Kim Sanderson enjoys an architectural perspective on translation at a wide-ranging colloquium in the heart of Paris

A trip to Paris for legitimate business reasons, namely a colloquium on architecture and translation? I couldn’t refuse an opportunity to become acquainted with the Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art, adjacent to the old Richelieu Library and the Palais Royal.

So it was that I attended the journées d’études on ‘Traduire l’architecture/Translating Architecture’ last December.1 This was a varied event, the period under review stretching from the 17th century to the beginning of the First World War, and I cannot attempt to cover all the presentations here.

Essentially, the focus was on books. Translation was shown as providing access to major new works on architecture. Thus it was the translated works themselves that had a direct impact on the reader.

However, it is clear that translators were pivotal to permitting target language (TL) readers access to selected information which emerged from their source language (SL) countries. Translators often selected their own sources for translation, therefore exercising a strong influence on knowledge about architecture in their TL cultures. They also influenced the perception of their SL cultures in broader terms, and further afield.

Connections with Japan

Some translators translated works they encountered on their travels. Because of their privileged access to an almost closed society, the rare Western visitors to Japan before 1867 (when the Edo period ended) were more influential than most other traveller/translators. Equally, translations into Japanese from western languages could also be very influential.

The organiser of the event, Jean-Sébastien Cluzel, mentioned the sourcing by Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold of selected illustrations from Hokusai’s Manga to illustrate his (German-language) work Nippon. This work had a major impact on western perceptions of Japan, and was in turn translated into other languages.

The illustrations discussed were detailed representations of buildings, which may have seemed, in “translation”, to stem from a technical source. However, the Manga in fact comprised thousands of illustrations on a wide variety of subjects, and were widely available in Japan: the ST was no technical specification. Furthermore, this material, while ostensibly providing Europeans with a window on Japan, already had a European perspective. Hokusai had himself studied European engravings and used their perspective techniques for these drawings.

One apparent repercussion of von Siebold’s ‘translation’ is the use of the word ‘Turm’ (tower) in German to denote what could be more accurately referred to as a pagoda (‘Pagode’ now also exists in German). The example which springs to mind is the ‘Chinesischer Turm’ (Chinese tower) in the Englischer Garten in Munich.

Approaches with a narrower thematic focus

Some of the contributions to the colloquium focused on specific aspects of a particular book translation. One such presentation was by Christoph Schnoor on his essay about La Construction des villes, a 1910–11 work by Le Corbusier on early urban planning. The presentation focused on the German-language sources Le Corbusier studied for his work. Could his use of corporalität to describe space be traced back to German Körperlichkeit? The interplay between the two languages here is of interest to me as the translator of the essay into English (I would explain the term as an ‘embodiment of space’).

Several presentations covered terminology issues. Perhaps terminology is an aspect of the translation process that is relatively accessible to those outside the profession? Perhaps it is also particularly appealing for architects to examine the building blocks from which a translation is constructed.

Elena Pliego de Andrés spoke about the terminology she used to translate Robert Willies’s On the construction of the vaults of the Middle Ages into Spanish. Pliego de Andrés’s project has enriched the resources available to architects – by providing a Spanish translation of an important work. It could also provide resources for translators: the compilation of terminology resulting from her research may be published. This is just one example of the potential value of sharing information at such events.

On that note, I should mention that the event in question was the second of three colloquiums on the role of translation in architecture. The final ‘Translating Architecture’ colloquium will be held in November 2012.2

It was fascinating to see what translation means to architectural historians, but all too soon it was time to return to the UK. I had just enough time to fit in a brunch meeting of the Société Française des Traducteurs on my way home. Here, I joined in the discussion on the value of subject-specific CPD, to find that an SFT colleague had also attended ‘Translating Architecture’.

1 The programme is available at [www.inha.fr/IMG/pdf/Traduire_1\ architecture_\ Programme.pdf]
2 At the INHA in Paris, 20 and 21 November 2012, details at [www.inha.fr/spip.php?article386]