

Riccardo Rapparini  
**The merry-go-round of the muses.**  
**Interview with Sebastián Irarrázaval**

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Abstract

This interview took place thanks to the Milan International Architecture Workshop (MIAW) held at the Polytechnic Institute of Milan in February 2021 and dedicated to reflections on Milan's Porta Romana. The many lessons and conversations with Irarrázaval gave rise to the idea of an interview that could summarize the numerous issues that emerged and whose relevance to the relationship between art and architecture naturally led to it being published in this issue.

The interview touches on numerous themes that tend, as often happens in projects, to overlap each other. However, in the flow of this conversation, three principles with a more disruptive force emerge: translation, repetition, and wholeness. Three concepts that in their recurrence in every artistic process help to trace and describe the importance that the arts have had in the construction of the architectural language of Sebastián Irarrázaval.

Parole Chiave

Chilean Architecture — Translation — Repetition — Wholeness

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**Riccardo Rapparini:** *I would like to begin this interview by reading a short excerpt from a collection of essays by the Russian semiologist Jurij Lotman entitled The merry-go-round of the muses which I think reflects a character of your architecture quite well: «Painting influences cinema, cinema influences novels, poetry influences cinema. It is the merry-go-round of the muses, the exchange between one aesthetic language and another, the construction of the substratum of values of every cultural system» (Lotman 1998, p.32). Lotman therefore argues that the languages of the arts tend to influence each other and derive their strength from this mutual dependence. How have the arts contributed to the construction of your architectural language?*

**Sebastián Irarrázaval:** There have always been processes of contamination between the arts that have mutually nourished the artistic disciplines, and ultimately, the culture itself. Every culture grows by importing from other cultures, just as every knowledge creation process is based on translations that are triggered between the arts starting from the concept of translation. The same happens in architecture, whose translation processes can take place either starting from other disciplines such as music and figurative arts, or in an interdisciplinary way, so starting from other architectural products. Interdisciplinary exchanges have always been very fertile in the arts; for example in music, just think of the processes of contamination that occurred between popular and religious music. More generally, we could go so far as to affirm that it is precisely how a culture imports that produces and defines its culture.

More specifically regarding the relationship between architecture and art, one should first of all ask what art is today and accept that it's impossible to

provide a single answer. But surely what we can say is that what all art has in common is the need to create something, and that this same creation can never take place in a completely empty space. Each new artistic production starts from a particular idea of culture, and therefore necessarily starts from previous productions. It is absolutely impossible to create something from nothing, it can only be done starting from some element that is drawn on. The avant-garde created the legend of the possibility of a completely original and uncontaminated creation, but this has always remained only a legend, as Rosalind Krauss (2007) has clearly illustrated. Just think of the processes of translation starting from African art by artists such as Picasso, Matisse but also Klee and Ernst, just to name a few.

**RR:** *In your projects, the translation process can start from very different elements such as works of art, sources derived from the context and finally also from the use of diagrams. How does the choice of the reference that will then determine the project take place? How does it rely on one image rather than another?*

**SI:** At the base of every translation process is the idea of being able to find and recognize something fertile, even accidentally. It is a process of attempts, experiments, failures, and successes. For example, for the *Locutorio* exhibition project, which brings a dialogue of love between two Alzheimer's patients through the relationship between architecture and dramaturgy to the stage, I looked at a large number of photographs to translate into the project, but they were all unsatisfactory until I discovered Gilbert Garcin's *La colère divine*, which on the other hand, turned out to be ideal. Intuition also certainly plays a fundamental role and is inextricably linked to a magical principle of art. The practice of *translation* is like a sleight of hand, it's something you have to try to trigger, something inside you which appears, because by unleashing it you manifest it. It's like a game and you have to accept a certain degree of unpredictability when you play, so the very idea of the game is not only connected to a rational part of the mind but also to an irrational one, and the same is true when approaching knowledge and therefore not only using rational processes, but above all through one's own sensitivity. This is one of the fundamental principles of aesthetics, to achieve knowledge through sensitivity.



**Fig. 1**  
Photo by Gilbert Garcin, "La colère divine", 2002.



**Fig. 2, 3**

Sebastián Irarrázaval, "Locutorio", scenography for the play by the playwright Jorge Díaz staged at the Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral, Santiago, 2017..



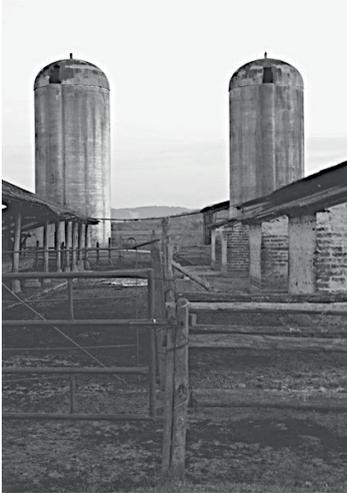
**RR:** *I find it very interesting how you discuss the relationship between architecture and art starting from the compositional processes at the base of the artistic disciplines and not limiting the architectural project to an object of art to be contemplated. There is a further creative process that I find recurrent in the analysis of your projects and which often overlaps with that of translation, namely the concept of repetition. You often resort to this process of reiteration of forms in your projects, as if it was somehow the repetition that gave a logical structure to the irrationality of the translation. How do you overlap these two themes in your design processes?*

**SI:** Surely the idea of working with a concept of wholeness has always been fundamental for me, and I think it is a principle common to all the arts, as is the concept that a certain form of order guarantees *wholeness* itself. *Wholeness* is always present; you can, of course, choose whether to embrace it or not, but it is always there. The contents of an art form are always structured through some sort of organization. For example, in program music it is the *program* that becomes the content, the descriptive line of a story that is told exclusively with musical elements. This, therefore, differs from absolute music whose content is the music itself. For example, Strauss composed the *Eine Alpensinfonie* in 1915 and its *program* sought to translate the experience of climbing a mountain into music and then to translate the vision of natural elements such as stones, streams, or atmospheric phenomena like the sunrise and sunset through sounds. Every element of this climb had to be translated into sound. Listening to this composition, we understand the meaning of these sounds based on our previous musical experiences and also for the specific physiology that belongs to each *phoneme*. This is part of what we can call *emotional content*. To live, to have a presence, we need a duration, we need time to exist, and of course, to physically take part in an experience. So it is absolutely impossible to entirely abandon the idea of some kind of *wholeness*. Now, coming back to your question, order is necessary in this concept of *wholeness*, and is achieved through *repetition*, exactly as it does in music. The point where translation and *repetition* meet is in the need of the former to find a *medium*, and the latter to manifest itself.

Take for example the *Mataquito Theater*, whose *translation* process has two origins. The first is linked to the *translation* of typical elements of Licantén,

**Figg. 4, 5**

Silos and cisterns in the municipality of Licantén, Chile, 2020. Sebastián Irarrázaval Archive.

**Figg. 6, 7.**

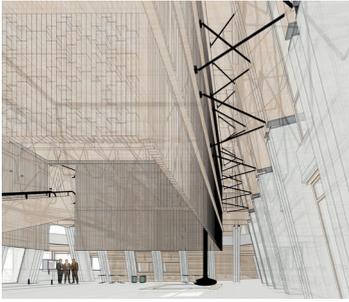
Sebastián Irarrázaval, "Mataquito Theatre", Licantén, Chile, 2020. Sebastián Irarrázaval Archive.

the municipality where the theater will be built, and in particular the silos and cisterns that mark the territory like monuments; the second, on the other hand, is linked to the *translation* of the characteristic constructive elements of the local agricultural architectures, such as the slender wooden structures of the vineyards, which *enlarge* and become the supporting structure of the project. After this first translation process, *repetition* is called into question by the need to fragment the program into three parts (foyer, gallery, and stage) but above all to be able to include the theme of the number. The *repetition* must necessarily be measured by the number, it must have to do with something inherent in us, it is connected to the understanding of the number. There is a form of pleasure, of satisfaction, which occurs when our cognitive abilities are stimulated by the recognition of the number. *Repetition* has to do with what can be counted, with the very possibility of counting but also with the possibility of not being able to count. This difference is likely part of the same difference that Roland Barthes identifies between *Pleasure* and *Enjoyment* (*Jouissance*), i.e., the distinction between a satisfying, euphoric pleasure and an enjoyment that is unbridled, lacerating in the absence of the former. In the *Mataquito Theater*, this repetition probably does not produce *Enjoyment*, but *Pleasure* due to its recognizability.

Recognizability is a fundamental theme of architecture and this is why I often choose construction methods and materials that belong to the place, precisely because of their recognizability and understanding. In local, informal constructions such as agricultural ones, the goal is not beauty: the beauty is the result of other factors and is achieved with elements that belong to the territory, that are close at hand. Translating these elements ensures that the project is recognized and understood by the population, and this is fundamental.

The idea of repetition is also linked to that of meeting an expectation. We are always prepared to recognize patterns, thereby an event that happened in the past prepares us for an equal experience that could happen in the future, this projection produces a form of pleasure. So whoever enters the theater is free to move from one side to the other and somehow has the chance to find something known, this security produces a certain pleasure but above





all makes it more comfortable to live in an architecture. I deeply believe that living has nothing to do with surprise, but with the expected.

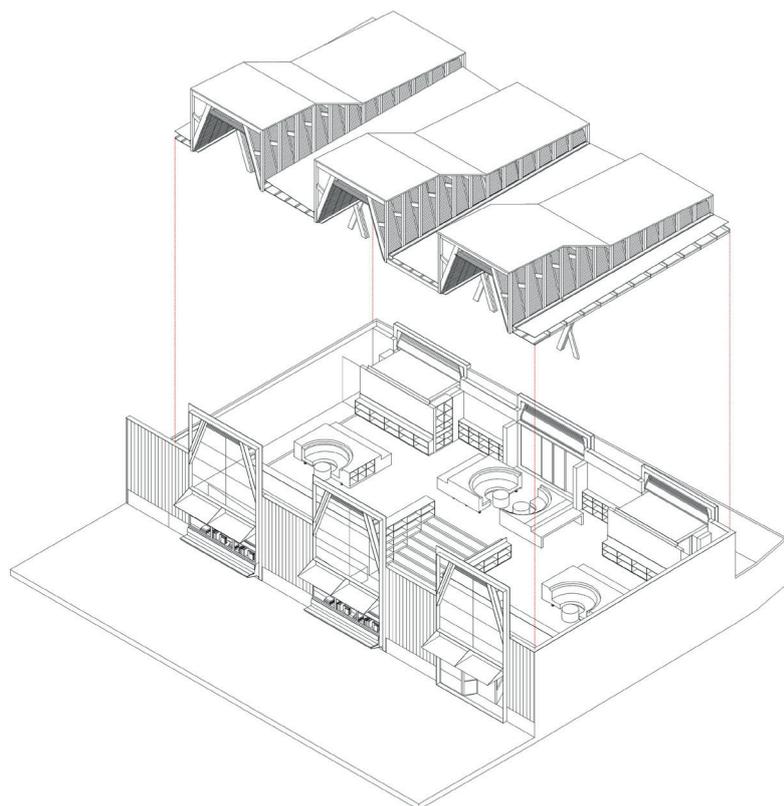
**RR:** *Respect for the place has always been fundamental in Chilean architecture and what you have previously told us confirms this. I think I can add that in your projects you are able to transcend pure appearance to reach the depth of a territory, making its underlying structures emerge. How do you approach a place when a project is commissioned?*

**SI:** Heidegger's idea of revealing a place has always been a source of inspiration for me. Revealing a place is impossible without revealing cultural aspects, but above all without evaluating how the body moves and interacts with the space. For example, for the *Public Library of Constitución* I decided to refer to what we could define *intangible heritage*, and therefore to that set of memories that represent and denote a people. For example, also in this case the constructive aspect is fundamental as it inherits the traditional wooden structures of the area.

This translation of the distinctive architectural traits from the place is fundamental, as it creates connections and a large part of *architecture* is precisely creating connections. These can be between internal parts of the building or between building and context, but also and above all with people. The way people react when they relate to the project contributes to creating emotional connections with the architecture. Creating this kind of affection and making the space as comfortable as possible is essential for me. People's affection for a project makes it *live* longer. As we know well, durability is one of the three founding principles of architecture, but I believe that it does not only have to do with the aspects of constructive solidity but above all with those related to how people take care of architecture. This aspect takes on an even more important role in the library, as we are talking about a public building in a place where the education rate is very low. Designing a welcoming space in which the population can identify themselves and become attached to it means

**Figg. 8, 9, 10, 11.**

Sebastián Irarrázaval, "Public Library", Constitución, Chile, 2015. Sebastián Irarrázaval Archive.



bringing them, in some way, closer to knowledge. For this reason, the interiors also try to redesign a domestic environment that invites you to spend your time inside and enter into a relationship with this place of culture. This feeling of *refuge* is then also projected outside, in the facades, which reproduce the benches of the Florentine Renaissance façades, inviting you to experience architecture in a welcoming way even in the liminal external-internal space.

**RR:** *In conclusion, a brief biographical note suggests the next question. Your university studies did not begin with architecture, but with literature. We mentioned translation and repetition before, now I ask you if there are other compositional procedures typical of literature that you use when designing? Or more generally, how do you interpret this connection between writing and architecture?*

**SI:** There are some obvious points of continuity, such as the idea of order: both architecture and writing need order and organization. Architecture is like a novel in that it aspires to a *wholeness* composed of several parts that are systematized through the use of syntax and grammar. The order in which the parts and the words are organized is fundamental, as it is the composition process that makes a project, or a poem, take on a certain meaning and not another. It is not the same if one word is used before or after another.

Then there is a further important component linked to the sound of words, which can even become more important than the meaning itself. Also in this case, the similarity to architecture is evident. For example, the materiality of an element can produce a completely different effect from the perspective of meaning. As in poetry, all elements are interconnected and the meaning manifests itself thanks to the relationship between the words. For example, the *Integral Stimulation Center*, a pedagogical center for vulnerable children promoted by the Isabel Aninat Echazarreta Foundation, was initially designed to be made of brick but for economic reasons it was not possible to do so. I therefore opted for a white-stained concrete, trying to experiment with entirely *liberating* the materiality, the material presence of the material. I had previously tested the density that is produced by wood, a material with its own internal intensity, and I tried to search for it in concrete, mainly exploiting the relationship between light and shadow.

Returning to the relationship between architecture and writing, I happened to reflect on a further interesting affinity that exists between the architect and the conductor.

As the latter accompanies the listener with the movement of his hands within a musical text and chooses whether or not to satisfy their expectations, the architect has a general vision that unites him with an omniscient narrator, to return again to literature. In fact, the architect somehow knows everything and can thus control the behavior and emotions of those who live in his project, just as the writer exercises control over his characters and, consequently, over the readers. Exerting control is a fundamental exercise of the architect, it means somehow anticipating what will happen in the future, when the project passes from his hands to those of the inhabitants. In the *Integral Stimulation Center* I tried to create something that had a casual aspect, but always starting from a repetitive matrix. This is clearly legible in the plan where the more casual external aspect instead recognizes an internal regularity measured by the classrooms. Where is the control exercised? In the choice of setting up a casual but repeated relationship to try to stimulate the cognitive abilities of children and to create a sort of freedom in a closed and protected space. The space is controlled to ensure that it itself takes on a pedagogical and stimulating role.

**Figg. 12, 13.**

Sebastián Irarrázaval, "Integral Stimulation Center", Talagante (Santiago), Chile, 2020. Photo by Cristobal Palma. Sebastián Irarrázaval Archive.



The days following the interview were enriched by further exchanges between Irarrázaval and myself. He wanted to *open the doors* to his library, suggesting some readings that in some way influenced his formation and that, for their richness and originality, I thought it interesting to mention in conclusion.

The first text he suggested refers to the idea of *wholeness* and *order* at the basis of every artistic creation, which Irarrázaval traces back to the figure of Mahler, addressed through Adorno's famous text *Mahler. A musical physiognomy*. It is no coincidence, then, that the study of the Bohemian composer is deepened through a text openly interested in investigating the formal apparatus of Mahler's music and therefore more directly translatable into architectural terms.

Regarding the theme of *translation*, the threads of the discourse are intertwined but two essays emerge with greater clarity. The first is *The task of the translator* by Walter Benjamin, who sees a metalinguistic role in the *translation* processes, the ability therefore to trigger a relationship between the original language and the language of the *translation* that *exists* in the difference between the two but which, through the difference itself, is able to

**Fig. 14, 15.**

Sebastián Irarrázaval, "Integral Stimulation Center", Talagante (Santiago), Chile, 2020.  
Photo by Cristobal Palma.  
Sebastián Irarrázaval Archive.



**Fig. 16.**

Sebastián Irarrázaval, "Integral Stimulation Center", Talagante (Santiago), Chile, 2020.  
Sebastián Irarrázaval Archive.

lead «the original [...] into a higher and purer area of the language» (Benjamin 1995), elevating it.

Benjamin is joined by a philosopher, Andrés Claro, Irarrázaval's friend and colleague at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile who trained under Derrida and has dealt with the theme of *translation* on several occasions. "*Transportation is civilization*": *Ezra Pound's poetics of translation* addresses the different cultural roles that *translation* assumes through contributions from Pound, but also Eliot, Goethe, and Derrida just to name a few. An even richer picture emerges in which *translation* is outlined as an operational process of building knowledge and culture precisely because of its ability to "produce poetic forms of meaning and representation (strengthening perception, expanding a vision of the world, reviving voices of the past that criticize and shape the present)" (Claro, 2014). Therefore *translation* not as a copy or transcription but as an act of transmission capable of projecting the past into the present, *translation* as a process of construction of new languages of art. Using Eliot's words quoted by Claro:

«Translation is valuable by a double power of fertilizing a literature: by importing new elements which may be assimilated, and by restoring the essentials which have been forgotten in traditional literary method. There occurs, in the process, a happy fusion between the spirit of the original and the mind of the translator; the result is not exoticism but rejuvenation» (Claro, 2014, p.4).

It should be noted that the intent of this *genealogy* of thought is clearly not to suggest the entire universe of references that formed Irarrázaval, but rather to underline the importance that the arts have had in the formulation of the processes he applies to projects. And so Adorno's Mahler gives us a key to interpreting the theme of *wholeness*, as does Strauss's program music where the *wholeness* needs *order* to manifest itself; Benjamin, Claro, and Pound alternate on the theme of *translation* that becomes an operative procedure and never a copy; Krauss *resolves* the conflict between *translation* and *originality* by warning us of the impossibility of a creation *from nothing* but only *starting from*; then Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* suggests an analogy between using a literary and an architectural text, a pleasure which, in order to be enjoyed, must necessarily have to do with recognizability; finally, the image of the bridge by Heidegger (1976, pp. 102-103) which *means* a place closes this *merry-go-round* of cultural references.

All these elements are linked together to become the material of the project. And a large part of Irarrázaval's architecture is driven precisely by the desire to create ties because, as he himself says, architecture is a *religious* discipline as it *re-connects*, it creates connections and these must be between arts, languages, places, and people.

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