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Tradition in Modernity : A Recipe for Vibrant Architecture

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Abstract

In design practice the concept of reusing traditional forms, ideas, elements, spaces, and settings is not new. Early attempts in history has been more successful than those of our modern times. In the latter, the adoption of visual abstraction as a way of presenting tradition in modern designs is superficial. It is less successful because making forms that are abstracted from history was separated from the building program. It is a historic wrapping that has nothing or little to do with the rest of the building design. It is a nostalgic skin that evoked emotions that hardly pertain to spatial experience of the building.

The idea of reusing same components for different types of architecture in different periods is not new. It is as early as Vitruvius when he showed us how to reuse authentic architecture of the temples. In his treatise he praised the Greeks for adding rows of columns around the temple edges interpreting it as an instant message of "dignity" since the arrangement of columns in rows "gives the imposing effect" of the deity and sets to dominate the viewer with air of respect and reverence to the house of god. But when it comes to less sacred buildings columns should convey a different message. "The columns will not be subject to the same rules ... which I prescribed in the case of sanctuaries; for the dignity which ought to be their quality in temples of the gods is one thing, but their elegance in colonnades and other public works is quite another." (Vitruvius, 15BC/1914, p. 154). The dignity of the deity in a spiritual ambience is different from the elegance of a stoa colonnade in a recreational festive atmosphere. What makes the message different from one setting to another despite the same orders are used is the spatial experience surrounding them.

By the advent of the 19th century this approach was codified by Quatremère de Quincy who made it a doctrine for the Beaux-Arts school of Paris. The result was vibrant architecture so much communicating with its surrounding culture.

In our modern times reusing tradition in contemporary design with the aim of producing vibrant architecture, as suggested by the ancients, is hardly realized. Few architects understood this approach. On one hand Norman Foster in his redesign of the British Museum grand court and Camzenda Evolution in his design of Google Zurich office reflect the true essence of vibrant architecture. On the other hand, C.F. Møller in his design of Darwin Center II does not. The paper will discuss the works of those few famous architects.

Keywords: vibrant architecture, Vitruvius, Quatremère de Quincy, Rasmussen, Foster, Møller, Camzenda

Introduction:

This paper will discuss the essence of vibrant architecture. What I mean by this is an architecture that offers its users a distinguished spatial experience. With such experience the users are able to interact well with the building program thus giving them a great sense of satisfaction. It is architecture that talks to the senses similar to music. This has always been the case throughout the ancient world. Back then architects considered what moods should they give to spaces that best suit their functions. They believed good architecture is the one that has a pleasing vibe with its users, and for this to happen they experimented with form, proportions, light, solid and void, form, structure, along with other aspects of space-making.

In our contemporary world this trail of thinking is seen as archaic and invalid for modern technology and lifestyle. Yet there are some architects who still believe in such ideas and are willing to exert an effort in establishing the right moods for their buildings. This results in distinguished design that goes down in history books as landmark architecture. The paper will discuss this point. But before doing so it is important to trace how the ancients considered vibrant architecture, by focusing on 3 moments in history in which such ideas were clearly presented. The first moment is Vitruvius' insights on the Greek temple and house, the second is the 18th century writings of Boffrand and Blondel, and the third is the theory of Quatremère de Quincy, the staunch teacher of the 19th century Beaux-Arts school.

By presenting such genre of the ancients, it will become clear how some architects of our times considered such genre as a tradition to be revoked in their modern building design with the aim of creating vibrant architecture.

Vibrant Architecture from the Ancient till the Early Modern

Vitruvius in his *10 Books* saw Greek temples communicating well with its audience. He praised the Greeks for adding rows of columns around their temples' perimeter interpreting them as an instant message of "dignity" since the arrangement of columns in rows "gives the imposing effect" and sets to dominate the viewer with air of respect and reverence (15BC/1914, p. 82). He further explained that the distance between the columns, referred to as "intercolumniation", with respect to the proportions of the column is crucial to achieve the mood of "dignity" required for the temple. If the distance between the columns was 4 modules, with each module representing the width of a column, then the height of the column was 8 modules. If the distance was 1.5 modules then the height of the column was 10 modules. With such inverse relation between the intercolumniation and the height of the column, the Greeks wanted to keep the walking around the cella a consistent experience that did not lose the repetitive effect of solid and void. It was this repetition that gave the mood of "dignity". Closer intercolumniation with shorter columns would give more solid effect to the waling experience and wider intercolumniation with tall columns would give more void thus losing the effect of dignity all together. Vitruvius concluded that the best proportions were the 2.25 intercolumniation with 9.5 modules for column height. He called the temple with this proportions Euostyle and confirmed that it was the one that best invokes the mood of "dignity" while walking around the *cella* (p.80).

Walking experience that captured the mood of dignity was not exclusive to the peristyle of the temple but also to houses belonging to "men of rank". For these houses to achieve the appropriate mood of "dignity"

they should have "lofty entrance courts..., and most spacious atriums and peristyles, with plantations and walks of some extent in them.." (p. 182). Thus walking through a sequence of gardens, colonnades and courtyards, would give the right effect. For men of lesser ranks , shorter walking experience would exist. With these observations, Vitruvius was the first intellectual in history to set the tone for what I call "vibrant architecture".

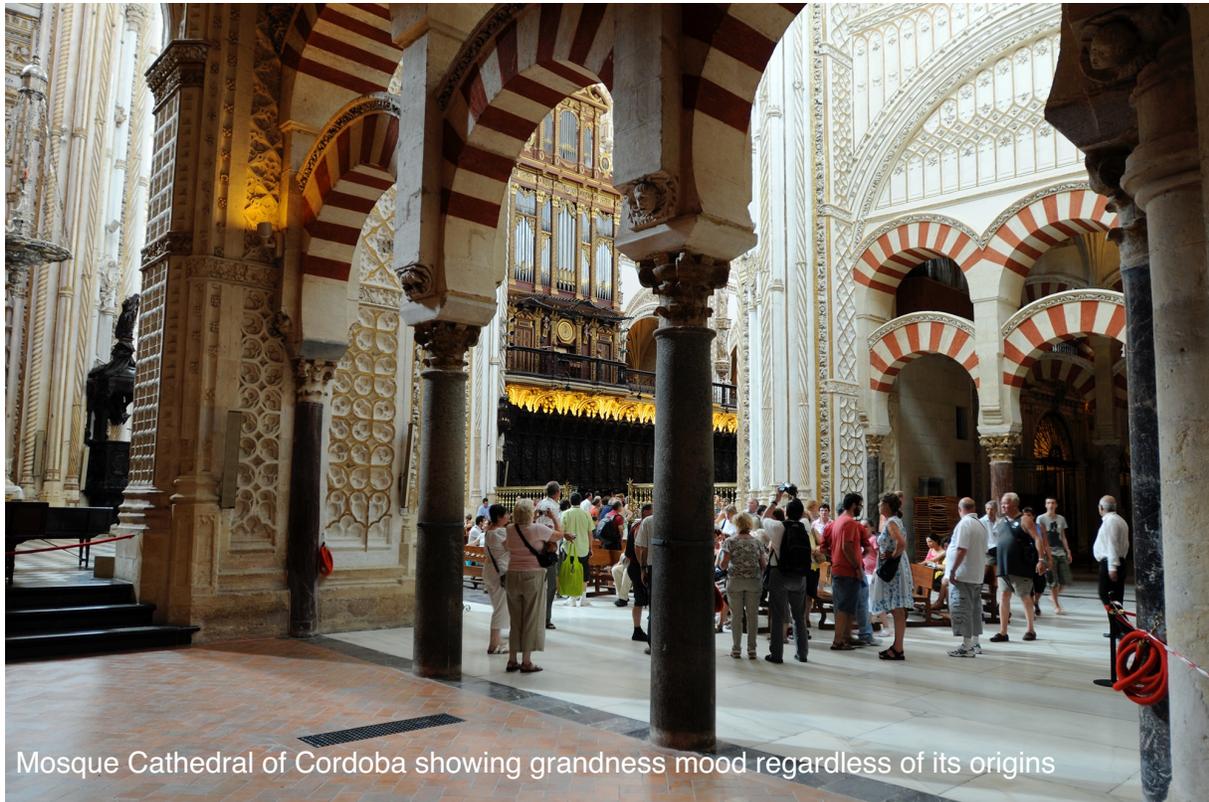


The second moment in history that showed progress in this trail of thinking was in the 18th century. Germain Boffrand stated in 1745 that architecture was an art of persuasion that had the ability to speak to viewers. It could express its purpose to them by affecting their emotions, it casted a **mood** using the **universal nonverbal language of the passions** (Palma, 2002, p.50). Jacques-François Blondel in 1771 further elaborated on the matter by emphasizing that architecture should have the power to "sweep the spectator off his feet, ..., lift up his soul to a state of contemplative admiration." (p.50) This is done by granting buildings a particular mood. He suggested specific abstract nouns to verify building types: decency for temples, magnificence for palaces, elegance for promenades, and robustness for defense structures (p.50). These nouns denoting the mood by which the building should be perceived were the starting point for any design. They were simple words that held the key to vibrant architecture.

Such understanding was no longer just exclusive debate among theoreticians but became the formal education of architecture in the 19th century Beaux-Arts School of Paris. Thanks to Quatremère de Quincy, the staunch theoretician of the school, who stressed that there must be a high level of transparency in architectural communication between the architect and the public. The architect would transform intellectual and moral ideas into physical forms and spatial experiences that would be readily understood by the public (p.52). Students of Beaux-Arts school by then had systematic learning on how to

establish this communicative transparency in their design. They were given the right mood for the building and they competed among themselves trying to prove it in their design (Levine, 1984, pp. 83-99).

Throughout the 19th century good quality architecture with a Beaux-Arts stamp must include this trail of thinking. Even during early and mid 20th century there were writings that echoed this tradition. Steen Rasmussen in his book *Experiencing Architecture* published in 1959, stated that " *it is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it. You must observe how it was designed for a special purpose and how it was attuned to the entire concept ... You must dwell in the rooms, feel how they close about you..*"



Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba showing grandness mood regardless of its origins

He called for buildings "to be created in a special spirit and they convey this spirit to others" and to have features that "become a means of communicating feelings and moods from one person to another." (p. 32-33) Throughout his book he explained the features to be light and shade, solid and void, textures, scale and proportions, rhythm and color.

In essence Rasmussen did not differ much from his pre-modern theoreticians. The difference between both is in the architectural detailing, forms and rules governing the arrangement of spaces. What remained is architecture that is "produced by ordinary people for ordinary people; therefore it should be easily comprehensible to all. It is based on a number of human instincts, on discoveries, on experiences common to all.." (p.15)) It is architecture that talks to the senses similar to music or better say ,it is a "frozen music." (p.105)



British Museum - Grand Court remodeled

Norman Foster and the British Museum

Few architects today understood this idea. Norman Foster, by the advent of the new millennium, followed the tradition of vibrant architecture upon suggesting improvements to the British Museum of London. It was no longer sufficient to rely on the aging "grandness" mood that was well represented by the Greek character of the building and the formal display of large collection of artifacts depicting many eras. Foster awakened the sleeping giant (Barker, 2001) by adding "awesome" and "delight" to the list of moods.

The "awesome" mood was applied through the conversion of the museum courtyard into an atrium covered with a dazzling steel mesh and glass panels. The stunning geometric forms of the roof with piercing light through its ribs impresses every visitor and captures the attention upon entering the museum. The "awesome" mood is nurtured by the clearing up the space from additions accumulated over time leaving a white neat cylindrical library standing in the middle of the atrium and surrounded by the original museum facades.



This contrast between the solid mass of the aging museum and the void of the atrium punctuated by clear glassed roof is the main source for the "awesome" mood. While the Greek facade of the museum recalls the "greatness" of the British empire that enabled the accumulation of histories from all over the world, the meandering roof composed of numerous triangular double curved glass panels that are individually cut suggests a refined technology that is rarely seen elsewhere today. Both tradition and modernity as

represented by solid and void have the same mindset, complementing one another, giving the same "awesome" mood.

The "delight" mood is felt upon walking up a newly added stairs around the cylindrical library. Visitors are overwhelmed by a 360 degrees view of the atrium that is packed by layers of activities: people eat and drink, some sit with their belongings spread casually on wide tables, others stroll and shop through a sequence of stores tucked in the library wall. The atrium became a public plaza for tourists and locals coming together performing the same amusing ritual of "to see and be seen" and experiencing the same moods of "leisure" and "delight".

With this renovated atrium, Foster had redefined this building type from just a present condition that displays history to history that displays the present.

C.F. Moller and Darwin Center II



Not faraway from the British museum is another awesome mood in the making, namely, Darwin Center II designed by C.F. Møller. It impresses the visitor by its huge 8 storey curvilinear shape that archives millions of insects and botanical specimens. It is an extension to the Natural History Museum of London and visitors can only view exhibits in its last 3 levels through closed winding corridors (Slessor, 2010, pp. 16-31). Strolling through these intimate corridors visitors start to wonder what this has to do with the impressive egg-shaped-skin seen from the outside (Figure 9). Soon the awesome effect fades away, leaving the visitor with uneasy feeling that the design was overdone, because there is nothing more to the shape except for some metaphoric cocoon preserving endless species of natural history.

The architect justified the huge egg-shaped form as an exercise in "tangential geometry buildup" inspired from Bernini's colonnade at St. Peter of Rome (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2010, p.42)! How this connects with what the visitor actually experiences inside this form is a concern that is never addressed. This prompted the critic of New York Times, Edward Rothstein, to obliquely criticize the extension by comparing it with the 19th century original building saying, "*but what the cocoon fully succeeds on doing is teaching us that*

the collection found in the museum's older halls are themselves reflection of curiosity, compulsion and analysis.." (2010) What in essence Rothstein hinted at was that the architect did not capture the mood "curiosity, compulsion and analysis" found in the older building. Møller's design had little to offer on its own and failed to include the qualities of the older building into its folds, contrary to the British Museum's remodeling.



The accompanying moods "curiosity, compulsion and research" mentioned by Rothstein are what every visitor experiences upon strolling through the 19th building of the Natural History Museum because of its immense transparency in displaying huge volume of specimens in spaces that vary in size, quality of light and abrupt transitions. Møller's design does not offer such experience. No wonder on Trip Advisor website only 1% of visitors commented on the Darwin center as opposed to the 99% who commented on the Natural History Museum!

Comparing both architects, Møller and Foster included tradition in their modernity. Møller was inspired by the geometry of Bernini's colonnade ended up with an egg shaped form that does not connect with people, Foster, on the other hand, adopted traditional mindset that evokes vibrant architecture. Møller's symbolic approach towards history is the common trend while Foster's experiential approach is the less frequent.

Camzenda Evolution and Google Zurich

Other architects who considered vibrant design are Camzenda Evolution office that designed Google Zurich office. They have redefined the concept of work environment by creating the mood "live and work"

in which the office space is composed of informal spaces that compliment the formal ones. Employees are free to toggle their productivity between both spaces in order to break the monotony of long hours of work. They experience the mood “live” by casually using the informal spaces to socialize with their peers or focusing with themselves. Google acknowledges such use of spaces as source of creative mood by officially giving 10% of work time to any employee who wants to pursue a new idea that is outside the work assigned by their management. Many new Google products came out of this 10%. (Steiber, 2014)

Today space experience and the resulting mood is slowly gaining momentum in some architecture schools in Europe and Australia. Students are required not just to build models but to take interior shots to capture the right mood of their design. I expect few years from now more vibrant architecture will show up in practice reviving a long standing tradition that started with the remarks of Vitruvius on Greek architecture.

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