

# Disciplining fiction: Projecting Robin Evans through history and geography

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**ABSTRACT:** In 1978, Robin Evans published “Figures, Doors and Passages,” charting an explicit strategy for the coupling of architecture and fiction. In it, he argued that pairing architectural plans and their contemporary literature would elucidate the connection between spatial configurations and social life. By doing so, he conferred provisional legitimacy to literature, suggesting that there might be disciplinary avenues to conscript fiction in architectural research. For Evans, affording credibility to fictional representations required a specific bracketing, a bracketing leveraged against forms of representation particular to the discipline of architecture.

Although some may discount the use of fiction as source material as simply an eccentricity of a design profession, it is seen as a potentially significant resource in disciplines whose credibility is tied directly to their sources’ veracity: historians and geographers have argued for the inclusion of fiction within their canon, though not without significant discussions of its boundaries and potentials. These discussions, recorded in their trade publications, argue for the capacity of fictions and set boundaries relative to the rigors of their respective scholarship. These arguments in History and Geography, rather than finding their limits at fiction, have led to new inroads within their own scholarship through a continued, refined discourse that identifies fiction’s provisional legitimacy and latent capacity.

Architecture’s appropriation of fiction has been more idiosyncratic, and no systematic survey of method exists. This paper compares the agendas, boundaries, and potentials of historians’, geographers’, and architects’ employment of fiction. The contemporary resurgence of literature, fiction, and writing as appropriate domains of architectural research evidences a need to frame their inclusion within architectural scholarship. Using Robin Evans’ explicit methodology as a point of entry, this paper compares his architectural representations and social fictions to those of History and Geography, in an attempt to identify a line of inquiry appropriate to contemporary architectural research.

**KEYWORDS:** Robin Evans, Fiction, History, Geography

## INTRODUCTION

Robin Evans’ employment of literature is a concerted effort to implicate architecture in the realm of human affairs. In “Figures, Doors and Passages,” his introduction makes this explicit.

Take the portrayal of human figures and take house plans for a given time and place: look at them together as evidence of a way of life, and the coupling between everyday conduct and architectural organization may become more lucid. (Evans 2011, 56-57)

However, while his intention may be clearly disciplinary, his conscription of literature to supplement, inflect, and extend the discipline’s purview is not exclusive to Architecture. His contemporaries in the fields of History and Geography also solicit literature as a source and device to interrogate their own disciplinary boundaries. In analyzing Evans’ architectural appropriation, this paper qualifies the credibility he gives to literature in reference to other disciplines whose scholarship is bound fundamentally to their descriptive fidelity to an actual time or place.



## 1.0 Robin Evans: Architecture and Literature

The inclusion of literature in Robin Evans' scholarship was a calculated gambit, one of which he was unequivocally conscious. Given his contemporaries' excursions into literature, either Hedjuk's poetics or Eisenman's semiotics, his use of fiction found clear disciplinary demarcations. In turning to literature, he hoped to furnish architecture with evidence of its formative contribution to social worlds. However, in doing so, he conspicuously avoided equating architectural forms of representation with fictional forms of representation. In order to frame his intention in enlisting literature to provide proof of architecture's social agency, it is useful to anachronistically acknowledge his conclusion:

In reaching these conclusions architectural plans have been compared with paintings and various sorts of literature. There is a lot to be said for making architecture once more into art; rescuing it from the semiology and methodology under which it has largely disappeared. But too often this restitution has been attempted by taking it out from under one stone and putting it back under another. This is sometimes done in a rather guileless way, by equating architecture with literature or painting so that it becomes an echo of words and shapes; sometimes in a more sophisticated way, by adopting the vocabulary and procedures of the literary critic or art historian and applying them to architecture. The result is the same: like novels, like portraiture, architecture is made into a vehicle for reflection. Overloaded with meaning and symbolism, its direct intervention in human affairs is spuriously reduced to a question of practicality. (Evans 2011, 88-89)

To avoid equating literature and architecture, Evans purposefully defined both forms of representation and afforded them provisional legitimacy. In order to qualify these differences, it is helpful to examine Evans' writings and analyse their disciplinary discrimination.

### 1.1. Spaces and Bodies: Plans and Literature

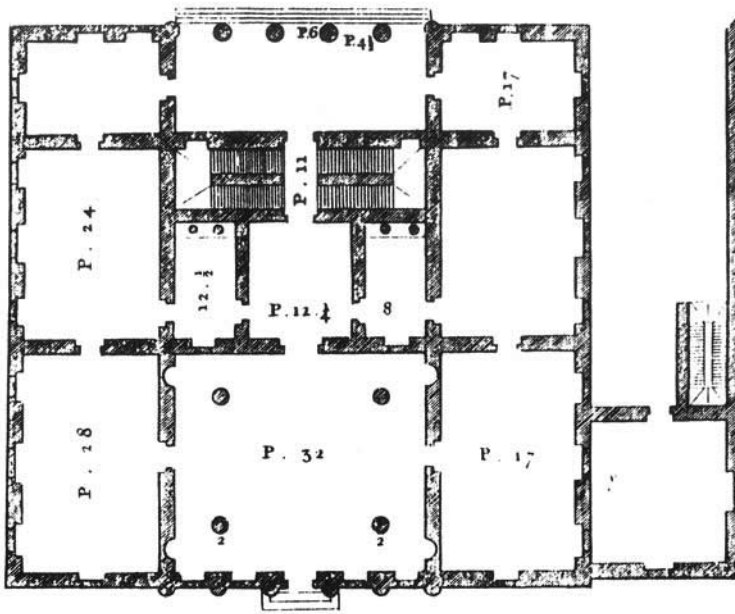
In "Figures, Doors and Passages," Evans turns to literature and paintings to evidence social patterns absent in architectural forms of representation. Evans qualifies what plans (a disciplinary form of representation) are meant to signify and what literature is meant to augment. He argues the plan is a useful representation of typical architectural spaces for this study, in that

If anything is described by an architectural plan, it is the nature of human relationships, since the elements whose trace it records – walls, doors, windows and stairs – are employed first to divide and then selectively to re-unite space. But what is generally absent in even the most elaborately illustrated building is the way human figures will occupy it. (Evans 2011, 56-57)

Evans prefaces his employment of the plan as the disciplinary form of representation that inscribes social patterns. However, despite this preference, he notes that such patterns are explicitly absent and only potentially inferred. In order to qualify architecture's influence on social patterns he couples the plans from two times and places with their contemporaneous literature to substantiate the relationship between architectural organization and cultural norms. Identifying three criteria that modern planners assume to be universal conditions of home (privacy, comfort, and convenience), Evans compares the architectural plans and literary situations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian villa and the 18<sup>th</sup> century English country home.

In order to correlate the architectural organization and social patterns of the Renaissance villa, Evans presents the plan of Palladio's Pallazzo Antonini (1556) and cites two pieces of literature, Baldassare Castiglione's courtesy book *The Courtier* (1528) and Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography (1563).





**Figure 1:** Pallazzo Antonini (Palladio 1556).

Palladio's plan is presented as a typically organized villa configured as a matrix of interconnected rooms. Given the disciplinary audience's ability to read the plan, we are able to project the manner in which bodies would be capable of seeing and circulating through space. Evans extends this to qualify a particular notion of convenience, one confirmed by Alberti's proposition that, "It is also convenient to place the doors in such a Manner that they may lead to as many parts of the edifice as possible." (Evans 2011, 63)

However, to qualify the conditions of comfort and privacy, Evans turns to literary sources to furnish the portrayals of bodies. Referencing the courtesy book, *The Courtier*, Evans brackets the book's credibility by noting that the description is undoubtedly "a purified, elaborated and sentimentalized account of actual events, but the portrayal of the group as a natural recourse for passing the time is in perfect accord with other sources." Those other sources include the autobiography of Renaissance artist Cellini. To qualify cultural norms of privacy and comfort, Evans quotes two short passages from Cellini

...as was only fitting at the age of twenty-nine, I had taken a charming and very beautiful young girl as my maidservant... Because of this I had my room at quite a distance from where the workmen slept, and also some way from the shop. I kept the young girl in a tiny ramshackle bedroom adjoining mine...

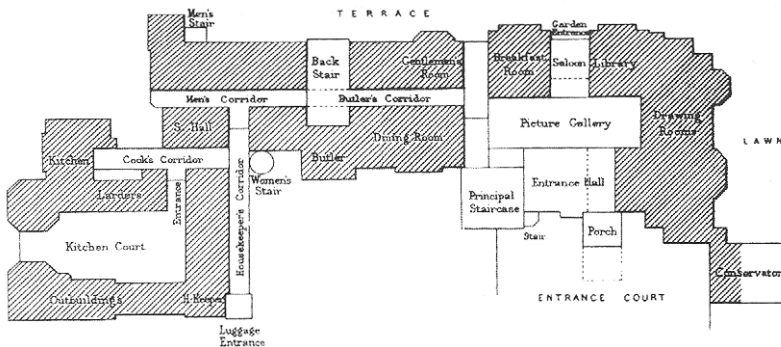
I had myself carried to the Medici Palace, up to where the little terrace is: they left me resting there, waiting for the Duke to come past. A good few friends of mine from the court came up and chatted with me. (Evans 2011, 66)

Privacy, in the first citation, is afforded through a calculated visual and physical distancing from the activity of others. Comfort, in the second citation, is meant to frame the normalcy of intrusion conditioned by the circulatory patterns of the matrix of interconnected rooms. As it was considered normal to happen upon someone in course of moving from one space to another, the protagonist opportunistically positioned himself and was camouflaged by a group of friends who also happened to find him in the normal course of their movements.



Evans concludes from these representations of space and portrayals of bodies a culture comfortable with the company of others, comfortable with being intruded upon given the convenience of movement, and able to construct privacy given the configuration of the homes they inhabited.

To implicate architecture in the “direct intervention in human affairs,” Evans identifies the emergence of the corridor. The transition from the previously described meanings of privacy, comfort, and convenience are contingent upon this new spatial device. To describe this transition, Evans provides plans of Robert Kerr’s Bearwood and Alexander Klein’s “The Functional House for Frictionless Living,” and references *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler.



**Figure 2:** Bearwood (Kerr 1864).

In the Bearwood house, the circulation afforded by interconnected matrix of rooms is replaced by the corridor, a space initially confined for servants, but elaborated into a planning schema appropriate to the division of domestic spaces for all inhabitants. Here, convenience is qualified not with the inclusion of company but by the exclusion of company. The seclusion of a space of movement brings “distant rooms closer by, but only by disengaging those near at hand. And in this there is another glaring paradox, in facilitating communication, the corridor reduced contact.” (Evans 2011, 79) This division between communication and contact is illustrated by the story of Cotton Mather, for whom any unintentional contact was a potential source of irritation. To prevent these intrusions, as the story goes, he engraved on his door in large letters “BE SHORT.”

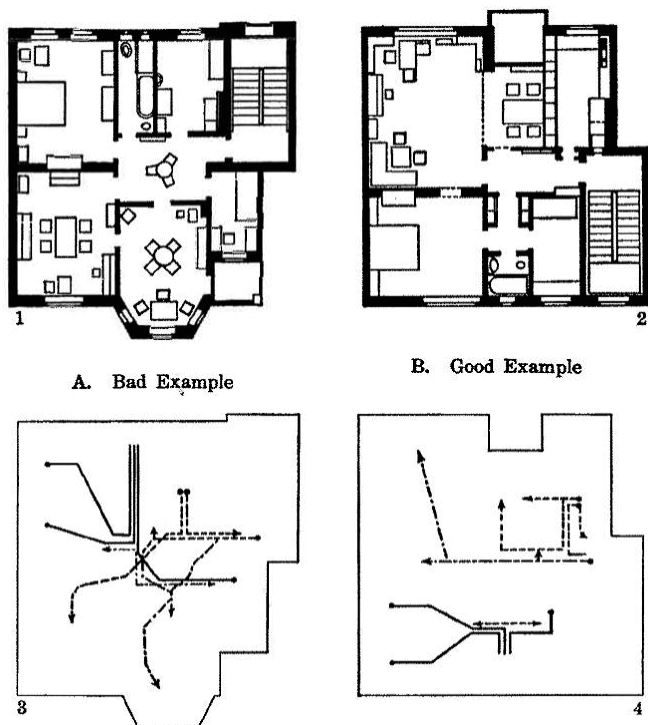
Attenuating this trajectory, Evans quotes the critique of Victorian domesticity *The Way of All Flesh*, the semi-autobiographical novel written by Samuel Butler that he only allowed to be published after his death. Citing a conversation between the protagonist and his mother, Evans portrays a culture discomforted by the proximity of others.

‘My dearest boy’, began his mother, taking hold of his hand and placing it within her own, ‘promise me never to be afraid either of your dear papa or me; promise me this, my dear, as you love me, promise it to me’, and she kissed him again and again and stroked his hair. But with her other hand she still kept hold of his; she had got him and she meant to keep him... The boy winced at this. It made him feel hot and uncomfortable all over... His mother saw that he winced and enjoyed the scratch she had given him. (Butler 1950, 235-6)

Evans follows, “The thing to notice is that when flesh touched flesh a subtle style of torture was taking place.” (Evans 2011, 84) Here, the acceptance of the intrusion of strangers identified in the Italian villa serves a foil for the assault of having one’s hand held by one’s mother.



Careful not to let the anecdotal nature of literature serve as the only evidence of cultural norms, Evans is quick to confirm the novel's veracity by extra-disciplinary qualifications by noting the book's appropriation by Dr. R.D. Liang's term "bondage" and Edward Hall's psychological citation for "proxemics." Bookending his description of Kerr's plan for Bearwood and the excerpt from *The Way of All Flesh*, is Alexander Klein's diagram of "The Functional House for Frictionless Living."



**Figure 3:** Functional House for Frictionless Living (Klein 1935).

Here, the critique of contact in Butler's description becomes a virtue in Klein's plan. Friction, or contact with others within the home, is an example of bad planning. It is not coincidence that this management of bodies occurs in plan. In conclusion Evans explains

....plans have been scrutinized for the characteristics that could provide the preconditions for the way people occupy space, on the assumption that buildings accommodate what pictures illustrate and what words describe in the field of human relationships... This may not be the only way of reading plans but, even so, such an approach may offer something more than commentary and symbolism by clarifying architecture's instrumental role in the formation of everyday events. It hardly needs to be said that giving architecture this kind of consequentiality would not entail the reinstating of functionalism or behavioral determinism. (Evans 2011, 89)

This passage is telling as it defines the role of the architectural plan, confronts a causal relationship between space and human affairs, and pushes historical understanding beyond simple commentary. The first two intentions have clear conditions for identifying disciplinary roles of representation and speculating about their significance through extra-disciplinary forms of representation. To understand the third condition, however, it is useful to compare the instances of evidence Evans provides to other disciplinary appropriations of literature.



## 2.0 History

Poets themselves, tho' liars by profession, always endeavour to give an air of truth to their fictions... (Hume 1878, 419)

Historian David Hume's suggestion that literature feigns truth serves as an effective frame for History's appropriation of fiction. Such reprimands fostered a rigorous, guarded, and contentious arbitration for their inclusion within historical writing. However, these injunctions may be foreign to architectural research and deserve their own examination in light of Evans.

### 2.1 Louis Mink: Historical Understanding

In 1970, Historian Louis Mink published "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," countering the strain of logical positivism rooted in Hume and extended under Carl Hempel's "covering law." Conceding that such modes of comprehension were capable of furnishing "historical knowledge," Mink suggested they were insufficient in producing "historical understanding." In order to avoid the causal and predictive mechanisms that attempted to model History as Science, Mink proposed adopting the literary mechanism of the narrative.

Surprises and contingencies are the stuff of stories, as of games, yet by virtue of the promised yet open outcome we are enabled to follow a series of events across their contingent relations and to understand them as leading to an as yet unrevealed conclusion without however necessitating that conclusion. We may follow understandingly what we could not predict or infer. (Mink 1987, 46)

Under such a model, the historian would be obligated to describe the relevant conditions surrounding historical events, but such relevancies would be adjudicated by the reader's ability to follow and understand the narrative, not that such relevancies had causal or predictive relationships to their outcomes. This desire to qualify complicity without causality resonates with Evans' descriptions of social life and their architectural pre-conditions.

In Mink's model, the historian was responsible for constructing the understanding of history, not simply a chronicle or commentary of the past. Rather than model the historian on the scientist who seeks to uncover a pre-existing truth, the historian is obligated to construct such truths.

The sense that such truths were "pre-existing" would appear to be specifically sympathetic to the discipline of History as a study of the past. However, Mink is quick to identify the pitfalls of such presuppositions.

... so another presupposition has been that historical actuality itself has a narrative form, which the historian does not invent but discovers, or attempts to discover. History-as-it-was-lived, that is, is an untold story... The novelist can make up make up his story any way he wishes, subject only to the requirements of art. The historian, on the other hand, finds the story already hidden in what his data are evidence for; he is creative in the invention of research techniques to expose it, not in the art of narrative construction. Properly understood, the story of the past needs only to be communicated, not constructed. (Mink 1987, 188)

For Mink then, history is an active re-construction by the historian to provide an understanding of past events, rather than a passive commentary. **Here it is helpful to recall Evans' injunction that architecture should not reconstitute itself as literature, but employ literature and literary devices to illustrate architecture's potentials.** Similarly, for Mink the literary device of narrative is not a model of the past, but a heuristic device to produce understanding. However, history should not be imagined as literature, nor, in Mink's mind, could they be confused with each other.



Fiction may indeed be accurate in reporting some events, actions, and the details of life in a certain period, but we know this (and know that we know it), only because we can compare fiction with history, without doubting in principle which is which. (Mink 1987, 183)

While literature may provide useful devices for understanding Mink's own discipline, the possibility of conflating the two is, in principle, impossible. However, for Literature Professor Barbara Foley such conflation is not only ubiquitous, but opportunistic.

## 2.2 Barbara Foley: Literary Veracity

In "History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature," Foley explores literary devices which connote historical actuality within novels. Employing history for its rhetorical power, Foley qualifies the necessity of authors to frame their work as historically verifiable.

The presumed historical truth of such documents also was--and is--central to their aesthetic effect: the explicit and concrete detail that produces powerful denunciation in autobiographical discourse would easily seem crude sensationalism in the realm of fiction. Linda Brent's account of her master's many attempts at seduction, for example, would be a kind of brashly salacious Pamela if viewed from the set of expectations routinely governing the reading of fiction; when viewed as factual statement, however, the narrative serves to heighten the reader's awareness of a particular oppression experienced by the female victims of "the peculiar institution." (Foley 1980, 392)

In order to assure the reader of a literary account, authors went to great length to substantiate their narratives. As Foley argues, Richard Wright found it necessary to append second additions of *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* with prefaces that evidence their historical veracity. While some literature may satirically adopt forms of literature assumed to be true, as in the case of Jonathan Swift's adoption of the travel memoir trope in *Gulliver's Travels*, others may subvert a documentary rhetoric.

[A] simulated slave autobiography written by the white abolitionist James Hildreth may have done more to hinder than to aid abolition, despite its forceful rhetoric, since it permitted Southern apologists for slavery to seize on the text's factual inaccuracies and charge antislavery advocates with deception and distortion of the truth. The guarantee of veracity was thus central to the political effectiveness of the fugitive-slave narrative as a genre. (Foley 1980, 392)

Such accusations are guarded against in Evans work as he explicitly paired his excerpts from novels with autobiographical accounts and noted extra-disciplinary citations. However, for Evans, the consequences of his conscription of literature extend beyond its rhetorical effects or its ability to understand, rather than comment on, history. In order to qualify Evans literary appropriations to implicate architecture in "direct intervention in human affairs," it is useful to examine his work in reference to Geography's appropriation of literature.

## 3.0 Geography

While literary devices are explored specifically for their epistemological and rhetorical consequences in reference to History, the physical consequences of literature are foregrounded in its appropriation within Geography.

### 3.1 Kenneth Olwig: Literature as Catalyst

In Kenneth Olwig's study of the Jutland Heath in "Literature and 'Reality'," he argues that literary (fictional, poetic, and mythological) depictions of geography can serve to activate actual shifts in the physical landscape. Skeptical of the use of literature to prioritize the experience of landscapes, Olwig argues the geography's appropriation of literature



... is concerned not so much with the individual's apprehension of geographic reality as it is, but literature's social function in envisioning reality as it is not but ought to be, and with its potential, thereby for stimulating change. (Olwig 1981, 47)

This potential for literature to stimulate change is illustrated in the transformation of the Jutland Heath. Quoting a survey from Harry Thorpe, Olwig notes that the heath was a characteristic landscape of 3,000,000 acres in Jutland in 1800 that had been reduced to 640,000 acres in 1950. This survey is accompanied by a quotation from a Fullerton and Williams account of the transformation which describes the transformation as a "waged war on the heather." However, apart from a general industrial narrative characteristic of modernization, no motive can be found for such an assault. Olwig points toward the poetry of Hans Christian Andersen and Steen Steensen Blicher to find such an impetus. (Olwig 1981, 54)

Conscripted in a military defeat that lost territorial claims to Slesvig and Holstein, Blicher and Anderson's prose serve as a call to reclaim a wasteland in service of Denmark's burgeoning national identity. Engineer Enrico Dalgas saw the effective, if disconnected, localized cultivation and afforestation of the heath. To galvanize public interest and solicit state and private investment to transform these minor/local interventions into a systemic and connected system, Dalgas founded the Heath Society and published *Geographical Pictures from the Heath*. To preface this agenda, Dalgas begins with Blicher's description of the heath which, counter to Mink's claim, he proclaims is "not poetry." As a paradoxical testament to the effects of Blicher's poetry, a stone with his name engraved upon it marks a hollow of preserved heath which his writing served to transform.

Despite the conviction and clarity of Olwig's conscription of literature, his appropriation is specific and calculated. His descriptions of the economic and political conditions are largely anecdotal, leaving any structural examination absent. Some geographers critical of this approach suggest such methods may amount to nothing more than

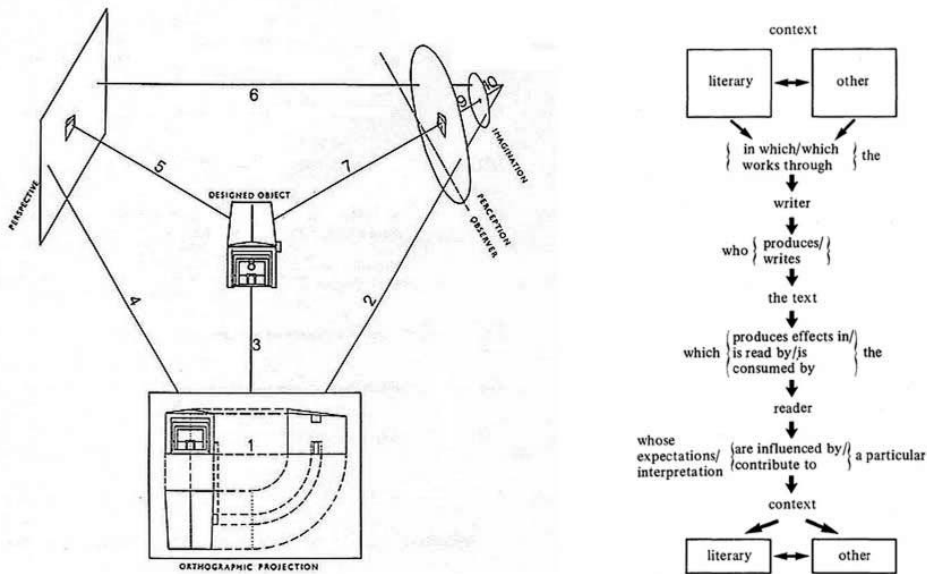
the casual ransacking of fictional writing as a ready means of recovering the most obvious images of intentionality, prised away from the material structures which help give them their effectivity... (Gregory 1981, 2)

Such material structures serve as the specific expansion of Geographer John Silk's appropriation of literature.

### 3.2 John Silk: Effect and Structure

Silk's "Beyond Geography and Literature" attempts to reconcile the context (social, economic, political) of the writer and reader with their potential effects. He frames the problematic relationship between reader, writer, and written text. This structure intends to explore the relationship between the context in which the text was produced and the production of a new context. To illustrate this relationship, he diagrams the process of the text in relation to these contexts. The diagram is strikingly similar, both in organization and intention, to a diagram produced later by Robin Evans for his book *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries*. In both diagrams the object of cultural production serves as a fulcrum around experience and wider contextual effects.





**Figure 4:** Left, Projective Cast (Evans 1995), Right (Silk 1984).

Here the disciplinary differences are also significant. For the Geographer Silk, the text acts indirectly through the conscious readings and interpretations of the reader that contribute to the production of a new context. For the Evans, architecture, as understood from the previously quoted conclusion, operates as a “direct intervention in human affairs.” However, the intention to use literature as a probe into obscure and contingent social worlds is also evident. For Silk, the “taken-for-granted world” (Silk 1984, 169) vivified in literary works can be paired with ideological structures to guard against Gregory’s accusation of “casual ransacking”. For Evans, the assumed rationality of the ordinary configuration of domestic space, constructed in plan,

...is a delusion, and a delusion with consequences too, as it hides the power that the customary arrangement of domestic space exerts over our lives, and at the same time conceals the fact that this organization has an origin and a purpose. (Evans 2011, 56)

For both, literature provides a unique, if necessarily bracketed, resource and device for probing a disciplinary relation to social worlds.

## CONCLUSION

This attempt to compare disciplinary appropriations of literature is meant to ground Evans’ architectural inquiries. This brief survey should not be considered encyclopedic, as it focuses on questions raised by Evans and analyzes them through his contemporaries in other disciplines. As such, it has intended to highlight sympathetic tendencies and agendas across disciplines. In all three disciplines, literature has been conscripted to describe consequence without causality. While the specifics of that appropriation differ, each strategy couples disciplinary forms of knowledge with literature conferring a provisional legitimacy to concededly fictive scenarios. In this way they attempt to appropriate literature without becoming literature. This last point for Evans is significant, both in his desire to distance his work from Eisenman and Hedjuk, but also for contemporary architectural research.



The contemporary resurgence of literature in architectural scholarship, for example Jill Stoner's *Toward a Minor Architecture* or Jimenez Lai's *Bureau Spectacular*, offer quite different positions on the relationship of design, history, literature, fiction, and research. Evan's work, then, is not meant to appear representative of an entire discipline's position, but form a well-grounded, situated, and explicit historical launching point to enter into contemporary architectural research.

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