

# ARCHITECTURAL MEANING

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Received March 4, 1985

## Summary

Architectural meaning arises from a definite relation between several different elements of meaning, different intensities of activity, as general ones are easier to understand than more concrete ones, but for recognizing reality, these latter are the more valuable. Architectural elements of meaning — from the general to the concrete — are: Expression and meaning of the building as a building — existential (1); formal features of the work — aesthetical (2); function of the work — functional (3); circumstances of origin — historical-ideological (4).

Special literature of the history of architecture has been much concerned with questions of content and form without unambiguously defining either the content or the relation of both concepts, attributable to mechanical adoption and application. While in literary and artistic works the two items are clearly recognizable and distinct, in architecture their meaning becomes blurred, or even in this restricted dualistic formulation they become practically unfit to study the history and theory of architecture. The category pair of subject and expression may be an adequate help to understand and explain sculpture and painting, but insufficient for architecture, it being more but also less than the former, since it is not only art as such: the building has a function. Of course, other arts have functions, too — they are made use of — but this use remains within the realm of arts, or better, they integrate life by their aesthetic, ideological impacts rather than as objects, as a building integrating life anyhow. Thus, a building is a “commodity” with a claim on artistic expression — this Janus-faced phenomenon is nearly impossible to interpret by the ready-made pair of concepts content and form. In the light of the above, it seems justified to attempt defining architectural content and architectural form as special, unusually interpreted concepts, delimiting and extending them to cope with the double face of architecture.

Preliminary to the analysis — aspiring to succeed but not convinced of a safe solution — let us tackle the terminology, in particular, the term “content” as used in architecture (and fine arts).

The term "content" has a tint disturbing its meaning. For instance, the expression "content of form" raises the feeling — to be trivial — as if a pre-existing form were stuffed with something to make it what it is, rather disturbing in architecture where effective "content" is due to spatiality. Besides, the essential momentum of the concept — its activity — gets lost. "Content" has something passive in it, hinting to immobility, although it refers to anything that essentially contains action and effect, hence to motion. So it seems more correct to speak of the meaning of form, a term integrating everything that is artificially distinguished — in spite of the unity of the two, stated to be a condition — rather than to try to find their dividing line. Let us convene that form has no content but means something, of course not only a single thing and in the same manner — just a possibility for analysis in the specially interested field of architecture.

Motion, dynamics, even the continuous effectiveness of meanings of form are confirmed already by the property of the meaning to "embrace" the form chronologically, preceding it in time, but after realization, taking shape, to track it. This fact becomes obvious from confronting actions producing the structure: design, construction, — with looking at, and appreciating the completed work. Confrontation at the same time delimits the range of action and effectiveness of the meaning.

The designing architect obtains beforehand a number of contentual momentums of his work, to be before concretizing the material, the ideological and artistic demands concerning the building material, through the screen of his attitude and creativity determined by his age. Thus, realization is anticipated by momentums of meaning to be embodied in material possibilities and formal demands, rooted in the requirements of society, and in the architect himself. This does not mean, of course, that "ideas" of the building are realized by sticking to the idealist dualism of content and form, but that the work, even when shapeless, is based on a widely undulating, rather than stable ground of meanings a priori impossible to be all crammed into the form.

Although these momentums become a perceptible reality in the architectural work executed in its formal appearance, construction circumstances, restrictions of materials, the fight for an artistic expression — even with a work of art — willy-nilly modify the original momentums of meaning, making understanding of the form a complex problem even the instant it arises. With increasing time distance, — looking at works from past ages — the difficulties to spontaneously understanding the form increase. Also a perfect interpretation is impossible because of the inaccessibility of form-borne but hidden elements of meaning. Essentials of the society producing the creation are known but not everything is manifest; for instance, the applied structure is understood but not why it has been applied, in spite of the availability of another structure more convenient for the problem; details of the

building emerging this moment did not jump to the eye for centuries; the architect known only by his name has long deceased, his workshop secrets cannot be disclosed, etc. All these are meant to illustrate the rich flow of meaning, evoking and then interpreting the form, and how the elements of meaning universally known at the time of origin of the work get blurred with time and forgotten, how often the most valuable momentums of the past become undecipherable due to theoretically complete, practically finite cognizability.

The abovesaid refers also to fine arts, not to architecture alone. A great many sculptures and pictures represent unknown subjects ulteriorly assigned to by the history of art merely as a mark or a reference to meaning.

Let us consider now the specificity of architecture, one of its twofold faces.

At first, it seems a simple statement that an integer architectural creation as an organism has a meaning, but also building parts, details have their own. A differentiation of meanings produces a peculiar architectural orchestration: simultaneous homophony and heterophony within a building, hence — without expounding the occurring concepts — “ideology”, the idea of the building as a whole may be reflected in some detail, while another kind of meaning — e.g. functional — may differ between details and the whole. Even if in a work of art the meaning of the whole may act as a common ordinator between details, integrating ramifying elements, forms with multiple meanings may be detached from the complex they were necessarily parts of — according to the academic concept of a work of art, — and if an element of meaning becomes overwhelming, they may be self-contained either undeformed or deformed, or, detached from the original context, they may change their organism.

A similar process is, of course, to be imagined in fine arts, in architecture it is an attempt to understand the essentials of historical monuments, as it about helps to explain phenomena in the history of architecture, those of form migration and form change.

Thus the theorem that the meaning of an architectural creation is not a simple “concept” but composed of different momentums is acceptable. The complex of meaning has the peculiarity — or at least, tendency — that its elements are attached to, or interpreting, the form with a differing intensity. The attachment, or better, radiation ability is not accidentally more intensive or more weak but it has a definite order from general to concrete. Elements of meaning with a rather general validity strictly adhere to the form, the more concrete ones do so less, hence abstract elements of meaning are always accessible to anybody, while more concrete ones are often concealed, ineffective because of a limited recognizability. On the other hand, concrete, single elements are the most efficient and valuable in approximating and reflecting

truth; poor radiation intensity, and at the same time, the depiction of truth, in concrete elements is an inherent contradiction of content and form — from the aspect of the onlooker desirous to understand — over and above the other fundamental contradiction that architecture is twofold: both a commodity and an art.

This dichotomy of architectural creations, activity and differentiation of the meaning of architectonic forms, as well as different intensities and tendencies of radiation ability underlies the decomposition of the complex of meaning and definition of its elements. The content of the form is assumed to comprise existence, aesthetics, functional and historical-ideological components, in this order, from general to concrete. This analysis refers to both the building and its details. For instance, the building of the Parliament by Imre Steindl can be interpreted as a whole in respect to the discussed set of meanings, and so can be its staircase, cupola hall, or even its arcades, columns, turrets, one by one. This discussion refers to the meaning of the building as an organism, referring here and there to the expressivities of architectural details.

1. A meaning of existence of an architectural work is understood as accepting the object as a building. This is the element with the most general meaning, identical at any time, anywhere, for anybody, distinguishing the object from natural things and also from other man-made things, as a building, not a mountain or a bridge.

This funny statement may incite one to wonder if a primitive question like does a building seem a building is worth to be considered. Inherent functionality of architecture justifies this wide interpretation of architectural creation, as building spaces may have multiple uses, simply because of the artificial closed space within the building. The refectory in the Milanese monastery Santa Maria delle Grazie, containing Leonardo's Last Super, was an excellent stable for horses of the occupying French army — as an extreme illustration. This train of thought finally leads to the statement of the limitations in meaning of the building. There are building forms hardly communicating more than existence in this meaning, since in constructing it, the only problem arisen was usefulness, or because the attempt to formulate its function or underlying idea was frustrated. These limitations of architectural meaning — irrespective of evaluation — are best apparent in buildings or building parts of different functions but similar in form.

2. The next element of the meaning of building forms has been termed aesthetic, it is the form itself according to the standard formulation, in the pair of concepts content and form — paradoxically in this train of thought — the formal meaning of the form. This element of meaning may comprise categories of the mentally-sensationally developed form perception ability of man, due, in final account, to nature itself, involving physiological and psychical features of man. Categories of equilibrium, rhythm, consonance,

dissonance, harmony, etc. would signify quite different phenomena in an imaginary human condition assumed to have naturally developed in a different way, — though we are what we are — hence these categories have been determined by our life process and tripartition of our body; definite eye level, eye capacity, small lime particles in the ear, etc. — since times known.

Forms start speaking to an onlooker with form perception, they “begin to mean something”. Beyond trivial statements about impression, involving extension, size, richness or roughness of the construction, deeper relationships: proportions, coordination or subordination of the forms will be perceived, form analogies emerge, etc., without needing to know the concrete function of the building. Even from an aspect as sterile as this the building raises a sensation even if built in times bygone so that many of its elements of meaning remain hidden to us. Such a contact between the work and its onlooker may arise at any time, its bases being rather general, and the aesthetic meaning is never “worn off” the form. An evaluation as, e.g.: some building form is depressive, overwhelming, or, on the contrary, attractive, elevating, remains valid within the wide limits of the history of arts. It may be considered constant — of course, not absolutely, since also “aesthetics” has its history, our sense of proportion is not the same as that of the Egyptians, etc. — as the aesthetic meaning element is more abstract than are the consecutive ones, and somehow it keeps its effectiveness in this sense or that of our aesthetics, as against momentums becoming meaningless or mute.

One cause of the phenomenon of form migration already referred to is exactly the more abstract aesthetic meaning, namely that aesthetics itself may shift in form among means of expression of other ages, different arts. On the other hand, form inevitably entrains the elements of meaning, too (that may fade out but are not annihilated) trading its origin in the new surrounding to the expert, or even may look dissonant with its “improper” saying, resulting in formalism. This “unconscious formalism” is, however, not a fault but only a mistake. Some consider the entire history of art a succession of such mistakes, or even, these mistakes to impregnate the development. Of course, the process of form migration may also be “initiated” by any other but aesthetic element — with a similar result.

The abstractness of the aesthetic meaning of the form has a special position in architecture, because of its limited expression possibilities, as mentioned. First, the greatest part of buildings and building parts are other than descriptive, as against most fine-art objects. Architecture though applies by far less abstract expressive means than generally believed, as architecture had a strong imitative tendency both in primitive times, and later, hence also in modern times. What is more, special, imitative architecture can be seen in periods where there are important changes in structure or building materials, and the new architecture acquired, in fact, part of its forms either from

outside — from nature, technology, crafts — or from its own past. In spite of this, architecture is typically non-descriptive, and if some object or detail was originally such, its form soon became conventionalized and its imitativeness obliterated. Thus architectural forms and relations are left alone, among them general relations as a system of proportion, a justification for the expressiveness and effectiveness in itself of the so-called aesthetical meaning element may imprint other architectural periods.

Often the construction, gist of the building, has been unilaterally interpreted because of its aesthetical meaning; for instance, art historians other than architects speak, instead of beam or vault systems, of architectonic forms composed of straight and curved lines; what is more, in some periods, known constructions suiting a given problem have been avoided from formal causes.

3. The third, functional component of the complex of meaning equals content in its everyday meaning; in relation to the whole it is function, genre, scope of the architectural work, comprising quite a number of minor parts incumbent on building parts, elements with different functions. The functional meaning is expected to let conclude on human activities accommodated by the building looked at, for what it has been built, how it copes or coped with its function. The latter is easier, the former harder to meet by the architect, because the mechanical satisfaction of demands, even the best solution, hardly exceeds the professional skill and routine, the due formal expression of the function, letting the building to “embody its purport” without any commentary and explication, is a complex problem, having to do with the essentials of architecture as an art.

The demand for an artistic expression of the function has emerged long ago in architecture, and has been realized in several works throughout the history of architecture. Architecture in a work of art could be an art exactly since it overrules practical needs — enriching rather than denying — making use of the possibility of artistic expression, delivered, in turn, obviously by the function itself. This problem could be never solved so as to disclose, “declare” its function to everybody, at every time, to tell as soon as asked, “I am more than a mere building, I am an office building, a church”. This is not due to the limitation of expressivity alone, as architectural restrictions do not permit anything else but to let the form refer to the content, but to that the functional meaning affects a sphere more restricted than before. It speaks the language of a definite historical period, society, ethnic group, or plainly: understanding the artistic expression of function assumes more concrete knowledge than earlier, its range of radiation is narrower, while its intensity — with the decay of its fundamentals — weakens without fading off or dying away, it being inherent as a component of the form. The Greek temple form originally meant a temple only for the Greek, and so did it, duly transformed for Christians — while within the defined sphere, when some problem

matured its peculiar form, it became conventionalized, easing both artistic expression and understanding. Nevertheless, several buildings are known in the history of architecture the exact function of which cannot be reconstructed because of the many concrete references by functional meaning.

The functional meaning of building parts and details is easier to understand since they have a more general meaning than that of the organism: primitive Christian basilicas incorporated cornices from different Antique buildings without alteration, at places corresponding to their functions, secondary application was permitted by their self-intended function. The inverted building-in of an attic base as cornice, however — encountered in mediaeval architecture — means a misunderstanding of the functional meaning, form transfer may be due to formal (aesthetic) causes.

4. The most concrete momentum of meaning, of the greatest importance for representing and understanding reality, is the historical-ideological one. Both a historically concisely determined, and the more abstract aesthetic functional meaning were seen to comprise historical elements — just as for the indivisible content, sectioned here only to be relatable — thus, in fact elements of meaning (including, in the final account, existential meaning) are always “historical”. There is, however, a range of the complex of expressions, reaching far beyond the form, or rather, the form comprises meanings not to be understood but through a thorough knowledge of history, society, ideology, economy, technics, etc., thus indirectly, rather than directly, through the form itself. Although the work willy-nilly comprises the attitude of society to the world, to itself and to arts, although in addition to expressing the mechanical function, the work represents the idea of the construction: its “spiritual function”, with exact nuances setting it off among objects similar in form and function — the form cannot tell itself for whom, for what, at what expense, at what sacrifices and efforts the building arose; the building represents only an instant of development — in spite of synthesising its past and future — since in fact, it has only a present to be contacted. Thus, however valuable these momentums of the architectural creation are, however truly they are reflections of reality, — as fundamental causes of shaping — the historical-ideological meaning of form is a function of historical “there” and “then” to a degree that it cannot be fully understood spontaneously but only in possession of a ramified knowledge involving a long chain of transmissions.

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Let us demonstrate correctness of this theory by a concrete example, actually, that of the Parthenon, partly, since it is a well-known monument and partly, since circumstances of its origin are known from the descriptions of contemporaries.

Evidence of an existential meaning is followed by quite a set of aesthetical ones: the sculpture likeness of the building, its sculptural position, landscape effect, perspicuity from any point of the environment; human dimensions and elaboration of the smallest details to be perceptible to man: that is an endeavour to an anthropocentric, humanistic expression involving optical corrections etc., — without being aware of it to be a temple, what is more, a Greek temple, exactly the Parthenon. Of course, even these meanings hint to being Greek — essentially recapitulating the Greek architectural concept — but it can be spontaneously felt without knowing why. Understanding this building as a temple, thus, its functional meaning, requires, however, some knowledge of history of architecture, while it is still insufficient to understand its idea: that of the open character of the Greek temple, that of the peripteros, depends on the Greek divinity concept. It is the hall of gods descending from Olympic heights among men, an attractive, magnificent building for a god incessantly wandering — remember Nike apteros! — awaiting with arms wide open the passer-by having left at some time, in some form, a celestial sign of an encounter with his (her) protégé.

Mentioning after all this, that this Greek temple differs from the others, its ground plan is other than typical, and also details differ from the usual ones, the Parthenon itself cannot be expected to disclose the causes. Only history can give an answer, namely that all these forms and deformations are due to a grandiose effort of the Greek people at last to bring about national unity, so much longed for, and to unite dispersed economic, religious, artistic forces; but in vain: Parthenon is like a fully-blown flower that having developed anything available to this art, in full bloom already tends to wither. With the important projects of the Acropolis, Pericles — as said by his enemies — only wanted to create work opportunity for his workless seamen and soldiers to delay an imminent catastrophe.

The difference of elements of meaning in the effectiveness could also be illustrated by analysing architectural details such as cornices, columns, doors, etc. Let us conclude, instead, with the extreme example of Erechtheion standing on the Acropolis of Athens beside the Parthenon. Female figures of the prostasis or Caryatids of the Erechtheion are spoken of as personifications of the column function, i.e. supporting. This is true but stone lips of Korai do not speak of the ideology of this personification: slavery and shame, that of the people of Carya, traitors to the Hellenic cause, and allying Persians, punished for it by letting their hetæras walking the streets of Athens wearing their national costumes, despised as renegades. This tradition relegated by Vitruvius is either true or etymologized by himself, this example illustrates how rather unique building parts like descriptive Caryatides have a limited power of expression, let alone have abstract architectural forms.

Rather than to represent some artistic agnosticism or to make look



true understanding of architecture like a privilege of a restricted circle of an aristocratically overdifferentiated culture, the above is merely attempting to point out differences between features and effects of contentual moments in the process of artistic cognizance. In reality, meanings do not become manifest in the described rigid order but as flashes, here and there becomes something clear, due not only to the education of the onlooker but also to the indivisibility of contentual elements, permitting the artistic content of historical works to be accessible, in spite of different expression intensities.

Those actually engaged in architecture need not consider many of the enumerated moments in their creative work — because of the meaning preceding form — they being self-intended in the consciousness of the surroundings, society of the architect, his contemporaries — as against the art historian, reconstructing rather than constructing. But his creation can be art — an invariable demand of man — only if he considers that he is expected not only some sterile aesthetics, a mechanically perfect function — craftsmanship — or formulation and expression of generalized architectural statements but an artistic shaping of his project, in conformity with *hinc et nunc* concrete historical-social-national requirements.

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