

Spatial Language: Lisa Robertson's Architectural Poetics

Introduction

Punctuation becomes scaffolding, narrative voice becomes collective, and syntax becomes a site for dwelling. Such “becomings” result from Lisa Robertson’s spatial poetics, which figure most prominently in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (hereafter referred to as *Occasional Work*). The 2017 book thematizes the expression of language in—and as—architectural space.

The first section of Robertson’s lyrical essays, *Occasional Work*, consists primarily of catalogs commissioned for various art exhibitions. Writing from the perspective of the Office for Soft Architecture, a pseudo-corporate author-function, Robertson accounts for the shifting texture, geography, and architecture of 20th-century Vancouver. The second section, *Seven Walks*, contains writings as the subject (presumably Robertson) and a guide navigate the city of Vancouver. These poems document the contemporary urban *topos* vis-à-vis a collective subject.

Robertson’s poetry offers a nuanced engagement with architecture on literal, grammatical, and conceptual terms. The book was initially conceived as its introductory manifesto, which outlines the invented architectural movement of Soft Architecture and its accompanying office. A sentence begins: “The work of the SA paradoxically recompiles the metaphysics of surface, performing a horizontal research which greets”—and continues—“shreds of fiber, pigment flakes, the bleaching of light, proofs of lint, ink, spore, liquid and pixelation, the strange, frail, leaky cloths and sketching and gestures which we are.”¹ In an instance, the sentence shifts from a removed, theoretical tone to a sensorial, fragmented description. The book follows suit, ebbing and flowing between these two voices. Her sentences are as explanatory and theoretical as they are poetic and intimate, with the first-person plural narrator suggesting that Robertson is both a theorist and a poet.

¹ Robertson, Lisa. *Occasional work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. New York, NY: Publication Studio Hudson, 2017, 17. “SA,” here, refers to “Soft Architecture.”

Sustaining a focus on architecture throughout the book, Robertson intertwines poetic and theoretical reflections on modernist architectural design, commenting extensively on architects such as Lilly Reich and Rem Koolhaas. Robertson points out how her poetry responds to architectural space when she says: “More and more poetry is becoming for me the urgent description of (...) space.”² Moreover, she attests to the analogous relationship between architecture and poetry in when she writes: “I too want an architecture, a poetry, that is both delusional and critical, a ludic zone, precisely because I cannot conceive of a site as innocent. Every site is a form of governance, command.”³ The repetition of the article “a” between “an architecture” and “a poetry” (without a conjunction such as “and” between the two phrases) creates a sense of parallelism, suggesting interchangeability or equivalence between the mediums.

Recent scholarship has examined the role of architecture in *Occasional Work*, primarily its intersections with urban design, politics, modernism, materiality, and ecocritical and feminist perspectives.⁴ Such work tends to position architecture as a literal referent in Robertson’s work, overlooking its conceptual role on the level of language, and more precisely, the sentence. *Occasional Work* engages with architecture and architectural theory on literal, physical, theoretical, and—this essay posits—grammatical levels. To understand the significance of architecture in Robertson’s work, it is necessary to consider it in figurative, abstract terms—not only as physical construction but also as a linguistic and grammatical structure.

Therefore, this essay takes up architecture in non-technical terms, setting aside architectonics and formal architectural principles in favor of treating the “architectural” conceptually for the

² Robertson, Lisa. *Occasional work*, 15.

³ Ibid, 68.

⁴ Eva Darias-Beautell, “The Softness of Theory: A T(r)opological Reading of Lisa Robertson’s ‘Soft Architecture’,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 49, no. 4 (December 2016): 53–70; Geoffrey Hlibchuk, “Delirious Cities: Lisa Robertson’s *Occasional Work* and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 36 (September 14, 2011): 223–42; Maia Joseph, “The Afterlife of the City: Reconsidering Urban Poetic Practice,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 34, no. 2 (2009): 152–77. Such scholarship often frames Robertson’s poetic dismantling of rigid architectural paradigms in terms of urban design and marginal aspects of city life. Eva Darias-Beautell, for example, investigates the relationship between material and metaphoric modes of representing urban experience: first by exploring the process by which the discourse of theory is supplemented by an embodied practice; and, second, probing and testing the radical potential of this combinatory choice. Geoffrey Hlibchuk’s “Delirious Cities,” examines materialist-poetic tropes—such as fabric, translucency and delirium—to explore urbanity. Maia Joseph, on the other hand, reads Robertson’s poetry in relation to urban poetics, drawing on ecocritical perspectives to outline how Vancouver’s changing landscape shapes her poetic representations of space.

purposes of literary analysis. As literary scholar Joshua Clover aptly puts it, architecture is “not the built thing, not the signified; not particularly architecture as it appears in cities and towns. (...) Instead, the referent, the architecture-concept.”⁵ In what follows, I contend that Robertson’s writing operates as “soft architecture”: a fluid, provisional structure where punctuation becomes the scaffold through which language constructs, deconstructs, and reformulates itself. Robertson engages architecture not only referentially but compositionally, linguistically, and grammatically—through the structure of the sentence, the organization of syntax, and the plural narrator.

The Architecture of the Sentence

The linguistic articulation of architectural space finds its most precise expression in the structure of the sentence—to which Robertson carefully molds language in *Occasional Work*. Jennifer Scappettone acknowledges this in “Site: Surfeit: Office for Soft Architecture Makes the City Confess.” Amidst her deft exploration of Robertson’s feminist underpinnings, Scappettone writes that “sentences that obey the syntax of dissolving, sopping space” become Robertson’s rhetorical strategy over the “march of tolerable grammar.”⁶

Indeed, Robertson alleviates the rigidity of the sentence as a form, softening the architecture of language. Where other poets might reroute the conventions of linear prose (*détournement*) through typeface, layout, and visual poetics, Robertson opts for a more understated rigor, alleviating the firmness of punctuation within its own bounds. She reframes the decision to work in sentences as an implicit mandate when in a 2015 lecture devoted to the form of the sentence, she explains:

Writing, for me, is the search for a sentence. Unremarkably for my age and context, I learned or absorbed an interpretation of sentence form that is primarily syntactic and structural. And this received convention of materialist description has shaped much of my thinking. Before being exposed to this now pretty much canonized, and so almost invisible convention, I had as a matter of course as a reader developed my own intuitive criteria for sentence reading and writing, and at heart, it was emotional.⁷

⁵ Joshua Clover, “The Adventures of Lisa Robertson in the Space of Flows,” *Chicago Review* 51, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 77–81, 77–78.

⁶ Jennifer Scappettone, “Site Surfeit: Office for Soft Architecture Makes the City Confess,” *Chicago Review* 51/52 (2006): 74.

⁷ Robertson, “Lisa Robertson Lecture.”

As both a structure and a “search,” the sentence is simultaneously a container and a convention—neither predetermined nor fixed, but something to be *searched for* (though not necessarily, and perhaps not ever, *found*). Sentences, and especially Robertson’s, both constrain and liberate thought, structuring meaning and building space for subjective reconfiguration.

The most thoroughly elaborated component of the sentence in the lecture is the pause: the moment of rest that follows a sentence and functions as the sentence’s interpretant. Apropos of Alan Gardiner, Robertson asserts that a sentence gains its definitional grounding by way of the pause. Quoting Gardiner, Robertson defines a sentence as: “a group of words motivated by a particular communicative desire or will, followed by a pause.”⁸ This pause forms a boundary between fragments of language, themselves described, constructed, and delimited through the pause itself, such that language is provisionally defined by the edges of its own container.

The period provides a negative receptacle, a space for language to dwell. Without the period, language becomes crowded and indecipherable—as evidenced by its Ancient Greek roots.⁹ The period only gestures toward linguistic signification, for insofar as it signifies, it does so in the negative register: a pause, a gap, a break. The negative tilt and tone of the pause activates the liveliness of language. The pause is not itself language but allows language to become meaningful, and to finally express. Just as the architectural void is not absence but a component of design, Robertson’s pause—in its negation—reorients the terms of engagement. The chiasmic mark, both a moment of rest and an arbiter for meaning-making, unifies vectored sentences, gathering the repetitive structure of inwardly varied sentences in the production of meaning.

⁸ Alan H. Gardiner, **quoted in** “Lisa Robertson Lecture.”

⁹ Historically, the full stop emerged from a desire to enclose negative space. Text was originally written continuously, without blank spaces between words, until the 3rd century BCE in Ancient Greece, readers were tasked with punctuating the text. They marked the page with oblique dots, whose placement determined their meaning, effectively fracturing the continuous flow of language to shape textual units and reorganize meaning. This act of pre-reading resists punctuation’s normative characterization as secondary, and rightly acknowledges punctuating marks as both primary and formative to an encounter with text.

Punctuation: Structured Silence

Turning back to the lecture, Robertson acknowledges the forward-facing directionality of a sentence of linear prose. She notes, however, that “any pause has a character.” These pauses do not turn out to be the stable, prescriptive, forward-facing cues that a brief glance at her simple page layout might indicate. Instead, her punctuation opens multiple avenues for meaning, endowing language with multiple meanings and the indeterminacy of interpretation.

The deceptively simple and seemingly static form of the sentence becomes multidimensional and multidirectional in her hands. In *Occasional Work*, the full stop often follows other shorter, more ambiguous pauses (as pathways and possibilities)—commas, parenthesis, semicolons, colons—that each function, with distinct contours, as both syntax and sites of activation. In the second of *Seven Walks*, Robertson’s syntactic marks permit internal reversibility: “If it were a velvet (one of those worn ones that shrinks or adheres like a woman’s voice with ruptured warp and covert intelligence); if it were a canvas (all ground and flayed beyond the necessity for permanence.)”¹⁰ One might read through these parentheses linearly, or elide the parentheticals altogether, only returning to them in a second read. Considering these variable traversals through language, Robertson’s sentence begins to look like sentences. One might expect first “if” to be followed by a resulting “then.” The language following the “if,” can be imagined as a stand-in for an absent “then,” as the causal result of a positive instantiation of the first “if.” From another vantage, the similar beginnings of the clauses (“If it were a (fabric)”) intimate an internal, analogical correlation between them. Beyond the semicolon’s pause, break, threshold, or gap, the parenthetical imposes a comparative view of the sentence it seeks to split.

Even as the sentence faces its own final pause (“permanence.”), it remains inhabited by this complex array of pauses. Compared to the prototypical mark of the period, the semicolon seems multifarious: less prescriptive, more versatile and open to interpretation. With the parenthetical and the semicolon, Robertson performs the many things that a pause could be. In her words, it could be “a breath, or fumbling. Or a change of direction. Or a flicker of recollection or recognition. An incipient negation.”¹¹ Punctuation delineates language to facilitate meaning (“recollection” and “recognition”)

¹⁰ Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 199.

¹¹ Robertson, “Lisa Robertson Lecture.”

and also orchestrates a temporal rhythm reflective of bodily movements (“breath” and fumbling”). In this way, the pause becomes a breath and the human a space through which language flows. The pause thereby shapes and reflects the subtle negotiations that occur between reading and being, such that Robertson’s architectural language functions both as a space which *moves* and a space *to be moved through*.

Syntax as Linguistic Scaffolding

Scaffolding features prominently in *Occasional Work*, notably in her poem *Doubt and the History of Scaffolding*, with archival images of Vancouver’s construction sites prefacing the text. These images of scaffolding visually scaffold her poetry, acting as “a furnishing,” “a skin,” or “a grove” for her words.¹² Words such as: “Memory’s architecture is neither palatial nor theatrical but soft.”¹³ She upends traditional constructions of memory—fixed, monumental—with a more pliable, intimate description that emphasizes its inherent fluidity and adaptability. Like scaffolding, memory is a structure that is transient and changeable. Then later, “Scaffolding is analogy.”¹⁴ The provisional nature of scaffolding mirrors the malleability of analogy as a literary form, and the capacity for each to facilitate transformation and movement: whether in the construction of a building or the articulation of a thought. Darias-Beautell comments on scaffolding as a structural force amidst her articulation of the social and political stakes of scaffolding in a city undergoing gentrification:

Scaffolding is invested in literal as well as highly symbolic meanings: it refers to the city’s perpetual state of building and renovation, and also expresses ‘the vulnerability of surface,’ (140); it points out the conditions of decay and contamination in the building construction materials, exposing their environmental contingencies, but also celebrates the malleability of the structure; it covers something that is not fit for living, but also announces transformation and change.¹⁵

Darias-Beautell rightfully notes how Robertson’s poetics interact with the structural constraints of the environment, but she fails to observe how the poet addresses the problem of structural constraints on

¹² Eva Darias-Beautell, “The Softness of Theory,” 60. Darias-Beautell quotes Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 140.

¹³ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 139.

¹⁵ Darias-Beautell, 60. Darias-Beautell cites Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 141

the level of the text. Robertson unsettles the conventions of materialist description, itself no doubt a component of the environment. In doing so, she highlights the primacy of “interpretive frames in determining reality” such that the sentence, like the scaffold, becomes a central component of text’s ongoing negotiation and flow—between theory and the body, between a word and a pause.¹⁶ Robertson’s concern with scaffolding self-reflexively pertains to her own description of it.

Robertson’s comment that scaffolding articulates “the negative space of the building” rhymes nicely with the pause as the arbiter of a sentence.¹⁷ The pause, like the scaffold, could be described by, to use Darias-Beautell’s words, “the vulnerability of surface” and “the malleability of the structure.”¹⁸ The period only becomes the pause as it is encountered by the human, such that the transition from the period to the pause is a movement from predetermination to potentiality, from a notation to the future it points towards. Like the scaffold, the pause announces “transformation and change.” As Maia Joseph puts it, Robertson assigns scaffolding “the task of making visible what the urban environment is, what it is not, and what it could be.”¹⁹ Robertson’s play on punctuation with(in) the sentence performs a similar function: making visible what the sentence is, what it is not, and what it could be. The poet further elaborates the role of scaffolding, conceptualizing it as a projection of the body:

We could say scaffolding is a furnishing insofar as it supports the desires of our bodies. It’s moveable and it faces us. We orient it to our transient needs. It has a front and a back like furnishing, and like our bodies. Like furniture it is a projection of our bodies, making us bigger, more limber, more elegant and serious. It intersects with our experience like the wave front of a dynamic system. A scaffold sketches a body letting go of proprietary expectation, or habit, in order to be questioned by change.²⁰

Viewing scaffolding as punctuation—where the pause signals breath—we recognize how each “supports the desire of our bodies.” As illustrated by Robertson’s parentheses and semicolons,

¹⁶ Adam Dickinson, “Pataphysics and Biosemiotics in Lisa Robertson’s Office for Soft Architecture,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18, no. 3 (2011): pp. 615-636, 627; See also Darias-Beautell, 60.

¹⁷ Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 141.

¹⁸ Darias-Beautell, 60.

¹⁹ Maia Joseph, “The Afterlife of the City: Reconsidering Urban Poetic Practice,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 34, no. 2 (2009): pp. 152-177, 163.

²⁰ Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 141.

punctuating pauses may reverse, skip, and fold; they are “moveable” and subject to the will of the reader. Robertson’s pause not only instructs but also *responds* to us, facing us as we metabolize language. Robertson soothes the hard-edged bounds of language—punctuation and the syntactic rules of sentence-making—into something much softer. For Robertson, linguistic scaffolding exists to be softened, and paradoxically problematizes the will to do so. “A proposition is followed by a pause,” the poet explains, before asking: “When we begin a sentence, its enunciation, do we know when we will pause?”²¹

The Collective

Occasional Work’s introductory manifesto features collective assertions that vaporize the lyric subject or self. “We walked through the soft arcade. We become an architect.” Then later, “We die and become architecture.”²² While *Seven Walks* oscillates between the first- and third-person perspectives, this section solely deploys the collective “we.” Robertson describes this spatialization of subjectivity as “becoming multiple” and “becoming an architect.” Such writing is not just a counterintuitive spiritualization or dematerialization of the body; there are stakes to these “becomings” for they enrich and complicate, rather than efface the body—and subjectivity itself. Far from merely undoing the body and abstracting it from its qualities, as conceptualism tends to do, Robertson’s “we” indicates the urban specificities with which it is necessary to think spatial experience. But even as a sentence becomes *our* sentence, the question of who constitutes this “we” remains ambiguous and shifting. “We” may consist of “My guide and I,” Robertson-the-poet and Robertson-the-theorist, or the Office’s many constituents.

“Soft arcade,” the pathway to “becoming an architect,” directly references Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, a foundational work which reverberates throughout *Occasional Work*. This influence becomes evident in her exploration of the flâneur, the dream-like fluidity of the moving body through the urban

²¹ Robertson, “Lisa Robertson Lecture.”

²² Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 13.

landscape, and the city as a site of collective memory.²³ As we have seen, Robertson's plural pronoun and syntactical scaffolds produce a literary architecture to be experienced and moved through, fulfilling Walter Benjamin's definition of architecture as an art whose reception occurs "through *the collective*."²⁴ Language is not merely read or observed but also *lived through* with subjects implicated in the structure they inhabit.²⁵ "Subjects" not "subject" and "we" not "I" because language, for Robertson, and architecture, for Benjamin, are necessarily experienced collectively. Robertson's "we" ultimately refers to us, her interpolated readers.

The plural narrator plays a pivotal role in Robertson's articulation of soft architecture. The "we" of the Office for Soft Architecture is not a homogenous entity but a multivocal, collective consciousness. This polyphonic approach echoes the indeterminacy of punctuation discussed earlier: commas and semicolons open multiple pathways through the sentence, just as the plural voice produces multiple, participatory modes of navigation.

Far more than a formal or stylistic device, Robertson's punctuation invites readers to enter the space of the poem and inhabit the pauses, the gaps, and the breaks in language, where meaning is continuously made and unmade. *Occasional Work* proposes that language and space are mutually constitutive and in constant reconfiguration. The result reimagines architecture as a conceptual phenomenon, not defined by physicality or materiality so much as by the processes of movement and meaning-making it enables.

Conclusion

Robertson resists traditional syntactic and architectural paradigms that insist on permanence and stability, proposing instead a poetics rooted in transience and movement. By examining Robertson's

²³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). See also: Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *Selected Writings: Volume 3 (1935–1938)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁴ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 48 *Selected Writings: Volume 3 (1935–1938)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 119–120 [Italics added]. In the passage cited here, Benjamin also asserts that architecture is perceived "in a state of distraction [*Zerstreuung*]." The word *Zerstreuung*, translated as "distraction," also connotes dispersion, deconcentration, and dissemination.

²⁵ In one of many instances, Robertson reflects on language as an embodied space: "We say thought's object is not knowledge but living." Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 16.

poetic techniques on a close, observational scale, this essay has explored how “soft architecture” manifests conceptually and grammatically.

It has been tempting to view grammar and architecture as involved in a simply analogical relationship here, if not because Robertson suggests interchangeability (“I too want an architecture, a poetry”) and outright claims analogy (“scaffolding is analogy”).²⁶ But as we have seen, it is more complex than this. In the twofold *Occasional Work and Seven Walks*, Robertson pursues the fluctuation of architectural and linguistic structure to articulate the dissolution of their disciplinary bounds. She undoes a binaristic understanding of language and architecture to the extent that language *becomes one with architecture*. In her architecture of and for language, two- and three-dimensional structures and material and immaterial elements converge to “face the reaching middle.”²⁷ Robertson suggests that poetry and architecture share more than a metaphorical kinship; at this “reaching middle,” they *become* one another.

Given this dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, her poetry does not simply encourage interdisciplinary inquiry; it demands an *antidisciplinary* approach. This essay falls short of that ideal, still tethered to the structures its subject seeks to dissolve. Yet, in the spirit of her poetics: we are always in the process of becoming. And, in her words: “Nevertheless I wanted.”²⁸

²⁶ Ibid, 68, 139.

²⁷ Robertson, 17

²⁸ Ibid, 259

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