2010

Fixation on Conceptual Systems

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/datum/vol1/iss1/30

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In the back of our heads, we continue to admonish this notion of a concept. It is seen as abstract, and the question is often posed, “will somebody really see the concept unexplained as a narrative once structured in the built environment?” The answer most often is no.

Young designers often use a concept and create a design that mirrors that concept, unable to see it as merely an inspiring idea. For example, a design based on the visual qualities of light filtering
through a dense forest soon develops into synthetic trees. Although it is easy to appreciate the allure of light filtering through the forest floor, the concept is not about the actual trees inhabiting that forest. The design becomes too literal and quickly becomes a tasteless mockery of the real thing, as is often seen when man attempts to directly replicate an experience that nature has long since perfected.

At variable points within the design process, the concept becomes a hindrance if followed too strictly. Acknowledging the important moment in the design process when the concept becomes a decision-making influence is an ability that appears to come with experience. Furthermore, it becomes critical to hold onto the concept for a certain period of time. If there is no central idea to base decisions on, they soon become random and a design quickly becomes detached and incoherent.

Filtering and assembling our ideas into a coherent whole is the perpetual battle of a designer. Problems arise when there are too many great ideas. Just because a designer has a great idea does not mean it belongs in that particular project. Even to the non-designers of the world, it is immediately apparent when an idea has been forced upon the design's functionality.

We have all seen a good-looking outfit ruined by one accessory gone awry. In the same way a pair of shoes or a nice tie will not look good with every outfit, good ideas in architecture do not always translate from project to project. An important sign of maturity in a designer is the ability to filter and clarify ideas. Just because an idea is exquisite residing within a precedent does not mean it is appropriate within a different application.

There are reasons why it is generally considered unacceptable for a beginning design student to use 'aesthetically pleasing' as a reason for making design decisions.

**AN AMALGAM OF AESTHETICALLY PLEASING IDEAS DOES NOT NECESSARILY LEAD TO AN AESTHETICALLY PLEASING DESIGN.**

Theodor Adorno states that “great architecture gains its supra-functional language when it works directly from its purposes, effectively announcing them mimesically as the work’s content.” The aesthetics are the most connected when derived from an original system or concept. The importance of a concept and a connecting reason for each decision is vital to a young designer. Without a concept to return to, decisions become arbitrary.

If beauty, as aesthetic attractiveness, is so important to designing the occupiable spaces of our daily lives, then why is beauty not an acceptable reason for decision making? Using improved aesthetics exclusively as a rationale for a particular design decision is blasphemy in a critique. Admittedly, there are few designs that can survive critique from the general public if based purely on aesthetics. Function must be apparent. Neil Leach makes an interesting comment on function, stating, “there must therefore be a negotiation, it would seem, between the functional and the aesthetic — between a representation of functionality and functionality itself.” When the reasoning of aesthetic presence is based on an established system, it is still perceived as coherent, even if not a functioning element of the original system.
I have reached a point of dissatisfaction in my architectural education where I feel unable to reach the next step in my understanding of design. We all know that feeling when you walk into a space and a quiet calm of excitement settles in. We desire the ability to grasp what it is that makes the space so intriguing and so comfortable at the same time. We desire to inhabit the space in a way that we become part of it and the space, in turn, becomes part of us.

How can we possibly begin to know how someone will perceive a space from drawings and models?

I can not seem to grasp how to create such a sensation without designing 1:1 in a physical manner. How can we possibly begin to know how someone will perceive a space from drawings and models? I can fulfill a program, create legible drawings and represent a volume in a scale model but I am missing that understanding of the, for lack of better terminology, “aha” moment. I know the sensation, and I know when a design truly moves me. The only place to begin to understand the design process that creates such a sensation is to pursue continual advancement in the understanding of models and drawings. Leach discusses modeling as a form of conjuring, “architectural drawings and models could be seen in the same light as mimetic representations of an actual building, which might, as it were, 'conjure up' those buildings for the beholder. Drawings and models could therefore be seen as charged with the potential to open up a 'world.'” Leach concludes his thought stating, “the very principle of modeling must be seen as 'invocatory.'” In the end it may not be possible to utterly envision how a building will be occupied and perceived, as the building reacts to the human occupant in a reciprocal manner, “a building could be perceived as an ever-evolving fabric of occupations which is molded by human activities.”

Only through our imagination of the finalized space can one begin to understand the affect it will have. If we create a system that we can return to when making an untracked decision then the design will appear to have a purpose. “Space and the sense of space can become more than impoverished purpose only when imagination impregnates them with purposefulness.” It is easy to come to the conclusion that when designing for the human scale it is nearly impossible to predict the final outcome. Though difficult, it is through creating an intriguing scaled space that we begin to realize its potential should its proportions increase. There is no guarantee that a good design will retain its intrigue at full scale, but a lifeless design is sure to remain as such when enlarged.

I am unsure on when and where a system or concept becomes beautiful, but it can found through multiple iterations of the concept. Given my humble knowledge of the process of architecture, I know for sure beauty cannot just be pasted on. The turning point of this comprehension appears to be in understanding where the developed system or concept is applicable and where it must be loosened. “Beauty makes presence shine. It brings elegance and dignity and has a confidence, an effortlessness that is not labored or forced. This fluency and ease of presence is ultimately rooted below the surface in surer depths.”

I do not know how to teach this, nor do I even know if it is possible to teach. Maybe it is only attainable through experience and observation. For the moment I am content in my frustration. Being discontent with fulfilling a function and only creating a compilation of “pretty things” may be the first step towards an understanding, “for architecture has only ever consisted of the ornamentalization of structure and the structuration of ornament.”

Creating intriguing and stimulating scale work appears to be the first step on a long journey that requires awareness of our own perceptions of the environment around us.

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