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A recent article in the British architectural press laments the desecration of a fine 50 year old piece of modern public architecture with flock wall papers. Such desecration is the experience of many architects who witness their design intentions being mis-interpreted, or inappropriately maintained. There is clear evidence from research and literature in environmental psychology that people use buildings and spaces in ways which express their personal or collective values. Many architects are acutely aware that their tastes are not shared by a wider public. But so strongly introverted is the architectural culture that its response to this awareness is frequently expressed as a belief that the public needs educating in architectural values.

Recent design enquiries in the New Zealand Government Architect's office which practices for a multicultural society, have shown that many conflicts over public building projects can be attributed to unreconciled value differences between building controllers, users and designers. Even when a functional brief and appropriate design quality have been agreed upon, establishment of appropriate style and taste with which they are to be met frequently remains illusive.

Many architects dismiss the concept of taste as ephemeral. But the concept of taste, defined as what is socially correct, is an intrinsic aspect of social life which pertains to manner and style of behaviours and to the artifacts and spaces which support them. Through interpretation of a functional brief into built form, the architect inevitably imposes personal values on the brief. Many architectural journalists and commentators reinforce a commonly held belief that architects have a mandate and responsibility to do this - to influence public taste.

Taste is socially defined and depends for each person on their values as determined by social experiences. To maintain social cohesion, values are continuously being negotiated, so tastes and their expressions in fashion and style are continuously changing. Indeed this negotiable characteristic of taste is understood and exploited in marketing strategies of commercial institutions. Their success depends on their abilities to assess public tastes and the limits to which they can be negotiated. Their public in turn derive security and a sense of well-being from the relative permanence changing tastes throw by contrast on the span of human life.

There are two problems facing architects addressing public taste. These are how to assess public taste, and how to make relatively permanent building structures which will have relevance through changing tastes. The answer to both of these probably lies in recognition of the negotiable nature of values and tastes.

Building briefing, design, and evaluation procedures which enable tastes to be negotiated are being developed in the New Zealand Government Architect's office. These imply a transition in the role of the architect from that of form-giver and arbiter of taste, to one of facilitator and advisor in the social process of delivering and looking after buildings. They also set a greater demand on environmental psychology for elucidation of social processes, and less on its ability to provide normative data for designers.