

# Architecture and Social Media

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## Editorial

It's impossible to imagine life today without *social media*, and it seems increasingly impossible to play our part in society without constantly communicating online. We are networked – digitally, globally, constantly. And yet *flash mobs*, *Facebook parties*, and the Occupy movement all show that *social media* are at their most effective in the context of individual, physically-affective experience and social interaction in real places. No other technology has infiltrated the rituals of our daily lives to the same extent as *social media*, which are now starting to rival the very cultural technology – architecture – that has traditionally provided the physical conditions for human socialization.

*Social media* have given rise to new models of socialization, and these are changing our concept of space and time and our sense of the public and the private. By facilitating *Airbnb*, *couch surfing*, and *car sharing social media* are altering everyday materials and spatial parameters. These are becoming increasingly temporary and ephemeral, and they are leading to new ways of structuring communities, to new forms of socialism. The question is, how does architecture relate to social media, that's to say, how does traditional, analog technology relate to the new, digital cultural technologies? Are they holding each other back or are they joining forces?

## »The end of architecture« ...

The fact is that the modern view of architecture dates back to that far-reaching insight once formulated by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), who declared that the real purpose of architecture was to bring »men together into societies«. Alberti placed greater importance on the social function of architecture than on its protective function. For it is not protection from the elements, as common wisdom would have it, but human beings' need for social interaction that sowed the seeds of architecture. Since then architecture has not only been *reactio*, it has also been *actio*. Alberti provided architecture with its modern, dialectical definition: it is the absolute prerequisite for the processes of human socialization. At the same time,

complex processes of architectural construction are palpable evidence of the highest degree of social organization.

If *social media* are in fact increasingly competing with architecture as our main means of socialization, this could seriously diminish its role in our own time. Without that socializing function, architecture would become no more than an elaborate stage set, it would be mere semblance. According to Alberti's dialectical definition, it would cease to be architecture.

There are already signs of this all around us. Media-façades, over-sized screens, and vast expanses of mirror glass are turning architecture into pictorial, mimetic replications of its real or media-made surroundings. Witness the extension of the Historical Museum in Berne, with a giant mirror façade that seems to be mimicking the aesthetics of *touch screens* and *iPads*, or Jun Aoki's Louis Vuitton store in Roppongi, or Rudy Ricciotti's Museum *MuCEM* in Marseilles. Will the age of the network society see the demise of architecture – at least in terms of its modern definition? It seems reasonable to harbor doubts. Some regard what is happening today as more than just a shift in the value system of architecture. They hail it as a historic watershed.

... or »toward an architecture«?

But is there not also evidence of exactly the opposite – aren't there signs that the greater the speed and reach of free-floating communication in the global network, the more it is dependent on architecture? Aren't we in fact seeing a rediscovery of urban locations as catalysts for social interaction? Take the advent of *guerilla gardening* in major cities such as Berlin and New York, or Jürgen Mayer H.'s extravagant *Metropol Parasol*, which is clearly turning the neglected Old Town in Seville back into a hub of public life. Taksim Square in Istanbul, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and *Stuttgart 21* have all become synonymous with the interconnection and mutual intensification of architectural and media-based socialization.

And it seems that the return of sensuality to architecture and the ubiquity of topics such as atmosphere, space, body responses, aura, and empathy are striking indications of this. The fact is that as long ago as the early 1990s a new sensitivity toward materials and atmosphere arose from the reaction to the virtualization of space by new media technologies. Does this therefore mean that we are now facing a communicative and spatial-material reconceptualization of architecture, somewhere between the digital, virtual realms of *social media* and the tangible, atmospheric, physical realms of architecture and the city?