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Some Observations on the Interdependence of Architectural and Industrial Design

Abstract

In recent years, a particular kind of building can be seen in cities. They seem somehow familiar to us from the time of modernity, yet at the same time they appear unfamiliar and novel. Often these buildings are completely glazed, but nonetheless they tell the observer little about their function and utilisation. They share an apparent demand for distancing themselves from the built environment around them. They indulge themselves in the novel, which lets them appear even newer and the surrounding buildings exceedingly dated. Since they tend to deny scale, they may be perceived as high-tech objects rather than buildings. They often remind us of the designs of digital devices, smartphones and tablet PCs. The following essay shall elucidate such characteristics and their corresponding background.

There has already been an historical period, when new technologies and methods in industrial design provided the measure of whether architecture was modern or not: the machine age. The large and airy station halls of the railway, built from iron and glass, set a new scale and thereby demonstrated the obsolescence of the densely built city centres. The parallels between architectural and industrial design of that era were indicated in a nutshell by the painter Max Liebermann, who is supposed to have said about the Berlin Cathedral (1905), »Very nice, very nice. Everything can be twisted off.«

Today again technology is obviously determining architectural and industrial design. Since the late 20th century, the introduction of so-called *splines* and *NURBSs* into three-dimensional modelling software spread the possibilities to create curved or ›organic‹ designs. Moreover, 3d modelling tools are generally independent from scale. Thus it turns out that a car can look like a vacuum cleaner and a trendy detached house like a bicycle helmet.

Unlike the spectacular architectural forms by, for example, Zaha Hadid, the buildings described here approach the design of the widely-used digital

devices, thus they return to more geometric shapes. Their design is characterised by large, dark and reflective glass displays, round off corners, opacity and a kind of minimal design which expresses ›elegant simplicity‹. Two fairly literal examples are the multifunctional building at Vörösmarty tér in Budapest (2007) and the MuCEM in Marseilles (2012). In this essay, I will also present other examples that adopt the design of digital devices in a less literal manner.

This essay will deliver some observations on the interdependence of architectural and industrial design. It offers possible approaches to help elucidate the phenomenon of buildings, which, at first glance, one could designate as ›smartphone architecture‹. Finally, this essay will provide a new approach to viewing similar buildings designed over the last 40 years.

Keywords

Digital devices

Adoption of objects

Shift of scale

Objecthood

Smartphone architecture