

Total Mobilmachung

Flow. The word has something very dynamic, almost heroic about it. It has all kinds of implications – flexibility, movement, development, progression. And Flow also means heating up. The status quo is cold, immobile and solid but Flow is hot, mobile and adventurous. And, where it's hot, things tend to happen. If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen. Whatever way you look at it, Flow is out there with the winners.

Behold, the connotation that has been following us for the last hundred years. Ever since the Futurists sang the praises of speed and started making art that desperately tried to detach itself from the static media by which the message had to be proclaimed, there has been a thread running through cultural history in the direction of a total mobilization of values, things and states of mind. Anyone not prepared to Go with the Flow succumbed to marginality. If you wanted to win, you went with the Flow. Your passage between A and B could never be quick enough. The transportation of people, goods, money and data continually improved. Cultural capital and natural resources were exploited more and more simply to facilitate the Flow. At last a point was reached where the Flow was no longer a means but an end. Who cares where or what A is? Or B, for that matter? As long as there's a channel between them. Flow is then no longer a factor of intermediation or a consequence of the wish to arrive somewhere, but a destiny. Movement is not necessary for life, movement is life. It is the journey, not the destination. Flow is no longer an expression of words, of coming and going, but a state of Being.

The New Economy, which was based on this transformation, is now going through a historic sobering-up and the world economy is on the rocks, due among other things to over-investment in the telecom sector (which is dogged by misguided investments in the communication channels of the future, resulting in a shocking overcapacity). But it would be too simple to proclaim the end of the Culture of Flow. Flow is too deeply rooted in the logic of our modern civilization for that to happen. The economy may fall prey to the bears, but modernity is bullish by definition. There are those who describe the hunt for new information, new experiences – in other words, for new kicks – as a form of addiction, and suggest that it should be treated in exactly the same way. But actually it doesn't bear the least resemblance. On the contrary, apart from a few activists, the general watchword is a return to growth, and as soon as possible if you don't mind. And if it can't be done with good grace, by savage cuts in interest and taxation, then with bad, by economic shock therapies or even a war.

What design is suited to Flow as a contemporary cultural condition? That can only be interaction design. After all, the visual design of places and objects becomes less relevant if those places and objects, the good old *As* and *Bs*, are displaced by the movement between them as the criterion of our existence. Interaction design, on the other hand, addresses itself to making the possibilities of this movement pliant and efficient, and sometimes even beautiful and valuable. If Flow does indeed become a state of existence, that 'existence' could also be of a high standard – conscious, intelligent, not aimed at minimizing the nuisance but at maximizing the experience.

Yet that is still rarely the case. Architecture and design are still unremittingly preoccupied with embellishing the functional object. Buildings and useful objects are all literally given a form.

In much of architecture and design, of course, that form is packed with metaphorical references to a culture of movement. This has been true ever since Futurism. The form refers to the total *Mobilmachung* we know from philosophy (in which the classic paradigm gave way to relativism), from physics (in which the observer became the crucial factor in the perception of reality), from biology (in which the arbitrary nature of phylogenesis was established), from art (in which happenings and performances became just as important as art objects) and, naturally, from computer technology (in which connectivity, compatibility and hence ultimate interchangeability were effectuated). But despite this prolific attention to what is going on in culture, the medium of the imagination remains a building or an object – static, in principle timeless, permanent and above all capable of being owned by someone.

The question is, how long can it go on? How long can design continue relating to things, when the things themselves are dissolving into a universal Flow? And if they are no longer about that, what will the design be? Is it still fodder for architects and designers? This issue of *Archis*, compiled in collaboration with the *Doors of Perception* conference, explores the answers.

Doors of Perception 7, about Flow, will take place in Amsterdam on 14, 15 and 16 November (see Diary, p. 120)