

Commodity, Firmness and Delight

A History of Art, Architecture and Public Space

By Peter Hunter

The 18th century definition of architecture as 'commodity, firmness and delight' is echoed in today's briefs calling for architectural solutions which create value, embody the principles of sustainability, and catch the elusive 'wow' factor. Like Sir Stuart Lipton (profiled in this issue), Peter Hunter believes there is a role for bodies such as CABE and the Arts Council to encourage the creation of high quality design and help clients put 'delight' amongst their requirements.

Is architecture an art, or a science? This question has confounded architects, engineers, craftsmen and builders and all those concerned with the construction of buildings for the last hundred years. It was not always so.

In the beginning, shelter was mandatory. Later, status emerged and shelters were acquired. Gifted craftsmen, carpenters, armourers, enamellers, painters, weavers and many others became highly skilled and then realised that they conferred wealth on their employers. The craftsmen mobilised; they formed Guilds. Some members became Master Craftsmen and buildings became structures. When Renaissance humanism prevailed, there were no preconceived ideas about the segregation of art from science. Thus it was not thought incongruous that Michelangelo, a sculptor, should be architect of St. Peter's. Brunelleschi, a goldsmith, worked on designs for the Duomo of Florence and Perrault, a physician, was chosen by Louis XIV to build the east front of the Louvre.

Haussmann's Paris

In nineteenth-century Paris, Baron Haussmann created new boulevards and dramatic vistas which ensured that residential buildings were a harmonious part of the city's building projects. He provided, at the intersections of these imposing public concourses, space for public buildings: important sites

for grand monuments. Gustave Eiffel created one of the most enduring symbols of pride and achievement for a city; his tower was a challenge to contemporary tastes. Throughout Europe, significant new buildings were erected by individuals who were not primarily architects. Thomas Telford designed St. Katharine's Dock in London (1824 – 1828); Joseph Paxton, a gardener to the Duke of Devonshire, in the early stages of his career, built the Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851; and Isambard Kingdom Brunel, engineer, financier, politician and surveyor, was responsible for the glass and iron roof of Paddington Station, built in 1854.

John Ruskin, in his treatise on architecture, wrote apparently contradictory instructions: 'Ornamentation is the principal part of architecture', 'We want no style of architecture', and 'The forms of architecture already known are good enough for us.' This was a time when the battle of styles was raging; Barry's new Houses of Parliament combined the Gothic and the Elizabethan styles. His building provoked Disraeli to declare that the architect responsible should be publicly hanged.

The Pre-Raphaelites

In the 1840s, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones began a serious commitment to painting, inspired by another artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Morris' numerous interests inclined to architecture but he did not wish to be confined to any single discipline. His aim was to create as far as possible a new philosophy, emphasising craftsmanship and materials. This was exemplified in his home, the Red House in Bexleyheath, in the design of which he collaborated with the architect Philip Webb and a group of craftsmen eventually organised into Morris, Marshall and Faulkner & Co (1861).

Their principles and achievements led to the formation of the Arts & Crafts Society in 1888.

William Morris believed that he had established a new order, combining artistic expression, craftsmanship and a new



Paddington Station roof

method of building, yet by eschewing the use of machinery in his manufacturing processes, he confined the practical application of his ideas to projects financed by the wealthy. At about the same period, in Belgium, a group of artists and architects attempted to combine their individual talents in the building process. The style they developed became known as Art Nouveau and was a profound influence within artistic and architectural debate, particularly in the work of Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his wife, who combined architecture, painting and the applied arts, exercising a lasting influence. In Vienna in the 1900s another movement of artists and architects, including Klimt and Otto Wagner, startled their contemporaries with remarkable and contrasting works of art, architecture and sculpture. This movement became known as 'The Vienna Secession', another strong influence in the development of ideas about architecture.



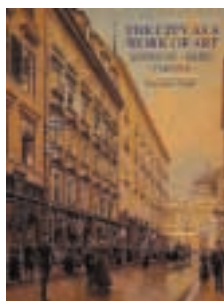
Crystal Palace

The Bauhaus

In 1919, Walter Gropius, who came from a family of architects, took up his appointment as Director of the Schools of Fine Art and of Crafts at Weimar, which he renamed the Bauhaus. This was, perhaps, the last conscious attempt to try and develop artistic and architectural ideas in the same intellectual environment.

He involved artists such as Kandinsky, Klee and Brill and the architects Marcel Breuer and Mies van de Rohe. They were working during a period of great social change; a time of austerity. The commissions for great nineteenth-century public buildings, which had promoted such fertile partnerships between artists and architects, were replaced by an urgent need for mass-produced housing, for schools and utilitarian accommodation of all kinds.

There have been many polymaths starting from different areas of interest who have had the ambition of reconciling science and art in some higher intellectual synthesis. Perhaps the attempt to do this, and the tension that has thereby been created between art and science, has been helpful



Glasgow School of Art

to artistic endeavour. Great movements in art, such as Impressionism, were invariably the result of intense theoretical and scientific debate, but architecture has grown poorer in the process and has gradually become isolated from the rest of the artistic community. Possibly the best definition of architecture was expressed by Sir Henry Wootton in the eighteenth century as 'commodity, firmness and delight', illustrating the complexity and fundamental truths of architecture.

In 1986 Professor Donald Olsen wrote *The City as a Work of Art*. This book challenged many assumptions about urban history and set out to show that London, Paris and Vienna were deliberate works of art. Professor Olsen argued that the architecture and physical structure of each of these cities reveal a great deal about the values of the societies that created them. He underlined the need to look closely at the nineteenth century, when assumptions about works of art and their qualities were very different from those of today. As Professor Olsen puts it, 'Form was not to follow function, but to transcend it. Beauty was regarded as uplifting and artistic but if not considered beautiful would be depraved and therefore not art'.

It is perhaps within the complexity of the city, with the need for 'commodity, firmness and delight', that one begins to understand the importance of these three elements. Art should be an equal partner with 'commodity and firmness' in modern buildings, yet no established basis for the involvement of artists in the long process of architectural design and implementation has been achieved. This is not the case in the imaginative worlds of film and television, nor of the theatre. Consider the easy conversion from stage-set designer to architect of Inigo Jones and John Nash or, more recently and in reverse, of Sean Kenny. It is easy to imagine 'delight' as part of the make-believe world of the theatre, or the film or television studio, where its presence is expected and the talents that create it work together as a matter of course and are formally credited in title sequence or programme note. Why should things be so different in the real world?

The theatre provides an example of various disciplines working together to create a single



Bath's Royal Crescent

effect. Very often this is a combination of art and of architecture in its widest sense, providing a setting to stimulate the imagination of the audience and enhance the performance. Eighteenth-century architecture sometimes emulated theatrical design, resulting in the elegant crescents of Bath, the geometric complexity of the New Town in Edinburgh and Nash's terraces in Regents Park. These examples were speculative developments and they were fashionable and controversial. Their architects were as concerned with the business success of their projects as many architects are today. The use of decoration and involvement of artists in many aspects of the building process was considered practical and prudent; it was good business sense.

After the Second World War, architects tackled practical problems with a spirit of idealism. They sought to derive beauty from the form and function of the buildings they designed. This intellectual rationalisation was an extension of the ideas promoted by the Bauhaus. Post-war architects were faced with social and economic difficulties and a vast building programme necessitating buildings that would be as 'lean' as possible, economically and aesthetically. There was 'delight' in the minds of the architects working on these buildings but it was delight in

the abstract, a quality not immediately accessible to a public shocked by war. In 1951 the Festival of Britain, a determined effort to celebrate the achievements of post-war artists and architects, was criticised as frivolous and wasteful.

Some return to earlier ideas may be seen in those areas of London's Docklands where public art, usually in the form of sculpture, has appeared to identify a particular project. At the Broadgate office complex, a systematic effort to incorporate art and sculpture from the outset of building works has been well received. The results have encouraged public interest and investment in this aspect of the Broadgate development (see Peter Murray's article in this issue). The achievements at Broadgate and elsewhere during the last decade have coincided with a fundamental change in the architectural profession. This change was precipitated by the abandonment

of their experience or talent, would receive the same payment for specific elements of work. They also all followed a strict code of conduct which forbade advertising or 'touting' for work. Architects are now in an unprotected profession. Fees are set on a competitive basis and the architect must be a person in business.

This new role for architects is determined by financial, not artistic,



Vienna Secession, Gustav Klimt

considerations. The architect has to secure a position within the building team in direct competition with other professionals. Might these developments provide an opportunity for a new alliance between the architect as designer and the artist as creator? To explore this idea within the architectural profession would require careful management. Computer-aided design (CAD) systems initially inspired a certain degree of apprehension; it was feared in some quarters that they might remove not only the drudgery of the minutiae of technical drawing but also the flair and originality of individual workmanship. There is still resistance to the use of CAD, though it has been developed and made far more responsive to the working needs of architects.

Initiatives from the Arts Council and from other sources have recently given encouragement to architects to include art in the building process. Though commendable, this tactic would be superfluous in an ideally balanced framework of architectural patronage. An architect's education already provides some incentive to embrace artistic tradition but it does not actively promote the concept of creative collaboration between artists and architects. The pursuit of this collaboration is left very much to individual architects and their clients.

No-man's-land

There is another area of general concern, where the talents of different individuals could be combined to good effect. In urban and in rural settings there can be found forgotten corners, expanses of no-man's-land. Invariably, when plans are invited for such a piece of ground, numerous interested parties come forward with diverse proposals. Ownership of these spaces is sometimes public, sometimes unknown. City engineers will be concerned from traffic and safety points of view, while the public utilities will invariably cut across any site. Other specialist interests are concerned with signs, the condition of pavements, of trees, grass or water. Anyone who has tried to deal with these conflicting concerns will recognise the need for someone to take charge and co-ordinate all the interests. It is often difficult to determine an order of priority for action: all aspects of the space are of varying importance but, crucially, must be brought together in harmony.

It is easier to imagine the complexity of such problems in cities, where the spaces between buildings are, in a sense, public 'rooms' and the surrounding elevations their walls, yet these problems do occur in rural districts, where their successful resolution is just as important. The spaces between buildings have a profound effect on the sensibilities of all who use them. Consciously or subconsciously, the volume, texture, colour, decoration and noise-level of our environment affect our attitudes. This essential element of everyday life has fascinated artists and architects throughout civilisation.

Few artists today would consider it appropriate to make a simple perspective drawing of a proposed building or setting for a building, yet the abstract effects of light and shade, of colour and texture, the positive and negative relationships between spaces, might be well shown in such a piece of work at the earliest stage of architectural design. Building projects must pass a variety of official tests before they are realised. One crucial early test is the democratic approval of a planning

application by an elected authority. Furthermore, every building must conform to strict building regulations. These formal processes could be interpreted as safeguards of 'commodity and firmness', yet there is no formal insistence on 'delight'. Is this perhaps the missing element in those developments which have dismayed the public and caused them to censure the architects and clients responsible?

Consulting on delight

How can 'delight' be formally described? How can it be approved by committee consensus? Might it not be simpler to leave the whole subject to a few enlightened patrons and let art and architecture continue on their parallel tracks? This is the nub of the matter. If 'delight' is to be considered as fundamental as 'commodity and firmness' and if it is to be the shared responsibility of artists and architects, then it is essential that some formal process be established to measure the 'delightful' needs and potential of every building project in the same way that planning and building regulations measure the practical implications of any development.

In every planning application, a number of statutory consultations need to take place. Would it not be a simple matter for another consultation to be added to the list? Where appropriate an individual could be appointed to the local authority's staff, their sole responsibility to appraise the local role of the arts in building projects. There should be a national body which would oversee and organise this activity: the Arts Council is a well-qualified contender so, of course, is CABE.

As we have seen, throughout history there have been collaborations between architects and artists, some of which resulted in movements achieving lasting influence. Not many buildings are designed by architects compared to the total number built. Very few artists are commissioned to become involved either with buildings or the spaces between them. Perhaps it is in this no-man's-land that a new and influential collaborative movement could be started? Surely a combination of talents and an improvement in our environment would result in many more commissions and the flowering of imagination and creativity? Nor need this be confined to the plastic arts. In many public spaces there is a need for and sometimes a tradition of performance of 'live' art.

Buildings and the spaces between them constitute the environment in which we live our lives. These places are used by all of us and cared for by few of us, yet they may be defined as 'settings for life' and represent an unequalled opportunity for the creativity and imagination of a whole new cast of players.

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