FUNCTION AND CREATIVITY IN ARCHITECTURE

A Value Management Perspective

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Function and creativity are two of the most hackneyed words in the discipline of architecture. Since the Renaissance, architects have seen themselves as creative artists worthy of the same consideration as painters, often producing works in both media. This opinion became even more clearly evident in the nineteenth century with the separation of the technological from the ‘artistic’ aspect of the field, with the introduction of structural engineers. Few people would question that architecture is a creative discipline, and that function is a necessary part of the design and implementation of architectural works, but the nature and effectiveness of its approach to both creative and pragmatic thought is questionable.

PROBLEMS OF ‘FUNCTION’

Function in architecture has always been an undercurrent in architectural writing and practice, but acquired a new status in the early twentieth century with the advent of the Modern Movement. It became the prime slogan for young avant-garde architects disillusioned with the older generation’s over-ornate use of historical styles. The maxim of Louis Sullivan: ‘Form follows function’ (quoted in Hatje 1963:276) was taken up several decades later by the progressive architects of the 1920s and became the battle cry of four subsequent decades of designers.

While great advances were made under this banner, specifically in more relaxed and efficient planning and a greater concern for natural light, ventilation and hygiene, the primary focus shifted towards the perpetuation of the ‘functional aesthetic’ derived from images of ocean liners, motor cars and grain silos. Despite the express concern in the progressive architectural journals for functional appropriateness, analysis of the works published indicates that criteria for selection were that the buildings ‘looked right’ rather than that they necessarily ‘worked right’. This phenomenon has been attributed to two sources: Le Corbusier’s charismatic polemic and intensive publication of his own designs (Banham 1975:246); and the publication
accompanying the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition of 1931 (Hitchcock and Johnson 1966).³

Criticism of the Modern Movement began in the 1960s, primarily as a reaction to the by now sterile ‘functionalist’ imagery which had become so entrenched.⁴ Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966) was one of the more powerful confrontations of the Modern Movement’s restrictive programme which argued for a more broadly based approach to the architectural problem, drawing from popular culture. His polemic was a reaction to the architectural approach introduced to the United States by Walter Gropius, criticised by Herdeg as a ‘... dichotomy between plan and appearance and, on the part of the architects, a certain blindness to formal structure and a general reluctance, if not inability, to experiment with new solutions...’(Herdeg 1983: 37).

While function is still regarded as a major issue in architecture by almost all its proponents, its understanding is ad hoc and intuitive – ‘we all know how a kitchen should work’ – with no real challenge to these assumptions. Enquiry into functional innovation is directed towards the more technologically orientated aspects of the discipline, notably in the fields of low-energy design and materials development. Few high profile architects have shown any consistent attention to these areas in their design, paying lip-service at most.⁵ Thus the empirical and traditionalist attitude to function in architectural design is perpetuated, even where the scope of the problem is not effectively addressed by these means.

THE PROBLEM OF ‘CREATIVITY’

Creativity in architecture is even more subject to intellectual abuse. In the education of architects, Theory and Design is considered the central course, with other aspects of the discipline being subservient (Lewcock 1997). Architectural theory is regarded as the driving force in creative design, but in general, this theory is derived from disciplines outside its field, and tends to the philosophical and esoteric. Thus, ‘creativity’ is measured by an often formalist response to a verbal discourse. This has been promoted in all the visual arts through the development of their own critical elite, each with its own self-referential discourse. Increasingly throughout the twentieth century this has isolated lay people from any debate through its alienating use of language.⁶

In academic institutions this isolation is exacerbated through the ‘design studio’ and through the ‘jury’ system of evaluation, where students learn to justify their decisions within this closed discourse. Seldom are parties from outside the discipline invited to these events, and when they are, their opinion is regarded at best with mild amusement (Cuff 1992:63-66). The aspirations of students and practitioners alike are focused on the respect and admiration of their peers, rather than the public at large, or even their colleagues in associated