

Political architecture and relation between architecture and power

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Abstract: Central aim of this paper is discussion about architectural manifestation, methods used in architecture to express aspirations and connections of urban and architectural hierarchy with the social occurrences and political context. It is familiar that the role of politics, authority and power of government, democracy and diplomacy are tightly connected with architecture, which means that architecture through its great communicational powers, can be used for political and social objectives. Since the relationship between the authority and architecture is being reviewed, the paper will focus on the buildings with purpose of serving the authority itself. Presence or absence of the social and political consciousness among architects reflect their status and role in a political system, making their influence equally significant. In that context, this paper will also reflect on their presence and contribution during architectural history. The research method of this paper is descriptive analytical analysis of the relationship between architecture and politics in various political regimes.

Keywords: Political architecture, Architecture, Identity, Power, politic.

Introduction

Knowing that in comparison with arts, architecture leaves the greatest, most direct and continuous impact on a man, as it is the essential evidence of human life, many agree that architecture is much more than utilitarian. Its aesthetic presence motivates the human emotion and helps engage consumers to its content using their physical senses to recognize the function. Broadly illustrating, architecture consists of two dominant aspects: utility and aesthetics. If a function is constant, variation in form reflects values. In the case of state representation architecture, these values are expected to be purposely reinforced. Comparing to the functionalist statement that form follows function, in political architecture it can be assumed that form follows values.² Marxist political theorist, Fredric Jameson pointed out - *The seeds of the future already exist within the present and must be conceptually disengaged from it, both through analysis and through political praxis.* Transitions from the historical situations of the former diplomatic properties, and the current diplomatic presence are also in constant perplexed relationships, and the architecture that is left behind those relationships can clearly tell its stories.

Architecture as a form of communication

Architecture can be used to transmit messages when the building users invest into building's meaning. Levels of such communication have certainly changed during time. Marxist theoreticians especially pointed at social, political and class connotations of architectural complexes, understanding them as portrayals of the existing social standing. Many in the field of architecture believe that architecture can be read as text, that it is a self-contained sign system with its own grammar. In the modern time, French theoreticians of XVIII century settled that practice, stating that architecture affects the consumer as if it was talking to him (*Architecture parlante*). This process evolved during the epoch of mass culture in the second half of XIX century, and institutional and instrumental culmination happened in the countries of totalitarian regimes between the world wars. Styles became indications of social statuses and symbols of ideologies during the XVIII century.

¹Natasha DimitrovaGuenova, *Form follows values: Explaining Embassy Architecture*, A Dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy Degree, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2012

Rules of stating social differences became regular. Visions of neoclassical heights and monumental edifices became somewhat an architectural norm in the Nazi Germany.³

Branding

The term *nation brand* was developed by Simon Anholt, describing the attempts of states to build their reputation. The strategy often involves a symbolic value of products used to emphasize distinctive characteristics of the nation which are particularly desirable to be seen by the foreign public, and buildings can surely help attain these goals in many powerful ways. For example, the Finnish embassy in Washington is a glass, granite and copper box shaped building, sends visitors a clear message of how Finland should be perceived – modern, high-tech, with quality workmanship. One glimpse on the building can absorb a message more loudly than millions of leaflets, tv campaigns or posters.⁴

Comperhension of symbols

Shapes and materials of a building are often said to symbolize values. Glass, for example, signifies transparency (democratic *accountability*). Greek and Roman statues remind citizens of democratic ideals from the ancient past. Likewise, Daniel Libeskind chose the symbolic height of 1776 feet for what used to be called the “Freedom Tower”. The dispute appears when representations of democratic values are not equally comprehensible. To arbitrary observer, it needs to be explained how much the tower is high, and why it is so, in order for him to understand the meaning. Such declarations do little to influence the way a building might become part of a political experience. More important, a symbolic gesture towards democracy can fuse with ignorance. German citizens can watch their deputies from Norman Foster’s glass dome on the re-designed parliament building in Berlin. They are symbolically elevated above their representatives, yet remain distant spectators who cannot even hear what is being said in their name. Representing democracy and facilitating democracy are two different things and what can be called *democratic decoration* (transparency of the glass) can actively distract from noticing the actual absence of democratic facilities.⁵

Political architecture

Architecture is a political act, by nature. It has to do with the relationships between people and how they decide to change their conditions of living. And architecture is a prime instrument of making that change – because it has to do with building the environment they live in, and the relationships that exist in that environment.

- Lebbeus Woods

Financial, as well as material, and intellectual, and emotional resources of a whole group of people get involved in a particular building project. And any time you get a group, you’re talking about politics. To me politics means one thing: How do you change your situation? What is the mechanism by which you change your life? That’s politics. That’s the political question. It’s about negotiation, or it’s about revolution, or it’s about terrorism, or it’s about careful step-by-step planning – all of this is political in nature. It’s about how people, when they get together, agree to change their situation.

- Lebbeus Woods

Architecture and war are not incompatible. Architecture is war. War is architecture. I am at war with my time, with history, with all authority that resides in fixed and frightened forms. I am one of millions who do not fit in, who have no home, no family, no doctrine, no firm place to call my own, no known beginning or end, no "sacred and primordial site." I declare war on all icons and finalities, on all histories that would chain me with my own falseness, my own pitiful fears. I know only moments, and lifetimes that are as moments, and forms that appear with infinite strength, then "melt into air." I am an architect, a constructor of worlds, a sensualist who worships the flesh, the melody, a silhouette against the darkening sky. I cannot know your name. Nor you can know mine. Tomorrow, we begin together the construction of a city.

- Lebbeus Woods

³http://www.arte.rs/sr/umetnici/teoreticari/aleksandar_kadijevic-4101/tekstovi/odjeci_stranah_totalitarnih_politickih_ideologija_u_srpskoj_arhitekturi_cetvrte_decenije_xx_veka-2142/

⁴<https://publicandculturaldiplomacy3.wordpress.com/2012/03/18/architecture-diplomacy-undervalued-dimension-of-branding/>

⁵<http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/06/can-architecture-be-democratic/#.VdGN-rS7mXc>

Democracy and architecture

Common understanding is that the built environment is bound to be political. Yet from the recent past, the combination of architecture and politics tends to evoke undemocratic proofs - totalitarian leaders designing monumental edifices and avenues for eternity. And if authoritarians consider themselves architects, architects may like to act like authoritarians - they can create something for the people, but not anything meaningfully seen as *of* the people nor *by* the people.⁶The earliest architectural expression of modern democracy in the USA was inspired by Thomas Jefferson who adapted the language of the classical order, designed the political architecture of the modern state translating the rejection of a colonial style in a positive choice. The neoclassical style became the canon for the new state buildings - the capitols and the courthouses. A contradiction and failure to project concepts of democracy and revolution into architecture can be seen on this example. Likewise, the modern architectural movement of the post-war period was inspired by revolutionary ideas of radical socialism and equal movement empowered by the USSR. This model also shows a failure to express the modern concept of democracy into an adequate architectural form, and both of them demonstrate a stylistic canon that dominated and misled the architectural shaping of a democratic society.⁷Daniel Libeskind added another possible understanding of the relationship between architecture and democracy - *it's not so much the process as the architectural and spatial "product" which ultimately has to be democratic*. He talked about creating a *space for people, not just corporations*. What is a *space for people*? One possible answer is - a space where citizens recognize their polity and themselves as subscribing to democratic values. These thoughts are fated to become more important in current time, therea of remarkable urbanization, new planning and building challenges around the globe.⁸

There is a mention that democratic architecture provides usable area where citizens can gather, debate or protest. What recent political events, like the Arab Spring or social upheaval in Southern Europe, have made apparent is that in the age of the Internet and social media, physical space is still of a great importance. Therefore, democratic architecture should produce the space for what the political scientist John Parkinson called *democratic performance*, where citizens create their political messages. For instance, parliaments could have large, empty spaces where the people can gather to state concerns, but not overly landscaped and pleasant for tourists gathering. As a political theorist Claude Lefort indicated, the logic of representation in a democracy is different from a monarchy - the king can represent the territory without remainder, while in a democracy the place of power remains empty and disputable. So, parliaments never fully represent the people, but neither do citizens gathered in a public space. The political scientist Philip Manow noticed that the reflection of representative buildings in a pool symbolizes the fluid, impermanent nature of democratic representation - neither the assembly nor assembled citizens ever fully represent the people without remainder. They are fleeting and sometimes they might disturb each other. It's by making that dynamic fundamental in democracy, visible and productive, architecture and urban design can both symbolically represent and facilitate democracy.⁹

Architecture for the ruling body

Over the course of the past three thousand years, architecture has been linked to the ruling class of absolute power, as a discipline and a building activity. Ruling bodies use the built environment as a tool to exercise their authority, for the physical existence of the built form allows them to declare their political intention. As Jencks stated - *Architecture seems to offer messages that have mass appeal, that lend themselves to being taken for granted even when they are not highly conventional, but there are at the same time inventive and heuristic aspects to these messages*. For that matter, it is commonly used as a tool and a symbol of the state, in the service of politics by a ruling government, mainly in order to propagate political ideologies to the pluralist society. Arousing nationalistic emotions of the masses, the intention is to maintain status and position in society.¹⁰Both the introvert Egyptian pyramids and extrovert buildings as the Roman Pantheon or Gothic cathedrals are linked to a small elite who use the communicational power of architecture for imposing their perspectives of the world and people, and democratic ideas as freedom, equity and fraternity were yet to be discovered. In that context, Daniel Libeskind's words about relationship between architecture and a democratic society can illustrate the universal standing - *For the most part, architects aren't democratically minded people. They admire the cities built by kings and generals*.¹¹

⁶<http://www.arcc-journal.org/index.php/arccjournal/article/download/51/51>

⁷Sylvain de Bleekere, *Style and Architecture in a Democratic Perspective*, Universiteit Hasselt

⁸<http://www.arcc-journal.org/index.php/arccjournal/article/download/51/51>

⁹<http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/06/can-architecture-be-democratic/#.VdGN-rS7mXc>

¹⁰Dr Alice Sabrina Ismail, *Architecture as an expression of political ideology*,

¹¹Sylvain de Bleekere, *Style and Architecture in a Democratic Perspective*, Universiteit Hasselt

This custom has culminated in Germany at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth decade of the last century, turning architecture into a tool for propagandas and glorification of country's foreign and domestic politics. Compositions which illustrated hierarchy were popular among the growing bourgeoisie. Supporters of strict moral, esthetic and social norms were attracted by the cult of hierarchy of principles of academic eclecticism. Rustic decoration of ground floors accentuated firmness and formality in the representative building appearance, with facades which hid their inner organization. Upper, richly decorated zones of the exteriors, were frequently used to emphasize the irrelevance of a small man before the superiors. Such building design, in its reduced form, was applied in most of the Nazi architecture in XIX and XX century, clearly stating the significance of the government and its ruler, their sublime rights, chosen by democracy or conquered by force. As a form of a pageantry, academic architecture was a spectacle, a monument, and this canon referred to the smaller buildings as well. Static forms and clear visual statements emphasized dominance of universal on individual, unity over imparity, experience over experiment, sublime over daily, absolute over relative, legal over revolutionary, institution over a unit, order over anarchy. Ideological and esthetic motifs in fascist Italy, Japan and SSSR are likewise good examples for such actions.¹² Succeeding reform of architecture was launched by the representatives of Art-Nouveau and early functionalism, and influenced official administration edifices used for the authority's purposes. Connection between neo-classical, academic style, political representation of a building and the new modern approach had been made, marking the time of a mixture of transitional, heterogenic, semi academic and introductory modern style. The new tradition of monumentality with prominent totalitarian connotations in the countries where architecture was orchestrated by its politics was suppressing other designing styles, unlike in democratic countries, where the creations of new national styles wasn't restricted, and Art-Deco, modernism and international styles were simultaneously developing.¹³

Influence on politics

In one of his interviews, Lebbeus Woods mentions the influence building environment has on community. BLDGBLOG: *There's also the possibility that a building project, once complete, will change the society that built it. It's the idea that a building could directly catalyse a transformation, so that the society that finishes building something is not the same society that set out to build it in the first place. The building changes them.*

WOODS: *I think architecture should not just be something that follows up on events but be a leader of events. That's what you're saying: That by implementing an architectural action, you actually are making a transformation in the social fabric and in the political fabric. Architecture becomes an instigator; it becomes an initiator.*

The power of an idea, metamorphosed into architecture, the reminder of what is and was, can act as a tool of control, intimidation, planting ideals into the general public and changing perceptions of their surroundings. They become adaptive and accustomed to the newly created environment. This ultimately gives people what can be called a false sense of control. What is also undeniable is that surrounding is always changeable, and an architecture can continuously alter peoples' perspectives, making them question the ones who have placed them and what their motives were in the first place.¹⁴

Design as a political act—Politics in the form and space

As previously stated, architectural form, with its visual and relational properties, is able to express political authority of the ruling body.

Scale may draw attention to the building's significance by emphasizing its height, length, width and depth. Built forms presented as large or tall, vertical in height or horizontally massive compared to human proportions and its surroundings, with significant visibility and dramatic sculptural effect can symbolize the authority. There are five most often mentioned reasons for this need:

- Emphasis of dominancy and control
- Evocation of feelings of impressiveness in order to be remembered

¹²http://www.arte.rs/sr/umetnici/teoreticari/aleksandar_kadijevic-4101/tekstovi/odjeci_stranah_totalitarnih_politickih_ideologija_u_srpskoj_arhitekturi_cetvrte_decenije_xx_veka-2142/

¹³http://www.arte.rs/sr/umetnici/teoreticari/aleksandar_kadijevic-4101/tekstovi/odjeci_stranah_totalitarnih_politickih_ideologija_u_srpskoj_arhitekturi_cetvrte_decenije_xx_veka-2142/

¹⁴<http://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/architecture-as-weaponry/>

- Assertion of identity in the world
- Visual prestige and dignity of the patron
- Projection of influence in society¹⁵

For example, in Roman Empire, the atmosphere and the buildings directly coincided and were crucial to how the public would respond to their speeches and messages. Their giant concrete statements were designed to intimidate and overwhelm, but with community gatherings in mind. The overwhelming greatness of these buildings, their colossal size and complex design, enforced the nation's ideologies.¹⁶ Furthermore, Catherine the Great's Palace in Russia, designed by Bartolomeo Rastrelli in 1752 for the wife of Emperor Peter I, is an example which projects a play of façade elements and picturesque decoration, signifying the ruling power of the Russian monarchy. The façade elements are arranged in hierarchical organization at the roof, body and base section.¹⁷ Another clear, most recent sample can be Dubai - a city almost non-existent during the '80s. Through Dubai the strategy of the ruling body via architecture in order to entertain, gain support for the government's campaigns and encourage unity of a new-built city can be seen. Immense architectural achievements are created in an attempt to gain the loyalty of the masses, leaving the consumption of the energy used to create these monuments as a secondary issue.¹⁸

Architects and politics of today and *starchitects* culture

Personal ideology of an architect draws incentive from the history of architecture and ideologies in conjunction with contemporary social, scientific, and artistic courses. Many influential architects through history have even publicly declared their political orientations - Antonia Sant Elie, Karl Fridrih Šinkel, Gotfrid Zemper, Šarl Garnije, Antonio Gaudi, Valter Gropijus, Le Korbizje, Hannes Mayer, Albert Šper, Verner Marh, Oscar Nimayer...¹⁹ However, significant number of public buildings built according to the state regime during the last two centuries didn't have extreme political nor ideological imprints, so it can be concluded that contemporary architecture does not represent elements of the imperial ideologies in the whole, but rather the work of the sculptors and architect's artistic approach.²⁰ In one of his famous interview, Michel Foucault stated - *Nothing is fundamental ... These are not fundamental phenomena. There are only reciprocal relations, and the perpetual gaps between intentions in relation to one another... the architect has no power over me. If I want to tear down or change a house he built for me, put up new partitions, add a chimney, the architect has no control. So the architect should be placed in another category-which is not to say that he is not totally foreign to the organization, the implementation, and all the techniques of power that are exercised in a society. I would say that one must take him-his mentality, his attitude-into account as well as his projects, in order to understand a certain number of the techniques of power that are invested in architecture, but he is not comparable to a doctor, a priest, a psychiatrist, or a prison warden.*²¹ On the other hand, L. Altiserperceived that every artistic practice can be possible only through and within it, stating that the ideology works from and for subjects²² Nazi architecture in today's Berlin houses the offices of a liberal democratic government, at the same time reminding citizens of the need to reflect on the totalitarian past. In fact, it can be said that, if democracy is ultimately about an ideal of collective autonomy, then such collective re-signification over time is a process that's much more important than adding glass or allusions to heroic Founding Fathers in the new buildings.²³

There was a time when structures which embodied the sustainable approach and challenged the boundaries of urban design were hailed as the most revered architectural achievements, and now they've become corporate establishments and other business-oriented buildings. This can be due to some architects' altered perspectives - going from dedicating themselves to environmentally conscious or utopian design choices

¹⁵Dr Alice Sabrina Ismail, *Architecture as an expression of political ideology*,

¹⁶<http://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/architecture-as-weaponry/>

¹⁷Dr Alice Sabrina Ismail, *Architecture as an expression of political ideology*,

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¹⁹http://www.arte.rs/sr/umetnici/teoreticari/aleksandar_kadijevic-4101/tekstovi/odjeci_stranah_totalitarnih_politickih_ideologija_u_srpskoj_arhitekturi_cetvrte_decenije_xx_veka-2142/

²⁰<http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/06/can-architecture-be-democratic/#.VdGN-rS7mXc>

²¹Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault reader*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1984

²²http://www.arte.rs/sr/umetnici/teoreticari/aleksandar_kadijevic-4101/tekstovi/uloga_ideologije_u_novijoj_arhitekturi_i_njena_shvatanja_u_istoriografiji-2182/

²³<http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/06/can-architecture-be-democratic/#.VdGN-rS7mXc>

that would benefit the urban living space as a whole, to self-indulgence in an attempt to create potentially branded names.²⁴ Architectural conformists are slaves not only to the ideologies of the government institutions, but can join in other centers of social powers – capital, media, influential non-government institutions, revisionist movement, criminal groups. Thus, a new un-ideological type of designers – managers appeared. They aim to catch as many jobs on the market as they can, striving for profit instead of ideological satisfaction or artistic affirmation.²⁵ They create a sense of security for themselves, which comes from monetary assets, and the goal of becoming a *starchitect*, above all else.²⁶ Such a relaxed attitude towards the political status of architecture's actual, paying clients overlook that *starchitects* who today effectively sell their name to authoritarian regimes in Central Asia (eg. iconic buildings by Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan), directly serve the strategic goals of these regimes. *Starchitects* reinforce the legitimacy of governments which allows them a freedom to build, raze and displace, and that can rarely be had in democracies.²⁷

In summary

Ambitions of authority can easily be ingrained in elements which conceive form and space. Form has the capacity to arouse strong perceptual interest for its spectators, communicating across cultures. Hence, it is used to express the authority of the ruling body, which can be done in the following ways:

- presented in monumental and dominant scale in its physical context
- using symmetrical composition or hierarchical organization and richly decorated façade with interplay of color, texture and materials
- placing edifice in a higher ground level standing as a distinct structure in site²⁸

As stated by Lefebvre — “*Architectural space*” is not simply meant to serve its own purposes, but is also part of the dominant discourse of power and domination in society:

- portrayed with monumental scale structures producing maximum spatial quality
- arranged in segments, hierarchical manner along an axial path based on linear and fanned syntax structures, forming a single dominant focal point
- forming a single entrance with no transverse point results in constricted and restricted movement within space segments creates high visibility of surveillance within the spatial organization expressing patterns of authority and control
- primary space is positioned in the middle of the entire spatial organization surrounded by ancillary space²⁹

The creative process of designing is constructive and diverse, thus more diplomatic than the aggressive methods of engagement in politics.³⁰

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²⁸Dr Alice Sabrina Ismail, *Architecture as an expression of political ideology*,

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