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From Geology to Building– The Process of Layering in Architecture

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Anne-Catrin Schultz is a German-born architect, architectural historian, and author. She is a professor at Wentworth Institute of Technology, where she teaches history, theory courses, and research studios. She writes about historic and contemporary tectonics exploring the links between technology, performance, and narrative. Her primary research focuses on the work of Italian architect Carlo Scarpa and the phenomenon of layering in architecture. Anne-Catrin has previously taught at the University of Stuttgart, the University of California, Berkeley, California College of the Arts (CCA), and City College of San Francisco. In practice, she has worked with firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), and Turnbull Griffin Haesloop Architects (TGH). Anne-Catrin's publications include Carlo Scarpa–Layers (2007) and Time, Space and Material–The Mechanics of Layering in Architecture (2015), both exploring layering as a framework for architectural transformation. Her 2020 book, Real and Fake in Architecture–Close to the Original, Far from Authentic?, examines the blurred boundaries between reality, propaganda, and imagination in architecture. More recently, her research and writing have focused on the impact of technology, politics, and social change on architecture, particularly the built environment after disruption. She is a member of the editorial board of Technology|Architecture+Design (TAD) and curated its 2023 issue on "Tectonics."

ABSTRACT

This lecture discusses the evolution of layering in architecture and urbanism from the mechanistic approaches of the Industrial Age to the process and performance-driven strategies of the 21st century. As a generative process, layering shapes the geology of our planet, which is made from matter arranged in continuous accumulation. In the Anthropocene – our current geological age, marked by human impact on the Earth – manmade sedimentation becomes an integral part of this evolving landscape at all scales. Exploring architecture within the broader framework of ecosystems, this lecture begins by examining the intersection of built and natural environments, engaging the work of key scholars. It continues with a discussion of the large-scale tectonics of urbanism and landscape architecture and concludes with observations about tectonic forces in the realm of architecture. Layering as a design strategy and analytical tool employs additive and subtractive mechanisms. This sediment-based framework understands the act of building as a continuous and non-hierarchical process through time, thus combining preservation and adaptation into design evolution. The organizational system of the built environment is seen as dynamic, allowing for historic geometries to co-exist with twenty-first-century patterns— physical, chemical, and digital ones. With this approach, buildings and their sites are not considered distinct objects but are seen as ongoing interventions that are shaped by process, not outcome. The case studies documented, and their constructed layers serve as testament to the ever-evolving social, technological, and cultural forces shaping our world.