

The Value of Architecture

From the authority of economy to the reality of the architectural object

In times of crisis and uncertainty, we re-evaluate things. Our perception of what is meaningful tends to change. It is clear that architecture and the built environment are valuable. We can use objective formulas to calculate a building's value by comparing construction or maintenance costs with sales or rental income margins. The figures recorded in accounts can testify to the value of architecture. This may be a rather dull example, though. Nevertheless, it provides evidence for addressing the question of architecture's value, which seems strangely underdeveloped. Due to the inherent nature of architecture — its concrete and representational forms, functionality, technical ingenuity and cultural and social context — discussions about architecture and its relationships often diverge. If we assume that the value of architecture is an obvious aspect of its existence, we miss out on a crucial discussion.

Axiology

Anyone working in architecture is faced with the challenge of creating not only a design, but also value. However, one might get the impression that the attitude towards this aspect is rather ambivalent. There is reason to believe that this ambivalence arises in situations of conflict, when the architect's understanding of value differs from that of the client or economic stakeholders. The concept of the 'value of architecture' can appear very economic and pragmatic compared to the openness of the creative process of architectural design and problem solving. This shows that different acts of prioritisation take place with regard to the 'value of architecture, and that the emphasis on value is inconsistent.

Friedrich Nietzsche coined the term 'transvaluation of values'. Confronted with the phenomenon of mass culture and the growing influence of democracy, Nietzsche perceived a threat to all beauty. As a "tormented aesthete", he sought salvation. However, the Saviour is no longer a personal God. Instead, God was to be replaced by impersonal values.¹ But impersonal values are impossible because values are defined by subjects according to their desires, wills, and beliefs.² Values are determined by authorities. To establish values is to assert their validity. Displacing or transvaluing the values of others devalues them. There are as many values as there are ways of evaluating them. Values are constantly changing because evaluators and their dispositions are constantly changing.³ Nietzsche's axiology tends to postulate a subjective notion of value. Individual preferences determine the facts of value. In opposition to this position, objectifiable facts of value are invoked. This issue also represents a problem in contemporary axiology, or the philosophy of value: the conflict between subjectivist and objectivist positions, and how to overcome it.⁴ Subjective facts of value stem from the preferences of individuals and groups. On the one hand, subjectivist valuations are not without

¹ E. Straub, 2010. *Zur Tyrannei der Werte*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ F. v. Kutschera, 2010. *Wert und Wirklichkeit*. Paderborn: mentis Verlag.

an empirical foundation. Individual preferences are 'empirically determinable'. However, when preferences are self-determined, there is no need to consider external factors or follow an external moral authority.⁵ According to objectivism or realism, however, facts of value belong to the same reality as the object or circumstance itself. For instance, architecture provides habitable space. This is an *effect* of the architectural system *as* a built environment. In the context of a capitalist economy, this space becomes a resource that can be sold or rented. There is a fact of value in this real circumstance. Some individuals or groups will find this fact preferable, while others will show no interest or condemn it. When contemplating facts of value, it is likely that both subjective and objective perspectives will be considered.

Contemporary axiological approaches contribute to a more balanced argumentation between subjective and objective positions. Referring to axiological aspects at this point helps us to understand that the evidence for the value of architecture is ambiguous. Experiences, individual preferences, and determinations constitute a context, as does the encounter with the concrete world, accompanied by awareness and acts of abstraction. In debates about architecture, we encounter arguments fuelled by individual preferences, while arguments are also supported by objective facts of value. However, to arrive at a justifiable statement about the value of architecture, it is necessary to consider not only a range of positions, but also changes in what is considered valuable, for example in times of crisis.

Towards the question about the value of architecture

Architecture offers possibilities in terms of design and implementation, but it also offers resistance. These modes of resistance become apparent in the interaction between systems. As the built environment is designed to perform specific functions, it necessitates conceptual approaches, technical ingenuity and internal organisation. At this point, architecture often comes into conflict with another system: the capitalist economy and related socio-economic spheres. The character and institutional affiliation of the value-proclaiming authorities and economic actors varies, ranging from expert systems and the corporate sector to municipalities and governments. Implementing ideas, realising designs and integrating technologies must constantly be negotiated in relation to the interests of stakeholders, lobbies, developers and investors. Each stakeholder may have their own value proposition, strategies, and programmes for investing in and profiting from the development of the built environment. Investing in architectural ideas and designs is not just a gesture of goodwill on the part of a client, authority or company, but a considerable investment of assets. As a specific social system, the economy is an essential factor in the realisation of architecture and in discussions about its value. Consequently, the relationship between architecture and the economy simultaneously demonstrates the importance of how architecture is valued. On the one hand, economic actors have strong value-proclaiming authority. Conversely, authorities within the architectural discourse have been keen to adopt a more nuanced approach to the value of

⁵ Ibid.

architecture. Therefore, this study is interested not only in economic factors of value, but also in a broader understanding of value-constituting aspects.

The value of architectural signs

Studies have been conducted on the economic importance of design, as well as on the relationship between design disciplines and economic actors. The economic geographers John Bryson and Grete Ruston have investigated the importance of industrial design for the competitive success of companies and nations, and for the prosperity of regions, through design production and design markets. Design has been identified as a key factor in national competitiveness, recognised as an essential business and economic factor, and regarded as a strategic tool for differentiation in a crowded global marketplace. However, can the aspects and processes examined in the context of industrial design and corporate activities be directly related to architectural design? It is striking how closely corporations and architectural signs are aligned. “[C]ompanies enshrine and fix their symbols into the built environment [...]”⁶ Companies hire star architects to design built images that become part of the “exercise of symbol creation”⁷, which is branding. However, it is not only corporate branding. The same is true for cities and regions. In the 1990s, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao played a pivotal role in the city's transformation from a dilapidated industrial centre into a popular cultural and architectural tourist destination (in addition to its ongoing transformation into a centre for service industries). This helped create the infamous 'Bilbao Effect'. Since opening in autumn 1997, the building has attracted over 10 million visitors, generating substantial economic value and a high return on investment despite the initial costs.⁸ Being taken by the numbers in terms of revenue, the boost of tourism and job creation, other cities and regions around the world tried to achieve similar effects through signature architecture or cultural spectacle. However, it became clear that only some of these projects were able to generate economic value or have a reinforcing effect on cities and regions, as was the case in Bilbao. There may be several reasons for this:

- 1) Miscalculation of expected visitors. The architectural object obviously fails to appeal to the individual preferences of people and groups. The architecture, its image and/or its programme are not perceived favourably enough to affect the actions of potential visitors. Consequently, the revenue generated does not correspond objectively to the investments made.
- 2) The market for architectural flagship projects has become more competitive, and originality as a currency has been harder to come by. Sites such as the Guggenheim Bilbao, the *Reichstag* dome in Berlin and the popular Dutch pavilion at Expo 2000 in Hanover symbolised a sense of new beginnings in Europe after the end of the Cold War and the dawn of a new millennium. The Guggenheim Bilbao has benefited from a positive attitude towards change

⁶ J. Bryson and G. Ruston, 2011. *Design Economics and the Changing World Economy*. London/New York: Routledge.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. S. Haarich and B. Plaza, 2010. *Das Guggenheim-Museum von Bilbao als Symbol für erfolgreichen Wandel – Legende und Wirklichkeit*. In: U. Altröck, et al. (eds.): *Symbolische Orte. Planerische (De-)Konstruktionen*. Berlin: Reihe Planungsrundschau.

as a symbol. Its representational value has been consolidated by its role in social transformation. However, signature architecture, often associated with unprecedented economic power and increasingly criticised for being out of control and having ruthless effects on local and global contexts, is in turn increasingly perceived as excessive and tasteless.

- 3) The distinctive features of a building or its purpose are not considered significant enough to compensate for contextual deficiencies. Disadvantages such as a poor location, nominal regional identity, unattractive urban spaces, insufficient cultural and recreational offerings, and a lack of other attractions diminish the value of the architectural symbol itself. Cities embedded in global routes or already established as tourist destinations often lure visitors with new attractions and symbols in order to feed the caravan of architecture and urban tourists, and to keep up with the pace of cultural profiling.

Aesthetic economy

On the one hand, architecture's reality or effect is the conditioning of space. On the other hand, architecture addresses a distinct "audience" through its apparent characteristics. The philosopher Gernot Böhme has noted that the capitalist economy, which he identifies as an *aesthetic economy*, actually commissions architecture to communicate with individuals as consumers. In this economy, architecture appears as a product whose essential value is the *staging value* (*Inszenierungswert*). According to Böhme, this staging value constitutes an additional category of value – alongside utility value (*Gebrauchswert*) and exchange value (*Tauschwert*) – through the aestheticisation of characteristics and qualities.⁹ After recovering from the economic downturn caused by the world wars in the first half of the 20th century, the capitalist economy developed again from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance, based on ongoing growth. Once essential needs have been met, capitalism must rely on the satisfaction of other kinds of needs, which Böhme refers to as 'desirings' (*Begehrnisse*). Desirings are most convenient for the economic development because they always grow through their satisfaction. Desires are exploited through the production of luxury, which prioritises the appearance and materiality of objects.¹⁰ Architecture has become part of the aesthetic characterisation of goods, and provides the context for the consumerism that cities and places rely on as part of the consumer experience. The staging of products is the most important aspect of the aesthetic economy, which in turn is directed towards the staging and idealisation of life itself. According to Böhme, this value derives from the aesthetics of goods or commodities (*Warenästhetik*). Processes of aestheticisation and competition for attention have also led to architectural design exploiting formal and technical possibilities to generate an "artistic abundance"¹¹.

⁹ G. Böhme, 2008. *Zur Kritik der ästhetischen Ökonomie*. In: K. Maase (ed.): *Die Schönheit des Populären*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A. Gleiniger, 2009. *Neue Patterns? Alte Muster? – Vom Pathos des Ornaments*. In: A. Gleiniger and G. Vrachliotis (eds.): *Muster. Ornament, Struktur und Verhalten*. Basel: Birkhäuser.

An example of this development is the creation of patterns as an element of building design, enhanced by information technology, which reopens the discussion about the function of ornament in architecture. Clearly, this formal abundance is less concerned with the structural legibility of architecture than with decoration as a 'design extra' and a means of communicating with consumers. While patterns today appear as traces of codification and information processes, we are confronted with the question of the meaning of the emerging forms, which must be considered beyond aestheticisation and the production of decoration in architecture.¹² Consequently, this meaning is understood to go beyond architecture as a signifier. This implies distancing oneself from the excess of appearance and turning to the systemic coherence of the architectural object itself.

Values and the reality of the architectural object

Regardless of changing market situations and states of crisis, architecture still seems to satisfy the need for representation. The "demonstration of economic or cultural power" through the means of architecture remains a "favoured approach".¹³ In comparison, this kind of "design extra" is much less evident in our "common habitats" that we otherwise use and occupy every day. This context is apparently considered less worthy of the "design extra" being attributed to the built environment. At this point, modes of evaluation come into play that tend to influence the development of architecture. These modes simultaneously make a statement about the value assigned to the built environment and, by extension, to society and its practices. However, questioning the kinds of "design extras" we want to negotiate signifies the demands for a different understanding of architecture considering its meaning and significant impact. In this case, we move away from excess and towards the concept of architecture as a system. Consequently, the value of architecture is no longer primarily conceived in terms of its representational function.

Crises such as the financial crisis of the early 21st century and the ongoing ecological and climate crises tend to shift the focus away from the abundance of designed objects and towards the ecological, economic and social values that architecture can sustain. As previously mentioned, the problem is not solely an internal architectural matter; it is not something that can be satisfactorily discussed and resolved within the realm of architecture alone. Design is a "multi-scalar concept", not a unitary one.¹⁴ There are differences in the characteristics of particular design disciplines and between their preconditions. For instance, industrial design focuses on the mass production of goods for broad consumer markets. By contrast, architecture tends to provide individual solutions and is characterised by a desire for uniqueness in its responses to design problems. This approach to architecture has also been subject to criticism, for example being compared to the work of architect and inventor Richard Buckminster Fuller, who intended "to promote inclusive standards rather than exclusive extravagances".¹⁵ Fuller's ideas, such as those concerning prefabricated housing, were

¹² Ibid.

¹³ C. S. Becker, 2010. *Das nächste Projekt*. In: C. Kühn (ed.): *Umbau 25. Architecture for Sale*. Salzburg: Pustet.

¹⁴ J. Bryson and G. Ruston, 2011.

¹⁵ C. Lichtenstein, 2009. *"Spirit House" and "Steppenwolf" Avant-Garde. American Origins in the Dymaxion House Concept*. In: H.-Y. Chu and R. Trujillo (eds.): *New Views on R. Buckminster Fuller*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

undoubtedly revolutionary. After the Second World War, he won Beech Aircraft as a partner for producing the *Dymaxion House* – a technically inventive, lightweight and prefabricated housing unit. However, what started as a promising collaboration between the aircraft industry, which was in need of new business opportunities and market segments after the war, and Fuller ended in a failed partnership. This situation can be interpreted as a dispute over values.



Richard Buckminster Fuller: Dymaxion House

Fuller conceived of architectural design as the thorough development of environmental control systems and advanced shelter technologies. Therefore, the value of architecture lies in the context it creates, and once deployed, it serves humankind and saves resources effectively. On the investor's site, the interest lay in the immediate deployment of housing units to provide living space for the rapidly growing demand and markets after the war. The differences in objectives and value propositions between the designer and the economic actor brought the project to an early end. Consequently, the escalation of the conflict resulted in Fuller losing the project, and his expertise lost the opportunity to influence design evolution. In retrospect, it is difficult to keep track of the definitive positions of the negotiating parties. Fuller's extensive notes and records may reveal additional details. Nevertheless, this example illustrates the severe consequences of parties pursuing different objectives. The strategies and anticipated goals of architectural design are not homogeneous. Fuller's point of view presents an approach to the value of architecture that considers it as a performing entity. Some approaches focus more on the performative capacities of architectural forms and the interconnectedness of systems. Compared to the excessive focus on representation, this also signals a different approach to evaluating architecture. One example is the work of the Hong Kong-based architectural Office *eskyiu*. For the 2011-2012 Hong Kong & Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism they presented their project *Aqua Industry*. One of Hong Kong's most

pressing issues is the limited scope for land use and the ever-increasing demand for building space. Official strategies to address this problem include land aggregation and the outward shift of the coastline. The project of *eskyiu* proposes an alternative to environmentally unfriendly land reclamation programmes in coastal areas.



eskyiu: Aqua Industries concept

The project consists of multifunctional, lightweight, vertical structures based in the water and close to the shore. The habitable towers rest on artificial islands and contain mixed-use facilities. They are designed to incorporate a variety of features, including artificial fishing reefs and facilities for algae cultivation. These algae are ultimately used to power hydrogen fuel cells, which provide energy for the towers' facilities and the surrounding transport infrastructure. Various elements are incorporated here to create an effective system that improves living conditions in densely populated areas. The value of the architectural object is analogous to its performance.

The notion of the 'actor-world' was coined by Actor-Network Theory. This refers to a driving force that incorporates a variety of elements to form a distinct, effective entity, and determines possible users or inhabitants. In the aforementioned project, *eskyiu* constitutes the actor-world. However, once again: If the *eskyiu* actor-world is unable to incorporate economic actors and decision-making stakeholders, it will be impossible to implement the project and therefore to realise the value of the architectural object as an effective entity. Essentially, we lack strategies for including potential stakeholders, rather than for advanced performative architectures. These strategies are either absent or ineffective. The economy's value-proclaiming authority and the production of architectural excess constitute their own actor-world, deploying their own strategies. Their products are obviously able to appeal extensively to individuals' experiences immediately.

The value of sustainable or socially beneficial design, however, seems more abstract. Often, contemplation is needed to understand its value. Does architecture therefore need strategies to appeal to people's more immediate needs? In this discussion, the concept of lifestyle is increasingly relevant. It is not merely a notion associated with consumerism and improving one's lifestyle through products. Rather, it concerns individual preferences and daily activities. Here, the two conceptions of value present another challenge. Apparently, it is insufficient to argue with objectifiable facts alone. Individual demands and how they emerge also require consideration. As individual preferences become increasingly important in various situations and circumstances, creating greater demand, they also provide opportunities for architecture to connect more strongly with societal practices.