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The Seattle Central Library: Civic Architecture in the Age of Media

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Current technological devices are changing our understanding of time and space. Most importantly, they are changing the way we *expect* to experience time and space. Our lives and cities have continually been redefined by innovation, making it hard to argue which technology (mercantile, automobile, digital, etc.) has had the most impact. Yet, we are at a point of significant inversion, where many technologies are becoming more active than their users. As Simone Weil has suggested, technology now “is the thing that thinks, and it is the man who is reduced to the state of the thing.”¹

While all of technology might be involved in this inversion to some extent, media technology has had the most

powerful impact on the general population and its relationship to urban experience. Media today is more mediatory than ever, insinuating itself between us and everything else. In particular, digitization has created a situation where media is now not only a means by which we *understand* the world (as with traditional media like newspapers), but increasingly the means by which we *experience* it. Even when we visit real urban spaces such as Times Square, the plurality of experience suggested by the two words “public city,” has been slurred into one word—“publicity.” Through this slurring, the larger experiential potentials of architecture, as well as media, more often than not become diminished.²

Yet, in several completed projects in the United States, it is possible to see a renewed desire to reclaim architecture’s potential as the actual media interface itself.

Above: Seattle Central Library, exterior view. Courtesy of Seattle Public Library.

Michael Maltzan's MOMA Queens, Zaha Hadid's Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, Herzog and DeMeuron's de Young Museum in San Francisco, and Rem Koolhaas's Central Library in Seattle each try to provide visually engaging urban experiences in real time and space without demoting architecture to mere backdrop for other more immersive digital media. In much of the rhetoric used to explain these works, their architects also reveal a common intention to confront the dilemmas of producing architecture in an age of digital media by using spatially and temporally exciting visual strategies rather than simply decorating a building's surface.

While the success of each project varies, it is interesting to look at the relationship between the rhetoric and the reality. This is particularly true for the Seattle Central Library, where the well-documented intentions of Rem Koolhaas and his Office of Metropolitan Architecture have received even more praise than the highly acclaimed finished product.

Coexistence of the Digital and the Real

With regard to the Central Library, Koolhaas has often talked of a perceived assault on books by the culture of digital information. "As other media of information emerge and become plausible, the library seems threatened, a fortress ready to be 'taken' by potential enemies," he has written. "In this scheme, the Electronic become identified with the Barbaric."³ As Koolhaas has repeatedly stated, this positioning is not only untenable but unnecessary. "It is not a matter of either/or.... The modern library, especially in a cyber city such as Seattle, must transform itself into an information storehouse aggressively orchestrating the coexistence of all available technologies."⁴ At a fundamental level, this need could, of course, be said to pertain to any building that also has a website.

Yet, in Seattle, Koolhaas has attempted to find a new relationship between the virtual and the actual. This is clearly illustrated by the somewhat unprecedented containment of all books on a long ascending ramp and the centralization of all resources (digital, human and traditional) in a fifth-level "Mixing Chamber"—"where the chattering of 132 computer keypads adds a modern sound to the coughs and whispers of a library."⁵ Koolhaas's intent was to make the Central Library more than a building "exclusively dedicated to the book"; it would be "an information store," where all new and old media would be presented "under a regime of new equalities," in a building "that combines spatial excitement in the real world with diagrammatic clarity in virtual space."⁶



While most architectural reviews have applauded the library for its success at establishing new relationships, both social and technological, there has also been a constant rumble of counter-critique about this orchestration of multiple experiences within one large tent-like enclosure. Though Internet blogs represent a very limited sample of public opinion, those addressing the library have tended to return to a common set of issues: complaints of noise due to the open structure; the continued dilemma of coexisting with the homeless; and the failure of both the planning and the graphics to help one negotiate a nonhierarchical collage of programs. Underlying these functional critiques

Above: Mixing chamber/reference area. Courtesy of Seattle Public Library.

Below: Looking at mixing chamber. Courtesy of Seattle Public Library.



is a general disbelief that architecture (particularly modern architecture, and even more particularly radical architecture) can actually solve the problems of urban life. Most of the blog-writers imply that either more traditional spatial hierarchy, more effective security, or more privatizing technology would have provided a better use of public resources. Even Koolhaas seems to have accepted the accuracy of several of the functional critiques, such as the signage problems and the need for a broader social-service solution for the homeless population. But, as a debate about public space today, it seems more interesting to examine the disparity between some of the attitudes behind these critiques and Koolhaas's rhetoric of intentions. Intentionally similar to the "big boxes" that permeate our commercial landscape, the library's uniform skin conceals a vast diversity of cultural programs. In this case, though, instead of sheltering only a diversity of products (as at a Walmart), the building also includes a number of spaces made solely for information exchange and social interaction. The library, then, is the most literal realization of Koolhaas's long-standing obsession with heterotopic programming within a single edifice (*Delirious New York*) and the capitalist landscapes of "bigness" (*S,M,L,XL*).⁷

As compelling as Koolhaas's beliefs might be as social polemic, it would not be surprising that people might resist them in reality. In a world where people are becoming more radically individualized—by non-communal living (the suburban house), non-public transportation (the car), and non-shared technologies (any earphone-based personalized media)—experiencing such enforced "togetherness" can be unnerving, disorientating, and downright irritating.⁸ In traditional civic architecture, buildings are organized more *pictorially*. With most of their civic-ness portrayed externally, the viewer looks in from outside the "frame" at the icon itself. By contrast, in Seattle, the civic object is intentionally mute on the exterior, requiring one to be "ingested" into it.⁹ Once inside—and once again unlike traditional civic architecture—one's experience is significantly less pictorial than *picturesque*, or at least more sequential in character. As if in an interiorized version of an Olmstedian park, you must wander through the literal gardens of public space and become part of the *mise-en-scene* of urban life itself.¹⁰

Understandably, entering the diegetic frame rather than staying outside can be uncomfortable. It is not only the traditional book and library that has become threatened by

new digital and electronic media, but traditional forums of public life itself. As enthusiastically pronounced now thirty years ago by Marshall McLuhan,

The Renaissance Legacy. The Vanishing Point = Self Effacement

The Detached observer. No Involvement!

The viewer of Renaissance art is systematically placed outside the frame of experience.

A piazza for everything and everything for the piazza.

The instantaneous world of electric informational media involves all of us, all at once.

*No detachment or frame is possible.*¹¹

However, neither McLuhan nor Koolhaas see this engagement as terrifying; rather, they claim it can be empowering. Our current popular culture promotes this belief as well—as in the upswing of urban-sited sitcoms and the ubiquitous use of urban landscapes in advertising campaigns from Volkswagen Jettas to Apple iPods. These representations suggest that the city might no longer be something to escape, but something to which we should remain "connected." Nevertheless, with most of these examples, the technology exists between ourselves and the city, as if to suggest our bodies cannot be located there without it. One could argue that the Seattle Central Library is another such piece of technology.

Politics of the Interface

As an interface to the urban, the Seattle Central Library is a somewhat unprecedented architectural object. Its skin does not portray a solid separation between itself and the city, as do many pre-Modern buildings; nor does it simply mimic Modern architecture's desire to fully dissolve the distinction between inside and outside. Instead, it tries to be *both* an autonomous urban object *and* a complex microcosm of urban fabric and the digital world beyond.¹² Rhetorically, Koolhaas has embraced this binary tension between place-making object and ineffable network: "The anticipation of a looming conflict between the real and the virtual is moot at the moment where the two can be made to coincide, become each other's mirror image. The virtual can become the distributed presence of the Seattle Central Library that users find confirmed in its actual site in the city."¹³

To Koolhaas, the Seattle project sets up a dialectic between itself as an identifiable "place" (or location distinct from other places) and an open "space" (or mobile network without boundaries between the actual and the virtual).¹⁴

Opposite: Interior garden. Photo by Timothy Hursley.

Thus, the library's exterior objectifies it as a place in the city, a civic destination; yet, the inside is conceptualized as a fluid intersection of spaces through which as social actors move, rehearsing their role in civic life.

But is this what most people today want out of their civic buildings? Can Americans really feel comfortable in an unmediated public space that includes such a range of cultural, social and economic populations? Americans might conceptually accept that democracy is a messy and inclusive process ("like making sausage," as the saying goes). Yet when it comes to civic architecture, they more often than not desire less conflict and more idealization—for example, favoring historic images of civic virtue via Classicism, or future ones via new individualizing technologies (allowing virtual libraries instead of real ones). It is not a new phenomenon for Americans to find the past and the future more comforting than the here and now.

It is interesting that the rhetoric surrounding our new technology also has begun to promise the same idealized ambitions as past forms of public architecture: utopia. In the world of digital media, as exemplified in the "Anthem" television commercials for MCI: "There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, the Internet."¹⁵ Yet, as tempting as it might be to believe this concept in a world torn apart by real and constructed conflicts, social issues will never be resolved via technology alone. As Alberto Gomez-Perez and Louis Pelletier have argued:

It may be true that the accessibility of electronic "space" adds a new dimension to the old dialectic of public and private realms, suggesting possible new forms of human interaction. Nevertheless, ...[w]e should not be naïve about the so-called public nature of cyberspace. True public space, the space of architecture, is the "space of appearance," where the facing of the Other...Bodies transformed into information are not phenomenological bodies. Although it could be argued that at the moment society's public forum is indeed the information highway, and that encounters in its nodes are fruitful, such a highway should not be construed as a substitute for the space of dialogue and erotic exchange, the space for an architecture of resistance.... The goal is hardly to pursue the dream (or nightmare) of our dissolution into networks of digitized information; it is rather to construe and build spaces that resist such a collapse.¹⁶

In simple terms, an architect can respond to this reality by representing more pictorial images of our shared

utopian ideals. Or, as in the case of the Seattle library, an architect can try to avoid the utopian and offer more literally a "platform," or in this case a series of platforms, on which we must collectively negotiate ever-present issues of class, race, and gender.¹⁷

One of the most striking spaces found in the Seattle Central Library is the tall void that skewers through several of its levels. In this almost enigmatic space, with its strange institutional vocabulary, we can find a latent critique of the role of citizens within democratic society. In the very first line of an A+U discussion of the library Koolhaas stated, "The library represents, maybe along with the *prison*, the last of the uncontested moral universes: communal accommodations for 'good' (or necessary) activities...."¹⁸

Anyone familiar with Koolhaas's past polemical writings, as well as his early unbuilt projects (such his Arnhem Prison renovation project in 1979), would know of his previous interest in the role of vision in the establishment of civic order. He was particularly vocal on the prison typology of the panopticon, in which the vision of one modulates the actions of others. This vertical space in Seattle is perhaps a latent reference to the central void of the prison panopticon. Yet here we find no guard in the guard tower, but only ourselves—each regulating our actions through the presence of another's vision. Through such reversals, where the users are both the "seers" and the "seen," we try to find a way to coexist in a more diverse and less hierarchical way.¹⁹

Enforced Interaction

If one takes a longer view of architectural and urban history, such visually organized spatial practices are not altogether radical or unprecedented. Pre-Modern perspectively based architecture often provoked similar reciprocal relationships between individual buildings and the larger city. In these past "scenarios," however, citizens activated the mobius-like blending between architectural volume and context through their daily lives.

In a sense, architecture began to lose this core agenda (i.e., helping define the larger collective urban experience through spatial/temporal phenomena) during the early part of the nineteenth century, when the forerunners to our contemporary media forms were entering their infancy.²⁰ Then, by the early twentieth century, film and photography had begun to dominate the cultural landscape, providing the majority of our collective "experiences." We can almost hear the "first kiss" of modern media's love affair with urban life in Walter Benjamin's now-infamous quote:



Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended.²¹

Early-twentieth-century films by such artists as Dziga Vertov (*Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929) and Charles Schiller (*Manhatta*, 1921) embraced the city for all its visual, spatial and temporal potentials. Yet, as these new media forms became more present in popular culture, less “experience” seemed to be demanded in architecture and urban design. Over the last one hundred years plan-

ners have largely retreated from the phenomenological intrigue of the city to the safe haven of statistics and matters of public protection and management. Meanwhile, the majority of architects became singularly obsessed with architecture itself, narrowing the discipline’s potential and disengaging from architecture’s historical role as the media form through which we experience a sense of collective life.

The significance of the Seattle Central Library is that it is decidedly ambiguous about where the life of the city and the role of architecture should begin or end. Through the sectional layering of many visually connected spaces it formally orchestrates many of the exciting qualities found when traveling through a city—the very qualities of simul-

Above: Homeless men playing chess. Photo by author.



taneity, vibrancy and voyeurism that Benjamin alluded to and that Vertov tried to mimic using documentary database structure, montage, and even multi-image collage.²² And, just as many contemporary film-makers continue to explore the city-symphony genre using multiscreen database formats to increase interactivity and more closely represent the temporal structures of urban life, the Seattle Library pushes the simultaneity of experience through multivisual exposure of different program elements. When a person engages an interactive digital installation (such as shown here with an installation of work by The Labyrinth Project), their experience is contingent on the

Above: Interactive Exhibit. Courtesy of Kristy Kang and USC's The Labyrinth Project.

actions of others accessing the same database simultaneously. The same can be said for the experience of a piece of architecture like the Seattle Central Library. In both cases, one doesn't have to engage *directly* with another person to establish an expanded perception of being part of a larger collective body. But it is not an option to remain, or even to pretend to remain, fully isolated either.

It is interesting to note, as a final point, that the architects mentioned at the beginning of this article are from *the* generation which supposedly valued collective civic engagement more than any other (a.k.a. the generation of 1968). Koolhaas, Hadid, Herzog and DeMeuron, et al. are the inheritors of McLuhan's "global village"—the generation which claimed new technologies and collective art practices could democratize or open up the master narratives (as well as actual spaces) of previously privileged and cul-

turally isolated institutions. Yet, forty years later, we realize that most of the once-radical visual strategies and technological advances of the sixties and seventies have simply been co-opted for the sake of capital exchange rather than social change. In new civic works like the Seattle Central Library, however, we can see significant attempts to reverse this condition by offering something reality TV shows, IM technologies, and Internet chat rooms can only mimic: *actual social exchange in real time and space*. Though Koolhaas's initial training as a screenwriter has often been noted, his Seattle project suggests that this connection to media culture in fact now transcends the linear narratives and scenographic strategies of film structure alone, involving new references to the potentially more interactive strategies of the digital age. Most importantly, this engagement with contemporary visual culture has occurred not by *reducing* architecture to a mere backdrop for the digital, but by once again employing the spatial and temporal tactics natural to it to engage us more fully in collective life.

Notes and Acknowledgements

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1. Lewis Lapham, "Introduction," in Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2001), p. vii.
2. The uproar over product placement in the fictional spaces of movies and TV seems a bit absurd to me considering our complacency toward product placement in real spaces.
3. Rem Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, Nobuyuki Yoshida, ed. (Tokyo: A+U, 2000), p. 84.
4. Sheri Olson, "Seattle Central Library, Seattle," *Architectural Record* (July 2004), p. 89.
5. Tom Haines, "Seattle Still Percolates Behind this Artful Project," *Boston Globe*, August 21, 2005.
6. Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, p. 84.
7. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).
8. "Togetherness" is a word that proved irritating even to Jane Jacobs. See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 55-73.
9. The choice of the word "ingest" makes reference to John Hedjuk's claim that the difference between architecture and sculpture is that architecture *ingests* people.
10. This distinction between the picturesque and the pictorial grows out of a similar distinction first made by Yve-Alain Bois, in reference to Richard Serra, in his article "A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara Clara," *October*, No. 29 (1984).

11. McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, p. 53.
12. This seems similar to the "both/and" strategy of Venturi rather than the "either/or" strategy of standard Modernism. See Robert Venturi, "Inside/Outside," in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977).
13. Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, p.84.
14. See Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). "A place (lieu) is the order...[in] which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place)...it implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements....On this view, in relation to place, space is like a word when it is spoken...in contradistinction to place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a 'proper.' In short, space is a practiced place." (p. 117)
15. See Lisa Nakamura's discussion of colonial tendencies of the internet and technology, in "Where Do You Want to Go Today: Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet and Transnationality," in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 255-63.
16. Alberto Perez-Gomez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 382.
17. This is true to Olmsted's Central Park as well, with its intentionally non-Classical structure and its series of picturesque and intentionally nonfunctionalized scenarios or places for social exchange across classes and races.
18. Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, p. 84.
19. An opening-day newspaper feature included coverage of how the design of the library reflected the reality of the homeless population, stating that "Homeless people need the library at least as much as others, if not more." The article continued, "The new building will have working security cameras and it was designed with more open spaces and clear lines of sight." Rebekah Denn, "Special Feature," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 20, 2004, p. F10.
20. Alberto Perez Gomez and Louis Pelletier argue that this point occurred most precisely after 1830, with the redefinition of the public "subject" after the French Revolution. "Architecture was threatened by both sides: by engineers and sociologists, whose disciplines were endowed with greater rational certainty, and by new art forms such as photography and film, which acknowledged better the political 'reorganization' of the nineteenth-century observer." See *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*, p. 83.
21. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations/Walter Benjamin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 236.
22. For more on the relationship between new and older database orders from Vertov to the present digital age, see Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). For a slightly alternative view, focusing more on our lasting impulses for narrativity in the digital database age, see Marsha Kinder's "Design as Database," in Jeffery Shaw and Peter Wiebel, eds., *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 342-53.