Image, representation, experience: understanding the architectural object argumen...

Design, Photography

Image, Representation, Experience: Understanding the Architectural Object

Answering the question on the ways in which photographic images provide us with information about architectural objects requires an understanding of visual representation. As stated by one of the past designers, the basis of visual representation entails interpreting the marks made on the surface. However, understanding visual representation depends on an individual's visual literacy – this entails understanding all of the aspects of visual appreciation. The various types of visual appreciation include: appreciation of images for constructing, appreciation of images for representing and appreciation of images for communicating knowledge. In a nutshell, visual literacy, in simple terms, could be termed as a collection of competencies that are vital to learning, and humans develop this through seeing.

In modern architecture, no building is complete until it has been presented in a photographic/image form. The reason why photographic images are important in architecture is because they convey the experience and narrative of space through a two dimensional medium. Whether the photographic images are a true representation of the architectural object as designed by the architect is a question for another day. However, one thing is for sure: the images draw perceptions about the architectural object and, as expected, such perceptions vary from one individual to another.

As it has always been said, a picture is worth a thousand words. Although some people would like to argue that photographic images distort the viewers' experience of the building such that the viewers look at the building from the perspective of the photographer, it is essential to point out that, in

some cases, the image is the only medium that the viewers might have to interact with the building. Therefore, the image is the only medium which can help the viewer to appreciate and understand the architectural object at that time.

However, the use of images is not always objective and can, at times, be subjective. The aspects that the viewer sees from the image as presented by the photographer may not be as the architect intended. The architect presents the building in a unique way that not even the photographers can be able to capture in their images. Therefore, the picture is not an actual representation of the architectural object as designed by the architect rather it is a perception that depends on the presentation of the image by the photographer. In order for the viewer to understand the architectural object as intended by the architect, he/she has to experience it in person. If this is not possible, then, the viewer of the photographic image has to completely dissociate himself/herself from the photographer and look at the image at an angle that is devoid of influence from outside sources. However, this is not possible in theory because the photographer has some aspects that he/she wants to focus on before presenting the image to the viewer. As a result, the aspects on focus will depend on the objectives of the photographer. In the same breath, it is impossible to look at the photographic image independent of the mind of the photographer.

Consequently, if the photographer presents a distorted view of an architectural object, the viewers are also likely to view the image of the architectural object with a distorted view too. Despite these negative propositions against the use of photographic images in appreciating

architectural objects, the use of images still remains one of the most genuine attempts at presenting authentic representation of architectural objects. If it were not for photographic images of architectural objects, were would architecture be? This means that images and photographs of architectural objects still remain a fundamental aspect of architecture. Despite the inherent weaknesses of using photographs and images of architectural objects, nothing comes close to replacing the images/photographs entirely. Photographic images of architectural objects reveal something that is akin to reality. This makes it possible to assess buildings, architectural objects, and other pieces of art. Therefore, although architecture is best experienced in person, architectural photography so far remains the most important tool of documenting and conveying the qualities of design among the industry and the public. Through photographic images of architectural buildings, legendary icons such as Ezra Stoller and Julius Shulman were able to not only document the final designs but also provide a means of interpreting the architecture.

In the past, architectural photographers have been able to create a lasting impression of architectural designs, and it is for this reason that we view photography today as a gateway into another era. Nonetheless, by looking at the aspect of space, we find that there is a collision between the photographer and the architect; photography has less to do with the illusion of space, but has more to do with the viewer’s perception of the photographer. The only way the viewer may think independently of the building is by dissociating himself from the photographer such that there is no way we have a perception of the photographer in thought or presence.

While the invisible presence of the photographer seems to be the dominant aspect of architectural photography, it is important to note that, this should be taken as a fault of the photo/image; rather it is a reflection of the social relationships that exist between the photographer and the architect. When the photographer and the architect are in collaboration, the viewers are able to look at the image without interference from the photographer. Therefore, the photographer does not let his/her thought to contaminate the space. In this case, the photographer becomes a body with quiet thoughts such that the viewers can enter into his body, using his eyes, and experience the thoughts of the architect independently.

In actual sense, however, the recognition of a photographic image is more than a representation of actual space; the photographer asserts his authority on the photograph, and this becomes something more. This experience reflects a collision between the architect's and the photographer's thoughts. As a result, the viewer is unable to assess the architectural building though the space of the photograph but is forced to look at the building through the space and the mind of the photographer.

Indeed, photography serves to interpret architecture in several ways, and it is one of the platforms where people get different perspectives about the interesting elements of structure. Many years ago, the discovery of photography changed the perceptions of reality and prosperity forever. The illusion that a moment could be captured in such precise details completely altered the way people started to record, report and put into memory both major and minor events.

Inherently, people are visual beings and through photographs and images,

photographers are able to convey information about architectural objects and illustrate concepts that would not be so oblivious. Through images and photographs, viewers get to appreciate the inner processes of creativity, and acknowledge the beauty of architectural objects. Therefore, photography in architecture has not only changed people's perception of architectural objects but also changed people's perception of the world around us. In architectural photography, photographers take great care to ensure that images of architectural objects are presented in their relevant, related contexts, and this provides both aesthetic and conceptual appeal.

Through photographic images of architectural objects viewers do not have to depend on background information of the object, but can still explore the subtle placements of the object that the viewer is interested in. In a more assertive way than the spoken word and writing, photography is quite representative of its time and by looking at an image, one can tell the era of the image unlike other mediums whereby the era is not oblivious.

Nonetheless, all this boils down to one thing: perception.

As we all understand, the human perception process is a complex, demanding creative activity. Among the things involved in the process include constructing the meaning of objects, and responding to them. Under normal circumstances, the perception process entails the registration of an object's physical attributes, events taking place, and the people around the object. The process also involves taking note of the relationships between people, events and objects. Furthermore, the process entails intricately linked details such that a simple evaluation of the objects and a more complex assessment of their attractiveness takes place; the process of

assessing their attractiveness is manifested as communicated attitudes of people, objects and ideas.

Generally, both positive and negative reactions arise from different people after seeing an object. However, this is understandable because people are not neutral observers of the world and this constitutes a crucial element in perception – the element of assessment. It is essential to note that people's attitude towards objects is determined by various factors such as the stimulus under evaluation, the context within which the observer finds the stimulus, the objective characteristics of the stimulus, culture of the observer, matters of particular interest to the observer, and other subjective properties attributed to the observer.

One of the most basic architectural features of every object is appearance. In most cases, appearance is considered the most important factor in making assessment of any architectural object. In the current state-of-affairs, people take it for granted that photographic images should be an important part of designing buildings. Although it is not yet quite clear whether buildings are better experienced as images or as architectural objects, it is essential to indicate that images are vital elements in designing buildings because they depict buildings as objects. As one Roland Barthes said, " In the image. The object yields itself wholly." Nothing can be further from the truth. Unlike texts that give vague perceptions of buildings and probably suspicious impressions of buildings, photographic images present the building as it is; the image enables the viewer to observe the photograph with intensity.

In most of the cases, architectural drawings try to present as accurately as possible the distinctive atmosphere of a building in its intended place.

Although the portrayal underlines the absence of the actual object, it creates curiosity about what the reality promises and creates a longing for its presence. As it is always the standard procedure, buildings are inspired, copied, produced, propagated and consumed via the images. If images and photography that surround us was never present, what would architecture be in a culture in which all images are not used?

When it comes to visual appreciation, it is important to discuss stimulus-driven and goal-directed control of attention. Other times, it may be under strict supervision according to the observer’s goals. As research indicates, there are some psychological aspects in every individual that affect their perception towards objects that can be affected by individual traits, especially temperament. This indicates that attitudes towards architectural objects could be conditioned individually, at the level of temperamental differences.

Architecture is a visual art that deals with sight and, therefore, photographic images of architectural objects serve to satisfy that aesthetic appeal. Through imagery, people are able to perceive space, understand graphic languages and interpret three-dimensional illusions as represented on a two-dimensional platform. From the two-dimensional images that fall into our eyes, somehow, we are able to see three-dimensional objects. This enables people to calculate some things such as distances, the height of cliffs, the distance of danger and so forth. The reason why people are able to convert two-dimensional images into three dimensional images is because we are endowed with depth perception capacity. Depth perception cues can either be monocular or binocular. Monocular cues do not require both eyes to

observe the object simultaneously, while binocular cues require both eyes to observer at the same time.

People are also endowed with color perception capacity, because the sensations of color cannot exist without an observer within the eyes to observe them. Color does not exist in the eyes of the observer until the information is consciously interpreted in mind of the observer. Differences in color wavelength determine how fast we perceive colors. Most of the objects around us contain more than one color, and it is rare to find monochromatic colors. People's perception of color is also influenced by other factors such as past experience, familiarity with the object and the physical characteristic of light stimuli. For example, one researcher found out that an object cut in the shape of a leaf is found to be more green compared to another object cut in the shape of a donkey. Therefore, previous color and form associations have an influence on the perception of color.

Figure 1: A picture illustrating the experiment on memory color

Source: http://www. macalester. edu/academics/psychology/whathap/ubnrp/aesthetics/perception. html

Figure 2: A picture illustrating dispersion of color

Source: http://www. macalester. edu/academics/psychology/whathap/ubnrp/aesthetics/perception. html

Another important aspect of perception is the Gestalt perception. The Gestalt perception relies on the relation between stimuli instead of the relations that exist between the stimuli themselves. One of the aspects of gestalt perception is the principle of nearness. This principle enables us to see and group what we see according to closeness. The stimuli that appear to be

close together are grouped closely together, while those that appear to be distant apart appear to be some distant apart. The same concept applies to objects that appear to be similar to one another; similar objects are grouped together.

Figure 3: A picture illustrating the principle of nearness

Source: http://www. macalester. edu/academics/psychology/whathap/ubnrp/aesthetics/perception. html

Figure 4: A picture illustrating the principle of similarity

Source: http://www. macalester. edu/academics/psychology/whathap/ubnrp/aesthetics/perception. html

Lastly, another aspect of perception is the pictorial perception. Pictorial perception consists of elevation, linear perspective, texture gradients, interposition and other cues that are presented by artists who intend to represent three-dimensional images in two-dimensional forms. Despite the fact that depth perception and pictorial perception are two aspects that are independent, the two aspects are closely interlinked; depth perception could be seen as an extension of pictorial perception.

Figure 5: A picture illustrating interposition

Source: http://www. macalester. edu/academics/psychology/whathap/ubnrp/aesthetics/perception. html

Figure 6: A picture illustrating the concept of elevation

Source: http://www. macalester. edu/academics/psychology/whathap/ubnrp/aesthetics/perception. html

As visual beings, people have the ability to see and recognize visual order, texture, color, pattern, symbols, excellent craftsmanship, expression and

beauty. An understanding of these concepts constitutes something called visual literacy. Visual literacy entails the ability to read and interpret visual images. Visual perception is a function of experience. Visual elements such as lines, shapes, color and texture are stored in the brain and they automatically come to the mind when intuitions that conjure up similar images appear.

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