

OBJECTIVITY IN THE DEFINITION AND MEANING OF ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Architecture is as ancient as the desire of humanity to be comfortable, safe and cultured. The meaning of architecture has continued to be on the arena of debate because of the variables that impact on it, and because architecture encompasses and accommodates every human endeavor, its definition is mostly and often influenced by these human realities. There is no architecture without a context. This work aims at reawakening the discussion on the meaning and definition of architecture in an attempt at objectivity. Using the comparative narrative method, some opinions and submissions regarding both meaning and definition are reviewed and highlighted in an effort to determine their objective content in the whole debate. It is observed that style was mostly employed in the classification of architecture and that style itself is influenced by a number of factors. Hence some of the factors include materials of construction, techniques and climate. Also at the heart of this classification is aesthetics which is also culture and time bound. Though it is argued that even in its uniformity that distinctiveness is a quality of architecture, there is evidence that following the scientific approach and with more research, especially in the area of valuemetrics as espoused in the Hartman's theory in the science of ethics, objectivity in the definition and meaning of architecture can be attained.

Introduction

According to Ching et al (2007), Architectural profession pre-dates the establishment of schools because it has always been a cultural part of mankind. Like the processes plants and animal domestication in agriculture, architecture emerged in humanity's pre-history and will remain an integral part of its expression to the very end Ching et al (2007). Pre- historic humanity contended with it as they organized their physical environment to meet their needs of shelter. In ancient Greek, the architect, known as the archi-tekton (the master builder) was instrumental to the classification and establishment of the notion of a civilized society. Then architecture was considered the mother of the visual arts since painting, decorations and sculpture often developed in the context of building projects, especially in the form of murals or friezes. However, unlike other forms of art, the principal aim of architecture was to fulfill the basic human need for security; the provision protection from inclement weather and the intrusion of wild animals. It is almost impossible to escape evidences of building activity wherever people lived (Gympel, 1996).

Synoptic Review of Architecture in Human History and the Emergency of Theories

Exemplary works of architecture abound in antiquity, the temple of Artemis in Ephesus, seen as one of the Seven Wonders of the World and the Roman Pantheon that is regarded as one of the most enigmatic structures of classical architecture. These were created by architect-master builders without formal architectural training. The first formal documentation of architectural works was done by Vitruvius, the first century architect, who documented his thoughts and activities in written treatise *d'architectura*. This treatise was available for study by the renaissance architects, many of whom were also great scholars and thinkers. The renaissance architects; Alberti Leon Battista (1404-1472), reputed to be the greatest architect-theoretician of his age and the intellectual forerunner of the versatile genius Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Vignola Giacomo (1507-1573), and Serlio Sebastino (1475-1534), despite not having any formal architectural education, respectively wrote extensive treatises on architecture in their: *de re-aedificatoria*, *regola delli cinque ordini d'architettura*, *tutte l'opere d'architettura* perspective.

These Master builders, Alberti in particular, heralded the idea of formal analysis of buildings. Relying on the basic ideas of Vitruvius, Alberti enunciated the well-known mathematical definition which states that beauty consists in a rational integration of proportions of all parts of a building in such a way that every part has its absolutely fixed size and shape, and nothing could be added or taken away without destroying the harmony of the whole. He expanded the Vitruvian principles and focused more on arithmetical, mathematical and algebraic descriptive analyses of compositional forms. This theory of conformity of ratios and correspondence of parts (organic geometry) was propagated for every building, especially for churches (Wittkower 1965).

It is important to note that while easily distinguishable from other forms of arts, like painting and sculpture, what constitutes architecture has remained a point of contestation. While some argued that architecture arises out of an urge to protect oneself from the elements, others submitted that it is an aggregate expression of symbolic desires that is at its best when impregnated in local traditions (Ching et al, 2007). There are those who define architecture from the point of view of use and purpose; the functionality of products of architecture, especially buildings. In this group are Nwagbara et al (2010) who posited that "a building is basically a shelter. It encloses space to create satisfactory internal environment for appropriate activities of man. The space must be protected from excessive heat, light, air and noise; it also provides adequate heat, light and air for comfort. Thus the building is an environmental envelope (Foster, 1991)... fulfilling this function, the building must be of adequate weather resistance, strength and stability". Given these subjective postulations, which by their nature triggers debates as to the nature and content of architecture, contextuality is self evident. Architecture must be domiciled. Its domain

impacts significantly on its contents and meanings. Hence, a piece of architecture can be multi-lingua when located in different climes. The question then arises as to whether the meaning or nature of architecture is defined by the shifting sands of time and clime. If that be the case, then architecture means all and nothing. It supposes that architecture depends. But as a concept it must possess an innate meaning and character, the architectureness that is subject to qualification by the context of time and location.

Sometimes, theories of what constitutes architecture are linked to the identification of certain variables like space, structure, or social processes in terms of which buildings should be seen or evaluated. Zevi (1957), for instance, advocated a theory of architecture in which space is the fundamental ingredient. For him, to grasp space, to know how to see it, is the key to the understanding of building. Those who engage on more complex inquiry into the organic unity of man and architecture will definitely find that their point of departure for an integrated, comprehensive vision of architecture is via the interpretation of space, and they will measure every element that goes into a building according to the space it encloses (Zevi, 1957).

The interpretation of architecture in antiquity was underscored by the criticism in ancient classics (Montes, 1985). However, the first and earliest recorded attempts at interpreting architectural products are found in the treatise of Vitruvius, Hippodemus and Alberti. The Vitruvian treatise, however shallow, offered the anchor of this study. While Pythagoras extended the attempts made by Vitruvius, Hippodemus' efforts created the studies that laid the foundation for urban design. Though historical records maintain that Winckelmann is the father of modern art history, Hegel is regarded as the precursor of methodological and systematic philosophy of art history, which expanded further attempts at interpretation of art and architecture.

The earliest antecedents of modern architecture in this quest could be found in several attempts made in architectural interpretation and understanding through the application of scientific methodology on these exercises. Then the challenge included not only what the architect did (the product) but also what he was thinking about (the process) when he did what he did. Over time, it was this consolidated effort at scientific interpretation of architecture, in terms of process and product that produced the classification of architecture (a posteriori) into styles in the 19th century. Style has been the greatest attempt at classifying architectural products.

Style and Aesthetics in Architectural Definition

Incidentally, aesthetics has been at the heart of style appreciation. In the study of aesthetics which is a branch of axiology, genre and style are common concepts. This was so even during the Aristotelian era and during the 20th century. In particular, it was during the 20th century activism on the concept of aesthetics, vis-à-vis style genre, that certain architectural orientations or methods were officially called particular styles (Gothic, High Renaissance or Baroque, Islamic/Christian, Roccoco,

Colonial, Modern, etc). It was also around these periods that vigorous efforts were made to classify past works of architecture in terms of style. This was the epoch of literary criticism. "Style as a manifestation of its creators' personality and social setting became a syndrome by which to judge the nature and quality of entire culture" (Arnheim, 1981). In concurrence to this perspective, Edem et al (2010), while referencing the work of Meyer Shapiro (1953), opined that in the "approach to style concept, the basic assumptions are that every style is peculiar to a period of a culture and that, in a given culture or epoch of culture, there is only one style or range of styles".

Two of the factors involved in the development and generation of architectural products influence the final outcome of these products. First is the design and execution process. Second is the suitability of the context in which the results of the first factor are displayed. The results or products emanating from the processing of these factors are also results of values attached to both the process and the materials used.

The first-hand measure of any people's level of development and civilization is through their physical structures and general environmental portrait. Architectural products, in their varied forms, constitute a greater measure of this portrait. Image laundering is significantly enhanced by architectural media. Should the first vista be one of disorder and un-appeal, even the most ferocious print and electronic media propaganda would do less because the portrait represents the label of the value. "Architecture abounds, but its status is unusual. When approached by aesthetics, architecture is problematic. While we may visit a work of architecture to view it much as we visit a statue in a plaza or a painting in a museum, we usually can enter the architectural and move around inside it...The traditional aesthetic attitude of a viewer viewing an object should be balanced by seeing that in architecture the object shapes and facilitates our activities with a view to our functions and goals, which are not limited to the aesthetic realm. Great works of architecture may slip out of the category of works of arts as they work for other human purposes" (Mitias 1994). The import of this is that in-depth studies and analyses of physical development, especially in the areas of architectural evaluation and measurement are necessary. However, there are always the problem, in this area of architectural judgment, of WHAT and HOW to measure and evaluate. Methods used are determined and enhanced by creative ingenuity of the researcher.

Classification of Style and the Notion of Uniformity in Architecture

For instance, in trying to establish the architectural style structure in Ibibioland of Nigeria, a comparative analysis technique method was employed. In this method "the structures of existing architectural styles from other cultures in the various stylistic periods were studied, identified, documented and then used for comparison with those found in Ibibioland architecture"(Edem et al; 2010). They went further to aver that "in traditional cultures every house is supposed to look like

the next well-built house in the area. This is because the rules of construction and aesthetic quality are not created (uniquely) for each house but are traditional, uniform and the same throughout the area, having been handed down through the generations of cultures. Besides, physical factors such as climate, materials and technology appear only to act as modifying, rather than determining factors..." Uniformity is also a style and uniformity can define a particular mode of architecture. In itself, uniformity is a function of measurement and precision. However, in architecture and because of its fluidity, uniformity may not always be exactness or duplicity. It means relatedness and shared symbolism as well as relative spatial congruity that flow from related functional concepts. Uniformity in architecture is not measured in mathematical terms but in expressive tones. Even in a style there is always a tinge of individual idiosyncrasies and arbitrariness. It is this quality that separates one piece of architecture from the other even when both belong to a particular style or epoch. The moderation of uniformity and distinction is the measure of creativity in architectural practice. Architecture is often define by materials and techniques used. It can also be defined from the point of view of proportionality and size; by use and suitability and stability; by climate, culture and time. Hence, there is always a varied understanding of the meaning of architecture. Each understanding and definition is dependent on the perspective in use. All these are embellished with the cloak of aesthetics.

When the realm of aesthetics is reached in the debate, the submissions of David Novitz (1994) becomes handy when he said that "the aesthetic merits of a building depends on how well it responds to the values, needs and concerns of an individual". Hence, it is obvious that "whatever the criteria that we use in the aesthetic appreciation of architecture, we can see that they are not purely internal to the building" (Novitz, 1994). Continuing in his submissions and in the defense of Giedion (1965) who Scruton (1979) accused of being a radical functionalist because of his use of 'constituent and transitory facts', Novitz (1994) insists that if, "according to Scruton, aesthetic judgment enters crucially into everyday life since people feel properly at home within a society only to the extent that their values are manifested in and enshrined within the society" then he was right that "*a merely functional building does not lend itself to the imposition of a public meaning*" when viewed from his perspective that "*aesthetic sense...is precisely devoted to the task of endowing the world with an order and meaning of that kind. Not only the man who builds but the man who lives with the product, must see the building in relation to himself...in that process his humanity may be either rebutted or confirmed*" while on the other hand "*a building which answers to his aesthetic sense...provides him at the same time with the intimation of public order, of a world responsive to objective values, a world in which the individual is realized and not merely gratified*" (Scruton, 1979).

Conclusion

Over the centuries, aesthetics have been in the heart of classification of styles and architecture. Even in this epoch of Post Modernism the trend has not significantly changed. Architecture continues to evoke debates and varied opinions on what constitutes its meaning and definition. It has been submitted that these meanings and definitions depend on the perspective taken. It could be from the perspectives of Materials of buildings, the technology employed in the construction, the size and proportion of the architectural product. Climate, culture and functionality are other factors used in the definition and deposition of the meaning of architecture. Beyond these tangibles, the influence of aesthetic contents in the characterization of architecture is also noted. However, it is equally observed that aesthetics operate in the realm of values which in themselves are culture, time and climate bound. The result of these perspectives is sometimes varied and at other times uniform, depending on the ingenuity and dexterity of the architect.

By submitting that the definition of architecture is also time bound is to posit that different ages define their architecture depending on their circumstance. The objective definition of architecture cannot be carried out with the tool of aesthetics because of its slipperiness and connotations. If it must, the scientific method in the mode of Hartman's valuometrics theory (Forest, 1994) has to be employed. In fact, this approach has been used by Agbonome (2012) in his Value Measurement of Architectural Products Using Hartmanean Theory: A conceptual Approach. If this approach is further investigated and studied, the objective definition of the meaning of architecture will be realized because the method is anchored on the concept definition of architecture. Notwithstanding the notion of objectivity in definition and meaning of architecture, it is pertinent to note that uniformity in architecture and in the context of this work does not imply duplicity but relatedness. Architecture has perspectives and façade the combination and integration of which results to the entity it produces.

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