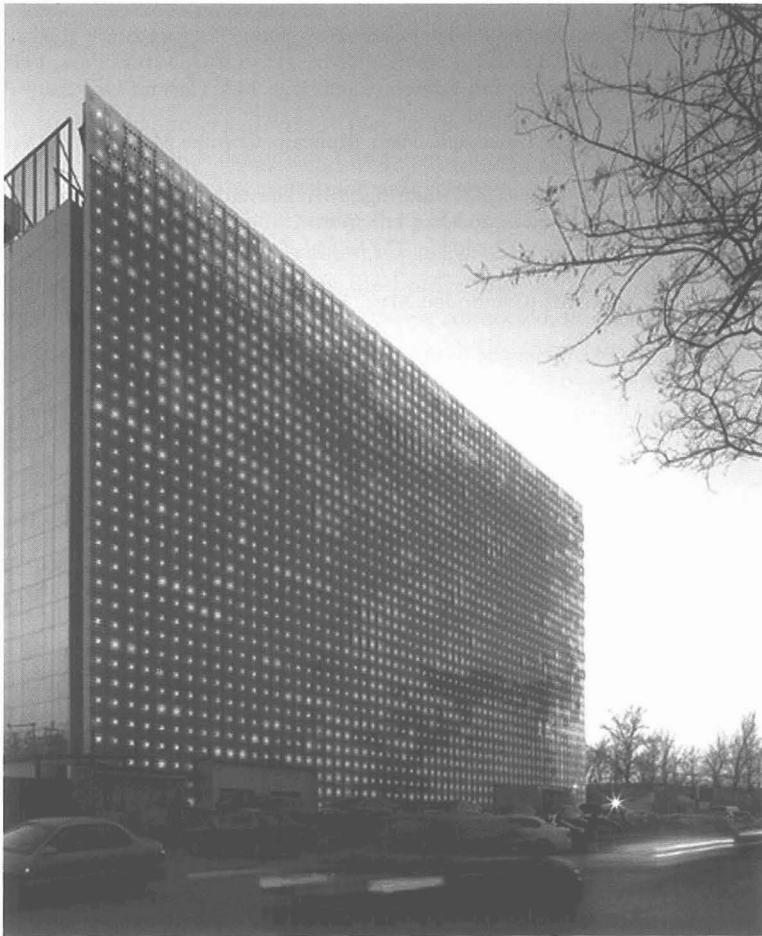


**Media Façades Festival Berlin 2008:  
Media Architecture as a Type of Urban Screen—A New Exhibition Format**

*Mirjam Struppek*



GreenPix-Zero Energy Media Wall, Beijing

The Media Façades Festival Berlin 2008<sup>1</sup> transformed the digital commercial façades of Berlin's public space from October 18 to November 3, 2008. Those façades became urban viewing panels in which digital information space was linked with real city space. The goal was to generate an extensive program of Urban Screenings and thereby to generate a sustainable impulse for the future media development in urban space. A conference and an architectural exhibit that presented projects accompanied the Festival and supported the technical discourse. The success of the festival, as well as the extensive interest of the news media in it, showed the need to research this medium further in relation to its possibilities as a new exhibition format.

Twenty-four artists produced site-specific content in a collaborative process on several Berlin Media Façades: a sleek, downtown edifice housing SAP—the business and software management firm; O2 World—a multi-use arena named by Telefonica O<sub>2</sub> recently built in the downtown riverside gentrification area Mediaspree; Gasometer—an enormous, low pressure natural gas holding tank now off-line and dating from 1912 that is undergoing a contested reuse overhaul; and Collegium Hungaricum—a Hungarian cultural centre tucked away between larger buildings that hoped to literally gain visibility through this project.<sup>2</sup> These Façades were meant to facilitate engagement with a wide bandwidth of non-commercial, creative possibilities in interdisciplinary relationship to the format, foregrounding new possibilities for relations between content, format, spatiality, and site-specificity. Through new forms of interactivity and participation, the projects were creatively directed towards participatory fashioning by the citizens in order to emphasize local identities. The contributions of the artists made clear the large challenge of being confronted with completely new resolutions, spatial arrangements of pixels, as well as new size and distance dimensions. Important for the development of the projects was the realization that in addition to their characteristic geometrical format, façades always also embody the involved participants. In this way, as well as through their physical positioning in urban space, they stand in relationship with their surrounding environment. The fronts of the O2 World and the Gasometer Night Screen turned out to be icons of the contemporary city development: as harbingers for processes of gentrification they became local points of friction.

The curved glass front of the enormous structure of the O2 World with its integrated LED illumination system permitted an interesting play between inside and outside. Depending upon the intensity of the beams, the interior became visible or was over-illuminated with medial messages. The light emissions frequently led to complaints by the local residents. In his project “Sonic slogan—Think different, fuel element yourself. Join the revolution!” George Klein plays critically with the resolution of radiating political messages of the 1970's, messages which today are often turned into “radical chic” in advertising messaging.

The artistic works for the Gasometer reflected the role of the Media Façade as means of communication that incorporate participatory gestures. The STIMMUNGSGASOMETER (mood measuring instrument) made the so-called Night Screen—Europe's largest LED advertising wall—a barometer of the city by measuring the average mood of passersby with the assistance of face recognition software. “Apply here and actively co-design your surroundings!” the BBD2 agency challenged the population and produced completely personal advertising on the spot. “Which animal is in you?” asked the artists Yuka Oyama and Becky Yee. From the answers they developed animal masks, which were used in their video clips—the population became performers in the screenings.

With the entire, large panorama window used as back projection surface, the Media Façade interior of the Collegium Hungaricum Berlin invited play with the artistic gaze into the interior of the building. N-Solab gave insight into the dream worlds of this Façade with its installation “AREyeM” using specially developed software that simulated the REM phase of the Collegium Hungaricum as a sleeping building.

Nika Radic opened the projection window to an illusionistic space and showed the everyday activities of a cleaning woman at night with her video installation "Office Cleaning." Additionally the screen was interactively controllable with a multimedia City-Terminal. Here passersby and visitors supplied with a "Spread gun" designed by the artist team V/R Urban could compose messages and comments and transfer them directly onto the large sized Media Façade.

The exhibition in the German Architecture Centre showed a broad overview of various content formats and Façade types, exploring the relation between digital images and the structural shell of a building by comparing completed projects with innovative new concepts. The aim was to look at the technological myths surrounding Media Façades, as well as practical aspects such as LED technology, detail solutions, screening and financing options and energy consumption.

New installation methods allow a more invisible integration of light pixels into architectural elements. Thus a more creative play with the relationship of the light as well as with moving images and architecture becomes possible. Architecturally well-incorporated and purpose-built screens can provide interesting aesthetic experiences with space and structure. A temporary use is becoming possible without the aesthetic problem of a "black screen." A good example for a creative integration of moving images into a Façade is the BIX<sup>3</sup> installation at the Kunsthau Graz. The "screen" merges perfectly with the building, supporting the uniqueness of the architectural form. An impressive example of the variable creative use of a temporary LED construction spanning more than 1,500 square metres is the Façade for the African Pavilion at the Expo 2008 in Zaragoza. "Arrays of semi-transparent plastic squares flexibly arranged on the façade flutter in the wind, reminiscent of moving water. While by day African landscapes are created across the façade, by night climatic events such as thunderstorm clouds and impressions of African people and animals are shown on the video wall."<sup>4</sup>

An interesting new trend and a challenge for aesthetic construction is emerging around issues of energy consumption, where we find a combination of LED lights with a direct source of energy through solar technology. The GreenPix-Zero Energy Media Wall in Beijing is a good example of a photovoltaic system and light pixels integrated in the glass curtain wall of the Xicui entertainment complex. "Harvesting solar energy by day and using it to illuminate the screen after dark, mirroring a day's climatic cycle."<sup>5</sup> Another trend can be found in increasingly flexible, lightweight and easy to install LED-net constructions as they begin to transform the scaffoldings at construction sites into temporary digital façades; such is the case of the Urban Screen "Milano in Alto" Project in Milan.<sup>6</sup> A trend that requires critical observation concerns how these urban media architectures are being integrated into the urban surrounding so as to become a medium for simple digitalization of large-scale urban advertisements.

Due to the high costs of construction and maintenance, most large eye-catching Media Façades are projects with a commercial backing. They might seem provocative communication tools—as in the case of the Gasometer and 02 World in Berlin—culminating in heated debates with local residents. Using these Façades for commercial content certainly has not helped gain local acceptance. The Dexia Tower<sup>7</sup> in Brussels as well as the Uniq Tower<sup>8</sup> in Vienna are exemplary instances of corporate efforts to create a strong profile for their high-rises through the application of a designed Media Façade. The intention is to change the image of the building (named after the company) through art and light-events. The artist collective Mader Stublic Wiermann created a very successful animation called "Twists and Turns" for the LED installation at Vienna's Uniq Tower. The animation was overwhelmingly effective, relying on the skilful application of effects of optical illusions in black and white, which distorted and broke up the Façade into a number of weird, three-dimensional objects. This ordinary high-rise was transformed into a dynamic luminous sculpture and became a new landmark

in the city. The special light game “Touch” created by LAB[au] for the Dexia Tower used a huge touch screen installation in front of the tower as an interface for interactive engagement with the public.

Media Façades combine three unique aspects: light radiation; flexible and strategic programming of content; and movement of images. A fourth possible feature is the interaction with the audience or responsiveness to the environments. If strategically situated in the urban environment, this combination makes Media Façades a powerful medium in our information-saturated modern cities—a next step in the evolution of the façade as a communication tool. Issues concerning content are key when we judge the social benefits of this medium. We have to ask who programs it, and is it relevant for citizens? Can Media Façades express the creativity of a city by showing urban gestures, surprising visuals, public stories and political iconography, and thought-provoking content? Meaningful content can change the experience of place or create affective and strongly shared experiences among strangers, for example through playful interactive experiences. Local, site-specific or participatory content can work against the homogeneous face of modern architecture, mobilizing citizens to take part in actively shaping the public space. The best example of this attitude is still represented by the three unique happenings of the Chaos Computer Club—Project Blinkenlights, Arcade, and Stereoscope Reloaded—which placed façades in Berlin, Paris and Toronto temporarily in the hands of citizens who could create their own animations and love letters via a web interface or play games interacting with the respective façade via mobile phone.<sup>9</sup> These screens were also used to express grassroots political messages. Light and information should be considered precious resources. We should aim at a moderate usage of Media Façades as a creative urban communication medium.

*Translated by Jennifer Ruth Hosek*

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 The Media Façades Festival Berlin 2008 is an Initiative of Mirjam Struppek/Urban Media Research and Susa Pop/Public Art Lab (PAL), implemented in cooperation with the Media Architecture Group (MAG) Vienna. [www.mediafaçadesfestival.com](http://www.mediafaçadesfestival.com)
- 2 Descriptions of the sites by the translator (jrj).
- 3 [www.bix.at](http://www.bix.at)
- 4 [www.ledonlighting.com/com/en/projects\\_f.htm](http://www.ledonlighting.com/com/en/projects_f.htm)
- 5 [www.greenpix.org](http://www.greenpix.org)
- 6 [www.urbanscreen.net](http://www.urbanscreen.net)
- 7 [www.dexia-towers.com](http://www.dexia-towers.com)
- 8 [http://tower.uniqa.at/index\\_tow.php](http://tower.uniqa.at/index_tow.php)
- 9 [www.blinkenlights.net](http://www.blinkenlights.net); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos\\_Computer\\_Club](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos_Computer_Club)