

Project: Rhetorical Architecture: the Bullitt Center and Arguments for Sustainability

In order to better understand how persuasion and sustainability can work together, this project looks at how Seattle's Bullitt Center embodies a deliberative message that offers an argument in favor of changing attitudes and behaviors through its spatial and material design. Ultimately the Bullitt Center physically advocates for different decision-making and modifies our understanding of the persuasive power of architecture and the role of advocacy in campaigns for sustainability.

Progress-to-Date

Data Collection

Largely qualitative and visual, I have taken notes and collected texts and images from tours, websites, news articles and other outlets that will allow me to support my analysis of this space.

Literature Review

After a review of current literature in rhetorical studies on material rhetoric, I have found that most authors primarily attend to material rhetoric in two ways. First, many material and architecture structures commonly exhibit what rhetoricians refer to as forensic rhetoric (arguments about the past). We most commonly see these types of arguments in spaces like natural history museums where a narrative of past environments or species is told to the viewer about how things once were. Other sites of material rhetoric often rely on epideictic rhetoric, which are arguments that celebrate the present. Scholars often show how this operates in sites devoted to national sentiment (celebrating who we are) or that honor an individual. I have completed much of my literature review write-up in which I argue that there is a lack of attention to the ways in which architecture can function as a mode of advocacy.

Analysis

In order to meet my project's objective of understanding the role of material and architectural discourse in arguments for sustainability, I have begun my textual and visual analysis. My data demonstrates that architecture can indeed embody calls for change but I have reformulated my conception for how this takes place since my project proposal. Initially, I identified three primary audiences that could be persuaded by the architecture of the Bullitt Center: consumers, developers and building material manufacturers. After some work on my data, though, I now replace consumers with leasees of the property. Here is an updated overview of my major points:

First, the building's design encourages its leasees to change their behaviors in environmentally-conscious ways. The building encourages biking, using stairs, working in natural light, and other behaviors that have been neglected in modern work culture. Secondly, the design of the building invites other developers to borrow plans and strategies that mimic the sustainable design of the Bullitt Center, which ultimately advocates for change not just of individual developers but of the industry as a whole. Lastly, the design of the building advocates for change in the building materials industry and has done so successfully by persuading companies like Proso to remove hazardous ingredients (as specified by the Living Building Challenge) from their products. In these ways, the actual design of the Bullitt Center functions as a mode of advocacy that can change individual habits, trends in development and the manufacturing industry.

Plans

Interviews

While I have collected much of my data by taking photographs and using information made public by the Bullitt Center, I still plan to conduct a few interviews with individuals associated with its initial conception. This will allow me to better situate the intentions of the designers.

Analysis and Writing

I need to continue writing my manuscript, primarily by editing my literature review and detailing my analysis. My work is on track for completion by the end of the 2015-16 school year and I look forward to sharing my progress at our spring social and then sending off my work for review.