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THE IRRATIONAL LIFE OF ARCHITECTURE

IRRACIONALNE ŻYCIE ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

While architects seek to create new forms for their designs, the reception of architecture by its users remains largely reliant on identifying the familiar. The essay examines the ways in which familiarity establishes formal preferences and the metaphors used to mediate and ‘access’ the less familiar architectural form.

Keywords: habit, metaphor, form, design, irrationality

Streszczenie

Podczas gdy architekci starają się tworzyć nowe formy dla swoich projektów, odbiór architektury przez użytkowników pozostaje w dużej mierze zależny od identyfikacji znanego. Esej analizuje sposoby, w jakie to co znane określa formalne upodobania i metafory używane do pośredniczenia i “dostępu” do mniej znanych form architektonicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: zwyczaj, metafora, forma, projekt, irracjonalność

One of my first assignments in architecture school was the design a kindergarten. My proposed design was similar in form to a common kindergarten found in Israel, one that closely resembled the kindergarten building that I attended as a child in the 1970s – a modernist single-story rectangle. Years later I wondered how an ambitious first year architecture student who I saw myself to be ended up with such a banal and uninventive solution. Clearly even a kindergarten child could have come up with something more imaginative. Perhaps the lack of skill and confidence in one’s intuition drew me away

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from seeking a less conventional solution in favor of the safe retreat to the familiar. In time this changed.

Through the practice of design the architect's talent (or intuition) develops, and with confidence and experience more and more knowledge is synthesized to inform this intuition. Skills improve and expand across various aspects of the architecture work to the point where the architect masters form. When aspiring to be inventive in their own practice of design architects seek new forms and new expressions, a tendency that had already been identified by Adolf Goller in the late 19th century by what he termed the 'Jading Effect'¹.

Yet while architects venture into the creation of new forms, the reception of architecture on the other hand relies heavily on the exact opposite – an insistence on the familiar.

*The Habit of Form*² as I have termed it, describes the phenomena by which certain forms are preferred over others by mere habituation – as a result of familiarity, custom and established associations. Architectural forms in particular, as well as artifacts, follow a pattern of 'fitting better' over time. As an old jacket or pair of shoes seem to mold themselves better to the shape of the body or foot, so too our aesthetic appreciation. We subconsciously become accustomed to certain forms and our preference tends to the familiar. A studied psychological effect explaining this is called *Mere Exposure Effect* or also known as "familiarity breeds liking". Experiments conducted in the late 1960's by psychologist Robert Zajonc first showed that repeated exposure to a certain picture or a musical tune led people to rate it more positively than other stimuli of the same kind which they had not encountered earlier. In brief the principle of "mere exposure" means that as things 'grow on us' we acquire intrinsic tastes through repeated exposure over time. This stimulus ranges from people to commercial products, places to shapes. For example – the more often a person is seen the more attractive and intelligent that person would appear to be (although there are exceptions when over exposure has a reverse effect and leads to a negative reaction).

It comes as no surprise that the advertisement industry has exploited this principle in countless ways. Yet "mere exposure" has also been helpful in relation to understanding the reception of Art works, in its influence on the stabilization of a canon³.

There are of course other significant factors which influence the perception of three-dimensional shapes and determine aesthetic preferences. Gestalt theory for example aimed to reveal principles of visual experience, explaining our 'natural' tendency towards certain

¹ Adolf Goller, *What is the cause of perpetual style change in architecture?* (1887), from *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, by Robert Vischer (Author), Conrad Fiedler (Author), Heinrich Wölfflin (Author), Adolf Goller (Author), The Getty Center For The History Of Art, 1996.

² *The Habit of Form* by Rafi Segal appeared in *Pidgin 6*, a journal published Princeton University School of Architecture, 2008 p. 88–95.

³ "The repeated presentation of images to the public without direct awareness of memory makes mere exposure a prime vehicle for canon maintenance. Tacitly and incrementally over time, it teaches the public to like the images, to prefer them, eventually to recognize them as part of the canon, and to want to see them again" Cutting, James E. – "The Mere Exposure effect and Aesthetic preference", (2006) In. P. Locher, C. Martindale, L. Dorfman, V. Petrov, and D. Leontiv (Eds.) *New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Psychology of Art*. Baywood Publishing, p. 9 <http://www2.psych.cornell.edu/cutting/pub/locher.pdf>

appearances rather than others. A whole branch of late 19th century visual studies in art history and theory, *Kunstwissenschaft* (science of art), dealt with such questions, albeit not primarily in relation to architecture.

The habit of form in architecture plays a significant role, especially since the reception of the architectural work is primarily irrational. Architecture is experienced emotionally, instinctively, often without even being aware of it, as Walter Benjamin notes:

*Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction*⁴.

Benjamin explains that contrary to the art work which demands concentration from the spectator, buildings are often used and occupied without their inhabitants necessarily being aware of their formal qualities. The preoccupation with everyday activities undertaken in the spaces of buildings themselves (the habits of daily life) diverts attention from the particular formal qualities of buildings. Benjamin considers this as a potential strength of architecture. Yet here, a distinction should be drawn between the experience of everyday architecture, i.e. the majority of structures which make up the built environment, and those exceptional, iconic, ‘cutting-edge’ works of architecture we consider to be of high artistic achievement, and thus fall under the category of art. The latter attracts attentive viewing and is perceived differently and is intended to be set apart from the conventional building.

Architects and designers are conscious of architectural form and are often critical of the relation between the form of an artifact or of a building and the use it serves. Architects attempt to apply rational thinking in evaluating form by criteria of use, performance, structure, economics, etc. rather than rely on its familiarity. Nevertheless, we still find ourselves surrounded by forms that are no longer used in their originally intended capacity nor serve the purpose that brought them about. Forms tend to persist, superseding their original ‘reason of being’ or intention, appropriating other meanings and uses. In architecture, where processes of change are slower than changes in other ‘shorter-lived’ forms this phenomenon is ever more present. Several architectural forms continue to re-appear and to be used for different purposes than the ones they were originally conceived for. Lofts are a common example of spaces initially designed as warehouses or factories that have become desirable spaces for living.

Architects find it difficult to accept that certain traditional forms continue to be popular while innovative new forms often encounter public resistance⁵. An example of such a posi-

⁴ “Buildings are appropriated in a two-fold manner; by use and by perception...on the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regard to architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception” Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, part XV, p. 239–240, from *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1968.

⁵ Especially true in regard to Modern Architecture, as Michael Benedikt points out: “Almost nobody likes “modern architecture”. Sure, people are grateful for air conditioning and good plumbing, but they have disliked everything else about modern buildings and the modern city for sixty years” Michael Benedikt – “Less for Less Yet: On Architecture’s Value (s) in the Marketplace”, from *Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture*, edited by William S. Saunders, London, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2005, p. 17.

This general dislike of Modern Architecture is not necessarily a fundamental resistance against the formal qualities of modern design but I argue based on lack of sufficient custom or habit which in time may change.

tion can be read in Le Corbusier's famous statement 'eyes which do not see'. In his polemic *Vers une Architecture* ("Towards a New Architecture") Le Corbusier calls against those eyes (society at large) which fail to see the new forms generated by modern life and how these new forms, primarily resulting from technological advancements and civil engineering, represent a new aesthetic. Le Corbusier's critique to 'open our eyes' is a call to disregard previous ways of seeing and to rid architecture of old habits (=forms) in favor of looking at the world anew. The question that remains unanswered is why architecture, in its aesthetic and modes of thinking, is so slow to adapt to the modern condition, in contrast to the engineer's rapidly changing world of infrastructures and machines, automobiles, ship liners, airplanes and more.

A problem arises when the architect presents unconventional forms and designs which are found difficult to 'digest' and therefore trigger a negative reaction. Even though such designs, from a functional point of view, might perfectly well suit their programmatic and utilitarian requirements, the resistance to them can simply result from the unfamiliarity with their form. This problem accentuates since people often attempt to conceal an irrational response with a rational explanation. The most common claim voiced to hide the dislike for the way a design looks is to say that it does not function well, meaning it does not perform well enough from a utilitarian point of view. And even if this was true, I would like to remind ourselves that when we love something we easily ignore its flaws. And there are always flaws.

When a new, non-familiar or "un-habituated" form is introduced and does encounter resistance, metaphors are used in order to facilitate its reception and to establish a stronger connection with it. The metaphor mediates the different viewpoints of the architect and the public by associating the abstract, un-familiar shape to a well-known object/subject/theme. Metaphors are powerful since they do not rely on rational argumentation or reasoning, their impact is immediate and irreversible.

There are endless examples of how metaphors help in the reception of architecture. The London Planning Council recently began to assign names to proposed buildings during the planning review stage – nicknaming or identifying associations that could help communicate the proposed plan when it is unveiled to the public⁶. This approach was largely adapted following London's famous Gherkin tower precedent, which showed that using metaphors for buildings, even if the metaphor was that of a pickle, increased the public's accessibility to the project, and its eventual acceptance.

Furthermore, metaphors are not only used to help access the work but also to enhance it with additional meaning. The more public exposure a new architectural work receives, the more attention and importance is given to the metaphors used.

Contrary to the attention an "un-habituated" architectural form would draw, familiar form is usually received without resistance. Although it might be criticized for its banality, the functionality of a familiar form is rarely questioned. An exception might be in regard to children who have not yet been accustomed to certain conventions of function and form and easily replace the form of a horse with a broom stick for example, as that which can be used for riding (perhaps this is why Picasso said every child is an artist). The familiar form should not be accepted as is, since it can be as deceiving as the less familiar. Political institutions of power have used conventional

⁶ Conversation the author had with Peter Rees, Chief Architect of the City of London, NYC, Winter 2007.

and familiar architecture forms as ‘stable’ carriers of often unsavory agendas. After all Fascism adored the Greek orders. The unexpected is hidden behind the known. But whether we deal with the formal habits of everyday life, which occur on the individual level, or with socio-cultural preferences as a whole, I suggest in this context to understand the architect’s service to society by riding it of redundant habits. With imagination and intuition (talent) and an ability to identify useful metaphors, architects strive for a change in the familiar, seeking a moment of awareness to form and perhaps even inspiring the work of architecture to stand as a work of art.

References

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- [2] Benedikt M., *Less for Less Yet: On Architecture’s Value (s) in the Marketplace*, from *Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture*, edited by William S. Saunders, London, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2005.
- [3] Locher P., Martindale C., Dorfman L., Petrov V., and Leontiv D. (Eds.) *New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Psychology of Art*. Baywood Publishing, <http://www2.psych.cornell.edu/cutting/pub/locher.pdf>.