

Contribution to comprehending symbolism and meaning of architectural form

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Abstract. Architectural form and space, from the very beginning of their creation, weren't only elements reflecting mere act of building; as the act of human actions, they included proper symbolic presentation of a creator's perception of the world. The initial point is that each physical, therefore each architectural form, speaks volumes on more than just their purpose, so it can have symbolic meanings, being proved in history of architecture for such a long time. While observing architectural form, these two questions impose. The first question refers to identifying usable purpose of particular facility, in other words, its function. The second question imposes to identify what are the things that we are reminded of concerning that particular facility. This second question represents search for the meaning in each form that mankind instinctively longs to identify in order to comprehend the world we live in. No matter if we are in natural or building area, everything we are surrounded by has got specific forms recalling certain associations. The aim of this paper is to indicate that pictures appearing as a consequence of close forms and designs represent associations and they should not be compared to symbols. The goal of this research is to contribute to clearer seeing of symbolism of architectural form, in which situations it exists and whether it exists in contemporary architectural forms. This work is based on elements of Gestalt observation theory.

1 Introduction

Before any further elaboration, it is essential to clearly define and separate concepts such as „symbol“ and „sign“. The reason for this is because „symbol“ is very often immersed and identified with term „sign“.

Word „symbol“ is also very common identification of a trademark or a label on some product. This fact is indicative itself, because contemporary society lacks and tends to lose symbolic meanings at all.

This work defines „sign“ as an object, gesture or idea referring to something else and clearly transferring message desired. „Symbol“ refers to more complex, not so direct.

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Almost every time it represents something else, beside the picture itself, having a hidden, deeper meaning.

That particular moment when certain architectural form obtains some conventional meanings in its expression, when there is something general in a specific unit, then the symbolism in architecture appears. For example, if a church is designed in shape of Latin or Greek cross, religious symbolism is out of question. In some other case, cross-shaped design can be a symbol of place.

If the symbol tends to be successful and to overpower changes in temporal and spatial dimensions, as well as to be settled no matter on different cultural milieu, it has to originate in specific human experience. Gestalt theory representatives use past experience and define it as a trace. [1] Obelisks', ziggurats, minarets and each form that direct our view towards the heights wouldn't have been symbols of success if mankind didn't have experience in defeating gravity and defining climbing as successful and triumphant act. Climbing is eternal challenge and joy, unlike speleology (carrying the mystery of discovery with itself), humans at early stages of their lives are prepared to learn the substitute meaning of some other desired things. [2] A little baby expresses their needs by crying, which is a proper way of communication until they grow up and start using system of signs in order to satisfy their expectations. This way, a child uses the fact that objects can represent each other. Thereby the signs are used to signify general experience, objects desirable to get, avoid or describe. [3]

It is essential to clearly emphasize that associate picture is not the same as symbol. It represents just the first step to symbolic meaning, if there is any in facility observed. It is known that many facilities, in almost every city, get the alternative names according to associative meaning, but it is substantial that the symbolism shouldn't be reduced to it only. Having that in mind, history of architecture recalls some attempts of building a school or a library in a shape of an open book, or building a restaurant or a motel in a shape of a goblet. It is essential to denote that metaphors, created by architectural form, originate from design expressing and its reflection on our vision. In perception, it shows certain qualities and situations important to mankind. The essential observation strength lies in underlining general quality in something special, so that way special feature reaches a higher level on relativity scale. According to what was previously said, the knowledge results from metaphorical note of some forms. Linking of certain traditional meaning for its greater stability in psychology makes bond stronger and long-term. [4] Such example can be depicted in each semi-dome spaces and their symbolic meaning in architecture. The fact is that domes used outside sacral architecture are strongly connected to religious symbolism of sky and not only its physical imitation.

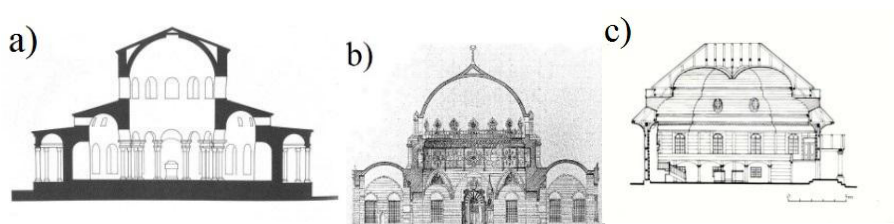


Fig.1.a-Byzantyne church, b- Mosque, c-Synagogue.

2 Perceiving symbols

Contemporary man becomes, as psychology claims, more distant from spontaneous symbolism. [5] Civilisation departure from nature and pure source of religion, tearing apart physical links with natural affairs, made this separation drastical. Therefore breaking

spiritual note of everyday life occurs, becoming a funds of symbol properly interpreted as poorer and reduced to an exceedingly small amount. The initial fact should be that expressive features of architectural composition create chances for spontaneous meaning forming. There cannot be any disputes about everyone's creating certain mental pictures considering meaning because architectural composition achieves certain expression. It is created by architectural work's dynamics and vocabulary of elements applied, where integral parts of architectural composition take part in forming the expression.

Significant factor in understanding the meaning of architectural form is Einföhlung and Empathy theory. [6] It is about theories of compassion dealing with analyzing the factors having the effect on form of design features. This theory of perceptual expression starts from the point that experience related to human body and gravity influences human comprehension of all bodies and objects around. Each human carrying a burden, climbing and falling is familiar with importance of pillar in construction and its difficulties. Each slope is regarded as climbing, and dissymmetrical triangle signifies instability. Therefore, static calculations and static force are not crucial for beholder because they, on empathy basis, form their own perceptual statics. This notable system of perceptions in facility designs distinctive architectural expression. That dynamic of perception can be considered crucial according to residential and working expression of facility, so we recognize economical, social and cultural residing and working. [7] For that reason, architecture is the strongest corporeal proof in each culture that archeologists seek for. What's relevant for this topic is interpreting and meaning of architectural form and presence of its symbolical meaning. Because of human disconnection with premordial religious comprehensions, different and uneven interpreting of symbolic phenomena and their roots. Clear and differentiated architectural style is one of the prerequisites for clear symbolic meanings. On that grounds, a language offering new word for each new situation is not a language. Clear meaning of architectural form assumes repetition of limited number of elements and their relations. [8] For further observation of experiencing and creating of symbols in architectural form it is essential to have in mind the fact that the identical forms on whole Earth were present even when there was no contact or possibility of transferring information between various groups of people.

Jung considers the appearing of previous phenomenon because of „original ideas“, „hereditary images“ or „archetypes“. He regards that hereditary images are deposited in „collective unconscious“ representing basis for production of each dominant design. [9] There are two important elements of Jung's theory for this topic. The first one is assumption about existing of inheritory mechanisms carrying specific archetype structure. It refers to readiness of an individual to create circular forms called „mandalas“ at anytime in any place.

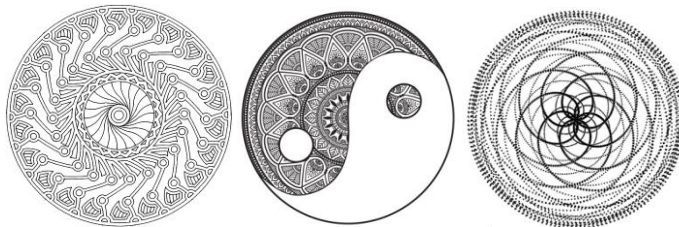


Fig.2. Mandalas of different geographical origin are always basically in a circular shape.

The second crucial thing is the assumption that conscious idea of what that particular mandala represents lacks. According to what is already said, Jung's theory is on the point that archetypal inheritance doesn't bring the understanding element with itself. Obviously, this theory doesn't require assuming what Gestalt psychology claims is always a case about isomorphic rule (certain inner similarity between ideas and experience). Jung in

his theoretical considerations claims that certain archetypical pictures are essentially linked to meaning of a place they are situated. He thinks that symbol is immediately perceived through symbolic ideas, with them carrying the meaning. Also, in his opinion symbol and meaning are being concurrent. Rudolf Arnheim opposes this Jung's explanation. [10] Arnheim claims that similar or identical visual symbols may appear on different places and time for two reasons:

1. Vision covers perception of acting of visual forces configuration.
2. Such perceived configuration forces are viewed simultaneously as ideas of forces acting in significant life situations. For example, everyday moving of the Sun is perceived as a symbol of life because the perceived ways of lifting, increasing and reaching the top and descending are spontaneously perceived as structural (isomorphic), similar to dynamics of procreation, emergence, culmination and decline.

The product of Arnheim's attitude is that observing the object (as well as an affair) represents certain configuration of perceiving forces. [11] The accepting of the fact that human facial expression and body posture represent proper reply to their spirits all over the world. Sudden glare into some dark hole when we reach it in the middle of forest road gives creeps to everyone, as well as fear and negative thoughts. This experience is universal so it gives space for constructing certain verbal abstractions. It is possible to conclude that psychological experience of mentioned situation would be proper to a specific picture and its previous experience. That experience can be collective and general in cultural and civilization level. However, that is not genetic picture.

Based on previous information, there can be concluded that departure from prime symbolism has really occurred and the symbols are gone, leaving only their meanings. If we apply those conclusions to architecture, more precisely on urban designing sphere, graphical ideas represent clear language for communicating on each professional level (from designers to contractors). For example, cross-hatching in both directions in 45° signifies reinforced concrete, or winding line between parallels means thermo-isolation and interrupted line denotes hydro-isolation. An equilateral triangle everywhere in the world will be noticed in the same way and its spatial substitute is a pyramid. At each beholder's point of view, its aspiring towards the sky is obvious and it indicates human longing for eternity, success and pleasure, resulting from the feeling experienced during the process of climbing. The same attitude exists considering circle. The whole of human psyche, on each its level, is expressed in the easiest way using that design. [12] Circle shows perfection and harmony, with no beginning and no end. Visual experience of circle is one of the first conscious ideas of human being, like Sun and Moon on the sky as well as numerous examples of flora surrounding us. First residential units, created after human's abandoning of cave were circular, so were temples dedicated to deity.

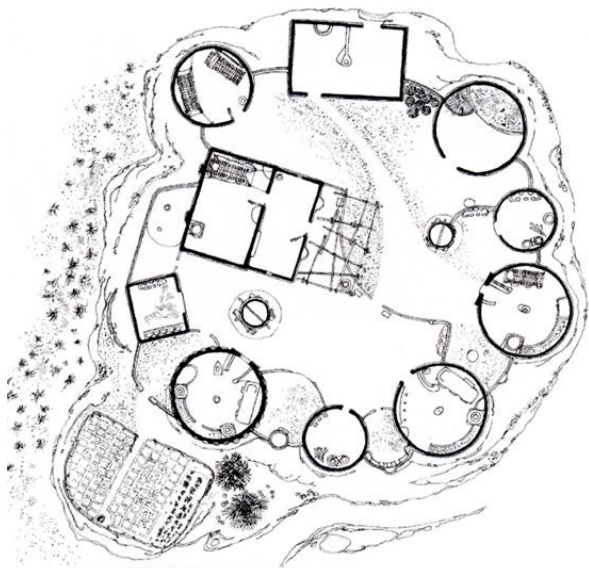


Fig.3. Traditional settlement of Middle Africa.

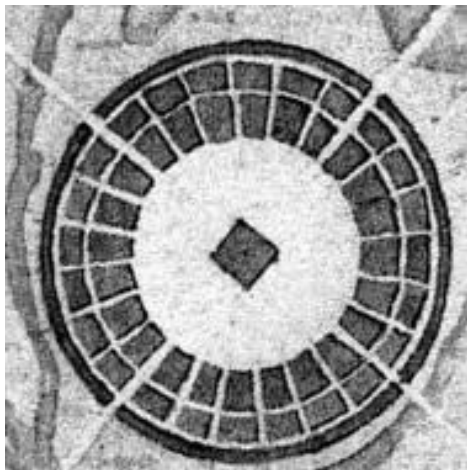


Fig.4. Plan of Baghdad.

The question imposes why the circle should be hidden form in unconscious sphere when it is so present in real visual. As oppose to the circle, square represents linear morphological group having symbolism of organic world of flat areas. Transformation of a circle contour of certain cities (as Baghdad used to be, with precisely defined center) to square scheme is a conspicuous need for spatial and psychological orientation encouraged with four sides of the world. [13] Humans, besides satisfying elementary existential requirements, have always believed that they do God’s work, creating the world-cosmology, so it needs to be taken into consideration. That cosmic symbolism is present in every culture around the globe and it’s still lasting. Many identical features between universe, city, temple, castle and cottage contain, very often, the same symbolism shown in spatial way.

3 Conclusion

Forming of emotional component according to perceived designs which certainly affects human confirming of perceived pictures, is a fundamental meaning element because the space and designs around us (like time) are essential framework of living. Researches so far can lead to three architectural form appearances [14]:

1. Forms of great clarity. Their expression and feature are interpreted directly and precisely in considerable amount, so their social, political and spiritual concept can be seen clearly.
2. Architectural forms in accordance with desired metaphors, but gaining some other metaphorical meanings throughout the time.
3. Forms creating some other meaning unit based on their structural and spatial references.

Gestalt theory proves its consistence in the sphere of perceiving and cognitive processes. It points that symbolism is disappearing and losing because the conditions for its creation became more complex. Above all, there are requirements for repeating elements and forms of design for creating symbolic ideas through many generations, to form design and unconventional language to be interpreted identically.

Forms of modern architecture have never been organized to create stylistic system, being proper to residential requirements contemporary to time of their creation. This corresponds to the fact that system of symbols develops gradually if wanted after all. [15] It is really hard to interpret the function, not to say a symbol, out of neutral forms and variable designing language. In architectural design system given it cannot be established. Meaning is the only thing remaining. Synonym for contemporary architecture is wall-curtain, combined in different ways. The ornament Adolf Loos claimed to be crime didn't have symbolic meaning in that particular moment. [16] No one was there to interpret symbol any longer, so it didn't have a proper role. The same applies to architecture these days.

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