Rhythm & Repetition

1. Definition

Rhythm and repetition – established through sequences of words or recurring sound patterns – constitute the grid from which affective and imaginative world-building in language can emerge. Such sequences are the literary equivalents of the building blocks of an urban environment. They are the aesthetic material of prose and poetry, combing audio-visual form (more recognizable in sound than in sight) with fragments of meaning and purpose, as well as with symbolic function.

2. Example

In the urban built environment, the equivalent of these rhythmic patterns is to be found in sequences of material objects as well as series of standardized events that city dwellers will be able to perceive as both distinctive and coherent patterns (see fig. 14). Rhythm in urban planning is thus best described as the finding of a cadence, a contour, a figure of periodicity or pleasing combination of repetition and variation that establishes recognizability as well as harmony, while simultaneously promising to offer a solution to a recurring problem – to be applied in vastly distinctive urban scenarios around the globe. Building on the insights of Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language*[74], the language of urban design has sought to use rhythm and repetition more systematically: Alexander's insight that some basic design ideas are virtually universal and can, with variation

and adaptation to local context, be applied to solve recurring design challenges, is reminiscent of the idea of rhythm as repetition with variation as it exists in poetry.

Fig. 14: Sequence of arches in a tunnel. Lührmannstraße, Essen.

Photo by Phillip James Grider

3. Explanation

Rhythm arguably conjoins spatial, temporal and energetic forces. It emerges from the coincidence of repetition, interference and the cycle of "birth, growth, peak, then decline and end".[75] Here, it might help to think that rhythm and repetition also belong to the oldest and most important systematic devices of literary expression, which organize certain aspects of phonology for aesthetic purposes. Material ordered in this way has pervasive effects on all other levels of poetic language – morphology, syntax, discourse.

By way of explanation, one of the operations needed for the production of poetic rhythm – meter – selects one phonological feature of language and its intonational features (stress, pitch, length) and

reduces the existing complexity of stress in ordinary speech (3 to 4 levels of stress; high, medium and low pitch, various durations) to simple binary oppositions – stress vs. unstress; level vs. inflected pitch; long vs. short – which may be generalized as marked vs. unmarked. Regular patterns of these contrastive features create units of structure (feet, measures, metra, cola) that will in turn comprise the line of verse. Metrical rules do not themselves derive from the language in which they are used. Rather, they derive from general laws of rhythmicity and from arbitrary poetic conventions, which have developed over time. Generally, rhythm is defined by the five elements of regularity, repetition, variation, hierarchy and grouping.[76]

In poetry, it is the recurrence of stresses and pauses that is the most obvious path toward rhythm. Meter provides structure – the ideal, regular pattern of stressed syllables and unstressed syllables, whereas rhythm fills the grid, providing movement and variation within that structure. Meter and rhythm appear to be comparable to a theory and its praxis, which stand in productive tension to one another. Because some lines require the promotion of usually unstressed syllables or the demotion of usually stressed syllables in order to fulfil metric requirements, whereas other lines are marked by incomplete feet, meters or lines, it seems most likely that the actual rhythms playfully work against a theoretical meter, which is recognizable to experienced readers as soon as little more than 25% of all lines in a given poem follow the ideal metrical pattern.[77]

Notions of space syntax usually claim that architecture, much like poetry, gives sensual access to human patterns and thus allows a critical reflection on the forms and buildings in which human beings make themselves at home.

4. Applications

When thinking about rhythm and repetition, it is helpful to think of words as building blocks of the imagination and of the world to be seen. Words are potentially not transparent but rather opaque, since they are given figured and textured shape. Humans are not

only producing patterns, they are also projecting them as they go along. Paul Fussell speaks of a "contract between poet and reader" which rather narrowly prescribes the recognition of patterns of sound and language.[78] This idea of a contract between designer / planner and user indicates that the prerequisites of sustainable patterns of rhythm and repetition consist of extensive negotiations and mutual consent. Having always worked with the rules of rhythm in the material world – recurring building blocks, housing patterns, and vistas – planners, in thinking about rhythm and repetition, are encouraged to think beyond the material city. Equally important are the repetition and variation of immaterial and imaginary elements: the use of urban functions (including unintended functions), or of references to the city's palimpsestic history or to real and imaginary cities relevant for the planning area.

Related entries: Model, Path-dependency, Scripts, Symbol

Further Reading

Hillier, Bill. *Space is the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture*. UCL: Space Syntax, 2004.

Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Opondo, Sam Okoth. "Genre and the African City: The Politics and Poetics of Urban Rhythms." *Journal for Cultural Research* 12, no. 1 (2008): 59–79. DOI: 10.1080/14797580802090984.