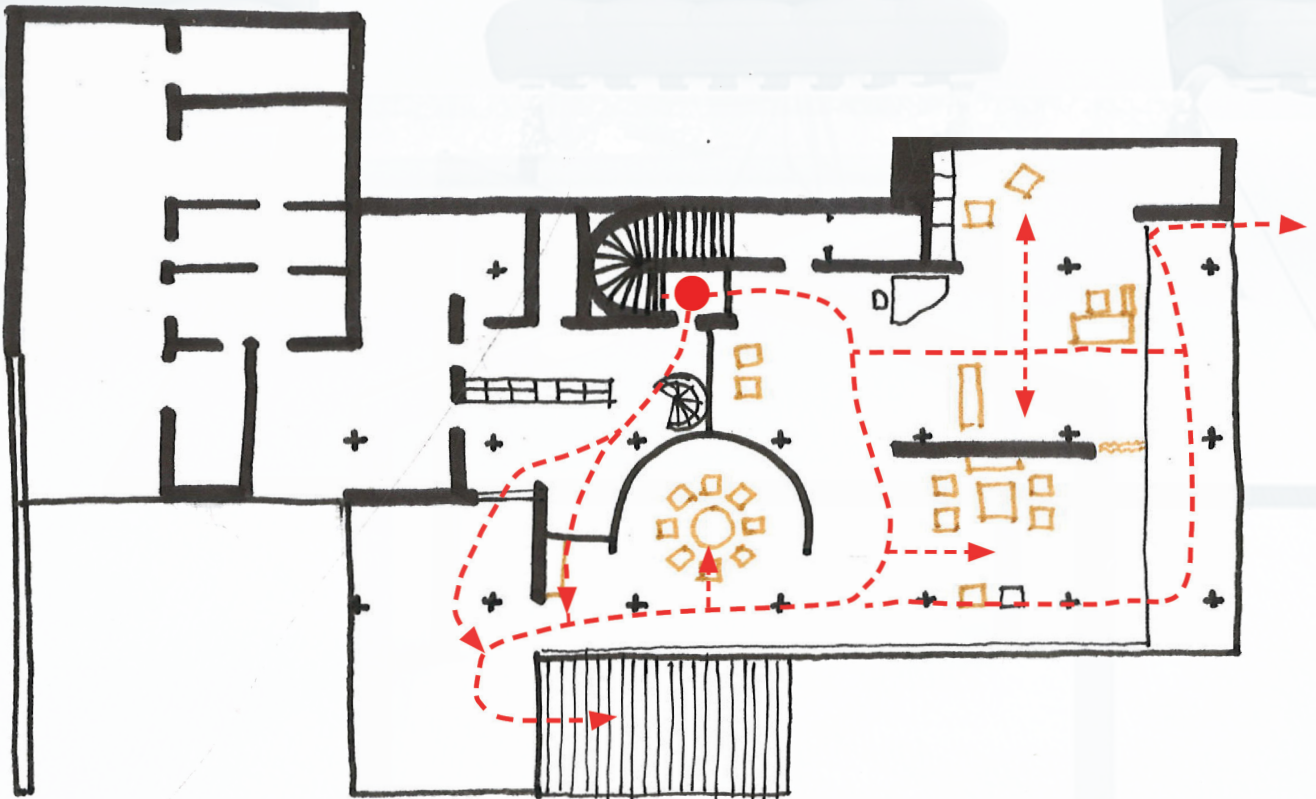


21

Narratives in Architecture

Adhrita Roy



Exploring Synergies in Adaptations of Written Narratives and Spatial Constructs

Experiences which an architect curates are created by the way narrative and architectural realms inform each other. They are a means of expression adopted to both conceptualise and express a design in built space, or additionally, through words, to communicate an idea to its spectators and inhabitants. The two media of communication through which the author is looking at narratives in this research are - narrative expressed through written text (stories) and narratives expressed through built architectural projects.

Architecture stems from a multitude of different agencies and systems of thought. It incorporates social and cultural narratives, as well as varied activities and spaces to satisfy different programs as a part of the requisites of a design brief. However, there is a difference in the way literary narratives are conceived when compared to narratives embedded in spatial constructs. In literature (specifically, stories), the rules of grammar help construct sentences where the meaning indicated in the text is easily understood by readers. In architecture, space is experienced through the movement of our bodies in that space. This movement impacts the sequence, or the way, in which spaces are perceived by the inhabitants. It thus becomes easier to grasp the 'compositional structure' (Kanekar, 1999), i.e., the physical make, of the building rather than the narrative of the built form.

Thus, to understand the use and role of narrative in an architectural project, this article focuses on the phenomenon of adaptation. Since 'adaptation' is an integral part of this research, there is a need to define the meaning of the term. In the 'Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies,' Thomas Leitch writes that the definitions of adaptation vary based on three perspectives - 'A process, a product or an act of reception' (Leitch, 2017). Building on the third definition of this term in this research, 'adaptation' is used to define the phenomenon of carrying information from one medium of expression to another, while allowing the potential of modification of its perception in the process. Here, stories are taken as a second medium of expression - a 'lens' through which the author attempts to decode architectural spaces.

This article aims to establish a relation between literature and architecture by analysing the implication and outcomes of adapting a story into an architectural project and vice versa. This is done through a reading and analysis of the book 'The Glass Room' by Simon Mawer (2009), which adapts the house Villa Tugendhat

by architect Mies van der Rohe into its story. For ease of understanding, in this research, (1) the entity which gets adapted is the 'source' and (2) the entity which emerges from the process of carrying across information from the source and conveying it through a different medium of expression is the 'transformed object'.

In approaching this research in terms of method and analysis, the first step was to select a case study (i.e., a story and its related architectural project). This was done by ensuring that there was an initial affirmation that the selected architectural project was indeed adapted into the specified story. Simultaneously, a literature review was conducted for previous works with content related to this subject to build on existing work. This helps derive the parameters and frameworks of study. Subsequently, a check of this adaptation was conducted by establishing correspondences between the selected building (source) and the story (transformed object). Here, 'correspondence' means 'a connection between two things' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, n.d.).

What this study thus analyses is the synergy which exists between language and architecture. In architecture, communication comprises both visual and written content. We study forms, plans, sections, images, and often approach buildings as objects to be progressively dissected to understand the functioning of its spaces. However, when experienced by its inhabitants or explained by architects, there are successive layers of time, movement and inhabitation patterns which are added to the formal characteristics of an otherwise inert building. Created by an intersection of literature and architecture, narratives are deeply ingrained in the experience of a spatial construct. However, in architectural analysis, the building is often treated as an isolated object. Using narratives as an alternate means of communication allows us to employ a different perspective in understanding an architectural space and to bring it within the lived experience of its inhabitants.

The Fictional Space [Story] & 'The Glass Room' [Adaptation]

With sixty-seven chapters split into five sections, Simon Mawer's 'The Glass Room' (2009) narrates the story of the (fictional) Landauer House and its inhabitants, over 62 years. This research uses Mawer's book (used interchangeably with the word 'story' in this article) as a case study because it draws inspiration from the architectural project Villa Tugendhat by German-American architect Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) as verified by critics Melissa Katsoulis (Mawer, 2009) and Fiona MacCarthy (MacCarthy, 2012). In the book, Viktor

and Liesel Landauer, an affluent couple, commissions Rainer von Abt, a renowned architect of the time to design a house, which would sit on a hill overlooking the city of Mesto, Czechoslovakia. As it gains popularity as a symbol of progress and modernity, the house with its glass room becomes the focal point of the story.

Set against the backdrop of political and social change in Europe, the house initially thrives as a celebrated icon of modern architecture and becomes a symbol of wealth for the Landauers. With time, as the family navigates personal upheavals, changing relationships, love and betrayal, the Landauers are forced to abandon the house when the Nazi troops occupy Czechoslovakia. Thereafter, under the ownership of the German Reich, the house is turned into a clinical laboratory focused on researching ways to anthropometrically identify Jews for persecution.

However, with the changing tide of war, once Czechoslovakia is liberated, the house is briefly occupied by the Soviet troops and later turned into a physiotherapy centre for children suffering from polio. As the story progresses, the house changes and so do its inhabitants - doctors, researchers, engineers, soldiers, and dancers - till the house is finally restored and converted into a museum. Preserved as a specimen of one of the early examples of modern architecture, the house is where the author concludes his story and where the Landauers finally return.

The Real Space [Building] - Villa Tugendhat [Source]

As stated above, the book adapts its fictional space (Landauer House) from the actual building, Villa Tugendhat. What follows is a brief history of the Villa to establish why this building was chosen by Mawer to be adapted into his story. Renowned for his minimalist rectilinear buildings, clean silhouettes and play with mirror-like reflections on glass facades, German-American architect Mies van der Rohe's (1886-1969) style of design developed during his years in Europe and later manifested into tall steel-framed towers (the glass skyscraper) after he moved to America. The radical design of these glass skyscrapers pushed Mies into 'the forefront of the modern movement' (Blake, 1960) in architecture. Villa Tugendhat was one of Mies' earlier works.

Mies received the proposal for Villa Tugendhat around the time he was preparing designs for the Barcelona Pavilion, a German Pavilion designed by Mies and Lilly Reich, for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, Spain. Commissioned by the Tugendhats, Mies was asked to design a modern house for their family on a

plot which the couple had received as a wedding gift. Continuing the Barcelona Pavilion's combination of large glass panes, chrome columns, low rectilinear roof and use of strategic placement of walls (and partitions, in the case of Villa Tugendhat) in a 'free plan', the architect cleverly incorporated a method to start creating a combination of open and enclosed spaces (Carter, 1974).

The first example of a family house where a steel structure is incorporated into a building design (MacCarthy, 2012), Villa Tugendhat has a very interesting history. Inhabited by the Tugendhats from 1930 to 1940, it was used as a design office by The Flugmotorenwerke Ostmark (German aircraft company) during World War II. Later, it served as a residence for the Soviet Army. During that time, the house suffers severe deterioration. The furniture is used for lighting fire, and the spaces within the house are turned into stables for the horses. After the war, it was turned into a place which can be used for private dance classes by Karla Hladká, a teacher at the Brno conservatory who also arranged for the repair of the house by the architect Albin Hofirek (Zidlicky, n.d.). Under the ownership of the government, it was turned into a rehabilitation centre for children with spinal defects in 1950 (Zidlicky, n.d.). It now stands on the slope of Brno, preserved as a museum.

A Classification of Types of Adaptations

To understand the relationship between literature (stories) and built space, it is first necessary to understand the parameters under which one can study the interrelatedness between the two media of communication. One of the first parameters which becomes apparent when establishing this relation is the idea of syntax. In literature, it is the 'syntactic... rules that enable us to understand how words are assembled into meaningful arrangements' (Psarra, 2009). This means that our understanding of literary texts is facilitated by the rules of grammar.

In architecture, the syntax or 'grammar' lies in the relations and arrangement of elements in physical space. This gives us the first type of adaptation which can be possible between the two media of communication. Apart from syntactic devices, iconic references in architecture can help create a narrative model in a built project (Psarra, 2009; Hillier & Hanson, 1984). Architectural styles and visual cues can convey meaning and become important icons. Two types of adaptation between literature and architecture are 'iconic' and 'syntactic' (Kanekar, personal interview, January 21, 2024). Before proceeding to analyse the type of adaptation between the 'source' (Villa

Tugendhat) and the 'story' (The Glass Room), it is necessary to understand the type of adaptation and how correspondences are established between the two entities. The parameters which the author used to study the relations between the 'source' and the 'transformed object' are: timeline, explicit correspondences and implicit correspondences. These parameters were derived during a pilot case study conducted while developing the research proposal.

The Timeline (Program)

Stories narrate incidents which take place over a certain period. Thus, there is a clear timeline which can be understood by the readers. Figure 1 allows one to compare how the sequence of events in the story relate to the actual history of Villa Tugendhat. When we

compare the sequence of events in the story with the sequence of events which took place in Villa Tugendhat, we see that the timelines exhibit an exact match. This helps enforce the fact that the fictional building in the story is indeed the adaptation of Villa Tugendhat. Figure 1. Diagram showing the correspondence between the events narrated in the story and the actual timeline of events in Villa Tugendhat.

Explicit Correspondences (Descriptions of spaces with corresponding images from Villa Tugendhat)

This partial quote from 'The Glass House', clearly establishes the explicit correspondence between the story and the building as it demonstrates the clear similarity between the living room of the fictional house (the Glass Room that inspired the book's name and thus

STORY :

- 1928 - Rainer von Abt (architect) meets Liesel and Viktor Landauer in Venice. He submits drawings for their new house
- 1929 - Construction of Landauer House starts
- 1930 - Construction and interior ends in 1930.
- Rainer visits the Landauers in Mesto.
- 1931 - "Is the Landauer House habitable?" is asked by a journalist of Die Form.
- Viktor suggests that their villa could be used for a recital to raise funds for the Human Rights League
- The slogan 'Juden raus' is painted on the walls in Vienna (Austria occupied by German troops). The Landauers leave for Switzerland.
- 1939 - German troops occupy Czechoslovakia. The Landauer House is confiscated by the German Troops.
- The Reichsprotektor visits the Landauer House
- Briefly occupied by Messerschmitt AG - aircraft manufacturing corporation
- Mesto liberated by The Red Army. They reside in the Landauer Villa
- 1949 - Zdenka is a dancer and physiotherapist for children suffering with polio.
- Liesel visits the Landauer House with her daughter

ACTUAL BUILDING :

- 1928 - Mies van der Rohe submits his design drawings to Greta and Fritz Tugendhat
- 1929 - Construction of Villa Tugendhat starts
- 1930 - Construction ends in August, 1930.
- 1931 - Mies visits the Villa in Brno.
- 1931 - "Can the Tugendhat Villa be lived in?" asked by Justus Bier of Die Form
- 1933 - Grete Tugendhat and the League for Human Rights - providing assistance to refugees
- 1938 - Nazi troops occupy Austria. Grete Tugendhat leaves for Switzerland.
- 1939 - The house is confiscated by the German troops
- 1942 - The house comes under the ownership of the German Reich
- Briefly occupied by Messerschmitt AG - aircraft manufacturing corporation
- 1945 - Brno liberated by The Red Army. They reside in Tugendhat Villa
- 1945 to 1949 - Karla Hladká opens a dance school in Villa Tugendhat
- 1967 - Grete Tugendhat visits the house with her daughter



Figure 1. Diagram showing the correspondence between the events narrated in the story and the actual timeline of events in Villa Tugendhat

an important space in the story), and the living room of Villa Tugendhat. By identifying the spatial qualities in this quote, it is paired with the corresponding image of Villa Tugendhat. This aids in understanding the extent to which the spatial qualities of the Villa have been incorporated into the story - and thus, the type of adaptation.

'... the light from the expanse of plate glass that made up the south wall, smell the Macassar wood, sense the people standing there between the glass and the onyx wall, between the plain white ceiling and the ivory white floor.' (p.9)

The quote describes the place the visitor enters when they go down the stairs from the entrance foyer. In the story, this is the place the author calls the Glass Room. If we follow the same route in Villa Tugendhat - it brings us into the living room. As seen in Figure 2, the plate glass wall (highlighted in red) makes up the southern wall of the building and the onyx wall (highlighted in red) faces the plate glass. The ceiling and floor are also white. This indicates that the living room of Villa Tugendhat is indeed the Glass Room.

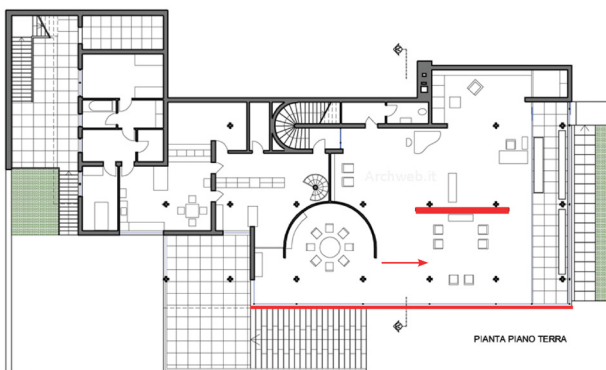


Figure 2. The planes highlighted in red indicate the onyx wall (left) and the glass wall (right) (20th Century Architecture, n.d.). Plan: (Archweb, n.d.)

Implicit Correspondences (Abstracted descriptions of spaces with their suggested spatial qualities)

These quotes from 'The Glass House', describe the Landauer House by employing abstraction in the description to emphasise the intangible spatial qualities of the house.

'For him, it embodies the pure rationality of a Greek classical temple, the austere beauty of a perfect composition, the grace and balance of a painting by Mondrian. There are no disturbing curves to upset the rectilinear austerity of the space.' (p.151)

The quote highlights 'rectilinear austerity,' suggesting that Mies used planes and straight lines to create a sense of formality in Villa Tugendhat, inspired by his Barcelona Pavilion design (Carter, 1974).

'The house exists, fixed in time and space like a fossil. Repair work is done, badly.' (p.427)

'The building itself, as low-slung and anonymous as a sports pavilion, is reflected in the water as though it is standing on an inverted, blurred watercolour image of what is painted above it in hard-edged acrylic.' (p.430)

The spatial qualities of the house - 'the past', 'like a fossil', and 'anonymous' indicate that the building is aging. 'Hard-edged acrylic' highlights the building's colour contrast with the landscape. Villa Tugendhat's white exterior contrasts with its green gardens. These confirm the fictional house in The Glass Room is adapted from the Villa. These elements are now used to analyse the implications of adapting a real building into a fictional story.

Analysing Correspondences

If one were to look at Villa Tugendhat in isolation, it is one of the best examples of functionalist architecture of its time (ArchEyes, 2023). Today, having been a part of several publications dedicated to 'interwar modernity', it is better known as a member of the International Style of architecture (Zidlicky, n.d.). With Italian travertine, Moroccan onyx wall, Macassar ebony wood and a 24-metre-long plate glass wall, the Villa initially gained popularity as one of the most expensive residential buildings of its time.

Though it was initially criticised because of the sheer cost of the project, renowned architects such as Ludwig Hilberseimer, Pierre Villon and Walter Riezler wrote praising the intention behind the building's design. It was in 1932, when the Villa was presented at the 'Modern Architecture: International Exhibition' curated

by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip C. Johnson, that it gained more popularity and repute. Thus, over time, the building has come to be regarded as an important representative of the modern international style of architecture (Zidlicky, n.d.). Comparing Landauer House to the timeline of Villa Tugendhat, the controversy surrounding its design, its symbolism, and the political context of the time, it is evident that the Landauer House is an 'iconic' adaptation of Villa Tugendhat. However, how does this iconic method of adaptation help in the book's narrative? To study the role of architecture in this writing, the story is converted into a tabular format using the framework used by Kanekar

(2014) to study the narrative in Peter Eisenman's entry titled 'Moving Arrows, Eros, and Other Errors. An Architecture of Absence' in the 1985 Venice Biennale. Here, the sections correspond to the ones established by Mawer in the book. Once the information is segregated, the rows have been ordered according to the parameters used for studying correspondences (Table 1).

Program

In the story, the way space is inhabited within the Glass Room and the resultant movement patterns change through the five sections of the story.

Table 1 : ANALYSIS OF THE STORY				
SECTION 1	SECTION 2	SECTION 3	SECTION 4	SECTION 5
a. Program				
House as a place of art for the family to live in	A laboratory for racial profiling	An abandoned, dilapidated building with no function	A physiotherapy centre for children	House as a museum
b. Description of space (Used for portrayal of the building at the start and end of section)				
Starts with the couple asking the architect to build a Glass House for them	Starts with the interior of the house being modified to house a clinical laboratory	Starts with the laboratory being dismantled and the building being abandoned	Starts and ends with the Glass Room being turned into a gymnasium for children with polio	Starts with the proposition to turn the house into a museum
Ends with the Landauers, Kata and Marika leaving Czechoslovakia as a family and heading to Switzerland	Ends with the Landauers leaving Switzerland and Kata and Marika being separated from the family	Ends with the house being occupied by Soviets		Ends with the Landauer family members returning 'home'
c. Abstraction of space (Tone of narrative)				
Starts with positive - proposal of the house and ends with negative - family leaving the house	Starts with positive - house not being pulled down and being turned into a clinic and ends with negative - family separated	Starts and ends with negative	Starts with positive - the Glass Room being repurposed into a gymnasium and ends with negative - Hana's story about losing her child	Starts with positive - a proposal to turn the house into a museum and ends with negative - Liesel is blind. She does not know what happened to Marika and Kata
The house is compared to Otilie - built as Otilie grows up.		No mention of the family (and Otilie)		Otilie revisits the house and reunites with Marika
27 of 35 chapters with scenes in the Glass Room	6 of 14 chapters with scenes in the Glass Room	All chapters have scenes set in the Glass Room	8 of 10 chapters with scenes in the Glass Room	2 of 3 chapters with scenes in the Glass Room

Table 1a. While using Aarati Kanekar's (2014) framework as the base to categorise information, the rows are grouped together for analysis according to parameters established by the author for this research. Timeline is expressed through a change in the use of the house, and titled as 'Program'. Explicit correspondences are expressed through a similarity between images of Villa Tugendhat and descriptions of space in The Glass Room, and therefore called 'Description of Space'. Implicit correspondences are expressed through the similarity of images of Villa Tugendhat with abstracted descriptions of space in the book, and hence titled 'Abstraction of space'.

Section 1: The Landauer House is a family residence. While there is a strict arrangement of furniture, residents move freely (shown in Table 2 as Family House).

Section 2: The Landauer House is a clinical laboratory. The human subjects who are brought in for testing are made to follow a strict route within the space. The narration of this route allows the author to estimate the inner layout of the house in this section (shown in Table 2 as Clinical Laboratory). From the entrance of the house, subjects are directly taken down into the clinic - Glass Room (starting point marked by the red dot). They first fill forms at the entrance of the staircase; they move to the cubicles to change (2); they are then taken to be measured by instruments placed in front of the onyx wall (3), and finally, they are taken in front of the curved wall of the dining area (4) to be photographed.

Section 3: The Landauer House is abandoned. There are no regular patterns of movement within the space.

Section 4: The Landauer House is a physiotherapy centre for children suffering from polio. The narrative focuses on activities in the Glass Room where it is used as a stage for dance classes (in front of the onyx wall). Since not much is written about the movement patterns in this section, the Physiotherapy Centre in Table 1b, shows the suggested spatial layout and the movement patterns.

Section 5: After restoration, the Landauer House is a museum. It is reintroduced to us through a guided tour booked by visitors. The spatial layout in the Glass Room is similar to the layout in Section 1. The story culminates with two characters, Otilie and Markia (childhood friends), reconciling in this room.

The story consistently uses the spatiality and iconicity of the Glass Room to structure the flow of time in the story. As elaborated in Table 1b, it can be seen how the spatial layout of the Glass Room changes across different sections in the story (drawn by referring to descriptions provided in the story).

Description of space

Oposing descriptions of spaces within the house are used to further enforce the layer of time in the narrative. This can be seen in Table 1c where the new house is seen as a symbol of opulence and is the recipient of attention and admiration from its visitors in Section 1. However, after being restored as a museum, it turns into an anonymous building in Section 5, showing the passage of time.

Table 1b : OPPOSITIONS IN SPATIAL DESCRIPTIONS USED AS A NARRATIVE OF TIME	
SECTION 1	SECTION 5
"The impact of the place overwhelms visitors, (...) the ornamental bric-a-brac of the wealthy, and instead discover here the ultimate opulence of pure abstraction. Glänzend! they exclaim, a word that has both the literal and figurative meaning of brilliant." (The newness of the house is evident as seen when visitors acclaim the beauty of the place). (Mawer, 2009).	"The building itself, as low-slung and anonymous as a sports pavilion, is reflected in the water as though it is standing on an inverted, blurred watercolour image of what is painted above it in hard-edged acrylic." (With time, the house faces numerous damages throughout the war, no longer a symbol of opulence - it loses its novelty). (Mawer, 2009).

Table 1b. Oposing descriptions of space used to establish flow of time in the story.

Table 1c : OPPOSITIONS IN SPATIAL ABSTRACTIONS USED AS A NARRATIVE OF TIME	
SECTION 1	SECTION 5
"Landauer House stood beached on the shore above the tidemark like a relic of a more perfect golden age." (House as the symbol of modernity) "For him it embodies the pure rationality of a Greek classical temple, the austere beauty of a perfect composition, the grace and balance of a painting by Mondrian" (The new building - emphasis on its architectural ideologies and their purity). (Mawer, 2009).	"The house exists, fixed in time and space like a fossil. Repair work is done, badly." (The house has faded into anonymity). "But it isn't a museum. It is vibrant and alive, (...) echoing as a piano echoes to the noise of children and the crying of adults" (The house has now become old - it is no longer described by its form and visual characteristics, but the history it holds within). (Mawer, 2009).

Table 1c. Oposing descriptions of the intangible qualities of space used to reinforce the flow of time in the story.

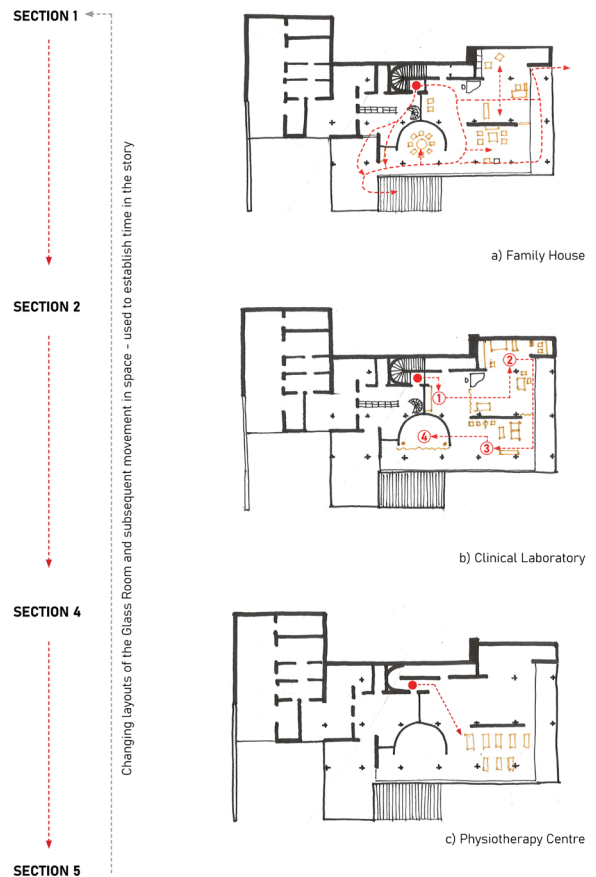


Table 2. Illustrating the change in layout of the Glass Room through the different sections in the story

Abstraction of space

'Abstraction' can be defined as the representation of realworld objects in a stylised manner to emphasise their intangible qualities rather than realistic details (Leitch, 2017). As seen in Table 4, the contrast is evident in the way the author writes about the building and the Glass Room. It highlights the 'perception' of the building that is being suggested to the readers through the different sections in the story.

In 'The Glass Room,' oppositions and symmetries are conveyed through the changing program (Table 1a), contrasting descriptions (Table 1b), and abstractions of space (Table 1c) within the Landauer House, with a focus on the Glass Room. Since the story adapts Villa Tugendhat, the architectural project's iconicity is prominent. The building's physicality creates a strong image, making the story's building 'visually' descriptive. Vivid descriptions of movement, inhabitants, and layouts convey the building's lived experience to the reader. 'Program,' 'Description,' and 'Abstraction' serve as devices leading to outcomes of time and perception in the story (Figure 3).

To conclude

If one sets aside how the spatiality of the built project assists the narrative of the story, it brings back the central question driving this research. How does the story help us gain a deeper understanding of the narrative of spaces within the building?

When analysing buildings, we study forms, plans, sections, methods of construction or assembly, and often approach buildings as objects to be progressively dissected to understand the functioning of their spaces. However, the story format gives a different understanding of these formal characteristics, making use of appropriate literary tools such as description to make the reader aware of the changing nature of function in the architecture of the house, which is used to establish the notion of time in the story.

In the story, changing descriptions of architectural spaces are used as a device of perception in the story to establish the notion of 'time.' The story takes the exact likeness of the plan of Villa Tugendhat and then transforms the house into a research clinic by telling readers precisely how the inner layout of the house changes during this time. It tells readers how it turns into an abandoned house when all furniture is removed, and elucidates how the large expanse of free space facilitates the building to transform into a physiotherapy centre. To consider the famed onyx wall in the building, the story tells readers how the onyx wall glows a deep orange on winter afternoons, and gives an orange hue to the inside of the house - a fact which has scarcely been explained in any documentary texts of the building. The story vividly describes the transparency the Glass Room gives its inhabitants and explains how, with change of seasons or time during the day, this degree of transparency from the outside changes and

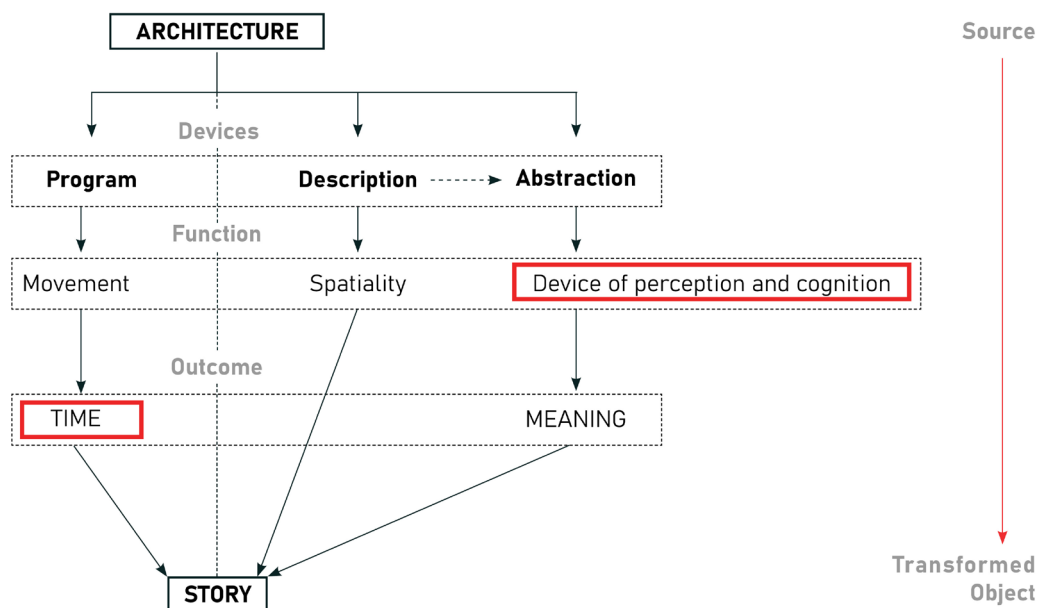


Figure 3. Defining the parameters which contribute to the 'outcomes' and aid in the adaptation of content from one medium of communication to another.

the expanse of glass almost becomes a mirror reflecting its surroundings.

Studying The Glass Room and analysing how the information about the building has been represented in the adaptation helps us understand how the writing fed back to the perception of the building and understanding of the source architecture itself. Knowing the real building behind the story enriches the reader's mental image of the space and its transformations. Likewise, reading the story before visiting the actual building heightens the experience of the architecture. Noting that many people considered Mies' approach to his projects to be 'cold', Blake (1960) instead argues that Mies' 'romantic' approach lay in the way his 'glass walls reflect[ed] the changing seasons, the drifting clouds, the colours of the sky and leaves'.

Research on text-architecture relations highlights how these two media interact and complement each other. It suggests exploring how adapting architectural projects into other media can help share their stories more easily with a wider audience outside of the architecture community.

Note: This article is based on the author's undergraduate thesis titled 'Narratives in Architecture' and can be accessed at <https://portfolio.cept.ac.in/2024/S/fa/drp/ar3596-drp000963-spring-2024/ug190032-spring-2024-ar3596-ug190032>. Bindu Maringanti, Research Assistant, WCFA (2025-26) helped in editing this article.

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