Architecturally Speaking

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Architecture

Architecture involves many specific considerations—dimensions, weights, stresses, etc.—about which there is seldom room for disagreement. If any question arises concerning, say, the length of a certain corridor or the height of a certain building, it is a simple matter to measure it or to read the size off a scale drawing. We do not sit up nights arguing over the weight of a cubic foot of concrete or the crushing strength of brick. We put it to the test. We use, in short, the operational approach.

But architecture also includes numerous intangibles—unity, rhythm, scale, grandeur, to mention only a few. Concerning these there is plenty of room for disagreement; so much, in fact, that heads have rolled because of them.* And since there is no way of going out and measuring unity or grandeur, the disagreements are seldom resolved but continue to grow in both magnitude and intensity until they finally achieve the respectable status of Schools of Thought.

A certain rather jolly field of study called semantics has developed a technique for resolving differences in—

* The Emperor Hadrian of Rome in the second century A.D. ordered the execution of Apollodorus of Damascus, an architect who disagreed with the Emperor over the esthetics of a proposed temple.
volving intangibles. It is known as “find the referent.” In other words, find the specific thing or things to which the intangible under discussion refers.*

The device employed in this fascinating game is the “abstraction ladder.” A series of terms is set in vertical order, leading from the intangible (abstraction) at the top to the specific thing (referent) at the bottom. While this process is not guaranteed to settle all disputes, it will most certainly do a great deal toward clarifying the issue and putting a halt to endless quantities of random sniping.

Let us say, for example, that A and B disagree about the nature of happiness. After coming almost to blows, each constructs an “abstraction ladder.” A’s ladder looks like this:

Happiness
Love
Woman
Sweetheart
Ethel

B’s ladder, it turns out, reads somewhat differently:

Happiness
Fun
Sport
Fishing
Trout

A is understandably resentful over any comparisons be-

* The term semantics ordinarily refers to the study of meanings and significances in verbal expressions. But General Semantics is now understood as the name for a new structural approach in which man is considered as a whole; his perceptions, interpretations, knowledge, intellectual and emotional reactions, and bodily functions are treated as inseparable phases of a total psycho-physiological process.
At any rate, it should become clear to Messrs. A and B that although they might discuss the relative charms of Ethel and trout, there is very little point to their arguing about happiness. Their referents for the abstraction “happiness” being different, they are not talking about the same thing at all.

Unfortunately, most people never bother to find the referents for the abstractions they use. If pressed to say what they mean by one abstraction, they will often answer with another. This process sometimes results in elegant language but seldom in any clarification.

Take the term “architecture” itself. Even men who devote their whole lives to architecture find it hard to say just what they mean by the word.

X will say it means “the art and science of building.” Of course, both “art” and “science” are abstractions of a high order, having to do with processes in which the rational and intuitive faculties are used in widely varying and unmeasurable proportions. One could argue indeterminably over what one means by “art” as distinct from “science,” let alone how much of each is involved in “architecture.” Y prefers Sir Henry Wotton’s phrase, “commodity, firmness and delight.” Since each of these would describe Marilyn Monroe just as aptly as the Parthenon, the phrase is not much help in arriving at a definition of architecture. Goethe’s poetic expression, “frozen music,” which Z swears by, has an intriguing sound

* "... mathematicians have an intuitive predilection for selecting their terms and pursuing their line of enquiry among possible meanings... the feeling which directs the selection of material which is... interesting and important is akin to the artistic sense, but, unfortunately... has been neglected by 'psychologists.'" Alfred H. Korzybski, Science and Sanity.
but a disappointing lack of substance, for music at a
standstill has neither melody, rhythm, nor harmonic
sequence. It is just as difficult to grasp an image of such
music as to accept architecture without theme, pattern,
or sequence.

What, then, is architecture? Or rather, what specific
referents can we find for it?

I remember as a small child being taken to some
public building by my father. There, on one of the
walls, was a grand mural painting depicting a muscular
giant, almost nude, holding a cluster of ships in one
hand and some trucks in the other. Airplanes buzzed
around his head, and a long train wound its way be-
tween his outsize feet.

"Who is that?" I asked, clutching at my father's leg.

"Transportation," he replied. And even to this day I
got curious mental pictures when I read in the paper
that Transportation Is Tied Up, or Transportation In-
creases 50%. The effect of this kind of personification
is to make it hard to realize the extremely simple fact
that the abstraction "transportation" has vehicles, driv-
ers, cargo, and passengers for its referents. That's all.
There is no giant, clothed or otherwise.

Similarly, "architecture" consists of architects, build-
ings, and people. There is no gracious lady in classic
robes, holding aloft a pair of dividers and a triangle,
however thrilling such an image may seem. And there
is definitely not so much as a single chip of frozen
music.

Insofar as the architect is concerned, architecture is
above all a creative process. He has an idea in his mind,
an effect, an emotion, let us say, which he wishes to
express in terms of structure. His intention of going

beyond mere utility to express something of greater hu-
man meaning is architecture, to him, regardless of the
success or failure of his actual accomplishment. To the
architect, in short, architecture is a subjective matter
dependent upon his purpose. The element of purpose,
therefore, must find its place in our definition of archi-
tecture.

The observer (people-in-general) is uninformed as
to the architect's purpose. He looks at a building, and
an image falls upon the retina of his eye by a process
as mechanical as photography. This image has no mean-
ing to him until his mind has interpreted it and his
emotions have responded to it. Of course, such inter-
pretive and emotional responses are totally dependent
upon his personal sensitivity and the degree of his train-
ing. The observer's consciousness of architecture, in
other words, is as much a subjective matter as the archi-
tect's purpose. There is no architecture for the observer,
except insofar as he is aware of it. Awareness, then, is
the second element in our definition.

Thus far we have been speaking of matters existing
either in the mind of the architect or the mind of the
observer. What of the structure itself? Surely the struc-
ture, to be architecture, must contain some character-
istics that have an objective reality other than dimension
and weight. Here we are on softer ground. We can say
no more than that the structure must be composed of
shapes, colors, textures, lights, and darks—physical ele-
ments, in short, which are capable of evoking the emo-
tional awareness already referred to as the observer's
response and capable of expressing the purpose of the
architect. We must always come back to the observer
and the architect, as representatives of the human spe-
cies, because architecture exists only for humans. We do not expect a dog to be stirred by the majesty of the Pantheon or the tracery of Rheims. Clearly, therefore, when we attempt to define the objective characteristics of architecture we are doing nothing more than approaching human subjectivity from another angle.

Architecture can thus be understood in three ways—three levels, if you like. One, the creative intention of the designer; two, the potential evocativity of the structure itself; and three, the response of the observer.

Usually when people disagree over whether or not a certain building is architecture, their differences of opinion lie in each of them having taken only one of the three possible views of the matter. One may be attacking or defending the intention of the designer, another may be revealing his own sensitivity—or lack of it—while yet a third may be attempting to analyze the building in accordance with some esoteric formula of proportions.

The abstraction “architecture,” tracked down to its referents, becomes a trio of emotions—emotion intended, emotion inherent, and emotion evoked. The common element is emotion, and if one must use a single term to define architecture, that is it. Architecture is emotion. If the emotion is mild, so is the architecture. If the emotion is great, the architecture is great. If there is no emotion, there is no architecture; there is only building.

I am blandly using the word “emotion” here as though it were a term with a single, well-accepted meaning. Since it is very far from being such, I must specify not its “true meaning,” for there is no such thing, but the sense in which I mean to apply it.

Actually, the complex neural reactions and interactions that go on within us can no more be separated into parts labelled “intellect” and “emotion,” than “space” can be separated from “time,” or “body” from “mind.” These splits, which are possible only under the Aristotelian structure of our language, have already been discarded by modern medicine and physics.

But granting that “emotion” and “intellect” are inseparable, there are still neural activities which are more thalamic than cortical, or more cortical than thalamic. They are more (or less) in the lower, automatic areas of the brain or more (or less) in the upper, cortical layers, in which association and reasoning take place. It is in this sense that I use the word “emotion”; “feelings,” “moods,” “states of mind,” etc., fall into this category.

It is significant, in view of many of the points to be made in successive chapters, that these “feelings” deal almost exclusively with the individual’s relation to his world, which is not surprising when one considers that matters such as fear, safety, and so forth are among the most fundamental and ancient concerns of all living creatures.

In relation to specific buildings, examples of architecture, we feel ourselves to be small (a sense of awe); exalted (a sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves); protected (a sense of shelter); dominated (a sense of the power of authority); uplifted (a sense of the mystery of God). In all these cases, and many others that come easily to mind, the thing to note is that the observer asks himself, “What is this building to me?” or rather, “What am I to it?” Large? Small? Weak? Strong? Protected? Exposed? Threatened? Scorned? Gratified?
The basic desires and fears of the observer as touched and activated by architecture are the "emotions" to which I refer. They are the essence of architecture, the core of the meaning of architecture, on the lowest primitive levels of survival-motives no less than on the loftiest transcendent aspirations of which we are capable.