

How is harmony is
perceived in
contemporary design
philosophy essay



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Through generations, harmony has always been seen has a perception of a global perfection and beauty. A connection between two or more parts combined together and a good relationship with each other is what defines a harmonious beauty. This pleasant relationship can be found between people, feelings, nature, sounds, colour and science. All things on earth display harmony with each other.

At first, harmony was perceived by the Greeks and Egyptians as a kind of calculation. They saw it as a form of combination of notes that brings melody and rhythm to music. As a result, after understanding the meaning of harmony in music, the concept became an universal experience that can be seen and felt. Various philosophies, art and science around the world had adopted the theory of harmony. For instance, the concept of harmony is essential in the Chinese philosophies, in defining the relationship between man and his environment or between the different elements of nature.

However, in design, the philosophy of harmony had been seen and interpreted in many different ways. The perception of harmony is made of proportion, scale, symmetry and asymmetry. The architect Vitruvius had seen and described harmony as a beauty made of perfect proportion. This beauty needs to be the reflection of the proportions and symmetries of the human body. After Vitruvius developed this concept of harmony, many architect and designer followed approximately the same interpretation of proportion. It had a huge impact and had permanently changed the work of architects, designers and artists.

Nevertheless, through various architectural movements, the idea of proportion by using geometry to create symmetrical spaces developed to more asymmetrical proportions. In the Bauhaus period, the idea of adopting a more modern and dynamic design was to bring asymmetry into spaces and forms.

The main idea in special design in my opinion is to bring different perception of harmony to the people discovering spaces. This essay seeks to define the notion of harmony and will elaborate its evolution and how it is perceived in spatial design. The notion of harmony is questioned as to if it is still relevant to the contemporary spatial design.

The perception of harmony

Harmony in different cultures had various definitions but in general the basic remains the same, all things on this earth display a certain level of harmony with each other. Philosophers through time and culture have defined harmony as a pleasant feeling for humans. The first idea of harmony was shown by philosophies beliefs of different culture. All beliefs have the same basic idea of bring a pleasant and harmonious feeling to humans.

For instance, Chinese philosophies of harmony were to create a good and peaceful relation between humans and nature. The meaning of the Yin and the Yang form the Chinese philosophy refers to all opposites that combine on earth. Nature had connects its opposite together such as hot and cold, light and dark, male and female to create a collection of harmony within a balanced system. The Taoist religion uses the symbol of Yin Yang to express their philosophy of life: harmony through dynamic balance between life and <https://assignbuster.com/how-is-harmony-is-perceived-in-contemporary-design-philosophy-essay/>

nature. Following this concept will bring happiness and harmony between life and nature (Courtney and Young Lee, 1997, p. 15). The basic idea is that environment is part of people lives and it is a concept of harmony on its own. This is the reason way Feng Shui plays this part in the Chinese philosophy that is governed by spatial arrangement and organisation of things in relation of the yin and the yang theory. Creating a positive feeling in people's homes will complete the feeling of happiness. It is the reflection of a special energy within a space by taking into consideration the placement of object or forms in a manner to allow a harmonious energy flow. This energy will help to improve life by bringing positive feeling within the space.

In the same way, Japanese design study the connection between man and nature. To keep nature within our living spaces, it is essential to incorporate design into nature and nature into design. Japanese design is meant to integrate and take in consideration the nature that surrounds it. Their design philosophy is that human must not destroy the relationship between him and nature. This is the reason behind the fluidity between the inside and the outside as seen in Japanese architecture. The integration within the natural environment is essential.

On the contrary, the Greek interpretation of harmony comes from the musical sound that a melody can produce. The basic meaning of harmony in the Greek philosophy comes from music. Music notes were perceived as an overall support to the melody. The musical harmony is made of different parts and each part is related to other part. They all contribute to the formation of a complete melody (Cheng 2009, p11-12). The overall sound the instrument produces is transformed in a beautiful melody that brings a <https://assignbuster.com/how-is-harmony-is-perceived-in-contemporary-design-philosophy-essay/>

pleasant sensation to the ear. From this interpretation of harmonious sound, the Egyptian philosopher Pythagoras who was a mathematical genius had defined harmonious sound as mathematical equation. His theory was that all things were numbers and that there was a mathematical relation between notes in music. Music was considered as “ a measurement in distance and vibration” (Marlis, 2006, p. 145). Moreover, harmony was applied to sound and forms. The relation between harmony in music and architecture came from the same word “ bait”, which means build and rhyme (Gadalla, 2003, p. 15-16). Architecture and musical harmonies are both based on mathematics. Hence, music is a geometry that is translated into sound and in the same way architecture is a geometry that is translated into proportions.

Accordingly to these general definitions the main objective of harmony is the fusion of parts together to obtain a whole. This concept of ideas will be the basis expression of how design can bring harmony into spaces. Hence the interpretation of harmony began to build a true concept that evolved into a universal human experience.

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The perception of harmony in design can be defined as a combination of visual elements such as forms, proportion, symmetry, asymmetry and scale that will create a perception of beauty. This perception will bring a unique design on creating a pleasant relation with each part of the space. The relationship of proportion through natural elements is observed and applied to design. These expressions of harmony will define the beauty of the design.

Formerly, Egyptians, Greeks and various philosophers had defined proportion through forms of natural structures. This notion of proportion became a universal law that many philosopher or designers had followed. This universal law is the relation of sizes between systems of dimension that have been developed through centuries. These dimensions can be calculated with quantity or degree called geometry which determined the form and shape. This combination of harmony and geometry came up with the rule of proportion in architecture. This universal rule was a method of dimension that was based at first to measure an ideal perception of beauty in architecture. This system helps, in the first place, to work out the layout of the spaces. Secondly, it was to create a sense of harmony and balance within the space. The mathematic of space planning is based by the element of proportion and scale (Corinna Rossi, 2004, p. 2-5). The philosophy came from the human proportion, geometry, Fibonacci numbers, pentagram and golden ratio which were all applied as part of the practice of architectural design.

The whole idea of the theory of harmony in design is the need to integrate the design to its environment. Nature has proportion that is defined as beautiful and a design needs to have beautiful proportions. For this manner, the use of proportion was to reflect the notion of perfection in the design.

In contrast, harmony in contemporary design is seen more invest to the initial ideology of beauty. The expression is incomplete composition. The idea of organic integration does not rlay on fixed ideal type and neither proportional systems that privilege symmetry and proportion. Design are subsystems mutually inflect and adapt to each other, achiving interation via <https://assignbuster.com/how-is-harmony-is-perceived-in-contemporary-design-philosophy-essay/>

various mode of spatial interlocking soft transition at the boundaries between parts, morphological affiliation and so on.

Thus the idea is to not add or subtract without elaborate inflection, meditations or interarticulations.

is more an expression of social values to adapt our modern lifestyle.

The approach can be seen as a geometric perspective that is controlled and intuitive vision of proportion

Breaks the conventional rules of proportion

The terms of harmony has changed but the goal remains the same.

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According to the mathematical terms that allow the calculation of proportion, the theory of the Golden Ratio was influenced by the classical Greek architecture, the number phi 1.618 is a numerical content that relates to mathematics, biology and art (Doczi, 1981, p. 109). It is a simple form that acclaims divine proportion that is found everywhere in nature including shells, snowflakes and plants. The Greeks used this concept to reflect balance of symmetry in their design and art. The best example of proportion with the use of the golden ratio is the Parthenon in Athena. Different segments divide the monument from the columns to the top, the segments join to a meeting point and it reflects a perfect rectangle (Doczi, 1981, p. 109). The method of calculation is a multiplication of the sum of the two previous numbers in instance 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8... It is called the Fibonacci

numbers and it will determine the proportion and symmetry of the architecture (Doczi, 1981, p. 92).

Moreover, “ Harmony in architecture is to create order with symmetry”, as mentioned by the architect Vitruvius (Mallgrave, p. 6-7). Harmony is an idea of beauty that is made of symmetrical order. The idea of Vitruvius was that harmony has a universal sense of beauty that can be applied to everything, to humans and forms. According to his beliefs the structure of natural design was based on universal laws of proportions and symmetry. He compares forms to the perfection of the symmetrical beauty of the human body. Thus, his concept of harmonious design must make exact reference to the perfection symmetry and proportion of the body.

Similarly to Vitruvius, the philosopher and architect Leon Battista Alberti followed the same vision of harmony and proportion. For him, harmony is a relation of all parts to each other and everything was governed by mathematical laws. For instance, Alberti describe that a building is made of “ lineaments” which are constituted of numbers, scale and order of each part of the building. He compared it to the mind and body of a human being (Hendrix, 2004, p. 109-110). His vision was that the mind of the body will be represented by the proportion of the design. The body will represent nature and material. It does not mean that lineaments are materials but more like an overall projection of a form (Hendrix, 2004, p. 109-110). Likewise, Le Corbusier tried to improve the appearance of design on using the proportions of the human body of Vitruvius and took his one body height and used the golden ratio and the Fibonacci numbers of the human measurements to

create his one system. His idea was to refer the symmetry and proportion of his one modular system (Padovan, 1999, p 326).

Hence, this mathematic sum will define the perfect proportion of what a harmonious design will represent in its whole. The reference to the human body is the key of perfect symmetry that need to be applied to gain a harmonious form.

Therefore, the main idea of symmetry is to bring an equal distribution of forms or weight to the structure. These structures need to project a physical balance of proportion to bring certain equilibrium to the design. To provide this equilibrium, the design is seen into two parts on an axis, the same amount of weight on each side, similar to a reflection on a mirror. This distribution is associated with symmetrical balance. This symmetrical balance can also be determined with shapes that are repeated in the same positions to both sides of the design. As in the Greek classical architecture, symmetry was usually centralised in the special layout of the design. This symmetry brought a sense of balance to the space by projecting the same image on both side of the design. Besides bringing the concept of balance with symmetry it is also an aesthetically pleasing reflection of beauty. As we can see in the uniformity and arrangements of the Greek architectural columns, the order, dimension, placement, repetition and position reflect a harmonious beauty of perfection.

Furthermore, the Egyptians principle of the symmetry and repetition had been the main objective of the Egyptians architecture. One example of symmetry can be found in hieroglyphs the Egyptians writing system, which

was based on parts of the body and their symmetrical relation to each other like fingers, palms, hands and feet. The human proportions come to their philosophy of perfection and it could be found everywhere from inscription to their buildings (Rossi, 2004 p. 5-10)

The symmetrical balance of the Greek and Egyptians was a systemic objective to their ideal of perfection. This theory of symmetry went all over the world and had affected many architectural movements. However, the first influence of a non symmetry distribution was seen at the Bauhaus period. In the 20's and 30's architecture was influence by the modernist philosophy of the Bauhaus, and that period was considered as a pioneer of the asymmetric revolution. Some designers saw asymmetrical design as more modern and dynamic approach to design. The idea of creating a non equal distribution of weight on either both side of the axis which determines an asymmetry balance. This modernised view of design will bring a more interesting schema of forms that has the same straight and can also bring balance to a space. Designers such as Walter Gropuis, who was a German architect and also the founder of the Bauhaus school, always designed his buildings and spaces with asymmetrical proportions. He wanted to create a provocative impression within the elements of the buildings and facade (Droste, 2006, p. 46) The concept of Mies Van der Rohe, was similar to Gropuis. Mies' idea of combining symmetry and asymmetry design is to him, a provocative impression to the building and was considered as " Avant Garde" (Droste, 2006, p. 82). Mies wanted to approach his spaces by using contrast of density, openness, asymmetry and symmetry. He was convinced

that the contrast would create a tension, which will provide a dynamic experience.

After the Bauhaus period, the influence of the asymmetry began to appear more regularly. The elements of order in design still continued to grow but by using the path of a more natural structure called “ organic structure” to produce harmonious designs. Designers like Frank Lloyd Wright, balanced volumes on expressing organic contextual designs with asymmetry spars this notion. In his work on the Kaufmann House “ Falling Water” the organic structure was to combine modern technology within natural settings. The concept was to link nature, new technology in a modern concept of asymmetry (Hoffman, 1993, p. 108-109).

In fact, this huge movement of asymmetrical design was the beginning of an unconventional solution of harmonious proportions. This method had influenced the future generation of designer and has been experimented to define new concept of proportion to create a harmonious design.

Organic architecture is based on the idea of nature and how the design can integrate within it. Now organic design is seen in a more physical way. Two designer case studies how to create a free flow of curves and asymmetrical lines in order to express the forms of their design concept. First, the work of Santiago Calatrava was not inspired by the measurements of the human body but was to incorporate the existing shapes of the human body within the design. Through the observation of how the movements, gestural, postures, flow and structure of the external body are made, he came with his own inspiration and concept. His work on the Planetarium in Valencia the “

Eye of Wisdom” was built in the representation of a semi eye with its pupil. The location of the building allowed the reflection on the water of the building and was seen as a complete eye (Shahshahani, 2004, p. 33).

The second case study was from the famous architect, Zara Hadid. Her work consisted to show an irregular geometry in organic forms. Her main focus is to translate harmonious proportion into a contemporary dynamic process that projects round and curvy forms. The classical proportion is for her like an enclosed and rigid solution, so her point is to bring harmony in a softer or smoother sensation. On many of her works, the emphasis on the skin interface or environment is a way to project an unconventional, softer but dynamic design. In the new Guggenheim Museum in Taichung, there is a strong ambition toward a new organic language. There are two main galleries corridors that looks like there are melding with each other in the central part of the architecture. Instead of a mathematical intervention to bring the two portions together, there is only a realistic idea of how things can be fusion together naturally. This is translated by a smooth intervention with no added parts, but an overall unique composition (Schumacher, 2004, p. 31).

Contemporary design

The classical method of mathematics to project harmonious balance of proportion and order in my opinion is relevant for a few contemporary designers. For the new generation of designers, the idea of breaking the conventions on using harmony in an asymmetry and unbalance way is their concept of new modern design.

The idea of harmony in symmetry for the first category of designers is still the ideal of a classical and non ephemeral reflection of beauty. Design and nature is now an old discipline and is still being used in contemporary spaces or forms. In my research I found that already in the 60s organic shapes began to rise with aesthetically pleasing form on integrating with its environment. The inspiration and concept was toward proportion but with new approaches towards geometrical forms. These new organic approaches was seen in organic contextual concepts or in curvy lines seen in Antonio Gaudi or Frank Lloyd Wright works. However, some designers now became more oriented to organic shapes meaning curvy structure of natural forms rather than straight lines. The information towards ecology and biology in our days is in abundance. Natural structure, patterns and forms in a flower, a leaf, a stone or a seed are still viewed and connected to the natural law of Fibonacci numbers and golden ratio. Instead of using the natural laws, I think that designers focus on the geometry of the natural structure and in which it will define their harmonious curves.

The second category of designer is going with the path of a more asymmetrical unbalance approach toward design. Moving away from the rules of geometrical proportion or the golden ratio, designer based their design on organic proportion. Directing by the example of the concept of Calitrava, he does not use the measurement of the human body to create beauty but on looking to its body language. Nevertheless, this approach can be seen as a geometric perspective, but it is controlled and holds an intuitive vision of proportion. The sensuality or fluidity of the bodies movement will give this sensation of harmony. The architect Zaha Hadid for example is a

famous designer that had broken the conventional rules of proportion. Her vision is organic forms and for her an unbalanced composition is seen through asymmetry that brings a true contemporary dynamism to her design. Her idea is to bring an irregular geometry and on the same time that the irregularity brings a smooth and flow feeling of flowing in space.

I think that we are going toward a century of designer who break new boundaries and has established a new reflection on how things could be done instead of the conventional way. Designers want to explore new horizon and new limits in design. In my perception, design in the future will always find new path of experimentation even if the old notions of harmony rise time to time, but with the fusion of new ideas.

Harmony is still relevant in the contemporary design. The way it is expressed had been modified to a modern point of view. The translation of harmony in contemporary design is an important projection to bring to a design. Without harmony, in my perception the buildings, spaces or shapes of different design will have no meaning, no spirit.