**The Importance of Ornament**

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The three components of a good building as outlined by Vitruvius are as valid today as they were in his time, but while architecture is both an art and a science, it’s the art which tends to engage people. That’s because beauty is a feeling which draws us in before we can think. To paraphrase the neurologist Antonio Damasio, “we are not thinking machines who feel, but rather feeling beings who think.” Most people don’t notice their surroundings unless it affects them positively or negatively, and like our social interactions, it’s often the little things which catch our eye. Whether an architect applies ornament to their building or composes its parts ornamentally, they are communicating an intention to please the viewer. Conversely, buildings with no ornament or sense of composition appear cold and unwelcoming. Studies have shown that blank buildings exact an emotional toll similar to the psychic one we feel when ignored.

The word for ornament in ancient Greece was Kosmos, which came from the word to order or arrange. This is also where we get the word cosmetics, from the French ’cosmetique’, meaning to beautify. The other Greek word that’s important for the traditional understanding of beauty is Harmos, meaning to join together, therefore the more harmoniously composed, the more beauty one feels. This is also why Modernism rejected ornament. It seemed more rational to talk about practical matters than how a building made one feel. Thanks to our Modernist education, many architects still view ornament as having little to do with serious or real architecture, but I digress. The Greeks believed the universe, or Kosmos was created from elements which swirled around in chaos until harmoniously ordered by their gods. How else to explain the feeling of beauty in a world of full of chaos. According to the philosopher Pythagoras, the planets emitted a unique vibration based on their orbital revolutions which together created a harmony similar to the pleasure we feel when listening to music. Science has recently shown this feeling comes from our need for order to survive. Humans evolved to take pleasure from making sense of our surroundings, the quicker the better. The pleasure we feel is a product of the hormone oxytocin, which is related to altruistic behavior. Recent studies have shown that people who experienced more beauty in the world where more generous to strangers, which helps explain why we are attracted to places with which we have no cultural reference. Therefore beauty is about more than ordered geometry, it’s also about the intention to please other people. Whether experiencing an act of kindness, discovering the truth, or admiring a bountiful landscape, we are drawn to those things which promote our well-being. As the environmental biologist, E.O. Wilson put it, beauty is “our word for the qualities that have contributed most to human survival”.

Nevertheless, this intention to please is best expressed by the same geometric patterns found in nature. Neurologists recently discovered that the brain is most aroused by patterns which have a 20% redundancy of elements, similar to a well composed building. While we all crave the stimulus of variety, this average is the mean between minimalist simplicity and expressionist complexity. In other words, the pleasure one feels contemplating the beauty of the Kosmos is in direct contrast to the discomfort felt in Chaos. The two are dependent on each other, thus the classical definition of beauty as a balance between order and disorder, or a unity within variety.

This definition remained constant from Antiquity until the 20th century when architecture schools adopted Modernism. Beauty as commonly understood was deemed obsolete along with traditional styles and the notion of applied ornament. Modernists believed that man had entered a new age, a Machine age to be exact, similar the Information age we are being sold on today. The problem with these labels is that they ignore human nature, which has remained the same for thousands of years. Modernism’s rejection of ornament is based on the idea that humans evolved in tandem with technology, therefore buildings ought to be designed the way an engineer designs a machine. As Adolph Loos, the first architect to call for the abolition of ornament said, ‘The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use.’

The root of Modernism’s issue with ornament goes back to the Industrial revolution and the commercialization of architecture. The sudden growth of cities meant there were more building types required and more opinions to cater to. Thanks to a growing middle class, architectural patronage went from the few to the many. At the same time, globalization introduced a variety of styles to choose from. The democratization of taste produced a considerable amount of anxiety ability among those who prided themselves connoisseurs. With the rise of stylistic pluralism, they believed public taste was no longer a sufficient rational for such a noble profession. With the elevation of science, some opted for a rationalist ideology while others embraced a moralist point of view, but whatever their logic, they all claimed the mantle of truth. The parade of revivals made it seem like style was nothing more than a fashionable garment concealing the science of building, but while they debated, most architects simply took advantage of the widening palette. Artifice has always been part of the architect’s tool kit, which is why they used to be called artificers. Even with real materials, the question of which style bedeviled these self-appointed reformers, but in a globalized world, why should there be only one style? As the 19th century philosopher Stendhal wrote, “There are as many styles of beauty as there are visions of happiness.” Whatever theories one employs, the public is either going to be delighted, indifferent, or turned off by what we design.

Adolf Loos once said that ‘the house does not have to tell anything to the exterior.’ Quite the opposite. Humans instinctively read each other, first emotionally and then rationally. Architects who ignore this fact will always have a hard time connecting to the public, something the 12th century monk, Bernard of Clairvaux understood when he wrote, ”since the devotion of the carnal populace cannot be incited with spiritual ornaments, it is necessary to employ material ones.” While science has shown ornament is good for our well-being, let’s look at the many ways it engages the public. Maybe then we can lure architecture schools back into the human age where we’ve all lived for thousands of years.

The main reason to ornament a building is to delight the passerby. Regardless of one’s culture or level of education, people are attracted to harmoniously composed patterns of light and shade. As Vitruvius put it, “the eye is always in search of beauty.” We instinctively look for threats in our environment, therefore the most convincing ornament tells a story of how a building works. Take the Classical column, whose entasis is an expression of its load bearing function, or a cornice, which is an elaboration of a roof’s function to shed water. The same is true of the Gothic arch and flying buttress which started as structural necessities. Over time, these elements became conventionalized into the styles we recognize today. The quality of ornament has always been a reflection of the owner’s wealth, the builder’s skill, and the architect’s eye, in other words, ornaments communicate social status. As Vitruvius said, ”When it appears that a work has been carried out sumptuously, the owner will be the person praised… when delicately, the master workman… but when proportions lend it an imposing effect, the glory will belong to the architect.” This was a bad thing according to Modernists who believed capitalism was the root of all evil. By getting rid of ornament, they hoped to engineer a classless society.

Ornaments can convey useful information about a building’s use, location, or history. Even when converted to another use, historic buildings are pleasant reminders of the passage of time. Modernists believed this was pure nostalgia, but imagine throwing all one’s photo albums away. As psychologists will tell you, our identity is a construct of the stories we tell each other. Without these reminders, we feel isolated and adrift. This is the same thing dictators do when banning books or stripping a local population of their culture and history.

Ornaments also enhance pride of place by adding to a community’s visual coherence. When an architect employs location traditions, they are extending the visual harmony of the whole. Given the need to add density in many historic neighborhoods, it’s especially baffling that we don’t train students to work sensitively within these communities. As the National Trust for Historic Preservation said at its founding in 1965, “the real value of any building to the community lies in its being a delight to the eye and its susceptibility to human use.”

Lastly, a building can be a civic ornament. This works best when the building is isolated, but like a social gathering, there can only be so many characters before the whole party becomes chaotic. For example, a structural building might be beautiful on its own, but in a typical street is jarring. Conversely, a humble building might seem worthless on its own, but in the larger context plays a role in securing the beauty of the street and overall neighborhood. This is especially true for the average urban building on a budget. The judicious handling ornament goes a long way to ensuring that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Whatever an ornament might signal, the most important is the fact that someone cared enough to design something you might find beautiful. This is the ultimate rational or whatever reasoning one needs to show kindness to their fellow human being. As the late Henry Hope Reed said, “Man does not build for himself alone any more than he smiles for himself alone, the facade is designed out of respect to the beholder, a form of architectural courtesy to the man on the street.”