

and CONCEPTS

What is good to know about criteria for evaluating architecture in general. Consider these requirements – Urban Adequacy: relation to context, location, district, proximity of green area, view. Transition spaces: entrance hall, court, stairs, lifts, natural light. Inner space: proportions and form, height of rooms, quality of daylight. Function: inner organization, short connections, served and servant spaces, flexibility. Aesthetics: form, expression, facades, materials, composition, interior design. Structure and technical equipment: acoustic, insulation, heating, ventilation. Ecology: exposition, balconies, terraces, winter gardens, energy efficiency. Economical expediency: ratio quality/price, justification of expenses. Concept: idea, unity, originality, innovation. Specific criteria: individually determined.

Even if most of us can appreciate a nice apartment, the problem is it is extremely rare, as most developers mass-produced for decades only mediocre and low quality dwellings. They will continue doing so until we have enough knowledge to form and insist on our criteria, thus reversing this fatal downward spiral. Apartments are a kind of pret-a-porter, addressed to everybody, but alas, unable to satisfy anyone. In order to realize a quality project, you need a good parent couple of developer and architect. But nowadays, this team generally doesn't work well. There is a family crisis, as the first is dominant and obsessed with financial results, and the second is often not at the level of the high expectations towards him. Until the two protagonists undergo successful marriage counseling, a lot of time will pass!

According to an ancient Chinese legend, heaven and earth separated progressively: the light and pure essence of the Yang elevated to become skies, and the heavy essence of the Yin sank to become earth. I see architecture and buildings as a link between earth and heaven, between the material and spiritual world, between science and art, between the ephemeral and the eternal. The art of organizing space through construction is one of the major expressions of mankind and civilization. According to Confucius we have to unite heaven, earth and humanity in a perfect entity...

Thus, ecology became more and more present in architecture and urbanism. The call "back to nature" became stronger and more perceptible, taking new and different forms: from the use of natural materials to the spread of organic architecture; from the construction of energy saving buildings to the development of public transportation and cyclist's alleys; from the creation of vertical gardens to new generations of urban parks. There is a great upheaval in ecological values. The great green march began. The movement for sustainable development was born. The need for quick, mass construction had naturally established concrete as the main building material of the 20th century. But enchantment with such artificial materials hit a tipping point when evidence of cancer-causing asbestos within them surfaced. We are constantly informed of new research, revealing the harm of using some plastics. Accordingly, in the beginning of 21st century, we started discovering the virtues of building with wood and stone; clay, straw and other natural materials. They are ecological, harmless and beautiful, and already prevalent in architecture. Why exposed concrete in the interior provokes the sensation of cold, while wood seems to create the feeling of warmth and coziness? I guess such human sensitivities are likely the result of a recycled image of natural materials, passed down by generation, seeping into our collective memory and

subconscious to stimulate an emotional impact.

For hundreds of thousands of years, mankind evolved amid nature, in the environment of green plants, in contact with sky, water, sunrise and birds' songs. All of the sudden, in the lapse of several generations, there was a radical change of scenery and we landed in a sea of concrete and constructions, without enough daylight, with unbearable noise and pollution. How should we feel? Bad! And all this was done in the name of progress and "modern" living. Now, after we've created our awful cages and inhuman living conditions, we dream of escaping them - at least for several days fleeing to the few corners of paradise left of untouched nature; building holiday dwellings by the sea shore, or in the mountains. The most absurd fact of all is that, in doing so, we often destroy them with concrete!

We all have subjective perceptions of beauty, and seldom agree on what is beautiful, as we have different criteria. Does that mean there are no universal aesthetic standards? While they certainly exist, the question gets complicated due to the multitude of styles.

Remembering Dostoevsky's elegant saying, "Beauty will save the world," we ask ourselves why are there so many ugly buildings around? What is the problem? Normally, all architects and developers have the best of intentions to create beautiful works. However, in reality, it turns out to be a very difficult and complex task to create a beautiful building. Signs of the hideous are easy to detect: too many heteroclit elements, lack of concept or composition, and above all, bad taste: kitsch being its most flagrant form. Again, we ask ourselves, is the world sinking?

Although beauty is irrational and unpredictable, its world has guidelines and principles. Composition can be defined as the way to organize the elements of a work in a specific system by introducing order within them. It determines the distinctive microcosm of laws for every work of art and architecture. There are two orders: symmetry and asymmetry. The ultimate goal is to achieve unity and harmony in the newly created universe. The tools are scale, proportion, contrast, and nuance. There can be formal or inner beauty, as well as ephemeral or timeless beauty. To reach the latter, great ideas and true inspiration are imperative, sparked by the strive for perfection. The world of art is metaphysical and spiritual. One develops aesthetic taste through contact with valuable works of art, by contemplating and analyzing them, thus learning their principles and styles. As far as architecture is concerned, we have to navigate outside and inside a building, to observe and evaluate it according to various criteria. There is beauty of the inner and the outer space, of facades and forms, of interiors and furniture, of ornaments and details, of materials and their blending. When there is an accumulation of a critical mass of beautiful elements, composed in mutual harmony.

In my attempts to analyze taste, I have asked myself why people more often prefer ancient and traditional buildings to contemporary ones. I think the reasons are twofold. On one hand, certain inertia haunts aesthetic tastes, preventing new styles from establishing themselves. Artists are sometimes visionaries, well ahead of their time, and many of the greatest are often acclaimed only after their death. This rarely happens in architecture, as many people are involved in the design and construction of a building, resulting in a collective product, emblematic of the epoch. That is the reason why architects must catch the spirit of time and

embody it in their works. On the other hand, buildings have to be regularly reconstructed, renovated and maintained, in order to last. If they are not valuable, people simply neglect doing so, dooming them to eventual extinction. I would name this process the “Darwin Theory of Architecture,” analogous to survival of the fittest. More valuable constructions withstand the test of time with the exception of accidental destructions. This is why ancient buildings represent the select few of every epoch and feature timeless beauty, expressed in different styles, as well as the aesthetic ideal of every generation. Will this principle continue to work in the era of concrete, which is an almost indestructible material? Time is the best judge of architecture and art, increasing the worth of really valuable works, and deflating fake “masterpieces” of the day. How many “great talents” were forgotten forever with time, and how many geniuses were not recognized as such by their contemporaries?

In Ancient Greek, *Architekton* means “master builder”. Unlike other arts, architecture is also a science with both utilitarian and expressive functions. That is why the profession is multidisciplinary, requiring the mindset of both an artist and engineer. In recent decades, a global tendency of overspecialization occurred, which contradicts the intrinsic architectural requirements of polyvalence. In the Renaissance age, young architects were often painters and sculptors, acquiring their professional skills through long apprenticeships within the ateliers of established masters. Today, architecture is studied in universities, but despite the ambitious pedagogical programs and acquired theoretical knowledge, only a few degree-holding students will become good practicing architects.

What happens when an architect faces the terrifying blank piece of white paper and starts to design a building? Some people probably imagine that divine enlightenment occurs; a genial idea flashes through his mind and afterwards it is only a matter of technical work to draw up the plans and supervise construction. In reality, the creation of a good and valuable project takes years of inspired and relentless work by a large team. It starts with urban analysis and feasibility studies. Then, a crucial stage follows: the creative search for an idea and solution best-fitted for the program and context, as well as its functional, aesthetic and other requirements. As in the game of chess, the number of variants is infinite, but there is probably only one that corresponds optimally to the huge list of often contradictory demands. The designer has the strenuous task to find it, as if he is looking for a diamond in a vast forest. The art of architecture consists in the inestimable know-how that makes this possible, the ultimate goal being to create a masterpiece. Architecture is born out of restraints. After a valuable idea blossoms, it must be developed in the more detailed phases of the project and eventually materialized in a magnificent building. All these stages are also a part of the art and alchemy of the “master builder.” To improve, change, advance, amend and progress, these are actions during the creative design process, which represent a constant movement forward. The quality of the project is directly proportional to the invested work and talent, a product to a great extent of the creative endeavor accumulated with time. The ancient Roman architect Vitruvius defined Architecture as “*firmitas, utilitas, venustas*”, or structural stability, functional and spatial utility, and beauty. To achieve them all in the design process, we must proceed step by step, theme by theme, beginning with urban context, function, and space, then structure and aesthetics.

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gives enormous energy to overcome stress and difficulties. Fire is also maintained by the thought of participating in significant projects to the benefit of society. Designing is a process of searching for ideas and solutions by trying different possibilities and constantly making decisions. A project for me is like a huge structure made of “choices” – either artistic or rational – and each one has to be correct because it is the base for the next upper one. Mistakes can crack the construction. Most architects design through sketching, probably the best method of creation by theme, beginning with urban context, function, and space, then structure and aesthetics. Architecture demands years of experience, maturity and knowledge. The average age of the world’s top 100 architects is probably over 65 and the doyen Oscar Niemeyer has more than 100 years, but still continues to work. One of the most important conditions to become one of them is to have love and devotion towards the profession, which they should take as a vocation. People wonder why designers spend many sleepless nights exhausting over a project. The nature of this job is like an avalanche: the work is small in the beginning, but grows larger towards the end when presentation of the project approaches. The little flame in the heart gives enormous energy to overcome stress and difficulties. Fire is also maintained by the thought of participating in significant projects to the benefit of society. Designing is a process of searching for ideas and solutions by trying different possibilities and constantly making decisions. A project for me is like a huge structure made of “choices” – either artistic or rational – and each one has to be correct because it is the base for the next upper one. Mistakes can crack the construction. Most architects design through sketching, probably the best method of creation | 191 and spatial thinking. I remember my senior year, as a student, when I started to produce many sketches for my projects. I had this feeling, like I’d started walking in Architecture and it was a euphoric sensation. Computer 3D images are also a big help, but they cannot and should not replace traditional methods, like perspectives and models. It is important to produce a maximum number of variants, and visualize them. Then, the right choice can be made thanks to experience, knowledge, intuition and aesthetic taste. The whole process is repeated every step on the way, from larger, generalized decisions to the minutest details.

Architectural competitions are important catalysts of this process. Some may ask how is it possible to organize a contest in a field of art? Architecture’s specificity is that almost all criteria are measurable. The best way to reach optimal quality in architecture is to professionally organize a fair competition. It takes time, money and efforts, but the results are worth it. Special attention must be paid to the program, the pre-selection of candidates, the criteria and composition of the jury. It is also a way for architects to surpass themselves, demonstrating the best of their capabilities and their art of creating projects close to perfection. I have participated in many competitions and the emotions are indescribable. It is comparable to making a breathtaking and difficult attempt at conquering a mountain peak; success depends on preparation and many other factors. The final result is well worth it, as new remarkable buildings are an enormous benefit to society. Architectural mastery has no limits. The art of finding solutions requires optimism; everything is possible and constraints exist only to be overcome. Architects are dreamers who believe that by improving the built environment they can change the world for the better. I am one of them. The Art of Architecture serves this high end by allowing architects to successfully transform their ideals and those of the society into reality.

We live in a strikingly interesting age. I do not think such diversity of architectural trends has ever existed side by side. They range from modernism to organic architecture, minimalism to

expressionism, the ecological movement to eclecticism. Architecture has never been such a colorful mosaic of styles, as in the beginning of 21st century. This pluralism provides unprecedented freedom and opportunity for talented architects to express themselves. But some people could associate it with chaos and lack of direction. It is important to focus on architectural values and criteria, as we seem to be losing our points of reference in that respect.

Fast Architecture is often well-packaged, but of poor quality. That is why, generally, we have to pay more attention to content. Function and inner space are universal architectural values, yet today they are depreciated, resulting in a negative effect on our quality of life and well-being. We can't continue to privilege some values for the sake of others. The highest ideal is "Architecture" with a majuscule, the one that satisfies all architectural criteria! Despite the seemingly impossible mission, it has already been materialized in many masterpieces and can be achieved, but with great efforts, as well as talent on the part of the architect, and comprehension and willingness on behalf of the investor.

One of the major differences between arts and architecture is in the scope of presence. If we like a book, we take it, read it, and leave it. If we love cinema or theater, we go to see a movie or performance in the respective hall. A building, for good or bad, is big and immobile, and often we can't even go around it. If it is beautiful, we are happy and pleased, but if not, it irritates and oppresses us, even subconsciously. It is a huge responsibility to be an architect, of which few are aware. Another important difference is that architecture is realized through moneyed means. A painter simply needs a canvas and paint; a musician, an instrument and scores. An architect, however, needs an investor to finance his project. Together, they must form a team and build trust in each other. That is why an architect rarely has total freedom to make artistic decisions by himself, and sometimes, financial dictatorship is severe! Like another Pink Floyd song notes, "Money... is the root of all the evil today." When used with intelligence and expedience, it is the motor of economic and social progress, but its misappropriation and greed can cause irreparable damage to society and also to architecture. Alas, for many investors, construction is a kind of "Eldorado", and their strive for quick and unscrupulous profit is at the expense of quality. Thus, terrifying and dull buildings are born, proliferating all over the world.

How much does an architectural project cost? It depends mainly on quality. A great project requires enormous efforts and time to be conceived. By contrast, a quick "copy and paste" proposal doesn't have any value, and is even harmful because it will generate a mediocre building that, for decades, will handicap its inhabitants and society. That is why it is extremely important to evaluate the quality of a project according to a number of clear criteria, and one of the best ways to do this is through an architectural competition.

It is necessary to understand that our built environment depends on all of us, despite the fact that some try to make decisions for us, profiting from our lack of interest and knowledge in the field. We are the world and we should adopt a more active stance towards the buildings we live in. What architecture will prevail in this century? Green, organic, minimalist, expressive, functional, spatial, eclectic – all the above? It is up to you! If you ask me: Let it be the one with a majuscule "A."

[**Stefan Dobrev**, Quotes from Architecture Stories, published in 2012]