

Staged materiality

Gernot Böhme

I. Two bookshops

In the old city of Constance there are two bookshops, only a few hundred metres apart, but so different from each other that one could believe, going from one to the other, that one was entering another world or time. One, Das Bücherschiff, is approached by steps and a narrow entrance door. It gives the impression of being jammed into a residential house: one passes through rooms unclearly and crookedly connected to each other by steps. In actuality, the space is articulated not by walls, but by the wooden beams of half-timbering, whose spaces are filled not with bricks and mortar but with books. The beams are what shape the atmosphere of this book-shop: yellowish-brown, rather soft wood, corresponding to the warm light of the incandescent lamps. The wood gives the effect of being well-worn, irregularly hewn, old, but not aged; rather, "matured". The atmosphere tempts one to linger, to rummage. One feels no sense of being observed; one could belong there oneself. In the summer, they say, one can also drink tea in the back courtyard of this bookshop.

As for the other bookshop, Gess: entering at ground level, one slides, so to speak, past the sale bins in front, through the glass door, and onto a "conveyor-belt" running at an angle through the entire store, in actuality a marble passage. Following it, one passes the stacks of sale books and best-sellers and the cash register, quickly finding one's way to the various departments clearly indicated on the walls. Toward the rear, the store widens and receives a second floor, clearly marked, announcing its presence with a steel platform cutting into the marble path at an angle. Glass, marble, stainless steel and metal surfaces clothed in elegant grey define the atmosphere here.

The visit, one feels, must be quick and decisive. Information is at stake, and this is the place to find it.

Are these different worlds? Yes and no. The spatial organisation and above all the dissimilar materials do in fact produce a feeling of being in different worlds. One result of this difference might be that the two shops would attract quite different clientele and customer personality types. And for people of the sort who have "their" bookshop, the difference in the atmospheres of the two stores certainly will determine their priorities. But the fact that the two bookshops, as is usual, have different areas of specialisation – the one perhaps more visual arts and literature, the other more design, languages, travel, and pop psychology – is basically irrelevant. The retail book trade as a whole is so outstandingly organised – there is probably nothing in the entire world to compare to the German book trade – that one can order practically any book in any store and receive it the next day. Functionally considered, all bookshops are alike: they are terminals of the major retail booksellers. But in their atmosphere they are not alike at all. On the contrary: their functional sameness permits and indeed necessitates the differences in their aesthetic presentation. Precisely because the differences between two bookshops can scarcely be articulated functionally, they must be articulated in the design. The competition is a competition of atmospheres: here wood, rusticity and warm

light, there chrome, glass. steel and neon lighting. And so the initial assessment is reversed. For what appeared at first glance to be the old and the new, the conservative and the progressive, the difference between two worlds, proves upon closer examination to be the broad range of variation of a single world, the Modern or Post-Modern. Both variations are the product of design, the conscious creation of atmosphere, a theatre of, and by means of, materials.

II. Material and materiality

Considered more closely, neither in the one place nor in the other must the beams carry any load or the steel bridge provide access to something otherwise unreachable. Both the half-timbering and the steel are non-functional, i.e. purely aesthetic. Or, better said, their function consists in presenting themselves. They help shape the space – they represent themselves, half-timbering and bridge – or rather, their materiality, wood and steel. The materials are, so to speak, emancipated. Their functional liberation enables them to exit as pure appearance: they no longer have actually to perform what they promise, as long as the promise is there.

And so the old call for the integrity of materials is transformed into its opposite. Its demands had forced the materials into inconspicuousness: precisely because they were supposed to correspond to function – of equipment, of buildings – they disappeared behind it. The new sensibility for materiality prevalent in current design and architecture calls for exactly the opposite. Materiality is supposed to show itself, to come forward, to help shape the atmospheres in which we live. Material and materiality thus part ways, as do the processes of making and perception.

Material is the stuff of which things are made. Its qualities are inconspicuous; they don't call attention to themselves. What is significant about material is how it responds to manipulation and stress and, no less important, how it fits into legal and economic calculations.

Qualities that have to do with the manipulation of materials, for example, are malleability, ductility, fusibility. Qualities related to stress are elasticity, breaking strength, non-flammability. Qualities attributable to a material *qua* raw matter in economic and legal calculations are above all homogeneity, standardisation and consistency of quality. As such they allow for ordering according to list, price guarantee and warranty. For the production of objects, this triad of working, stress-related and economic-legal qualities renders superfluous the question of what the objects are made of; the material, the raw matter, is defined not by its character, but by functional equivalents. This gives rise on the one hand to the dominance of "characterless" materials in current production – of particle board, concrete, plastics. It leads to the systematic construction of materials according to the qualities demanded. This is the birth of the science of materials as engineering technology: ceramics, alloys, crystalline structures and sophisticated hybrids of all three are developed with great ingenuity for specific functions.

On the other hand, the character of materials becomes autonomous: materiality becomes pure outward form. Wood, glass, steel and marble as elements of architecture and design no longer designate materials in themselves, but qualities of appearance, the more characteristic, the better. Wood may still be wood, but oak is certainly a veneer and red oak a stain. Decades ago, Jean Baudrillard spoke of the *valeurs d'ambiance*. Nowadays this phrase should probably be translated as "theatrical value".

Paradigmatic for the rift between material and materiality, between the quality of the raw stuff and its theatrical value, is particle board. But of course the discrepancy between surface and inner structure that it epitomises has precursors reaching back far into the past: not only related veneer techniques, but also architectural facings, stuccoed marble, enamelling. In fact the materialist Semper's own opera house is a prime example of the split between material and the staging of materiality, or materiality as theatre: the marble columns are stucco, the wooden panelling is painted.

This could bring us to the premature conclusion that the discrepancy between material and materiality is a perennial phenomenon, a part of culture *per se*, as it were. After all, weren't the Egyptians already masters of surface finishing, and wasn't the objective of 2000 years of alchemy the semblance of matter, i.e. the production of materiality? There is certainly truth in this. But one has to recognise that the interest in materiality as the reality of appearance is tied to particular cultural and economically-defined epochs, in short, to epochs of luxurious economy. And as far as alchemy is concerned: the absence of quantitative methods of description left no alternative but to define materials by the quality of their outward appearance. Only such a definition necessitates the warning that "not all that glitters is gold". Materiality is thus revealed as a product of economic development and of the state of science and technology.

The economy of developed industrial nations is dependent on the production of luxury articles. When basic needs are satisfied and production for war declines, the maintenance of production levels and, indeed, any growth at all, depends on the demand for luxuries and on their artificial – i.e., fashionable – or technological obsolescence. This leads to the dominance of the appearance value of products, of aesthetics over practicality. On the other hand, the development of science has deepened the rift between essence and appearance and has made the definition of materials independent of their outward form. In effect, the progress of technology has situated the level of human creativity ever deeper within the material. For the Greeks, the prototype of creativity was the craftsman giving a particular form to a given material (the carpenter, the stonemason). Today, the material itself is the actual object of creativity: what is created is its inner, not its outer form.

And so we have electronic devices in wood grain, marble-ised typewriters, express trains in white, gold, and silver, post offices in marble, department stores like castles. This development raises the question as to how materials are perceived at all, or rather – approaching it from the perspective of the object – how they present themselves. This could be related to the question of why, in the aesthetics of materials, traditional materials still dominate, i.e., why modern substances are attired in the design of traditional materials.

III. The manifestation of materiality

Materials manifest themselves with a particular character. What we designate as character is the structure of their atmospheric aura. That this character is decisive is shown by the fact that, for example, when one needs wood to create a particular atmosphere in a space – whether to achieve a sense of easiness and warmth or of prosperity and solidity – one has to give the surfaces wood-character. Under no circumstances does this simply mean that they must look like wood – although that too, to be sure. Here the texture comes into play, already giving us an important element of the character, that is, the specific way in which something displays itself. It may be the linear patterning, otherwise the grain or marbling

– or to put it in general, if paradoxical, terms: the typical form of irregularity. The significance of this paradox is currently being studied in fractal geometry and chaos theory. The results are tentative and therefore uninteresting for the aesthetics of reception, but they could become important for the aesthetics of production, particularly when the design of types of irregularity is at issue. This gives us a preliminary answer to the question of the aesthetic prevalence of traditional materials. Up to this point, only the one or the other has been possible for human creativity: either the regular – from Plato’s ideal bodies to the symmetry of wallpaper design – or the irregular – from the spontaneous idea to *peinture automatique* – with one exception: handwriting.

Handwriting – typical irregularity, non-conceptual recognisability. This is one way in which materials show themselves, one which nature performs for us in unending variety but which up to this point has scarcely been successful in industrial production, though perhaps it was never intended. But in order to let a particular materiality appear, it is not only important that the surfaces look like ... [this or that]. That would be colourless and flat, and would expose itself as an imitation. To be sure, whether it is an imitation or not is irrelevant when the appearance of materiality is at issue. But clearly there are further dimensions in which materiality characteristically manifests itself, without which an imitation would not be sufficiently watertight: for example, colouration in all its nuances, the microscopic structure of the surface, i.e. the degree to which it isn’t surface at all, its haptic qualities, one could say. The crucial point is precisely that these qualities do not usually have to be verified haptically at all – they are atmospherically perceptible even without the concrete sense of touch. At a physical level this is doubtless connected to the optical features of the surface formation, to absorption, diffusion, refraction. But with respect to the aesthetics of reception, the issue here, as with colour, is what one can call its synaesthetic character: whether a material gives the effect of being warm, gentle, repellant, smooth, damp, obtrusive or reserved. This kind of character always affects several senses, and for this reason can be perceived representatively through different senses, or, from the perspective of the object, can be produced through different material qualities: the cold through blue, the repellant through a glossy finish, the shrill through colour contrasts.

If we call the first dimension in which materiality manifests itself its physiognomy, the second would be its synaesthetic character. A third dimension is the social character. Materials have a social character to the extent that they, by reason of their use of culture or tradition, stand for something: the 1920s, for example, or co-siness, grandeur, in some cases also the natural. But that brings us to a new subject.

IV. The iconology of materials

Only recently has the discipline of art history become aware that such a thing as “The Language of Materials” exists. Inherently, the language of materials is surely as old as art itself. Up to this point, however, the study of art, with its emphasis on the language of forms, has not given sufficient weight to the fact that materials, too, are carriers of meaning. In any case, since iconology is the study of images, it would be better to speak of the semantics of materials. The semantics of materials is based partly in their origin, partly in the privileged access of particular strata of society to certain materials, but partly also in sheer convention, whether fashion or ideology. Of course it was significant that a material came from the Holy Land or that the stones of a particular building were fragments of the Bastille. And, for example, if the Roman emperor had a monopoly on Tyrian purple or a particular Egyptian porphyry quarry, then purple and porphyry stood for imperial grandeur.

What is interesting is how ideology and convention can also invest a material with the semantics of origin, even when it is in fact found everywhere. In the nineteenth century, for example, granite acquired significance as the material of the fatherland, even though the German fatherland or Prussia is hardly distinguished by the presence of granite, but more by the absence of any other usable kind of stone. The language of materials in the history of art follows still other cultural patterns besides origin, privilege and ideology: for example, the alchemistic classification of the seven metals or their hierarchical ascription to the ages of the world – the golden age, the silver age, the iron age. Through the use of a particular material, then, works of art can represent the world order or the hierarchical order of society implicitly, i.e. in addition to or through their sculptural form.

To be sure, the language of materials as identified by the history of art is only a very small part of the larger potential of materials for significance in the aesthetic constitution of everyday life. Here it is better to speak of a social character than of a language. From the perspective of art history, the effect of a material's social character presents itself as a code which must be deciphered. This is due precisely to the conventional nature of this character. The difference between a lion of bronze and one of granite is only perceptible to us at the synaesthetic level. But when a viewer no longer shares the convention, the fact that the use of one material as opposed to another is symbolically something can only be mediated through art historical hermeneutics. In contrast, leather as a material for car upholstery exudes elegance, loden cloth conveys a sense of the rustic, while stainless steel is chic. These effects are directly perceptible, but their conventional character can fade and in some cases even turn them into their opposite. A typical example is the history of the aesthetic effect of concrete, "which in the first half of our Century was invested with positive, almost messianic significance, and in the meantime has degenerated into a popular metaphor for vices such as contempt for humanity, narrow-mindedness, and heartlessness". (Raff 1994: 15)

V. Sensing material

The creation of an atmosphere through the character of materials can indeed be called magic. What is magic? Conjuring, telekinesis, the triggering of effects through signs. Magic is puzzling, it is incomprehensible. Because cause and effect are not of the same kind, it is dangerous and insidious: it can also work against our will. All of this applies to the effect of materials in the theatre of the world in which we live. Most remarkable and incomprehensible of all is how this effect can be had through mere appearance, i.e. through materiality without material. In fact, the pure aesthetic of materials assumes we won't handle or touch them. What produces an atmosphere of coldness or softness would probably be robbed of its effect if one tried to verify its promises by touching. On the other hand, it is at a very physical level that the synaesthetic character, or the character of the atmosphere produced, moves us. Even simply to confirm the qualities of a material on its surface would cause the atmospheric effect, for which it is in fact employed in design and architecture, to collapse. The effect is deep and subcutaneous, as a rule even unconscious. Only afterwards, when we already feel a certain way in a space, when the atmospheric effect of the materials has already completely bewitched us, do we perhaps try, irritated, to identify its origin. This is what is eerie and dangerous. The same is true for the social character of materials. As opposed to the discipline of art history, we have asserted that this character is not usually read, but is sensed. The noble, majestic quality of a material, its elegance or old-fashionedness are sensed. But this does not mean merely that the material is able to point to or signal the noble, the majestic, the elegant, or the old-fashioned; rather, it seems to

radiate them. They must in some way be connected to, anchored in, its material qualities. This is why it is sometimes difficult to distinguish clearly between the synaesthetic and social character of a material. Is solidity synaesthetic or social? Probably both. The solidity of the material stands for the solidity of the social conditions in which it is employed.

Materiality can certainly be used to make magic. Designers, interior decorators, set designers do it. But what are they relying on? What gives them the certainty that their magic will work and that their conjurings will reach the public? How is it possible for us to be affected physically by something with which we have no physical contact at all? Magic?

The answer to all these questions probably lies in the fact that, besides the perceptual and work-related relationships, there is a third relationship to material which we will call the medial. In the working relationship we are involved with the material as raw matter. When we grapple with it, intend something with it, seek to form and change it, certain qualities become manifest: material is elastic, soluble, fusible and brittle. In the perceptual relationship we are involved, not with material as working stuff, but with materiality, the pure form of its appearance. Here we encounter its physiognomy, its synaesthetic and social character. But we can also be inside the material, walk on it, sit on it, rest in it and – eat it.

This relationship to material is dominant in early childhood, before the working relationship and distanced perception have developed. The fact that we exist as bodies among other bodies and live physically within different media is the basis of our direct physical experience of materials. We experience softness or hardness, wetness, dryness, coolness, and warmth on, or better, in our own bodies. Aristotle designated this special perception as the actual touching (*Haphe*). A more precise translation would be sensing. To sense a material is not to take note of its qualities by touching its exterior. This would involve more than just the surface, as Aristotle says, our flesh is simultaneously the medium and the organ of this sensing. Thus we experience and recognise firmness, softness, warmth and coolness in our experience of ourselves. The sensing of materials is in this way a sensing of oneself. In this physical sensing of ourselves lies the foundation of the later perception of materials as well. To a certain degree it is never lost, for we remain bodies among other bodies and live within media. But the more distanced approach to material and materiality preserves these experiences only as a background memory. The magic of the material is disclosed, even if we inevitably fall for it again and again. And why not? How impoverished life would be without this element of everyday regression.

References

Raff, T.(1994) *Die Sprache der Materialien. Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe*. München: Deutscher Kunstverlag.