
The built environment

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The built environment in context

The built environment gives expression, meaning, and identity to the entire sweep of forces involved in people's relation to their surroundings. It provides cues for all kinds of human behavior, and it is symbolic of all kinds of political, social, and cultural elements. As a result, a building or other element of the built environment of a given period and type tends to be a carrier of the *zeitgeist*, or "spirit" of its time. Every city can therefore be "read" as a multi-layered "text," a narrative of signs and symbols. If we think in this way of the city as a text, the built environment becomes a biography of urban change.

As Lewis Mumford put it: "in the state of building at any period one may discover, in legible script, the complicated process and changes that are taking place within civilization itself" (1938: 403). Thirty years later, sociologist Ruth Glass was to characterize the city as "a mirror . . . of history, class structure and culture" (1968: 21). Both comments point to the way that the built environment reflects the underlying relationships, tensions, and contradictions in society. Yet the built environment not only reflects the underlying structures of society—it also serves as one of the means through which they are sustained and legitimized. In this context, one of the most obvious roles for the built environment is in helping to stimulate economic consumption through product differentiation that is aimed at particular market segments. The designer, by virtue of the prestige and mystique socially accorded to creativity, adds exchange value to a building through his or her decisions about design. Thus, architects' professional values and career structure, which reward innovation and the

ability to anticipate cultural change, also serve to promote the circulation of capital.

Another important role of the built environment is that of legitimation. A major theme in the literature on architectural history is the way that architecture has repeatedly veiled and obscured the realities of economic and social relations. The physical arrangement and appearance of the built environment can help to suggest stability amid change (or vice versa), to create order amid uncertainty, and to make the social order appear natural and permanent. Part of this effect is achieved through what political scientist Harold Lasswell (1979) calls the "signature of power." It is manifest in two ways: (1) through a "strategy of awe," intimidating the audience with majestic displays of power inherent in urban design and (2) through a "strategy of admiration," aimed at diverting the audience with spectacular and histrionic design effects. It must be recognized, however, that it may not always be desirable to display power. Legitimation may therefore involve modest or low-profile architectural motifs. On the other hand, it is by no means only "high" architecture that sustains the social order. The everyday settings of workplace and neighborhood also help to structure and reproduce class relations.

Meaning and symbolism

When we focus down from high-level generalizations, we find that people often endow buildings with meanings in ways that can be highly individualistic and often independent of their class or power. If, then, the built environment communicates different things to different people, or groups of people, we