Architecture and Meaning

AK/FA 2100
Art and technology
Jan. 4, 2005
Architecture is the unavoidable art.

Architecture is the physical record of human activity and aspiration.

Architecture is what nature cannot make.

Like written history or literature.

Mayan Temple, Mexico
architecture as the whole of the environment built by humans
humans think as they build. Give expression to feelings and values
buildings have messages, either conscious or unconscious
Different buildings - different meanings

- Capital building, Washington D.C.
- Empire State Building, NYC
- Big Donut Shop, LA
- Parliament Hill, Ottawa
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architecture has the power to affect and condition human behaviour

the physiological response to architecture

architecture as symbolic representation

a building may seem strange if it does not correspond to our symbolic vocabulary

Antonio Gaudi, Barcelona
Park Guell, stalagmite vaulting, 1900-1914
Marcus Vitruvius (25AD) - most basic definition of architecture

good architecture must provide utility, firmness and beauty - or commodity, firmness and delight (Henry Wotten)

Illustration from Marcus Vitruvius’ De Architectura Libri Dece (Ten Books on Architecture)
Utility: the arrangement of rooms or spaces to best accommodate its uses. Buildings must be adjusted to suit the site.
Beauty: “pleasing and in good taste and that its members (parts) are in due proportion to correct principles of symmetry”
Today we can restate these ancient principles as such:

- does a building reinforce and support its use? Does it enhance its setting?
- Is it built well?
- Does it appeal to the senses?

Daniel Libeskind,
ROM Extension, Toronto
Function: a difficult element in mid 20th century
- around 1920: function restricted to a purely mechanical sense
- International Style

AEG Turbine Factory, Peter Behrens, Berlin, 1908-9
Function: a difficult element in mid 20th century
around 1920: function restricted to a purely mechanical sense
International Style

Fagus Factory, Alreld, Germany, 1911, Walter Gropius
Gropius: “a thing is determined by its nature and if it is to be fashioned so as to work properly its essence must be investigated and fully grasped. A thing must answer its purpose in every way, that is fulfill its function in a practical sense and must be serviceable, reliable and cheap.”

Gropius, Bauhaus Master’s house, Dessau, 1926
Le Corbusier:” the house is a machine for living in”

Bruno Taut: “The aim of architecture is the creation of a perfect, and therefore most beautiful efficiency.”

Bruno Taut, Glass Pavillion, Werkbund Exhibition, Cologne, 1914
many buildings no longer accommodate the function for which they were originally designed
alternative is to design a building that can accommodate all possible future activities
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: “Vielzweckraum,” the all purpose space or universal space
not without its problems

Crown Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 1952-56
- “One single building for all nations and climates” - Le Corbusier
- Ignores the reality that function is socially and culturally influence

Crown Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 1952-56
Function has several components

- **Pragmatic utility**: accommodating a specific use or activity
- **Circulatory function**: to accommodate movement from area to area
- **Symbolic function**: building makes a visible statement

United States Television Factory floor, 1947
Function has several components

- pragmatic utility: accommodating a specific use or activity
- circulatory function: to accommodate movement from area to area
- Symbolic function: building makes a visible statement

The Paris Opera - Charles Garnier, 1861-75
Function has several components
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- Symbolic function: building makes a visible statement

Palace of the Soviets, Moscow
(was never built)
Function has several components

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Mies Van der Rohe, Chapel, Illinois Institute of Technology
- Function has several components
- Pragmatic utility: accommodating a specific use or activity
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Minnesota state capital, Saint Paul, 1895-1905, Cass Gilbert
Function has several components

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Eero Saarinen, Kennedy Airport, NYC, 1956
No building is devoted wholly to one kind of function

Diagram to the right shows relationship between utilitarian and symbolic functions

the psychological function: optimum satisfaction of all types of function
Louis Kahn’s design of a laboratory space
local example: Perimeter institute for theoretical physics, waterloo