evolution

Early in the twentieth century, haute avant-gardism became the prominent measure of quality in all of the arts. It started with European architects, artists and intellectuals as a reaction to world wars and epic pandemics. Seeking a new beginning, the artistic imperative became one of defying all association with the past. This propagated the notion that only perpetually new and original forms of expression could affect artistic progress that would lead to a more optimistic future. Out of this dogma, originality rose as the most highly valued artistic quality along with the idea that it springs miraculously from the individual artist, owing nothing to others or the recent or distant past. Traditional architecture, which improves and advances through an "evolutionary" process, over time, was summarily dismissed in favor of radical reinvention and the illusion of betterment through perpetual artistic "revolution".

American architecture, undergoing a kind of adolescent search for an independent identity welcomed the new European dogma; ironically as a means of breaking free of the shackles of its formative European traditions. Without the same direct political experience, motivations and convictions of the Europeans, American architects saw only the style and not the substance. It is this avant-garde obsession with avoiding even the appearance of repeating anything that might be recognized as having conventional or traditional overtones, which continues to lead to the limitless mediocrity.

While avant-gardism cannot be held solely responsible for the plethora of design dreck in the surroundings, it must accept paternity for the bizarre, complex, highly personal and exclusive quest for architectural novelty that is broadly experienced today as the cutting-edge. Sitting quietly at the opposite end of the spectrum is the American nostalgic desire for a literal archeological recreation of the past. Architecture must have room for new ideas and experimentation or it will stagnate, but without also informing buildings with a memory of their cultural past, they are reduced to nothing more than idiosyncratic form.

The ideal of realizing a uniquely American architecture has always been strong. Whether modern or traditional, the true course of timeless and culturally elegant American architecture lies in the synthesis of both the past and the present.

Most architectural schools still teach that design originality, inventive form-making, and personal self-expression are the highest design virtues, that every new building should make an unprecedented, perhaps even radical and revolutionary aesthetic statement. However, this prevailing orthodoxy of modernism has created the most woefully banal architecture, and the newer flavors grasping for profound and shock-culture immediate media attention has no lasting integrity. The aim is not at revivalism or the creation of historic pastiche; it is an assertion that the "evolutionary" development of traditional American architecture has been irrationally marginalized by the "revolutionary" forces of modernism and shock culture. As a result, the place of traditional architecture in American culture is no longer appreciated. Illuminating this suppressed architectural history with a broader perspective on the past within new buildings will inspire a culturally richer American architecture for the future.

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