

«Architekturen des Augenblicks» – a phenomenological outline of the medialization of urban space in the 20th century

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I will explicitly talk as an art and architecture historian and i will try to open up the historical prospective on a phenomenon which has yet a more than 100 years old history and is strongly connected to the history of industrialization, electrification and the modern developments in architecture and urbanism in the 20th. Century.

New media and information technologies in the urban space have taken on many shapes – exhibition and conference demonstrate this impressively.

In actual fact, we are being confronted with a comprehensive scenario of medialized and information-technologized architectural and spatial concepts. They find their most invisible expression in increasingly omnipresent surveillance ...

- Abb. 2: Überwachungskameras

... and their most visible embodiment in more or less spectacular media facades.

- Abb. 4: Medienfassaden Paris, Frankfurt, Berlin, Seoul

In a popular definition, a media façade represents a projection screen, surface or “skin” for pictures, light, sound and color, increasingly attracting commercial interests coupled with artistic ambitions and, in the truest sense of the word, setting the stage for technological innovations and experiments. By contrast, beyond the medialization of urban space characterized by commercial and possibly political interests, an euphemistic vision of a “new infrastructure” for a young and unconventional cultural scene is evolving along the lines of interaction, participation, new forms of networking, etc.

In accordance with a definition by the well-known Berlin-based media architect and media artist Joachim Sauter (1), media facades represent a “fourth format” that has to conform to two criteria: “On the one hand” according to Sauter, “a media façade should form an integral part of the architecture. It should be the skin and not a mask, make-up or scar on an architectural body. On the other hand, in its expression and narration it must correspond to its function and the architectural design. And: it should not be assigned a theatrical role that contradicts the content of the building.”

With this postulate from the year 2004, Sauter does not only formulate a functional claim in the sense of “form follows function” of the classical modernity. He obviously also lays a sort of moralistic claim to the honesty and authenticity of a medial intervention that in a somewhat odd way is attached to the pejorative use of the adjective “theatrical”. Nevertheless, his demand for truth and truthfulness aims directly at the discourse surrounding the increasingly medialized space that has become evident over the course of a century as a result of the advent of electricity. This urban space, which dates back to the classic modernity of the 1920s, has not only become the scene of conflict between thoughtless commercialization and demanding design, but it has also become the embodiment of a place that in large format represents what has become the verdict of the age of information and media: simulation.

- Abb. 5: Nacht Licht Stadt

Therefore, it will be not only necessary to thematicize the medial figurations of architectural and urban space caught in the crossfire between media-technological innovation and the development of materials and technology. It will also be necessary to contextualize these concepts in a history of the iconography of medialization in architecture. And it will be necessary to sound out their effects on the spatial configurations of urban architecture, and to put up for discussion their concept of public and civic space – how it was mentioned in some of the contributions we have heard.

Today, in the context of this panel, I can do this only sketchily and allusively. Therefore I would like to highlight some crucial examples and essential aspects which mark and illuminate the history of the perception of urban space and its medialization since the twenties of the last century.

• Abb. 6: Zitat Lichtenberg

At the end of the year 1774, the German experimental physicist and author Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799), who was a professor at Göttingen University, started on his second journey to England.

In one of his numerous letters, Lichtenberg describes the regular evening whirl on a London street which, in his own words, is only a fleeting portrayal. To me, however, his account of the plethora (“plethora”) of sensual impressions represents no less than the description of a painted picture: it is full of lofty shimmering and glitter, mirroring and glistening, and we can only suspect the “sensual orgy” which left not only Lichtenberg dazed - but also his readers!

The motifs that Lichtenberg chose to show us “the impertinence and scandals of the perception of the big city” – as formulated by the German literary scientist Heinz Brüggemann – are of visual forcefulness and intensity and they have therefore found a firm place in the literary topology of the experiences of a modern big city.

Light, color, mirroring, the kaleidoscopic spinning of pictures and signs and the convergence and no-longer-being-able-to-separate all of the sensual impressions: all of that remains valid today in the cognitive reading of the medialized urban space and represents the ingredient motifs for its design.

Walter Benjamin wrote of the “interconnection of space”, der «Verschränkung der Räume» when in the 1930s he considered the “mirror city” of Paris to be the metropolis par excellence of the 19th century in his great «Passagenwerk».

And in the literary pieces published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the 1920s, the German author Franz Hessel wrote a literary testimonial to the «architecture of the moment», den «Architekturen des Augenblicks», when advertising was implanted in the urban space and began to reconfigure and cover it with its own reality.

• Abb. 7: New York 1914 und 1937

While the architects and designers of modernity formulated the aesthetic principles of urban spaces that were being increasingly medialized and dynamized, artists, photographers and filmmakers were searching for adequate forms of expression with the new media and the connected new experiences of perception and space.

• Abb. 8: G. Kepes, Berlin 1930; E. Mendelsohn, New York, 1929

In this context, it would be photography, but particularly film that would open up new possibilities for simulating architecture, space, and urban experience.

• Abb. 9: Walter Ruttmann, *Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927

The potentials of film were recognized early on, and were investigated, in particular, by the artistic avant-gardes of the 1920s, for example in the works of László Moholy-Nagy, as well as in films such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (Berlin, Symphony of a Metropolis) from 1927 and

• Abb. 10:

Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* from 1929.¹

New analytical potencies arose from the possibilities of cinematographic simulation. Film became a medium of dynamized urban experience: A new image of the city emerged within its dynamic visualization by the means of the camera-eye.

- Abb. 12: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1929

Two perceptual events and spatial experiences were of central importance

in this context: the visualization of movement as a mode for representing time, and the transformation and dematerialization of the nocturnal urban environment via the diverse manifestations of light – means moving light: the invention of the metropolis in the orchestration of advertising, light, and movement.

And even if a mobile, motorized experience of the urban realm still remained a privilege of the few, particularly in respect of the visual stimuli available from a moving auto-mobile, such experiences would become a decisive source of inspiration that affected both: urban planning concepts and the design of individual structures.

And when in the wake of World War II individual mobility became a mass phenomenon, the automobile became now a planning parameter, while emerging from a new aesthetic – one founded on perceptual psychology – as an instrument of city and planning analysis that found its adequate forms of expression in film, and in cinematic resources generally.

- Abb. 13: Learning from Las Vegas

This was the basis for architects such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown when they investigated Las Vegas around 1970. Even the American urbanist Kevin Lynch - who at this time was programmatically preoccupied with ideas related to *The Image of the City* – had entitiled an essay written in 1964: *The View from the Road*².

And in her text “Learning from Pop,” which appeared in *Casabella* in 1971, Denise Scott Brown propagated video and film as investigative instruments in urbanistic analytical and planning processes:

- Abb. 14: Zitat Denise Scott Brown

Architectural concepts that thematize these simulated urban and spatial

experiences in various ways emerge from this dialogue with filmic modes of perception – all the way to the design concepts of Bernard Tschumi

- Abb. 15: Bernard Tschumi, Manhattan Transcripts, 1977

and his *Manhattan Transcripts*,³ from 1981/82.

- Abb. 16: Learning from Las Vegas

In the mobile, filmic urban analyses undertaken since the late 1960s, Scott Brown and Venturi discovered “main street” as an urban space that has become alienated in its mediatized symbolicity, and in order to develop from it a new, independent symbolicity for architecture.

Via «estrangement», Pop Art contributed essentially to rendering visible the experience of «alienation» in a commercialized world.

- Abb. 17: Archigram, Instant City

Mediatized scenarios based on technological visions of the future are ironically ruptured again and again in the pointed urban Pop Art tableaux of groups such as Archigram.

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With Pop, Modernism's claim of bringing <art into life> was in some sense

turned into its opposite: now, life pushed its way into art. But this was a <life> that at this point had already been diagnosed and identified as a mediated one. And mediatization – which for the avant-gardes of the 1920s was still capable of founding a new claim for art – had in the meantime become the object of a critique of civilization, or at least of a discourse that was skeptical of the media.

In light of the *Society of the Spectacle*⁴ on which Guy Debord trained his

sights in a highly critical fashion in 1967, perhaps nothing could have been more misleading than to have taken Las Vegas seriously in urban planning terms, let alone proclaiming it a new model.⁵ - For here was the quintessential experience of being totally overwhelmed and alienated by an environment dominated and guided exclusively by commercial interests and mediatized artificiality - in short: total simulation.

All the more illuminating, then, to remind ourselves that Lewis Mumford,

the American architecture critic and historian of the city, must have been aware of the phenomenon of simulation – without ever referring to it explicitly – when in the last chapter of his profound 1961 historical study of urbanism *The City in History* under the heading “The Shadows of Success,” he focuses his pitiless gaze on the contemporary “metropolitan denizen”:

• Abb. 18: Zitat Mumford

“He (this “metropolitan denizen”) lives, not in the real world, but in a shadow world projected around him at every moment by means of paper and celluloid and adroitly manipulated lights: a world in which he is insulated by glass, cellophane, plicofilm from the mortification of living. In short, a world of professional illusionists and their credulous victims. [...] That life is an occasion for living and not a pretext ... [does] not occur to the metropolitan mind. For [him], the show is the reality, and the show must go on!”⁶ Mumford conjures up an image of the metropolis as a form of fundamental cultural (self-)deception, one that has degenerated into a world of mere appearances consisting of distracting maneuvers and substitute worlds.

In those descriptions of this civilizational condition into which the metropolis has deteriorated in the modernity of the 20th century, Plato's metaphor of the cave has experienced a contemporary renaissance, in agreement not least with the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, who interprets “the metropolis as a repetition by means of new media and technology of the pre-civilizational cave [...]”⁷

• Abb. 19: Toyo Ito, Vision of Japan, 1991

In this context, Japanese architect Toyo Ito has provided us with an exceptionally vivid translation of this metaphor into a mediatized

spatial environment. In his design of the exhibition scenario for “Vision of

Japan,” held in London in 1991, it was perhaps less a question of any visualization of a “simulated dream of the future world,” as the architect himself imagined.⁸

In the “interlocking of (simulated) spaces”⁹ staged by Ito, he displayed instead a simulation of that very simulation into which the frequently invoked metropolis – the one dematerialized by information flows and by its own “simulating” visualizations – had ultimately degenerated.

Platonic Caves

Plato’s metaphor of the cave is one of the founding metaphors of European thought, as well as of the discourse of simulation in Modernity. With the mediatization of space, which took place in the 20th century on the basis of electrification, and the visualization technologies and strategies emerging from it, the Platonic cave underwent a new and thoroughly vivid interpretation.

At the same time, this experience of mediatized space was described early

on as an experience of dematerialization and virtualization, for example by the German architect Hugo Häring in 1928:

• Abb. 21: Zitat Häring, englisch

(“The square as a space in the sense of the historical art of urban planning no longer exists, it has been destroyed, completely dissolved.

In the afterimage, nothing corporeal exists any longer [...] the light sources appear freely disposed in space, floating. [...] Found everywhere, then, is the complete opposite of the historical architectural square. In terms of building material as well: light instead of stone. the conquering of open space [...].»)

The city – which had been dematerialized, “virtualized,” and transformed

by light and the newmedia into a large-scale media space – preoccupied the designers and artists of classical Modernism.

The ingredients of the artificial night transformed urban space into a magical realm of illusion. This was founded on technical developments that, while not yet functioning on the basis of (electronic) media, exploited first materials such as glass and its reflective effects; and with mirrors as such, which already constituted the experience of the virtual¹⁰: the countless reflections of the urban realm within whose “spatial interlockings” emerged an autonomous and artificial world of illusion, a new world of perception.

In this way, the idea and concept of simulation acquired its modern contours against the background of industrialization and electrification. And it acquired a new, multifaceted significance via the relationship of tension between a perceptual-psychological anamnesis of a technically accelerated world and its artistic visualization.

• Abb. 22. Leuchtsuren: «traces of light» - generated by the changings of light at Toyo Ito’s – unfortunately deconstructed «Tower of the winds» in Yokohama.

And it is still the night which is fascinating and crucial for the experience of mediatized urban space – think of last night.

But on the other hand mediated and mediatized space is a daylighted space of everyday experience, discovered and promoted as a space of a new – renewed – experience of the public. And so the question which remains is: whether in order to this a new quality of simulation is arising: the simulation of the public!