



MORE MIMESIS IN ARCHITECTURE

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Why are the houses in our cities not green and round? Throughout my many travels to various cities in Europe I have been asking myself this question, especially after recently having seen Gaudi's buildings in Barcelona while having in mind the grey communistic architecture of my childhood in Warsaw. Architecture, or the cityscape as opposed to the landscape, is our self-created world we live in. The 'ambiance' of the city is not only created by active elements, like social structures, but also for a big part by the static physical form of the architecture.

In this essay I would like to clarify how we evaluate our architecture and how we could adapt the appearance of the city to our basic psychological nature - whether the appearance of architecture as we know it should not be totally changed to suit our nature better.

Literature on green architecture presents different approaches to create a more environmental architecture, with the aim to build less destructively and to allow nature to physically sustain us. These approaches can be grouped into two main methods. Firstly, by keeping to the old primitive ways of building, the use of craft traditions and retreating from mass production and modern technology. Secondly, the more popular idea of using the scientific techniques that caused the existing problems, as only these techniques will enable us to solve them. In my opinion the latter is most reasonable, because even if we want to reject all knowledge, we will never be able to abolish it completely, as it has become part of our lifestyle.

A return to nature can happen on a couple of levels. There is the environmental building where the materials and techniques you use are protective of and collaborative with nature. Secondly, you can think of nature as inspiration for decoration, looking at visual aspects, of which the Rococo and even more the Art Nouveau movement are good examples. Related to this is the idea of looking at the technical side of nature and imitating its functioning. This has been done in the past by looking at birds for aeroplane design, but it could evolve into the use of DNA structure to create living architecture, adapting to human needs¹. I would like to focus on architecture in relation to the visual aspects of outside nature (biosphere) through knowledge of inside nature (the human nature or psychology).

Architecture from the very beginning had the function of 'shelter', when human beings started to imitate animals building nests and holes to live in. The American psychologist Maslow shows in his hierarchy of needs that 'safety needs' come directly after the first 'psychological needs'. These safety needs are produced by fears and anxieties which can be solved by finding safe circumstances, stability and protection, which architecture can provide us. King adds to this that the built site marks a place and home (territory). At the moment, there is not an obvious visual relation between architecture and nature. Architecture is purely part of our culture. We have, as it were, made a second nature, called by Gombrich in 'Art and Illusion' the creation of 'artificial substitutes'.²

In my opinion it is important to make human nature the principle for architecture. Bruce Allsopp points this out in 'Towards a humane architecture', saying that it is not up to the architect to produce whatever he wants, but to the public to decide on the appearance of the city, as it is them who will be surrounded by it and 'feel' it with all their senses. Indeed, at the moment buildings are under pressure of the architect's personal taste, value of the land (economy) and power of the owner of the building. But it is still the public that is going to walk through the streets every day and that will be psychologically influenced by its appearance. If I compare the appearance of architecture to art, as is easily done concerning shape and colour, then it should go back to the past when art was a product brought about by artist and client together. Because the city is a "mental landscape of meanings as an invisible landscape that shapes our behaviour"³ there has to be an ongoing conversation between the common inhabitant of the urban site and the architect. So, the right approach in my view is not us who have to adapt to new experimental alien constructions, but architecture that adapts to our human nature. The architect should just be the interpreter and translator. In such a way I think we can solve big social problems, like criminality in cities and class separation, as well as enhance our well-being. (See appendix, picture 1)

¹ John Frazer's idea mentioned in 'Taking shape' by S. Hagan, p.32

² Gombrich, E.H., 'Art and Illusion', p. 85

³ P. Gould and R. White (1974) mentioned in 'The evaluative image of the city' by Jack L. Nasar, p.1

Then, how do we evaluate the city and what exactly does our human nature want? Briefly, people want architecture that is warm and that comforts the senses, is pleasant to live with, treats man as he is and does not alienate us from it, and finally architecture should be appropriate to its purpose⁴.

To be more precise, J. L. Nasar mentions in his book 'The Evaluative Image of City' five visual features that are important for us when appraising a city: naturalness, upkeep, openness, order and historical significance. It is interesting that a purely visual feature is not mentioned at all, like colour and shape, whereas I am sure we feel different towards a dark brown big block of flats than to a light pink row of houses. The description of the feature *naturalness* (the quantity of vegetation, water and mountains in the city, as opposed to built areas, industry, wires and signs) comes closest to the question how we value nature. Research shows that nature has a calming and restorative value. Having a view at water from your house for example calms us down, and looking at nature in general makes us recover psychophysically in a quicker way. Also, the association with leisure time, as holidays are often outside of the urban space and the park is the place of recreation and romanticism, works well towards a positive evaluation of nature. Thus, the more nature, the better we feel in the city. It is at the same time a point of recognition. Nasar sees three points which create altogether the environmental image: identity, structure and meaning. Legibility or in his words 'imageability'⁵ of the city, which is related to all three points, increases our positive reaction. The easier we read the city and find our way, the more we like it. Nature is such a landmark that contributes to city imageability.

The paradox is that whereas nature contributes to a better legibility and therefore creates order, it is at the same time structurally seen a disorder. The natural world with all its organic shapes is unpredictable, whereas for instance industry constructed of straight lines gives a very apprehensible and definite structure. A good example of the latter is the grid-like street structure of Manhattan. We perceive regular and familiar objects like circles and squares much easier than complex ones, because we have already got a mental picture of them in our mind⁶. Nevertheless, Alan Holgate claims that "many people find primary form (...) objectionable in both the natural landscape and in the urban landscape (...)"⁷ The reason for disliking straight, hard and sharp lines, could have its fundamentals in childhood. Not only are we born out of 'softness', but we associate this division between soft and hard forms with pleasant or painful encounters in childhood. A concrete, cold building (glass is even worse because of the reflecting impersonal material) feels less embracing and less inviting to hide in than one made out of brick (idealistically in cave shape), which is warm and is associated with 'home'. To conclude, people prefer natural scenes to scenes perceived as having human intervention⁸. As Moholy-Nagy has said: "Harmony does not lie in an aesthetic formula, but in organic, undisruptedly flowing function."

This natural flow is very well explained by looking at colour. In nature there are gradual changes in colour and because of that "no sharp delineations of form occur"⁹. Also, the little elements of nature and the structure of its matter are so much mingled together that there is no sharp line between the elements. The many shadows created by these elements make a gradual change of colour from one form into another. Especially when you compare this harmonic effect to the tiring spaces in the city which are filled up with 'sharp' signs, signals and bill boards, advertisements that catch your eye and force you to read it, you get a feeling of unease, nervousness and perhaps even agitation. Hence, nature can provide us with order by buffering the more chaotic built elements and add more peace to our lives. (See appendix, picture 2)

Concerning complexity, Nasar explains that although we prefer order, human beings also prefer some visual complexity. An important detail is that there is a right and wrong complexity. The latter means urban chaos, like traffic, wires, signs and poles, while the former is a visual richness, something we value in nature (flowers, a water fall and idyllic landscape etc). Concerning Holgate the scarcity of details on a large surface will not catch our attention, but will lead our eyes to the outer boundaries of the form in search for something more interesting. Little variations in for example

⁴ Allsopp, Bruce, 'Towards a humane architecture', p.4

⁵ This word is actually earlier used by Kevin Lynch in 'The image of the city', to whom Nasar refers all the time.

⁶ Holgate, Alan, 'Aesthetics of built form', p.54

⁷ *ibid*, p.92

⁸ Nasar, Jack L., 'The evaluative image of the city', p.64

⁹ Phillipps, Lisle March, 'Form and colour', p.7

colour on the other hand will please our eyes and mind. You can easily imagine how a skyscraper, with absolutely no changes or ornaments on its smooth glass surface and with no visible windows, is disturbing for our human nature.

When separating form from colour, there is a whole philosophy of what colour does with our mind and body. It is said that warm colours for example raise our blood pressure, heart rate and respiration, while cold colours have the opposite effect¹⁰. One says that southern countries are much warmer in atmosphere and interpersonal contact because of the climate, which comes down to a lot of sun light. In my opinion we could work on this by using more colour. Not only would buildings feel lighter and therefore less frightening when painted in a cheerful colour, as colour affects visual weight¹¹, but by trying to break the darkness which evokes visual heaviness we would feel bigger and more proud than the buildings themselves. Also, it would diminish the strong vertical emphasis that evokes a feeling of pride and self-confidence or even arrogance. Of course buildings need to feel quite heavy and stable to give us a sense of security, but a gradation of colour into a lighter tint to the top would change a lot.

Phillipps shows a very interesting view on the relationship between form and colour. This dualism is omnipresent, having its fundamentals in life, which I understand as nature. Form is the representative of the intellect, whereas colour is representing the emotions. Thus, the human mind is divided into intellect and emotions, and art – flowing through mimesis out of nature – is divided into form and colour. In my opinion architecture as we know it in the West, is for the major part representing the intellect and missing the whole emotional part. If our mind consists of both aspects, architecture being a reflection of nature should consist of both, too, equally applied. The cold perfection of modern buildings should be worked up to give them this spiritual touch they miss. It could have the colours of a forest illuminated by fresh sunshine in the spring or the glittering of the sea at sunset. Why would we not get excited by the orange of our school building and go home to the green shades of our home, like leaves embracing its trunk. In western countries and especially those in the north, we should especially do something about the lack of sunshine with all its negative consequences, as we not only miss its quantity, but also its quality. Light is the reason we see colours and light in general is important for our well-being. Light therapy for example, is effective for healing SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder). Usually necessary in the winter, it replaces the lack of sunrays and puts people in a positive mood. In architecture more light could be achieved by decreasing the size of buildings, which would also adapt better to our primitive life style as it is not natural for human beings to live in the air. Artificially seen, a way to imitate lots of light would be to make use of chiaroscuro, where the colours are intensified but form is missing because of the shadows flowing from one colour into another. I think that if we are able to achieve so much with science and modern technology, the adding of colour to the building process should not be a problem.

Fortunately, the good news mentioned by Hagan in her quite recent book is that there is a trend towards more relativity, instability and complexity in architecture, which is completely opposite to the way classical and modernist building made use of nature by only focusing on its proportions or structures. I have noticed myself that the new suburbs in Warsaw are getting more colourful and that round buildings are getting popular, which in my opinion is a great progress. I am sure that by focusing more on what seems to be a simple detail nowadays - form and colour - compared to high-tech techniques and fantastic DNA ideas, we could transfer the “I’m home” feeling from the house to the city.

¹⁰ Holgate, Alan, ‘Aesthetics of built form’, p.77

¹¹ ibid

APPENDIX



Picture 1. Cube Houses, architect: Piet Blom, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

A perfect example of architecture where the human being has to adapt his life style to the building, because the floor and walls are not in 90 degrees.



Picture 2. Casa Battlo, architect: Antonio Gaudi, Barcelona, Spain

Built in the style of Art Nouveau, making use of natural elements and symbolism, for both interior and exterior.

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