THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF ARCHITECTURE 
IN THE SOCIETY OF SPECTACLE

Abstract | Economical, political, social and cultural context we live in has already been defined in 1960’s as a Society of spectacle (Debord). This society is based on radical exploitation of recourses – technology and media, above all. At the same time, it has lost an ideological background – in theological, philosophical or even ethical sense. Everything that has, from the Marxist point of view, been considered as “social superstructure” becomes an independent value, mainly commercial in nature. In such a world, role of architecture – as an artistic, social and existential category – has been changed. Traditional understanding and definition of architecture (utilitas – firmitas – venustas) is not satisfactory any more. The form – built, modelled or thought – is always an outcome of architecture since the only issue we can consider, in fact, is an architectural form. At the same time, contemporary architecture is not only based on using a full variety of media sources, technologies and their development, but new engineering solutions, materials and building techniques become a generator of thinking about physical structure and space in general. In that context, function of instead of function in architecture needs to be observed as a dominant value. Furthermore, the word ‘function’ should be understood as pluralia tantum, or even material noun. As photography does not reach art through painting but through theatre (Barthes), architecture reaches art through its functions and not through visuality. This is why function of architecture is not only utilitarian (having in mind the fact that without utility there is no architecture), but is a complex system of answers about different existential needs – economical and ecological, aesthetical, social, cultural, psychological, philosophical, ethical, political etc. Architecture as a system of thinking about space, establishes relation towards all of these problem aspects simultaneously and becomes an ideological category per se. Since human life represents a basic and essential object of architecture (Milićević), structure and final form of architecture need to be concerned as a machine (Le Corbusier), not as a scene, sculpture or designed artefact.

Keywords | society of spectacle, architectural form, functions of architecture, ideology, ideological function

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In the mid-nineties, in a milieu of people from different professions and susceptibilities, but with similar views on the relationship between architecture, city and stage events, art in public space, urban culture and values of community life in general, I was intensely addressing the topic of spectacle. (2) Back then, in order to illuminate things for myself and to determine and clarify my own relationship to the concept of the spectacle, I concluded that every public event that was prepared in advance, conducted in real time and space using scenic means can be called a spectacle. Much later, when I have discussed the definition of spectacle with my students for the umpteenth time, I realised that the definition itself was of no relevance. Is there anything in human behaviour that is not prepared in advance (is there a completely spontaneous action - or only the reaction can be such); can we claim with certainty that any aspect of life in the time of “Big Brother” is truly private; in the media world of “Matrix”, does it make any sense to reach for the concept of reality; and lastly, which of the means of our mutual interaction are not, at least to some extent, scenic? [3] The conclusion has, through reduction, emerged by itself - in a world in which “we live by generalised imaginary” in a society that “uses images, not beliefs, as it did previously” [4] every event is a spectacle. And realising that the event “is a dot” [5], i.e., the basic element of space-time continuum, it is clear that the four-dimensional space of our existence is the space of spectacle.

Therefore, we live “in the society and time in which we have lost a sense of community. Brought up and raised in a system, in which the collective was more important than the personal, the society was above the individual, and big ideas and big plans have outgrown what a single human was able to accomplish, we were faced with fundamental and dramatic changes.” [6] The world in which we live today is almost entirely unambiguous, homogeneous and based on the assumption that “the market is the core institution of modern capitalist societies, that is, on the assumption that both the domestic and international political agendas are primarily focused on securing the conditions for the proper functioning of the market.” [7] These conditions are valid, of course, for all aspects and areas of life, since “nothing can happen unless it happens somewhere”, [8] and therefore are applicable first and foremost to space, understood four-dimensionally. It is important to always keep in mind that every space has its owner, whereby “the ownership is thought of as a relationship ... as an ethical and political relationship in which one person or a group of people have the power to change the behaviour (roles) of other persons or groups towards the desired direction.” [9] The government, therefore, “is an urban and topological fact which has to count on the network of functions as established by the groups and individuals involved in the production of the game and its property.” [10] In that sense, the modern society is particularly interested in gaining control over space: “Urbanism, 'urban planning' is the method by which capitalism takes control over the entire natural and human environment. Following the logic of total domination, capitalism can, and now it must rewrite the whole area into its own decor.” [11]

What is the architecture, where is its place, what is it for and “what does it glorify” in this world?

Classical definitions of architecture are, as we well know, typically triadic, and are based on establishing a cause-and-effect relationships between:

- usability, viability, appropriateness (utilitas);
- strength, durability, reliability (firmitas); and,
- beauty, opulence, grace (venustas).
From this has derived a definition which had been commonplace for decades in architectural practice, theory, criticism, and education - a definition of architecture through the triple morphemes:

function - form - construction.

The third element of this system almost always remained in the shadow of the debate on whether the “form follows function”, or is the shaping the essence of architectural undertakings, regardless of the fact that the history of architecture was almost without exception based on the development of technologies, among which construction, no matter how significant, was not solitary. However, here I would like to argue for a different view at the definition of architecture, and, by extension, for the way we approach it - building homes and cities by modelling and drawing them, by writing or thinking about them.

First, I would like to consider the notion of architectural form, i.e., the form in architecture and urbanism. If we agree with the perception of form as “the perceptual structure, configuration or discursive composition of elements”, [12] we will have to accept the fact that the form is not, and it cannot be a distinct feature, an attribute of the architectural work, nor its element. On the contrary, architectural form is a fact in itself, that's assuming the only possible outcome of architectural creativity and architectural thought and in general, regardless of whether we're talking about realised, "real" physical objects, virtual or temporary structures, graphic fantasies, or theoretical, artistic and literary utopias. Being that the abstract thought cannot be documented; the articulation of ideas on architecture always involves the establishment of certain architectural forms.

The question now is - what the form is for, or what are the functions of the architectural and urban form? (13)

The very wording of this question challenges the usual reduction of function in architecture to utilitarian, and the physical structure to the work of art. It would, no doubt, be more accurate and more stimulating to see the architectural features in plural, as a collective, and perhaps even as compositional noun, assuming them not “in the spiritual unity of different artistic disciplines, but in the unique technological and technical medium that unites our fragmentary involvement in the world.” [14] Then we could speak with certainty about the architectural program “as a complex spiritual product” [15] which includes the entirety of reasons for the creation of an architectural work and the tasks that it has to fulfil by its very existence. Hereby I am referring above all to the existential needs of people as a field of stirring forces for which architecture is created, but at the same time, I do not want to set aside the reverse process – the one in which new needs are being generated by the architecture.

Regardless of whether they precede needs or answer them, functions of architecture make an open set with a content that is a direct reflection of our understanding of architecture and architectural creativity. In other words, our ability to establish the value of physical structure is proportional to our ability to recognise and use the individual properties, relationships, as well as the entirety of the structure in question. Any increase in the number of attributes used to define the models, also increases directly our aptitude for modelling. This means that in the design process (in which the defining the programme is included, of course) one of the fundamental tasks is establishing an active relationship towards functions of architecture. In order for this to be possible, they should be identified first. Personally, I have been preoccupied by this topic for years now and I shall share some functions - the ones with which I have dealt with to some extent - in the classroom, and in my own practice. These are:
It is clear that this list is completely subjective, arbitrary and that it is incomplete. Everyone should, in my opinion, draw up their own list, and supplement it with new items constantly.

It is important, however, to emphasise that all of these functions (as well as many others that are still, for me, unidentified) exist parallel and at the same time, independent of our awareness of them, or our knowledge to use them. Functions of architecture are a direct response to the needs for architecture, which, of course, co-exist in the analogue problem-planes; they overlap, intertwine, connect, and confront each other. That is why the issue of harmonisation, "orchestration" of these needs is the key issue of defining an architectural programme, and the establishment of a balanced composition of the functions is the central task in the process of architectural design. Each new task should by all means include a thorough analysis of the structure of needs, as well as the function structure, and the final outcome would, by definition, always represent a new value. That value is the reason why we observe architecture as one of “human activities that most directly affect the quality of life.” [16] The basic question of architecture, therefore, is not to design spatial boundaries and neither is it the space itself, it is rather that “the basic subject of architecture is human life.” [17] Just as the photography doesn’t touch “the art through Painting, but through Theatre” [18] (not through representation but through the construction of the scene), so the architecture as a programme art, does not get realised through design, but through the fulfilling of its functions.

This, of course, is an ideological question.

The concept of ideology can be understood in the context of the pursuit for “UberScience”, the “systemised corpus of concepts”, [19] therefore, as a category that includes all aspects and all areas of architecture functioning. This would mean that the composition of functions in architecture is actually an ideological stance. We can, however, observe the ideological function of architecture as a component, as a “body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture.” [20] Here, however, I see ideology as an organised system of values established in relation to a specific problem context; in other words, as a formulated artistic attitude, as a creative discourse. Seeing that art is always discursive and that “the artist, weather he realises it or not, always takes a stand toward the circumstances in which it operates, in other words, toward the context - ideological, political, aesthetic, ethical, cultural, social”, and that “there is no art without a message, whether it be political, socially based or deeply personal”, [21] it is clear that the architecture always actively fulfils its ideological function.

The question that now arises is - whether and how can architecture function in the ideological plane in a society whose essence is mercantile, which was left without ideals, without faith, without conviction, and without, from the point of view of humanistic culture, an acceptable system of values?  

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Since the “duty of every citizen is not to live in a society, but to change it” [22] today's social context may, paradoxically, provide a more solid ideological basis then it was the case with the seemingly defined, strong and reliable social context from which we came from. The refusal to consciously participate in the construction of the world in which we do not believe in, and which we do not like, refraining from adjustments and indulging different centres of power, and, in extreme cases, an active subversion of constructed and imposed value systems seem to me to be more stimulating, even more important than the celebration of the world in which we have believed in, but that, from today's point of view, seems to be a mere illusion, a construct, something that has never been real. So, there are no more great ideas, and no big words behind which we can hide, there are no institutions whose authority is without question, there are no ideological, political, social and even professional values that should not be questioned. There are only personal ideas, personal beliefs, personal power and personal responsibility. In architecture, where the equilibrium point of the forces is always located between the existential and creative needs, where all the energy should be focused on building a world that will make human life more valuable, that responsibility is dramatically high. We are obliged to be aware of it. At the same time, we are entitled to our view of the world, to our idealism, and even to our utopia. We have a right to believe that people are willing and able “to find their voices, to remember their names, to regain confidence, to reclaim their space and to recognise their own continuity ... to work on their stories and to fight for them.” [23]

[2] See the text: Dinulović, Radivoje: Public city space as a festival stage or, Who does the city belong to, Dialogue about festivals (ed: Simon Grabovac), Novi Sad Cultural Centre, Novi Sad, 2008, pg.47-53
[4] Barthes, Roland: Svetla komora (La chamber Claire), Rad, Belgrade, 2004, pg. 113
[6] Dimulović, Radivoje, Zeković, Miljana & Žugić, Višnja: Tavern Serbia, The textual explanation of the contest application for the appearance of Serbia at the Biennale of Architecture in Venice, Department of Architecture & Urbanism, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, 2012, pg. 2
[10] Ibid., pg. 14
[13] Darko Reba and I have dedicated a course at the PhD Studies of architecture in Novi Sad to this topic
[15] Radović, Ranko, while explaining the tasks for the subject Arhitectural design, FTN, Novi Sad, 1999
[17] Miličević, Sladjana, talking about her graduation project, spring 2008