2010

On the Possibility of Style

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The idea of style is a deeply troubling one for the profession of architecture. It is a pervasive and influential concept, but it is often only spoken of in hushed tones or quotation marks. Architects are highly resistant to the labeling of their own work as a style or “of” a certain style. Similarly, critics are equally hesitant to use the term, for they often feel as if it is overly reductive or disrespectful to the architecture in question. The largest problem with style, however, is not that it cheapens architecture, but that it might not actually exist. Style is an intellectually weak concept that does not exist at the tectonic level of architecture; rather, it persists as a folk classification that attempts to process the diversity of buildings without saying anything about the buildings themselves. And yet, as a concept, it is popular and will likely remain so indefinitely. Its weaknesses have been overcome by its legitimization as a concept by a number of prestigious institutions and buildings, as well as its continual tacit acceptance. A thorough understanding of style must recognize that style is maintained as a social construction that provides meaning at the social, as opposed to the tectonic, level of architecture. In this paper, I intend to show how architectural style functions as a social constitution in order to explain style’s inability to withstand basic interrogation and continued existence as a pervasive concept in architecture.

Like architecture itself, style has enjoyed many definitions over the years, perhaps as partial testament to its ties to the vicissitudes of socially determinate culture. Twentieth-century architect Le Corbusier has described it as a “lie,” “a feather in a woman’s hat,” and “a unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch,” among other things. Architectural historian par excellence Nikolas Pevsner referred to style “as an approach to the life that slumbers unconsciously within all of us” in a paragraph that dismissed the concept as inappropriate for the description of architecture. Style has also been described as mere “tendencies” by gothic revivalist Adams Cram. Style as a genre comes from the definition that emerged in the seventeenth century. The word is derived from the term style, which refers to an instrument used for writing. It has also referred to a piece of writing itself, or sections or paragraphs within a single document, as well as commenting textual qualities. The folk understanding of style coincides with a general increased usage of the scientific method, as well as knowledge in the European world. During this time, European intellectuals were thinking more critically about art and the nature of knowledge itself. Archeological expeditions, as well as colonial activities and general travel, occasioned the study of aesthetics would adopt the same taxonomy-based value systems that were appearing in a variety of pseudo-academic disciplines. The folk understanding of style coincides with the emergence of scientific rational classification schemes across intellectual disciplines. It is hardly surprising, then, that the study of aesthetics would adopt the same taxonomy-based value systems that were appearing in a variety of pseudo-academic disciplines. The word is derived from the term style, which refers to an instrument used for writing. It has also referred to a piece of writing itself, or sections or paragraphs within a single document, as well as commenting textual qualities. The folk understanding of style coincides with a general increased usage of the scientific method, as well as knowledge in the European world. During this time, European intellectuals were thinking more critically about art and the nature of knowledge itself. Archeological expeditions, as well as colonial activities and general travel, occasioned the study of aesthetics would adopt the same taxonomy-based value systems that were appearing in a variety of pseudo-academic disciplines.
encounters with exotic people and cultures, which precipitated a classification effort within the languages of the colonial powers. Knowledge of the world and of the past, greatly expanded during this time and, unlike at any other time, Europeans were acutely aware of their location within a broader and more diverse understanding of humanity. New words were needed to accommodate the ideas that emerged to classify this outpouring of information about Europe's past and its global neighbors. The evolution of style's definition reflects these trends, as the term soon added the classification of art, crafts, and architecture, pursuant to the European intellectual's need to incorporate the scientific method and classify everything according to the rational aspirations exposed by the Enlightenment. For Peter Collins, the emergence of the awareness of styles "aroused a concern for classification whereby a new science of architecture was developed, which treated buildings like documents of historiographic research; it [also] introduced a fashion for imaging Roman compositions, however alien these might be to the purpose the new building was intended to serve." It is likely that the opposition to style in contemporary architectural practice and parlance is influenced by a prolonged reaction to the excesses and abuses of nineteenth-century building. Ironically, it is arguable that the way in which the major buildings at this time were constructed with such a constrained use of architectural style was also involved in a broader nation-state movement where a national architecture was sought. This had the curious effect of many countries claiming for themselves architecture that was developed in the absence of the nation-state or for ecclesiastical purposes. In short, style was simply another aesthetic consideration that was supposed to accompany choices in language, music, and other forms of national self-representation.

During this time, a style was used as an indication for a building's image and presented the inclusion of certain features that came to be rigidly associated with the said style. Thus gothic architecture could be achieved by building something that looked gothic, giving the structure pointed arches, for example, as well as a number of other elements that came to be associated with the gothic look over time. Similarly, Egyptian architecture could be "achieved" by building with a certain heaviness, including battered walls, and specially ornamented columns. While the architecture was often very different it was still said to be by its look, but due to certain steps taken the design of the structure.

The most basic assumption of style is that it is believed to be generated out of the qualities of the building itself, but it is arguable that it is often the other way around.

Style is not a structural or programmatic phenomenon, but a social one. It is not the buildings themselves that have style, but rather, our belief that they do. In actuality, style is a mutable and socially constructed mechanism that allows us to bringing non-identical buildings into intellectual coherence. This assertion causes a number of problems due to the dilemma between the folk construction of a style and the physical construction of any single building. For one, it is not known which parts of a building are determinant or generative of a style. The mutability of the style mechanism renders the distinction between the qualities of a building that are essential and those only incidental to its style nearly impossible. That two buildings could be of the same style and not look or function in the same way poses a problem for classifying them, because an arbitrary selection of attributes may have been used to bring them into stylistic congruence. Hence, it seems as though style generalizes across cases, and also within them, because it is likely that many buildings “of” a certain style will lack some of the structural features conventionally associated with that style.
hard-pressed to find anyone who would dis- 

agree with the assertion that the buildings are 

more gothic than Chartres. Yale Law looks 

gothic. Admittedly, Yale Law looks 

more gothic than the Tribune Tower, but the 

Tribune Tower has flying buttresses just like 

Chartres. Johnson’s PPG Building seems like 

it should represent the biggest contradiction 

to its gothic classification, yet one could argue 

it does not because its glass construction 

allows for maximal light penetration, which 

was one of the principle attributes of gothic 

construction. Program cannot be safely relied 

upon, because there are other supposedly 

gothic buildings that do not share its cathedral 

shape. Perhaps the building is “bi-styled,” but 

this assertion lacks intellectual rigor since the 

two styles are so adulterated. The differences in the aforementioned 

buildings expose the limitations of assigning a style to anything that has to do with the build- 

ings themselves, despite our continual willing- 

ness to associate them with each other. The 

concept of style itself is the construct that 

allows us to group these and other buildings 
together by giving us a malleable mechanism to 
continue to art as if the styles themselves exist. 

In this way, the gothic style is functioning as a 

social constitution, insofar as it is a category 

that has become embedded into the institu- 
tional fabric of society and participates in our 

common stock of social knowledge. Its muta-
bility allows us to arbitrarily borrow different 
features to subsume a building into a style. 
The concept of social constructivism was 
first advanced by Peter Berger and Thomas 
Luckmann in The Social Construction of Reality. 
Berger and Luckmann argue that people and 
groups interact with each other, and these interactions then become habitualized into 
norms and reciprocal roles that are played out 
over and over again. Eventually, these roles 
are institutionalized as more and more people 
tact as though they exist. At this point these 

norms are said to be socially con-

structed, and they are maintained by people’s 

willingness to let them influence their behav-
or. These networks form a social reality that 
is separate from the world of real things but 
influences our organization of the knowledge 
of the world of real things. 
The process of the legitimation of social 
constructions occurs through the recognition of diversity in building as well as maintain our 
ability to communicate with architecture. 

For instance, if we line up with our construction of a classic 

arbitrary definition that is vaguely associated with the construction of a Greek temple like 

the Parthenon. Temples, however, were excep-
tional buildings and in no way communicate 
the diversity of building practices undertaken in the thousands of years of Greek civiliza-
tion. However, by arbitrarily selecting a few 
qualities or examples, we can transmit other 
architecturally-associated ideas of Greek civiliza-
tion in perpetuity. Hence classical architecture 

rarely uses pediments and Ionic and Corin-

thian columns to communicate democracy, civic participation, citizenship, and representa-
tive governments to people who tacitly accept 
these meanings. However, society could just 
as easily use amphitheaters and tholi to com-

municate the values of sexism, slavery, olive 

farming, or any other ideas that one might 

associate with ancient Greece. The reciprocal acceptance of the former architectural value 
set allows us to hone the notion of classicism 
until it is both entrenched and intuitive. 

The subjective nature of social reality allows us to arbitrarily and conveniently group non-identical buildings together into the same style by picking and choosing from a variety of characteristics until we bring the building 

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The idea of style serves an important function in the social fabric of society because it allows us to deal with the vast diversity in building as well as maintain our ability to communicate with architecture. 

To deny style is to deny hundreds, if not thousands of years of collective efforts to 

legitimize and establish the social construc-
tion of values into our stock of architectural knowledge. Social constructions are, 

after all, heuristics that allow us to get beyond the particulars of individual cases. This may cause 
problems in other areas, but for architecture it 
can be our medium. Style may be a weak 
concept, but it will remain an important one as 
long as we want to allow architecture to par-
ticipate in the social fabric of our collective 
system of signs and meanings. Architects may 
feel as though their work is above, beyond, or 
without a certain style, but they should be 
waried of the power of reciprocal interaction to 
form refined mutable categories that actively 
work to subsume style. And besides, I would 
venture to say that it is rather tough to dilute 
something that never existed in the first place.