

The actual revolution of the spatial experience lies in the bodiless transmission of signs. When signs could for the first time travel without a body, be it via electromagnetic waves or cable etc., the foundation for the bodiless spatial experience was laid. The telematic machines, ranging from trains to planes, and the telematic media, varying from television to the Internet, have ultimately dismissed the discourse of location and forced the discourse of dislocation as the foundation of our society. What we urgently need now is a new dynamic concept of space that is characterized through immateriality and non-locality. Architecture as spatial design has to adapt to this new "condition humaine."

Peter Weibel was appointed professor of visual media art at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna in 1984. He was head of the digital arts laboratory of the Media Department of NY University from 1984-1989, and founded the Institute of New Media at the Academy of Fine Arts, Frankfurt/M in 1989. From 1986-1995, he was artistic consultant and later artistic director of the Ars Electronica in Linz, and from 1993-1999 curator at the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz. He commissioned the Austrian pavilions at the Venice Biennial from 1993-1999. Since 1999, he has been Chair and CEO of the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe.

Disappearing Architecture - From Real to Virtual  
to Quantum, Ed. Georg Flachbart, Peter Weibel,  
Birkhäuser Verlag

Peter  
Weibel

:

(2007) 5,268-272

Architecture

:

from location  
to non-

location,

from presence

absence

## ARCHITECTURE: FROM LOCATION TO NON-LOCATION, FROM PRESENCE TO ABSENCE

### Introduction

During the 20th Century not only distances and scales have changed under the influence of telematic media and machines, but even more so the relation to the location itself: *hic et nunc*, here and now, here and there have become variable quantities. Location and space as the basic media of architecture are being questioned (refer to Deconstruction). Non-location, dislocation, dematerialisation are new radical architectural categories. Individual decision procedures that position the architect as a building artist in the proximity of a traditional understanding of art, based on sculpture and painting, is also replaced by new planning methods that are based on the complex system theories of the media and machines. Therefore computer based algorithms can replace data of individual signatures as proved by deconstructivism and primarily by its successor, the metamorphic or biomorphic school of architecture (blob-architecture).

This approach exceeds by far the recent understanding of experimental architecture and acts beyond material experiment, alternative buildings and model architecture. In this sense unconventionalities alone are not experimental. The new definition of experimental architecture experiments with architecture's semantics. Only by applying new parameters to well known architectural rules does a new, almost "experimental" definition of experimental architecture emerge.

With the following we are going to concentrate on the relation of location and space as a variable. Place-displacement – site / parasite.

### About the Discourse of Dislocation [1]

In traditional architecture everything has its place. A flat, a room or a desk is tidy when everything is in its place; a citizen without a residence has no place; having no place is forbidden. Not least functionalism and its connected theory of short distances refer to places: the City Hall on Main Square, the dining room next to the kitchen, the night stand by the bed. Even each detail has its allocated place and the nail has been hit on the head, at the right time at the right place. Building means to organize where something belongs [2].

Location is everywhere and where there is no location it is immediately produced through orientation and through memory. Architecture can also heighten an amorphous non-location to a place: the adoration of the location is expressed in the metaphor of the *genius loci*; each location is ingenious; buildings are allegories for these imaginations of location.

The idea of a location is the unity of body and space while in the Greek theatre it is the unity of time and place, as well as the unity of space, time and architecture for Sigfried Giedion. These ideas of the location use the body orientated spatial experience, the technique of localisation through the body. When a person crossed a room, changed the location step by step or moved from one place to another, this happened with the help of his body or with the help of another organic body such as a horse. Over the centuries the experience became phylogenetically ingrained in man's mind that changing location, dislocation, was only possible through one's own physical body. This is how phylogenetically the paradigm of body focused spatial experience developed, which has dominated civilisation throughout millenniums. With the exception of ships it has hardly been 200 years,

since the beginning of the industrial revolution that dislocation happened with the help of machines such as trains, cars or planes. The machine-made change of location happens much faster than the physical, in fact so fast that for the historically physical experience of space the distances between points of places seem to vanish and we therefore metaphorically speak of the vanishing of space. But even with the machine focused spatial experience we are still dealing with physical objects, with comprehensible artificial moving apparatuses whose criteria are still comparable to our natural moving apparatuses.

The traditional techniques of displacement: The floating away in mysticism, the displacement in shamanism, the non-location in nirvana – they all served to free the body from the location. Since the 19th Century new techniques to escape the prison of space have been invented. The body is freed from the prison of location through media and machines (1830 train, 1969 the Landing on the Moon). The beginning of a new spatial experience can be related back to the scanning principle, discovered around 1840, which was used for the first telegraphic trials (picture transmission over distances) which contained the idea of transforming a spatial dimension (drawing on a surface) into a linear sequence of points in time. The tele-machines (1840 Telegraphy, 1906 Radio, and 1927 Television) released the messages (signs) from the messenger (body). Sign messages can travel without a body. The separation of message and messenger introduces the discourse of non-location. Until this historic moment each (immaterial) message needed a (physical) messenger who transmitted, transported or displaced them from one place to another. Before the industrial revolution these messengers were primarily bodies (soldiers, horses, pigeons) and

during the industrial revolution primarily moving machines. In the post-industrial phase these are the communication media. The actual revolution of the spatial experience lies in the bodiless transmission of signs. When signs could for the first time travel without a body, be it via electromagnetic waves or cable etc, the foundation for the bodiless spatial experience was laid. After the physical transport machines such as train, car and plane it is primarily the telematic transport media such as telephone, television and internet that introduce the discourse of dislocation. Dislocation (of space) and disembodiment (of the body) create bodiless spatial experience.

During the industrial revolution the machine focused spatial experience takes the place of the physically focused experience of space, followed by the sign focused symbolic spatial experience during the post industrial revolution. Without this sign focused spatial experience, from the screen for the pilot to the map of the hiker, the entire body of modern civilisation would break down. Non-location as a metaphor of sign focused spatial experience rather than the machine and body focus is therefore the origin of dislocation.

The new spatial understanding beyond physicality cuts the ground under architecture, which has so far been defined as spatial art and, as we have shown, has always been tied to the body oriented spatial experience. When the architecture group Coop Himmel(b)au states, architecture begins beyond space or architecture begins where space ends they mean exactly that: contemporary architecture begins beyond the historical physically experienced space. Daniel Libeskind too denies the historical term of location or space in architecture as already suggested in his book title *Kein Ort an seiner Stelle* (No location at its place) [3].

The telematic machines, ranging from trains to planes, and the telematic media, varying from fax to television, have ultimately dismissed the discourse of location and forced the discourse of dislocation as the foundation of our society. This discourse of dislocation can also not be ignored by architecture. Architecture as spatial design has to adapt to the new spatial understanding. The telematic media ultimately force a new dynamic concept of space onto architecture. This concept of space is characterised through immateriality and non-locality. So if historic space can no longer serve as a foundation for architecture the only way out can only be to claim the criteria derived from the varieties of non-locality such as mobility, flexibility, dynamics, viability etc. Ideally architecture would have to free itself from a condition of two and three dimensionality and as the telefax transform into a non-linear sequence of configurations, into a spatial-temporal system that is. Through the telematic media space has become a linear sequence of points in time, a string of signs. Therefore spatial art has become a time art and the two dimensional flat picture has become a form of time. Hence rather than the site (*topos* or the three dimensional room) the non-site, non-locality (*atopos*), heterotopy and utopia play a much bigger role than before. A shifting of accent from location to non-location, from presence to absence has taken place. This shifting of accent unfolds the conceptual range of location (*topos*). Apart from the classical function of the location the non-location [4] and the non-locality (*atopos*) play a bigger role in contemporary architecture, primarily also heterotopia in the sense of Foucault, utopia and atopia in the location itself (such as prison or hospitals), most of all heterotopias and dystopia in the sense of Helmut Wilke [5]. While atopia are characterised by contingencies and dystopias by symbolic dismissals, heterotopia offer the diverse

structured forms of disorder of today's complex society. The idea of a heterarchitecture as "hybrid mixed reality" tries to fulfil exactly this new experience and to design an architecture which creates a new order between contingency, disorder and dismissal. It is understood that this architecture can neither be standard or a deconstructive architecture but only a non-standard-architecture [6]. The classical architecture disappears into the heterarchitecture.

#### About the Language of Absence

In the telematic era where signs travel without a body and where this immaterial sign traffic keeps the world economically and culturally together, the significances, symbols and signs, which is the non-present, the non-physical, hence the language of absence play a larger role than ever compared to the physical presence. The order of the modules becomes the order of the signs. More than ever architecture has to adapt sign or text character in order to be able to react to the primacy of the significances that have developed through the freedom of (the bodiless travelling) signs, caused by the telematic revolution as well as through the shifting of location, the dislocation through the telematic media. Present architecture builds on the dematerialised, disembodied space, on the space of signs and significances.

Through the principle of scanning and its relevant technologies messages without a body have become possible. Messenger and message, body and sign have been separated. The bodiless codes have also led to a separation of body and location. The historical equation of body and location disintegrated, the non-physicality led to non-locality. The telematic media, the spatial experience through telematic media have once and for all introduced

the non-physical non-locality. The location, the physical, physically experienced location is not lost to architecture as a medium, but is joined by the non-location space of telematic machines and media, which over-forms and deforms the classical spatial experience. Media experience and spatial experience create hybrid forms of a bodiless and body orientated experience of being. The individual experiences itself in one location and at the same time in several other locations. It experiences itself decentralised and eccentric. The eccentricity becomes obvious in the blurring of the borders between exteriority and interiority. What is inside and outside, in the body and outside of it becomes a mixed experience of a mixed reality.

This discourse of dislocation has naturally already had its roots in the history of architecture itself. Architects have always stormed against the physical limits of space and time, against the prison of bricks and stones, against gravity and mass. What today's electronic media and glass facades offer as opportunities to exceed the limits of walls had been tried in former times with the available contemporary means: the perspective illusion painting simulated rooms beyond the architect's possibilities. Looking back it can be said that within the discussion between architecture and mural painting in churches and palaces this radical differentiation between presence and absence had already taken place. As an architect Palladio produced local architecture with presence. Through the painting of Veronese this was extended by the dimension of a non-local architecture of absence: with illusion painting (virtual architectures and landscapes) the painter exceeds the physical and the physical limitations.

The influence of perspective painting on architecture was enormous in the Baroque era. The perspective through painting en-

couraged to bring the previously neglected side sections and rear facades also into the view of the architecture. Apart from these traditional approaches of non-locality which architecture owes to painting there are also moments of dislocation in the history of architecture which it owes to machines. The idea of underground architecture and the Baroque mural painting have the problem of the visual in common, however in contrasting positions that are on the one side a negation of the visual and an apotheosis of the visual on the other. The *trompe l'œil*-technique of mural painting in the Baroque and the Rococo era created rooms that didn't really exist and in this sense weren't really visible or which visualised the invisible that could not be seen in reality. The virtuosos of illusion painting in churches and palaces were the first architects of cyberspace, the virtual space [7]. The underground architecture was invisible architecture anyway.

Illusion painting has therefore, slightly and unnoticed, already disturbed the classical equation between reality and visibility. Within the classical understanding of reality until 1840 the rule said: what is real is visible, what is unreal is painted. The visual and the present form a unit. What cannot be seen is the absent and the unreal. The illusion painting has made the non-present partly visible. The classical equation therefore states: What is present is visible and the absent is invisible. What the subject sees is the present. The non-present is not visible. The painter, however, could already paint the non-present. This was not the main task of painting that in most cases insisted on the realistic depiction of the present, but as heresy illusion painting could break this rule. It is however the central task of the media as a language of the absent to make visible what is actually not present. In his book *Civilization and its Discontents*

(1930) Freud has defined writing as the language of absence and stated that technology as the language of absence would continue this task of writing.

Therefore the task of technology and subsequently the technical image and sound media is to make present what is spatially and temporally absent or past. The telematic media have set new accents in the dialectic of presence and absence, thereby leading from the architecture of presence to the architecture of absence. The dialectics of presence and absence has always included the dialectics of the visible and the invisible. The telematic and technical media in their annihilation of the historical equation between location and non-location as presence and absence have also introduced a new equation between location and visibility and therefore between presence and visibility. The discourse of dislocation has shattered the old equation. The classical equation - the present is visible and the absent is invisible - is no longer valid. The new equation, introduced by the telematic media says: Even the absent can be made visually present. Instead of the static definition of visibility there is now a dynamic discourse of the visual; rather than clear borders between visible and invisible, between presence and absence there are variable zones of visibility. Technical viewing has destroyed the classical ontology and thereby the classical concepts of the visual.

Architecture as a building art must react to the changes through the visual dislocation and the loss of the anthropomorphic viewing. The disembodiment in the realms of the mechanistic visual has provoked a new language of space. The media that parallel to the real space set up an electronically immaterial data space - particularly noticeable in the world wide data net, recognizable in cyberspace - don't operate with the historically constant con-

cepts and realities of space but they operate with the signs of space. The separation of messenger and message, of body and sign is followed by the separation of space and sign. The signs of space float freely, they dislocate from the real physical location. The discourse of classical architecture was built on location, space, body, matter, mass, gravity and so forth. The techno-discourse of dislocation has dissolved the historical differentiations and borders. The discourse of non-classical architecture is based on non-location, immaterial signs, dynamic systems, floating data and so forth. The discourse therefore not only concerns the physical location but also the separation of the sign-reality from sensual-reality and the separation of the visual from space or from presence. In the era of the primacy of technologically supported and integrated viewing the language of architecture becomes increasingly a pure language of signs and of a new form of technologically supported visibility.

#### About the Readability of Invisible Space

Modern glass technology made glass facades possible that make the readability of space become ambivalent. Glass panes, electronically controlled and built from quartz crystals allow a mobile play of zones of transparency and opaqueness. Such glass panes repeat the discourse of dislocation within the discourse of visibility and invisibility. With the help of variable zones of visibility that are systematically controlled a variable dislocation of the visual unfolds, ranging from transparent to opaque areas. The same areas can both be transparent and opaque. The visual state is not definitively defined and not static; it is mobile, flexible, transitory and dynamic. In this dislocation of the visual the discourse of dislocation, which in a hidden way rules architecture, is visually expressed.

The architectural space does not only approach a space of lines, in the sense of Deleuze [8], but the modern architectural space is more to be understood as a space of "mapping" and "re-mapping." The physical and the electronic space merge by projecting themselves within each other and mixed up. The visually present is mapped onto the absent, which is thereby made visible. With illusion painting it was exactly the other way round: The visually absent was mapped as a painting onto the architecturally present. In contemporary architecture that reacts to the telematic changes reality becomes a wire model, which architecture, by functioning as a variable texture (rather than in the old skin, membrane, façade function), makes temporarily visible. Architecture controls the zones of visibility. Reality becomes a range of absence and presence. Like a moving pointer architecture regulates the visibility even in previously invisible zones, making spaces readable and unreadable [9]. You only see people and objects if architecture as the control systems wants you to. Architecture itself can become absent and invisible. Invisible architecture can become visible through users. Architecture maps virtuality and reality intertwined. In the universe of variable zones the subject can understand medial architecture like selecting television channels. The user of contemporary architecture zaps through the visual zones of architecture and controls the visibility and invisibility of the architecture himself and thereby the degree of its virtual or real character. In contemporary architecture reality itself becomes a window. It is not longer about watching reality through a window, but reality is the window.

#### Conclusion

Architecture becomes the meat for the wire-frame model of reality. This theory

of the mapping of different electronic, physical or social spaces within each other as a new "location" of architecture is based on the concept of virtual and real life space. In order to be able to readjust or remap the space of virtual or real life according to the user's requirements not only new high performance computers, as they appear in quantum computing on the horizon, are necessary but it also requires the ubiquitous presence of computers in order to enable the architecture of absence. "Ubiquitous Computing", "DNA-Computing" and other next generation computing systems build the necessary prerequisite for an "Architecture of the Multiverse". The non-local architecture requires a "ubiquitous computing" in order to set up its presence and its location anytime and anywhere.

#### References

- [1] Weibel & Plotteg, Seminar for experimental architecture and algorithm design, lecture at Innsbruck University, 30th May 1996. In 1996 Manfred Wolff-Plotteg showed me the manuscript for a publication in a book, a collection of essays that I titled as "Architektur Algorithmen (architecture algorithms)". We jointly wrote a preface to this book on which this essay is based.
- [2] See also Mark Wigley. "Architecture has always been a central cultural institution valued above all for its provision of stability and order." Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley: *Deconstructivist Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988, p.10.
- [3] Daniel Libeskind, "Kein Ort an seiner Stelle," Verlag der Kunst, Dresden/Basel 1995, pp.172.
- [4] Marc Augé, *In the Metro*, University of Minnesota Press 2002.
- [5] Helmut Wilke, *Atopia*, Frankfurt 2001; Helmut Wilke, *Dystopia*, Frankfurt 2002; Helmut Wilke, *Heterotopia*, Frankfurt 2003.
- [6] "Architecture non-standard", ed. Edition Centre Pompidou Paris, 2003, exhibition 10.12.03- 1.3.04.
- [7] "Architecture in Cyberspace. Architectural Design", Academy Group, London 1995. See also Peter Weibel (ed), "The Media Pavilion. Art and Architecture in the Age of Cyberspace". Austria, Biennale di Venezia, Vienna 1995.
- [8] see also: Gilles Deleuze, "Le Pli", 1988.
- [9] "To make the Invisible visible" Christine Boyer calls "the progressive aspects of technology". In: Christine Boyer, "Cybercity. Visual Perception in the Age of Electronic Communication". Princeton Architectural Press 1996, p. 50.