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Learning to Read – visual context for architectural literacy

Preface

The notion of learning to read architecture has many contexts. Scholarly texts of architectural inquiry certainly have a unique syntax, multi-disciplinary references spanning from ancient time to today and include a variety of cross generational and multi-cultural foundations. One must be thorough to comprehend the meaning of these texts. Industry speak is another facet to literacy one must master to communicate effectively in professional practice.

However, the more foreign context of architectural literacy is the reading of our visual environment. This does not involve signage or bill boards of a place that uses standard character-based language or highly suggestive graphic displays to convey messages to passer-bys. No, this is the language of constructed form. In other words, "what does the form of buildings say?"

Introduction

For the purposes of this paper, it is suggested that architectural literacy is a visual language consisting of form, that act as symbols or characters that when assembled start to create an architectural statement. However, this inquiry does not attempt to definitively define this language of architecture. Readers will only conclude with a possible understanding of one component to this language – primary form. The objective of the paper is not such they can go into their built environment and "read a building". Rather, the paper attempts to describe certain contexts as hurdles that students can use to approach not only their own architectural literacy learning process but also address what appears to be an increasing visual illiteracy, and perhaps address it in their architectural work. Further, because of the amount of observation used to describe the current social condition, it should be assumed the underlying geographic context is the United States.

It is also not the purpose of this paper to judge the esthetic qualities of the architecture. Yet, it seeks to raise the question that if legibility of architecture is indeed a problem, regardless of its apparent quality, does this lack of appreciation and understanding play a role in our collective visual esthetic.

A Reading Deficiency:

Visual literacy is a notable challenge. It is not taught in the traditional manner and art education is perhaps the only educational opportunity to boost the level of visual literacy in the United States. Thus, this idea of visual literacy and architectural language will be particularly challenging for those with non-design backgrounds - the overwhelming majority of Americans. This is important as illiteracy has circular implications on both sides of the professional isle - for practitioners looking to speak through their architecture, and to more than just a handful of scholars, and for participants who more routinely experience the architecture.

If literacy is to be discussed, at least one approach to architectural language should be discussed. This also offers one answer a question recently posed by Professor Robert Dunay of Virginia Tech to graduate students: "Why teach architecture students primary forms?" (Dunay) Primary forms: the sphere and derivatives of the cube can be characterized as symbols of an architectural language. While platonic forms are "basic" and thus offered as a foundation to literacy, they are also one of the more widely understood and appreciated. While art education is on the decline, fortunately most adolescents get to play with blocks and develop an early understanding of the cube. This might explain the innate quality that these forms have with people around the globe. Primary forms not only provide us with a base character set, but also offer a globally understood and shared set of forms.

However, there are forces at work that not only challenge but also perpetuate visual illiteracy. Signage was mentioned earlier. Particularly in America, no one needs to read a building to understand what might occur inside because it is spelled out for you. Only the traditional institutions such as old religion, government or sport are identified by their style and/or site. The rift, from architecturally conveyed symbolism of purpose to explicit signage is driven in large part by economic forces such as consumerism (Allen

2). As with many cause and effect type questions, in this case one must wonder if signage initiated visual illiteracy or if signage is necessary because of it. More important to realize is to understand that like many problems, rarely are issues due to a single cause. There is much more contributing to the visual illiteracy of Americans.

When a cultural history is catalogued for the time period of our current architectural period, *the information age* will no doubt be a common reference. As architectural history has shown, an architectural epoch and the style of that epoch would reflect the human condition of the time. Stated differently with regard to transition and change, "Changes in architectural style can be understood as, among other things, a form of social change…"(Gutenschwager 246). Regardless if one subscribes to the perspective that architecture reflects life or rather that life reflects architecture, these two conditions, culture and architecture are intimately intertwined. We live in an era of instant information. The relative accuracy of this information is beside the point. Rather, the social conditions that arise from such an efficient resource are the cause for concern.

It is important at this point to raise the idea of enlightenment in defense of our modern condition, as one would suspect that our culture is at least as enlightened as the culture that existed during the original age of enlightenment. After all, people have incredible access to information. However, it is unlikely that Kant, following a suitable orientation to the modern condition would conclude that neither the freedom of information nor the freedom offered by the governments of free nations is contributing to our enlightenment as it might have for the public in his time (Kant 1)

And as individuals, the media outlets people plug into might even be interpreted as a type of modern day "self-imposed tutelage" (Kant 1). Thus, in many cases current technology is more of a cage than a liberator. As many mobile phone advertisements claim, "total freedom" is a misnomer. In this case, ironically, there is no escape - especially from the phone itself. And it is this simple comparison where a lot of weight should be placed with respect to the problem of literacy. Ironic to a free culture, with a slave-like dependence, the majority of Americans spend more time in front of media displays than ever before. When do the tools that are created to solve problems and improve our standard of living become a problem that impacts other aspects of our lives?

The idea of enlightenment is explained differently by John Locke in his Essays Concerning Human Understanding. Here he suggests two fountains that contribute to ideas: (1) Sensation – depending wholly upon our senses within the human experience and (2) Reflection – the perception of the operations of our own mind within us" (Locke 386). Given these understandings and our current contexts for sensation and reflection, sensation would appear to be receiving more of its fair share of input.

Humans are amazingly adaptable, but we can over adapt as well. If one considers the amount of time people spend experiencing new media (sensation), rather than reflecting, the quality of the ideas according to Locke might be 50% of their potential.

Two examples are offered to parallel over-adaptability and sensation as obstacles to our visual literacy. First, the history of the walking cane can be used to illustrate the lasting impacts of repeated exposure. Throughout history, walking canes were convenient tools that accompanied persons. A cane functioned initially for security, protection and travel by foot. As these original utilitarian requirements faded, canes became fashionable accessories, absent of any physical ailment that would satisfy a utilitarian need. Into the 19th century canes were finally retired as a fashion accessory. As people returned to the streets and sidewalks without canes, where there was no physical ailment requiring a cane, a newly conditioned outward physical manifestation produced a noticeable limp. The body responded to the stimulus – in this case a downgrade in physical ability. In time, the body responded again and limps disappeared, but the point is noted. Given a stimulus, positive or negative, the body including mind and eyes respond.

Second, architectural literacy may be compared to the written language in today's culture. Consider text messaging. English expressions were nearly manipulated overnight to fit the technology options available. For example, a traditional business salutation, "to whom it may concern" is conveyed as "2wimc". Indeed, words, even short expressions are boiled down to only the salient characters. This phenomenon is not new. Messages found on the outside of letters passing between loved ones in the last century express terms of endearment in much the same manner. For example, "B.I.T.S." or "Be In Touch Soon". Is this argument strong enough to suggest a literacy problem, or is it simply a cultural condition appropriate for the time? What is new about this phenomenon is the medium has created an explosion of use – such that text messaging is a new second

language to some people. And it is in this rapid abbreviation of a formal language that is the substance of our culture that has architectural implications. Do people want abbreviated architecture capable of rapid change? Do architects now how to design such a response?

"The ever-hastening pace and differentiated nature of our culture reflects our new understanding of the universe." "We have come to realize that the perfectly symmetrical universe we once understood is more like a multitude of organized and fragmented states." "For the architect with a historical foundation in symmetrical design and construction, this shift in understanding from perfect symmetry underscores the radical change in architectural language to an ever-changing architectural language" (Jencks 1, 2, 207).

There is significant cause for concern. As mentioned earlier, both sides of the professional isle are implicated. Not only does the architectural profession rely on these tools but also the people who are affected by built forms. Can the social aspects of our modern condition, such as *speed, economy, personalization and mass production* be seen in our architecture? The next evolution of prefabricated architecture, beyond the mass production of building components (such as dimensional masonry and lumber) to where more building parts are pre-assembled is telling. Thus, in much the same way the information superhighway as changed the nature of our intellectual independence, so has technology created an architectural condition that some argue must be embraced for the profession to advance (Kieran, Timberlake xii). This reference is included here as a means to illustrate the truth of our current condition, and how that truth is manifesting itself within architecture. How this impacts design is a worthwhile question but is not attempted here. As stated in the preface no intended esthetic insinuations of the quality of today's architecture are suggested.

Conclusion

This paper started its argument on the basis of enlightenment in modern society and via observation that suggests a large proportion of our cultural mass is in an age of regression or anti-enlightenment given the intersection of technology dependence and

absolute freedom [from truth]. An excerpt from Kant is intriguing to consider given our current condition:

> "A greater degree of civil freedom appears advantageous to the freedom of mind of the people, and yet it places inescapable limitations upon it. A lower degree of civil freedom on the contrary, provides the mind with room for each man to extend himself to his full capacity. As nature has uncovered from under this hard shell the seed for which she most tenderly cares – the propensity and vocation to free thinking – this gradually works back upon the character of the people, who thereby gradually become capable of managing freedom; finally, it effects the principles of government, which finds it to its advantage to treat men, who are now more than machines, in accordance with their dignity." (Kant 4)

Freeing ourselves from our new tools is incomprehensible. It is a crutch that cannot be taken away as it would cause a permanent disability. As culture increasingly morphs, it is difficult to completely understand our current condition. Ambiguity is rampant. In retrospect, it seems easier to look back to a simpler and more digestible time period. After all, it has been condensed and packaged for us in books rather than us trying to experience, process, comprehend and definitively conclude the state of the present. Yet, those time periods that seem more digestible to us now felt the same way to those who lived it.

In his pages on revolution, Le Corbusier spoke of his own time, in relation to past history. He was also forecasting, just as history tends to, a future that would repeat itself as a second mechanical age. The prediction was accurate despite the fact the technology was electronic. And the solutions that blind-side us present opportunities that the people of the day have trouble seeing and acting upon (Le Corbusier 271).

Finally, the question remains: would a decline in architectural literacy contribute to a decline in architecture? Perhaps in knowing how our advancements can cause handicap, a healthy dose of self-discipline and return to ways that exercise our eyes and our minds that can show us the true meaning of things. Perhaps as authors who respond to the call for good literature, so can architects when the audience has improved their own visual reading level and in the process, seek to see something more.

Citations

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