Style and Architecture in a Democratic Perspective

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Abstract
The paper belongs to the section ‘Questions that encourage 
debate on the nature and role of research scholarship in 
arbitrary and related disciplines.’ It deals with research 
on structural relations between architectural education and 
cultural and human sciences. The paper addresses two 
major premises. Firstly the cultural role that architecture can 
play in the shaping of the ongoing process of 
democratization of the global society. Derived hereof is the 
second one: ‘What are the implications for our current 
architectural education?’ The argument develops over three 
stages.

The first one concerns a subject in the field of cultural 
history, stating that, historically, architecture was commonly 
an expression of the ruling powers. The first paradigm is 
that of the earliest modern democracy, the USA. Its initial 
architectural expression was inspired by Thomas Jefferson 
who adapted the language of the classical order. The 
neoclassical style became the canon for the new state 
buildings: the capitols and the courthouses. This paradigm 
shows a contradiction and failure to project concepts of 
democracy and revolution into architecture. The second 
paradigm comes from the modern architectural movement 
of the interbellum period. It was inspired by revolutionary 
ideas of radical socialism and equal right movement, 
proclaimed and empowered by the USSR. This paradigm 
again shows — albeit of another nature —  the failure to 
express the modern concept of democracy into an 
adequate architectural form. Both paradigms learn how a 
stylistic canon dominated and misled the architectural 
shaping of a young, democratic society.

In a second step, the paper focuses on two fundamental 
reflections. The first one highlights the relationship between 
democracy and style. A modern concept of liberty, for 
example, becomes visible in an architectural interpretation 
of Jefferson’s original design for the first Academic Village, 
Virginia. In the analysis of this architectural realisation, a 
more subtle image of Thomas Jefferson emerges. He was 
the founder of the Declaration of Independence, the 
philosophical basis for the first modern, democratic state. 
The second reflection dwells on the only consistent 
democratic philosophy of the 20th century, that of John 
Dewey. His concept of creative democracy is relevant to 
educate the ‘democratic consciousness’ of young 
architects. It is further assumed that thinking in such a 
‘democratic way’ can help to release architecture from a 
dogmatic stylistic canon.

The third and final step addresses the implications for 
arachitectural education. The challenge is the shaping of the 
student’s social and political consciousness via an analysis 
of historical buildings freed from an encyclopaedic and 
uncritical approach.

Text
Philadelphia is not only the name of a city; it also refers to a 
political and social program. Within the spirit of William 
Penn, who founded the colonial city in 1682, the name 
‘Philadelphia’ became the motto of a tolerant and 
democratic society. (1) The city is the living evidence of 
how democratic thinking can steer the lives and history of 
people in a concrete way. Because of its role as capital 
during the American Revolution, Philadelphia became the 
cornerstone of the first modern, democratic society. The 
Independence Hall of Philadelphia supplies ample evidence 
of this situation. There is also a direct link between this 
‘cradle’ of democratic thinking and contemporary 
architecture. (2) During the twentieth century Louis Kahn 
(1904-1974) lived and worked in this city. His son, 
Nathaniel Kahn, shows in his documentary My Architect (3), 
how his father designed in Bangladesh - then still one of the 
poorest areas in the world - the impressive building of 
parliament: The National Assembly Building, Dhaka (1962- 
1974). Up to the present date, this is a clear example of the 
human will to use architecture as means to form a 
democratic global village.

This and other aspects of the city of Philadelphia create a 
geographical and mental space for a fundamental reflection 
on the structural relationship between democracy and 
architecture in the framework of the debate over the nature 
and role of research in architecture and its related 
disciplines. I would like to feed this debate with two 
propositions. I believe that they are crucial domains of 
research -in the disciplines of humanities-, which help to 
shape architectural ‘consciousness’ in general and design 
theory in particular. The first proposition concerns the 
cultural role of architecture during the process of 
democratization of the global society. The second 
proposition comes out of this and affirms the responsibility 
of contemporary teaching in architecture regarding this 
process of democratization. My argument is built up over 
three stages.

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1 Style consciousness instead of democratic consciousness
This first phase is situated in the scientific domain where cultural history and cultural philosophy support each other. In this field of knowledge the following observation is meaningful. Architecture, as discipline and as building activity, has over the past 3000 years been linked to the ruling class of absolute power. Semiotically and anthropologically there might a world of difference between the introvert Egyptian pyramids and extrovert buildings as the Roman Pantheon or Gothic cathedrals, but their meaning is still imbedded in a cultural environment of a small elite who use the cultural power of architecture for expressing their image of men and world. In this framework democratic ideas such as freedom, equity and fraternity are still blind spots on the mental map. In his recent autobiographical book Breaking Ground, Daniel Libeskind reflects on the relationship between contemporary architecture and a democratic society. In his final chapter Faith he writes: "For the most part, architects aren't democratically minded people. They admire the cities built by kings and generals". (4) This reflection witnesses of a self-critical architectural consciousness. It is a powerful voice from the midst of contemporary architecture that pleads to redefine the 'old' structural relationship between architecture and non-democratic powers. Such operations demand for a change of paradigms in the reflection over the cultural and social responsibility of architecture. In this context the following question emerges: why is it still necessary at the start of the 21st century to emphasize the relationship between democratic thinking and architectural consciousness?

The history of modern democracy starts in Philadelphia in 1776, now 230 years ago. Nobody less the founding father, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) himself designed not only the political architecture of the first modern state, he also created the basis for the architecture of the new state. In general, one can say that Jefferson voiced the collective will of civilians of the independent modern state to break with the colonial, kinglike 'look' of the built environment. By doing so he expressed for the first time a quest for an 'architectural identity' for the newborn democratic state. He answered this in stylistic terms. "Which style suits best our new democratic identity?" As such the first democratic architectural consciences crystallised into 'style consciousness'. Jefferson translated the rejection of a colonial style in a positive choice for the neo-classical style. He wanted to realise a direct link with the European climate of the Renaissance, which, in its turn, was based upon and paid tribute to antique architecture. So, influenced by Jefferson, the young democratic United States adopted a neo-classical 'look'. Today this is still visible in the Capitol, departments of justice and national icons such as the Lincoln Memorial (1922) and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial (1942) in Washington D.C. The Benjamin Franklin National Memorial (1938) further exemplifies this. Architect John T. Windrim (1866-1934) designed the building after the model of the Pantheon in Rome, and John Russell Pope (1874-1937) did the same for his design of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial.

The historical mutation of a modern democratic consciousness in an architectural notion of style, which is indebted to Classical Antiquity, creates a contradiction. It learns that the first attempt to translate a modern democracy into an appropriate architectural concept failed in its aims. This is also understandable. To act and think democratically was so radically new that even the Founding Fathers of the United States could not anticipate its consequences and implications. Neither Thomas Jefferson nor Benjamin Franklin (1706-1826), the founding father of Philadelphia and first president of the American Philosophical Society (1769), could free themselves from a Eurocentric reflex. They could not yet translate their democratic thinking in an authentic architectural vision taking into account the different cultures which constituted newborn United States of America: the Native Americans, the Afro-Americans and the European colonists. (5) The first generation of American democrats did not succeed in transforming their revolutionary ideas into a new architectural concept. But neither could their European colleagues.

It was not after the French Revolution (1789) that modern and democratic ideas reached European architecture in its most radical form. This only happened after the 1917 Communist Revolution in the Soviet Union. It was under influence of contemporary philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) that progressive Europe saw its first experiments of transforming a democratic society into a radical 'equal' society. The idea of freedom was regarded as a function of the idea of freedom. Quite soon this modern will for 'equality' was translated into an architectural vision. The contours were drafted by Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) in
his The Housing Question (1872). (6) ‘Modernist’ designers of the first decennia of the 20th century turned Engels egalitarian ideas into stone. They wished to transform the 1917 revolution, which they regarded as the summum of all revolutions, into revolutionary architecture. Within modern ideology of Soviet communism a new notion of style emerged. Only five years after the revolution, El Lissitzky (1890-1941) wrote in his essay Ideological Superstructure the following architectural programme: “Destruction of tradition. Our time demands designs that have heir origin in elementary forms (geometry). The struggle with the aesthetic of chaos takes its course. The demand is for a conscious order”. (7) But this modern aesthetic canon is not as revolutionary as it claims to be. It is routed in a modern and radical rationalism. That rationalism has its origin in the 16th century. It dictated the tabula rasa of the past and proclaimed it as an act of emancipation to create a free and equal society. The modern movement in European architecture during the interbellum flirted with that rationalism and its esthetical canon of pure geometry. The utopia of social emancipation was translated into a rationalistic aesthetics of an ‘Existenzminimum’, which, in reality, resulted in countless ‘modern’ living blocks. (8) After many decennia of experience with such systems in soviet states and countries in the former Eastern bloc, but also in the many suburbs of western cities, one feels that this modus of living is also an unsuccessful attempt for transforming democratic ideals into architecture. The modern movement of the ante-bellum solely focused on the notion of a ‘pure’ rational style. As such it suffered of great theoretical and esthetical narcissism. By concentrating on its own esthetical identity, this modern movement failed to integrate the real revolutionary foundation of the modern era: democracy.

Our conclusion therefore corrects Charles Jencks’s discourse in his postscript of Modern Movements in Architecture (1973). He writes: “If a viable architecture is to emerge, then society will have changed in important ways as well”. He evaluates the modern movement as “the most inventive and excitingly formal architecture ever produced, but surely with the most ridiculous content”. (9) He argues that there can only be revolutionary architecture when society changes. He defines revolutionary architecture as “a viable, a credible public realm, the council system”. (10) Here lies the weakness of his argument. The social revolution is since The Declaration of Independence more than two centuries old. During all that time democracy was more than an utopian idea of the enlightened elite. Within that period of time architecture has not been able to contribute in its own right to the tiresome development of a democratic consciousness. Conceptually Jenks also fails because he only devotes a few lines to democracy and reduces it to ‘council system’.

The absence of a consistent democratic consciousness in the modern movement - and the problems it creates - becomes apparent when Mies van de Rohe (1886-1969) immigrates the Unites States in 1937. As a victim of German fascism he does not start a constructive dialogue with his new democratic environment. As richly documented in Mies in America, edited by Phyllis Lambert, the former leader of the Berlin Bauhaus, uses democratic freedom as a platform for spreading his esthetical canon of the modernist utopia of stylistic purity. By which he hoped to transform architecture in America”, as Cammie McAtee writes. (11) With this anecdote we leave the first phase of our argument. In the second phase we argue that the structural tie between democracy and architecture lies beyond the notion of style.

2 Democratic consciousness beyond style consciousness

It may seem contradictory to start this second phase by going back to the work of Thomas Jefferson. And yet it is with him that we find the first paradigm of a structural tie between democracy and architecture that goes beyond the notion of style. Jefferson was responsible for the neo-classical appearance of official monuments of the young democratic United States.

He was, without doubt, the first architect of the Free America. Of all the designs, projects and buildings which he approved and realised, the Academic Village (1826) in Charlottesville, Virginia, was his most dearest. (12) On his grave monument he had engraved: “The author of the Declaration of Independence, the Statue of Virginia for religious freedom and Father of the University of Virginia”. He saw the whole concept of the first university of the Free America as his child, and with the Declaration of Independence as his ‘brother’. The architectural style is again neo-classical as Jefferson regarded this as paradigmatic for good architecture. The Rotunda which defines the central axis of the site is modelled, again, after the Roman Pantheon. But the democratic meaning of The Academic Village does not coincide with this overall style.
There are signs that The Academic Village was the first laboratory to research the structural tie between democratic consciousness and architectural consciousness. Some architectural elements express democratic thinking and put into perspective the notion of style. The first element is the concept of the academic village itself. Jefferson said: "In fact a university should not be a house but a village". (13) As no other, Jefferson understood how the young democratic state had no future without taking care for the education for all civilians. Therefore the young democracy needed a university. For this democratic concept, Jefferson could not depart from one large monumental building. Instead he designed the concept of a village with for every professor a separate house to live and teach in. These modest houses were grouped, together with the student dorms, around a large open space, the Lawn. That is the second element: an open public space where professors and students can meet freely. It is a free space for a common academic life. It also forms a meaningful 'image'. All houses with their tutor-rooms face it. It symbolises the great freedom of seeing and thinking. For Jefferson the irreplaceable power of democratic thinking lies within a great openness of the human mind. This mind stands in constant dialogue with living nature, source of knowledge and cradle of the open space. It is further a living image of man's assignment to create in his mind an open space to ban dogmatic thoughts. This brings us to the third meaningful element: the Rotunda. Jefferson did not foresee in his Academic Village a chapel or church, but a Rotunda. This architectural programme expresses the width of democratic thinking that has its foundation free thinking. Jefferson systematically defended religious freedom. He therefore could and would not be able to incorporate a church building on the site. Off course, he realised that the model for his Rotunda, the Pantheon, was designed as a temple, and later converted into a Christian church. But his Rotunda was equipped with library bathing in clear light. In short, he converts a classical monument into a temple for education and knowledge, which then becomes a 'sacral' place of human emancipation, elevated by a consistent democratic thinking. This thinking found with Jefferson its first meaningful, but stylistically still inadequate transformation. If we believe that Jefferson laid the foundation of a consistent democratic process, then John Dewey (1859-1952) built upon this during the 19th and 20th century.

Bruce Kuklick notes that "when Dewey died in 1952 he was widely regarded as the twentieth century's foremost intellectual and the pre-eminent thinker in the United States". (14) The meaning of the work of John Dewey reaches further than that. His work represents in the whole of western tradition the only philosophy which implemented consistently the notion of democracy in questions concerning men, society, moral and science. The contemporary American philosopher Richard Rorty describes Dewey in his books Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) and Philosophy and Social Hope (1999) as his hero. He describes him as the pride of the United States and of democratic thinking. (15) Dewey promotes democracy to a central notion of the actual thinking of civilians in a democratic society. This basic knowledge has a universal relevance for every intellectual who takes up a responsibility in a global society that is becoming democratic, thus also an architect. He or she also belongs to a group of intellectuals that participate in this process. Two components of Dewey's consistent democratic thinking are also for contemporary democratic architectural consciences of great importance: creative democracy and reconstruction.

First, the component of creative democracy. Dewey describes, among others, in his book The Public and Its Problems (1927) and in his lecture Creative Democracy - The Task before us (1939) the notion of creative democracy. (16) He shows how in a society of free civilians, fundamental thought is neither a luxury, nor obvious. It should also not be restricted for the academic elite. It is an historical and social necessity. Democracy, he states, is much more than a certain system of government; it is on a deeper level a way of thinking that includes all civilians. Democracy puts every civilian in the position of a philosophical free-thinking man. Dewey does not recognise the essence of man in one or another invariable substance, but in the inclusive citizenship. In his own words: "The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human existence, the family, the school, industry, religion". (17) Creative democracy implies progressive thinking, which goes beyond the mere opposite of conservatism. Creative democracy is a way of living that adopts democratic thinking in all dimensions of daily and public life. Democracy is more than a state's form, it is way of living of all civilians, who in an active, or creative way develop their live in the community of their family, the
neighbourhood, the city, land, the world. Because democracy is in the first place the work of living men, it can never be regarded as an 'achieved' situation that must be preserved. Democracy is an open category; it does not operate as a closed concept, such as, for example, modernistic or rather more or less communistic utopias.

This insight brings us to the second component of Dewey's democratic thinking: the reconstruction. Creative democracy translates itself into a strategy of reconstruction. Such a reconstruction differentiates itself from destruction, which executed the modernistic tabula rasa in the name of a closed utopia which it wants to imitate. The act of reconstruction is also different from post-modern deconstruction which, as put forward by Rorty in Achieving our Country (1998), is imprisoned in a form of culture-pessimism. (18) Reconstruction is the strategy of creative, democratic attitude which accepts all elements of a true experience as working material to help free individual reconstruct their lives. The Academic Village of Jefferson here appears as the first paradigm of the true contents of democratic reconstruction. The key to that reconstruction is the adoption of the democratic thought in the real, existing living conditions. Reconstruction is thus always the method and the result of a collective experiment whereby all available knowledge is invested to reconstruct an existing situation. The strategy of reconstruction also works with open dynamics, which is not from the outset theoretical and dogmatic defined as invariable. In this strategy thinking is more fixed on the process and not strictly on the result. Every result is after all timely and is part of a never-ending process of democratic reconstruction. In the strategy of reconstruction there is no forced happy end. Every completion of a cycle results in a temporary ending, which opens up to a new beginning. An important implication of the democratic strategy of the reconstruction is the relativity of the notion of style. As we have explained in Tragiek, Transcendentie en Triade (1999) a fixation on style is meaningless, it is also harmfully. The process to objectify the history of culture, art and architecture is not only preserved. Democracy is an open category; it does not operate as a closed concept, such as, for example, modernistic or rather more or less communistic utopias.

3 Democratic consciousness, architect of the democratic space

It takes only a small step from the emancipation of architectural consciousness from the notion of style, to contemporary architecture and contemporary architectural education. In line with Jefferson's concept of The Academic Village, the American philosopher John Dewey points to the specific devotion of democracy for upbringing and education. For him, a democratic society appears to be a permanent, open school. Seen from this perspective, the question of how to organise future architectural trainings can contribute to a true and global democratic community, becomes relevant. Are they still capable to providing sufficient conceptual space to create a democratic consciousness that will help their students to shape the 21st century? Future architects need architectural trainings where they can experience and develop their inclusive citizenship. The answer to this question starts a rich and equally complex debate. It constitutes the basis for the developments of research on architectural design. The contribution of cultural sciences to this debate, and thus to the shaping of a democratic consciousness of the young architect, is, I believe, situated on the level of the process of consciousness itself. History teaches us that no human being is born with democratic consciousness. It takes shape in a culture that emancipates itself from her own and collective prejudices. For contemporary architectural students, a fundamental confrontation with architectural history in general and with that of modern architecture in particular, is indispensable. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) arguments in the fourth of his Unfashionable Observations On the Uses and Disadvantages of the History of Life (1874) convincingly that the modern approach towards history as an encyclopaedic collection of 'objective' facts, harms the education of men who should be capable, with his own creativity, to built up a meaningful here and now. (20) In the same spirit the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) explains in his monumental opus Memory, History, Forgetting (2000) that dealing with history implies an interpretation that is capable to forget in a creative way. (21) To stuff memory with so-called objectively reduced facts, mutes the imagination. In a democratic environment, an encyclopaedic and linear study of the history of culture, art and architecture is not only meaningless, it is also harmfully. The process to objectify that history also gives a linear direction to the notion of style. This is made clear in the work of Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968), who created the ideology of the modern
movement in architecture, by representing modern architecture as the stylistic continuation and completion of classical architecture, as rediscovered in the Renaissance. (22) The as yet incorporated democratic thinking of Dewey and his concept of reconstruction creates a new forum for another, not on style-centred study of cultural-, art- and architectural history. This study can be enriched and deepened by the research on a structural relationship between certain architectural realisations and a democratic consciousness. Here are some meaningful elements that can contribute to the development of a democratic consciousness of contemporary citizens. The concept of ‘the public life and space’ in the vision and the work of Charles Willard Moore (1925-1993), New German Parliament, Reichstag, Berlin (1992-1999) and City Hall, Greater London Authority Headquarters, London (1998-2002) from The Norman Foster Studio; there is also Daniel Libeskind democratic process of incorporating the undemocratic war-experience in his Jewish Museum Berlin (1989-1999) and his architectural master plan for Ground Zero as an answer to 9/11, which he regards as an “an attack on democracy, on global democracy and global freedom.” (23) Indirectly he honours in his Breaking Ground Jefferson and Dewey’s consistent democratic thinking when he writes: “One of the things I admire most about this country is its readiness to experiment and to change. Americans are enthusiastic about the unexpected. They see the world as a work in progress. That’s the beauty of American pragmatism”. (24) And finally there is the oeuvre of the German architect Günter Behnisch. Of all the post-war architects he has been most active in trying to answer the question: what does it mean to built for a democracy. Probably the quest to find some sort of answer to this question remains one of the greatest challenges for contemporary schools of architecture in a democratic society. It certainly was the question of Thomas Jefferson, the first architect of the first democratic society and also the Founding Father of the first democratic university in the modern world.

Endnotes:

(1) Penn, W., Excerpts from: Frame of Government of Pennsylvania (1682), published on: http://www.constitution.org/bcp/frampenn.htm: “Thirdly, I know what is said by the several admirers of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, which are the rule of one, a few, and many, and are the three common ideas of government, when men discourse on the subject. But I choose to solve the controversy with this small distinction, and it belongs to all three: Any government is free to the people under it (whatever be the frame) where the laws rule, and the people are a party to those laws, and more than this is tyranny, oligarchy, or confusion.”


(10) Id., p. 380.


Libeskind, D., o.c., p. 278


References:


