

# Function, Purpose, Use in Architecture and Urbanism

UTE POERSCHKE UND EDUARD H. FÜHR

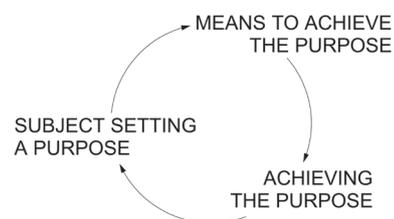
## Editorial

The term functionalism has found its way back into architecture and design<sup>1</sup>, either adopted in its old understanding or stated as a new movement. In both cases, however, the terms function, purpose, and use have seldom undergone further theoretical reflection. In light of this situation, we asked in a Call for Papers to critically reconsider these terms in their historical contexts, to discuss what we can learn from the old approaches, and to propose how we might need to refine them. The numerous responses show the continued interest in this topic, and with this issue *Function, Purpose, Use in Architecture and Urbanism* of the journal *Wolkenkuckucksheim – Cloud-Cuckoo-Land – Воздушный замок*, we present a selection of the submissions.

The issue is divided into three thematic foci. The first focus examines function, purpose, and use as historical terms within their respective architectural contexts. The second focus consists of studies that present, analyze and historically classify individual works of architecture and urbanism. The third focus discusses conceptual, theoretical and philosophical approaches. In this editorial, we would like to address a question that concerns all contributions, namely, if and how the three terms of function, purpose and use can be distinguished from one another. In everyday language, these three terms might be interchangeable, because they fall roughly within the same categories of practicality and the seemingly non-aesthetical, or because in normal conversation the nuances of an interlocutor's position can be verified. But if architectural theory or theory in general is concerned, the clarification of terms and their specific applications contribute to a more precise understanding of the topics they address. Such clarification is however often quite difficult, because a main characteristic of terms is that they simply cannot be defined distinctly and remain open to different interpretations. Nevertheless, the meaning of terms can be located to a certain extent. In this respect, one can say the following about the terms function, purpose, and use: All three terms are relational, meaning that they refer to a relationship of things, facts, actions and/or people. The things that interrelate and the kind of relationship differ, however. With regard to purposes, there must always be a subject that sets a purpose, and also a means to achieve that purpose. This relationship could be represented as follows: F1.

In contrast, when functions are discussed, there are no intending subjects. If a thing or fact has a function, then it acts upon another thing or another fact – within a whole to be defined. Things enter into action-reaction or cause-effect situations, and thus create parts-whole-relationships. The question of whether these action-reaction dependences follow a purpose is not addressed in this concept. In calculus, for example, a mathematical function describes a cause-effect relation, but not a purpose. In biology, organs are described through their functions, that is, how they interact and thus maintain an organism, and these functions can be described without knowing if an organism actually has

<sup>1</sup> The German Society for Design History (Gesellschaft für Designgeschichte), for example, titled its 2010 annual meeting »Neofunktionalismus?« (Neofunctionalism?).

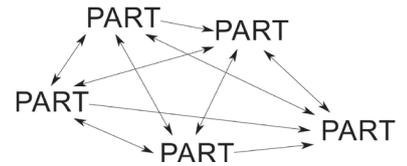


F1

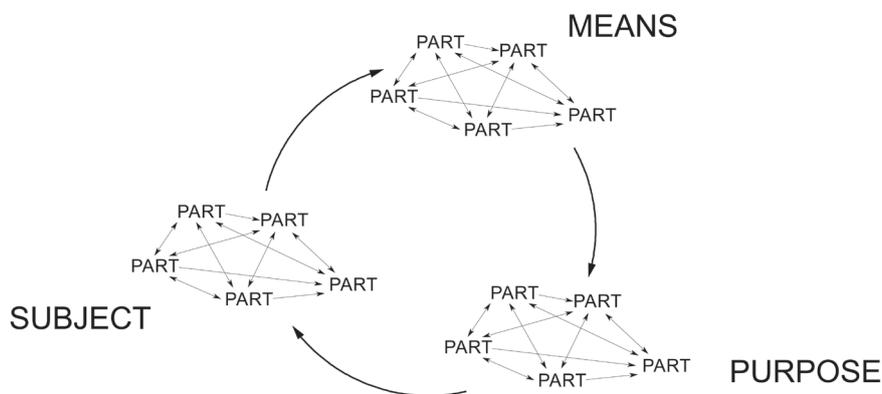
a purpose. Any consideration of an organism's purpose would inevitably lead to the question of whether nature had a purpose and eventually whether there was a »purpose setter« (God). Instead, in biology, one observes the environment of a specific action-reaction-relationship (system, organism) and its relationships to other systems. We would represent this relationship in the following way: F2.

When it comes to architecture, it may seem easy to keep these two concepts apart, but history has proven otherwise. One might also ask why this differentiation is necessary at all in architectural discourse. There are good reasons, however: considering an architectural object as a means to serve a purpose (end) is different than considering this same object as a part in respect to creating a whole. The latter is an architectural discourse beyond a purpose setter (client); in other words, one can observe an architectural object as »purpose-free« and »autonomous« and therefore beyond the onerous discussion about whether architecture is a (purpose-free) art. Particularly High Modernism before 1930 understood this as a favorable opportunity. Buildings and cities are always means to purposes, and they also always have functions. People (as intending subjects) pursue many purposes when they build buildings, one of which can be the purpose of artistic expression. Furthermore, buildings always consist of parts that actualize with their functions a cause-effect relationship and therefore a building. And buildings themselves are parts of a larger functional relationship with their surroundings. In architectural discourse, these fundamental concepts should be kept apart, because they address completely different questions, none less important than the other.

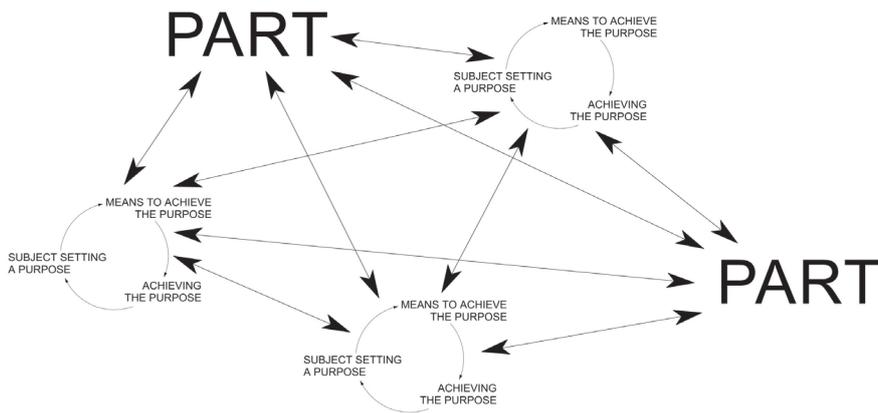
Taking this as a basis, the two concepts of function and purpose can be combined to form a more complex system, considering on the one hand, that intending subjects, means and purposes can consist of parts-whole and cause-effect relationships, and on the other hand, that parts can consist of intending subjects, means and purposes. The following diagrams show this (F3, F4):



F2



F3



F4

We have included the term use in our theme issue, because it opens another perspective on this topic. Use is an activity that includes a thing. Using a thing familiarizes us with the thing and is thus of experiential value. Use can make a thing a means (which is then put into a means-purpose-relationship), but it can also generate a purpose-free and aesthetic experience. Use can lead to art – or not. In all cases, however, one can experience a certain independent existence or resistance of a thing when using it. Only when we interact with a thing can we determine whether it really suits the intended purpose or experience, or whether it is perhaps better for other purposes and experiences. When interacting with things, we can, for example, experience material characteristics or discover if and how parts act to form a whole.<sup>2</sup>

2 Hahn 2002

To better understand this issue's contributions, it was important for us to point out these fundamental characteristics of the three terms, within which there is still enough room for further interpretation. A big hurdle in architectural discourse is the confusion of these terms in the last century. Before approximately 1930, these terms were used – relatively clearly – with the meanings described above. Texts by Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, Carlo Lodoli, Gottfried Semper, Eugene Viollet-le-Duc, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos or Hannes Meyer show this, as do the contributions on these authors in this issue. The confusion between the terms started around 1930, specifically where people were considered as »the masses«. High Modernism treated subjects as objects, that is they eliminated the peoples' purpose-setting activity. Particularly in mass housing, individual residents did not exist anymore, but were replaced by objectified and standardized needs.

An additional significant reason for the confusion of the terms lies in the architectural discourse's internationalization, where purpose / Zweck and function / Funktion have often been translated interchangeably. In 1948, Sullivan's »form follows function« was translated into German as »Form ergibt sich aus dem Zweck«.<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's exact use of the term »Zweck« in his 1924 *Baukunst und Zeitwille* became »function« in the translation.<sup>4</sup> And Adolf Behne's 1926 *Der moderne Zweckbau* was translated into English as *The modern functional building*, which might be justifiable but is nothing less than a first interpretation of Behne's text.<sup>5</sup> These translations by seminal theorists have subsequently been cited by numerous pupils without checking the original source or recognizing translations as interpretations. No wonder that,

3 Fisker 1948: 132

4 Forty 2000: 183

5 Bletter 1996

because of this confusion, other critics have called for an abandonment of the term function in architecture and design.<sup>6</sup> With this, however, the understanding of function in architecture as described above would be lost, too.

Sublimating purposes, functions and uses is a central task in architecture and urbanism. We hope that in this issue the aesthetic relevance of all three terms becomes evident.

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