

Interview with Alexander Gutzmer on ‘Media houses’ for *Baumeister: Das Architektur-Magazin*

Note: This is an English Preprint Version of the interview, and supplied images, which was translated in German and fairly heavily edited. The proof of the final published version in German is accessible at:

(Gutzmer) Why is it interesting for a cultural researcher to engage with media houses?

(Rodgers) Engaging with media houses implies a certain perspective on media. At a basic level, it implies an interest in the settings of media production, more so than the content or technologies produced, or the consumption practices of media audiences or users. But also, it means thinking about how the material environments embodied by media houses not only help to shape media production practices, but also symbolically express the role of media organizations in society. Rem Koolhaas’ work on media buildings, such as Beijing’s CCTV Center or Berlin’s Axel Springer Campus, represent an attempt to negotiate a relationship between the internal organization of media companies and their external presentation to, and engagement with, urban publics. And for urban geographers like me, who are not architects, media houses offer a very interesting way of studying the broader relationships of media, place and urban life.

What is specific at them, what sets them apart from other office buildings - both analytically and practically?

It seems to me that media houses can express at least two distinct things. First, they express the unique organizational characteristics of certain media-related professional fields, such as journalism, television production, or software design. And second, they express the unique technological requirements of media forms or infrastructures. For example, historically, newspaper buildings often included machinery of production such as printing presses; and today, broadcasters are still usually co-located with things such as recording or editing suites, studios, and so on.

But while these organizational and technological features usually set media houses apart architecturally, some media companies today occupy pretty generic office spaces. Where this is the case, I think it’s interesting to ask why. Of course, if a media company occupies an office at all, they clearly still require a specific location. They might need regular face-to-face meetings, or need to be near sources of information, or suppliers of expertise such as accountants, lawyers or ICT professionals. What we appear to be seeing in some parts of the media is a loss of the organizational or technological specificities that had, in the past, shaped the nature of their office facilities. In some of my own work on news organizations, I’ve observed how the shift from print to digital has had significant implications for newspaper offices, and in particular the design of newsrooms. While historically newsrooms were designed for the daily task of producing a print product, they are increasingly spaces that need to provide for the digital circulation of news, which is far more reliant on third party platforms such as social media.

What interests you regarding the Toronto Star buildings?

The *Toronto Star* is one of Canada's premier newspapers, but one thing it is *not* notable for is its headquarters. Opened in 1971, the *Toronto Star* building at 1 Yonge Street is a 25 story, blocky structure that is generally regarded as a mediocre, even ugly, example of the International Style. It was designed by Webb Zerafa Menkes Housden Partnership (now known as WZMH Architects), who were involved in a range of similar office and residential projects, as well as the CN Tower – certainly Toronto's most notable communications structure.

It's been just over 15 years since I first started studying the *Toronto Star*. Although the early days of my research were ethnographic – I was more interested in what how people did their work 'inside' the building – in time, I became interested in the building's history. When urban historians write about the *Toronto Star* building, they tend to remark more so on the significance of its time and location of construction: it was one of the first buildings in what was to become a high-rise waterfront district that would replace an empty post-industrial landscape. But what I found is that aesthetics were less important than the building's intended role within an 'organizational complex'. This is a term that the architectural historian Reinhold Martin uses to describe American corporate architecture in the postwar era. For Martin, postwar offices, computer centres, product plants and training facilities were 'conduits' for the practices and communication flows making up organizations modelled on a 'total system'. And this was true for the *Toronto Star* building: it was chiefly built to realise new logistical possibilities for the newspaper through modern office design, computerized information management and advanced printing presses.

Logistical ambitions were also what drove the newspaper's Vaughan Press Centre, opened to much fanfare in 1992. Though this facility housed a satellite newsroom covering the increasingly dispersed suburban regions of Greater Toronto, it was principally built as an advanced printing facility boasting automation and robotics, strategically located at the junction of two highways branching out to the urban region.

So I have been interested in thinking about what these logistical or systems histories tell us about more banal modernist styles of media houses, particularly those built by newspapers in the 20th Century. I am also interested, though, in the afterlives of such facilities under contemporary urban conditions. The *Toronto Star* building and its surrounding land at 1 Yonge Street was sold by parent company Torstar for C\$40 million in 2000, only to be resold to condominium developers in 2012 for C\$250 million. While the building is still leased by the newspaper, and its facade still includes the words 'Toronto Star', it is soon to encompassed by a large-scale residential development designed by Hariri Pontarini Architects. This development includes a series of new residential towers – one reaching 80 stories – and current plans would construct an additional 12 stories on top of the existing *Toronto Star* building. The Vaughan Press Centre was more recently sold for C\$54 million: its strategic location, ample electrical and water supply making it an ideal candidate to host a media logistics successor: a data centre.

Given the current crises of many media firms, will the idea of a "media house" cease to be relevant?

Not in general, no, but perhaps in some media fields. We are certainly seeing evidence of this in news organisations. When I arrived at the *Toronto Star* in 2005, its open-plan newsroom

hosted around 500 staff. It was a place with people frequently were moving about, desks were strewn with paperwork and computers; and staff were stationed at locations carefully determined by their role in the production process. Today, this same newsroom has been physically reduced in size, through the addition of partition walls, since there are no more than 170 people in the editorial department. It is much quieter, cleaner and more anonymous. Activities are spread more evenly throughout the day, and the spatial organization of the newsroom is far less rigorously defined. News organizations like the *Toronto Star* still need newsrooms, but the rationale for a dedicated office – financial, practical, even symbolic – seems to be falling away.

On the other hand, we are seeing precisely the opposite happen in other media fields. Notably with digital platform companies, which are building extraordinary office facilities. Clearly, for these companies, there are extremely strong financial, practical – and apparently above all symbolic – needs to create ambitious, bespoke buildings, and even master-planned campuses.

What about King's Cross, what interests you there?

Initially, I started exploring the area north of London's King's Cross Station – which is a 67 acre, comprehensively-planned new 'cultural' or 'knowledge' quarter – to develop a tour for my undergraduate media students. In developing the tour, however, I became increasingly curious about the development, and began to study it as part of my research, which has recently extended into the relationships of digital platforms and urban life.

One really remarkable feature of the King's Cross redevelopment is that it has become such a locus for digital platform and technology companies. Google is building a £1 billion, 1000-footlong 'landscaper', designed by Bjarke Ingels Group and Thomas Heatherwick, which alongside other offices could eventually help the area host nearly 7,000 'Googlers'. Facebook has acquired 611,000 ft² of office space, enough to host at least 6,000 workstations, in one of London's most significant property deals in the last decade. Samsung has opened a 20,000 ft² 'brand showcase' designed by Thomas Heatherwick that promises to "bring the latest technologies to life with curated experiences". YouTube, meanwhile, has laid down local roots in the form of YouTube Space London, a dedicated space hosting events, training and production facilities. Other tenants present in or coming to King's Cross include Nike, Universal Music Group, Sony Music UK, Havas and DeepMind Technologies.

In looking at all of these facilities, I have been less interested in individual buildings, and more so in the overall redevelopment, and asking why it has attracted these companies. One set of questions is around aesthetics - King's Cross is unique in that it is not only based on a very carefully-constructed masterplan, but it is owned by a single landholder. This has allowed the development to be highly designed and coherent - most notably in how it mixes old with new, showcasing the site's industrial heritage. For example, a curated retail area has been built into a former coal storage yard; new flats and a greenspace were carefully built into the wrought-iron shells of rebuilt gasworks; and a design school (Central Saint Martins) was incorporated into the expansive premises of a former granary.

Another set of questions are around the strategic positioning of the redevelopment within London's urban fabric. The site is adjacent to one of the most important junctions in the London tube network, not to mention two major railway stations, one (London St. Pancras) with international connections to continental Europe. It also offers uniquely large quantities of floor space near to other important employment clusters, such as the new media district in

Shoreditch, the financial district in the City of London, and of course the universities and research institutes of Bloomsbury.

In general, the big issue is always "communication" these days. Can there be architectural rules for "communicative" buildings? And are media houses more or less "communicative" or is our idea that "communication" companies have to be based in more communicative architectural environments somewhat naive?

Architecture has arguably always been communicative, or worked like a medium. But it's true that the field of architecture seems to now be especially attracted to communicative forms of architecture. I'm not an architect, of course, but I suspect that communicative architecture has proliferated not just through a set of new ideas, but because there has been an expansion in the range of new building materials available – not to mention computer-assisted modelling and so on – which make it possible to realise ambitious communicative design ideas and ideals.

I'm not sure about there being rules for communicative architecture, but the interesting quality of media houses is that they are arguably subject to higher communicative expectations. Given that these companies are engaged organizationally and publicly in communicative endeavours, how should their buildings respond? For me there is a possible correspondence, but also tension, here between the interior and exterior of media houses.

Historically, media houses tended to communicate authority and prestige above anything else. I am thinking here, for instance, about the parade of newspaper skyscrapers that once lined Park Row across from New York City Hall, which the media historian Aurora Wallace has written about in detail. Today, the headquarters of platform companies seem to emphasise more interiorised innovations. They are basically a constellation of amenities aiming to underscore the philosophy of the firm, and improve employee morale, which we learn about through press releases or online videos rather than first-hand experience. Apple's fortress-like headquarters in Cupertino, California is a good example, as are Google's major offices. Given the centrality of such companies in our social and political life today, I would modestly suggest they should at the very least be considering how their buildings might correspond and interact with the new public (and semi-public) realms they are rapidly establishing in our cities today.



Figure 109: Illustrative view of the Zone A Building roof from the south-west overlooking Battle Bridge Place and King's Boulevard

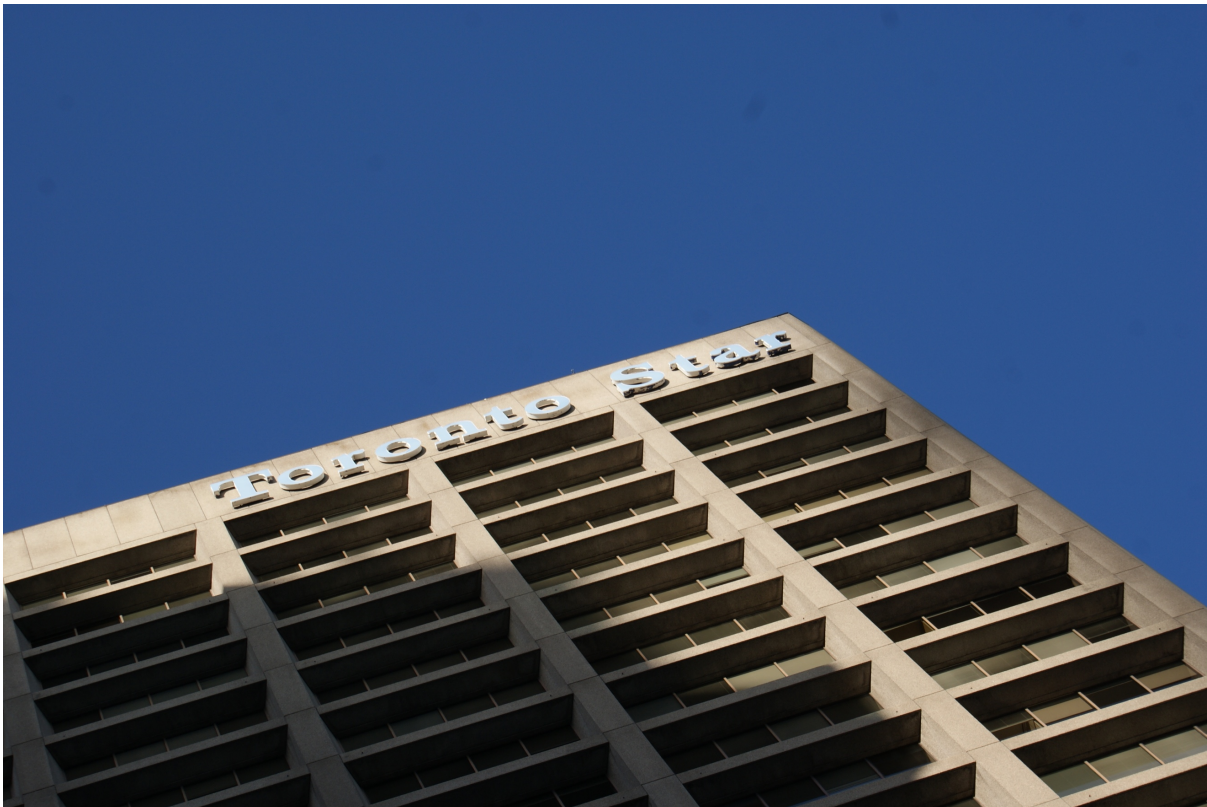
Artist illustration of Google 'landscaper' at King's Cross, London.
Source: Bjarke Ingels Group and Thomas Heatherwick



our way! Stenciled Android logos announce the imminent arrival of Google's new UK headquarters.
Source: Scott Rodgers



Panorama of YouTube Space London video façade on Pancras Road, London.
Source: Scott Rodgers



Façade of Toronto Star building at 1 Yonge Street, Toronto.
Source: Scott Rodgers



The newly-built Toronto Star building ca. 1974, with the under-construction CN Tower top left, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Toronto-Dominion Centre top right.
Source: City of Toronto Archives



Artist illustration of Pinnacle One Yonge development, with reconstructed Toronto Star building just visible at bottom left.
Source: Hariri Pontarini Architects



A parade of construction cranes indicate the scale of Google's 1,000 foot 'landscaper'.
Source: Scott Rodgers



Existing Google offices at Pancras Square which, together with Google's nearby building under construction, will host around 7000 employees at King's Cross.
Source: Scott Rodgers