Build This for Me: The Genres of Architecture

Jillian Merrifield

In this article, Jillian Merrifield investigates the activity systems of two different kinds of architects, looking specifically at the way that they achieve their objectives. In her interview with a software architect and a commercial architect, she learns about how they work with real-world genres, how they adjust for different audiences, and how they use specialized languages in their compositions.

I have the privilege (?) of having two architects for parents: my father, Rich, is an architect in the traditional sense (that is, a designer of buildings/physical spaces), while my stepmother, Marilyn, is a software architect. This is the source of numerous jokes in our household, but I've never had a clear sense of how what Marilyn writes is similar to or different from my father's work—in fact, I had no idea what a software architect even was for the longest time. I've certainly never understood how two people in very different lines of work could both be architects.

There had to be some similarities between what they did, though. To investigate this idea, I turned to the idea of **activity systems**. According to the ISU Writing Program's website, an activity system is "the situation and contingencies under which a text is composed, reproduced, and/or distributed" in attempts to achieve an objective. The objective, of course, is whatever the writing is supposed to make happen. Perhaps they operated within similar activity systems, with similar objectives.

I also thought that perhaps, because they both work in technical fields, they would have similar relationships with specialized language (words that are used within a specific group that may be unfamiliar to others). I thought

that this might be true both in respect to the English language but also potentially with respect to visual languages as well, as I know that drawings are a big feature of architectural work.

To learn a bit more about what these two architects write in their separate professions, I created a set of interview questions and distributed them online, encouraging my parents to respond both to the questions and each other. Once I got the first set of answers, I did some thinking and then responded with a few rounds of follow-up questions. What follows is what I learned, interspersed with some of my own commentary.

I began the interview by asking my parents to tell me a bit about what they do so that later, as I learned more about the genres they produced, I could see how they served their overall job functions. This information would give me a sense of the kinds of situations in which they write and what some of their objectives might be.

MARILYN: I am a Senior Manager in the IT organization of a large pharmaceutical company. As part of the Strategy and Planning team, I am focused on helping the Commercial side of the business to deploy new products into the marketplace. I partner with creative agencies to deliver websites and iPad and mobile apps. I also work with Customer Relationship Marketing to enable sales people to track and communicate effectively with our patients and Healthcare professionals. I work with the Business Intelligence team on database management as well.

RICH: I am an architect, specializing in office space, medical offices and other types of commercial tenant spaces. I provide a full range of architectural services to my clients, including programming, schematic design, development of construction documents, administering contractor bidding processes, assisting with obtaining building permits, and performing various tasks during the construction process.

I thought it was really interesting, in reading these responses, that Marilyn's title deemphasizes the architectural function of her job. I wonder if there will come a day when architects working with material structures will need to distinguish themselves in the same way that software architects do. I also wondered what it said about the activity system in which she operates, but there were more pressing questions to attend to.

Before I started getting into specifics, I asked for a few comments about the general objectives of the written work that they produce. I thought that this might help me see how the way that they produce these texts ultimately helps to achieve their objectives.

RICH: Most writing in my work is intended to convey factual information or direction clearly and efficiently. Since the outcome of the information transfer is often [the] physical construction of something, there is an unusually direct correlation between what is written and what is done in the real world. Text

on drawings does use a certain kind of style and technical jargon, whereas letters or e-mails can tend to be more conversational, but the general goal for outcomes is the same.

MARILYN: Coding and [software] architecture are like architecture and electrical wiring. And like electrical wiring, there are other rules and standards that provide best practices and standards to those communities. But when you ask me to think as an architect I'm not going to that level, I will specify use HTML5 as a standard for a web page vs. HTML so that the page will look right on the screen but I assume that the developer [coder] knows HTML5. And yes, we have code reviews to follow up to make sure they did it [inspections].

Next, I asked several questions about the types of genres that they produce, who they write for, why they write, and how they adapt to their audience. Marilyn, who was the first to respond to these questions, took them up in a completely unexpected way, consolidating her responses to multiple questions into a single chart. Rich, who came to the online document after her, followed her lead and worked his responses into the chart. If I had been conducting oral interviews, I think I would have gotten very different answers (certainly less organized!).

Originally, some of these genres were placed in the same row, which tells me that Rich, who filled in the chart second, drew parallels between Marilyn's work and his own. For ease of reading, I've split these responses into different rows, but used shading to show where Rich identified similarities and grouped his responses with Marilyn's.

	Written Work/ genres	Audience	Intended Outcome
Marilyn	**Statements of work - Contracts**	Internal or external people	Define the scope of a project and outline the costs and deliverables. Establish a signed contract or agreement
Rich	**Proposals and Contracts**	Clients and Potential Clients	Providing a description of my proposed services and associated costs; explaining work not covered
Marilyn	**PowerPoint Presentations**	Provide information or training, propose a solution	Agreement to a solution People understand and can remember what was shared and have a positive opinion of me and the team
Rich	**Design Drawings (With text outlining design features)**	Clients: Owners, Tenants, Facility Managers	Understanding of the proposed design ideas; Design approval

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	Written Work/ genres	Audience	Intended Outcome
Marilyn	**Diagrams**	Internal people	To help visualize a process or an architecture
Rich	**Drawings**	Clients, Contractors, Building Officials	To describe scope of construction work and compliance with building codes
Marilyn	**Project Schedules**	Internal or external project teams	Awareness of the tasks and resources that are needed on a project to ensure successful delivery
Rich	**Project Schedules & Phasing Plans**	Clients, Contractors	Coordination of construction work with the Client's operations

In addition to what he put in the chart, Rich also offered a few generalizations about the audience and purpose of his work:

RICH: Aside from quick notations for my own use, most writing is for the purpose of communication with others—to describe tasks, work scopes, design ideas, etc. Drawings require a great deal of text to explain in words what is not always clear graphically. Words reinforce the images, and generally take precedence over them if there is a discrepancy. Most of my written work is intended to simply document ideas, decisions and agreements.

Something that I found interesting, in reading these responses, is the different trajectories of these texts. According to the ISU Writing Program's website, ***trajectory*** *refers to "what texts do and how they move around in the world." Most of Rich's writing is directed outside of his own office—after all, the people building the things he designs are outside of his office. Marilyn's work, though, has a mix of internal and external trajectories. I was curious how intended audience and trajectory impacted their writing, so I asked whether they adjust the way that they approach their genres when they are writing for different audiences.*

MARILYN: How I adjust my genres for audiences depends on the work product—if it is a presentation, I make sure that it can stand alone in case it is circulated to others and I am not presenting it. I like using tables which are easier for people. I will use a diagram if needed.

RICH: If I know that a document is intended for a client or someone that is known to be unfamiliar with design or construction issues, I will try to avoid using terminology that might be confusing or difficult to understand. This does not necessarily mean changing the content, just the words that are used.

Both of their responses demonstrate that they are accounting for their audiences in their composition decisions. Because Rich specifically mentioned word choice, I asked them how they do or do not use specialized language in their genres.

MARILYN: If you mean that perhaps we use technical jargon when communicating with others who are not technical, then yes, we need to keep it very high level and provide analogies or provide a description. Honestly, non-technical people are not interested nor do they have the time to understand our world. They care about the outcome and trust me and the team to make it happen. They just get confused and feel stupid if we go into too much detail.

RICH: Certainly [I use] specialized terminology as it pertains to building materials and processes. Where these are used, they are written with contractors in mind—an audience that would be familiar with this "language." In my case, it is more common that people look at and be confused by the graphics involved in my work—floor plans, etc.—rather than the words used to describe the work.

In addition to talking about specialized terminology, Rich also talked about the specialized graphic (visual) language of his field:

RICH: Much of my work product is much more graphically based—construction drawings, for example. The problem here is that we are generally trying to describe a proposed reality that will be constructed and will exist in three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface—the paper. Just as a writer would carefully select words to describe something, we select from a graphic vocabulary that includes line weights and styles and filled areas of color or hatching. In our profession, certain graphic standards have evolved over time, and are clearly understood by the intended audience. Dotted lines, for example, indicate items that cannot be seen directly in a view.

I followed up by asking about how they translate the specialized languages (including visual languages) of their work for various audiences. I was backtracking a bit here, finding a way to relate their use of specialized languages to the objectives they sought to achieve with their writing.

MARILYN: There are different types of diagrams—physical, logical, network, integration, transports—it goes on. The thing that is similar is that they are read by others and used to guide them in what they are to do. When we create architecture diagrams, we make sure that we all use the same conventions and symbols. Because architectures need to be understood by internal people, it is not unusual for a company to create their own stencils and training to be consistent.

Marilyn's response made it clear that translating the specialized language isn't something that she has to worry about very often—it's usually only used within her team. Rich's

response indicated a need to spend more time negotiating between specialized language and more general language:

RICH: I have learned to be very good at describing design ideas and translating into words the sometimes confusing graphic images that are used in presentations. With the development of software that makes it easier to prepare images of almost photographic quality, it is less important to be able to make this translation, as people are comfortable with their understanding of photographic images. Also, since we have to assume that not all viewers of a drawing set are familiar with our graphic standards, we generally include legends that combine words with the graphic symbols for each drawing type and line weight/style to explain our intent. In most cases, these legends take the mystery out of our graphic language for the layman.

It seemed to me that both architects had a good understanding of their genres in the present day, but I wondered how they got to this point. When I asked about how they learned to produce the genres that they use in their work, Rich was the only one who answered.

RICH: While there was formal training in school regarding how to put together business letters, etc., most of the language and forms were simply learned and perfected over time by practice, learning from situations where my intent was not made clear enough by the words that I used, and adjusting over time. As I am sure is true with most professionals who have been in their fields for a long time, we have learned to pull language and form from our experience and memory to apply to situations as needed—whether adding text to a drawing, writing a proposal or responding to an e-mail. We do it almost without thinking. New knowledge tends to come from either making mistakes and learning from them, or more rarely, from making note of particularly well-written documents or well-handled situations.

This response seemed to clearly link Rich's learning process with his success in achieving his activity system's objectives (or others' successes in the same thing). While Marilyn didn't talk about how she initially learned the genres she uses, she did talk a bit about how she continues to learn about different communication methods. She shared a few tidbits that she learned in a professional development session recently:

MARILYN: Corporate America is inundated with e-mail and people don't have time to read e-mail or other lengthy documents. Our writing needs to be to the point. If someone opens a long e-mail, they just will skip it and wait for the person to reach out or hope that someone else will respond to the e-mail. Another trend is to include multi-media instead of writing. People are used to YouTube as a method of communicating and it is quite effective and fun. Lastly, we are using WebEx to host meetings—recording it and then sharing it with others to share when there has been a presentation shared or other significant information shared.

I noticed two things in this response. The first was that Marilyn uses specific multimedia tools to create her texts in ways that will achieve her objectives (for example, WebEx). The second was that the genres that she uses are changing over time—meaning that she has to adapt. That got me thinking about how the activity systems are probably changing also over time. I wanted to make this a more specific question, though, so I asked how changing technology has impacted their composition processes—after all, that technology is a tool that contributes to the production of their writing. By this point in the interview, Marilyn had already made reference to several different technological resources that she uses, but Rich hadn't mentioned technology at all.

MARILYN: Great question—there was no concept of technical architecture until recently and over time the standard type of documents traditionally used have undergone tremendous change. The variation in the industry and the lack of a single clear standard makes sharing documents more difficult. And the tools are cumbersome to use. Thirty years ago, there was no need for any of this—it was the dawn of PCs and most companies were using IBM mainframes. Then we went to client-server and now we are back to essentially what we had with the IBM Mainframe environments only we are calling it a cloud—few people really get that. The fact that companies were able to create applications and websites didn't exist, and the need to connect with external parties through code has resulted in the creation of processes and tools that didn't exist.

From what Marilyn said, it seems that her activity system hasn't even been around for very long—it only exists because there is a digital space that needs to be structured, something that didn't exist thirty years ago. I know that people have been designing buildings for much longer than that, though, so I was also interested in what Rich had to say:

RICH: I began learning the elements of this graphic language in my earliest drafting classes in high school, and spent years perfecting the art of creating consistently rendered lines by properly sharpening and twisting a pencil as I drew it across a page. This was a very tactile way of communicating—something that I feel has been lost as more and more work has shifted to the computer, where line styles and weights are selected from menus and rendered electronically on the screen. Even the ability to clearly letter text notes onto a drawing was a highly prized skill, and was practiced endlessly in the days of drawing by hand. Now everything is simply typed onto a screen, and a whole new generation of architects has appeared that lack the ability to artfully communicate by their own handwriting. Expediency has replaced artistry, and I contend that a little of the meaning has been lost in translation, in the same way that the subtle nuance of a phrase often gets lost when it is translated into another language. Not everyone would agree with me on that point, however.

This presented a million more questions that I could have asked—about technology, about collaboration within the activity system, about reactions to change—but I chose instead to step back and think about what I had learned.

Rich and Marilyn's work clearly functions within complicated activity systems that have changed a lot over time. To help make sense of this, I turned to **cultural-historical activity theory** (**CHAT**), which offers a way of looking at a piece of writing and seeing it as a part of a larger, complicated world (activity system). I thought that this might help me to understand how Rich and Marilyn's respective objectives are fulfilled by their writing. While CHAT is often considered as seven aspects (for more information about these, I recommend checking out the ISU Writing Program's online glossary), I really like the approach to CHAT that Ryan Edel outlines in his *GWRJ* article, "In the Twilight of the Modern Age." Edel streamlines CHAT into three categories: the act of writing, cultural views, and physical resources, all with the caveat that the borders between these categories are somewhat slippery (97).

Looking at what I now know about these two architects' work products through the lens of those three categories, it's much easier to see the differences and similarities. There's only occasional overlap in their acts of writing—they might use similar tools (like e-mail) to produce some genres and different tools for others, but both find themselves collaborating with and thinking of others as they write their texts. They both have strong relationships with physical resources, whether it's Rich's relationship with material space or Marilyn's relationship with digital spaces (like websites), but the realities of how they distribute their texts are very different.

Perhaps the greatest area of unity is in the real world interactions of their texts. Both produce texts with the primary objective of designing, organizing, and constructing material or digital space. They collaborate with others along the way, sharing their plans and receiving input, and ultimately their diagrams and construction drawings are taken up by others—programmers, contractors, etc.—in ways that lead to the construction of physical and digital spaces. Everything that they write, from e-mails to contracts to architectural diagrams, builds on the previous writing task to achieve that objective.

With all of this in mind, I can finally see why they are both called architects, even if they work in completely different fields, with different tools and with different groups of people. While their activity systems exist in different fields—digital spaces and physical spaces—they are united by the shared objective of directing others in the creation of spaces, and this is reflected in the writing that they produce.

Works Cited

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Jillian Merrifield is a first year PhD student in English Studies with a specialization in creative writing (mostly fiction). She worked as an architectural draftsman for two years–proof that your English degree can take you anywhere.