

The background of the page is a vibrant orange color with a complex, repeating geometric pattern. The pattern consists of various shapes, including triangles, squares, and hexagons, arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement. The colors range from a bright, saturated orange to a slightly darker, more muted shade, creating a rich, textured effect.

Aspects of Mediatecture

The design potential of mediatecture is currently being tested in very different sorts of public space. Any attempt in this book to describe some settled methodology could both interfere with this ongoing process of evolution and make mediatecture less accessible. From today's perspective it is not even clear if we are dealing here with a very new or a very old phenomenon. For this reason, this chapter is intended as an introduction which presents “aspects” of the mediatectonic way of working or, better, the mediatectonic way of thinking. This list of aspects is certainly not exhaustive, but hopefully it is at least the start of an attempt to create a proper place for this discipline which we know as “mediatecture”.

The Principle of Sensual Orientation

I studied architecture at the Technical High School in Aachen between 1980 and 1988. But the individual who had the key influence on my later development came not from academia but was Bruno Schindler. Schindler is an architect who has spent his entire life dealing intensively with the question of what really lies at the heart of architecture and how architecture can be used to articulate key relationships. He is a brutally consistent lateral thinker who never compromises, which makes him quite unsuitable as a candidate for either an academic career or the realities of the architectural office. He lives in Aachen and has been involved for some time with the architecture magazine ARCH+. In 1987 he had the opportunity to produce a whole edition of the magazine and it was upon reading this that I came face-to-face with an idea that turned everything that the university had been trying to teach me on its head. This idea formed the basis of my understanding of mediatecture.

As I made my first attempts to understand architecture through the act of writing I contacted Bruno Schindler and this resulted in me being supervised by him for the rest of my studies. He has spent his whole life quietly surrounded by a small group of loyal students and he is very proud of the fact that most of these students have gone on to really achieve something. Writing this book gave me an opportunity to revive this contact and this renewed dialogue with Bruno Schindler allowed me to both sharpen my own position and improve the focus of the book which, up to that point had become somewhat indiscriminate in its attempt to cover too much ground.

In my attempt to present aspects of mediatecture in this book it appears to me very important that I also include the text that sparked my initial interest in the subject. Bruno Schindler has kindly granted us permission to reprint here his central article from ARCH+. It is short but to the point – almost, indeed, a manifesto. I will show the same images in the same sequence – because the sequential way in which images are used by Bruno Schindler is almost a language in itself. Which is hardly surprising considering that his central message was that architecture should offer us a form of sensitive orientation.

As I went out into the real world of architectural practice I gained a sense of comfort from knowing that I was carrying this idea with me.

A sense of comfort which was misplaced perhaps, because the real world of architectural practice looked very different: But firstly, here is the article:

Theaters of Power

Bruno Schindler



Book of Hours of the Duc de Berry by the Limbourg brothers from around 1415

Architecture is that part of building which seeks to demonstrate and legitimize power. Pyramids are architecture but farmhouses are not. The power of the Pharaoh stretches far beyond the horizon while the influence of the farmer ends at the bottom of the field. Architectural monuments are theaters of power. They are like the mighty flanks of warships bristling with cannons below and masts above, sails billowing in the wind and colorful flags proclaiming dominance and promising energy, profit and the inevitable victory celebrations. But architecture, on the other hand, has very little to do with the ebb and flow of the needy, the churning sea of houses, workshops, shops, huts and hovels; with – putting it another way – the needs of those without power. And hence books about architecture are full of temples, palaces and castles – as well as stations, arcades and skyscrapers – as is well demonstrated by this old plan of Rome.

Architecture has, from the very beginning, been concerned with power. Constantly surrounded by competitors and opponents, the powerful recognized early on that architecture has the ability to convince the public that it is better off with the leaders that it knows. Architectural progress became driven by the relationship between the purposes of power and the virtuosity of buildings – and this is a relationship in which the agenda of the powerful invariably took precedence over the skill of the builders. This explains why the baths and the fora of Rome remain known by the names of the emperors who built them despite the fact that they have lain in ruins for centuries. And why Versailles is, quite correctly, known as the palace of Louis XIV - and NASA's launch pad in Florida is named after an American president. From the very beginning, many works of architecture have been seen principally in terms of their relationship with the powerful figures in a city, a region or an entire country – and some have even come to represent the fortunes of an entire people.

This brief reference to the relationship between power and architecture intends to show that there is hardly any area of human activity which is less able to be an end in itself. And should a building have the temerity to attempt to remain autonomous – while at the same time avoiding the danger of drifting into insignificant formality – then its only chance of doing so successfully is by turning one blind eye

to authority while the other eye squints warily at everything that the building must not be. In this connection it is highly instructive to look at the arms industry (and its civilian counterparts), to see the buildings which result from a constantly shifting balance of power – buildings which would hardly be worth mentioning were it not for the fact that the last two hundred years of European history have been marked by such a fatal complicity between the concealed exercise of power, autonomous architecture and meaning-based interpretation.

In the 18th century the powerful began to hide themselves increasingly behind philosophical speculation and formal institutions, which reduced their reliance on architecture alone as a means of intimidation and persuasion. Castles were abandoned and replaced with museums while nature, art and science each gained a virtuous aura as they became part of the secularized “better world” under cover of which the concentration and extension of power could continue much as before. Architects for their part were forced to work out the new rules of the game and they discovered these in the airy reaches of artistic theory, with the natural result that they were able to extend their influence over all those activities which could be interpreted as belonging to that “better world”; In short, architecture came to dominate virtually all building. Only those objects (which, ironically, were the true sources of power) such as factories, railways and bridges which it was difficult to envisage as part of the better world were left to the (new) engineering profession, the success of which was based on completely different, that is to say scientific, principles.

This completely speculative “better world” had, of course, the one severe drawback that it could not be judged in terms of the five senses alone: rather, it depended on continuous interpretation. The result was the growth of a new profession of “givers of meaning”, who did not tire of explaining that progress, having started with the monkeys, was now in the hands of the English Gentleman - as a result of which the future looked extremely rosy.

Concealed power structures, autonomous architecture and meaning-based interpretation became increasingly intertwined and involved in ever more areas of life to the point at which even the humblest tenement building was given the architectural treatment, which made it ever more difficult to guess, on the basis of simple observation, which façade concealed a seat of power and which did not. It was precisely in those buildings where architecture should have been able to make a social statement that such architecture was missing – whereas it was precisely in those buildings where architecture logically appeared not to belong that it flourished. The act of building became a dark exercise in social deception and only with the images of the blue planet earth rising above the deserts of the moon and the writings of the Club of Rome did this situation change. Here, finally, autonomous conjecture independent of all sensual perception was exposed as a dangerous imperative of the present rather than a sure way towards a better future. Since this moment, powerful institutions have recognized that the wider public demands a more sensitive approach, as a result of which they now prefer to



clearly demonstrate how they intend to use architecture as a means of presenting and legitimizing their power. This is a very old approach – and, perhaps for this very reason, also completely new. (Corporate Style).

Every sort of power should arouse suspicion, but it is at least infinitely preferable that power structures are represented in – rather than hidden from – a society. Not so much because it is against the interests of the powerful to see support eroded by an atmosphere of fear but rather because it is to be hoped that it is better for their subjects to live in awe of the visible rather than in dread of the inscrutable. It is clear that architecture has the role of creating social orientation and showing everyone exactly what their position is – indeed, this seems the only obvious reason why architecture must be comprehensible at all. This is clearly demonstrated by castles and cathedrals – but it is also true of railway stations and stadia. These are all building forms of which not only every child has a clear image but which are informed by a simple basic idea.

In addition to this, any architecture must be based on principles and common beliefs which are shared, unquestioningly, by an entire society – regardless of political and social division. But this question of belief is of course not so easy; take the example of the prudent woman who considers the alternatives when deciding whether she is to baptize – or inoculate – her new-born baby....Or of you yourself when deciding in which bank you wish to deposit your money: the bank with the Doric columns or the one plastered with security equipment. Of course a bank can have both – classical columns and state-of-the-art security apparatus but the concern remains that the two together create a ludicrous impression.

The old belief that further scientific and technological progress are the indisputable guarantors of a better future has disappeared over the past 40 years like sand slipping between trembling figures; the certainty which drove the heroic modern, despite the lessons of Verdun, has been driven away like smoke in a strong wind. This has left us with a naked reliance on science and technology and due to the fact that, ever since the writings of the Club of Rome, there are no longer any winners who are in a position to point to past victories or promise a better future, the only option left to the powerful is to hunt out and then architectonically present all possible imperatives. This was true after the Black Death (14th century) and the Wars of Religion (17th century) and it is equally true today.



Bruno Schindler's conclusion, that architecture has no option other than to methodically surrender to the balance of power has unfortunately not been borne out. Architecture remains too often in awe of the investors who are very reluctant to accept any sort of meaningful content because this would limit their ability to let or sell a property to any possible end-user: real estate objects should remain as socially and commercially mobile as possible. And while this state of affairs can be frustrating, such is the interchangeability of international architecture that it can hardly be challenged.

And, as for those exceptional projects which are not directly the responsibility of investors, these are generally shared out amongst an elite group of star architects in the hope that a little of their stardust will rub off. This is a question of marketing.

Of course this process often results in extraordinary buildings, but these are seldom convincing examples of an architecture based on sensual orientation. This indeed is not the goal of the major competitions involving star architects, and for this reason competition briefs are not couched in these terms. It is much easier to allow oneself to be surprised by the complex language of shapes spoken by the stars and rely on the autonomy of architectural genius than to deal directly with the more subjective, internal complexities of a project. (This drifting apart of internal meaning and external appearance is very clearly demonstrated in the process which led to the decision to rebuild the Stadtschloss in Berlin.)

Fortunately I was still young when I learned this difficult lesson and my reaction was the concept of mediatecture. If a building is not in a position to react to the communicative requirements of sensual orientation then at least its programmable surfaces are. Programming is so variable and flexible that it can react to any requirements, which explains why the concept is, in principle, so well received by investors – although one can naturally not expect support from these same investors when it comes to the deeper question of renewing the paradigm of the sensual effect of architecture in the public space. There is much to do – but that is of course what this book is about.

The question of whether such an approach will allow the balance of power to be rendered sensually communicable in the way intended by Bruno Schindler becomes a dialectic: in many cases power structures search for ways in which they can present themselves in a more positive light – to which end a media façade is very well suited. And this also means that the very existence of a media façade is often evidence of the power structure which lies behind it – “the medium is the message”. The ways in which content is then presented on this media façade are then highly variable. But even if it is purely used for the display of a program of media art (see Vattenfall's media façade in Berlin) this does nothing to diminish its importance to the power that lies behind it.

And despite all the critical connotations of what here may sound like a voice from 1968: this is good thing! We work “creatively” in order to make power visible. And when this also results in the production of art, this can only be a good thing. But my point is that it is just as easy for me as a creator to articulate the communicative interests of a power structure - and to “create social orientation and show everyone exactly what their position is” - without requiring the fig leaf of art. The same incidentally applies to advertising, because advertising is more or less the oldest way of communicating power. Bruno Schindler always quotes the example of the blossom which uses its conspicuous appearance to exercise power over and to attract the bee. And here is another story which Bruno Schindler told me:

“Everybody knows Mies van der Rohe’s 1921 design for an office tower in the Friedrichstraße in Berlin. Mies was naturally widely attacked for such a design. Taking the elegant façades of the existing buildings on the Friedrichstraße as their starting point, critics claimed that the pure glass façade offered nothing for the eye to hold on to. Mies answered by referring to the growth in advertising on façades and pointed out that, especially in the Friedrichstraße, there would soon be very little to see of these so loved historical façades. For exactly this same reason, he added, no one should be concerned about his building because its façade too would soon enough be covered with advertising and, hence, would become just another integral part of the Friedrichstraße ensemble.”

Similarly applicable in this context would be the system theory of Niklas Luhmann and the argument that power is in any case nothing other than a means of communication – but to digress further in this direction would soon take me outside the remit of this book.

And this brings us full circle. I wrote above of how the idea of mediatecture began from my reading of the article by Bruno Schindler and my hope is that this book is also a beginning. Because even when we have already come so far that this book contains some impressive results, the idea of mediatecture must still properly assert itself. It is a new idea – and an unusual one in a culture so dominated by the mechanical results of industrial production or a culture which generally understands the term “media” in terms of television or the printed press. But this is changing: the social networks which, in turn, are activated by “social media” are providing many people with a new way of understanding media.

And this changes the game.