

Thoughts on Aesthetics with Considerations of Architectural Aesthetics

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While I cannot pretend to have engaged in any appreciable study of the various theories of aesthetics which have been put forward throughout philosophical history, I have recently developed certain thoughts on the subject in the context of an ongoing class series presented by LaRouchePAC on “The New Paradigm”; particularly the two presentations in that series contributed by John Sigerson. I share certain of those thoughts below.

We wish to make sound judgments respecting the aesthetics of architecture. Before doing this, we need to clarify to ourselves certain basic principles of aesthetics in general.

First, let us begin by listing those things which are most commonly accepted as legitimate expressions of “art”. We do this because art is supposedly the subject of investigation in which aesthetical considerations are predominant. Thus, by listing major forms of art, we can more readily identify that content which is common to them all; content which, when so identified, can be adopted as the distinct subject which we associate with the term “aesthetic”.

I list the following:

Music

Poetry¹

Short Story/Tale²

Painting

Sculpture

Architecture

Before proceeding to identify the content which is common to the above-listed forms of art, we will first notice that the first three forms of art seem to differ from the last three in the following respect: the first three forms of art are experienced by the observer of them through time, while the other forms are experienced in space. But, this is not the right distinction to make, for we can readily see how it is that all experiences must occur over some interval of time. Thus, the proper distinction is as follows: The first three listed art forms of art are not expressed in the visual (spatial) domain; whereas the last three are expressed in the visual (spatial) domain. But, to reemphasize, while these art forms differ in whether they are spatially expressed, they do not differ in that they are temporally expressed. That is, both visual and non-visual art is experienced over intervals of time.

¹ “Were we bidden to say how the highest genius could be most advantageously employed for the best display of its own powers, we should answer, without hesitation--in the composition of a rhymed poem...” - Edgar Allan Poe

² “The tale proper, in our opinion, affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose.” -Edgar Allan Poe.

Therefore, let us examine the common characteristics of the processes of experience of the various art forms which occur over time.

Without discussing more detail than is necessary, we can make the following observations: In each of the art forms listed, the process of experience of the piece of art over time is punctuated by a series of conceptualizations of distinct unities of effect. That is, over the course of the process of the experiencing of a piece of art, the mind comes to identify certain elements of its experience as parts of larger distinguishable unities. These unities are sometimes called “thought objects”. Retroactively considered in the noun mode of conceptualization (that is, abstracted from the mental process necessary to their generation within the mind), these unities can be identified as distinct emotions, concepts, perceptual effects, intentions, etc. As the mind continues to engage in the process of the successive generation of such distinct concepts, higher order concepts can be generated which, as unities, subsume the formerly distinguished concepts as particulars.³

As a short interjection, it might be said that “good art” must, at least, be that in which it’s observer’s successive such conceptualizations are associated with the apprehension of pleasures of the highest order: beauty, ennoblement, sublimity, profundity, etc. Further, if the piece of art is such as to be readily conceptualized by the observer *as a unity as a whole*, then the piece of art can be said to have earned the title of “*piece of art*”, as opposed to a mere succession of distinct effects, even if pleasurable ones.⁴ That is, ideally, art should lead the observer to continue the process of distinguishment of unity from the beginning to the end, such that, not only are distinct things recognized throughout the total experience, but the total experience is itself recognized as a distinct unity with *necessary* termini, as opposed to a mere succession of experiences which only formally end and begin at boundaries determined legislatively. The characteristic of art requisite to the attainment of such conceptual unity can be indicated by the general term *continuity*.⁵

Thus, to recapitulate, we might say that, in the process of the experience of a piece of (good) art, the observer is led to engage in a process of successive acts of conceptualization over time. We might say, using other language, that, in the experience of art, the observer is led to engage in successive acts of *discovery*.

In order to illustrate this point, we will first make use of examples from the non-visual arts.

³ What I have said here should not be viewed as mysterious or esoteric. A basic investigation of the concept of oneness will reveal that there is no conceivable thing which is not “contracted” in things which are other than that conceived thing. Or, put more simply, there is no actually conceivable thing which does not have parts (which, in turn, are themselves conceivable things). A discussion of this is included in an essay authored by me on the foundations of mathematics. It can be found at the following link:

<https://www.findingprometheus.com/single-post/2017/07/18/Thoughts-on-Reason-Formalism-and-Mathematics>

⁴ “If wise, [a skillful artist] has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect.” -Edgar Allan Poe

⁵ For more on the principle of continuity, see the before referenced paper:

<https://www.findingprometheus.com/single-post/2017/07/18/Thoughts-on-Reason-Formalism-and-Mathematics>

In music, successive musical statements are made, each containing specifically distinguishable qualities of emotional content in varying degrees. As pieces of musical statements express themselves through time, the identification of a musical statement must occur over time. Over the course of time in which one experiences good music, the mind is led to discover certain distinct musical concepts, each discovery being associated with a sense of delight. Ideally, this continues until the end, and the whole itself is thus discovered as a unity.

In poetry and short tales, the same can be said: The mind discovers new ideas throughout the whole, ideally culminating in the effect of distinguishing unity of all that proceeded.

Moving on to the visual arts, we start with sculpture: We look upon a sculpture. But, although certain of the aspects wrought into the medium by the artist may seem to immediately impress us with apprehensions of the aesthetic, we do not observe all of the work in an instant. We must survey the work through time. As we do, we come to discover things which are of great interest to us. Without elaborating upon the distinctly recognizable things within a sculpture which may be of aesthetical interest to us, we can say, at least, that the discovery of such things excites us. So much can be said for painting.

As for architecture, the same can be said: As our mind, by wielding the eye, surveys the edifice, it seeks out that which it always seeks out: new things to be discovered; particularly those the discovery of which bring about the higher kinds of pleasures available to us. If the structure contains many such elements, our act of surveying the structure will be accompanied by the pleasure associated with those kinds of acts of discovery.

With these considerations, we have laid a basis upon which useful artistic criticism might be carried out. In accordance with the stated subject of this paper, we will proceed to consider certain questions in architectural aesthetics, questions which are quite relevant today given the recent decade's trends in architecture worldwide.

A few days ago, a question was posed to me: "Do you think that the One World Trade Center is beautiful?" Since the One World Trade Center, or "Freedom Tower", only typifies the architectural style of most of the large building in New York (and other major cities around the world) erected over the recent decades, I answered the question generally, and made use of the points which follow.

Given what we have discussed above respecting the basis of all aesthetical artistic effect as being the act of discovery which takes place within the mind of the individual which surveys the art composed for the purpose of eliciting such effect, we can conclude that "glass-tower", or "mirror box", architecture is highly defective. In fact, if architecture be defined as the art of rendering the structures purposed for human habitation and activity beautiful, or, aesthetic, then we must conclude that such architecture as that represents a total artistic failure.⁶ Why? Because a large

⁶ There is no need to quibble over definitions of the word "architecture". We distinguish between the functional and aesthetic endeavors of architecture. If architects were not supposed to make any aesthetical considerations in the design of buildings, they might be referred to as "engineers" only. The word "architect" seems best reserved for those who unite function and aesthetics in the design of the material structures needed by society.

glass tower of uniform appearance throughout the whole is artistically equivalent to a piece of “music” which is nothing but a single note held for a certain period of time. In both cases, there is no *development* in the experience of the observer of the kind indicated above as necessary to good art. In both of these cases, there is nothing in the art which enables the mind to engage in the process of discovery, or pleasurable distinguishment, of anything (besides, of course, the initial impression).

Of course, a building of extraordinary height will be imbued with a certain aesthetical content by virtue of its height alone. The reasons for this are made clear in Friedrich Schiller’s philosophical essay *Of the Aesthetical Estimation of Magnitude*.⁷ However, the key word here is “extraordinary”. For, despite the validity of Schiller’s argument in that essay, even the aesthetical effect derived from the sheer height of a structure is subject to diminution by virtue of comparative relations of two types: immediate, and previously experienced. To explain: Imagine a single solitary skyscraper of tremendous height rising high above all of the other relatively meager structures around it. This structure will be perceived by the observer of it to capture the aesthetic quality referenced by Schiller- at least it is very likely so, since the building would be so much larger than everything around it. The immediate relations between this structure and its surroundings alters the profundity associated with its height. If this same structure were to be surrounded by hundreds of others of similar height, it is difficult for us to imagine how our aesthetical estimation of its magnitude of height would remain equal to what it was when it was standing alone. The other factor which determines the aesthetical estimation of height is the comparative relation of the structure to structures previously experienced. If we have seen thousands of structures such as the one we now view solitarily towering above everything around it, our aesthetical estimation of its height is decreased. Indeed, Schiller does not address these alterations, instead seeking to identify the first factor which determines our aesthetical estimation of magnitude, namely, the relation of the thing observed or considered, to one’s capabilities as an individual person. But, as our capabilities (particularly physical capabilities) are also subject to change, so too must our aesthetical estimation of magnitude. Our physical capabilities can change in two ways: bodily, and technologically. Changes in either will alter our aesthetical estimation of magnitude. For example, if we are a small child, a mile may seem to be a great distance, the thought of traversing which frightens us. Bodily alteration of our physical capabilities to act in the universe, however, such as growing up and those caused by exercising, might lead us out of such an aesthetical estimation of one mile, to one in which we view a mile as but a trifle to be traversed in but 5 minutes by foot. Technological alterations of physical capabilities which alter aesthetical estimation of magnitude are easily illustrated: Drive across a barren desert on a remote highway. A distance which seemed not so great in the comfort of a working car, will suddenly seem frightening if the car breaks down.

Thus, while great height in a structure may be aesthetical, the estimation of this aesthetical quality is easily altered in the ways just described. So, the gleaming glass towers of modern architectural preference are liable to lose their artistic value quite easily, since nearly all of it is invested in a single aesthetical effect. Needless to say, in a city like New York, in which there

⁷ A translation of which can be found here: https://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/Schiller_essays/magnitude.html

are very many tall buildings, the comparative relations above mentioned render height to be of little aesthetical estimation.

What, then, is left of the tall glass tower for us to even consider as being aesthetical or not? Those towers being minimalistic, the characteristics of them are few- height, shape, and color. True, color, as well as lustre, can contribute to the aesthetical power of something, but, only to a very slight extent, especially if the color be uniform as are most of the glass towers of today. Further, the aesthetical effect of color and lustre are also subject to the same diminutions by comparative relation as is height. Modifications of shape serve to supply such unartistic structures with a slightly greater degree of variety. But so long as general uniformity of appearance is the characteristic of the structure, modifications of shape serve to interest us but little.

Thus, to recapitulate, the modern glass tower is understood to be an artistic (and thus architectural) failure, by virtue of the fact that no aesthetical effect deriving from discovery is to be found in the course of the observer's experience (surveying) of the structure. Everything to be discovered about a uniform glass tower can be discovered at first glance. Further consideration (experiencing/surveying) of the structure will not be accompanied by any discovery -or what we might call *motion*- of the mind. Structures which represent artistically successful architectural designs are successful for the reasons which are inverse to these cited reasons for failure.

Briefly, some differences in visual versus non-visual art will be pointed out which bear upon architectural considerations.

In non-visual arts, like music, all of the elements of the work of art to be experienced are distributed in time, and time is of a single dimension. Thus, the observer is constrained with respect to the exact order of phenomena to be experienced, and thus to the exact order in which the processes of discovery leading to aesthetical apprehension are to be had. This provides the non-visual artist with a precise control over what the observer will experience, in what order they will experience, and at what rate (i.e. tempo) they will experience⁸, and, thus, precise control over the order and rate in which the processes of discovery leading to aesthetical apprehension are to be had. These capabilities, arising out of the strictly temporal nature of the art, provides the artist with greater artistic powers, respecting intended aesthetical effects, and achievements of artistic unity. Naturally, such power also imposes greater responsibility upon the artist respecting the composition of the work of art: each element becomes more important to the whole.

However, in the visual arts, the artist does not have the power to decide the precise ordering and tempo of experience in the mind of the observer of the art produced. This is because all of the elements of the work of visual art that are to be experienced are distributed in visual space, and visual space is of three dimensions. Thus, when a person turns a corner and comes to view a building formerly out of their view, the artist cannot control exactly what part of the building the observer will seize upon first. The artist also cannot control the order respecting which parts of the building the observer will next look to. However, there is some control in this respect. For the

⁸ Control over tempo is greater in music than in poems or short stories, but it is still relatively strict in these latter.

artist/architect might select to design the building to have certain prominences which are sure to first draw the attention upon initial impression. Further, features of the building might be skillfully designed so as to lead the observer to survey the structure in a particular way. Masterfull artistry would exploit such skill capacities to ensure that the elements of the building so surveyed would be themselves ordered to elicit a coherently ordered set of conceptualization/discovery processes in the mind of the observer. That is, *aesthetical continuity* and *development* might actually be made a characteristic of such a structure.

Such questions are influenced, to a great extent, by the environment in which the building is situated. Will the building be viewed from the bottom up, or the top down? This will be decided by the proximity of the observers (of the building) to the building. For example, if a building were constructed within the tightly packed tower clusters of midtown or downtown Manhattan, the observers of that building would not be able to see it until they were relatively close to it. Thus, the way in which that building would be surveyed would be affected. If a building be built far from other structures, it will be visible from greater distances. Different aspects of buildings are initially seized upon by observers depending upon their distance from the building. It would not be rational to build a building which were designed so as to be most impressive in those of its features which are appreciated best at a certain distance if the environment surrounding that building precluded the convenient positioning of any observers at that particular distance. Such are the considerations of the architect. The question of interest to the architect is how the observer of the building will experience it, not how the building might look on paper. A building might look very good on draft paper, but the view of the structure seen on the draft paper might never actually be attained by any observer of the building due to the environment in which the building is situated. Just as Kepler reasoned that the presence of harmony in the objective proportions of things was not as important as the presence of harmony in the actual experience of things, so too must the architect reason that the position of the observer and the desire to instill within that observer perceptions of harmony and beauty must determine the objective relations of the structure.⁹ A simple example from another well-loved visual art -that of sculpture- will serve to illustrate the point: In sculptures of humans which are fixed upon high pedestals, or are particularly tall in themselves, the skilled sculptor ensures the head to be slightly large (relative to the objective proportions of the human body) so that the head does not appear shrunken out of proportion to the observers so far below it.

⁹ Kepler was only able to find a clear expression of harmony in the solar system after concluding that the objective relations of the motions of the planets were not where harmony was to be found, but, rather, that harmony was to be found in the relations of the motions of the planets as those relations would be apparent to an observer of the planets if that observer were located in the same place as the sun (or, “standing on the sun”).