Medial Practices of Architectural Design

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Call for
Abstracts

Medial Practices of Architectural Design

Issue 40 is devoted to the medial practices of architecture. Although it represents a follow-up to Issue 32 *Architecture and Social Media*, it focuses specifically on the subject of *mediality*. Issue 32 overhauled the classic, media-theoretical concept of *medium* as it had been formulated in the 1970s by Charles Jencks, Aldo Rossi, and Heinrich Klotz[1] for the field of architecture and by Umberto Eco and Algirdas Greimas for the field of semiotics. These architects and theoreticians understood *medium* as a more or less neutral entity in the transmission of a message (comparable perhaps to a telephone conversation) from one side to the other, meaning from the side of the architect to that of the user. Through various articles, Issue 32 explored the signification of the medial work as well as its social appropriations.

Now that medial techniques have quickly, and downright hastily, developed and changed, Issue 40 sets a new focus with the topic *Medial Practices in Architectural Design*. The idea is to investigate the influence of all media that is used in the design process from two points of view: first, in the sense of the influence of design media on the design process, i.e. of its transforming influence on the concept production and on the implementation of architecture, and second, in the sense of the effect on the users and thereby of architecture's impact.

Architecture not only communicates something, but also triggers actions, emotions, and physical reactions in its viewers; the perspective on the architecture changes, and the architecture changes, resulting in a mutual reciprocity. The media of the design process are further developed or replaced by others; over the course of their existence, buildings are furnished and converted multiple times.

For a long time, the design was seen as the result of the intellectual and aesthetic genius of an architect. In this context, 'hard-' and 'software' (often described as tools, instruments, and procedures of design) were understood as useful but neutral aids that served the idea. Nevertheless, even if it was not addressed, the architects and artists were highly aware of the fact that the media in which they were working, be it pencil, technical pen, watercolor illustration, or cardboard model, also always play an essential role in their work and are in no way neutral.

This is wholly in keeping with Friedrich Nietzsche's observation: "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts."[2] Every architect knows

1 See Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York 1977, and Heinrich Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne: Architektur der Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden 1987.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Briefe von Friedrich Nietzsche Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, in: *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Munich 1981, Vol. III/1, p. 172.

that a soft pencil is needed for the design sketch, and a hard, sharp pencil for the working drawing. For examples of this, we can look to the dynamic architectural sketches of Erich Mendelsohn, which were created in the medium of ink drawing or soft pencil, or to Karl Friedrich Schinkel's brilliant pen-and-ink drawings with which he put his ideas for the Altes Museum and the Schauspielhaus in Berlin to paper with great precision. Media can truly co-write our thoughts. This also applies to other visual media, like photographs, which are never mere depictions, but instead always encroach on the object and change it according to their own modes of being.

In this sense, mediality—according to the philosopher Dieter Mersch—always exists as an independent middle that inserts itself between the thing and its impacts. This applies to the images of existing reality and their appropriations, i.e. to the perception and habitation of architecture.

In the design and physical realization processes, on the other hand, the focus is on the creation of reality. Here, the medial in the process of design and realization planning inserts itself into the objects.

In this context, Mersch also makes reference to the active participation of the medium in the knowledge and awareness process itself. Wherever we are affected by the things in various ways, wherever the things trigger thoughts, actions, and feelings, mediality is more than simply intellectual and visual: it takes place at many different levels of perception. The connections between media theory, aesthetics, and ethics can also be seen wherever the sensory conveyance of world experience becomes the subject of discussion.

Today's tools and practices a. in the design process (the now traditional CAD, *parametric design*, *digital fabrication* with *virtual 3D modeling* and real *3D printing*, etc.), b. in the realization process (Building Information Modelling, BIM), c. in the rendering process (site plans, photos, clips, layouts, functional diagrams, computer renderings, and animations, interactive 3D virtualizations), and d. in the practical appropriation (cultural transmission of living and usage behaviors, advertising for home and office interiors, portrayals of life and work in films, etc.) of architecture are increasingly understood as a medium in the sense of medial practice. Generally speaking, a medium and the medial practice are defined as self-willed and as an important factor of the identity of the design, of the building in its spatial situation, and of its perception and usefulness.

Issue 40 explores the self-will of media in the design process, in the realization, as a work, and in the appropriation of the architecture. The curators of Issue 40 are inviting architects, media theorists, philosophers, artists, and designers to submit critical articles on this subject. The articles can be of a theoretical-philosophical nature or can also describe the phenomenon of the medial on the basis of concrete observations and case studies. Submissions dealing with the following issues are welcome:

– How does architectural mediality manifest empirically through concrete examples of architecture that has been built or designed? What is the self-will of architectural mediality? Can it be understood as a function, cause,

inclination, or control, or perhaps as the opening of a space of possibility? What is the relationship between the medium in its unique character and its architecture-generating effects?

– How can the medial of the architectural design process be examined philosophically? What schools of thought can be used as a basis for a theory of architectural mediality?

– What do the medial practices of the design process look like? How do they differ from those of other art forms? What does that mean for sketching, drawing, or modeling? What materials come to the fore in this context?

– How can digital and analog media be understood in architecture and in the architectural design? Do the so-called new media (e.g. CAD, BIM) follow analog or digital ways of thinking, or can perhaps intermediate forms be found with which the phenomena of the medial can be described with greater precision? Or simply: is the separation of analog and digital even sensible? Are they so clearly separate, or can it be said, particularly in light of the architectural design process, that the digital also has a historical dimension that dates back far beyond the computer? It is enough in this context to refer to the breaking down of media into bits and bytes through information technology and to the representation in digital imaging processes on monitors or virtual-reality headsets? Or shouldn't digital media be defined instead by its possibilities for transformation, modification, and reproduction?

– For the medial aspects of the design process, shouldn't we go deeper, beyond the visible, and follow a differentiation of physicality and cognition in the tension between material spaces and spaces for the imagination?

Appendix

Media-Philosophical Foundations

Medium, mediality, and mediatization have become central theoretical concepts since the second half of the 20th century through the development of reproduction technologies and mass media. The theory has repeatedly made both a historical narrative of the media of modernity and their social and cultural significance the subject of its investigation. The book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan[3] can be understood as an attempt to define not only the conciseness of technical media, but also their function as dimensions of the medial. In this sense, new light has been shed on the medial as a general dimension of human perception and activity.

Since then, the debate surrounding media has been significantly expanded: on the one hand, there seems to be a tendency to describe everything as a medium, and on the other hand, an attempt has been made in philosophy to understand the concept of *medium* as conceptual abstraction. In this context, the question has been raised again as to what a medium actually is, because, as was noted by Stefan Münker and Alexander Roesler in their book *Was ist ein Medium?*, "the theoretical examination of the *concept* of the medial" is nothing new, but "the theoretical examination of the *concept* of medium is."[4]

Starting with the attempt to gain a new understanding of the concept of medium in its specificity, the philosophical examination of the medial has once again made it to the forefront of a history of philosophy that, from its very beginnings, has dealt with the constitutional function of medial relations and perception processes, like in *Texte zur Medientheorie*, a collection of texts published by Günter Helmes and Werner Köster.[5] The question of *What is a medium?* is therefore not simply a question of abstraction, but rather a critical analysis for generating a new way of viewing the differentiations that shape the media-theoretical discourse, e.g. between old and new media, natural and artificial media, analog and digital media, and sensory and technical media. In this context, media philosophy is needed for conceptually clarifying "what media do as means of accessing and understanding the world."[6]

The reflections of Sybille Krämer on the operativity[7] of the medial and the insights of Dieter Mersch with respect to the medial in its event components have contributed significantly to the definition of the medial. According to Mersch, mediality always exists as a middle that "inserts itself between the relata and their differences."[8] As expressed using an older term from the field of aesthetics, the medium is a *tertium comparationis* that, in its intermediary function, exerts an influence on and attaches itself to that which is being conveyed.

3 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge 1995.

4 Stefan Münker und Alexander Roesler, *Was ist ein Medium?*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, p. 7.

5 Günter Helmes and Werner Köster (eds.), *Texte zur Medientheorie*, Stuttgart 2004.

6 Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Handbuch der Medienphilosophie*, Darmstadt 2018, p. 14.

7 Sybille Krämer, *Operative Bildlichkeit: Von der Grammatologie zu einer „Diagrammatologie"? Reflexionen über erkennendes Sehen*, in: Martina Heßler and Dieter Mersch (eds.), *Logik des Bildlichen: Zur Kritik der ikonischen Vernunft*, Bielefeld 2009, pp. 94–123.

8 Dieter Mersch, *Philosophien des Medialen: ‚Zwischen' Materialität, Technik und Relation*, in: Gerhard Schweppenhäuser (ed.), *Handbuch der Medienphilosophie*, Darmstadt 2018, p. 20.

Relationship between medium and perception in the design process

The architectural design process is shaped by various media that open up a variety of dimensions of our spatial perception—from the imaginary space to the three-dimensional model and the practices of spatial experience. In this sense, the architectural design process generates a space in which things become perceivable through the senses, and our experience of architecture becomes possible in various scales.

From a medial point of view, architecture is therefore related to other art forms, such as sculpture, painting, music, and literature, but at the same time, is different in several ways; it is precisely from the investigation of the media of the arts that a theory on the media of architecture can be developed from the difference, a theory that is not only based on the repeatedly used visual media, but also incorporates other and new medial developments in architecture. In this context, special consideration is given to the artistic practices that operate with media's transgressions of limits.

The aim is to explore the creative potential of media and, at the same time, their intrinsic connection to sensuousness, which nevertheless cannot be separated from architectural description—as is shown paradigmatically by the books *Wissenschaftliche Selbstbiographie* by Aldo Rossi[9] and Schinkel: *A Meander Through His Life and Work* by Kurt Forster.[10]

Analog and digital media

Today, architectural design is inseparably linked to analog and digital technologies. In his book *Analog und digital*, Otl Aicher writes that humans are analog beings, not digital beings.[11] He defines the difference between analog and digital as a fundamental difference in humankind's destiny as thinking, perceiving, and designing beings. This is about a dichotomy: the digital is the exact construction of thinking and the precise control of perception, while the analog is the understanding of relations in thinking and perception.

In this sense, the digital is point-by-point, while the analog creates an overview in which the human being is less exact but can think in more general terms. While calculation is based on the digital, the analog stands for the abundance of relations in thinking and perception that humans, as the discoverers and designers of their own lives, can make use of in society. In this context, the differentiation between analog and digital media is of an epistemological nature.

On the other hand, although the questions as to how people design their lives through analog and digital media and how these medial spaces shape communication, society, and our cities have an epistemological basis, they also refer to practices that give substance to the medial spaces and therefore create the analog and the digital again and again. In a paradigmatic manner, the architectural design process is a creative practice like that, to be understood as a hybrid act between the analog and the digital that could lead to new interpretations or to the revision of the differentiation proposed by Aicher.

9 Aldo Rossi, Wissenschaftliche Selbstbiographie, Bern 1988.

10 Kurt W. Forster, Schinkel: A Meander Through his Life and Work, Berlin 2018.

11 Otl Aicher, Analog und digital, Berlin 2015.