

# On Architecture: Complexity and Decline<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*Architecture is a collaborative, trans-disciplinary undertaking, not unlike political practice. Architects following armies into conquered territories, turned visions of political order into architecture, the embodiment of order as varied as was the role of the architect throughout time. When Germany, pondered her image as an industrialized nation with philosophical gravitas, she turned to design recognizing the new means of mass production, mechanized yet not losing sight of the makings of good taste: craftsmanship, proportion, and the fitness of form to purpose, both emotional and utilitarian. The architect once again was leader even at times when building was at a lull as Bruno Taut wrote in a letter dated November 24, 1919 “Today there is almost nothing to build ... it is a good thing that nothing is being built today. Things will have time to ripen, we shall gather our strength, and when building begins again we shall know our objectives and be strong enough to protect our movement against botching and degeneration.” These views were in their natural context of *The Crystal Chain Letters*, the correspondence of “*Architectural Fantasies*” by Bruno Taut and his circle that included Hermann Finsterlin, Max Taut, Walter Gropius, Hans and Wassili Luckhardt, and Hans Scharoun (Taut, 1985). Taut maintained the complexity of an organic union between building and architecture, essential and mystical as that between body and spirit.*

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Architecture is complex as life, individual as creativity, and temporal as circumstance; and so, the question of style had mutated through time and place remaining relevant and critical to a course of development that was never a matter of course. Heinrich Hübsch (*What Style Should We Build?*, 1992) attributed style directly, if not solely, to national character. He affirmed that “style means something general, applicable to all buildings of a nation, whether intended for divine worship, for public administration, for education, etc.” (Hübsch, 1992, p. 66) --Greek style, Moorish style, etc.—the glass correspondence in early twentieth-century Germany sought meaning within individual creativity and strong will: “Tell me what love, faith, and the hope of an iron will are, and I will tell you the meaning of building,” wrote Hermann Finsterlin—who signed his letters with the pseudonym *Prometh*-- in 1919, “to take the creation of the seventh day one wave further in the chain of breakers stretching toward infinity.” Cf.

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(Taut, 1985). Style to Finsterlin is an act of love, faith and will power: attributes that transcend individuality through representation in art-form, the form of architectural elements, “which is the artist’s primary task and bears witness to his talent” (Hübsch, *What Style Should We Build?*, 1992, p. 67) offering grounds for esthetic judgment in the controversial matters of style. Such matters were protectively disputed in “circles” of common views on order, power and election – as choice—anticipating further complexity, hence “the smaller and more selective, and more polished our circle is, the more intensive and radiant will be its impact. Keep our temple pure... keep back the profane mob.” (Hübsch) A clique made probable resolving a seemingly unsolvable equation. Another problem in pondering creativity is the magnitude of many creative endeavors where resources, skill and aptitude for beauty and harmony in a craft that has no bounds: from a leaf sheltering an insect to planning and populating all places, all is but faces of architecture.

Let us not be deceived by the theory of architecture having long been rooted in philosophy and esoteric knowledge, and in the laws of physics and chemistry through quasi-chemist serendipity and moral constitution; I say, let us not be led astray by exclusion away from architecture as a social act, answering to the human condition. Exclusion of some popular element in design and craft is, at best, deference of a role that is bound to govern and rule once an artifact assumes its place in the collective eye of the public. Still, limiting interference may be viewed as reducing proverbial noise, namely the fetters of convention and custom, along the course of innovation. The context for this notion Hübsch (1992) is cultural when he writes that “the pace of progress, impeded in any case by the need for stability and by the force of custom, differs considerably among nations.” (p. 69) While customs vary, their collective force remains comparable, so is their right of action, being the need for the stable, familiar and the recognizable, unquestioned and always more widely embraced than the doubtfully innovative.

Writing from the outlook of a newly mechanized modernism, amidst rabid debate on the ethics of mass production, the severance of the immediacy between hand and artifact, Hübsch accepts with little questioning the classical notions of functionality (*utilitas*), beauty and elegance (*venustas concinnitas*) and especially solidity (*firmitas*) as measures of real or serious architecture. Those qualities remain essential to design; however, their *becoming* in the Hegelian sense --that the laws of physics govern material form-- must be reconsidered in accordance with the new terms of craft, quality and quantity. Suddenly, standard processes are applied regardless of place, design, context, and most notably, regardless of the craftspeople involved in the making. Craft is a matter of operation and strategy, a working of apparatus that may be, but not directly expressive of the result. The working of a chisel onto the surface of a stone block to the way a stonemason holds the chisel, applies it to the stone and skillfully hammers the other end of the chisel to chip off the surface into a pattern of repeated dents that form a texture of consistent depth and even distribution could directly be related to the stone blocks laying in a pile to the right of the stonemason versus another pile to his left pending. The relation is directly one of cause and effect, and the cause may be reduced to the impact of the tip of an iron chisel on the surface of a stone block; but it is not simply so, if only because chisels and stone blocks through the same pair of hands are much more alike than are stone blocks undergone the working of two stonemasons, of different skills, personalities, and characteristics, in other words, two different people.

It is the complexity of the human individuality that defines character in craft, even one of comparable educational background, experience, and acquired skills. That same complexity, inherent of the human factor and all that it imparts on life itself, is characteristic of design when design is perceived as a path between a certain need and fulfilling it; except, more often than not, the programmatic need only partially answers the overarching need *to* design –rather than the need *for* design. The need for design may account for an artifact generated through design beginning at conception and ending at material embodiment, that is the making of a tangible object of utility. On the other hand, the need to design is a need to express, to represent and to craft in satisfaction of an instinct, irrespective of any attributes or reception of the resulting artefact. While the need *for* design answers needs external to design itself –political, economic, social, educational, etc.—the need *to* design is internal, self-referential and primarily descriptive of the maker; or, on the other hand, extending to matter passing through the fingertips of craftsmanship thus becoming artifacts. “[Architecture] begins by satisfying the most pressing needs; only later, when it produces buildings intended for a higher purpose, does it gradually rise to the level of fine art.” (Hübsch) The cause to design –external, pertaining to society or internal, pertaining to the intrinsic urge for esthetic expression—is best understood through *purpose* as a term of dual reference: utilitarian and emotional. Those two components of purpose are inextricably integrated when considering emotion and utility in design. There are, however some different considerations for one compared to another; for example, while the makings of taste and emotion are relative and proportional, those of utility pertain to equipment standard measurements. The exactitude required for articulating the parts of a machine may not be required for laying out the elements of a façade or a floor plan, where proportions –not dimensions-- relate the components in one totality. Those variation remain within one unity of self-expression and social service amounting to facility of living and gratification of the heart all the same.

Design may most thoroughly be understood as a secondary text that is often indirectly so, or at least not obviously so; it is a response that has the appearance of a question. Noteworthy attempts at defining seem to describe it in terms of what it is *not*, indirectly testifying to the mutable nature of creativity in apprehending behavioral tendencies and prescribing altered patterns, trends and making solutions through design. While Hübsch considered architecture to generate or mother the arts when he wrote “Architecture should not be called a sister of the other arts but rather their mother; this is the art that leads the way and educates the others,” (1992, p. 70) John Ruskin (The Seven Lamps Of Architecture, 1880, 1998) was not alone in distinguishing architecture from building, considered architecture to be the art of the unnecessary. This consideration seems to place necessity where utility is, while representation is left with little but whim or ephemeral pleasure as “the unnecessary.” The very maxims of architecture as the most collaborative of the arts and one most demanding of resources allocation and management negate it being unnecessary; for, while building is founded upon material and construction systems so it rises and asserts itself as architecture in matters of composition, rhythm, ornament, taste and invoking sensation in all things *building* and *architecture*.

“Architecture concerns itself only with those characteristics of an edifice which are above and beyond its common use,” is Ruskin’s (1880, 1998, p. 9) way of

referring to utility as the lower end of purpose, in placing the properties of architectural consideration *above* and *beyond* utility. This is an implicit hierarchy of purpose, suggesting emotional or sentimental purpose being of a higher order than utilitarian one, or at least that utility is a lower purpose than another, without naming it. Ruskin recognized in machinery the underpinning reason for exactitude of measurements, qualities at general odds with the rule of proportion in architecture versus exact measurements whether in classical doctrine or subsequent diversions such as the Gothic style that Ruskin advocated on ethical and religious grounds in his essay “The Nature of Gothic.” Machinery may be the one instance in design where exact measurements are key for operating an apparatus, this is while attempts at finding exactitude in architecture as the art of building –or the art in, or behind building—have been largely inconclusive. Classical orders and combinations of Antique details have been executed in varieties and combinations as many as the creative minds behind them, yet always within a range of norm, not unlike the features of a face. With proportions as the measure of beauty, architecture was an art of inexhaustible variety. Not according to Heinrich Hübsch (1992) whose term *technostatics* is used to refer to proportion in response to technological exigencies.

Technostatics is one of three factors that Hübsch (1992) names to be in natural progress over time and changing sensibilities besides ornament and “formal delicacy” which may be explained as the ever-changing conventions of good taste, that is, critical thinking finding distasteful today what was accepted of yore, a natural process that sweeps in the course of its path “that truly moving simplicity and unpretentiousness of the early buildings, which never represent more than what they are.” (Hübsch, 1992, p. 70) Architecture as representation of life and dwelling in their complexity may not be reduced to *building*. Yet, nostalgic sentiments may have taken Hübsch to times of perceived purity against what he terms “the intrusion of foreign influence” as “most nations... are like cuttings transplanted in alien soil,” (Hübsch, 1992, p. 71) and along the same line of thought he attributes the progress toward technical exactitude and the preference of perfection to proportion to political escalation as a catalyst of change. The biased or, more tactfully, interpretive quality of the aforementioned reference to cultural blending or political transposition of people and circumstances shaping taste or collective sensibilities is of lesser interest to me than is the observation that tendency toward exactitude versus proportion as grounds for esthetic judgment is significant indication to the withering of serendipity and the fading of the sharp esthetic sense that allows favoring certain subtle proportions in art and the making of artifacts, including architecture, over others. The dulling of a keen instinct, a measure of beauty and an organic sense of taste is the germ of decline contained within architecture, inevitable, of fate, destiny and the norm, upon which architecture had so securely rested for years of evolution, now slow and steady and now turbulent and detrimental to all things constant and secure. This is the art of instinct, sensuous beauty and spatial interpretation of life, bearing within its own making the seeds of destruction to its makings thus forever renewing the same questions that mutate and float on the surface of the waves of circumstance as does the foam riding the waves of an ocean.

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