

Dr Maria Theodorou, Director SARCHA (School of ARCHitecture for All)
e-mail: maria.theodorou@sarcha.gr

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Paper Abstract

TITLE: The Housing of Democracy

As a TV correspondent reports the latest political news from Berlin, a powerful background image captivates the spectators' attention; a continuous flow of bodies on their slow spiraling ritualistic passage, human figures suspended midway to heaven in the transparent elegant cupola of the Reichstag. The visitors of Norman Foster's celebrated German Parliament's makeover are indifferent of that which happens in the Assembly Chamber just under their feet. Besides, they are only allowed to get a glimpse of parliamentary action from far above and only through an opaque surface. However, literally stepping on top in the company of fellow tourists to overview the Nation's Assembly enacts in itself the fantasy of participation. This is a democracy enjoying its eclipse for it cares enough to build its magnificent monument.

During the last decade of the 20th, the new flamboyant architecture of parliaments together with other numerous impressive buildings became a tourists' 'must see'. Architects joined forces with politicians and administrators and were quick to capitalise on the abysmal appetite for the consumption of culture. 'All things cultural' have devoured any interest for the 'political' in a generation of individuals spoiled by the intensive application of identity politics. Any interest for the community had dried up and the concept of 'society' had evaporated into thin air.

Nowadays, tourists still go up the cupola and the media use this image as a sign of reassurance. For in many parts of the world, the political system crumbles. Police squads flank parliament buildings to protect the MPs since due to the economic crises, the voters' distrust turns, more often than not, into rage. People get mobilized. A large number of various groups, collectives, initiatives etc, have been formed to debate and act. Cities live their moment of the 'political'. On October 15, 2011, the orderly lined-up tourists in front of the Reichstag encountered the messiness of the Occupy Movement protestors.....

The paper will start off by examining the relation of architecture to the institutional 'politics' of democratic representation. It will give a brief historical account of the 18th century heated debate on the appropriate geometry of assembly that in fact generated the still existing model-plan for parliamentary buildings. It will then move on to the architecture of the end of the 20th century parliaments to examine how the neoliberal obsession on transparency, the spectacle of procedures and the type of democratic behavior expected from citizens were embedded into the architectural form. The paper will conclude by providing insights into the current architectural manifestations of the 'political'. These are non-other than 'city openings' in which the Occupy Movement and other forms of protest become visible as they attempt to challenge and create a rupture in a democratic order that, as it appears, it has become obsolete but not yet substituted by a new one.