

Power Meaning in Architecture in the XXth century

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Summary

Throughout history, the architectural language has been exploited by political leaders as a means of ideological assertion, mass control, domination and manipulation. The rise of a community has been associated with the elevation of new buildings, while the definitive conquest of a people was marked by the destruction of its fortresses. Buildings have always been used as symbols of power, because the messages communicated through architecture are long lasting and strong. In order to promote their ideologies, dictatorial regimes employed symbolical architectural values, historical and monumental styles, as well as well-known signs and symbols that commanded people's respect.

"Les Grand Projets" of Mitterand regime are a contemporary example of using architecture as a symbolical vehicle for propaganda and political assertion. Although criticized for his authoritarian style, the quality and inventiveness of the architecture promoted by the French president, his style and program coherence are for sure to be preferred to many situations found in more democratic systems, where the city is built without unity, obeying some immediate, isolated individual interests. The architecture imposed by Mitterand is also much to be preferred to the other extreme, the grandiloquence of pseudo classic dialects of the totalitarian regimes. Hitler, Mussolini, Ceausescu, Stalin promoted a severe, monumental and gigantesque architecture meant to impress and dominate.

In free democratic markets, the political power tends to be replaced by the power of money. Architecture gets subordinated to the corporate image, commercial purposes and the taste and preferences of the real-estate investors. Real democracy would rather mean the citizens' involvement in the decision making about their built environment and the buildings important for their community life. The power of people should be expressed in participative architecture and urbanism. For this it is essential to train citizens in the spirit of democratic communication and prepare them with a basic architectural culture, otherwise there will continue to be room for manipulation in favor of various extraneous interests.

Keywords: symbol, meaning, communication, ideological assertion, national assertion, manipulation, domination, propaganda, dictatorship, democracy, power, politic, authority, architecture, built environment, participation, people, citizens



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To build is a symbol of domination

Along history, the architectural language has been exploited by political systems as means of ideological assertion, mass control, domination and manipulation. Many times, as the regimes changed, the built environment's attributes have been used to destroy the traces of the past and to endorse a new political and social order. The Berlin Wall, a black mark on German history, is today almost entirely demolished and replaced with modern edifices, symbols of democracy and civilization.

The rise of a community has been associated with the elevation of new buildings, while the definitive conquest of a people was marked by the destruction of its fortresses. Bombings in conflicts between states (the World Wars) or cultures (terror attacks) have symbolically targeted important public buildings, in a punitive quest to hurt national dignity.



The act of building means marking the occupation and the power over a territory. The building of Orthodox churches in some Romanian areas with ethnic conflicts has been in many cases a political gesture for the assertion of national spirit. Especially after the 1918 Union, big cathedrals were built in "sensitive" cities such as Alba-Iulia, Cluj, Timișoara, Satu Mare. Thus Orthodoxy appeared as "an essential ingredient of the national identity". The cathedral symbolized the taking in possession of the newly added territory which "was thus fixed through consecration on the map of the Orthodox Romanian nation."³

¹ Twin Towers, New York, 11 september 2001, <http://www.mpc.edu>

² Frauenkirche, Dresden, www.neumarkt-dresden.de

³ Ioan Augustin – p.14, Bizanț după Bizanț după Bizanț, Editure Ex Ponto, Constanța, 2000



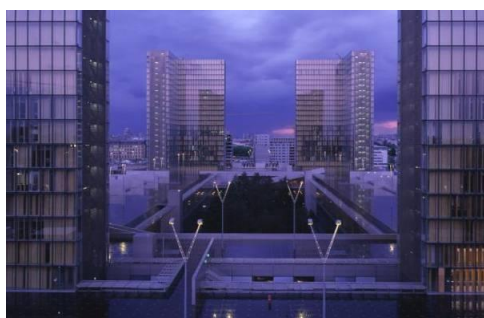
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Dictatorial use of architectural symbols

Buildings have always been used as symbols of power, because the messages communicated through architecture are long lasting and strong. The ideas and principles promoted by different political systems have been expressed thoroughly and durable in public buildings and urbanism. Promoting an architectural style, a certain type of public building or favoring certain social classes shows the politicians' attitude towards the people⁴. A relevant example is the waste of urban space on propaganda, reducing the space available for people's lodgings during the Romanian communist dictatorship (G.M. Cantacuzino).

There is a strong connection between politics and architecture; the leaders have often used the symbolism of architecture for the assertion of power, for manipulation and for projecting a certain image. In order to promote their ideologies, political regimes employed symbolical architectural values, historical and monumental styles, and well-known signs and symbols that commanded people's respect.

Les Grand Projets of Mitterand regime are a contemporary example for using architecture as a symbolical vehicle for propaganda and political ideology assertion. Evoking the ideals of the French Revolution and the necessity of refreshing some urban areas, François Mitterand started in the 80s the erection of numerous cultural buildings in Paris and in other French cities. These new edifices were intended as a demonstration of France's technological and cultural power and as a proof of environmental awareness.



Mitterand's preference for simple geometrical shapes generated the assertion of a new, original stylistic expression. The use of basic volumes - sphere, cube and pyramid - was meant to signify the affirmation a „new model of society” and to promote „the idea of the revival of Man”. *Les Grands Projets* included many

⁴ Octavian Alexandru Iliescu, *Simbol în arhitectură*. P.47, Universitarz Editure Ion Mincu, Bucharest, 2002

⁵ National Library of France, Paris, architect Dominique Perrault, www.eikongraphia.com

⁶ The Louvre Museum Pyramid, architect I.M.Pei, www.e-architect.co.uk



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grandiose and symbolic buildings, L'Arche being undoubtedly the most eloquent and monumental - a grand white cube that expresses „formal and political directness and simplicity”, sitting „at the front of the most culturally loaded axes of the world”⁷.



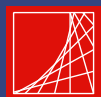
The French president had been accused of pharaoh like ambitions, (he was nicknamed by the journalists “Miterramses I”), political arrogance and power games as a consequence of imposing his will in the formulating of the project theme and in the choosing of architectural solutions. However, today, the merits of his populist political program are acknowledged, as well as the role played in the cultural and economical revival of France during the 90’s.

The quality and inventiveness of the architecture promoted by the French president, his style and program coherence are for sure to be preferred to many situations found in more democratic systems in which the city is built without unity, obeying some immediate, isolated individual interests.

And, more than this, it is much to be preferred to the other extreme, the grandiloquence of pseudo classic dialects of totalitarian regimes. They promoted a severe, monumental and gigantesque architecture meant to impress and dominate. To exert control on population, the dictators brutally changed the existing urban structures and used the prestige of some urban areas for imposing new colossal built objects to celebrate their “eternal” power. Mussolini proposed the insertion of grandiose plazas in the medieval Italian cities, and Stalin decided in 1949 to raise tall buildings and this made the cities blow up vertically. Stadtplan fur der Grosse

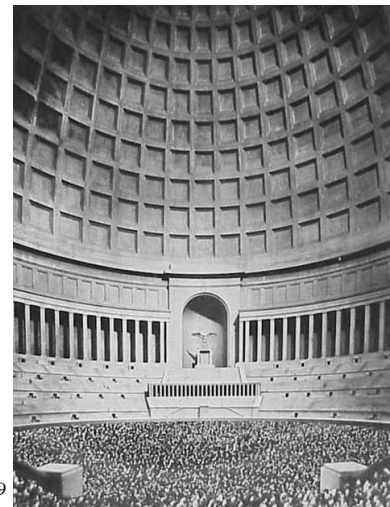
⁷ Architectural Design no 65 - Power of architecture, p.96

⁸ Grande Arche de la Defense Paris, architect Johann Otto von Spreckelsen, <http://en.wikipedia.org>



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Berlin conceived by Hitler meant the change of the city scale into gigantesque and its transformation according to the fascist ideology.



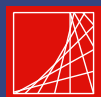
The totalitarian regimes transformed architecture into a propagandistic instrument; they imposed stylistic orientations that expressed grandiloquence and authoritarianism. Invoking „the soviet people’s right to columns”, Stalin had used for the propaganda of his regime an intricate and monumental architecture. The edifices were imprinted with slogans, speeches and paragraphs from classical communists’ writings in order „to educate” masses and the soviet cities were decorated with the statues of the Bolsheviks revolutionaries.

Democratic architecture – does it express the power of people?

In democratic systems with free markets the political authority is replaced by the power of money and the decisions of the big real estate investors are the ones that generate the dominant architecture of the city. In some rare positive situations, the architecture is determined by the force of some architect’s talent and personality. This is however dependant on the architect’s precious ability to make themselves recognized and accepted. For instance, Norman Foster, a knight, exerts his power as a famous architect praised with excellence titles to influence but he also uses the powers of art, technology and science in modern and original buildings all over the world.

⁹ Hitler with a model of the Great Hall, as played in the film by Bruno Heinz, www.meaus.com

¹⁰ Great Dome proposed by Albert Speer, blog.miragestudio7.com



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Foster considers that architects should sustain the public interest through their works, that is why he decides to symbolically express democracy, communication and openness through the transparency of the London Council building' skin. Placed on the Thames bank, this ecological building evokes the relations that connect the electors to the ones who represent them and it enhances the trust in public authorities. Foster also communicates through his building values of the contemporary civilization: democratic spirit, openness and respect to the environment.



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In an article in *Architectural Design Magazine – Power and Architecture*, Maxwell Hutchinson notices that during the twenty century there are only a few investors connected to great architects' names: Edith Farnsworth - Mies van der Rohe, Guel - Antoni Gaudi, Guggenheim - Frank Lloyd Wright, and most of the big real estate investments with good design are corporate buildings, subordinate to their commercial image and purpose: Seagram Building, Johnson Wax Building, Lloyds building¹².

About Donald Trump, multibillionaire, a big "patron" of today's American architecture, Maxwell Hutchinson things that his real estate investments do not exceed in architectural quality: his power and skill in business have no correspondence in a well formed architectural vision. Trump believes in a large diversity of shapes and styles, thinks that Atlantic City Casino should look like Taj Mahal and prefers to work with a mature, experienced and famous architect, because „fame sells for itself”.

¹¹ Greater London Authority Building (London City Hall), London, United Kingdom, flickr.com

¹² *Architectural Design - Power of architecture*, no 65, 3-4/1995



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Democracy brought to social, cultural and political maturity should mean the citizens' participation in design decisions about the city they live in and about the representative buildings of their community. A good example of democratic communication based on architectural symbols is the public dialogue from the United States in the frame of the reconstruction project of the Twin towers destroyed during the 11th September terrorist attempt. The citizens' participation in this project is a political gesture which intends to prove the unanimity of the protest reaction against terrorism and public insecurity and a moral healing of their national pride.

Democracy in Romania

In contemporary Romania, the architectural culture is almost not existent, and the democratic culture is at a beginning. The rhythm of construction grows fast and uncontrolled, without connection to the context and to people's and cities' needs and this is going to have long term disastrous, irreversible consequences. The participative architecture and urbanism are maybe the solutions to this crisis. They might help discover the communities' real interests and needs about their built environment. But is the Romanian public trained so that they could have correct opinions in architecture and urbanism? If the public were trained in this direction, they could surely participate in a dialogue and they could make good choices for their social and cultural life. Otherwise, they might only be manipulated for various self serving interests.

¹³ Trump Taj Mahal Casino, www.casinofolk.com/trump.html

¹⁴ Trump Tower, www.city-data.com



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Social communication problems affect architectural communication

For a democratic and harmonious built environment, it is important to raise the level of education in this matter, but it is also essential to train citizens in the spirit of democratic communication about all the problems that concern them.

Laurentiu Soitu, specialist in social communication has a pessimistic point of view about this: he notices the absence of the preoccupation for a communication civilization and the lack of interest for the meaning of words and language, of gestures and behavior. In his work „Social Communication”, he observes that our civilization is characterized by monologues and by a strong influence of publicity and propaganda. The social communication is dominated by the TV screen with its stars. Its tendency to the vulgar and the monotone is masked by blinding flash light and noise. For these reasons, the common people lack an awareness of social identity, they have the feeling of not being asked, listened to, solicited or engaged in any form. From here issues the indifference about the common problems of society, which makes it difficult having a participative architecture.

In this kind of pseudo democracy, it is quite hard to express the power of people in architecture and urbanism. Architectural communication is directly affected by the social communication problems, it becomes unable to discover and respond to the real needs and desires of people.

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