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THE ENVIRONMENTAL "PSYCHOLOGY" OF THEATRES AND MOVIE-PALACES
1902 TO 1930

Summary

Architecture which is "popular" has been largely missing from our environment for the last fifty years. The USSR attempted to impose an architecture which would be appreciated by the masses through its espousal of an architecture of "social realism". Of their own volition the architects of movie-palaces of USA in the 1920s were also attempting to provide an architecture that would be appreciated by the masses. They were conscious of the effects of colour and decoration on people's moods and feelings, perhaps being more aware of "environmental psychology" than are many of their modern-day colleagues who exist in a world more populated with social scientists.

Architects and architectural historians have theorised for many years about the visual qualities of buildings, suggesting ways of designing to produce "good" building appearance or satisfactory "architectural composition" (e.g. Robertson, 1924). The Modern Movement justified much of its theory, with the claim that the building forms proposed would be socially beneficial. With recognition of the potential value of input from the behavioural sciences (as far back as 1962 in Australia), some architects became interested in relating theories of perception to architectural design (e.g. Thorne, 1974a/b; Prak, 1977). However, this practice has not been widely adopted and Lang (1983) currently finds it necessary to extort teachers of basic design to use in their courses appropriate research within the area of perception. In an effort to confront architects with the idea that they are producing buildings unsuitable for their users or the general community, social scientists and others have investigated differences between architects and non-architects in the ways they respond to building design. (See, for examples, Proceedings of International Architectural Psychology Conference, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1979.) Certainly architects have needed the recent view that the Modern Movement did not provide all the answers to the problem of "good" design but in diverting their attention to more recent theories (of Post-Modern Style) they may have drifted further from community appraisals of their work (Groat, 1982). The current mode is rich in symbolic use of past architectural forms and details, the symbolism of which is frequently described in thick and obscure language (e.g. Agrest and Gandelsonas, 1979). Neither the visual forms nor the verbal interpretations appear to have the meaning for the general public that is seen in them by the architects, or by certain historians (e.g. Norberg Schultz, 1980). Resorting to semiotics to describe the symbolism of buildings has, according to Rapaport (1982) produced more obscurity than clarity of meaning.

For at least fifty years, architecture has adopted a visual and verbal language which, although it has a certain internal coherence, has failed to communicate its supposed 'meanings' to the general public and has, indeed, aroused dislike. It is instructive to compare two attempts made, against a socialist background on the one hand, and a capitalist one on the other, to produce buildings that would be 'understood' by

the general public, in the sense of having clear and widely shared connotations. Kopp (1970), in documenting the development of the architecture of "socialist realism" in Soviet Russia notes that the classical style had been a luxury of the privileged classes, while modern architecture (whose superiority he assumes) had been discredited.

"But the moderns also had against them the forces of custom and tradition ...; they had against them the fact that they were ahead of the masses ... And they had left behind not only the masses but also the conventionally trained professionals, the building workers ... and timid administrators" (p. 225)

The place of modern architecture was taken up by "strange Greek, Roman, Florentine, or pseudo-Russian edifices, supposedly the fruits of applying to architecture the method of socialist realism" (p. 219). Kopp comments that this was not "realist" architecture but rather a mask of decoration expressing the opposite of reality.

With somewhat different theoretical overtones this is exactly what took place in USA from about 1913 to 1933 in the design of the picture-palace type of theatre. Although it could be argued that their assumptions were basically similar the major architects for these buildings did not defend them in ideological terms. They argued their case on "psychological" grounds.

The Pseudo-Sociology of the Cinema

Popular writing on the escapist "dreamworld" of the cinema, where underprivileged people with dreary, unfulfilled lives could while away a few hours in a mock-palatial atmosphere, secretly living out some emotion portrayed on the screen, is colourful. However it may not represent the true story of the cinema. No systematic studies of theatre/cinema audiences were made until around World War II and the popular theory was probably highly influenced by the claims of the film-company advertising copy-writers and the language of the exhibitors' journals.

The Movie-Theatre Users

In 1908 *The Moving Picture World* 2:2, January 11, noted that two million Americans, one third of whom were children, attended movie houses each day. It also claimed that audiences included few women under 30 but many who were middle-aged or elderly. It is not known how such claims were researched but one of the few analyses of market research figures (being of those from 1940 to 1946) show that movie-going in USA was fairly evenly distributed amongst males and females and over income groups, with the high-income group attending more frequently than low-income, while members of the middle-income group attended most frequently. People with higher education would attend slightly more often than those with low education (Handel, 1950/1976). To ascertain the nature of the audience in the 1920s, Gomery (1982) has used the methods of urban geographers. He demonstrates that, apart from the large downtown picture palaces, some of the largest and most elaborate were built in what were then middle-class areas. A check of

theatre buildings against average-income-in-1933 for the 49 local government areas in the Sydney metropolitan area suggests that Gomery's thesis may also apply to Australia.

The Environmental "Psychology" Claimed for by Theatre Architects

The earliest "environmental psychology" study into theatre design was carried out in 1902 as an unstructured observational survey of theatre patrons as they left a performance. From standing at the exits and listening to the patrons' comments about the theatres' designs the architects, George and C.W. Rapp (1923), concluded that there should be a major change in the design of theatres. Rather than send the cheap-seat gallery patrons up a mean, austere side-entrance stairway they initiated the grand stair in a large richly decorated lobby-foyer for the balcony patrons. Socially, it was an egalitarian move. Psychologically, it gave every patron the feeling of being important.

Architects in the 1920s attempted to achieve an "ensemble" effect of colour, decoration, lighting and furnishings (Ahlschlager, 1927) although the interior decorator for Loew's theatres claimed that she had managed to reduce public preferences for colours to a formula. "Warm" colours proved most successful in communities "made up mainly of the more primitive classes" while "cool" colours "made the greatest appeal in the more refined neighborhoods". She gives an example where the audience attendance increased after changing the colours of one theatre (Dorin, 1927). Cambria (1927) discusses the "success" of theatre design in attracting patrons. The exhibitors' journals noted that "conservative design has lasting appeal" and the "advantages of formal design" are important where the "theatre is fast becoming a museum for those who cannot visit the art galleries and centers of culture" (M.P.N., 1929). Hanon (1928) claimed that if the theatre-goer is "shocked at the outset by some outré or grotesque ornamentation he will never be in the proper frame of mind to enjoy ... [the] entertainment". Lamb (1928) noted that interior decoration should be defined in "psychological terms", while Ebersson (1927) went so far as to claim that the "peculiar blue", his firm used not only released "the nerve tension of the audience" but had "beneficial effects on the mind".

Conclusion

These and other architects such as Charles Lee (1929) strongly implied that their buildings were beneficial psychologically. Whether this was so or not, their buildings were so successful with the users (the audience) that they, as architects, were employed by exhibitors to design individually, many hundreds of movie palaces. In retrospect, however vulgar their buildings may seem, however naive or amateur their psychological efforts, it is clear that they considered the users and possessed an environmental awareness which has hardly been equalled since. Parallel to the rise of "social realism" in USSR these architects of USA were attempting to design buildings which would be understood by and have meaning for the vast majority of their users.

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