Rhetoric of Form

Scott Williams
Iowa State University

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The creation of form is much like the process of writing a moving statement. A narrative which speaks to an occupant emotionally and comes to life as it is explored deeper. The designer's vocabulary of materials, textures and colors pair with the syntax to invoke feeling. This is why so many people use the term "design language," because that learning process of creating form compares so similarly to learning a second language. Just like learning a language, fluency can come only from total immersion.

When learning another language within the classroom, a student is given rules for grammar and a basic vocabulary. Likewise, an architecture student is given rules for structure and building codes. However, the student doesn't yet know how to bend these rules or that it is even possible to do so. That is what fluency is: a full understanding of the language, whicharms the designer with an arsenal of vocabulary and colloquialisms to increase the comprehensibility of the statement. When the existing phrases and words are not enough, fluency gives you the ability to bend rules and invent new words which, although they may not be grammatically correct, intensify the impact of the design.

The switch from basic classroom understanding to fluency can only be achieved through total immersion, whether you are learning Chinese or architectural design. Constant exposure turns new ideas into ingrained knowledge allowing the designer to think in terms of context, vocabulary, and comprehensibility. A designer can determine which material palette enhances the design, how much light is necessary, how the materials fit together so the seams between do not detract, but rather add to the flow of the form. All of these details are significant. However, students generally get caught up in the size of a typical bathroom stall and other problems already stored in an experienced architect's mental database. The development of this database can come from research as well as looking with a critical eye at your surroundings.

Intrapersonal listening (understanding one's own emotions) plays a big role as well. When you are in a space, what do you feel? What elements of that space make you feel that way? If there is a dark corner behind you, you may feel anxious or that something is behind you. However, if you are in that dark space looking into a lighter space, then you may feel empowered, as if you have control. If there are huge windows facing a street at ground level, there may be a feeling of a lack of privacy unless that window is the front of a busy bar allowing the space to expand into the street. Teaching yourself to understand these elements will inevitably lead to the betterment of your designs. Developing your own mental database will inevitably lead to the development of your own voice or style.

Immersing yourself not only in architecture, but in all fields of design is crucial throughout your career. As an architect, you never stop learning. There is always room to become more fluent, even poetic. Right now you are wrestling with design issues that you will not blink an eye at ten years from now because it has become second nature. I don't mean to say that experienced architects don't struggle with their designs. They just know how big that bathroom stall is without looking it up a dozen times, leaving them free to strengthen the rhetoric of their forms.