

Why should buildings be more than ,mere machines’?

by Michael Nagenborg

The machine has been a key metaphor within architecture as well as in urban design (Caballero-Rodriguez 2013). Despite famous references to the “building as a machine for living” (Le Corbusier) there are good reasons to be critical about this metaphor. For example, Lynch (1981) has pointed to the rise of the “city as machine” in times of colonialism.

It was none of such reasons that made Karsten Harries argue against the idea of the building as a machine in “The Ethical Function of Architecture” (1985): To him looking at buildings as machines means to reduce buildings to their functionality. This entails a certain view on machines that defines technology artifacts by their function. While this view is shared by most Philosophers of Technology (Franssen et al. 2013), this is certainly a limited perspective on technology.

In my talk I will explore the non-functional aspects of technology. These include “technology as experience” (McCarthy/Wright 2004) as well as “technological mediation” (Verbeek 2011). The outcome of this exploration will be that ‘mere machines’ – that is: machines that can be adequately described by their functionality only – hardly exist. Furthermore, I will point out the inherent danger of making use of the machine metaphor to criticize functionalist approach in architecture and urban design, that is the disconnect between Philosophy of Architecture and Philosophy of Technology. The sheer existence of this disconnect is actually surprising in face of the deep interconnectedness of contemporary lifestyles with technologies.

I further will argue that overcoming the gap may be beneficial for both disciplines: (1) Philosophy of Technology may become enabled to seriously address technological artifacts and infrastructures as part of the build environment. The absence of major any contemporary work on urban spaces from the perspective of Philosophy of Technology might serve as an indicator for this necessity. (2) Philosophy of Architecture may benefit from the insights into the co-shaping of human behavior and the technology. This especially holds true with regards to the conference topic “autonomy.”

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