The Materialist and Idealist dialogue in Architecture.

Because it true that each and every site is arguably different, in that each site presents different challenges for the designer to respond to, it may be said that developing a responsible, and therefore a pluralist, prescription in terms of design principles is so to say impossible without eluding to broader philosophical and political positions. In this essay I will look at such broader positions and how it is applicable to architecture as a whole. I will show the constitution of architecture as a dialogue between the philosophies of Marxist Materialism and Idealism. Out of this we will discern a general prescription for an architect to approach architecture.

Idealism

Idealism in philosophy means that it is our ideas/ minds/ consciousnesses that manifests the ultimate reality around us(Singer, 2001). The term has nothing to do with an “ideal” or as Peter Singer puts it: “The philosophical term should really be ‘idea-ism’ rather than ‘ideal-ism’.”(Singer, 2001). In the Hegelian sense this means that any raw information one receives from the outside world gets changed and given order in order before it can be understood by human consciousness(Singer, 2001). Consequently we therefore also change the external world according to this understanding to how we think it ought to be. It is easy to from here make the connection with architecture as a manifestation of said understanding of the world for architecture is but the changing of the physical world as to harmonize with of our ideas of what is deemed important. Kennith Frampton asserts a somewhat similar doctrine when it comes to his interpretation of the site as the first place the architect realizes his own architecture (Frampton, 1995). The site is thus taken and interpreted (changed) by the architect to manifest his own understanding thereof.
Absurd relations in Architecture

For Albert Camus, the question of suicide is the only true philosophical question as this question reveals a significant amount about being human and our relation to the world (Camus and O'Brien, 1955). The notion of absurdity in the philosophical sense can be briefly essentialized as follows: “… the experience of being compelled to be without comprehending being.” (Day, n.d.). The feeling of absurdity results from man’s relationship with the world and shares similar sentiments with the idealism described previously (the mind constitutes ultimate reality). It asserts that man’s relation with the world is absurd precisely because he changes it to understand it and yet fails to fully comprehend why and how it was changed. In other words: to be human with the implication of not understanding what it means to be human (Day, n.d.). Since architecture is designed by humans for humans, it could be said that the architect has a similar relation to the site and that the architecture resulting from it is but a manifestation of this absurd relation (we design architecture without fully comprehending it’s impact/ what it means). To conclude this segment we see that architecture in the process of form making and meaning giving, will always be within the framework of Idealism with a character of absurdity.
Marxist Materialism

Materialism can be seen as the flip side of Idealism. It has the same rationalist basis of the human consciousness perceiving the world from the theatre of the mind, only it places a much greater emphasis on the external world’s influence in the ideas/mind/consciousness (Singer, 2000). Materialism therefore holds that it is the material world that influences and changes the way in which we think/the way we perceive the world and not the other way round (Singer, 2000). In terms of architecture, materialism can be split into two aspects: the material influence on the architect before the building is conceived, that is the material context/the site itself and the social context/the people on site, and the material context after the building is built, in other words the material building that influences the thoughts of general public/its users after its conception. Similar to Frampton’s attitude towards the site, the site is what provides the artist with the stone out of which he is to carve his masterpiece; the site is the first recognition of the architect’s understanding (man places stone on ground before placing stone on stone) (Frampton, 1995). The material impact of architecture, after its conception, is also clear when one looks for example at features active within the city such as the pavement where acts as a means to create a feeling

Figure: 2
A significant image of where human creation leads to a situation of absurdity: the creation by humans of a stone god before worshiping it as their superior. In the words of Jason Day: Here is god, he has finally joined us (Day, n.d.).
of safety (it enforces contact with other people) and distinguishes between the public and private (Jacobs, 1962).

Figure: 3

**Architecture as a Commodity**

The definition of a commodity as Marx uses it can be stated as follows: an external object, whose qualities can satisfy human needs with a value produced with labour over time in its (the commodity) production (Marx, 1930). As a lot of human labour time goes into the designing and building of architecture, it is safe to say, in relation to Marx’s definition, that architecture, both in the design itself and in the eventual building, is a commodity. This in turn means that users of architecture and architects themselves are susceptible to the same problems of alienation seen in the production of commodities by the working class as Marx and Engels describes it (Marx, Engels and Varoufakis, 2018). Because your work and surroundings do not belong to you, as the commodity of architecture belongs not to the architect or the people, but to the building owner, the value that is infused into the product (architecture in this case) gets alienated from the people who build it and the people who use it (Marx, Engels and Varoufakis, 2018).
Surplus value and Urbanization

Because it was proven that architecture is in the materialist sense a commodity, it is now possible to look at some of it’s roles as a material commodity. The value produced in all the commodities within cities is always greater than the value needed to sustain the means of the commodities’ production (the labourers). Cities are thus the epicenters of surplus value (Harvey, 2008), yet only the owners of the means of production, that is the owner of machinery, factories, land, etc., has access to this surplus value (Marx, Engels and Varoufakis, 2018). They therefore can do with that surplus value as they like as they have the power to do so. The aim of capitalism is to make surplus capital, this surplus gets reinvested in different industries with the aim of producing even more surplus value (Harvey, 2008). For the building industry, this type of investment is particularly destructive as this type of approach tend to shape cataclysmic change rather than gradual change (Jacobs, 1962). It is therefore important for the architect to keep this in mind that the product he creates has an impact on a larger economic system of which the building industry so often is the victim of.

In conclusion we see that there is a dialogue between idealism and materialism within architecture. In interpretation and influence architecture is a product of materialism (the idea of architecture is changed by the material world and the product of architecture changes the ideas of others) and in creation it is a product of idealism (particularly absurdism) as the material influence gets changed/interpreted by the architect to then change the physical site. In a sense it is a dialogue between materialism and idealism in which materialism speaks louder. The design must therefore come from the site (physical and it’s people) and be interpreted responsibly as to not lose its long term value as a commodity of the people using it.
Bibliography


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