

HISTORY AND THEORY 2

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ASSIGNMENT 1

M5X01981

W. Holland 1703148

Question:

In what ways do you think that the detail of decoration contributes to the quality of British architectural design?

Introduction

Many 20th century architects have turned their back on decoration and view ornamentation as being purely superficial; Adolf Loos is quoted as saying “The sophisticated modern city dweller should know better: applied ornamentation, like tattooing, should be evidence of low civility. [...] In modern times ornament was vain and vulgar”¹ the rapid change in opinion on ornamentation over the last century reflects the changing manufacturing processes that made heavily decorated objects and thus buildings readily available to the masses for the first time. In order to distance themselves from the great unwashed, the social elite have sought to transcend above ornamentation instead seeking clarity and refinement of the building as a designed object which has been perpetuated in the modernist movement, but in doing so they have created spaces devoid of humanity.

Within this essay, I aim to identify the contribution of ornamentation on buildings within the United Kingdom and try to explain how the inclusion of the decoration can add to the quality of architectural design. Before I can answer the main question, I will break it down in to its elements, in order to produce a more informed response.

Detail: within the context of architectural decoration the term refers to the level of complexity, pattern, choice of material, form and function within the design as well as how each element has been thought out and arranged, for example how well a series of individual elements combine to form the composition.

Decoration can be described as any form of embellishment used to adorn an object or in our case a building, Decoration on buildings can be categorised as;

- Surface - Flat, Incised or in relief- examples would include carvings, patterned ashlar or brickwork
- Edge - Any treatment on a corner within a building – examples would include quoins, antefix or crockets
- Junction – this is the transition between two elements for example where the roof meets eaves of a building, the common treatment for these would be cornices, dental and string courses.
- Imitative – ornaments that have a symbolic meaning or are copying elements from the past in a new material. For example, copying Roman or Greek marble columns in scagliola.
- Applied – ornament that has neither symbolic or structural reference such as tracery, screens or motifs
- Structural – Decoration applied to any structural element for example baroque scrolled leaf work applied to brackets supporting balconies.

¹ (1) Masheck, J. 2013 “Adolf Loos – The Art of Architecture” Page 2

Architectural quality can be a little more subjective and in turn difficult to evaluate, We can recognise the attention to detail and success and failure of the crafts and trades that constructed the buildings around us, but to evaluate the quality of the architecture we must look to identify how well the building performs both in function and sits within its context and see if the decoration has aided or detracted from its core function and design, Ryan Stucky describes architectural quality as; “A sign of consideration; considering every use and function exploring, testing & challenging that design; fabricating and creating to the highest possible standards”² R, Stuckey 05/03/2019

Main

I have selected three different buildings that were constructed over the last 200 years across the UK, which have all been built in different architectural styles and which use different types of decoration to adorn the structures as well as different modern technologies to realise the architects vision; I will try to show why the architectural styles changed and how manufacturing processes influenced both design and the quality of the architecture as a result. The buildings I have selected are:

1. Royal pavilion Brighton 1786 -1823
2. Westminster palace 1840-76
3. Selfridges. London 1909

Royal pavilion Brighton:

The Pavilion which can be seen today was redesigned by the architect John Nash in 1815 however large parts of the original building were designed by the architect Henry Holland and was constructed between 1786 -1823 along with formal gardens; For George IV who at the time of commissioning was the Prince of Wales.

The Pavilion was designed to be a weekend beach retreat and venue for entertaining the well heeled and a space for displaying the sovereigns collection of fine porcelain in the fashionable sea side town of Brighton. The original building was designed in the French neoclassical style and constructed from traditional load bearing masonry and very similar to many private houses of the period. The original building was well constructed by highly skilled masons but was not a piece of architectural significance. This lack of design was probably one of the contributing factors to John Nash's redevelopment which was unique and inspired departure for British architecture influenced by the dome topped stables adjacent to the pavilion. Nash mixed together several styles from the far east, the exterior being restyled in to a stylised rendition of an Indian palace “Indian Orientalism” with the

² (2) Conversation with Mr Ryan Stuckey B.A. (Hons) Arch, P.G. Dip Arch, P.G. Dip Arch Prac, ARB, RSAW (President elect), RIBA

interior being fashioned in the Chinoiserie on top of the original symmetrical plan from the neo classical house, The combining of the three styles is more than a little in-authentic in its representation of the orient however as a composition Nash has successfully merged the styles on the exterior if.

John Nash's design was only possible by utilising new advances in cast iron production which had only been used on industrial factories and bridges until that point in time. Geoffrey Tyack refers to the techniques used by Nash in his design as "He employed imaginative devices and innovative techniques, particularly in the use of cast iron" he then quotes Summerson, J. as saying 'a set of domes of so provocative a shape that they would assert complete dominion and whip the stable in to submission'³ The lavish onion domes are constructed from a series of interlocking iron frames which terminate in huge turned finials and clad in a skin of interlocking iron sheets covered in a less successful mastic coating. The construction of the roof and spires would not have been possible without the use of the iron frames and the construction can be read in the additional supporting columns of the front gallery or loggia. The fretted screens and rhythm of the oval windows cast patterns of light and shade unique to the palace and not seen in Britain at the time. The aesthetic was such a departure from British architecture that it became widely revered and copied. In order to fit the building within the landscape John Nash redesigned the surrounding palace gardens taking it from a formal pattern layout of hard borders to a picturesque landscape in line with work by the designer Lancelot Brown. Much of the external decoration imitates forms and patterns found in nature with over lapping palm leaf like forms banding around the bases and tops of onion domes. The style was not truly unique to Nash as much of the detailing and elements have been copied from palaces across the British empire in the Indian sub-continent how ever the attention to detail and cohesive palate tie the design together it to a unified composition. Without the lavish decoration the building would simply be a functional venue space much like the National Exhibition Centre (NEC) and would not have been so successful as to promote the new sovereign's ability to be at the forefront of fashion and promote his wealth and power across the empire, even if in reality he was far less powerful than the Chinese emperor of who he revered so highly.

³) Tyack, G. 2013. "John Nash: Architect of the Picturesque" page 128



1: Royal pavilion Brighton, J Nash, 08/03/2019

Westminster palace:

Designed by the architect Sir Charles Barry in 1836. It was designed to sit on the banks of the Thames on the site of the former palace which was destroyed by fire in 1834. The chosen style was that of the gothic perpendicular and was part of the wider gothic revival across the UK. The gothic revival style was a throwback to the middle ages. It was a stark contrast to the neo classical styles popular with country houses and other public buildings of that time, it was a conservative and symbolic approach in turbulent global political times much like today with revolutions taking place and republics being formed across the empires;

The new republics such as the United States had embraced the neoclassical styles for their public buildings which is one of the main reasons the design commission decided to choose gothic revival for the new palace. At the time of its design the British architects were struggling to find an architectural style that they could identify as distinct to Britain and the empire.

The overall design and presence of the building is a dominant landmark in the centre of the City and on the banks of one of the busiest trade routes in to Britain. The highly elaborate imitative decoration was a key feature of the design. Almost every surface is treated with some form of decoration:

The external surface ornamentation imitates many features from cathedrals from across northern Europe. Some of the key decoration includes; Highly embellished carved portal door on the State entrance tower, carved floral bosses, pendants, buttresses, spires, intricate string courses, carved pilasters and columns, Carved figures and beasts. The level of detail is spectacular it sets the tone for the seat of power in England. The interior is equally as lavish with hand painted clay tiles, coffered timber panelling large stone and bronze statues, tapestry's and hand painted ceilings complete with golden scroll work and hanging bosses.

The levels of detail serve to overwhelm the occupants and make them feel small and insignificant in the presence of symbolic ceremonies demonstrating power and control. Even the roof line was designed to tower over the neighbouring terraces of Georgian town houses. Lewis, M.: "Barry recognized the threat of monotony in an 800-foot-long

symmetrical façade and he broke it in to shorter sections with a series of turreted pavilions, paired at either end”⁴

Although the palace was built at the height of the industrial revolution mass production of elaborate domestic and vernacular objects had yet to really happen. The opulent decoration was still only seen within the hands of the wealthy and on the public buildings. The decoration on the palace only adds to heighten its presence and has been extremely well designed by. Each element has been carefully considered and added to the composition on the elevations to best enhance the verticality of the structure in doing so Barry has enhanced the symbolic ceremonial function of this building and even his design of the embossed emblem of the portcullis has been utilized by the establishment both on other buildings, official documents and even the currency. The palace is instantly recognisable the world over more so than any other parliamentary building on the global stage. In my view, the design was a true piece of successful architectural design.



2: Westminster Palace, C, De Barry, 10/03/2019

Selfridges of London

I believe there is no better test of the contribution of the decoration than that of capitalism, The nature of business changes both the funding for a project and the driving force behind a projects ethos, if the style of the exterior is failing to attract the clientele of the business will simply shut up shop and either demolish or give the building a facelift, This process of redevelopment or rejuvenation can be seen across UK highstreets, where lesser

⁴ Michael J. Lewis 2002. "The Gothic Revival" Page 82

pieces of architecture have failed to serve the primary function of the business which they house.

Selfridges store London was designed by American Architect Daniel Hudson Burnham and Built in stages in the 1900's, the first stage opened to the public in 1909 and the store was a technical marvel and revolutionary new building in the UK at that time . It utilised techniques pioneered in America of concrete and steel frame construction to offer wider expanses to display and sell goods. This was only possibly by demonstrating that the new technique was safe and even required new building construction laws to be passed in parliament. This allowed Selfridges to offer wider shopping avenues. In doing so he was able to display his goods in a more opulent setting for its customers and allowed him to retain the customers within the store for longer periods of time in tern leading to higher revenues. This technology allowed Selfridges to offer a shopping experience so ahead of its time that it has remained relevant for 110 years allowing the business to thrive and expand.

The wide expanses are one factor that help sever the functional requirements for the business, but the opulent aesthetic sells the shopping experience to Selfridges target market. The original building was designed in the Beaux-Arts style which brings together elements of imperial Roman and Greek classism with elements of gothic ornament. The style was taught in French architectural / design schools and was widely used across America by the new barons of industry to display their wealth. This is probably why Selfridge chose to use this style in his flagship British store. The buildings design is a formal layout governed by the boundaries of the site. It utilises ionic capitals atop of fluted tapering columns, with string and dental courses decorating the junctions between stories and the roof. The upper storey is decorated with floral cartouches and carved window surrounds. The lower stories are primary glazed between engaged fluted columns. The large expanse of glazing within the elevation would not be possible without the innovative construction removing the need for large portions of load bearing masonry. Selfridge embraced craftsmanship in the face of technological advances and changing attitudes towards ornament his vision drew upon the classical styles and enhanced them manipulating the scale and proportion to serve the functional requirements of the business. The level of ornament both within the store and on the exterior have helped to elevate the design of the building it is not simply an expression of its construction but is a highly crafted and well-designed piece of architecture with a timeless appeal. The decoration is not simply superficial window dressing it is integral to the overall composition. The store is a perfect architectural temple to both the capitalist ideal and the classical decoration.



3: Selfridge London, Daniel Hudson Burnham, 08/03/2019

Conclusion

Adolf Loos's view that many buildings which were poorly designed and thus relied solely on decoration to give them artistic merit is not necessarily wrong, we can see the same thing happening in the urban landscape today with speculative developers using reconstituted stone features such as quoins and pilasters to adorn their vernacular developments which are in the whole very poor quality this is not the fault of the decoration but in the philosophy of the developer.

Ornament isn't always needed to perform a material function it is there to server and express contemporary cultural and political views and ideas on the largest human structures that of the built environment. I strongly disagree with Loos's view that: "Since Ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture. The ornament that is manufactured today has no connexion with us, has absolutely no human connexions, no connexion with the world order."⁵ Many crafts have seen a resurgence in recent years, people are seeking that physical connection to the world around them that is so far removed from them built by the hands of machines.

⁵ Adolf Loos. 1908. "Ornament and Crime" Page 5

People don't realise they need ornament but it enhances the environment around them and adds a positive level of complexity to any structure if done correctly with care and attention like the highly thought out works of Carla Scarpa. Some architects have created some beautiful spaces, forms, and structures devoid of obvious forms or decoration they have inadvertently expressed the structure, light, shadow or ambiance of a structure to depict decoration subconsciously and those that have transcended decoration and turned their backs on the skills of master craftsmen have created bleak, soulless, brutalist monoliths devoid of character and humanity which haven't lasted more than a generation, There can be no clearer sign of discontent with a architectural design and a bland structure than for it to be levelled with explosive after only standing for fraction of the materials functional life . Decoration and embellishment allow designers to communicating ideas and ideologies with a wider audience even if they are not aware or able articulate what they are seeing.

Well thought out ornamental detailing of any surface or junction can help to enhance a structure and contributes to its aesthetic whilst changing the mood and feeling within the building and even change the perception of the exterior even if the material is made like concrete. All designers should aim to embody something of their personality in the objects or structures that they help to create leaving a piece of their humanity to live on after their mortal flesh has failed them. What better way to leave your mark than to leave a beautiful provoking building that designers should wish to travel on a pilgrimage to study in hundreds or even thousands of years' time.

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