CHAPTER 7

Early Modern Architecture: Conditioning, Disciplining, and Social Control

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Architecture and Social Disciplining

The interrelationships between art and discipline constitute a vast subject matter for research, most of it still awaiting investigation. Yet, its significance is clear: paintings and sculptures, for example, inform and enlighten us; they mediate imaginations and indirectly convey “appropriate” patterns of behavior. They inform us about religious beliefs, and they reinforce concepts of state order and justice.1 Art affects the social space in many ways. We can often deduce its effect from the intentions of the patron.2 If the sources remain silent about these intentions, we may assume that particular artistic expressions are very likely to be in conformity with the patron’s intention.3

As far as their social and political meaning is concerned, works of art can develop a life of their own. This is especially the case when there is a considerable temporal gap between producing and admiring them. As sign systems—as they may be partially, but not entirely, considered—works of art depend on their context; their meaning and effect can only be determined in the broader context of space and time. They depend on their positioning within a specific social system. An obelisk in Luxor or Heliopolis signifies something else than the same obelisk standing on St. Peter’s Square in Rome, or in Paris, or in New York. The Sacra Conversazione conveys different meanings depending on whether the painting is situated in a church, in a palace, or in a museum.

For the premodern age, it is hardly possible to underestimate these effects of architecture and the visual arts.4 Works of art had little competition from other media. They existed in a world that was relatively scarce with images compared to modern society, and people were unfamiliar yet with the representation of space as a perspective image. Certain strategies of artists, such as the depiction of the supernatural in “real” space, might have had a marked effect. It simultaneously
made religious paintings lose their magic. Conversely, it enabled the spectator
to relate to the visionary realm, in which miracles became a direct experience of
the viewer.  

Many of these observations on paintings also apply to architecture. Its pecu-
liarity lay in the fact that early modern observers were relatively immobile, so
that they generally used to see fewer images than the modern observer. Consequently, remarkable, huge buildings were relatively rare, which made them
into effective media for communication, often of a disciplinary character.

Finally, we should realize that the language of images, which often appears
cryptic to the modern reader and therefore needs to be deciphered, was
intended for people familiar with it, who perceived any inconspicuous detail that
is difficult to grasp for the modern observer. Occasionally, even the “fine dif-
fences” might have been properly perceived. It is important though to distin-
guish precisely between the various social positions of the observers. The
perception of iconography of the learned humanist differed from that of ordi-
nary people. Unfortunately, we hardly know anything about the latter’s perception,
so that we are left with hypotheses and speculation.

Disciplining and Conditioning

Next to customary terms such as “social control” and “disciplining,” it appears
to me that another concept is eminently suitable for describing the effect of art
within social space: conditioning. By “conditioning” I mean the process of acquisi-
tion of norms, patterns of thought and behavior—including norms and pat-
terns concerning the political order and the religious system—all the way until
their internalization. When internalized, they are regarded as a matter of course,
no longer reflected upon, and they may become part of the habitus of an indi-
vidual or even of a whole social group, by which they increase in social relevance.
We become aware of the consequences by analyzing the sources. However, men-
tal conditioning can also occur without any visible consequences. Hence, condi-
tioning refers to “being inclined to” or “being disposed to” something.

Art, then, is a symbolic representation of part of the habitus, of the owner or
patron for example, but in addition it has a conditioning function, for the observer
or user. The practice of this conditioning can involve passive or unconscious processes
of internalization as well as conscious changes in thought and behavior caused
by media and discursive or physical force. As a last resort, people do not think
any more about what they are doing. Conditioning, therefore, can be regarded
as one aspect of the larger process of social disciplining; the former is a psycho-
logical process, preceding the visible changes of behavior to which the latter con-
cept refers. Both processes are interrelated in a complex manner. Hence, condi-
tioning supposedly is an object of study within the history of mentalities.
Works of art, “texts without letters,” can only be looked at; they influence through the eyes. This term is eminently suitable to describe the effect of art. Conditioning implies not so much the use of force, but rather a subtle strategy of regulation of behavior that is a precondition for the interaction of individuals. Every form of coexistence is only possible when people are conditioned by rules. The process of civilization, as analyzed by Norbert Elias, might also be described as the dialectics of conditioning.

**Magnificentia and Architecture**

The representative architecture of secular as well as religious buildings may condition the onlooker’s way of thinking and acting, so they are both involved in the disciplinary process. Because of the paucity of literature on the subject, I will focus on a few examples. I intend to demonstrate that one can use early modern architecture as a source for the study of discipline and the conditioning paradigm generally. Buildings with a clear function in the system of governmental control and discipline, such as fortresses or prisons, will not be discussed here. It is evident, from the “language” of their architecture, that their purpose is to intimidate, deter, and discipline.

From an early date, contemporaries were well aware of the political and social effect of great and splendid architecture. One might find the idea of architecture’s disciplinary function in Machiavelli’s *Il principe*, especially in chapter 20, where the author discusses the usefulness of fortifications. However, Machiavelli does not explicitly mention the significance of architecture as such. This subject has to be considered especially in connection with the theory that identified *magnificentia* as the ruler’s outstanding characteristic. That concept was clearly associated with patronage in architecture. Theories of architecture from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as the treatises by Alberti, Scamozzi, and Palladio, use a variant of the term magnificentia to characterize great and splendid buildings. They call such a building *magnifico*. The idea of “appropriateness,” of the right mixture between mediocrity and display, belongs to the tradition of the theory of magnificentia, and it can be traced from Aristotle until the economic literature of the eighteenth century.

A few centuries after Aristotle, Vitruvius, dedicating his book on architecture to the emperor Augustus, stated that the *princeps* should care for public buildings that served the common good, “so that the dignity of the realm possesses excellent buildings which increase its reputation.” The thought that the ruler’s magnificentia serves the common good recurs in the work of Aristotle, Vitruvius, and several Medieval authors. Already the *Fürstenspiegel* of Aegidius Romanus (c. 1277–1279) expresses the idea that outward splendor is related to the social status of a person. Shortly after Aegidius Romanus, Piero de
Crecenzi wrote in his treatise on agriculture (c. 1300): “If the nobility and the power of Gentlemen is such that they find it disgusting to live together with their workers in the same courtyard, they could very easily settle at the aforementioned and very well laid-out place adorned with palaces and towers and gardens, just as it is appropriate for their nobility and power.”

Similar opinions were repeatedly expressed in the period immediately following. The idea of “appropriateness” remained important. The rise of the modern state, embodied in particular by the prince, reinforced the idea that only the man who rules deserves the splendor, which is associated with the notion of magnificencia. Aegidius already discussed questions of competition and outward splendor, of status and prestige; the idea that the prince was practically forced to use the power of art in order to express his status symbolically is implicitly present in his work. In the seventeenth century, the Jesuit and educator of the prince of Savoy, Emanuele Tesauro, expressed this idea explicitly: “Someone who is not a prince can therefore not possess magnificentia; or, to put it in a different light, who does not possess it, can never be a prince.” In the Europe of early absolutism, this attribute became an essential element of the ruler’s habitus. The same applies to the gentry and patricians. In an anonymous dialogue about economic life in Genoa, the author assures that the patricians would behave sadistically if they invested more than the necessary amount in splendor, “in order to give pain and to hurt the hearts of those people who can’t [afford to] do the same.”

At the same time, the patronage of architecture was linked to the Creation. Worldly rulers, wrote Roberto Bellarmin in 1619, followed God’s example when, without even caring for the expenses, they constructed buildings that served the common good. Thus, the relationship with the commonwealth and the allegory of the Creation legitimized the patronage of architecture in two respects. The magnificentia, as described above, had a stabilizing effect on society, an idea that is implicit in all these texts. This notion became even stronger in the eighteenth century. Franz Philipp Florin wrote in his oeconomius prudens (1719): “as God regards princes and masters as superior over ordinary people, he may easily accept that powerful people demonstrate their higher social status through outward appearance, in order to gain the respect and honor of their subjects. It seems as if they stand on a stage, where they can be seen by everyone, so that they have to take care that there is nothing about them or in their court which lacks dignity.”

It was Christian Wolff who most clearly emphasized the relation between the magnificentia of a building and its stabilizing function in society. In 1736 he wrote that beautiful buildings pleased human beings and increased their blissful happiness. However, they struck people with awe, especially ordinary people and those who made their judgments according to outward appearance. In the commonwealth, Wolff continued, reputation is important to people, partly because they have to engage in commercial and social transactions, partly because they give orders to others. The economic historian Roberto S. Lopez echoes Wolff’s
statement by stressing that the palaces of the Florentine Renaissance were a kind of “credit-card of the elite.” More important is the observation, made by Wolff and by others such as Johann Christian Lünig, that representation was well suited to impress ordinary people and to legitimize and consolidate power.

Such ideas were expressed not only with respect to the palaces of the princes. Andrea Spinola, who—according to Peter Burke—made biting comments on the “madness of our luxury,” nevertheless thought it appropriate to furnish the Palazzo Pubblico in Genoa splendidly, because this promoted the republic’s stately majesty.

Means of Conditioning: The Language of Buildings

Buildings were effective in conditioning and disciplining—for example in making the political order or a religious system accepted—through a complex semantic, of which only a few examples will be given. First, it was the mere size of a building that impressed the public, since in their own environment people were used to small and narrow spaces. For modern people, the contrast between “large” and “small” might be difficult to grasp, due to a different psychology of perception, which was noted by contemporaries. Today’s sky-high architecture often reduces the effect of a historic building right next to it. Furthermore, large squares and boulevards, which were constructed above all in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have made the sharp contrast between narrow alleys with small houses and large buildings fall into oblivion. This applies to most gothic cathedrals and town halls. It also applies to St. Peter’s Square in Rome, the development of which stretched from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, beginning with Bernini’s design of the square itself and ending with the construction of the Via della Conciliazione. Early modern theorists were aware of the dialectics between large and small. Leonhard Christoph Sturm, for example, recommended arranging the buildings next to the landlord’s estate (herrschaftlicher Gutshof) beautifully and symmetrically, but primarily they needed to increase the “magnitude of the palace” through their appropriate and modest beauty. Inside the great palaces this strategy can be observed in the order of rooms and space, from which the size of the throne room and the audience room can be deduced. Even in the late Middle Ages, it was well known that size symbolizes power, indeed that it might be power itself. Italian building regulations placed restrictions on the height of clan towers, for example, in Viterbo, Bologna, Lucca, and other towns, or they forbade destroying the tower of the commune in order to diminish its height.

The building material was also an important factor. Early modern travel books are rich sources that confirm that building materials played an important role in people’s perception. Marble, copper, gold plates, and timber were rated as signs of rank and power, even more than formal qualities or the artists who had been
involved in construction. These observations are confirmed in the economic history of architecture. It appears that the cost of building materials and transport accounted for the majority of expenses for architecture.

The contrast between “upstairs” and “downstairs” was equally important. One went up to the throne room, the council chamber and the princely rooms; the piano nobile was the second floor, rather than the ground floor or basement. It appears that this development toward a vertical organization of architectural space goes back to the time of Charlemagne. During the Ottonian period, the “exclusive upper storey,” first observed in the ruler’s gallery in religious spaces, had been developed. The elevated position of the ruler was self-evident then, so that it hardly needed any comment or explanation. The requirement that the manor house should be built high up became a topos of the northern Italian villegiatura literature. Alberti already expressed the opinion that the dignity of a place is more important than its utility. Scamozzi instructed that a villa had to be built above the “common land,” the campagna comune, so he suggested building on hills or other elevated sites. He went on to explain, quoting Averroes, that higher and lower sites were to each other as forms and materials with greater dignity were to those with lower dignity.

Thus, while the landlord could keep his domain under surveillance from his villa, the farmers and workmen literally had to climb up to him. The location of the villa or manor house might serve as a social metaphor; it also brought social reality home to contemporaries and contributed to the acceptance of authority. Similar considerations may have led several proprietors of country estates to preserve elements of the architecture of castles and palaces. Elements of fortification were no longer of military use in the seventeenth century; they were maintained because of their iconographic value, which mirrored the social status of the patron. In an urban context, too, the location of a building was of prime significance. The center of rule usually coincided with the geographic center, its pivotal position marked through outward architectural signs.

Finally, we have to consider elements like coats of arms, emblems, and other subtle signs whose messages are difficult to grasp. At least at first glance, they cannot readily be understood as tools of political and social conditioning. This also applies to obelisks, pillars, and the like. Theorists such as Sturm knew exactly the appropriate architectural forms matching each specific social status, just as he recommended the right stately robes and the seating order at weddings. To what extent his advice and that of his colleagues was followed remains unknown.

The City As Home and Utopia

Contemporaries were aware that “beautiful buildings” might impress onlookers and acquire a reputation of fame. Pierre Grégoire wrote in 1609: “To the extent that cities become more beautiful and more heavily ornamented, they are also
perceived as more distinct and attract more people who wish to visit them; and the greater are the honors bestowed upon their rulers, even from foreign nations. Among the various criteria for beauty, one in particular became central for the architects of castles and later also for urban builders: symmetry, or at least clear geometrical patterns. The architecture following this principle had a disciplining or conditioning effect in so far as it was recognized as the product of the ruler’s intention. It made all the principal streets lead to the palace or to a church, hence to the very place where power was legitimized. In this way, architecture was a symbol for the ideal order of the state, to be read like a treatise or an allegory.

The straight line displayed power; it had a similar conditioning effect as an arranged unit of soldiers in exercise. The well-ordered architecture of the planned city illustrated the ability of the state or prince to rule. The gute Policey was visually demonstrated by architecture as a means of communication. Simultaneously, the ideal city might be regarded as a monument to its founder, visible in paintings, sculptures, or emblems around the town. Sometimes, cities were named after their founder, Pienza and Richelieu, for example. This kind of propaganda obviously strengthened the authority of the prince or patron, even after his death. It stood for the splendor of his lineage.

Work As a Means of Disciplining

Architecture in general, and the planned city of the early modern period in particular, served as a complex metaphor within political theory. The patriarchal model of government, prevalent during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, caused theories of architecture to take the family as the model for the state and the city. The whole city was viewed, as it were, as the house of one family. Although this had no great effect on architectural forms, it caused the expenditure for architecture to be heavily discussed, especially the “conspicuous consumption” inherent to representative architecture. The principal consideration was that such buildings expressed rank and reputation and that they constituted, in Johann Christoph Sturm’s words, “a primary part of political wisdom.”

Quite another argument also pointed at the utility of representative architecture. Expensive buildings, such as residences, baroque churches, fortresses, and Renaissance palaces, provided work and income for many people. To construct them, not only architects, painters, and sculptors were needed, but bricklayers, masons, and all sorts of casual workers as well. In addition, during the early modern period, able-bodied vagrants and paupers or prisoners were set to work on these projects. Turkish prisoners of war, for example, were reported to have contributed to the construction of the canals of the Nymphenburg palace near Munich. As early as the fifteenth century, Cosimo de Medici had set poor people to work
on public building projects, as his biographer, Vespasiano da Bisticci, reports.\textsuperscript{45} Socio-political considerations may have been the reason for the decision to extend the Palazzo Pitti in Florence; it constituted an attempt to attenuate the effects of the depression of 1629–1630.\textsuperscript{46} Well documented is the sociopolitical background of the building of Augsburg’s town hall during the years 1615–1620.\textsuperscript{47} We know that all patrons of baroque architecture in southern Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries justified their building projects with the argument that they would provide numerous unemployed people with work.

To conclude, it is undeniable that rulers and other powerful persons consciously used architecture for purposes of social policy and social discipline. This is most strikingly revealed in a letter that the abbot Marianus wrote to the Elector of Bavaria concerning the construction of the \textit{Wieskirche} near Steingaden (Upper Bavaria), a church still famous today.\textsuperscript{48} Admittedly, his words were not written for publication, but they prove that he expected positive reactions to the labor-intensive construction of the church. This was clearly meant to increase the abbot’s reputation and to ensure that the peasants of the region would consider him their great benefactor. Indeed, the peasants were said to have been quite satisfied with the construction of the cloister and the generous amount of money they received for helping to build it. All masons, bricklayers, and carpenters praised the building that had provided employment and daily bread. The abbot advised the Elector to select a worthy representative who would place the first stone in his name. In that case, the common people would also recognize the Elector’s benevolent intentions toward them.\textsuperscript{49} This mid-eighteenth-century example shows very clearly to what extent architecture functioned as a means of discipline.

Notes

1. Rosenberg, \textit{Art and Politics in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy}. Further examples in: Roeck, “Visual turn?”
4. I do not differentiate between classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period, because many of the following considerations refer to the age before the “flood of the media” and before increasing communication and traffic relations, hence, before the middle of the nineteenth century.
6. On this aspect, see Roeck, “Macht und Ohnmacht der Bilder.”
8. Some examples of conditioning as it is commonly understood are elaborated in
the research on confessionalization. Some behavior patterns, such as reproductive behavior, might be regarded as results of the conditioning effect of specific religious doctrines.


15. “Ma se la nobilita di signori et la potentia è tanta, che schifino d’abitare con suoi lavoratori in una medesima corte, potranno agiatamente nel predecto luogo così disposto fare dimorare il loro luogo ordinato di palagi et di torri et di giardini secondo che alloro nobiltà et possanza si converra.” Quoted in Bentmann and Müller, *Die Villa als Herrschaftsarchitektur*, 110.


17. “per dar pena e dolore di cuore a chi non può fare il medesimo.” Quoted in Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, 135.


mann können gesehen werden einfolglich auch sich nothwendig in acht nehmen müssen daß nicht irgend etwas an Ihnen oder an Ihren Höffen gesehen werde das kein Ansehen habe noch Ihrer Hoheit gemäß seie.”


26. The place in front of the town hall in Augsburg, the biggest construction of a town hall in central Europe, was not cleared until World War II.
29. The costs of architecture were relatively low compared to other expenditures of the early modern budget, but often, compared to the great result, extremely low; cf. Oberli, *Magnificentia Principis*; and Roeck, “Augsburger Baukunst,” 119–38. Roeck, *Kunstpatronage in der frühen Neuzeit*, 111.
35. According to some theoreticians, decoration with pillars was reserved for the noble buildings (“publiquen Gebäude oder Herren-Häusern”); details in Schütte, “Die Lehre von den Gebäudetypen,” 213–16.
38. Aristotle, though, from a military point of view, found a “tangle of houses” more secure than a “geometrically ordered” town. See *The Politics*, VII, 11.
39. On the relation of architecture and geometrical spirit, see Eichberg, “Geometrie als barocke Verhaltensnorm”; with subtle differences also: Dinges, “Residenzstadt als Sozialdiszplinierung?”
40. On these towns, see Kruft, *Städte in Utopia*. 
42. Palladio, I quattro libri dell’architettura, 12 and 46: “La città non sia altro che una certa casa grande, e per lo contrario la casa una Città picciola.”
45. Bisticci, Le Vite, 190.
47. Roeck, Wirtschaftliche und soziale Voraussetzungen. As Zückert shows in his Grundlagen der Barockkultur, the imposition of building taxes (Baufronen) considered too high sometimes caused protests by the subjects.