Making a Place for Pragmatics in Art and Aesthetics in Architecture

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Abstract

Long standing views about art and architecture have differentiated the basic premise for their existence as aesthetics and pragmatics respectively. This paper is based on the premise that architecture must learn its aesthetic aspects from pragmatism in art to fulfill its pragmatic purposes and art must adopt the purposefulness inherent in architecture to assign meaning to aesthetic experience. Questions are raised and an attempt is made to answer the same through identification, and redefinition of certain theories to apply them to architecture and to today's social, cultural, and political scenario. Suggestions are made for architecture classrooms to exploit the wealth of scholastic insight available on pragmatism and neo-pragmatism in art education.

Key Words: Art, Architecture, Aesthetic experience, Home Economics Education

Introduction

Making a Place for Pragmatics in Art and Aesthetics in Architecture Kant separated architecture from fine art and labeled it as an impure art because it is purposeful while beautiful artworks only give the impression of having a purpose but actually have none (Bearn, 1997). This is a notion held by many in architecture and has echoed in the world of architecture as 3 words by Louis Sullivan (1947) - "form follows function". While architecture's intent, in its pure modernistic era, was labeled as fulfillment of a particular function, the intent of art was its aesthetic quality labeled as "art for art's sake". This paper is the result of my belief that, maybe despite the fact that we have come beyond the modernist era, art and architecture are still considered to have the same intents, functional and aesthetic respectively, by people (including artists and architects who may not clearly understand their fields and work).

These concepts (or misconceptions) defined the underlying purpose of this paper and led to its title: "making a place for pragmatics in art and aesthetics in architecture". Can the visual arts (architecture included) achieve pragmatic or aesthetic qualities without considering both qualities together? Isn't the fulfillment of pragmatic qualities dependent on considerations of aesthetic sensibilities and vice versa? This paper attempts to answer these questions through identification, application, and redefinition of certain theories in order to apply them to architecture and to today's social, cultural, and political scenario.

Defining Pragmatism in Art

The pragmatic thought that influences this paper the most is that the purposes that art strives to fulfill are defined by the effect it will have on the audience (Spiegel, 1998). The fulfillment of this purpose is the reason for the existence of works of art. The pragmatic method would steer away from assumed necessities and first impressions, and look at consequences and facts (James, 1907). According to neo-pragmatic art educators pragmatic methods of instruction encourage students to reorient their beliefs towards themselves and the events they experience (White, 1998). Anderson (1990) defined the underlying assumption behind pragmatic theories of art as paving the way for the social, political, and spiritual betterment of the world through works of art.

Defining Aesthetics in Architecture

Aesthetics is not just beauty but includes qualities that please the mind and that exalt the senses (Spiegel, 1998). Ziff (2000) stated that aesthetics is related to the conception and appreciation of beauty, and to the notion of taste and pleasure. Aesthetic critique of a work of art involves observing the work, thinking about it, experiencing it, and finally appreciating it in terms of its aesthetic character. Ziff elaborated that the purpose and reason for the existence of a work of architecture is an important aspect of the process of aesthetic analysis. Cherry Holmes (1993) listed beauty, harmony, pleasure, joy, success, and well-being as criteria that are significant in assessing the aesthetic implications of elements derived from a pragmatic thought process.

Aesthetics in architecture goes beyond beauty and is a tool towards the fulfillment of its pragmatic purpose. Architectural space and human psyche share a relationship that is tied together by concepts of society, culture, and emotions. Architectural aesthetics encompass the sense of place, emotions attached to the interaction of people's psyches with the space, and behavioral responses to the ambient environment. The question that this paper strives to answer is if this definition of architectural aesthetics does not parallel the definition of pragmatism in art? Although this paper focuses on architecture this question may further extend into various fields in consumer sciences as an attempt to identify consumers' immediate as well as long-term behavioral and psychological responses to products they encounter.

From Nature to Environment

As House (1994) pointed out, philosophy changes with the world around it and although some of Dewey's ideas are still relevant, some changes need to be incorporated. I

believe that in the concrete jungle that the environment is becoming, an important change that needs to be brought to Dewey's ideas is redefining the idea of 'nature'. To quote Dewey (1925/1981), "Experience is of as well as in nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases…" (p. 12). Dewey's definition will need some reconstruction and elaboration in order to make it applicable for the current structure of the overall physical and metaphysical environment. Nature plays an important role in all of Dewey's ideas and this term needs to be replaced by "environment" a large part of which is the built environment. This concept was stated by Lippard (1997) as, "In the last twenty years or so, the word "environment" has replaced and demythologized a great part of what was once considered Mother Nature." (p. 12). Garrison (1994) summarized that for Dewey experience is all about the way human beings interact with their environment. Many of the experiences that Dewey related to nature are now located in concrete confines that only allow nature a small peek. Consequently, the definition presented by Dewey would read as: "Experience is of as well as in the environment." This would be a more holistic explanation of experience, as it will include the built environment that surrounds all human activity and, to a great extent, governs people's behavior and actions. I remember a friend on his way to his first skydiving experience. He explained his feelings as, "What amazes me is that there will be so much empty space around me. That never happens." The absence of open space in today's physical setting is often overlooked, and presence of built structures and other man-made products is an inherent part of any environment. Most people will be at a loss for an answer when questioned about the last time they were in a completely natural environment, one which had no human influence either in terms of structures erected by human beings or natural elements groomed by them to satisfy their comfort and aesthetic preferences.

Initiating Reflective Inquiry

Dewey (1916/1980) questioned if a large part of the epistemological difficulties people face are not a result of the fact that their ideas of reality are formed without any reflective inquiry, which, if undertaken, would lead to beliefs that would be stable and permanent. Applying the same to architecture, one may imply that a large part of the problems in architectural designs are a result of architects' finding shelter in previously "successful" designs without questioning the relevance to a specific project, success being often defined by personal satisfaction, as against post-occupancy evaluation. Dewey rejected the idea of fixed, eternal structures, laws that are considered in advance to be continuous occurrences (Garrison, 1994). This notion applies to design elements that are assumed universally viable for fulfillment of aesthetic as well as functional requirements. Functional criteria that work for one project are considered universal for all similar projects and similarity in projects is largely related to buildings serving the same function, for example, two office buildings, two restaurants, or two shopping malls. In doing so architects may fail to consider specific needs of the society where the proposed project is located and its beliefs, psychology, and behavior or interaction with the built environment. Globalization and the propagation of the "one size fits all" philosophy in design is also a concept that may be related to Dewey's idea of a widely prevalent epistemological problem.

Von Eckardt (1982) stated that, "If you are in love you don't need a sex manual. If you are only fooling around you have no business working for the arts." (proverb). Von Eckardt's statement was in reference to the guidelines and rules that architects and planners seek during the design process. One may extrude this to relate to Dewey's (1958) idea of art making as an act of love in which the artist is not just solving a problem but is attracted to the ideas, emotions, and actions involved in the process of art making and viewing. Rorty's (1989) concept of recontextualization of contingent wholes is also along the lines of exploration of the emotions and discovering reality during the process of art making (process of design as applied to architecture). Architectural design ought to be a process of discovering realities through experience and interaction with the built environment. Architecture can only be experienced in terms of its influence on people's emotional state and behavior. Anthropometric data and corporation guidelines do not independently make architecture. What makes architecture is space that speaks to its consumers and a design process that was based on "recontextualization" of the pre-specified data and guidelines to apply to the specific project, its socio-cultural context and its projected users. Like architectural spaces, all products may be evaluated in terms of their effect on consumers in terms of individual consumers' psyche as well as projected influence on the social scenario they penetrate.

Form (still) Follows Function

The supremacy of functional consideration in architectural design was summarized by Sullivan (1947) in the dictum 'form follows function' (Michl, 1995). In the age of Renaissance and Baroque, technicalities were considered subservient to formalist objectives and function was the most important quality for a building to be considered delightful (Holgate, 1992). The belief was that good architecture and beauty are automatically achieved if the design process is strictly geared toward logic, functionality, and economic efficiency. Functionalists believed that the form of all objects is a derivative of the intended purpose and designers can find forms relevant to their intended function in previous examples (Michl, 1995).

Proponents of functionalist theories in architecture avoided the term architecture because it references art, which was associated with aesthetic qualities (Norberg-Schulz, 1988). They adopted the term building which, according to them, was a true depiction of what the field meant. Norberg-Schulz further mentioned that aesthetics were replaced by the idea of creating clear and functional

construction which did not, in any way, express or symbolize. This form of architecture was essentially neutral and homogenous providing few possibilities for variations in life. Some proponents of modernism like Walter Gropius and Mies Van der Rohe stated that function or rationalism is only the basic premise for the modern movement but the intent was aesthetic satisfaction (Norberg-Schulz, 1988). The consensus however remains that even though the underlying agenda for modernism may have included an aesthetic component it was function that predominantly guided architectural design.

Going Beyond Functionalism

Eisenman (1976/1996) introduced the concept of post-functionalism which essentially negates functionalism while proposing certain theoretical alternatives. He argued that function is only worthy as a representative of the meaning that architecture is intended to symbolize. Post-modernism, which is used as a synonym with post-functionalism in architecture, was largely a demand for meaningful architecture while rejecting the formalist belief in the definition of architecture as being a mere translation of practical and socio-economic conditions into the form of buildings (Norberg-Schulz, 1988). Postmodernists like Tschumi (1980/1996a) discarded modernist concepts and propagated the basic difference between building and architecture as the idea that buildings are based entirely on usefulness whereas architecture goes beyond that limitation.

Tschumi (1977/1996b) identified the problem with previous definitions of architecture stating that typically architecture is considered as "a thing of the mind" rather than an experiential art, an empirical event based on the senses (p. 534). He further mentioned that geometry and the pleasure of the senses come together to define the pleasure of architecture. Architecture is an appreciation of both sensory spatial experience and rational concepts, and a work of architecture is defined not by pleasure or functionality, but by the fact that it sets the unconscious in motion.

Tschumi (1981/1996c) adopted the idea of post-structuralism which identifies architecture as a human activity and space as related not to function but to events. He claimed that both modernism and post-modernism were tangled in the web of formalism although the definition differed, one is autonomous and self-reflecting while the other echoes historical and cultural precedents. There is a need to include the human body, and all its experiences in any discourse about architecture.

Schumacher (1997) discussed the concept of datascapes defining an approach to architecture that rejects aesthetic sensibility, style, and taste in favor of selected functional parameters that define form. He mentioned that aesthetics, if granted more importance than is due, would lead to illusions that quality of design is ascertained aesthetically without the consideration of historic periods. The suggestion, therefore, was to start with functional form and find beauty within logics of modernism and social relations instead of starting with ideas of beauty. Hicks (1999) mentioned that today function has become a "given" and is not a concern any more. According to Hicks, the phrase "form follows function" should read as "function follows form" (p. 44) since functionality of a product can be taken for granted and having assured that aspect, attention may be directed to the aesthetic. One may say that although functionality has always been a prime concern in architecture, the need is to redefine function in architecture. Form can still follow function and Sullivan's (1947) statement will hold true if the definitions are blended to contemporary needs and beliefs. The definition of function needs to be stretched to include aesthetic sensibility of the designer, as well as the consumers. It needs to include meaning making with reference to societal and cultural beliefs. It needs to encompass behavioral and psychological relationships between the built environment and human beings.

Hicks (1999) mentioned with reference to the importance of the ambience of restaurants that dining out has become an art where the quality of food is no longer the most important factor. The function of a restaurant building has gone beyond a space that provides seating for a certain number of people to dine. Likewise, the function of an office building is not just to accommodate 20 cubicles each 10 feet wide by 10 feet long, restrooms, a pantry, and lighting and air-conditioning. The function of an office building is to provide 20 people the environment to work together, interact, and to encourage these people to feel motivated to complete the tasks assigned to them. The function of this building is to represent the company's image in a way that makes the employees feel connected and dedicated to the company's purpose. And the building's function is to relate to the people that spend 8 hours a day inside it, to respond to their lifestyle, beliefs and needs. The designer therefore starts not with column capitals and furniture templates, but with a study of the company's philosophy, the beliefs of the people working in the establishment, their needs, and the environment they return to when they leave the building, or the environment they leave when they enter this workplace.

Datascapes as defined by Schumacher (1997) include performance criteria like density, light conditioning, ventilation, visual penetration, structural limits, and so forth. According to Dewey the essence of a thing depends on human interaction with them in terms of its purpose as well as their preferences (House, 1994). Therefore, human preferences are a part of providing meaning to things aside from the purpose it fulfills, and human preferences constitute a large part of their aesthetic sensibility and response to the work. Consequently, datascapes should also include research about psychological and behavioral reactions, preferences, and relationships of human beings to spaces, colors, texture, and other products in the space. These datascapes cannot be universal since there are culture specific requirements. It is culture that defines art, its relevance, and structure. The importance of culture in the arts has been emphasized by several scholars (Anderson, 1990; West, 1991). Anderson (1990) defined

art as "culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium." (p. 238). Art in societies relates to subjects in the socio-cultural framework that produced the work.

Architecture and design need an approach that responds to the consumers and to the society they cater. Designers need to consider a broader range of datascapes during the design process so that the designed product is part of the social structure of the culture it serves. Design needs to go beyond fulfilling a function and get involved in socio-cultural meaning making, and behavioral psychological research.

The Pragmatic Aesthetic of Architectural Space

White (1998) defined three stages in Dewey's vision of art experience: 1) contingent wholes, which correspond to the beliefs that viewers bring to the artwork, 2) demystification of the viewers' beliefs as they focus upon alternative accounts of the world presented by the work, and 3) recontextualization or holistic change that occurs in the viewers' beliefs as a result of their encounters in the world and with the work. Rorty (1989) maintained that truth is based on the cultural field and emerges from our interactions and recontextualization of contingent wholes. Design may be said to work in similar stages with consumers' emotions by transforming their emotional states in the process of the interaction between the consumer and the space or product.

As discussed earlier, the purpose of a design is to mold the consumers' emotions to what the space or the functions being performed require, or to the moods that the space was supposed to set. It is a transformation of emotional states from those that were brought to the room, the feelings that the space elicited, and the emotions that the space provoked as a result of their interaction. It is at this last step that the space fulfils its pragmatic purpose by setting the mood for the activity to be performed. In this process it fulfills its aesthetic purpose by initiating the senses by being conducive to what the consumer brought to it in terms of emotional states. It may be said that this is how far functionalism in architecture needs to extend. It needs to embrace aesthetics and emotions by acknowledging the interaction of man and space. Architecture should be based on "pragmatically aesthetic" or "aesthetically pragmatic" criteria in order to be truly functional. Neither aesthetic nor pragmatic needs can be fulfilled without the consideration of both these needs simultaneously. Fulfillment of the pragmatic (functional) requirement in its holistic sense will automatically fulfill aesthetic requirements, and fulfillment of aesthetic requirements is a step in the realization of designs that are holistically pragmatic. Parallels may be drawn into home economics and consumer sciences to follow a similar process in evaluating consumers' responses to various products to identify if functional criteria are fulfilled through meaningful interaction between consumer and product.

Pragmatism in Classrooms

White (1998) mentioned that a good curriculum as well as a good work of art depends upon the values of the communities that produce them and the values of the persons that interpret them. It is essential to explore stories from students' lives and experiences, and to explore the relationships between art and the lives of people through the use of contingent wholes, demystification, and recontextualization. Taking the example of Picasso's Guernica, White mentioned that although such works of art are used as part of the curriculum, educators seldom use the practices associated with the formulation of the artwork, or the artist's emotions and ideas during the creation of the work. White summarized that art education driven by pragmatism would encourage inquiry into the ideas that students bring with them, a healthy interpretive exchange between art works and students' beliefs, and wider expectations of learning outcomes. White also mentioned that these outcomes depend a lot on the extent and method of using the pragmatic agenda to develop relationships between the "issues raised by images and important aspects of students' lives" (p. 228).

As discussed earlier in this paper, concepts of pragmatism in art are relevant to ideas of aesthetics in architecture. Architecture education has to encompass concepts of aesthetic sensibilities in order to achieve an education that provides a more holistic definition and understanding of achieving pragmatism in architecture. It becomes essential to apply ideas of pragmatism in art education to architecture education in order to encompass aesthetic aspects as well as socio-cultural and political references, and relate them to students' lives and experiences. Encouraging students to explore experiences from their lives, their interaction with various spaces, and their opinions about architectural structures would be a step towards a complete architecture education, education that produces architects geared towards socially responsible designs that respond to more than the consumers' requirements in terms of anthropometric data and guidelines from building corporations. Students will learn to distinguish between a living, breathing human being in a space as against the outline figures in books that provide architectural data. Architecture education should encourage reflective inquiry and encourage students to analyze spaces from the consumers' perspective.

Similar approaches may be identified for different segments of home economics and consumer sciences. Education in every consumer-related field can approach student learning as a process of defining and/or redefining their beliefs based on conclusions derived from an inquiry into their interactions with various products. This process would provide insights into the relevance of a product from the consumers' perspective and justify the product based on functionality, aesthetics, and socio-psychological implications.

West (1991) pointed out the problem with studies in architectural history by stating that architects rely on the history presented by art historians or archeologists. These people do not look at history from an architectural point of view. Architectural education ought to emphasize the

need for students to look at history and analyze it from their personal perspectives in terms of social histories of technology and architectural practices. These histories depend on the cultural issues and present cultural crisis becomes the center of architectural history. Dewey (1925/1981) emphasized "truth" as being a product of social practices.

Classrooms need to incorporate studies of history from the cultural and social perspective; analysis of current social-political scenarios, multiculturalism, and globalization, as well as analysis of the design of structures and products with respect to societal beliefs and lifestyles. This approach to history will open students' minds to analysis of spaces and products they encounter based on such socio-cultural and global criteria, and will initiate productive thought and discussion about available products based on their impact on individuals and society. It will also initiate inquiry into their designs from these perspectives and evolve a more holistic and socio-culturally oriented critique.

This would be the first step in encouraging students to involve themselves in reflective inquiry when making design decisions. The realization about the influence of designed spaces and products on human behavior and lifestyle will come from discussions in class and analysis of students' personal experiences or observations. This realization will lead to concepts that are stable and will lay the foundations of designs that reflect the designer's as well as the society's beliefs.

Conclusion

Architecture and art differ in the basic premises set for their existence according to long-standing views. However, if architecture has to learn its aesthetic aspects from pragmatism in art in order to fulfill its pragmatic purposes and art has to adopt the purposefulness inherent in architecture, this could be the beginning of aesthetically pragmatic art and architecture. Aesthetics and pragmatics, although defined as two separate concepts, are not separable and neither can be achieved without considering the other. If these considerations become part of conscious decisions made by designers and artists, they would lead to artwork, consumer products and architectural structures that respond to the viewers/consumers, relate to them, and elicit the desired responses from them.

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