Design Criteria in Architecture

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1 Introduction

In an earlier piece (Pitt, 2006b) I contrasted criteria for successful design in architecture with that in engineering. I argued there, among other things, that with the advent of "postmodern historicism" in architecture, beginning in the 1970s with the work of Venturi, there ceased to be operative criteria to evaluate architectural design and I made a first step towards outlining what such criteria might look like in the current age. I suggested that:

- Variation is important, but not variation that negates everything else. The Pompidou Center in Paris is an example of this.
- Harmony is important, but not harmony to the point of boredom. An example of a harmonious but boring architectural creation is the Levittown type suburban housing development in the United States.

In this chapter I elaborate those ideas, contrasting them with traditional canonical criteria, and offer some additional criteria in an effort to capture this fundamental idea: that architectural design must strive to make architectural projects work in context, given their functions. In short, I will develop a design objective called "Common Sense Design", based in part on some of the suggestions William James makes in his 1907 *Lectures on Pragmatism*. In part this involves developing the idea that certain designs have managed to survive relative to the domain in which they were developed and that we should learn from them. This is an argument against universalist principles of design, focusing on not just the locality of the site, but, rather, on the insights we can glean from the indigenous culture. As an example I will end by considering the Michael Graves complex in The Hague, which, from a distance, is a success, but, in context and in impact, appears, on one interpretation, to be a failure. Seen in another light, Graves' complex can be favorably compared to Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum.

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2 Architectural Design and Philosophy of Technology

First, why the emphasis on architectural design? Or, more bluntly, what does architectural design have to do with the philosophy of technology?

To speak of living in a technological society is to speak of a society in which human activity seamlessly engages artifacts of one kind or another, from computers to houses to shuttles to legal systems, etc., in the processes of living and seeking a better life. Those artifacts are designed. Sometimes they are designed for one purpose and used for another, but they remain designed. Thus, at the heart of the concept of an artifact is the concept of design. And since the philosophy of technology is concerned in many ways with artifacts, many questions about architectural design can be seen to fall within its purview.

Put simply, architects design spaces as well as the constructional systems that enclose and mediate them. These are spaces that we use for living, working, recreation, etc. Sometimes they contribute significantly to achieving the goals we seek to accomplish in those spaces and sometimes they do not. Therefore, before we design the space we ought to have some criteria to guide our design. We need such criteria to maximize the probability that we will succeed in accomplishing the goal of creating a space that contributes positively to the activity for which that space was designed. These criteria should serve two purposes:

1. they should guide design, and
2. they should be the criteria by which we judge the success of the design.

To say this is not to commit to a vicious circle, i.e., we judge the finished product in terms of whether it meets the criteria we used to design it. It is more complicated than that because in the time line from initial concept to a design to finished product it is quite possible, in fact, I would argue, almost inevitable that the meanings of some or all of the criteria undergo subtle but important changes. That is, we may think we know what we mean by harmonious when we start the design process, but when we look at the finished space, it may not have turned out to be harmonious, in which case either we did not know what we meant by the concept when we began, or the concept of harmony we employ in evaluating the end space has changed from when we started and we now have two different interpretations of the same word. This can happen for a variety of reasons, but my explanation is that when we think of a concept like Harmony, given that it is part of our *criteria* for a successful space, we jump to the conclusion that as a criterion it must be universal and fixed in its meaning, when in fact there are no such fixed meanings.[1] To take this one step farther, I am willing to defend the view that in each application of, for example, the concept of harmony, we add to or subtract from what we thought we meant when we started the design process. Meanings change in application, or to put it in Peircean terms, meanings change when reality pushes against language.

[1] This analysis is firmly related to Goodman's (1955) new problem of induction and his concept of projection.