Change and Transformation in Architecture: On the Concept of Zeitgeist

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Abstract

In the context of a multicultural society, the role of architects and the limitations of architecture are changing in the direction of an effort to create sustainable environments and sustainable development. From this point of view, the age of globalization has prompted us to rethink certain concepts in terms of our roles. Regarding the strong relationship between “change” and “transformation”, the connection of Zeitgeist to architecture has been dealt with in terms of the concepts which are evoked or which emerge within the scope of this study. At this point, the relationship between change and transformation as reflected in architecture will be examined, and a series of questions which the idea of Zeitgeist prompts will be addressed.

The problem area addressed by the study embraces the following subjects: Change and Transformation, Architecture as an Instrument of Identity and Meta-language, Zeitgeist and Architecture, Tradition or Future. It is expected that the conceptual position of this paper will contribute to theoretical studies.

Keywords: Architecture, Zeitgeist, Change, Transformation, Society

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1. Introduction

“Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains... How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.”

(Rousseau, cited in Colquhoun, 2005, p.130)

Since the beginning of its appearance on earth, humankind has needed to construct in order to stand and maintain its existence, and has mastered various construction techniques in that pursuit. As technology has played an ever greater role in human life, humanity has found itself not only enjoying greater convenience, but also facing significant controversies and complexities. Humanity, conceived of as individuals trying to prove themselves, entered the participation process by becoming members of society and acquiring the ability to live together. Hence humanity inevitably became a part of a cycle of change and transformation.

The most significant factor affecting the transformation process is change. Change as a common worldwide expression has come into prominence within such subtopics as “sustainability, globalization, technology” in architecture (see Figure 1 below). The practice of architecture taking part between theory-practice dialectics gained a transdisciplinary quality given the constant change it underwent, due to the fact that both the architect and the practice of architecture are expected to establish multidisciplinary links. This state of affairs can be traced back to Vitruvius, author of the earliest architecture book and developer of the first theory of architecture (Güven, 2009).

![Figure 1. Change and the Relationship between Concepts](image)

Vitruvius considered formation of the theory of architecture more important than the construction of a building (see Figure 2, 3 below), because his purpose was to avoid the loss of traditions rather than to search for the new (Güven, 2009). Along with these arguments concerning the discipline of architecture, he also specified some characteristics that architects must have. Even in those days, he pointed to the necessity of both architects and architecture having organization. This model proposed by Vitruvius remains largely valid for architects and architecture of the 21st century. Today, globalization and sustainability, as well as technology and developments in communication, make
architecture a profoundly interdisciplinary activity. Architecture, an upper-identity and an upper-language, gives us hope for the future by bringing out the spirit of the profession within the dialectics of man and society.

Figure 2, 3. Vitruvius, Ten Books on Architecture.

As architects, we emphasize such expressions as “designing the future, looking at the future, and catching the spirit of the age (Zeitgeist)”. Doing so urges us to rethink and continually question such concepts as the practice of architecture, professionalism, the process of education and, especially, architecture for society.

Architecture and the future are comingled with the idea of change. Architecture must anticipate transformations and focus on designing life and spaces of the future (Hacıhasanoğlu, 2005). In that regard, as proposed by Vitruvius (1998), such questions as the following arise: Must we try to understand the past and our traditions? Or must we strive to keep up with the age, aiming at creating the architect of the future? Therefore, it is the space between these two dialectics, architecture and the role of architects that will be examined in this study. The boundaries of the discipline and its positive and negative sides will be discussed within the framework of society and architecture by associating modern architecture and today’s expressions.

2. Change and Transformation

The word “change” as a noun is defined as “the whole of the changes that take place within a time period” by the Great Turkish Dictionary, published by the Turkish Language Association (BTS, 2010a). In English, the word change is defined by the Oxford Dictionary (Oxford Dictionary, 2010a) as “an act or process through which something becomes different”.

The word transformation, which is conceptually related to change, means “coming into a form different from its own, occupying another position, changing form” (BTS, 2010b). Thus the word transformation supports “change,” and the two concepts can be discussed together (Oxford Dictionary, 2010b).
Architecture, like all the disciplines, has had a close association with these words. The pair, change and transformation, are among the most significant goals on the agenda of architecture. Essentially, change is a state originating from the nature of existence and thus defines transformation. Which object or process can be referred to as unchanging? It can be pointed out that both interdisciplinary interaction and change within the discipline itself establish how and in what direction transformation will occur. It is inevitable for disciplines to go through changes in a world in which both objects and subjects are changing.

Such concepts as globalization, sustainability, ecological approaches and technology diversify the change-transformation circle and the subject matter of architecture. While every architectural product is fairly becoming the subject of change, all the products are tagged with various titles, periods and concepts under the influence of the transformation process. This situation puts the matter of consumption on the agenda and sets up a world in which constructed models are gradually consumed and considerations of quality become lost under the title of “diversification”.

The concept of consumption, which is rather popular in the social sciences, is on the agenda in architecture as well (Keskinok, 2009). Consumption in architecture can be regarded as a kind of challenge, because a consumption-based society results in the use of architecture as a tool, and architecture increasingly acquires an instrumental perspective. As consumption increases, individual efforts simultaneously increase, and in this way the concepts of change and transformation are no longer considered as individually perceived concepts, as they enter the circle of speed (Önal, 2005). That’s why change is frequently addressed as progressive and transformation as a structural matter (Önal, 2005).

It can be argued concerning the term globalization that tradition is interchangeable with global values. The work of some of the architects today considered star architects becomes a basis for common structural models, and these architects and the roles that they assign to society - the user - are frequently imitated. The decreasing distance between societies and cultures and the way they are joining the rapidly changing process can be felt more on a local scale. Shopping centre buildings in cities can serve as examples of this situation. Fairs, hypermarkets, entertainment centres and so on have become new consumption places near shopping centres (see Figure 4, 5 below). With the appearance of various types and forms of construction, the consumption culture shaped by the economic structure can attract more attention and reach the consumer more easily. Thus, architectural products will be used as trademarks and the motto of consumption culture will be put into practice.
Within the boundaries of all these patterns, architecture transforms into an ‘object’ via consumption. In this way, the use of space as an object and the phenomenon of architecture through production are simplified reduced to fashions and trends. Meanwhile, the relationship between architecture and space is more complicated than might be expected. For instance, the association between space and consumption is defined as follows:

Space is a part of social signifiers’ system and consumption patterns besides being an object produced and consumed in the social production practice. Apart from being a passive fact as a consumption object, it has an influencing and organizing function for consumption relations (Yırtıcı, 2002, p. 9).

Consumption is defined as follows in “The Consumer Society” by Jean Baudrillard (1998, p. 49-68 and 195), who investigated the issue in detail:

It is essential to put forward just in the beginning that consumption is an effective way of relation (not only with objects but also with collectivity and the world), a systematic activity on which the whole of our cultural system is based and a global way of reaction… Consumption cannot be described as the satisfaction of natural needs… Consumption has its discourse and its anti-discourse… Critical counter discourse…

In such a condition, the boundaries of the discipline emerge as an issue. Thus the effort to recognize the changes experienced, to interpret, and moreover to question the everlasting relation between theory and practice are under discussion, too, because even the structured environment and the role of the architect are being consumed. Such debates as “architecture for whom - society for architecture or architecture for society?” arise. Architectural practice is constantly in question in terms of moving it away from its focus via expression. This approach, which we can consider a part of change, is also a process we have been consuming due to wrong applications as we move ahead by consuming the concept of consumption (in all the disciplines), a state which we frequently refer to as “variety, a new perspective”.

Owing to the changing environments and concepts, it becomes necessary to think about architecture again (Aydınlı, 2005). Even though change and transformation depending on change are criticized in certain ways as the local identity is being lost, they are anticipated as an alternative way to build the future (Aydınlı, 2005). While this process and change are
on the way in architectural practice, architecture is on the point of the transformation of parameters (experienced outside) such as globalization, sustainability and technology (Önal, 2005). And now, the architect is questioning his role as well.

3. Architecture as an Instrument of Identity and Meta-language

The change taking place in every component which affects architecture - such as the economy, politics, and technology - has an influence on architecture on various levels, too. It is possible to talk about social change in the context of architecture particularly when issues concerning society are in question. The change of the component in the society illustrates the society, the change in the society and its rapidity. Therefore the relationship of the human-society-architecture-culture is experienced rapidly and transforms by evolving within this cycle.

![Figure 6, 7. Examples from Le Corbusier’s various drawings](image)

The practice of architecture behaves like a language and builds itself. From the oldest times when it was first manifested, architecture has brought itself up as a tool for expressing itself and has constructed its own means of representation. If we consider this representation technically, drawing tools utilized in the production of the architectural product can be taken as an example. Architectural activity was made up of drawing practice until Alberti to Le Corbusier (see Figure 6, 7 above) For instance, plan drawings were in use instead of section or facade (Tanyeli, 2010). Today, however, the act of design has gained a new dimension with the help of digital tools and model programmes, and the production process has begun to be constructed (see Figure 8, 9 below).

That is to say, techniques in the world of architecture do not change very rapidly because architects have been using their drawings as a means of expression for centuries (Tanyeli, 2010). It’s clear that the architect needs a tool for representation and that the architectural product proves itself by being represented. The language spoken by the architectural product strives to be mentioned in every condition, whether local or global.
Representation as a lexical entry means “behaving on behalf of someone or a society, being a symbol, symbolization” (BTS, 2010c). For this reason the state of representation can be brought to discussions of identity. A number of questions may arise, including “What sort of identity should the architectural product have? What is identity in architecture? Should identity include an image? What is the role of the architect within this identity?” Undoubtedly, these questions can be multiplied. However, it is beneficial to focus more on the association of identity with architecture rather than on what that identity is per se.

Identity has both an individual and a social dimension (Durmuş, 2009). The unity of society and identity is shaped over time by the relation among individuals and society. According to the theory of social identity developed by John Turner and Henri Tajfel, individuals most commonly act as members of a certain social class, not as individuals (Demirtaş, 2003). This sort of behaviour assists in the identification of the individual’s position within the social structure.

With the mechanization created by the industrial revolution, and the technological developments and the fact of consumption following, individuals face various difficulties in finding purpose and meaning. Because of this challenge, the identity and meaning issues surrounding constructions are recorded as a significant input during the designing process, and they become eligible to compete with other basic values (Güzer, 2007). Just as the role of the architectural practice is changing and transforming depending on such inputs as identity, meaning, representation, globalization and technology, the role of the architect is also changing, because architects have become interpreters instead of lawmakers (Bauman, 2003). Even architects known as star architects today do not undertake the role of imagining or foreseeing the future (Tanyeli, 2010). The architect’s role and identity in society have undergone a change, too. Now, architects tend to carry out applications by interpreting all the inputs. It is obvious that the architect cannot remain indifferent to the future and change.

Every change objects and change stage occasion different thoughts. Architectural relations, like history, should have literary relations, simply because it is not possible to articulate a
new statement if we do not build a language which is specific to us. For architecture, works are either clothed in existing concepts or existing concepts are clothed in the works. Nietzsche called this condition ‘representation illusion about concepts’. That is to say, he argues that ‘we clothe the concepts’. We present what we wish to see; not what should be or what is as it is. Architecture, in this sense, has constructed itself as a meta-narrative throughout history. Precisely at this point, how the discipline of architecture carries on successful communication with concepts becomes clear.

4. Zeitgeist and Architecture

It is a widespread tradition in the society of architecture that every text begins with expressions related to the definition of architecture. So, why do we try to restrict architecture with a definition? Or why do we put it into patterns in order to understand and discuss its essence or message? In my view, this tendency stems directly from our minds’ need for interpretation.

The term Zeitgeist, used frequently by Heinrich Hübsch and his contemporaries in their texts, roughly means “the spirit of age”. Words that frequently replace Zeitgeist in translation and discussion are, for example, essence, fundamental, psyche, truth, origin (Tanju, 2010). However, as the meaning of the word cannot be defined precisely, it is generally used un-translated in its original German form. In its original language, Zeitgeist denotes “of our time” or “time spirit” and refers to the common virtual, intellectual and cultural environment of an age (New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, 2005). According to David Watkin, the roots of Zeitgeist architecture can be traced back to such architects as Pugin, Viollet-leDuc and Le Corbusier and to historians like Nikolaus Pevsner (Durmuş, 2010a). As pointed out by Tim Benton, Zeitgeist is an architectural state obtained by society (Berry, 1997). Alan Philips argues: “… architecture has a moral and ethical base that cannot be separated from the contemporary nature of its cultural and social milieu. Palladio was as modern to the Romans as Koolhaas is to the Dutch. The Zeitgeist is not something to question; it simply exists.” (Berry, 1997) (See Figure 10, 11 below). Take, for instance, the use to which Zygmunt Bauman (2003) puts the word ‘modern art has rarely broken from the Zeitgeist of the modern age’.

![Figure 10, 11. Villa Rotonda, Palladio; Generic City, Rem Koolhaas.](image-url)
In Germany in the 1800s there existed modernism, disintegration, and pluralism in problematic relation. This problematic situation supplies various clues in terms of necessary concepts that must be reconsidered. This is because the concepts under discussion in the texts then - in other words, all the value judgments conceptualized by 19th and 20th century architecture - find their own level in modern architecture as well. Hübsch’s (1992) text dating from 1847 reveals significant clues about Zeitgeist. Modernists envisaged a theory or a language based on the 19th century’s notion of “the spirit of the age”, called Zeitgeist by the Germans in reference to the belief that the spirit of the age could only have been expressed via art and architecture (Durmuş, 2010a).

In the first place, let’s deal with a few points that Hübsch takes into account. In general, Hübsch (1992) is consistent in his formulations and narrations. As he particularly embraces materialist arguments like technique, material, climate and being effective in architecture, he interprets architecture from this point of view. He thinks that personal manieras cannot determine the manner; they can only be its flavour. Similarly to the German writers of the age, he complains about corruption and collapse/illusion taking place in architecture. He especially avoids being subjective and artistic. The strongest inference that we can take from Hübsch’s text today is that the discussion of manner and the visualization of being in a period of crisis are valid for the practice of architecture, too (Durmuş, 2010b). For this reason, the concept to be taken from the text and dealt with is Zeitgeist.

It is clear that the word has been shaped in accordance with its structure by various writers and has been reported as something “natural”. The concept builds its own definition and virtually creates the state of encountering a transcendent world. Neither should a definition be attributed to it, nor should it be equated with existing definitions. Attention should simply be drawn to the new concepts that it can represent, in the same way as modernist reading creates its own production. Because of this provisional nature, Zeitgeist is a concept that can be considered within a wide range of meanings from the comprehension of the world to the physical world.

What words represent is actually a reference to these words’ own weaknesses. We will likely forever misinterpret the spirit of the age owing to this lexical illusion; perhaps we will demote it to a reference to simple styles and various schools. In mentioning the relationship between Zeitgeist and change and architecture, it can be recalled that the idea of change is part of a perspective in which the education-cultural-experience triad and the period aiming at diversifying life are matched up with each other (Durmuş, 2010a) (see Figure 12 below), because change evokes the new, whether the completely new or the new which is relevant to the old. As the earth itself on which we live is in the position of ‘being’, historicity and architecture are based on realizing it. We’re still undergoing change when we realize we’re changing.
For example, according to Matei Calinescu, the constantly increasing speed of change tends to reduce the importance of any certain change; the new is not new anymore (Bauman, 2003). When we consider this state of affairs, enlightenment begins. The new is not new anymore. Perhaps it has never been new. The concepts that we frequently consider new were already under discussion a few centuries ago. Then how will architecture create a new rhetoric? Perhaps the new is the ability to put forward similarities and differences. Roland Barthes (1964), in his article about the Eiffel Tower, referred to how the tower gains various dimensions and how it is interpreted as object-subject. Barthes expects efforts of signification and interpretation from his readers. He tries to draw attention particularly to how the attained meaning changes as the identity of the experiencing person and the means of signification change (Durmuş, 2010c). Owing to this approach, modernist reading creates its own reading; it turns to the past or the old to find the new.

According to Rosenberg (2005), the idea of globalization no longer captured the spirit of the times; hence the age of globalization ended abruptly. While globalization was frequently regarded as the Zeitgeist of 90s, such concepts as sustainability and ecology can be taken under consideration within this scope (Rosenberg, 2005). This state of affairs seems to embody what is meant by catching the spirit of the age. In fact, architecture is a part of a building process following what’s on the agenda and depending on social and public needs.

It is understood that the Zeitgeist of society and culture can be found in its own unique architecture. Precisely at this point, we may find ourselves obliged to choose between the tradition and the future, because Zeitgeist might be both representing the tradition and promising the future. This combination is the result of the interdependence of architecture and society. Therefore, the fact of the relation of architecture to both society and other disciplines, in other words its being an interdisciplinary information area, is not a new expression (Durmuş, 2010a).

5. Tradition or Future?

Today, is it possible to talk about representation? To what extent is representation necessary now? Isn’t everything designing itself in the 21st century? Is it possible to foresee the probabilities of the future?

The future is no longer a formation to be limited only to architecture. Although the speculations, expressions and even utopias of architects are considered instances of
foresight, it is now important to take the future of the branches of architecture and any kind of activity into consideration.

It is not possible to draw conclusions at the point at which we are discussing change. For this reason, a number of questions can be useful:

- What is the Zeitgeist of today and what should it be?
- Can a generalization or a definition be made? Is doing so necessary?
- Isn’t Zeitgeist the change itself in architecture?
- Doesn’t every age set up its own spirit? So, is it possible to talk about the future and change in architecture? Is change not taking place even in this process?

Therefore, a practice/manner/approach fulfilling today or catching the spirit of the time (Zeitgeist) is neither completely new nor is such a search needed; on the contrary, it is necessary to keep away from static thoughts. We are in a labile world today. The fact that the boundaries of disciplines are quite vague will likely bring polyphony of architecture to the agenda.

Living in the dream of searching for a true and consistent architecture sometimes requires the architect to utter assertive expressions. This sensational attitude has surrendered its place to an interpretive one in the postmodern world (Bauman, 2003). Architecture is now on its way toward forsaking comprehensive expressions claiming to be valid everywhere; that’s because it’s not the architect’s task to write prescriptions. Although such was the case in certain periods, the disintegration now being experienced will necessitate holisticity on a new level of transcendence.

Tradition existing with culture and being enriched by architecture can also be a tool for expressing the future. Does the idea of future without tradition, or tradition without future seem more reasonable? Neither seems reasonable, perhaps. However, it won’t be far wrong to point out that the architect’s role of foreseeing the future has changed, and that the architect has assumed an interpretive identity.

References


**Illustrations**
Figure 1: Prepared by the author.
Figure 2: http://vitruviusfootsteps.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/vitruvius-the-ten-books-reduced.jpg
Figure 3: http://www.cs.drexel.edu/~crollo/Archimedes/Crown/Vitruvius_1548/vitruvius_manuscript.jpg
Figure 4: http://blog.willamette.edu/centers/llc/worldnews/Florida_-_Disney_World.jpg
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Figure 8: http://artlitideas.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/frank_gehry_star_wood_hotel_3.jpg
Figure 9: http://www.tate.org.uk/40artists40days/zaha_hadid.html
Figure 10: http://www.lehman.edu/vpadvance/artgallery/arch/ideas/images/PalladioRotondaPlan.jpg
Figure 11: http://seandodson.wordpress.com/2008/03/11/is-rem-koolhaas-planning-to-build-a-replica-of-the-death-star-off-the-coast-of-dubai/
Figure 12: Prepared by the author.