CNU 25 Seattle - Authenticity (Final Draft)

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[1] As an architecture student in the late 80s, I was told we couldn’t design traditional buildings because they were not of our time, and that beauty was subjective and therefore irrelevant. Only modernist designs would be considered authentic. The problem was, this never made any sense. First, because modernism was by then historic. Secondly, anything anyone does is automatically “of its time”, and lastly, no one I knew seemed to care. [2] I was taught that the concept should drive the elevations rather than how it would be perceived on the street, yet I was surrounded by buildings that told a different story.

[3] Authenticity in architecture first became an issue during the early 19th century when the emerging middle class began to acquire the same ornaments once reserved for the upper classes. With the proliferation of pattern books, architects where able to pick and choose from a variety of styles and decorations, resulting in an eclecticism that made some uncomfortable. [4] Reformers such as Pugin and Ruskin inveighed against the industrialization of architecture, with cast-iron elements standing in for hand carved masonry. By the end of the century, this reform movement had grown into the English Arts and Crafts, whose ideal of beauty was a simple vernacular cottage for every working man. [5] This began to change as the early modernists conflated the idea of simplicity with standardization. A machine aesthetic for a machine age.

The shock of WWI precipitated the first full-blown revolt against beauty as commonly understood. Modernists claimed that man’s innate nature had evolved, requiring a clean break with the past. As Le Corbusier said, “We no longer have the money to erect historical souvenirs.” [6] Yet these ideas found little currency in an America spared the worst of the war until the Great Depression. Suddenly Modernism’s socio-economic agenda seemed relevant and timely, yet not everyone was convinced.` [7] Albert Kahn, the Detroit architect whose factory buildings helped inspire modernism wrote in 1932, “ Good taste, sound judgment, laws that have governed the best in architecture heretofore, are just as applicable today as ever. [8] Many of those espousing the ultra-modern would have one believe that employment of precedent, no matter with what intelligence, is only archaeology; that a building to be worthy of consideration must resemble nothing ever done before, that cold logic must replace all romance; that light and shade, composition, proportion, detail, are all inconsequential; all that is decorative objectionable”. [9] Kahn understood that the play of light and shade on a building’s facade shines just as brightly for every new generation, regardless of changing technologies.

Who should architects build for? As the 19th century British theorist Edward Garbett put it, “Architecture is a courtesy due, from everyone who builds to humanity, on whose ground and in whose site he builds”,[10] or as the former mayor of Charleston put it, “If people can see it, it must be beautiful.” But if beauty is indeed subjective, how could Mayor Reilly presume to know what others would find beautiful? Because we share an emotional hardwiring.

According to the eminent neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, [11] “Man is not a thinking being who feels but a feeling being who thinks.” We instinctively read each other and our environment, first emotionally and then cognitively. Before our personal associations come into play, our emotions give us the shorthand with which to navigate the ocean of stimuli that otherwise would be impossible to process. [12] In a study of the New Urbanist town, Celebration, residents of spoke about the traditional styles of architecture as “having an emotional influence upon their daily lives”, and describing the streetscapes as “warm, cozy, and friendly”.

[13] The visual brain evolved by organizing large amounts of information into accessible patterns to accommodate the limits of our working memory. Because the mind organizes complexity into coherent patterns, we are attuned to prefer shapes with boundaries, rhythms and harmonic relationships. [14] The fractal nature of traditional architecture allows the viewer to discover proportional relationships between fixed units, their combinations, and the overall design. [15] The play between a detail to a building, a building to a street, and the street to a neighborhood creates a unity within variety, or a visual symphony, which we are hardwired to seek. Similar to how one unconsciously hums along with a song, the pleasure we take in the coherence of a building’s composition through its proportions help explain beauty’s appeal.

[16] One of the reasons for the continued popularity of traditional architecture is its tendency to generate the optimal amount of visual arousal. According to the environmental biologist E.O. Wilson, the mind is most aroused by patterns with about a 20% redundancy of elements, the same degree of complexity found in most traditional styles. [17] As a recent article in the New York Times put it, traditional architecture relies on “the physical laws and mathematical principles that undergird the fundamental elegance and practicality of the natural world”.

What kind of places should we build? Surely, they ought to be walkable and sustainable, but to be loved, they must also be humane, meaning buildings and public spaces that make people feel good. This has been beauty’s role ever since Vitruvius outlined Venustas as a guiding principle of architecture and urbanism. Our innate desire for beauty, defined as the harmonious arrangement of parts, is why there’s always been a general agreement on which people and places we find attractive. [18] At times we desire novelty and delight in standing out, but the pleasure we take in harmonious beauty is essential to our well-being.

So why does the Charter for the New Urbanism call for buildings to “provide their inhabitants with a clear sense of location, weather, and time” and not beauty? [19] If we are going to build “places people love”, shouldn’t we also talk about the things people love? To quote the famous urban planner, Camillo Sitte... “Major plazas and thoroughfares should wear their Sunday best in order to be a pride and joy to the inhabitants.” [20] The cynic might dismiss this as mere stage setting, but to the inhabitants of Venice, California and cities around the world, this kind of character forms an essential component of a city’s sense of place. In a recent survey by the Knight Foundation, 46,000 people in 26 cities where asked what they loved most about their cities. The majority responded that it was its physical beauty and opportunities to socialize.

In conclusion, architects and urban planners need not worry about authenticity or the zeitgeist. [21] Instead, we should advocate for humane architecture that is designed for people as they are rather than how we wish them to be. Whatever one’s aesthetic temperament, the public will not mind as long as you put their perspective first. As Oscar Wilde once said, “Put usefulness first, and you lose it, put beauty first and what you do will be useful forever.”