

Architecture: words or shapes

[Design](#), [Architecture](#)



The context, its cultural background and its function also affects how we view architecture. The question is, what is more important to architecture, its shape or the words that describe it? Aesthetic theory is a greatly important topic in the realm of architecture. It dictates how we view architecture, what makes it beautiful and why it is important to us. This is why there has been so much debate on the topic throughout history. The debate has developed over time and continues today with numerous theorists bringing their ideas forward and taking different positions on the topic.

Position This paper holds the position that words are more important to architecture than shapes. Conceptuality is stronger than formalism as an architectural idea. The principal argument is that shapes come from words. Lee Courier is a well-respected architect that discussed this topic. His ideology is given and backed up through experiences of his works. Saint Peter's dome is a great example where both sides of the argument are addressed. Is the great dome about form or symbolism? Recognizing architecture as parts of a whole shows how beauty is influenced by its context and how important this is.

Taste in architecture and how one should judge its beauty also considers what properties are most important. Is taste to be dictated by only visual properties or are abstract properties also influential? A flower is undeniably beautiful. Analyzing why this is and how this is related to architecture gives great insight and another perspective of the argument. **Words Create Shapes** Christian Norberg-Schulz enforces that words are more important to architecture than shapes by stating that, " Existential meanings are derived

from natural, human and spiritual phenomena, and are experienced as order and character.

Architecture translates these meanings into spatial form". When we grasp this understand we legalize how both types of properties are important to architecture but one informs the other, that words create shapes. A formalist would argue that without shapes there is no architecture. This is true, however question to ask is, where do shapes come from and what guides their composition and color? It is the meaning and purpose behind the architecture that guides its shape. Without words we have no shape or architecture.

This puts abstract properties above physical properties, making abstract properties the true root of architecture. Lee Courrier's chapel at Ranch is one of the greatest examples where meaning is manifested into shape. This church is a truly unique composition of forms to create a shape that is immediately recognizable. The beauty of this shape as an object is debatable, however this shape allows us to have an experience full of emotion and delight. Lee Courier himself said that he wanted to create " a vessel of intense concentration and meditation".

The meanings behind Ranch connect us at a spiritual level, making the architecture beautiful on a far deeper level than form alone. The shapes of Ranch create a space where we can encounter this more meaningful, deeper level of beauty in architecture. Lee Courier believed that the purpose of architecture is to move us. Great architecture stirs an emotion within us that

evokes recognition and respect. Lee Courtier's ideology is most convincing when one experiences it through his architectural works.

For example, Villa Savoy in Posits is one of his masterpieces where you can encounter his ideology. Centered in the house is a ramp that takes you on a Journey from the underbelly of the house on the ground floor to the main body on the first floor and then on to a roof garden. Throughout the house views of the surrounding nature are framed, your mind is free ravel, as the forms evoke a sense of exploration and delight. Villa Savoy is better experienced than viewed through an image, only then can you understand the greater meaning and purpose that informs its beauty.

One might argue that this is not beautiful architecture and a poor example, however upon visiting this house you cannot deny that the house is beautiful in its own right, evoking a response from the occupant. Lee Courtier's masterpiece is moving; therefore achieving what he believed architecture to be about. This experience and the emotion that is felt can only be described in words. Shapes play a big role in the architecture but clearly the meanings behind are more important. Saint Peters Dome The crowning Jewel of Mannerist Architecture is Saint Pewter's Basilica in Rome.

This great structure is the out come of a series of classical revival styles that were established and developed during this course in history. This was a time where famous architects like Brucellosis and Michelangelo were pushing boundaries and testing new waters. Architecture of the time was seeking to express the culture and religion through evermore ornamented and magnificent forms. This symbolism retorting the relationship between man

and culture, religion and, the new found freedom of the Renaissance period. The Catholic Church's ultimate representation of connecting Heaven and Earth is the great dome of St. Peter's.

St. Peter's. The dome accentuates the occupants focus upwards to a greater connection with, and realization of God. The appreciation one feels when being inside this great space is an undeniably amazing experience. The meaning behind this architectural feat is so strong that it becomes prevalent to the occupant in one way or another. When looking heavenward under the dome you feel a sense of awe and admiration. What we see is the immensity and ornamentation of the structure however this is interwoven with the deeper abstract properties we feel. Geoffrey Scott has the opposing view, that visual properties are more important.

He assumes that as the structural truth of the dome is hidden, it makes its meaning weak. The dome could not support itself and relies on great chains for reinforcement. Therefore the dome relies on its beautiful form and ornamentation to fulfill its purpose of majestically crowning St. Peter's. This argument is weak as he refers to the meaning of the dome but misses its main purpose, that it is a symbol of heaven. The structure was important in realizing the ability to construct this great dome but not as important as the meaning for the dome.

Without this meaning there would be no reason for this structural feat or the beautiful ornamentation and St. Peter's wouldn't exist. Therefore we can say that St. Peter's dome is a great example of how words are more important to architecture than shape. Beauty needs Context Paris is

regarded as one of the most beautiful cities in the world. So what makes this city so beautiful? It is the question one keeps asking themselves when having the opportunity to experience the city first hand. It is Paris as a whole that makes it the way it is. It is an incredible compilation of parts that are interwoven with history and culture.

From the planning of grand avenues that link iconic landmarks to innovative architecture, everything in Paris has its own part to add to the greater story. Notre Dame cathedral would not be complete without its picturesque setting on the Seine River and the vibrant context surrounding it. The Eiffel Tower would not have its elegance and splendor if it were constructed in the middle of a wasteland. Paris has a deep history in planning, in revolution as well as the romantic French culture. All the parts of Paris need this rich context to make it the way it is.

The whole, or the context gives the parts, or the shapes, meaning. Henry Bergson uses Paris as an example of parts and whole in his book *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. He suggests that Paris cannot be explained in its parts, the shapes within. It needs to be understood as a whole, as an overall impression of symbols and meanings. A clear way to understand this idea is his example of how letters make up a poem. When the letters are mixed up as individual parts they do not make sense, however when they come together to form words the poem can be understood as a whole.

It is difficult to find a strong formalist argument that directly tackles architecture in its context. There are many other compelling anti-formalist observations, particularly from Christian Norberg-Schulz. One example he

gives is of the ideal positioning of Greek temples in connection to the landscape. Even the formal elements chosen for each temple are symbolic of the sites characteristics. The dominance of anti-formalist understandings is testament to the importance of meaning in architecture. When we think about the meaning of architecture, we consider a wider spectrum of properties.

Formalists are so focused on form that they forget to thoroughly address aspects greatly important to architecture such as context. Taste Architectural taste can be broken down to whether we should Judge architectural works on a universal or individual basis. Universal Judgment of architecture is based purely on shape, proportions and other visual properties. It is free from the bias of any cultural influence or personal preconception. Emmanuel Kant looks deep into this perception and argues that this is the only way we can Judge beauty and architectural works. The individual perception holds the view that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

An individual can approach an object with a preconception from their cultural background, knowledge and experience to form a Judgment. This type of Judgment requires properties that are abstract to inform our aesthetic Judgment. We can then propose the question, how should we Judge architectural works? Should we limit Judgment to a universal approach that only considers shapes or should we have an individual approach that considers other abstract properties? Kant is a formalist and his views counter the conceptuality view of individuality. Kant believes that not everyone is able to decide whether architecture is beautiful or not.

It is a skill that has to be developed, so that one can make judgments void of any personal bias. Then and only then could that person decide whether an object was beautiful or not. Alexander Newsman thoroughly analyses Kant's writings in his book *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. This analysis is neutral taking no side of the debate, however he exposes the single mindedness of this argument. How could architecture and its beauty bear no relation to the world around us? We are employ human beings all connected and interwoven into our culture, thoughts and desires.

Of course who we are and what we do affects our judgment, not just of beauty and architecture but of everything we do. There is no way to separate the two, abstract properties inform our judgment and taste in the visual properties of an object. When discussing Elaine Scarry's writings, Newsman talks of beauty being manifested in appearance but being connected to a larger cycle, that informs understanding and interpretation. Architectural works should be judged as an individual. Everyone is unique and has their own cultural background, thoughts and leaning to bring to architecture.

Why would you try and block this out to form a universal opinion the same as everyone else? It is important for architecture to embrace conceptuality and let it continue to develop as rich and vibrant built form in all different shapes and sizes. *Language of Flowers* by George Beable presents a convincing discussion about flowers and how they pertain to beauty and love as aspects of aesthetic theory. The rose is an undeniably beautiful object that symbolizes

love and has the possibility for many more meanings determined by intention and interpretation.

A rose given out of love from one person to another makes this beautiful object more about meaning than form. We can say a rose symbolizes something more beautiful than the rose itself and the abstract properties are more important to the rose than visual. All can appreciate a beautiful rose but it is most beautiful to an individual when they have a connection to it rather than considering it just as a form. Beautiful architecture has the same properties as a rose does. It is beautiful in appearance, directed by its components and colors, and it is beautiful in meaning, directed by its symbolism and purpose.

Like with the rose, do we not appreciate architecture more when it has a greater meaning to us? As a rose symbolizes love and stirs emotion, architecture should also stir emotion as it is experienced and appreciated. Abstract properties bring out the true beauty of an object to make it truly beautiful. This true beauty is what both a rose and architecture is about. The formalist view is that the rose, like architecture is beautiful because of its form. This would mean that the rose as a beautiful gift is less about giver and more about the object, that architecture is more about appearance and sees about the people who interact with it.

Clearly you would rather receive a rose from someone you love rather than someone you don't know, even if you do not appreciate the form of the rose, the act of love gives it a greater beauty. Likewise you want to have architecture for the delight it brings no matter the form. What architecture

can bring to society is more important than a meaningless composition of shapes that does not relate to people. Conclusion We can conclude that it all comes back to words. The debate over shapes and words leads from one argument to the next and it will never stop.

It simply comes down to what is architecture all about? It is all about people. What is beautiful about architecture? It is beautiful in the way it relates to people and how we relate to it. Architecture is a place to dwell; it is a place for human beings. Architecture is meant to improve life, to provide us with shelter and delight. This can be manifested in various ways dependent on function, cultural meaning and purpose. What we see is its physical properties that have been informed by abstract properties. Every beautiful piece of architecture has Journey to be experienced and a story to be told.