

NULL / NON-ARCHITECTURE

By Dr. Wagih Fawzi Youssef

Abstract

An architect was believed to be an artist, but in the twentieth century he has moved from artist to technician. Today's eclecticism is a creative, cannibalistic combination of erudite nostalgia and extremely sophisticated esthetics. It needs revisionist history to feed on. The results are acutely artful exercises in cultural memory and personal value projection. This essay argues that contemporary architecture has reduced the esthetic function of architecture to a "non-architecture" characterized by unresolved relationships to the social and symbolic realities of our present age.

Keywords: *non-architecture, design reasoning, architectural beauty, modern architecture*

Introduction

Architecture fulfills other functions which are often considered primary. It generates harmony, order, beauty, and perfection. In order to fulfill such functions, a great deal of thought must be performed. To make an object beautiful means to grasp its essential traits. Paul Klee once said "I create for not weeping". Beauty, perfection, harmony, and order, all serve to give a sense of well-being by presenting a world congenial to human needs. They are also indispensable conditions for making a cognitive statement clear, coherent, and comprehensible. *Architectural beauty is the isomorphic correspondence between what is designed and how it is designed. Architecture cannot exist anywhere unless it is a property of everything perceivable.*

Design Reasoning

Genuine architectural design requires organization which involves many and perhaps all of the cognitive operations known from theories of cognitive thinking. Design activity is a form of reasoning in which perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined. The remarkable mechanism by which the senses understand the environment are all but identical with the operations described by the psychology of thinking in whichever area of the mind cognition takes place in the realm of imagery and in the split between sense and thought.

If one wishes to trace the thinking invested in the images of an architectural creation, one must look for well-structured shapes and relations which characterize concepts and their applications. Such relations are readily found in work done at early levels of mental development; for example, in nature. This is so because the mind operates with natural forms which are easily distinguished from the complexity of architectural designs. What matters more is that, instead of showing a mechanical drawing of a plan, the mind needs to discover relevant structural features of the design and find adequate expression or shape for it in the medium of lines on flat paper.

The design statement not only consists of visual concepts which are demanded by direct experience but also depicts the subject abstractly by some of its relevant features such as shape, relations, and function. This springs entirely from intense observation of the sensory world and interprets the character of the model without

straying, in any way, from the realm of the visible. Occasionally, a visual architectural concept jells into a precise, almost stereotyped shape, repeated with little variation in spite of diverse applications. This establishes a bit of order in a world of complexity.

Thinking requires more than the formation and assignment of concepts. It calls for the unraveling of relations, for the disclosure of elusive structures. Design serves to make sense of the world. To perceive an object means to find sufficiently simple, graspable form in it. This involves the kind of problem solving which needs intelligence of perception. One may have seen hundreds of architectural drawings but he never ceases to be struck by inexhaustible originality of ever new solutions to the problem of how to design a plan of a house with a few simple lines.

At higher levels of thought, the compositional patterns become more complex, and so do the configurations of forces discerned in the architect's world and interpreted in his designs. Here as everywhere else in architecture, *beauty is not an added decoration, but an integral part of the design.*

Bare Walls and Buildings

The wall is the sleeper of the environment. There is nothing more infinitely expressive than its receptive expanse. It establishes style and setting, creates mood as well as enclosure; defines time and place. Walls are an environmental event. They deliver signals, images, and messages.

In the modern city, the messages are minimal, beyond the state of technology and real estate. They are delivered as often by the graffiti artist as by the architectural designer. Today the wall has gone public. It has become one of the most universal art objects of our time. Beautiful or ugly, barrier or invitation, it is the arbiter of city environment and life.

The renunciation of decoration has led the modern architect to so manipulate his structural forms that *the entire building becomes merely reduced to a decoration.* The educated viewer has to look twice to see why the ordinary is extraordinary. All of that engineering elegance and efficiency born of rational, industrialized, solutions that were to make a better world - led by the architect - did not bring a new dawn. It brought one of most gigantic problems in the nature of life and survival than history has ever known. This is well-known and accounts for a lot of desperate posturing in the face of unresolved relationships to the social and symbolic realities of the age.

Styles were to be supplanted by the sphere, the cone, and the cube. When these abstract forms have the power to evoke emotional response, the reasoning went, then true architecture has been achieved. The sight of these forms affects us immediately by their delicacy or brutality. The abstract forms are apparently all there and we are moved by them, but the values represented seem poles away from those intended. *We are dealing with the death of optimism rather than with the death of art.*

The visionary architectural project, the intellectual or esthetic exercise, held little allure, since fantasy is not of much use in the desperate battles with reality. Thus architectural forms appear as icons or symbols. This has nothing to do with the basic design mandate of problem solving. It is a kind of poetry, it is designed to delight the senses with a loving use of historical and abstract forms to evoke a sense that there

was poetry in a smooth surface, in two lines meeting at right angle, and in basic shapes and forms.

The modern architect sets his buildings in a shining isolation. He sees his job a showing fantasy or dream but it is time to look ahead many years to the world of tomorrow to predict the form of the future. Architects and philosophers dwelt on the miracle of new architecture and the new morality that would shape it, or could provide some rich dividends for much more complex and sophisticated ways of seeing life and the world. Anti-architecture is true to our times.

This phenomenon has been reinforced by the modernist architectural esthetic. The twentieth century architectural revolution claimed the triumph of the beauty of utility over ornament; it endorsed the look of the machine product as an artistic end. It enshrined the functional esthetic. But it is an awfully short and dangerous step from the kind of expert and delicate adjustment that turn utility into art and from the recognition of those adjustments to the most ordinary solution, or the least design for the least design for money.

This deterioration is sanctioned, in a sense by the modernist "less is more" philosophy. At its finest, less is more, and the finest is limited to a few men such as Mies van der Rohe. Mies' work is magnificent, with a stripped, subtle, hard edged and demanding beauty that is going to be symbolized for the rest of time. It is also poorly understood and badly knocked off.

Even so, the glass box vernacular that grew out of his style is some of the best background architecture in history. Business clients rarely understand or want it. They are pursuing sleek space – profit formulas and effective technological solutions that no longer aspire to the kind of moving artistic greatness in the timeless and spiritual sense that architecture and particularly the big building, as always held a primary concern.

The pragmatic 'art' of non-architecture

The architect used to believe that he was an artist, but in the twentieth century he has moved from artist to technician. The pressure of technology and economics, and the overwhelming shift in emphasis to a non-art, pragmatic kind of building in enormous volume pulled the comfortable esthetic rug out from under him. So, he has now to deal with the rising pressure of social problems on an environmental scale.

There has been a tremendous upsurge of non-architecture. The architect is being pushed increasingly from the stage by non-architecture of every kind. To compete, the architect has tried to turn himself into a deliverer of computerized commercial services - a role and a set of values more easily understood and more highly prized by society today than a good building. Most recently, he is trying to put it all together by acting as a developer.

On still another level, those who see architecture primarily as a social act have espoused a kind of non-architecture that deals more with quality of amenities and the environment than with art. The way a building serves the processes of life takes precedence over sophisticated esthetic skills. Buildings are built by the forces of law and economic supply and demand, cash flow and the single bottom line, far more than

by the ideas, intentions, talents and visions of architects. Buildings are designed by competitive economics and cheap energy.

The art of construction is a very pragmatic thing. It is usually the art of cash flow and code compliance, and hitting the market right. What comes out of the process may eventually be art, depending upon the quality of the mind, and the idea, and the talent engaged in the struggle to have a concept.

The architect is fascinated by new materials, and structural systems, and radical engineering techniques. He has done a fine job of utilizing all his functional and programmatic knowledge, but he has invented nothing or very little, except for using recent engineering innovations. This, however, is no small accomplishment. In fact, this is where 'art as technique' comes in.

The architect has devised a system of esthetics to deal with and express such structures, as much as technical advances allow. He has pushed those functional and expressive designing systems to the design of the skin walls, the glass box, the concrete form, and skyscrapers to adventurous esthetic limits.

Today's tall buildings are strictly the product of economic calculations, tempered by codes and the law. Those boxy flat-tops that have replaced slender spires to jar the skyline and the viewer represent the best buy in structural space. Today's huge corporations require huge floor areas in stacks. Status is conferred by sheer size and the comparative quality and solidity of materials and fitting; not dissimilar to the architecture of ancient Egypt, yet far from sharing its artistic qualities.

However, the deleterious effect of this kind of inhuman standardized buildings on people and the environment is cheapness and the engendering of more problems than solutions. Many of the weaknesses in present day design can be traced to inhibitions which derive from erroneous assumptions about human behavior. The irony is that the architect has come to his new humanitarianism at a time when the profession is farther away from the people than ever before.

The architect as 'mastodon'

There is a tragic lack of a historical definition of architecture and the definition and comprehension of the art of building today. The history of architecture has been taught as a progression of a populace of terribly limited examples of how rational and tasteful things should be.

The history of architecture has been taught as a progression of monuments, without which we would have a hard time claiming a civilization. As a consequence, most of us think of architecture as a series of isolated great structures, related only by style, country, or sequence in time, which are the historian's tools for order and classification. They have little to do with the building of the real world, of which masterpieces are such a small part and non-architecture is such a large and very tangible part, for better or worse.

In this anti-environmental, anti-historical, stance taught by the modern movement, the architect has become the man clients often cannot get a direct answer from because he is too busy being original.

Now that the environment has been discovered, it seems that the architect has never been there. The architect is looking like a mastodon than a savior. Venturi tells us that "the world can't wait for the architect to build his utopia, and the architect's concern ought not to be with what it ought to be but what it is – and with how to help improve it now. This is a humbler role for architects than the modern has wanted to accept". To play this role Venturi suggests that the architect meets the environment on its own terms, because it is there. And because it is there we might study it, including the despised highway strip and the subdivision, to see what works and why.

The rapid evolution of modern architecture, with all of the behavioral esthetics involved, is something neither architect nor historian has designed. All that has been offered by either one diatribes against the end product. The architect looked the other way for enlightened clients and acceptance of the commonplace.

Conclusion

What is dealt with here is ideology, as much as history. There is an increasingly recognized, profound ideological split between the structural/functional esthetic of the modernists and the forma, spatial and consciously symbolic issues that preoccupy a considerable group of young architects now. This is fueling a revival of eclecticism as a means of image making. This urge for style and symbolism has been minimally addressed by historians of the modern movement.

It is with a special eye that the past is being reexamined by the present generation of practitioners, for better or worse, and used in their own work. Today's eclecticism is a creative, cannibalistic combination of erudite nostalgia and extremely sophisticated esthetics. It needs revisionist history to feed on. The results are acutely artful exercises in cultural memory and personal value projection but these are not simple or innocent times.

Nor is this a simple or innocent show. It contains much to debate. Image-makers are not going to supplant problem-solvers; and technology can be as elegant as symbols. Right now, history is being revised as a polemic for style. But in this case the recent past is being raided rather than discarded. In the process a great deal is being learned, much of value is being restored to the record, and a sound and necessary input is being gained.

Even a very beautiful building can be very bad architecture. The new architecture is a humanistic equation for which creative and qualitative standards are absolutely essential. The results of the present lack of qualitative standards are all too clear and pervasive.