

Art and Urbanism: Architecture, Power and Leisure

A Construction of two Architectures

The urban environment is a construction of two interconnected architectures: the physical architecture of the built environment, and the socio-political architecture of laws and legislation. While distinct in form, both architectures depart from, and bare testimony to, specific moral, cultural and ethical propositions on everyday life. The most important factor distinguishing both architectures is that the former governs the use of the spatial plane and the later governs the use of the temporal plane.

The Physical Architecture of the Spatial Plane

To understand how the architecture of the built environment governs space, one must first understand that space is the unifying element in physical architecture. The construction of the built environment is not a process of 'producing' space; rather it is the process of shaping space through physical impositions within it. By closing down one's choices for displacement in space, the built environment limits one's choices for trajectories of movement, forcing one to adhere to the cities available routes or face the consequences of laws and legislation.

The Political Architecture of the Temporal Plane

The social architecture of laws and legislation set parameters limiting behaviour. Through limiting one's behaviour, they also limit how one may spend one's time. Therefore, how one spends one's time becomes limited to the legal choices available in one's environment. Through the process of urbanisation choices have

already been made for us regarding how we will spend our time. This is inasmuch as our choices are limited by the parameters of legislative governmental control; which democratically give us the freedom to act within prescribed boundaries.

The Politics of Space

Both of the above architectures are crystallised in the lived experience of the urban environment. What is evident is that the architecture of the urban environment is a system of power. In the lived experience of the architecture of the urban environment specific proposals on culture, health, ethnicity, sexuality etc are continually made to the individual as they go about their business. One's awareness of these proposals is completely subjective. However, the existence of such proposals is attestable to in the circumstances one encounters, and the decisions one makes in the course of a day. It becomes apparent that politics is an implicit condition in the experience of space.

Conditions of the City

The conditions of power have been implicit in the architectural development of urban environments since human beings first decided to dwell together within walled fortresses. Cities have always been places where the ruling classes have attempted to shape the free movement and thought of individuals as a means of realising their own agendas. The architecture of the modern city is a continuation of this and is directly dictated by innovations in technologies of control.

Architecture and Control

There is no need for city walls anymore; since the invention of gunpowder and later the nuclear weapon, the impregnable place ceases to exist. The physical

confinement of the jail has been replaced by the economic constraint of debt, both serving to limit the movement and choices of individuals. The architecture of the modern city allows for mass mobility, capped by financial means and directed through advertising and placement of amenities. In the contemporary urban environment leisure comes into its own as a site of mass consumption and therefore mass control.

Leisure

The aftermath of the industrial revolution visible in the 21st century is a speed of production that vastly outpaces the speed of consumption. To compensate for this, the nature of goods produced by industry has changed. Ideas and concepts are now much more marketable and profitable than traditional forms of goods. In our leisure time we are offered ideas packaged as experiences for our consumption. For example, I can go on holiday, I can drink a Pepsi, I can eat a meal in a restaurant with friends or perhaps I can go for a walk in town and buy some nice new clothes. When buying goods it is the experience that is sold to us not the quality of the product. When buying goods our economic power is recuperated from us, and with it, our freedom to legally affect our environment. In this way the architecture of leisure serves to maintain a social status quo. The individual is given power with one hand and has it taken from them by the other. In this way the individual is trapped in a cycle of dependency upon those who own the means of production, and those things that give them a sense of significance and cultural belonging.

Power and Inertia

Cities are systems of power, in which the ruling classes determine through physical and social architectures, the choices available to the masses. In this sense, our

systems of government are not so much democracies as elected oligarchies. Through these governmental systems of control the urban environment has evolved into a paradoxical state of inertia through movement. At the basis of this is the economic reality brought about by the sale of experiences rather than solid products.

Economics and the urban environment

In traditional economic terms, there exists an infinite amount of desires, and a finite amount of resources. But now, with the production of ideas as commodity, we have an infinite amount of desires and an infinite amount of resources. The individual can buy into cultural iconic experiences, which are in themselves disposable and have no real significance to the betterment of the individual's social circumstances. In short the city has become a place to lose oneself in.

Socially Engaged Art

If art is to have any real social impact it must recognise the context in which it is operating. It must recognise the form of the architectures of the urban environment and how they interact and solidify in specific social contexts. These architectures must then become materials for the production of art, rather than art's subject matter. This is the only way in which art of any particular use or significance will evolve. Otherwise we might as well all 'down tools' now, and go get 'proper jobs'.

(Justin McKeown, Lantara Housing Estate, Ballymena, N.Ireland, March 2004)