the turn of the century

A Reader about
Architecture in Europe
1990–2020

Edited by
Matthias Sauerbruch
and Louisa Hutton

Lars Müller Publishers

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5

10 Matthias Sauerbruch, Louisa Hutton
Editorial

20 Mark Wigley
Time Machines

25 Ijoma Mangold
On Time Passing

29 Georg Vrachliotis
Architecture, Nature and Data

34 Mohsen Mostafavi
Architecture and the Burden of Influence

41 Peter Cook
Some Buildings and Entrails

48 Barry Bergdoll
Sustaining the City

55 Kristin Feireiss
Free Thought, Free Form

59 Dirk van den Heuvel
Letter to Berlin

66 Kieran Long
The Trenches of the Culture Wars

71 Anh-Linh Ngo
Landscapes of Logistics

75 Veronica Simpson
Architecture as Acupuncture

80 Jean-Louis Cohen
A Joyful Complexity

85 Florian Heilmeyer
Into the Great Wide Open

89 Marco Biscione
An Innovative Ensemble

94 Eric Parry
The Colours of Life
and the Air We Breathe

101 Thomas Auer
The Aesthetics of Sustainability

106 Angelika Fitz
The Care Turn in Architecture

8

111 Adrian Forty

Scylla and Charybdis

114 Philip Ursprung

Images on the Move

120 Ola Kolehmainen

Fluctuating Territories

138 Gerhard Matzig

Colour and Form

142 Kurt W. Forster

Dammi i Colori

147 Karin Sander

Collaboration

149 Kester Rattenbury

Reading Sauerbruch Hutton

155 Lars Müller

Architecture in Books

160 Biographies

Dirk van den Heuvel

Letter to Berlin

59

Dear Loulsa and Matthias

A long and also much overdue answer to your question. It has been on my mind ever since it landed on my virtual doormat: What to say about the "turn of the century" and the current state we're in? It's such a big question, and the events of last year have been simply overwhelming.

Alison and Peter Smithson famously stated that they were after a "rough poetry" in their architecture, achieved against all odds, "dragged out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work".

But after Brexit, after Trump? Too often, I have to pinch myself in the arm to assure myself that all this is real and not just another bad Hollywood film.

What follows is written as a letter to the two of you. Thinking out loud. An academic piece felt out of place. Also, when I started working on the text, I realised that I've been affected by the past events much more than I'd like to admit, from the pandemic lockdown situation to the unnerving news-feeds on the American elections, culminating in the storming of the Capitol. This month, we had national elections in our country, in the Netherlands, and the political parties seeking a generally white Europe and aiming for a programme of "de-Islamification" gained almost 20 per cent of the votes.

How did we get here? To the point of accepting rampant xenophobia as the new normal? How is it that our very own leaders are aiming to dismantle democracy and the rule of law? And this is just our bubble in the West. What about current developments in Hong Kong? Or in the streets of Myanmar, at the university campuses in Turkey, the ongoing siege of Idlib in Syria? In Australia, a mining company recently destroyed the Aboriginal burial sites at the Juukan Gorge – caves that are 46,000 years old, their traces of human occupation now irrevocably lost in the search of iron ore.

How is one to drag poetry out of this brutality? How to remain optimistic?

What might be lost

Architecture sits somewhere between the small things of everyday life – how you walk into a room, set a table, decorate the window – and the big events of history, of relentless modernisation and political power play. And these days, in an admittedly escapist mode, I'd much rather focus on those small, pleasurable things than the harrowing developments that unfold on the omnipresent screens we carry with us all day long, and which keep on bringing disruption into our rooms, while we're sitting around the table, or lying in bed watching a film.

This moment in 2021 seems so different from 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down and the Iron Curtain was lifted, events which took everyone by surprise. Without a single shot being fired, let alone an act of war, the process of reunification of East and West in Europe had begun.

I remember this vividly, as I'd visited the divided city just before. I was a 21-year-old student in Delft, and had joined a group excursion to Moscow and St Petersburg (then still Leningrad). Instead of flying home directly to Schiphol, we'd planned a stopover in Berlin. The experience of communist paranoia had made me averse to visiting East Berlin. Instead, I was happy to explore anarchistic Kreuzberg and the latest IBA projects. At the Kulturforum, I had my first encounter with the supreme control of steel and glass, stone and space, as delivered by Mies van der Rohe at the Neue Nationalgalerie. Also, I was deeply impressed by the phenomenal landscape architecture of Hans Scharoun: the Berliner Philharmonie, and the Staatsbibliothek in particular.

Naturally, my opinion had been influenced by Wim Wenders' *Himmel über Berlin*, in which Scharoun's library figured as one of the main sites for the film's protagonists, with Bruno Ganz in the lead role as an angel who falls in love with a trapeze artist. A feeling of melancholia for what might be lost permeates the whole film, especially the opening shots: a moving, flying camera that pans from room to room, person to person, trying to capture fleeting, everyday thoughts of worry, love and aspiration, while in between we hear Peter Handke's poem softly read and half-sung by Ganz:

Als das Kind Kind war,
War es die Zeit der folgenden Fragen:
Warum bin ich ich und warum nicht du?
Warum bin ich hier und nicht dort?
Wann begann die Zeit und wo endet der Raum?[1]

A new promise

The Staatsbibliothek is like a friendly giant. Due to its irregular geometries, it resists a conventional reading of its architecture – no typologies to rely on, nor codified decorum. Instead, it evokes associations with geological formations of other times, far removed from the trauma of the machinic and massive destruction of the Second World War. Beyond cynicism and nihilism, it offers another space, one that achieves a double gesture: to restore some form of continuity while also suggesting the possibility of a new beginning in order to try to recuperate the human and cultural values lost, first under the regime of Wilhelm II, and then under the Nazis.

When comparing the Philharmonie and the library, the interior spaces of the former are much more dramatic and spectacular in their architectural articulation. But the Staatsbibliothek comes with a delayed, lingering impression, since its architectural experience works through the body and its senses rather than the directness of the visual. The slow way in which the space of Scharoun's library unfolds when you enter its interior and climb the generous flights of steps, moving along the wide galleries and the quiet plateaux of study spaces, is nothing but the orchestration of a majestic spatial immersion, certainly something I hadn't experienced before. I'm from Holland after all, and Dutch buildings have to be light, small and efficient given the soil conditions and the limited resources available.

In 1989, the sculptural volumes of the Staatsbibliothek dominated the still empty *terrain vague* between the Kulturforum and Potsdamer Platz, with the Wall and its watchtowers in the background, along with the little yellow test train that was part of the propaganda project for the magnetic M-Bahn. And as I remember it now, as far as the eye could see, the muddy ground was occupied by the illegal "Polenmarkt". Even though the Wall hadn't come down yet, Polish citizens were somehow already able to travel to the West, which led to a spontaneous and surreal kind of bottom-up capitalism by the people.

A cascade of moments of liberation followed, big and small, as if years of blockage had finally found relief. The USSR broke up, and the Cold War era and the threat of atomic war became nothing but an awful, fading memory. A wave of optimism engulfed Europe. In the 1990s, the miserable Thatcher years were left behind, a young Tony Blair blazed his way to power with Cool Britannia in tow – that was before he would join Bush Jr in support of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela was released in 1990, after 27 years in prison, and the country's apartheid system was soon to be abolished. The internet took off, bringing about a new global culture. When laptops were a new thing! And mobile phones became massively available. A new sort of light, carefree and mobile way of living was within reach. And crucially for a gay person during those years, the deadly disease AIDS was succesfully contained with new medicines and therapy. A new party culture emerged, of which Berlin would become one of its centres. Optimism and freedom reigned. At least, that's how I recall it, a general feeling of freedom, progress and new opportunities.

Shortly after the Wall had come down, I would eagerly return to Berlin to make up for not having visited Mitte, Unter den Linden, Schinkel's masterpiece the Altes Museum, the futurist Fernsehturm, and the barren but astounding Alexanderplatz, from where Karl Marx Allee takes you out to Friedrichshain and further. To walk or bike onto Alexanderplatz, empty, disfigured, unfinished, and to simply undergo its vast, expansive scale was one of the most exhilarating experiences I've had. I can't quite put it into words, but for sure, such an experience was possible only after the old regime had gone and Berlin had been transformed – almost overnight – into a city of new promise.

Riding the waves of market realism

Yet this is not the whole story. In much the same way that Reyner Banham developed two opposing accounts of the 1950s in his renowned "Stocktaking" essays – one discussing "technology" and the other following "tradition" – one might write a parallel history of the 1990s that runs counter to liberal victory and salvation.

The triumph of liberalism over communism was famously celebrated by, among others, Francis Fukuyama, who declared it the end of history, since the ideological wars appeared to be bygones. Yet even then, signs of other emergent forces, the "clash of civilisations", were clear enough to see that such a provocative claim was built on hubris, not analysis: the ensuing Yugoslav wars should have sounded alarm bells as they were based on a mix of rekindled nationalism, racism and Islamophobia, just as the Tiananmen Square tragedy in Beijing – also in 1989 – signalled the imperial reflexes of a new world power on the rise.

For architecture and city planning, the end of the Cold War had two immediate effects. First of all, in the West, the welfare state system as an overarching framework to regulate spatial planning and distribution of resources was to be definitively dismantled. And second, free-market enterprise went hand in hand with a new conservatism and populism, which had been on the rise since the late 1970s. In the Netherlands, the new geopolitical condition induced an unprecedented alliance between liberals and social democrats, a new kind of progressive market realism, that was translated in the forward-looking architecture of SuperDutch (is this still a household name?). Whereas the conceptual, neo-modernist approach of a handful of offices was celebrated in the international media, quite another architecture flourished, too – a historicist pastiche architecture which flooded the towns and suburbs of the Low Countries.

Architectural criticism transformed into architectural branding, and I myself was glad to escape into the archive, to embark on a *recherche patiente* together with Max Risselada to retrace the sources of a socially responsible architecture, while the general opinion was that such an effort had desperately failed. Speaking to crowd-filled halls in Delft, Rem Koolhaas posed as the prophet of neoliberalism. In search of new opportunities, he castigated the welfare state for its gross incompetence, while mercilessly bashing Team X, Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger for their moralistic humanism. Jaap Bakema's work was simply ignored.

Viewed from the Netherlands, the direction of architecture and planning in Berlin seemed a mixed bag, to say the least. Rather than embracing the new freedom, the response to the new, post-welfare state reality culminated in

the regressive doctrine of so-called critical reconstruction, based on the city repair approach developed during the IBA years in the early 1980s. As is well known – I hardly need to explain this to you! – the critical reconstruction approach largely based itself on a defensive kind of typo-morphological orthodoxy of closed urban blocks, and strict control regarding height, façade design, maximum volumes and setbacks. Controversially, the reactionary mood also directed the decision to demolish the socialist Palast der Republik, designed by Heinz Graffunder, chief architect at East Germany's Building Academy, to make way for the revisionist reconstruction of the Berliner Schloss, the former Baroque residence of the Hohenzollerns, which opened only last December.

Radical contextualism

It was against this mixed mood of conservatism and new freedoms that your project for the GSW Headquarters appeared, which (as if by magic?) managed to bypass the dreary rules of the Berlin *Senatsbaudirektor*. It signalled optimism and cheerfulness, and how the language of modernism and the 1950s could be recharged with flair and conviction – quite in opposition to the desire of so many revisionists to erase the recent architectural past.

In hindsight, the clear and colourful composition of discrete volumes around the existing tower block read as an announcement of the later, more intricate projects: in particular the attitude of generously including, responding to and building on existing structures (as mundane as these might be), and the extraordinary undulating, polychromatic façades, which are intelligent climate sensors and regulators at the same time. Modernist tabula rasa and transparency are reworked into a method of layering and weaving.

What the GSW Headquarters project demonstrated above all is that another kind of contextualism is possible, more versatile and intelligent then historicist, typo-morphological orthodoxy.

This is also how I would like to understand the Smithsons' call for a rough poetry drawn out of the forces at play. Such poetry is too often misread as Brutalist provocation, as *épater le bourgeois*, whereas it actually concerns a practice of radical engagement and contextualism. Perhaps ecological or environmental would be better terms – since contextualism as a term seems too close to post-modernist semantics as propounded by Charles Jencks and Colin Rowe.

It's also from their search for a new radical contextualism that the Smithsons were great admirers of Scharoun's work. They even had him invited to one of the Team X meetings, prompted by their appreciation of his proposal for the Hauptstadt Berlin competition of 1957–58, where Scharoun had been awarded second prize and the Smithsons, together with Peter Sigmond, third. They included Scharoun's "Stadtlandschaft" proposal in their manifesto-like booklet *Urban Structuring*, in which they showed more of their Berlin projects, while talking about the newly imagined Berlin as an undivided, "open city" for an "open society". It's from Scharoun's concept of urban landscape that his projects for the Philharmonie and Staatsbiliothek would spring.

Much later, in the 1980s, the Smithsons will finally find the words to describe the qualities of such an urban landscape, when they reconceptualise their proposition for a New Brutalism as Conglomerate Ordering. Their appreciation concerns a topological architecture that goes beyond the sheer visual,

which "harnesses all the senses", offering "pleasures beyond those of the eyes". An architecture that cannot be reduced to diagrams, that is elusive and "hard to retain in the mind", for it's characterised by a "variable density" and "irregular geometry". And yet, according to the Smithsons, when moving through the spaces of such conglomerate order, one can almost instinctively find the way in and through these spaces, which are "an inextricable part of a larger fabric".

Sensing colour

What can one say about such pleasures beyond the visual and the generous and unapologetic use of colour in your projects? I would like to offer a few speculations here. Thinking out loud again.

My first proposition is that the use of colour is a crucial element in the contextual approach that you develop. It's part of an architectural strategy that addresses how one might operate in the new unstable situation, post-welfare state, now there is no larger framework that guides the architectural project. Under the impact of new technologies and globally connected economies, what we keep calling "city" is now a ubiquitous condition, a continuum in which the architectural project is an intervention that can regenerate and impact transformation, insert new values, a strategy of both continuity and renewal.

But how to read the use of colour? One sees suggestions that point to codes, signs or signals. There are associations of camouflage techniques, with examples of dazzle painting patterns, and clouds of pixels in glazed brick. The colours also come as dressing, mediating between decoration and the tectonics of a building, which is the "natural" and accepted place of colour in terms of the theory of modern architecture since Semper.

Within the modernist tradition, the visual is associated with the rational, the conceptual and intellectual, the project of enlightenment. But the eye is also a body part, and a sensor. From seeing to sensing is a shift that parallels the shift from the typological city of the 19th century to the emergence of urban ecologies in our 21st century.

Just as the eye and the brain are parts of the body, colour is a thing of the body first and foremost. I would therefore suggest that colour is not merely visual in your work – it is to be sensed rather than be seen. Even when the application of colour is abstract in terms of compositional techniques (serialist, strictly geometrical, repetitive and modulated, coded), it resists abstract, rationalist concepts of architecture, space, time and matter. Colour is sensed corporeally, to be experienced while moving around and within the building, with the light being reflected and absorbed in ever-changing ways.

Visiting the projects, it becomes clear that the use of colour is highly contextual, not just in the sense of fitting in or creating a contrast, but in terms of patterns from which an experience of immersion and recognition is constructed. This is also how your buildings take up their places in the larger urban fabric, and how one has to approach and navigate them. They might blend in like a chamaeleon, and then "emerge" from the fabric as a gestalt from the larger pattern, to create an event, invite engagement, mark a place, a point of orientation.

In such moments of individual recognition, the passer-by also owns the building, if only for a brief moment. Through daily routines and multiple visits,

such brief moments build up into experiences, and the building and its colours, materials, textures affix themselves into the memory of tourist and local citizen alike. Such immersive contextualism gives way to a new kind of openness and multiplicity, in terms of experience and inhabitation.

Creatures of optimism

A last thought for now, still unfinished it seems. In combination with the "weak" geometries of undulating volumes and the rhythms of softly bent and staggered façade systems, your buildings appear as creatures with a life of their own. Paradoxically, they are set apart from their context, while also engaging with it in a new way, a double gesture once again.

In your book on colour in architecture, you included an "incomplete glossary" for a possible manifesto on colour. Referring to Scharoun, one of the terms you list is indeed the German word *Wesen* – which you translate as "being" – to explain how a building should be exactly that, a being or creature, as well as a way of being in the world.

The notion of a building as a creature triggers many associations and resonates with today's ecological thinking, which seeks to connect a human and humanist perspective with more inclusive approaches to the environment. Today, ecological thinking holds a promise to be able to go beyond the relentless destruction of our environment. I would say it also denotes the still powerful agency in and of architecture, as a creature is something created, while also a creative force itself in place making. Such creatures present a rhythm of their own, and so – like Handke in reverse – time breaks up for a moment, and space begins, for recuperation and optimism, still.

Dirk
Amsterdam, 31 March 2021

1 "When the child was a child / it was the time of these questions: / Why am I me, and why not you ? / Why am I here, and why not there ? / When did time begin, and where does space end ?" Part of a poem written by the Austrian author Peter Handke in 1986 for Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987; released in English as *Wings of Desire*).

164

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