

Scenographies of State: The Staging of Democracy in the Performative Spaces of National and Transnational Parliaments I: Chandigarh

by

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This research looks at the staging of democracy in national, transnational and or supranational parliament buildings and their spatial relationship to the precinct, the city, the state and the nation through a performative paradigm and from a scenographic perspective. The symbolic architecture of national and supranational parliament buildings is designed and built to house governmental proceedings and at the same time to represent abstract political ideas and ideologies. This research intends to develop a typology of selected national and supranational parliaments, both current and in planning, based on their scenographic configurations and actual and potential performative practices and it aims to demonstrate a material and immaterial relationship between symbolic architecture and political ideology.

In utilizing the term 'staging', we bring forward a provocative proposition, namely that the concept, design and usage of parliament buildings can be understood as belonging to such symbolic representation that is inherently theatrical. The term 'staging' suggests the 'presencing' of (symbolic) acts of representation following specific dramaturgies as well as their 'housing' in such exterior and interior structures that allow for the efficient and convincing live performance or enactment of both action and text. The term *staging* and its French equivalent *mise en scene* originate in theatre theory and practice where they denote the process of putting a dramatic text on stage. The terms are also commonly associated with the „staging of“ an object, an idea or a narrative. A complex process, *staging* requires an object or idea to be singled out and isolated from its everyday context toward and translated toward a state of exhibition and public viewing. This process involves decisions that range from concept, motivation and intent to location and symbolic representation through design. Both for the theatre and for the state it is foremost the representation of abstract ideas – desire, morality, justice, truth, power – that requires careful

spatial articulation/staging in order to communicate, to debate, to persuade, to reach consensus, to educate, to overwhelm, to rule.

Through symbolic representation in the material and immaterial aspects of artistic and political performance, these abstract ideas can be formulated and discussed with and for an audience. This project identifies the parliament as a performative space that evolves continuously in the live and mediated interaction between actor, spectator and setting. The international comparative study of both established and emerging parliaments will show that the totality of material and immaterial elements comprise a *scenography of state* that both allows for and excludes distinct levels of access, viewing, participation and interaction. This paper reframes existing sociological, political science and architectural research into the „theatrical“ nature of parliamentary proceedings and the symbolic architecture of the parliamentary building through a scenographic perspective and adds an interdisciplinary performance design perspective to the contemporary discourse on the established and emerging spaces of democracy at its potential turn from a parliamentary to a performative democracy (Sloterdijk 2005, Weibel 2011). Example: The pneumatic Parliament in Bruno Latour's 2005: making Things Public: The Atmospheres of Democracy, ZKM Karlsruhe.

In existing research into the nature of the relationship between architecture, political identity, and power from a sociological or political science perspective, the use of theatrical terminology is evident. Typically, politics and parliament are described as *political stages* or *theatres of state* (eg Vale 1992/2008), its proceedings as *acts* and *scenes* (eg Goodsell 1988) and its participants as *actors* (eg Edelman 1964) while the focus of the research lies on the architectural symbolism of the static, built form and its social and political meaning. In contrast to research in this area from the perspectives of political science, interaction and communication theory (most notably on political symbolism: Edelman 1964; on symbolic interaction: Burke 1969; on architecture and power: Vale 1992/2008; on participatory settings Hajer 2009; in sociology (on roleplay and everyday performance: Goffman 1959, on civic hall interiors and power relations: Goodsell 1988 and, with focus on the static, built structure, (on architecture and democracy: Jencks, Jones 2001), the proposed study employs a scenographic perspective – a dual perspective positioned between performance studies and spatial design.

Scenography, both research area and working method in the performing arts and, increasingly, in spatial design, is concerned with the orchestration of all material and immaterial elements that make up a performative event (see Brejzek 2006, 2009, 2011). On an analytical level, it is thus engaged with „making meaning of space“ (see on scenography Collins 2011: and , on space in the theatre: McAuley 1999). This study contends that while parliament comprises a staged or: „scripted“ space (see Klein 2001), its performative quality arises from the interaction between politicians (actors), visitors (spectators/media) and the interior space (scenography). The

totality of all physical, visual, technological and immaterial design elements makes up their scenography.

These conflate between the initial governmental brief for the building, the subsequent architectural design and realization and the use by parliamentarians, public and media.

In contrast, this proposed research project intends to follow a scenographical perspective engaged with transdisciplinary „ways of thinking, doing and making“ (Pollock 2007: xiii). Scenography, as a discipline and working method provides such a transdisciplinary outlook as it is engaged with making meaning of space through the consideration of all elements comprising performative space: entrances and exits, stairs and stages, lighting, acoustics, surveillance systems and media rooms, size, perspective, foyers and ante-rooms all shape and define the choreographies of parliamentary procedures. These staged spaces of politics are constructed as symbolic architectures, representing abstract ideas and ideologies. Defined by its capacity to create reality through action and interaction (see Brejzek 2010 a, and b) and in close proximity to constructions and models of cultural spaces, scenographic strategies can be seen at the core of the design of the spaces of parliaments.

Case studies are based on parliamentary models (one chamber/two-chamber, horseshoe, Westminster-type, Communist-type), supranational ((European parliament Strasbourg, UN parliament New York, Geneva League of Nations). The study will be further informed by looking at postcolonial parliamentary spaces in countries with an indigenous population (Canberra, Wellington), parliaments that are part of a masterplanned capital city (Chandigarh, Brasilia) and supranational parliaments.

Currently, the UN counts 193 member states, one UN observer state (the Holy See/Vatican), one member state of a UN specialized agency (Palestine) and nine other states – a remarkable growth in numbers (and states) since its inception in 1945 with 6 founding states. Equally, EU membership has seen a constant growth from its 6 founding countries in 1952 to 27 countries, 5 candidate countries (with Croatia joining in 2013) and 17 other European countries in 2011. International organizations such as the UN and the EU both reflect and shape the political, cultural and economic identity of individual states in a dynamic landscape of merging, emerging and separating ethnicities and nations. Shifting borders, territorial claims and a continued movement towards independence by ethnic groups makes for new, and more, states compared with the beginnings of last century or even before German unification, the breakup of the CSSR and the reorganization of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Many of these new states have since joined the UN and the EU, have become EU membership candidates or are part of the EU neighbourhood policy, a programme that assists in bridging policies and infrastructure towards EU eligibility.

For the international recognition particular of a „new“ state`s political autonomy, independence and democratic values, both actual and symbolic deeds are required. The law-making government needs to be not only active in developing and maintaining democratic standards but it also needs to be housed in a building that, besides fulfilling its functions, represents a *house of democracy*. Albania for instance, an ex-communist country that is currently under close observation by the EU for recent claims of governmental corruption and election irregularities, is such a new country. In the governments' official brief for the architecture competition for its new parliament in the capital Tirana (2010-2012) the importance of the symbolic functions of parliamentary architecture in order to prove the states democratic values is clearly stated:

The planning of the parliament-building means the rigorous fulfillment of a series of criteria. The aim is to embody the idea of an active democracy, on the basis of which is freedom, peace and rule of law, and its architecture should enable the tangible transmission of these values.(www.parlament.al/web, for investors)

Wolfgang D. Prix, Design Principal and CEO of Coop Himmelb(l)au, Vienna says of their winning concept simply: „Our design for the new parliament in Tirana, Albania stands for the transparency of democracy“ ([www.coop-himmelb\(l\)au.at](http://www.coop-himmelb(l)au.at)).

At the centre of Coop Himmelb(l)aus design stands a glazed cone that houses the parliament. However, while parliamentary procedures are open to the public view, they are framed and made impenetrable by the glass construction, thus constituting a theatre-like „fourth wall“ that invites identification but forbids direct participation. The Tirana example shows that form, structure and materiality are regarded as the main elements in the symbolic function of architecture as capable of representing abstract ideas, immaterial values and ideologies. The example also highlights the architects' and the governments' highly disputable but historically prevalent beliefⁱ that symbolic architecture carries an unambiguous, singular message (here: *democracy equals transparency equals glass*) that can be decoded by the viewer and recognized by the international political community in exactly the way it was intended. Examples: Bruno Taut, Kristallpalast; Mussolini/Terragni, Casa del Fascio Como; German Reichstag by Norman foster.

The architectures of national representation, and in particular those of parliamentary complexes, parliaments and national assembly halls have been described by political and social scientists in a predominantly non-architectural language by recourse to the theatrical terminology of symbolic interactionist Kenneth Burke and sociologist Ervin Goffman. Utilizing a theatrical terminology and a dramaturgical approach, Goffman was looking at role-playing in

everyday situations and differing settings, and attributed many possible roles to the self depending on the social contextⁱⁱ. Goffman identified the self to be a construction by and through society and thus recognized the existence of many selves in the constitution of identity. It follows from this that individual identity is always also social identity.

In Goffman's influential dramaturgical approach shared also by Kenneth Burke and othersⁱⁱⁱ, political life is seen as a dynamic set of power relations and symbolic interactions in confined settings and his theatrical terminology creates an analogy between the microcosm of politics with the defined parameters of the theatre building, the processes occurring within it and the individuals involved.

Typically, following Goffman, parliaments are referred to as *political stages* and *theatres of state* (see Vale 2008^{iv}) populated by *actors* and characterized by *acts*, *scenes* and *settings* (see Edelman 1964). Additionally, that the codified national theatricalities of parliament proceedings must be seen in direct relationship to the specifically designed buildings, interiors and furnishings as one would describe a play in relation to its scenography, is generally acknowledged and emphasized.

In his comparative 1986 study of the interiors of 196 US-American civic halls, political scientist Charles T. Goodsell however, identifies a typology of three distinct interiors that symbolize different social meanings and enable different politically sanctioned and codified communicative and behavioural acts between government and individual. In his prologue to the study, titled *four scenes*, Goodsell alludes to the existence of an overall existing (spatial) political drama or play and recalls four wellknown historic examples of highly theatricalized political spaces: France's first National Assembly on the tennis courts of Versailles in June 1789, Hitler's Reich Chancellery in Berlin with its visitor path of more than 200 meters and, famously, Churchill's refusal to extend the cramped Westminster Chamber in 1943.

In contrast to existing research in this area, this paper employs a scenographic perspective – a dual perspective positioned between performance studies and spatial design.

This paper contends that while parliament comprises a staged or: ‚scripted space‘ (see Klein 2001), its performative quality arises from the interaction between politicians (actors), visitors (spectators/media) and the exterior and interior spaces (environment). The totality of all physical, visual, technological and immaterial design elements makes up the theatre of state. It is the aim of this study to go beyond the theatre metaphor and outline methodically the theatrical setting of the parliamentary exterior and interior, its intended and its played out choreographies and its workings as live and as mediatized performances. It explores the intersections between the theatre stage and the political stage thus revisiting central spatial concerns of both arenas throughout history. It outlines historical developments and present states of „practice“ and it looks toward the main future challenge of parliamentary buildings and

chambers: that of its potential for a mediated event outlining models for political media scenographies and their ethical implications.

Historical background to the spatial linking of theatre and politics in Renaissance and Athens: In 1588, Duke Vespasiano Gonzago commissioned the renowned architect Vincenzo Scamozzi, student of Palladio to design a theatre in the Northern Italian town of Sabbioneta in the province of Mantua. The Duke had the small town of Sabbioneta built as a Renaissance *citta ideale* by Scamozzi's theatre became a This theatre, one of the two surviving intact theatre buildings of the Italian Renaissance (the other one is Palladio and Scamozzi's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza), symbolic representation of the Duke's absolutist rulership by extending viewing axis, spectator's perspective, seating and access from the central perspectivist built stage set through the orchestra and the Duke's loggia onto the town's main square and beyond to the Duke's palace. Scamozzi, by focusing for the first time in the history of the built, fixed theatre in the 16th century, architecture and scenography of the theatre to one statement achieved to convey a single politically charged message: the message of the absolute power of the ruler over theatre, town and province.

Long before Sabbioneta, in its principal layout modelled on Roman amphitheatres, the Athenian citizens' main political meeting place, the open air *agora* was replaced by a specially built theatre-like structure to the west of the Acropolis, the *pyx*. Tiered seating and a prescribed viewing axis to the *bema*, the speaker's cube, comprised the scenography of early Athenian democratic proceedings.

Endnotes:

Vale (2008): 'The architecture of houses of parliament and of legislative chambers in countries around the world is analysed for its relationship to political culture. It is argued that parliamentary buildings and spaces (1) preserve cultural values of the polity over time; (2) articulate contemporaneous political attitudes and values; and (3) contribute to the formation of political culture. Preservation is illustrated by how parliament buildings occupy sacred sites, symbolize the state and assure the continuity of legislative traditions. Articulation is exemplified by reflecting the relative importance of the two legislative houses and making expressive statements about the role of parties, executives and individual legislators. Formation can be affected by the physical dimensions of chambers, the arrangement of seats, aisles and lecterns, and spatial relationships between houses and the parliament versus the executive. It is concluded that the advent of television broadcasting of parliamentary sessions may make these architectural features even more important in perpetuating, manifesting and shaping political culture.'