Architectural Veracities: Confronting the American Symbols of Democracy

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.

Declaration of Independence | 1776
There is a relationship between the qualities of an architectural element and its function. Architectural compositions should capitalize on the connection between element, program, and function to create the most powerful symbolic gesture.
Abstract

Architecture, through form and materiality, has the ability to shape space that results in specific, curated experiences. Those experiences have the capacity to represent certain values and impact a person's perception of the activities and people inhabiting those structures. This is particularly palpable by looking at government buildings and historically iconic public spaces. The seat of power for any country was built to project its ideals and preserve the values it identifies with. This relationship between symbolic values and the built form is strongest at the moment the initial structure is designed. Over time, the symbolism of that iconic structure serves a greater role as an identifier of supposed ideology than a reflection of current political thought. Branches of government that are always changing can and should reflect those shifts in political ideology while preserving institutional symbols of a larger political system. The resulting form is an evolving diagram of society instead of a static icon put on a pedestal. There is no standard architectural language that translates into a strict political meaning. However, the intersection of these independently abstract formal moves with materials that have different perceptual implications, come together to provide unique spatial experiences that can alter perceptions and provoke change in society.
Essay

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The Architectural Experience

Architecture at its very core is the shaping of physical forms to create space. The subsequent combinations of different architectural elements, such as walls, doors, columns, etc., begin to create specific spaces and, ultimately, compositions. The way that we currently experience the world around us is through variations of the architectural composition. However one can further define the qualities and functions of these elements when they become isolated from the rest of the members of their composition. For the purpose of this comparison, the isolated state of these elements through an imaginative, theoretical lens will be defined as the vacuum and reality will be defined as the isolated state of these elements if they interacted with people.

Because objects in the vacuum don’t have to concern themselves with human perception, the objects have qualities of their real life counterparts; they are the truest forms of themselves. For example, a door in the vacuum would be the equivalent of an object with the quality of “door-ness.” Those qualities are then translated into reality through their function. What makes people understand a door as a door is partly the action of what a door does and how a door works. If one isolates the door in reality the first way a person understands it’s essence is the opening and closing of that object. Here exists a similarity between the vacuum and reality. While both of these circumstances never truly exist in our day-to-day life, there is a truth to the qualities an object may carry and it’s real life functionality. While those qualities and functions by themselves are truthful representations that make up an object, there are very few times that separate objects come together to form a truthful representation of program.

A typical configuration of the architectural composition is a series of elements that are chosen only for their function instead of their qualities. These functions then begin to serve a greater purpose that revolves around an ideology or program which is typically driven by the designer/client relationship. What results from these compositions is a disconnection between the essence of the object itself and the essence of the program itself. The object has, in most cases, lost its meaning and is now defined by it’s relationship to other architectural elements. That loss of initial qualities makes the subsequent composition less impactful. In order to maximize the full impact of the composition, the cultural and formal elements of the piece need to work together. This is because of the way that architectural compositions are interpreted by the public. The act of having the public experience the architecture, has a social consequences. Once someone enters or views a given space and processes the formal qualities of that space, that experience impacts them and their understanding of the built environment. That impact, however small or large, is internally catalogued and then used for future reference when experiencing a new, unknown space. These architectural experiences are all political.
Political in this sense is defined as the structure and maintenance of power. These experiences are political because of the nature of the design process. The designer and the owner (if applicable) are inherently the people in power because the public, who is affected by this addition to their environment, doesn't have the agency to change it. The intention behind these types of experiences is therefore always going to be to shape the public's opinion. Whatever formal language and architectural autonomy that exists in the vacuum and isolated reality can not transfer over to the composition because of the significance placed on the overall message or ideology. This assertion of power through architecture then legitimizes and perpetuates the established power structure that allowed the space to come into reality. It's important to reiterate here that the architectural components themselves aren't political and don't have a fixed meaning. They acquire their meaning through the real-life manifestation of architectural configurations and the relationships within those compositions.
Essay

Power and Political Experiences

Classifying these experiences as political doesn’t necessarily mean that they only exist in governmental structures. Throughout history powerful people have used architecture as a means of asserting their power. The Medici family and the construction of Florence is one example of this. Giovanni di Bicci de Medici established the family’s bank business in 1397 and it ultimately became the largest bank in Europe during the 15th century. Giovanni’s son Cosimo de Medici took over the bank in 1434 and used his wealth and subsequent power to shape the urban fabric of Florence by being a patron of architecture and sculpture. (Going to add a list of the structures he built and was a patron of, as well as the legacy it has today. Cosimo de Medici was also never a political and didn’t have an established political power). The Medici’s lasting legacy and show of their power is still evident in modern day Florence. This city is an example of how architectural manifestations of power have the ability to shape society, even centuries after they’re built. While one can examine the different ways non-politicians gain enough power to physically shape a given environment, this thesis is going to focus on the what is the truest expression of a political, spatial experience: the design of capital cities and its components.

The Design of Capital Cities

Capital cities are uniquely positioned to house these political experiences because the role of the capital city is to be a container for the different branches of a nation’s political structure. Minkenberg writes about capital cities and the politics behind the spaces they create in his book Power and Architecture: The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space. He states that the cities are, “characterized by many of the functions that other ‘ordinary’ cities perform but are distinct in that they are the seat of national governments, i.e., their major institutions and organizations, and as a result they take on a particular political meaning.” The expectation of these cities is that they formally represent the ideology and values of that country’s political structure. Their primary role is to be a symbol and the lens with which to view a country’s political structure and population. This role the city takes, directly has an effect on the population by capitalizing on the consequences of specific architectural combinations. This is the ultimate political experience, shaped by the ultimate power figure in a country - it’s government. The most impactful political experiences are materialized through the strategic layout of the most significant governmental buildings, the sequence and access points into these spaces, and the arrangement of these individual architectural components inside these spaces to symbolize specific values.

Political Structures of Different Ideologies | Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Branches

Diagrams by Author
Germania, Brasilia, and the Reichstag

Using these parameters to critique the veracity of different capital cities, the impact of the political experience can be evaluated. The Speer Plan for Berlin, the Costa and Niemeyer plan for Brasilia, and the Foster + Partners renovation of the Reichstag are all conceptually impactful. However, each of these spaces reveal the real-life limitations of designing a political experience, that ultimately detract from its intended impact.

Scale and Germania

The Speer Plan for Berlin, ultimately titled “Germania,” redesigned the capital city to create a strong north south axis, along which the important program was laid out. The plan was segmented into Koningsplatz, an area with public goods and services, as well as an area with the ministries. The ministries and departments, as well as the public program, were meant to be oriented along this grand boulevard to create a sense of intimidation and hierarchy. As Helmer writes, “Dominance of public over private buildings by scale and position is a basic theme throughout.” Koningsplatz in particular is interesting to examine because it was designed to hold all the important program within the government. It was supposed to feature the Great Hall, the Fuehrer’s Palace, the Armed Forces High Command, as well as the Chancellary Staff Building and the Reichstag. Everything within Koningsplatz was ornately decorated and the scale was unnaturally monumental. The new layout also served as a symbol for the new socialist hierarchy. The buildings symbolized the People, the Fuehrer, the Military, and a vague symbol of Parliament. The design of the buildings themselves do a lot of things formally and through cultural associations to really maximize the amount of symbolism.

Formally, the scale of the Great Hall not only signifies importance but the grand entrance implies a ceremonial program. The building is also placed directly in the center of the north south axis. While that symmetry is important to the understanding of the sequence it also gives it more importance and elevates the meaning of the structure. Inside, the building mimics that of the Pantheon. The structure is meant to be occupied by 180,000 people standing, who would then be addressed by Hitler. The podium is located towards the northern side of the structure which contradicts the unifying circular language present in the rest of the form. Figure 2 and 3 illustrate the different possible approaches.

2) Stephen Dean Helmer, Hitler’s Berlin: Plans for Reshaping the Central City Developed by Albert Speer, (2014), 64.
**Essay**

Even though the form and placement by itself symbolizes the new form of government and larger political meaning, there are additional cultural components that add to this reading. The use of columns and its strong resemblance to the pantheon are meant to give it the importance of a temple with a slightly religious connotation. Hitler’s fascination of the Neo-Baroque was also a contributing factor to the ornamentation on all the buildings. Building with that particular style also gave the Great Hall a historical, imperial feeling. Capitalizing on the memory of historical buildings in Berlin with ornamentation as well as the consequences of architectural compositions to create a city that not only intimidated and created a hierarchy through formal means, but contributed to a larger political message and brand for the new city of Germania. Interestingly enough, despite the large and monumental design of this new capital city, there was one area that remained untouched.
Public Opinion and Public Space

The area around Tiergarten had long been an open, wooded public space that was enjoyed by all people in Berlin. Speer and Hitler knew that the public wouldn’t be receptive to this large change if they took away a prized public space such as Tiergarten. Everything about nature and the sequence through this space screams irregularity and the human scale: the small winding paths, the statues and playgrounds with seating around, as well as the natural vegetation throughout. The break that exists between the rigid Koningsplatz and the strong monumental program following Tiergarten shows the importance of public perception, even to a fascist regime. The need for objects and places at a human scale is an integral part of the design to capital cities. While the primary role of the city may be to become a symbolic center for the nation, the utilization of these monumental programs is an important component that adds to the symbolism. The monumentality of the final design is not to say that Speer and Hitler didn’t take into account the use of the space. The grand boulevards were designed specifically for the use of rallies and marches for the party. These uses of public space took precedence over every day use. Helmer writes as well in his book, “Normal aesthetic considerations seem to be sacrificed to the needs of enriching and magnifying the effect of the given rally, parade, or speech. That is, the mundane demands of the moment and particularly the promotion of ogles which are not even remotely artistic take precedence over either the provision of simple visual satisfaction, or the more complex transmission of social, cultural, or other concepts throughout symbols.”³ That political gain and sense of nationalism that the Nazi party gained through the manipulation of formal and cultural elements is overshadowed by it’s lack of day-to-day usability. Capitalizing on the inherent qualities of the door, column, wall, and street would have created a space that made people want to gather and enjoy and fuel that nationalistic pride that they wanted to cultivate.

³ Helmer, Hitler’s Berlin, 127
Brasilia and Monumentality

On the other side of the spectrum, is the design of Brasilia by Oscar Niemeyer and Lucas Costa. The capital was moved from Rio de Janeiro to this new, more central location of Brasilia. Since the city was being constructed from scratch, the designers had the task of creating a space that would define the national identity that Brazil wanted to create for the 20th century. The plan proposed by Costa and Niemeyer capitalizes on the symbolism of egalitarian ideals through modern construction. By taking the literal, formal interpretation of democratic ideals, Niemeyer and Costa designed a largely open city with few barriers between the people and the large governmental structures. As illustrated in Figure 8, Niemeyer creates several formal moves that bring people physically closer to those concentrations of power. However, the lack of smaller scale interventions create a space that, like Germania, only becomes utilized during strong demonstrations of political power instead of on a day to day basis. Photos of political protests in Brasilia fully show the power in this open interpretation of the city’s design.

Formally, there are two axes that the city is oriented on: the Monumental Axis where the government buildings are located and the Residential Axis where the majority of the residential program is. The entire city is designed with the car as the primary mode of transportation. The consistent flow and movement of the highways then make the green space within the city inaccessible to pedestrians and subsequently establish the city as an island. Since Brasilia uses modern architectural language to convey its egalitarian values it is closest to the notion of using architectural elements to create a larger symbolic system. However, the strict transcription of ideology to form results in a city trying to bring the vacuum into reality in vain. Through a real life manifestation of architectural elements, it becomes important to take into account the main variable between reality and the vacuum: people.
Figure 11 | Modern Day Reichstag

Public Program

Public | Private Sequence

Materiality

Figure 12 | Parliament Chambers

Figure 13 | Dome

Figure 14 | Restaurant

Diagrams by Author
Essay

Reichstag: A New Composition

A consistent theme that detracts from the connection between architectural compositions and symbolism is the lack of design for the user group. This is intentional. The need to be symbolic, political, and powerful results in an environment where places that highlight those experiences are given priority. This was evident through the boulevard in Germania and the scale of Brasilia. The German parliament building, known as the Reichstagbude, is a good example of a political experience that tries to incorporate public program in order to make the symbolism stronger. This intervention by Norman Foster both respects the existing built environment as well as capitalizes on the language of contemporary materials to highlight a democratic ideology.

The design combines the cultural and formal in order to create a space that brings together politicians and the public. Foster brought back the original entryway and originally domed language, but by altering the materials and program, formed a space that is primarily public. The dome is a giant public space where the visitors can walk along the sides and overlook the city while learning more about the history of the building. Foster relies on the history behind the facade of the Reichstag as well as the dome shape that references back to before Nazi rule. Capitalizing on that history and cultural associations, Foster creates a space that takes into account Germany’s tumultuous political past in addition to establishing the Reichstag with an air of authority and permanence. Formally, the architectural sequence, the materials used, and the hierarchy of programmed spaces convey the significance of the Reichstag as a democratic forum and, in the words of Foster, a “commitment to making the parliament publicly accessible and its workings transparent.”

The sequence in the Reichstag was always meant to emphasize the connection between the people and the legislators. Foster designed the entry to be used by both and to maintain a visual connection between different program so as to ensure that sense of stability. The materials used also continue with that idea of maintaining a sort of check on the government because Foster acknowledged, “history as a force that shapes buildings as well as the lives of nations.” The design of the structure has an almost obsession with light. This interplay between stereotomic and tectonic uses the qualities of architectural elements for their intended purpose to create a larger picture and symbol that’s reinforced. The walls become containers instead of barriers. The columns are reinforced as structure instead of an intimidating sculpture piece.

4| Norman Foster and Chris Abel, The Reichstag: Foster + Partners. (Munich; New York, Prestel, 2011), 9
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This is not to say that the building is open and accessible to all. By maintaining parts of the original Reichstag, the architects consent to implying at least one instance of monumentality and intimidation. A government building in a capital city after all, has to have a certain type of authority that implies control and power. By acknowledging that the original form already achieves this, Foster could then focus on connecting the aggressive monumentality of the historical parliament chambers, with the lightness and connections available through modern materials.

Real-Life Constraints

In addition to the issues outlined above, the most conceptually frustrating is the manifestation of a symbolic gesture in the built environment, but that is not utilized afterwards because of superficial barriers. For example, the act of placing monumental stairs to enter a building puts the people first and creates a strong gesture that the entrance is accessible to all. However, barricading those steps as a matter of security takes away from the democratic political nature of that experience. (Show other examples, and expand on other limitations) In all of these cases, the enemy of the symbolic gesture, conceived by the power structure, is in fact the power structure itself. By trying to find a way to preserve it’s power, it subverts the true political experience available to the public through the built form. The political experience then becomes propaganda.
The Need for an Architectural Veracity

Why is this architectural veracity relevant in the first place? Architecture by itself cannot change the political values of a country or the future direction that country will take. However, by shaping the built environment to truthfully represent the specific ideology of the government, the public begins to understand the system’s true intentions. There is nothing more powerful than the ability to alter people’s physical reality on a day to day basis. Architecture has the capacity to express intentions and values in a stronger way through the use of these compositions. Acceptance of the true political experience by viewer, is acceptance of the government’s political legitimacy. Without this understanding every governmental space is justifiably open to intervention and revolution. Governments who preach democracy, liberty, and equality, and who acknowledge that the legitimacy of their power comes from the public in exchange for securing these inalienable rights, have a duty to physically alter the built environment to reflect this obligation. If not, the government doesn’t have the political legitimacy it needs to operate.
Annotated Bibliography


Finch states that architecture is built in response to the culture and context of its site. The importance that a government places on the built environment correlates to its commitment to public space and its society as a whole. One reason historical cities are impressive, is because of the clear intention behind the design. Finch addresses the necessity of creating an interconnected community of art, architecture, and engineering that permeates all aspects of daily life. Furthermore, he affirms the necessity of connecting an icon to its surroundings so that it begins to be representative of the object it's symbolizing. This connection between symbolism and the importance a government gives to its infrastructure will help develop the method in which the legislative buildings could change.


This book addresses the human interactions with the built environment. Plummer identifies the more overlooked pieces of the human interaction with architecture and highlights the way we can change our perception of spaces. The ability to have a variety of choices when one enters a space, allows for various outcomes when a person enters a structure. That, “daily exercise of free will” is a fundamental way that people begin to express their will in an given environment. This personal human connection to a space is relevant to my thesis research because of the way it can be distilled and reinterpreted in a structure with a lot of symbolism.


This interview addresses the use of forms and the consequential reverence or defiance of history. In earlier times, architecture didn’t have an index of styles or different typologies to pull information from. As this index started growing, the buildings being designed were compared formally to the intention of its previous iterations. Pérez-Gómez identifies the two narratives pertaining to historical forms and presents the various impacts it can have on culture. This question of form’s relationship to culture and the ability for program to have cultural and political consequences is an important component of understanding the effects of a changing legislative structure.
Annotated Bibliography


The premise of this text is that icons are formed at the meeting point of power, meaning, aesthetics, and taste. The powerful are the ones who are able to then curate these icons without much input from those in different, disenfranchised positions. He uses the phrase “capitalist hegemony” to describe the everyday expression of how powerful the dominant class is, specifically through their creation of iconic buildings and sometimes whole cities. Skalir’s work will help identify what got our society to its current state in terms of iconic buildings and who are the players that shaped what structures we identify with our political systems.


Staub states that there is a long history of nations using representational architecture to create a specific narrative and identity for their public and the larger world. She specifics two identities: one being the official governmental narrative of idealistic values, and the other being of the people who actually use the spaces designed for consumption. The book also examines the political nature of public space which, in addition to cultural identity, will help place the design of a new legislative building.


Sudjic expresses architecture’s capacity to provide specific emotions in people. He states that architecture is used by political leaders to impress and intimidate, and that architecture has the ability to convey specific messages relative to the ideology. Sudjic also identifies the connection between architecture and controlling narratives. He states that the discipline is inherently organized and categorized to shape life in spaces. This book is important to my thesis research because it identifies how architecture can shape specific experiences, and how the powerful begin to mold the built environment to symbolize idealistic values that are removed from reality.
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Case Studies | Precedents

Case Studies

Germania

Reichstag

Brasilia

Precedents

National African American History Museum

Faust: Venice Biennale

Centre Pompidou
Case Studies

Germania

The Speer Plan for Berlin, ultimately titled “Germania,” redesigned the capital city to create a strong north south axis, along which the important program was laid out. The plan was segmented into Koningsplatz, an area with public goods and services, as well as an area with the ministries. The ministries and departments, as well as the public program, were meant to be oriented along this grand boulevard to create a sense of intimidation and hierarchy.
Case Studies

Reichstag

The new design of the German Parliament building capitalizes on its historical and cultural associations. Foster creates a space that takes into account Germany’s tumultuous political past in addition to establishing the Reichstag with an air of authority and permanence. Formally, the architectural sequence, the materials used, and the hierarchy of programmed spaces convey the significance of the Reichstag as a democratic forum and, in the words of Foster, a “commitment to making the parliament publicly accessible and its workings transparent.
Case Studies

Brasilia

The plan proposed by Costa and Niemeyer capitalizes on the symbolism of egalitarian ideals through modern construction. By taking the literal, formal interpretation of democratic ideals, Niemeyer and Costa designed a largely open city with few barriers between the people and the large governmental structures. However, the lack of smaller scale interventions create a space that, like Germania, only becomes utilized during strong demonstrations of political power instead of on a day to day basis.
Precedents

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Completed in 2016, the NMAAHC is the newest addition to the National Mall. Designed by David Adjaye, the museum showcases several exhibit spaces alongside a central grand procession from the basement to the ground floor. The building also utilizes various historical symbolic gestures, such as the wrought iron inspired facade and the porch entryway.
Faust: Venice Biennale

Created by Anne Imhof for the 2018 Venice Biennale, this performance piece brings together a variety of mediums. Both architectural and sculptural elements juxtapose the serious and uncomfortable nature of the performers. A sense of time is distorted within this piece. Performers move fast and slow while the audience gathers and experiences this mix of performer and space.
Precedents

Centre Pompidou

Designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers in the 1960s, this multi-use structure exhibits its essential elements on the exterior facade. Opening up the inside to be a multi-functioning arts center, library, cafe, and more. Its tense relationship with the surrounding historical context of Paris is also an interesting and provocative part of the design.
Final Presentation

Site

Program

Final Board
Site | Program

The National Mall | Capitol Building Grounds

This thesis investigates the architectural element in terms of its typical role and function, as well as its understanding as a symbol. What gives a column its qualities of columnness? The stair? The wall? The composition of these elements form the space around us, but their qualities are ignored when applied to symbols of power. The capitol city typology utilizes these typical architectural elements in the most subversive way: as a means to become a symbol and project power. The column stops becoming structural and starts becoming an appliqué, the stair becomes a wall, and the wall becomes a veil to shield the building’s inner complexity. The misuse of these elements have led to a static, and enduring structure that’s become more and more disconnected from the public. What if its permanence is fictional?

Compositional Follies

These elements come together in front of the United States Capitol to provide a series of public installations of rescaled, reoriented, and reimagined national symbols. These interventions not only question the unused public space between the National Mall and the Capitol Building, but also the connection between the public and power.
ARCHITECTURAL VERACITIES
CONFRONTING THE AMERICAN SYMBOLS OF DEMOCRACY
MARIA ESPINOZA | ADVISOR: AMMAR ELOUEINI

What gives a column its qualities of columnness? The star? The wall? The composition of these elements forms the space around us, but their qualities are ignored when applied to symbols of power. The capital city typology utilizes these typical architectural elements in the most persuasive way as a means to become a symbol and project power. The columns stop being structural and start becoming an appiqué, the star becomes a wall, and the wall becomes a sky to shield the building’s linear complexity. The manifestation of these elements have led to a static and enduring structure that become more and more disconnected from the public. What if its permanence is rational? These elements come together in front of the United States Capitol to provide a series of public installations of recalled, reinterated, and reimagined national symbols. These interventions not only question the unsecured public space between the National Mall and the Capitol Building, but also the connection between the public and power.

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BARACK OBAMA
IF THE PEOPLE CAN TRUST THEIR GOVERNMENT... ALL TRUST IS LOST
IT IS THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE TO ALTER OR ABOLISH IT.