish Turn framework in other cities with a large number of Latino immigrants, for example Chicago, San Francisco, San Antonio, New York,

⁴ Tschumi, Bernard. *Event-Cities 3: Concept vs. Context vs. Content*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004

Miami, to mention just a few. Also, the Spanglish Turn could be expanded and applied to another cultural context. US society is becoming more diverse as we speak, this cultural diversity is often dramatically manifested in the cities appearance and tenor. It is not doubt, the contact and mixing of different cultural groups has been intensifies and will continue to intensify in the next decades. Architecture and urban design will tremendously benefit by engaging with the dynamics of cultural hybridities in its practices and theories. In a larger framework, it would be interesting to see the applicability of the Spanglish Turn at the global scale, there are many large cities around the globe that are experiencing dramatic changes in their social and cultural make up due to recent immigration. In Europe, cities such as Paris, Berlin, London, Amsterdam are being transformed by their own dynamics of immigrant cultures creating their own new social and cultural patterns. In this way, the Spanglish Turn can be utilized as a theoretical "blueprint" that can guide future research in other places experiencing significant cultural, social and urban change. Each of these cities, whereas in the US or around the globe will have their own particular set of analytical systems and strategies, their own Metafunctions of Space, including Situatedness, Organization and Elements, and their own localized Charged Fields, including their own set of opposites such as Adulteration - Densification, Acceleration – Deceleration, and Aggression - Sedation. The Spanglish Turn can provide us with a new and different system of analysis for architecture that is intimately engaged with its own cultural and social context. An architectural design system that counter-balances the current dominant emphasis on mathematics and presents an alternative process that favor other forms of thinking, feeling and knowing for architectural design, a process that produces novel and fresh architectural forms.

CONCLUSION: Inscribing Latino culture into Architecture

While this process of analysis remains in its beginning stages, it is clear that the discipline of architecture has benefited, and will continue to benefit, from broadening its processes to include Mexican/Chicano aesthetic sensibilities and emergent behavioral systems within its ever-present goal to achieve contemporary relevance. As the process of Latinization will only continue to get stronger in the years to come, the aesthetic and spatial ramifications of this transformation of the contemporary city are enormous and exciting. And as the sensibilities of the Spanglish Turn become more fully elaborated, it seems certain that they will provide a picture of elaborate, malleable, and performative aesthetics that can provide a fresh take on old design approaches. Additionally, the conceptualization of forms as having both specific spatial attributes (situatedness, organization, and elements) and charged fields (adulteration - densification, etc.) can provide architects with the tools to utilize these translatable sensibilities for architectural design and to become agents of change within the city's contemporary landscape.

Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates that various dynamic cultural streams have come together to create a vibrant cultural and artistic milieu in the Southern California region today. This can be seen in the popular culture, visual art, and architecture produced here. It is also exciting to think about future directions this may take as people respond to more and more of global communications opportunities and gain exposure to alternate sensibilities. Needless to say, it seems inevitable that a tipping point is coming in terms of the incorporation of the aesthetics and spatial sensibilities of Chicano and Mexican immigrants into the design principles and aesthetics of the region. This in turn expresses the new political reality that Latinos are redefining what it means to be American, and through the sheer force of numbers and the resulting emergent patterns, are turning this nation's course towards a new, alternate direction – a direction whose specific end is still unknown – but one which will clearly be vibrant and dynamic.

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