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Building Terminal — for an architecture without objectness

BUILDING TERMINAL _
FOR AN ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT
OBJECTNESS

Introduction

Many people think that the new media are pushing architecture into the role of helpless victim. It can only stand by and watch how millions of people are spending more and more of their valuable time in digital surroundings; they no longer need architecture as the backdrop to the important moments of their lives. On top of this, the role of permanent carrier of cultural meaning has lapsed. The mother of the arts is becoming a marginal phenomenon. Others take a more optimistic view of things. As far as they are concerned, the only interesting architecture is computer-generated architecture. In this essay I will explore the fertile area between these two extremes.

Three Attitudes to the New Media

The key question for the coming years is whether architecture will succeed in developing other strategies besides the rationalization of existing practice. What other options are there apart from cost-cutting and streamlining? Equally important is the question of whether potential new strategies will in fact constitute genuine alternatives within the practice of building. Will creative innovation at the conceptual level really get a look-in? In any event, for this to happen designers must not merely take note of the new technology but also seek out its creative potential. Rather than automatically adjusting to current practice, they should adjust current practice where necessary to the new ideas. In this way architecture is able to conquer a new field of activity in a digital era. It can produce environments we have as yet barely encountered. It can create experiences we have never had before. It

can also organize itself in a way that challenges professional certitudes and makes the existing role play look hopelessly old-fashioned.

Before going into the nature of the new environments and experiences, we must first pause to consider the artistic mentality necessary for their creation. In order to be able to intervene actively in the development of the new media an architect must be adequately equipped mentally. A key element of this question of mentality is the relationship with technology itself. In architecture, as in other areas, it is possible to distinguish three broad attitudes to the new media. The first is the negative attitude where people stubbornly stick to the old familiar way of working and simply ignore the cultural significance of the new media. At best, since the computer has become indispensable for drawing, they will employ someone to take care of this side of the business. The whiz kid as alibi for not making any substantive changes. The architecture continues to look the same as ever.

The second attitude is that of an unabashed surrender to the hype in which the new media are lauded with quasi-religious fervor as architecture's saviors. The design identity of these architects is synonymous with their use of the computer. In the final analysis, they are asked only by virtue of their reputation as a computer apostle, a preacher of the digital gospel. However versatile their designs, it is above all their use of the computer that attracts attention. For those who adopt this attitude it is then only a small step to restrict themselves voluntarily to this stance. Eventually, they can talk of nothing else. At which point a true community of faith is born.

Finally there is the pragmatic attitude in which the two domains are seen side by

side, as two parallel worlds. Such prag-
matists have no difficulty accepting the
existence of virtual reality, of digital net-
works, and they are also prepared to use
the computer for the design of architec-
ture. At the same time, however, they stick
to the production of a physical, analog
world, appropriate to the functions we
have always known and adapted to the
physical movements we have always made.
Even if the entire office is computerized,
the benefits of the new technology are
barely if at all conceptualized and as such
taken into account in the designs. Media
remain what they are: means. Nothing
more.

Hybrid Environments

There is, however, a fourth attitude possi-
ble. Something that has so far received
much less attention is the possibility of
allowing the physical and virtual domains
to merge, of integrating them. By refusing
to let oneself be reduced to either a worn-
out dinosaur or a stressed-out cybernaut,
a whole range of innovative possibilities
capable of injecting architecture with
enormous vitality comes into view. It is a
matter of crossing the analog and digital
worlds, of hybrid environments that can
no longer be classified as one thing or
the other. The behavior of such worlds is
similarly hybrid, consisting partly of bio-
logical and physical reactions, partly of
cybernetic acts appropriate to a cyborgian
existence. The environmental quality of
such a hybrid world can never again be
reduced to the typical architectural para-
meters that have stood us in good stead
for centuries. All previous architectural
definitions, from Vitruvius to Peter Eisen-
man, run up against their limits here.

Beauty and functionality and solidity, tec-
tonic and cladding, program and meaning,
all these old concepts acquire a new con-
notation. The task is to chart the architec-

tural potential of a digital world, not in
spite of, not instead of, not even along-
side, but in the physical world. This I will
do by exploring the concept of architec-
ture conceived as terminal. As such it is
still a building, an object. But it is also
a computer, an interface. As a nodal point
in a wider communication network.

What if architecture were to become no
more than a prop for a display or projec-
tion screen? If the separation between
its two main functions, shelter and sym-
bol, were to become definitive and the
sheltering function were to divest itself
of any iconographic ambition and with-
draw behind the exterior? What would
remain of architecture as we know it if
spatial expression were to become a mere
adjunct and all designing capacity and
visual intelligence were to be put into
directing the surface? Would architecture
survive if the entire tectonic tradition
of construction and making connections
were to vanish as a source of design in-
spiration in favor of the visual story for
architecture when any of its buildings
can be animated and transformed by pro-
jections and electronic displays? What is
left of architecture if our architectural
"sign" language is no longer etched in
stone?

In the past, architecture also needed sun-
light in order to be seen. As soon as dark-
ness fell it lost its shape and substance.
Its meaning vanished, cloaked in shadows.
Even when it became fashionable to spot-
light monumental buildings, it was above
all the building as volume, as object, that
was emphasized. Out of the nocturnal
gloom there suddenly rises up a majestic
object, a representative of the realm of
things, that must try to last until dawn –
until the invention of neon light. Nearly
everyone has memories of the flashing
lights of Times Square, Shinjuko, Picca-
dilly Circus or Place Pigalle. These places

provided the defining images of the metropolis at night. Simple light-switching circuits strung along the upper edge of urban elevations created a deliriously metropolitan atmosphere that owed virtually nothing to the materiality of the architecture. The absolute acme of such urban animation (partly because of countless famous film scenes) is the Strip at Las Vegas. The ultimate funfair. But neon signs are only part of its story nowadays. Entire virtual edifices are contrived by means of lighting effects. Gigantic Jumbotron and Napcom displays dominate the scene. The best the visual display industry has to offer is on show here. And it is growing all the time. Ever larger LCD and magma screens. Ever finer resolution, ever sharper pictures. And although a surface of around 2x3 m quickly runs into millions of dollars in production and management costs, the price of hardware looks set to fall. Facades and walls could be brought to life by designers and provided with a new, dynamic iconography. Now that a good deal of public life is conducted indoors, in shopping malls or car parks, the game can continue by day. No longer must the use of light in architecture wait for nightfall.

A New Role for Architecture

At first glance, it would seem that these developments need not really affect architecture. They could remain an addition, a revitalization. But of course there is something far more fundamental going on here. It concerns a new role for architecture in a pervasive visual culture where the mass media have less and less need of the enclosure of the box (TV, cinema). The audio-visual media continue to find new outlets in the city. For the static nature of architecture, bound up as it is with concepts like foundations, durability, inertia and tradition, this has serious implications. Mobilization, which has long had

society in its grip, is now impinging upon the material environment. When stationary objects are visually animated they lose their objectness, their fixity. However sturdy their construction may still be, they appear to be moving. It looks as if we have here the next step in the rich history of parallax manipulation.

Where the baroque played the game of convex and concave and investigated the *trompe l'œil*, where neo-classicism discovered the mirror, where 19th-century engineering made a hero of the freestanding structure, where modernism turned the free facade and the free ground plan into ideology, we are now on the threshold of a new development in the psychological game of spatial design. For this new spatial effect the physical space is no longer strictly necessary, although duplication has its attractions. The great leap consists of uncoupling spatial perception and architectural structure. Now that really is "lite" architecture. In addition to striving after ever lighter structures, transparent and translucent walls and gravity-defying, curvilinear forms, architecture can now, via film, become truly immaterial. Contours fade, forms become fluid. The relationship between human beings and architecture is no longer polar or dialectical, but "immersive." You can quite literally be swallowed up in it... Who will be the first architect to win the Oscar or Golden Palm for best director?

Building as Terminal

I offer you the following scenario. Suppose that architects were to incorporate video walls and projections in their initial sketch designs. Suppose that in their negotiations with the client, investment by the likes of Fuji, Coca-Cola or Lucky Strike, by Sharp, Zeiss Ikon or Polaroid, by Silicon Graphics or Alias WaveFront, could be calculated in their budgets from the start. It might then

be possible to use the image-carriers thus procured for noncommercial, experience-heightening effects. Apart from one-dimensional messages from the multinationals, urban facade displays could at given moments become total theater, with the architect as director, as creative brain. This is the urbanism of the future. In addition to the advertisements, conscious and unconscious sensations are evoked. A mixture of film loops and abstract images affords artistically profound experiences. The consciousness industry, to resurrect that old concept, will help energize the public domain.

And as if that were not enough, we are also continuing to develop interactive paint, contorted facade surfaces and curved windows, to use sandblasted or LCD-programmed glass, with zinc and aluminum cladding. One can imagine a whole range of architectural interventions aimed at intensifying this projection game. And who will invent the double-curved display screen? Frank Gehry's Bilbao fantasia will be child's play in comparison with the building that really (re)acts as a terminal.