THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF ARCHITECTURE

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When studying aesthetic problems the applied arts offer a typical advantage. Before any questioning about their being (applied) art, the objects involved have to respond to many other require-ments of a non-artistic nature. This means that the separation between artistic and non-artistic properties is easier to accomplish than with the so-called "pure" (non-applied) disciplines.

Concerning architecture this is expressed by such "sloganes-que" statements as : "Before a man-made object can be considered a piece of architecture, it has at least to be a building" or "Not every building is a piece of architecture, but every piece of architec-ture is at least a building".

The same attitude becomes obvious when considering one of the definitions of architecture currently handled in architectural education[1]. This definition runs as follows : "A piece of architecture is a man-made object, limiting the range of action of the user, that aims at eliminating exogenous impediments on human behavior". One of the comments on this definition states : "It will be clear that architecture can have more properties (and usually does have them) than only the elimination of behavioral inhibitions. Symbolic functioning is one of the most important of these surplus properties. Nevertheless, even the most symbolic architecture has to answer first of all our definition in order to be firstly a piece of architecture and only next symbolic architecture"[2].

Evaluating architecture on the basis of this kind of definitions means evaluating what is called "building performances" (mainly of a physical and biological nature), but even such emotional proper-ties as cosiness, privacy and the like come gradually within reach of the techniques of architectural psychology. This kind of evaluation and the consequent criticism examines to what extent and in what way the architectural object achieves its goal, i.e.

eliminates behavioral impediments. But this is of course a user's attitude and it must be said that pieces of architecture not fulfilling this requirements can have (and are considered having) aesthetic value. Even technically clumsy, functionally mudded or economically disastrous architecture can have aesthetic value. This means that a piece of architecture being completely unsatisfactory to its user, can be aesthetically valuable to its beholder. Bad architecture being beautiful ? Or a bad building being beautiful architecture ? This is only possible if a piece of architecture is more than just a mere building. What constitutes this "more" ?

Let us look for what we do more about architecture than just using it[3]. Let us in so doing consider the situation of somebody who is confronted with architecture without any consideration of using or handling it. He is at least perceiving it, mostly visually and consciously but even non-visually and almost unconsciously. For the percept to be identified as being a piece of architecture the perceived object must have some properties that lead us to the interpretation that it goes about a piece of architecture. Properties we attach a meaning to, properties that act as signs (semiotically speaking : "indices"). All other further-reaching interpretations, all that can be said more by this spectator of architecture is said on the basis of signs. This goes particularly for those cases where somebody (mostly the architect) consciously endowed this architecture with properties that are expected to call for certain interpretations. But even if this is not the case, observers of architecture go on interpreting even on the basis of supposed signs.

This interpretations can be of various kinds. Some properties give rise to historical interpretations, others to functional or technical interpretations and still others to moral or emotional interpretations. So doing some pieces of architecture are called "old", "comfortable", "strong", "rich" or "severe" not because they *are* as such, but because they *look* as such.

The multitude and complexity of the interpretations is of course dependent on the proficiency in signification displayed by our observer. But nevertheless his proficiency will be more fruitful the more the multitude and complexity of the signs appearent in that piece of architecture is bigger.

If multitude and complexity of signs can be considered as the expressiveness of an object (or behavior)[4], then expressiveness can be considered as that something "more" that makes a mere building a piece of architecture.

Does this mean that expressiveness coincide with aesthetic value ? Some of our readers will argue that expressiveness giving rise to historical, functional or technical interpretations has no aesthetic relevance. But the point is that no interpretation of an observer has any relevance whatsoever concerning that building until these interpretations have been controlled by empirical and even experimental examination. Only this last kind of examination can lead us to statements about the actual properties of the building that are relevant to the user, while interpretations of a spectator only tell us what he thinks some characteristics of the building refer to. His interpretations do not reveal that piece of architecture, they reveal his attitude towards architecture. It depends on his cultural context whether he will classify some of his interpretations as aesthetically relevant or not and it depends again on his cultural context whether this aesthetic relevance is considered valuable or not.

But speaking about valuableness, let us go back to the user. Even for him, armed with empirical and experimental devices for a more or less objective evaluation of the building performances, this very building that answers to the highest degree any expectation does not exist, because we do accept priorities in the list of requirements a building should respond to. We do accept that we cannot have buildings that are at the same time and to the same extent historically testimonial, functionally immaculate, technically indestructive, economically low-costed and aesthetically superbe. The priority-order of this list is dependent on our cultural context and within this cultural context those priorities are dependent on the point of view one is taking in connection with architecture : the view of the user or the view of the observer[5]. But in any case the choice of what should have priority is in the last resort a moral choice.

If the foregoing is right, the meaning we attach to characteristics of architectural objects, the value we attach to these interpretations reflect our moral standards. This means that the kind of interpretation, the content or semantic aspect of the interpretations has no aesthetic but moral relevance.

Consequently the aesthetic value of architecture is equivalent to the extent to which this architecture give rise to a multitude and complexity of interpretations by any person, at any time.

These interpretations are based on architectural signs and it is tempting to say now that the aesthetic value of architecture resides in the wealth with which the architectural language is used. But

architecture is no language in the sense of a digital and symbolic signsystem such as natural languages are. Architecture is an analog signsystem with indices and icons as components. As metaphors are the most complex of these composing signs, we can rephrase our conclusion as follows : the aesthetic value of architecture is equivalent to the extent to which this architecture gives rise to a multitude and complexity of interpretations engendered by architectural metaphors. The aesthetic value of architecture is identical to its metaphorical potency. Therefore, highly qualified architecture (i.e. aesthetically appreciated by observers) can never be obvious, for obvious metaphors quickly decay into clichés. But on the other hand, highly original metaphors risk never becoming significant.

Designers know this critical dose, they call it the M.A.Y.A. point : most advanced, yet acceptable[6].

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NOTES

[1] PORIAU, M.A. : Inleiding tot de Architektuurteorie, Gent (SHIAS) 1979.

[2] PORIAU, M.A., op. cit., p. 7.

[3] Perhaps we should say "consuming" architecture, rather than just "using it" because the first includes the construction, use and decay of buildings.

[4] PORIAU, M.A., On Artistic Expression: a semiotic approach; forthcoming in : Communication & Cognition.

[5] Not to mention the different priorities displayed by clients and architects.

[6] LOEWY, R., Industrial Design, London (Faber and Faber), 1979, p. 34.