

the turn of the century

**A Reader about Architecture
in Europe 1990–2020**

**Edited by Matthias Sauerbruch and
Louisa Hutton**

Lars Müller Publishers

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Depending on whom you talk to, the thirty years since Sauerbruch Hutton started up their practice have either been very good for architecture, or very bad for it. Two developments in particular within the economic climate for new buildings have brought about these divergent accounts of contemporary architecture.

First of all, the freedom and speed with which buildings now circulate as images has led to the discovery of a new kind of value generated by buildings, a value unconnected to their traditional economic capacity to change land use and enhance rental value. Images of buildings now circulate so widely that even by themselves, those images have the power to bring benefits to the institutions, corporations or individuals who own the buildings, to the cities in which they stand and to the architects who designed them, regardless of the practical usefulness of the buildings themselves. In this way, buildings can act as “bait”, bringing further investment to a locality and maybe rejuvenating ailing economies, thus creating an additional gain less tangible than that offered by a building’s service function, but one that may far exceed the profits deriving from its practical use. This kind of value is not entirely new – to a very limited extent, a few buildings in previous times behaved similarly: cathedrals in medieval cities, St Peter’s in Rome, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and various other isolated monuments. But the accelerated circulation of images has brought about an explosion both in the magnitude of the effect and in the range of buildings capable of generating it: today, any building with a sufficiently strong image can become an attractor of this kind of value. What is sometimes described as the “Bilbao effect” – after Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which opened in 1997 – has

proliferated beyond a few isolated examples and is no longer confined to cultural buildings. We now have mini-Bilbaos all over the place, as building owners everywhere aspire to capitalise upon this newly recognised potential.

Architects have been beneficiaries in this development, to the extent that the process places a premium upon uniqueness. The successful image will be that of a building like no other – and in realising this, architects, who have expertise in the production of the novel and the original, are well placed. In these new circumstances, it has become the task of architects “to provide unique and memorable experiences” – to quote the Brazilian architectural theorist Pedro Fiori Arantes, who has written perceptively about the whole phenomenon in his book *The Rent of Form* (2019). What is required of the architect is to provide such an experience, and in a form that can be mediated through an image. This expectation is very different from the modern era when, earlier in the 20th century, architects were encouraged to produce universal typologies, buildings that might become a standard capable of being replicated anywhere. The skills that went into that kind of work no longer apply in the new situation, where uniqueness is at a premium. To a certain degree, this change mirrors the one that has taken place within capitalism itself, where the greatest profits no longer accrue in quantities of goods manufactured, as was the case in the era of mass production, but come rather from the capacity to create or enhance meaning, where products acquire a status beyond that of being mere things. It is this shift, towards less emphasis on product innovation and more on the creation of aura around products, that marks the most profitable companies, and the shift is similar in relation to buildings – with the important difference that buildings remain tied to the ground in the places where they are built, and can never achieve the insubstantiality aspired to in the world of goods.

For architects, the demand for uniqueness has brought advantages, and has required them to concentrate upon certain aspects of buildings. In particular, attention to the external surfaces of buildings has become relatively more important than it used to be. Previously, architects operated with a relatively limited range of surface finishes. Now, a proportionately greater amount of an architect's ingenuity goes into devising novel surface effects, often so that the mass of the building is made to seem to dissolve beneath the image projected by the surface. To “reach the immaterial”, in the words of Jacques Herzog, has become a frequent architectural aspiration. That architects find themselves obliged to commit so much of their creative effort to the design of surfaces is not entirely of their own choosing. Whereas once it was the disposition of interior spaces, the relations between users and occupied space – expressed through concepts such as “fit” and “flexibility” – and the relationship of buildings to their surroundings that absorbed most of an architect's attention, nowadays, whether they like it or not, architects find themselves expected to come up with novel and unique solutions to the external skin of buildings, because that is what will dominate the mediated image.

Some architects, especially those in design-led practices that specialise in the creation of singular buildings, have taken advantage of this situation and benefited from it. In a very few cases, they have achieved global fame and success, to an extent unimaginable to even the most famous architects in previous times. However, the temptation to pursue this market for singular buildings, advantageous though it has been, does come into conflict with other responsibilities to which architects pay recognition. If we take Rem Koolhaas' 2005 definition of an architect as “someone working for the public

good” (was he being sincere, or ironical?), the attention to singularity is cast into sharp relief by the other major development of the last thirty years, namely the impact on building production of the neoliberal economic policies pursued in many Western countries.

The systematic and progressive deregulation of the construction industry and of urban planning, the cutting of “red tape” and of many regulatory procedures in the interest of speeding up construction and of enabling market forces to determine what happens, when and where, has certainly provided greater freedom in the creation of new buildings. On the one hand, these changes have offered architects increased scope to experiment with new designs and untried forms of construction. While certain regulations, especially those relating to energy use and CO₂ emissions, have become more stringent (thanks in part to the initiatives of architects and engineers), in other respects, such as standards for dwelling sizes, safety procedures and materials licencing, oversight has been reduced. Just as with the new value form of contemporary building, architects have been not only beneficiaries of the process of deregulation, but also its victims. In the interest of “risk management”, we have seen a process by which responsibilities for safety, for quality assurances, are distributed along an ever-growing chain of agents, subcontractors and the like. As the ongoing public enquiry in the UK into the 2017 Grenfell Tower Fire disaster has shown, it becomes increasingly difficult to lay blame on any particular actor within the construction industry when something goes wrong, if no party is required to take ultimate authority for construction standards, whether for the quality of the building as a whole, or for any individual component of it. The culture of cost-cutting, buck-passing, risk avoidance has become unavoidable, indeed necessary, in modern-day construction. In this, architects are as complicit as anyone else, however much they might wish to take a stand against some of the practices of less scrupulous parties. Traditionally, architects were expected to protect the interests of clients, of builders, and of society at large. How well architects reconcile these divided, sometimes conflicting responsibilities is a mark of their ability. In the current situation, though, never has the opportunity for architects to act as the conscience of the construction sector as a whole been greater, even though their power to act is more circumscribed and diminished than ever.

How architects are to negotiate between the fresh opportunities presented by the new value form of buildings on the one hand, and the bear pit of a partially deregulated construction industry on the other hand, is a question that any architect entering practice in the last thirty years has had to confront. For those, like Sauerbruch Hutton, who have successfully navigated between the two without unduly compromising themselves, one can have only the greatest respect.