

Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts - Doctoral School

# **Media and Architecture**

*DLA thesis*

Erika Katalina Pásztor

7 March 2007

Supervisor: Professor Miklós Peternák,  
Head of Intermedia Department

# Media and Architecture

## *DLA thesis*

*Grand art* is a subsystem of the greater *media system* or visual culture, and which is constantly pushed by industrial practice towards a peripheral situation. With regard to television, *Bourdieu* (1996) gave utterance to his concern that the logic of media relays over to other areas of culture, to art, science, philosophy and even to law; by jeopardizing the existence of these cultural fields, it will even expose democracy to danger indirectly. In the media industry, art is associated with utilitarianism and its whole armament of indexes measuring the taste of a large audience by means of instant surveys. This feedback system is unique; the media industry is the exclusive field in which aggregated public opinion about the content gives immediate and undifferentiated value judgments on a certain production. The appealing index (attendance, popularity) is a *dictate*, upon which depends the general visibility of a certain production. In the long term, things not represented by media do not, in fact, exist.

Slow but continuous pushing of the elites towards the margins of mainstream media is one of the media industry's principal cultural effects. The question of the elite culture's subsistence has turned out to be a communications question, to which there might be possible answers in the media-tactical stimulation of public demands in conjunction with creating hybrid strategies built on deliberated institutional cooperation. Assuming that the processes throughout the factual effects of the appearance of the media industry are operating similarly in other fields of visual culture, the detailed exploration of these processes might function as a contribution to

further analysis and thinking in the development of adaptive survival strategies for the cultural institutional system. From a creator's prospect, a sole detail, the analysis of the media industry's influence on architecture turns attention to the question of how '*experience economy*' dominated by the media industry changes creative practices in architecture and media art.

The media industry is an extremely rapidly expanding segment of the global economy. When it is possible to get faster and larger returns in one sector than in others, the migration of capital, workforce and technology begins to flow from the less productive fields towards the more productive ones; in this way, the fast growing media industry affects the other fields of economy. By now, it is impossible to determine the exact boundaries of the media industry. In the background of the merging media, entertainment, telecommunication and information industry, stand *telematics* – the joint use of telecommunication and information technologies – and the recognition, as well as the exploitation of the *mobility of capital, products and workforce*. This requires simple interfaces and suitable surfaces for the communication between man and machine. The slogan: “*push the button, we do the rest*” by Kodak, in relation to *hidden technology* and society, has evoked the image of *the ideal man-machine interface* operated by pushing only one button, for one hundred and twenty years. We waste quickly perishable, expensive, specialised knowledge and – most importantly – time for our *hidden technology*. The maintenance of a few generations of older technology costs more than one new one. Consequently, the improvement of the means and methods used in intermediate communication aims not only to serve the various levels of human communication as effectively as possible, but also to *maintain mobility and the always current new technologies*. The relationship between man and machine has radically changed. Arising from the idea of *customisation*, we create *intelligent machine systems* that take different user needs into account and are able to learn. They attach the desire of creating even more perfect artificial worlds – *experiences* – and economical utilitarianism. Experiences earlier connected typically to media products became associated with consumption as a dominant element of diverse services. In the

*experience economy*, remarkable experiences are followed by increasingly remarkable ones: intensified competition runs for the consumers' attention.

These external economic pressures corrode *endurance*, one of the most important cultural values of architecture. They take architecture closer to contemporary media art creations, which are – arising from their inherent dependence on technology – ephemeral, and, except for the ones purchased and conserved by museums or collections, consequently they survive only through documentation (secondary representations) in the long run.

Outside of the professional scene, the judgment of architecture is not distinguishable from the real estate business or the construction industry. Good or bad achievements are both assigned to architecture and architects. There is no such connection between media art and the media industry. Media art and design is underrepresented in the cultural scene, including international practice. This is connected, but not merely, to the diverse cultural traditions and the historical perspectives of different professions; furthermore, it depends on the lifetime of media arts & design products, and the quantity of potentially accessible consumers. Media designers are interested in creating products of a short life-cycle and services to reach millions of consumers within a short time. Soon after consumption, newer and even better products should come to replace the old ones. Quickly perishable knowledge develops quickly perishable products. Short lifetime means quick oblivion; it is non-existence in a historical-cultural prospect, a sort of release from the liability of existence. Since there is a dumping of information and experiences stimulating all of our senses, the importance of media art's critical role is obvious. Although the existence or *non-existence* of critical artistic aspects might not be blamed in a post-modern, pluralist-value cultural environment, one thing is sure: money, power and *big media* are willing to monopolise everything. It drives all the new, experimental creations inheriting new aesthetical values to serve its own purposes by making them consumable for the masses.

The real estate business embraces architectural and other engineering planning activities, together with many others, such as legal, financial or marketing

communications activities. Real estate development means management of *land* and *capital*, two of the four *production factors* defined in classic economics, the two *immobile* subjects of property. A building is immobile, but able to be altered into a spectacular dynamic surface. Dynamic architectural and urban surfaces, forms and spaces have grown from experimental media art into almost mandatory additions to architectural design over the last few years. Media façades convert buildings into giant commercial billboards; *responsive* and programmable walls can display exquisite sights or personalised information. Augmenting virtual space, the media industry points to a greater occupation of the physical world.

In the real estate business, the result of the architectural design – the building itself – is an enduring final product carrying long-term communication values of business processes. Consequently, the building is a context-dependent communication medium in which *endurance* serves always the current representation goals, in this instance, the builder's long-term market survival and its brand image. Architecture supports the builder's brand strategy, and when there is a worldwide famous significant architectural design, it strengthens the builder's market position. In parallel with the improvement of the transmittable images with the growing quantity of the accessible audience, the role of architecture as a communications medium has grown to be a significant element. The value of an *emblematic, captivating, grandiose, unique* and '*designed by star designer*' building is appraised because of its intensified presence on the different levels of communications, while the interest of all important players – e.g., architects, companies interested in impressive real estate projects and political power ambitiously striving to immortalise its name – obviously overlaps.

In relation to the growth of productivity in the media industry, we may consider that *content* (substance) alters to infotainment and *format* becomes richer in experiences involving more and more sensory organs. Profit maximising drives the engine of experience economy by introducing always new contents broadcast in attractive packaging to the audience. There are at least two different ways to measure the formats' effectiveness. One of the important indicators shows the *quantity* of the audience attained; the other shows *for how long* a certain media product is consumed. In the case of media products, the marginal cost of involving one more consumer in

consumption is zero; the number of sold copies, admission, users or visitors does not influence the cost of the production; thus, if there is a larger number of consumers, there is more profit to obtain. Ergo, the media industry strives to maintain, increase and awaken the desire for consumption. There are tools for preserving desire, since media products are able to engage the spare time of users. They are also able to augment and occupy physical and mental space simultaneously, as provided by the diverse manipulation techniques transmitted by the products, and respectively by the more intensified 'psychological software', enthralling more and more senses. Where technology gives opportunity, media industry creates mass-customised products with amusing interactivity, users' involvement and user-friendly, spectacular interfaces. For the utmost satisfaction of individual demands, they solve the problem of personalisation with parametrisation, while for the necessary unification of the background technology, they use standardisation to minimise the cost of technology transfer.

The goals, tools and behaviour of the media industry described above appear in architecture, as well. *From a media industry point of view, architecture is only one of the potential media formats in which the content is displayed for the users.* This is perfectly matched with the outside expectations aimed at architecture as a communications medium. In experience economy, the expansion of the media industry incorporates architecture by occupying space, generating more than ever unforgettable experiences. Experiences as products have very short life-cycles, which mean fast obsolescence of the formats as experience carriers. This *non-material type of obsolescence* emerges as a new dilemma in architecture.

In connection with global ecological problems, there is relatively little talk about the harmful effects caused by architectural building activities and real estate developments. In fact, these activities account for half of all greenhouse gas emissions. This piece of evidence throws a new light upon all personal, business and public ambitions related to architecture. In an economy focusing on consumption, consumers' decisions influence basically market movements. If it is true that in experience economy we as consumers prefer products which are able to continuously satisfy our needs for new experiences, and are able to accommodate completely our

mobile lifestyle, and these products are wasteless when substituted, than the *non-material natured* media products conform best of all to our consumer demands. If these expectations will be projected on our material natured environment as well, then these preferences will slowly transform our built environment thought (through?) adoptions of dominant cultural patterns. Architecture provides the physical frame for experience economy's services, which relate back to this frame trying to minimise its rigidity derived from its material nature. In *the ideal architectural products* of a neo-nomad society, the *designed transient existence (übergangsstadium)*, personalisation, mobility and reusability are *inherent concepts*.

The emphasised role of architecture as communications medium and the messages it might transmit affect creative praxis. In relation to the question of *what* and *how*, the point has shifted on the question of *how*. Wedging the formal operational frames open, in parallel with globalisation, new institutional structures and forms have become established, with the tools of practice and the hierarchy of creative functions and sub-functions changed. There are more similarities in the architectural and the media art praxis, just to mention a few, such as the multidisciplinary character of activities, the intensified use of new technologies, teamwork, and both of the activity's states of subordination in relation to the current economic and social landscape. The emergence of cooperation between the two creative fields is noticeable in contemporary architecture and media art. Architecture builds in and uses those parts of media art which are suitable for achieving architectural communication goals. From the perspective of the architectural praxis, the involvement of media art provides a new ground for the emerging generation of architects to push their existential roots out amongst architectural offices developing into worldwide brand names during the 1990s and ever since then, continuously holding their strong market positions. Media art and design sees possibilities in architecture to change the scale and to expand the space of artistic messages.

The above described processes of the media industry and media architecture draw a one-sided and distorted vision; it would be easy to believe that these are the developments that the rest of the world will follow. Probably not, but it is indisputable that all these processes take effect through the communication channels

networking the entire world. Buildings seen by people outside of the *Castells' space of flows* are established as cultural models endowed with power, as *McLuhan* refers to wealth in relation to technology, with the power of the image of wealth.