In advanced societies, change is the last remaining constant. We have come to expect that anything can happen, and all that surprises us anymore is when things remain the same. Heraclitus' pronouncement that you cannot step into the same river twice, a distressing truism that completely contradicts our everyday experience, has become a subjective certainty that conditions our actions. We have learned to perceive seemingly stable circumstances as steady-states of temporary equilibrium that might abruptly become turbulent or suddenly collapse.

To investigate the impact of this development on architecture, it is helpful to distinguish between architecture as a building and architecture as a process. Architecture as a building is characterized by attributes like its form, its function and its performance, the latter comprising such measurable aspects as thermal insulation as well as the subtle articulation of power structures by means of a floor plan. Architecture as a process, on the other hand, can be defined as a sequence of actions and decisions—from the initiation of a project through its planning and execution, the resulting structure's utilization and eventual re-adaptation, all the way to its ultimate demolition. In considering architecture as a building, the demands lodged by society and the individual come last and are only loosely connected with the structure itself via the concept of performance. In the case of architecture considered as a process, it is just the opposite: the agenda is headed by social forces that lead to particular—and sometimes contradictory—demands being placed on the constructed environment. The focal point of interest is occupied by various protagonists and ideas, the history of their impact and their side-effects. The edifice that gets built is regarded as only a single consequence among others.

These two concepts of architecture complement each other, whereby they organize their contents in one case along a spatial axis and in the other along a temporal one. Obviously, there can be no architecture as a building without a corresponding process. Conversely, though, it is indeed possible to initiate an architectural process that never leads to an actual building but that has momentous consequences nevertheless. Here, I am not only referring to the influential but never realized projects we are familiar with from our study of architectural history. Every project leaves behind traces and experiences on the part of protagonists and observers, and these endure even if the project is ultimately shelved. Dispensing with implementation cannot necessarily be equated with failure. Often enough, the architectural process brings out new priorities and alternatives that make not going ahead with construction seem like the best solution for everyone involved. From the perspective of the process, a building that has been completed and celebrated at its dedication ceremony constitutes only a single point on a time axis, a temporary state situated between valuable experiences in the past and in the future.
Nevertheless, the architectural discourse tends to ascribe much higher value to the building than to the process. Thus, the reactions of those participating in this discourse in addressing the question of how architecture should respond to the demands placed upon it by a turbulent, unstable world are correspondingly building-oriented. We can cite as an example of an extreme response those tendencies that attempt to position architecture as the final bulwark of stable worldly wisdom based upon anthropological constants. The architect garbed in the clerical vestments of His Eminence the Master Builder who draws upon stores of accumulated archetypes and promises thereby to create what Leibniz called “pre-stabilized harmony” obviously—as attested to by the New Urbanism in the USA and the success of Krier and Kohl in the Netherlands—has bright prospects for success on the market in advanced societies, or at least in places where willing submission to a hierarchy is regarded as an alternative to the unrelenting pressure of self-determination.

Likewise building-focused are those attempts rooted in the 1960s to create a reactive architecture that responds mechanically to the turbulence of its environment. The architectural visions of ARCHIGRAM such as “Walking City” are tantamount to architecture’s general mobilization, the martial origins of which are to be found in the war machinery that the Allied armies of World War II deployed off the Normandy coast as part of the effort to break through the massive defensive fortifications of the Germans’ Atlantic Wall. Whatever this architecture gains in the form of mobility, it nevertheless loses as inflexibility due to its machinelike character. Even Cedric Price’s Fun Palace for Joan Littlewood ultimately remains arrested in this machine paradigm. Conceived as a temporary construction in a continual state of transformation, it turns users into machinists who spend their time operating the apparatus. The Pompidou Center as realization of Cedric Price’s vision owes its success not to a real gain in flexibility, but rather to its inspired metaphorical imagery of a reactive architecture. Extravagantly conceived as a machine, the structure that was put into use ultimately became a monument to itself.

In architecture, we much more frequently encounter examples of buildings that were conceived from the very outset as purely sculptural representations of the dynamism of the Machine Age. Their origins lie in early-20th-century Futurism. In the Futurist Manifesto of 1909, Filippo Tomaso Marinetti made it patently clear which standards the art of the future would have to live up to: A “roaring car” was said to be “more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace.” “Unique Forms of Continuity in Space,” Umberto Boccioni’s 1913 sculpture that was inspired by Marinetti’s manifesto, blends man and machine into a “metallized body” and is, in turn, the standard of reference for later artistic attempts to commingle the organic and the mechanical. Over the last few decades, most world-class architectural sculptors-on-a-grand scale—first and foremost Frank O. Gehry, but Coop Himmelb(l)au and Zaha Hadid as well—draw their inspirations from this formal repertoire. They thus implicitly adopt this practice of venerating the “metallized body” of the machine that Marinetti glorified in the Futurist Manifesto: “gluttonous railway stations swallowing smoky serpents … bridges leaping like athletes hurled over the diabolical cutlery of sunny rivers … adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon.”
Frank O. Gehry’s Stata Center that opened in 2004 on the campus of MIT in Boston is an example of such an adventure-seeking “metallized body.” Every single component of the $285 million signature building seems to be sniffing at the horizon, ready and willing to set off to new shores. The edifice is a monumental statement of MIT’s claim to being one of the world’s foremost universities as well as a testament to the financial potency of its sponsors, for whom the individual wings of the building are named. For instance, there’s a Gates Tower and a Gates Entry, whose W-shaped glass roof provides no conclusive answer as to whether it’s meant to honor William or Windows. The building’s interior features an almost endless profusion of ideas for engendering a creative atmosphere, full of nooks and crannies as situations for informal meetings and vertical views culminating in exterior vistas.


The Stata Center was erected on a parcel that had previously been the site of the most beloved research facility on the MIT campus, the legendary Building 20. Designed in 1943 as a new facility for radiation research, the building was an artifact of wartime haste. Designed in an afternoon by MIT grad Don Whinston, it was ready for occupation six months later: A completely utilitarian structure, framed with heavy wood timbers since steel was unavailable because of the war. The building was
exempted from the fire code on the condition that it was a temporary structure. It was one of the strongest buildings on campus, bearing 700 kg per square meter. In spite of being conceived as a temporary structure, the building remained in use for almost 50 years. With its dark central corridors and a completely repetitive plan and façade, the building lacked any architectural ambitions. In spite of its appearance, Building 20 had the highest reputation of all buildings on the campus when it celebrated its 25th birthday in 1978. This was partly due to its legendary history of housing important breakthroughs in research. But the building was revered by its users mainly for a lot of practical reasons that made it appear “the best research building ever designed,” as one of its users put it. In his book “How Buildings Learn,” Stewart Brand quotes some of the reasons users gave for this assessment. They value the “possibility to design your own space. If you don’t like a wall, you just put your elbow through it. […] The users see themselves as the creators of the building: ‘If you make a hole into the floor to get more vertical space, you just do it without asking […] This is really our place. We have designed it, we run it. The building is full of micro-environments, each one a creative space of its own. It has so much personality.” Building 20 is the prototype of an architecture in which the building itself takes a backseat to the process. The building’s appropriation by the users, the permanent process of reconstruction and the micro-environments that resulted from it were the key features of this architecture.

The planners of the Stata Center were most certainly aware that they might long be haunted by the ghost of Building 20. By implementing moveable wall systems in certain lab areas, they sought to impart at least a modicum of flexibility to the new edifice’s higgledy-piggledy floor plans. Nevertheless, it is an unlikely proposition that in 25 years, there will be users maintaining that a building designed by Frank O. Gehry that they walk into every day through a Gates Entry is “really their place” and that “they designed it, and they run it.” The Stata Center will remain a monument, a walk-through memorial to the power of those who commissioned it and the mastery of its architect.

The overall strategic objective being pursued by the MIT administration in erecting the Stata Center and a number of other new buildings on campus is to create very high-profile settings as a means of endowing the institution with a distinctive image that sets it apart from other universities. In order to build its own brand, MIT commissioned the major brand names of the architectural profession—in addition to Gehry, the roll of honor includes Steven Holl, Fumihiko Maki and Charles Correa—to deliver the appropriate goods. Indeed, architecture certainly does play a role in the university’s process of transformation, but the decision in favor of a spectacular signature building was made at the very outset so that latitude for innovation was limited in several respects. The architects had nary a chance to develop projects beyond the confines of their signature style, to say nothing of the question of whether the signature building was even the most suitable solution for the university’s actual needs. Building 20 suggested a completely different tack: Though it most certainly did not lodge ambitious claims to formal excellence, its neutral structure that was a permanent source of stimulus to making productive changes obviously did contribute to that very culture of scientific innovation that has made MIT one of the world’s leading universities.
It would be naïve to conclude from this example that only completely neutral structures are able to provide users with the possibility of satisfying their “true” needs. The idea of explicit renunciation of design ambitions might be useful as a polemic thought experiment, but once this is declared to be an official strategy, the resulting vacuum will quickly be filled by planning experts from a wide array of fields ranging from management consultants to Feng Shui gurus. The outstanding quality of Building 20 was not its neutral, open plan; rather, this was inherent in the specific culture of change that established itself there over the years as a practice of open planning.

If we in the architectural profession wish to contribute to such a culture, it would be advisable to abandon the concept of architecture as a building and instead consider it as a medium of change in whose imagined and real spaces society’s interests and needs are articulated and negotiated. Thus, instead of a one-sided relationship between process and building in which the process is nothing more than a means to an end, there emerges mutually advantageous reciprocal feedback between process and medium.

This concept of architecture as a medium to effectuate change should not be confused with the claims of classic Modernism to improve the world through architecture—for instance, Le Corbusier in “Towards a New Architecture” calling for “Architecture or Revolution!” A medium is not a tool that can be applied to modify something external to it. It’s just the opposite: A medium provides external forces with a certain bandwidth of articulation possibilities that the medium is in a position to propagate. According to Marshall McLuhan’s classification of media as hot and cool, architecture is one of the coolest. In contrast to hot media like books, films and radio broadcasts that focus on particular senses and display high information density, architecture permits a great deal of latitude for the interpretation of content, whereby, in this context, architecture’s content is meant to be understood as its performance. Architecture is a cool medium because most architectural forms permit a wide range of performance—for example, a structure built to serve as a stadium can also be used as a high-occupancy prison or refugee camp; after all, functionally speaking, it is nothing but a machine to control the movements of human masses.

It would be easy to use this detour as a way of reintroducing through the backdoor as it were the idea of an “autonomous architecture.” If architecture is the medium and the performance is its message, then McLuhan’s assertion that the medium is the message would have to apply here too. But nothing would be gained from this line of argumentation. McLuhan’s importance does not stem from an attempt to postulate media’s autonomy but rather from having pointed out that their characteristics often have a stronger impact on society than the content these media transport. Media without messages—as “post-humanist” and “post-functionalist” tendencies in architecture are wont to be labeled—are not autonomous. They’re dead.
Among the most important tasks confronting architecture today, therefore, is to credibly get across its potential as a medium of social change. This cannot be accomplished solely by the turn to projective architecture as is currently being discussed by architectural theorists (above all in the USA). Their enthusiasm for collaboration with anything that moves energetically enough is insufficient to come to terms with the contradictions of our advanced societies. To do so, architecture must also be effective as a medium of things quotidian and quiet, and occasionally perhaps even work as a critical background that points out alternatives to prevailing conditions without being pushy and making a spectacle of itself.

2 Ibid.
3 As Cedric Price and Reyner Banham, among others, did in the 1960s; see: Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Cedric Price and Peter Hall, “Non-plan: An Experiment in Freedom,” in New Society, March 20, 1969, no. 338