



Aesthetic Criticism of Modern Architecture

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Abstract

Architecture once involved a spiritual sense of satisfaction and wonder. Scientific thinking rejected the interpretive and non-tangible aspects of architecture, resulting in buildings that are no longer concerned with their relationship with humanity. A significant aspect of this relationship is governed by the aesthetics of architecture. Attributes that cannot be physically measured lost their place in the architectural design. The purpose of this study is to analyse the dramatic change in the aesthetics of architecture in terms of ornamentation, symmetry and proportion. The change being talked about here is the change in architectural mindset brought about by modernist architects. Arguably, until the end of the 19th century, the classical language of architecture was highly regarded and aspired for without much debate. However, the first attempt at moving away from classical design was after the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century. Critics argue that Modern Architecture, notably Machine Age Architecture, feels out of place and leads to cultural disconnect. The purpose of this research is to fill the void in the literature by conducting a qualitative analysis of Modern Architecture and its aesthetic classifications. The paper analyses the paradigm shift in the aesthetics of architecture over the recent past.

Keywords: Aesthetics, beauty, modernism, classical, function.

Introduction

Aesthetics is a philosophy that explores the value of art, beauty, and taste. It is also characterised as “critical reflection on art, culture, and nature”. The term “aesthetics” has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, and it refers to the study of beauty and sensory experiences. The Greek word “aisthetikos” translates to “of sense perception”, which highlights the importance of sensory experience in the field of aesthetics. It encompasses a wide range of areas, including art, literature, music, and even nature, and seeks to understand the ways in which we perceive, experience, and appreciate beauty in all its forms. Aesthetics, like ethics, is part of axiology, which studies values, principles and beliefs. Aristotle considered order, symmetry, and precision to be fundamental elements of beauty, whereas Plato viewed unity, proportion, and harmonious arrangement among its components as defining features of beauty.

Depicting animals or people realistically in Islam is seen as disrespectful to Allah since human-created art is considered inferior to Allah’s creation. Thus, Islamic art has been limited to mosaics, calligraphy, architecture, and geometric and floral patterns, while Indian art has focused on evoking spiritual or abstract states within the audience through symbolic representation.

Western Mediaeval art, prior to the Renaissance of classical ideas, was mainly devotional and supported by the Church, authoritative ecclesiastical people, or rich secular benefactors. Religiously uplifting messages were prioritised over literal accuracy or artistic writing. The artisan’s abilities were viewed as divine gifts to reveal God to humanity.

In the latter part of the seventeenth century, German and British philosophers emphasised the importance of beauty in art and the aesthetic experience. They viewed art as aspiring for beauty. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) believed that appreciating beauty brings together the sensuous and cognitive aspects of human nature (Friedrich, 1994). According to Hegel, art is the beginning through which the absolute spirit manifests itself to the senses, revealing beauty objectively rather than subjectively. Schopenhauer believed that observing beauty allows the pure mind to be free from the constraints of choice.

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, believed that beauty is objective and universal, meaning that some things are attractive to all individuals. However, a viewer's judgment of beauty is also influenced by taste, which is subjective and differs based on class, culture, and education.

Aesthetic perceptions are shaped by culture and can shift over time. For example, the Victorian people in Britain saw African sculpture as unattractive, while Edwardian audiences found it delightful. The first section of Donald Norman's 2003 book, *Emotional Design*, presents one of the most generally referenced studies supporting the premise that beautiful things operate better. During the early 1900s, contemporary architecture adopted the "form follows function" principle. Frank Lloyd Wright advocated for the integration of form and function in a spiritual connection, citing nature as a prime example. As we understand more about individuals and the way they think, we see that shape and function are inextricably linked. Treating form and function as independent parts ignores the fact that beauty is more than just ornamentation. Our minds cannot help but agree. According to Norman, we strive for success in things we enjoy.

According to Frank Lloyd Wright, the human spirit is responsible for the craftsmanship and beauty we see. In 1937, Wright noted that a mere structure may lack a sense of "spirit." He believed that while beaver dams, beehives, and bird's nests are lovely, but architecture is a greater manifestation of human nature (*Storrer and allin, 2002*). Traditional architectural forms can adhere to or deviate from the principles of the various styles that emerged after Roman classicism. However, choosing these styles demonstrates a desire to maintain continuity with the life and architecture of the time period. Incorrect understanding of fundamental principles may be considered bad taste.

Modern architecture is recognised for breaking away from the past and reshaping the field of architecture. Introducing new technology resulted in significant urban alterations, aesthetic modifications, and new construction ideas. Modern architecture brought about significant developments in the arts and human understanding. The introduction of this architectural style has resulted in a lack of distinguishing features across diverse structures, leading to homogeneity (*Amiri, 2016*). In the late 19th century, modern architecture emerged as a school of thought with a strong theoretical foundation based on contemporary ideas. According to Ghobadian (2003), this style of architecture became popular in the American city of Chicago and European cities like Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. Certain architectural styles are fads that swiftly come and go while others survived for centuries, even impacting modern architecture.

Many critics have made a compelling case that architects have abandoned architectural standards and lost touch with our past and the predecessors who constructed it. When the phrase 'architecture as an art' comes up, most people immediately think of classical Greek and Roman architecture. In an essay, Dr. Radomir Tylecote discusses the loss of beauty in contemporary architecture and the necessity to restore the elegance that classical structures still exude (*Rees-Mogg et al., 2019*). Modernist architecture has been criticised on several occasions, notably in the picturesque city of Paris. Take, for instance, the Tour Montparnasse, a modern office building in the heart of the finely built town of Paris. Parisians loathed the skyscraper so much that the government had to create laws prohibiting the construction of structures taller than 33 meters. People's reactions clearly indicate that the structure annoyed them psychologically. It appeared odd and disrupted the overall composition of the scene. If it were the other way around, a classical edifice amid a concrete jungle would become a tourist attraction (*Jones, Blundell, and Canniffe, 2012*).

Another example can be found in Austria, where Adolf Loos, who subsequently wrote the piece 'Ornament and Crime' denouncing ornamentation in architecture, was appointed to design a house in the heart of the city. What he constructed caused concern in Vienna. A modest practical house with no window roofs and no distinguishable aesthetic earned it the epithet 'the House without Eyebrows' (*Loos, 2019*). It even upset Emperor Franz Joseph to the point that he was forced to shut all of the windows overlooking this structure.

Modern ideas of the building also received criticism in England. In 2018, Housing Minister Kit Malthouse greeted the inauguration of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission with a tweet that compared a neoclassical courtroom in Alabama to a steel and glass structure in London. "One will stand for centuries, one won't," wrote Malthouse (*Malthouse, 2018*).

It is noteworthy that towns that previously boasted Classical Architecture are often the ones that resist contemporary architecture. Architects have abandoned the idea that beauty is as important as utility or strength when designing buildings, according to Dr. Tylecote. He believes that architects are not only out of touch with aesthetics but are also

responsible for their destruction. Modernism, which aimed to change people's perception of beauty, failed to do so, as humans possess an innate sense of beauty. The classical architects were masters of line and proportion, and their constructions were beautiful and full of life. Although modern architects may have forgotten the importance of beauty, our human instincts have not. (*Thwaites et al. 2007*). It is impossible for any advertising campaign to convince a tourist to visit Le Corbusier's modernised architecture of Chandigarh instead of the Taj Mahal in Agra. In fact, even modern architects themselves admit to this preference. After constructing the Lloyd's building, Richard Rogers chose to live in a Regency townhouse located in Chelsea.

The impact of architecture on one's emotions can be understood by simply looking at a powerful monument. In a forward in the same book, Richard Franklin Sammons states that the involvement of orders in both theory and practice was never questioned by early 20th-century idiomatic architects. Classical architecture, which was initiated by the Ancient Greeks and Romans, formed the basis of modern architecture. Even today, their timeless architecture is not criticised, though modernists can disregard it as something of the past (*Murphy et al., 2012*). With the production of modern architecture at a fast pace, people are failing to acknowledge the influence classical architecture had all over the world. The classical principles of architecture are being ignored, and their relevance is being undervalued. This article aims to explore the intentions behind Classical Architecture's façade design and the reasons for its timeless appeal to both professionals and the general public. (*"Application of Traditional Architectural Elements in Modern Architectural Design" 2021*).

Hence, we study the importance of beauty in the aesthetics of a building and how it affects us psychologically. Beauty has a purpose and should be considered as a function in architectural discourse.

Importance of beauty in architecture:

Plato and Aristotle, two famous philosophers, believed that beauty is the most important aspect of life, although they had different definitions of it. In nature, beauty is used as a survival mechanism. Animals employ camouflage to avoid predators. According to Rothenberg (2013), living organisms interact with their surroundings to increase their chances of survival and reproduction. Architecture follows the principle that form affects function, and attractiveness influences the survival rate of buildings. Therefore, architecture must be both functional as well as aesthetically pleasing (*Qureshi, 2015*). According to Hosey (2012), beauty is essential for sustainability because unattractive buildings are more likely to be demolished and replaced, which leads to temporary and unsustainable outcomes. Beauty is related to pleasure. We experience pleasure when we see something beautiful. Hormones such as oxytocin, endorphins, and DHEA are released in our brains, which causes us to feel this pleasure. Endorphin is essentially the body's emotional pain killer, which fights stress and depression. These hormones are fittingly called happy hormones (*Coburn et al., 2017*). Therefore, living in a beautifully constructed city can directly improve the well-being of its inhabitants.

If we relate architecture solely to function and form, and build just to serve a tangible purpose, how would then architecture be able to have a positive impact on our psychology? The answer can be found on the basis of our evolution. It has been found that buildings that incorporate such elements that our subconscious brain recognises as having similar characteristics to those environments that helped our ancestors to survive, provide a sense of pleasure (*Vartanian et al., 2013*).

Importance of Façade:

According to one study, 65 per cent of a newborn's neural organisation is dedicated to facial recognition. A familiar face offers a child a sense of security and comfort. This contributed to the Nine Square pattern's popularity in architecture. It can be found in some of the world's most celebrated architectural works (*Hosseini et al. 2019*). Another significant factor contributing to the Nine Square pattern's popularity in architecture is its likeness to human facial shape. Facial recognition is one of humanity's most crucial survival strategies.

According to some people, such as Prum, beauty is crucial for the survival and well-being of Homo sapiens, just like it is for other animals. Additionally, our brains are wired to appreciate aesthetics. The saying "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" does not apply, as certain evolutionary biology research has linked architecture to the significance of beauty in the biosphere. Alexander's four-volume dissertation, *The Nature of Order*, highlights the importance of beauty by

explaining how evolutionary growth led to humans developing a preference for attractive natural objects, which helped us survive and thrive. The concept of “biophilia” is gaining popularity, which refers to the love of living creatures and their structures. Robert Venturi, D. S. Brown, and S. Izenour suggest that Modernism has replaced the balance of “firmitas, utilitas, and venustas” with the idea that “utility plus firmness is equal to delight”.

The paradigm shift in modern architecture:

Classical architects took inspiration from the laws of construction followed by nature. On the other hand, modern architects such as Le Corbusier got inspired by man-made machines like passenger jets, cruise liners, automobiles, grain silos, etc.

They also based their design on the basis of machine aesthetics. This means their design depends on shapes that a machine can make with ease. This enabled them to mass-produce. Modern architects were ready to compromise the beauty of a building for the sake of achieving machine aesthetics (Roger, 2021).

Classical architects were artists first as they used their imagination and skill while designing buildings that were aesthetically pleasing, structurally strong and functionally adept. They did not compromise their design easily and even designed their own machines to achieve their vision.

To understand the importance of beauty as understood by the original builders and artists, it is critical to study the principles of Classical Architecture. How architecture was perceived before the 19th century is totally different from how it is understood after.

Proportion:

Both classical and modern architectural design methods aim for proportional harmony. Proportion is a fundamental component of traditional architectural design methodologies. Architects throughout the classical period relied on the uncompromising pursuit of proportionality, which resulted in the aesthetic theory known as column architecture. Similarly, in modernist design techniques, proportion again is the key factor. Several modern architects have addressed this in their theoretical work. The foundational concept behind the baseline technique is to emphasise proportion. Le Corbusier stated, *“The baseline is spiritual satisfaction, which leads to the exploration of ingenious proportions and the proportion of harmony.”* (Jiang, 2019) It makes the job more coordinated. At this point, the two design approaches (classical and modern) are similar.

Throughout history, humans have devised various systems of proportion. Vitruvius, an architect from ancient Rome, examined the proportions and relationships of the human body in his treatise on architecture. Leonardo da Vinci later expounded on Vitruvius’s ideas. The Greeks and Romans employed proportion to shape a distinct architectural style. Another enduring system of proportion is the golden rectangle, also known as the ‘phi’ rectangle or rectangle of the whirling squares, which has been utilised in art and architecture for millennia since at least the Renaissance period. The proportions are considered divine due to their abundant presence in nature and the human body. From ancient Greece to the Renaissance and modern architecture, the golden rectangle and its related proportional relationships have been utilised in designing buildings, from individual elements to floor plans and elevations. It is suggested that the golden ratio is inherent in nature and our bodies, influencing our minds, which explains why these proportions resonate with us.

Le Corbusier wrote in “Vers Une Architecture” that “(the baseline) has existed since the birth of architecture.” [1] Since the beginning, the baseline approach has served as one of the fundamental design methodologies used by designers. The illustrations below provide Le Corbusier’s straightforward explanation of the baseline approach. According to Le Corbusier’s reasoning, the baseline principle applies to both classical and modern architecture.

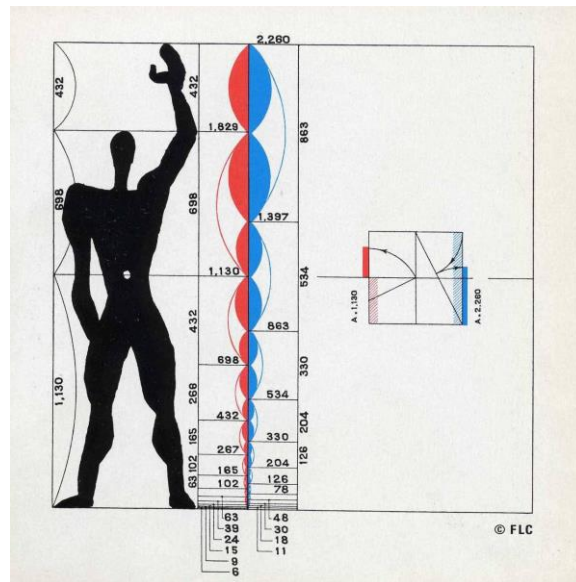


Figure 1: Modular Man by Le Corbusier (using the golden rectangle).

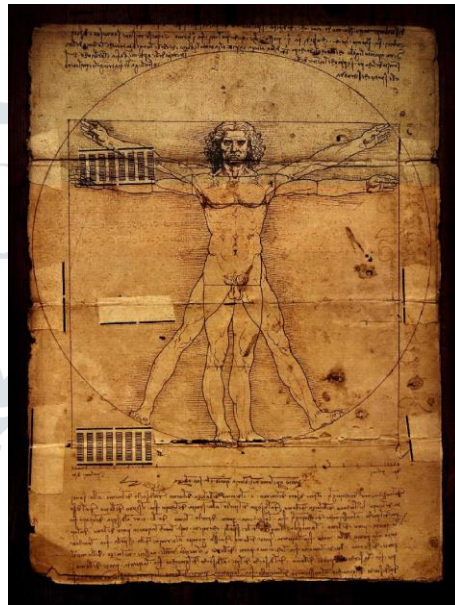


Figure 2: Vitruvian Man by Da Vinci (using the human body as being perfectly proportional).

Scale:

Scale refers to the relative sizes of architectural elements and how users interact with them. Some buildings are designed to be a suitable size for the people who utilise them. That is, the windows, doors, rooms, materials, and overall size are appropriate for human proportions. Some structures are sized more for their surroundings or purposes. That is, the construction elements lend themselves to creating a large, overwhelming, or even transcendent look. Then, there are structures whose size is intentionally confusing.

The Orders:

The Corinthian Order is based on a plant called Acanthus. It is regarded as an ancient symbol of regeneration and immortality. It grows abundantly in the Mediterranean region. Here is the story of the Corinthian order narrated by Vitruvius in his treatise:

In the ancient city of Corinth in Greece, a freeborn maiden once became very ill. She died before she was able to marry. Her grieving nurse gathered some of the young maiden's favourite possessions and put them in a basket and placed the

basket on her grave as a mourning gesture. An acanthus plant grew from underneath the basket and over time surrounded it with branches and leaves. Later, a poet and artist named Callimachus noticed the grave while strolling. Mesmerised by the beauty of the leafy basket, he decided to draw it and thus, unwittingly created the image for the Corinthian Order (Ching et al. 2014).

The orders are the foundation of the classical language of architecture. Properly applied, the orders can still make our buildings speak eloquently with soul.

Supreme Court Building:

It boasts splendid use of Corinthian Order from Rome's Imperial Period. The orders relate to the unparalleled dignity and monumentality of a building such as the Supreme Court. Ancient Roman temples were fashioned to house gods and were meant to command all. Such temple like buildings, especially when adorned in Corinthian order, still possess that superiority. The Supreme Court's impressive appearance conveys the message that it houses a noble institution which indeed it does.

Similarly, the temple of finance, the New York Stock Exchange building with its Corinthian Columns signifies that investments are secured and are properly managed. When we study the designs of nature, we find that maximum efficiency with minimum input (Nguyen, 2008).

Studying biomimicry and natural forms engineering principles can inspire architects and engineers to achieve more sustainable and efficient systems.

Continuity:

Let's compare continuity in the construction of a building to continuity found in nature. At the top, most contemporary buildings do not come to an end smoothly but rather stop (leading the eye!). Classical buildings are strictly very well-proportioned, symmetrical, and balanced. They have been drawn from nature, where we find almost everything in perfect symmetry and also follow a certain proportion. Famously, the golden ratio was revealed to be found everywhere in nature from a leaf to the celestial bodies in the solar system (Spuybroek, 2008). If this proportion is slightly disturbed, it just doesn't feel right. In architecture, the concept of pattern is commonly known as rhythm, which directs the movement of the eye from one focal point to another. Structures that integrate specific visually appealing patterns or rhythm are perceived as more attractive because our minds have been trained to link these patterns with feelings of safety, security, well-being and survival. The architectural creations dating back from early civilisations until the Industrial Revolution continue to influence our mental and emotional states significantly. These structures, with their repetition and balance of elements, evoke a sense of harmony and order that resonates with our innate desire for stability (Gifford et al., 2000).

"Please keep in mind that there is no connection between the pleasure you derive from ornamentation and that which you derive from construction or use. Attempting to reason between the two will only dull your appreciation of beauty. Keep in mind that the most beautiful things in the world are often the most useless, such as peacocks and lilies." - John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853). The incorporation of pattern and rhythm is essential in contemporary architecture for the creation of visually appealing and emotionally gratifying environments. Georges Gromort, in his book *Elements of Classical Architecture*, defines the word classical in terms of architecture. He states, "Classical design arises from understanding composition based on a hierarchical formal system governing the interrelations of parts and whole: every part is also a whole, and every whole is also a part". He explains that just the columns and mouldings of an 'order' do not make a building classical, although orders are undeniably significant parts of the classical design (Gromort, 2001). The five orders provide invaluable lessons in proportion, scale, and the use of ornament and hence form the basis of classical design.

Conclusion:

Industrialisation and the development of machines contributed to advancements in construction, including new materials, logic, and standardisation, which influenced architectural aesthetics. Modern architecture is known for its

focus on function, standards, productivity, and self-referential designs. This study highlights that Modern architecture prioritises efficiency and function to promote comfort, hygiene, quality of life, and well-being.

It's a natural truth that we are designed to spend more time with aesthetically beautiful things and even claim that beautiful products are easier to use. Sometimes functionality is enhanced by beauty. Human beings are inherently attracted towards aesthetically beautiful things. If two things have the same exact functional attributes and one is more beautiful than the other, we prefer the beautiful one. Beauty can be subjective, but some things are universally beautiful while some are universally ugly. Classical architecture is universally beautiful without any argument. Modern architects may defend their architecture but they have no doubts over the beauty of classical architecture.

On the outside, the design approach of classical architecture differs significantly from that of modern architecture. However, from the standpoint of aesthetic philosophy, these two design processes have intrinsic similarities. During the classical period, we gained a lot of valuable design expertise. If we can accurately comprehend the contrasts and similarities between the two design processes, the design expertise acquired from classical architecture may be incorporated into contemporary architecture.

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