

BUILDING, A NARRATIVE: THE ACT OF ARCHITECTURAL STORYTELLING

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Humans cannot survive without food, water and clothing. But an essential that seems to have missed this survival kit is 'stories.' Storytelling - a priceless souvenir, has been an inherent part of our civilization since the dawn of time. Our perception of ourselves and the world around us is structured around stories and this influence of narratives extends into architecture as well. Be it a means of creating empathetic links between the architectural subject and audiences, or a medium which plugs temporal gaps, bridges the geographical differences and merges the cultural layers within the built environment or embracing the micro-narratives of multiple stories, it is the narrative that holds multiple bits of a building together. Architecture, both as a process as well as a product is a brilliant storyteller.

Whether the candour of a rock-cut cave adorned with sophistication and the intricacy of details brought with such grace almost disguising the hefty, colossal character of stone, or the awe-striking, other-worldliness of the Gothic cathedrals with their flying buttresses and soaring vaults, or the revolutionary Bauhaus school building, or be it the display of grandeur of a powerful client with the strength of a facade like the Palazzo Farnese for the Medici's - each seeks to communicate a narrative, a tale greater than the function it accommodates, an experience almost like a well written novel.

The exploration of narrative beneath a piece of architecture is intriguing, both to the designer- who plants a story and to the observers - who interpret and unfold the same story



The act of story telling, perception and interpretation

(Source : *Confabulations - Storytelling in Architecture* By Paul Emmons, Marcia F. Feuerstein, Carolina Dayer)

in their own ways, devising new meanings while leaving with a multitude of perceptions and varied emotions. Embracing a story and portraying it through a built mass develops a connection and a sense of attachment with the audience that engages and provokes them. Thus, when a tale is breathed into that built mass, it transcends from a mere built entity into 'architecture.' It is thus brought to life when a relationship is established with the user, its audience. And the aptitude for the observer to unfold something and learn beyond the obvious involves and engages them so that they remain rather than pass it by.

Architecture is too magnificent to hide. Even the ugly looking buildings reveal something of the culture that made them, the faults are there for all to see. Yet architecture is also a powerful instrument, a potent medium for democratic, religious or political power. From a humble house that holds a home within its four walls to the tallest tower, designers want their buildings to stand on tiptoes, to reach that bit higher than a response to utility and not just envelope a function. Desire is part of architecture's language. From the Incas of pre - Columbian America to the indigenous Ainu of Japan, from New York to New Delhi, From Dublin to Dubai, every culture looks at architecture for eternal messages, and as an articulate documentation of civilizations itself. Narratives defend architecture against the 'trend mania' in the age of invention and the idea of utopia. A narrative

at times gives a dangerously implicit lens to see the world through. And to understand the dynamics of architecture you need to fully surround yourself by its complex and often bewildering phenomena.

In the early decades of the 20th century, people were thrown into such turmoil that modernist clean lines represented a way of the embroiled hell they were living through. With the pluralism and postmodern reflection that emerged in the closing decades of the last century and with the pull of embracing history, inevitably the way we build would be a reflection of the many voices of a diverse society. Within this messy, complicated, multi-layered but ultimately exhilarating everyday world, the significance of narrative in architecture should be widened for the designing and appraisal of buildings. It's the narrative in architecture that incorporates human nature into its method.

Storytelling is a complex method of design based on the concept of an interactive and psycho-physical participation in which spaces could be constantly reinvented, as in the cinema tradition. It could be interpreted in architecture as a system to arrange and to compose the space, starting from a series of sequences with communicative purposes and totally influenced by the variability of the concept of time. There lies a power in these stories to structure experiences unfolding in space and time.

Every object that is designed, whether conceptualized by an architect, or conceived by an artist, or a designer, or a product, encompasses a story within. Just as the proverb goes, you can't judge a book by its cover; the essence of that book is in its contents, is in the story within. And this analogy would aptly fit the astounding discipline of place making that architecture is. I'd attest to this by quoting Charles Correa:

Certainly architecture is concerned with much more than just its physical attributes. It is a many-layered thing. Beneath and beyond the strata of function and structure, materials and texture, lie the deepest and most compulsive layers of all.

If you look at architectural history, narratives peek into it and you see its evolution, not only in its physical role but also its psychological role in the cities we live in today. I reckon, narratives and phenomenology together bring architecture close to human nature and bring architecture to life. They foster the synthesis of human senses and perception while elevating a built environment. Manipulating the space, the materiality, and the light and the shadows to weave together a memorable experience, a story for the human senses to pick up and cast an impact on.

Architecture is often tied together with this bare statement, 'form follows function'. However, to challenge this, architects like Bernard Tschumi, Ole Scheeren propose a totally contrasting approach: 'form follows fiction'. A sensitive design is expected to be much more than a mere alliance of form and function. And this is when 'narrative' comes into the picture. To transform a built piece into interactive architecture, a narrative would be the highlight. Form follows fiction brings to the imagination a whole new world of design possibilities, and by shedding the doctrines of times past, finding new solutions for the built environment.

Representation of design is, in a sense, storytelling. It resides beyond the vague depth of reality and fiction. This mood, the subjunctive 'as if', utilizes a suspension of disbelief and by this suspension inveigles, enmeshes, embodies the reader in the tale. Architects actively construct stories while drawing; and the ways these stories are constructed are inseparable from the way a project is designed and is brought to life. Architecture, as world building, is crafting of a fiction in order to project a future reality.

To allow a building to come alive, cast an impact, involve the human senses, merge into the surrounding to tell tales, a narrative provokes us to think of the inanimate built mass and architecture as a space for stories and life – not only the stories of the people that reside there, or of the people and the time that the building once belonged to, but also what a particular architectural style speaks in a certain context. Narrative is so pervasive and promising as a mediating strategy precisely because it allows us to bridge gaps. As narrative is a construct, it is open to creativity and is subjective as well. Thus, making architecture devoid of any possibility of objectification.

How different could the experience be and how vividly can the narrative have beheld if the context was swapped with an entirely different one? How does the architectural language

complement the context upon which a building is set? How well does it speak of its time? Or is it bejeweled with the gem of timelessness? Upon allowing ourselves to engage with the built environment and by being a part of it, the narrative starts unveiling all the answers.

However, the relevance of narrative in architecture lands in a paradox during a period of economic challenge. I reckon, it definitely is relevant; it only needs to address and harmonize with the strengths and opportunities that are exposed to us. New building opportunities often promote recycling, reusing and renovating. This can give way to the stories limiting to an existing context. Perhaps, the narrative develops from a prior context and then is improvised to enter into a new one. It could also be a new story within an expressive facade, an artistic architectural envelope around the existing might of the old, advocating the relationship and the union of the past and the present. Eventually, whether a building fades into the backdrop or presents itself boldly, it is the narrative, the story and the experience within these buildings that will always continue to intrigue the audience and root these buildings into the places they belong. It assists the building to adapt to the surroundings and hold itself comfortably into a context. It only requires the viewer to pause and let the artistry and the potential of the architectural language inspire and enhance life altogether.



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