

Architecture and perception

We all know that feeling of deception when we see a masterpiece; everybody talks about it for the first time. It is not quite what we had envisioned. The piece of art being observed is the same for us as it is for others who are observing it. How is it possible that after all the information the media provided us with, the masterpiece did not bring the feeling we had envisioned? Walter Benjamin¹ would say it has something to do with the "aura"² of the piece. However, this so-called aura cannot be the mere reason for lacking the feeling we had envisioned. Works of art such as paintings and sculptures tend to move from location to location. Contrary, architecture does not commonly move from its original location. This is indicative of the aura, specifically when it comes to architecture, is often not the element that changes our perception.

This leads us to wonder about the following: what do we have to do to reach the specific vision and/or feeling? Is it the simple turning of our attention and eye to a work of art, or is there more to developing an attachment to a piece, and to comprehend the fascination of it?

Nowadays people are increasingly interested in the empathy of architecture and art. It is the personal engagement that defines whether we understand a piece or whether we do not. Our personal taste in, among others, art, is part of that personal engagement. David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese stated that this personal engagement in paintings and sculptures is something we find in the way we see a movement or positioning of the body. We see activation of certain muscles and our brain translates that into an emotion and gain empathy with. "*Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience*"³ It seems only natural that we feel empathy for visuals of humans. However, buildings, abstract paintings, and sculptures do not show these aesthetics, nor does architecture.

Bruce Thomas states that the key to understand architecture can be found in the intentions of the architect. This intention is often explained as "theory". Theory bridges the conflicting requirements of art and science. "*Culture, merchandise, or just light entertainment? New architecture at the millennium*"⁴

Psychoanalyst such as Leanne Domash have been analysing the term empathy from both philosophical and psychological points of view. They state that empathy is the mentalization and the relational understanding of trauma. Some analysts state that a building can reconnect the viewer, user, or inhabitant with effects that have been avoided, as a result of a trauma. "*Site, incite, and insight - architecture and psychoanalysis: commentary on Leanne Domash's paper*"⁵

This essay will aim to shed light on the personal perception of art, explained according to paintings and architecture. In order to do so, we are going to describe the resources we need to foster in order to appreciate paintings and architecture the way it is intended. These resources will be reverie, attention, and the investment of emotion. Finally, the connection can be made on why our perception of architecture and even art can change overtime. This

¹ Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a philosopher and cultural critic. His work consists of writings in philosophy, theology, literary criticism and art history.

² (Benjamin, 1936) Writes about the aura of the original piece. Something is created for a location, and when it is moved from its original destination it no longer holds the aura.

³ Freedberg, David, & Gallese, Vittorio, *Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience*, (unknown, Elsevier, 2007)

⁴ Thomas, Bruce, *Culture, merchandise, or just light entertainment? New architecture at the millennium*, (unknown, Lehigh University, 1997)

⁵ Sperber, Esther, *Site, incite, and insight - architecture and psychoanalysis: commentary on Leanne Domash's paper*, (New York, National Institute for Psychotherapies, 2014)

philosophical approach is inspired by the book "*The intimate philosophy of art*"⁶ by John Armstrong.

⁶ Armstrong, James, *The intimate philosophy of art*, (London, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2000)

Cultural heritage, such as the Louvre, Michelangelo's David, or Van Rijn's Nightwatch, are enjoyed by many. This is possible, because the finest buildings are conserved and visited by hundreds; and the greatest artworks are collected in galleries which overflow with visitors. However, their charm is threatened by their fame. Never do we experience the experience we had envisioned.

" The faithful follower of the Michelin Guide to Italy is likely to end up standing in the Via XX Settembre in Rome in front of the three-star facade of Santa Susanna - and a little puzzled. [...] This is the only church in Rome which gets highest honours specifically for its exterior. [...] - It doesn't look so very different from many other churches in the city. [...] Is this the aberration for the guidebook or is there something we are failing to notice?"⁷



Figure: 1 Church Santa Susanna. Designed by Carlo Maderna.
Photo taken by Zephyrinus (2010)

The quotation before was taken from Armstrong's book. In this quotation, Armstrong (2000), explains the unrepresentative credits in architecture that will likely influence many tourists' opinion. This is a classic example of how people's feelings towards architecture develop. Consequently, we will now take a more thorough look in the development of these feelings. If we are interested in a building, our first reaction would be to find more information about the object we are looking at. Humans seem to have a strong appeal for gathering information. Armstrong (2000) states that this appeal is strengthened by the fact that having knowledge seems to be necessary to create appreciation for the artist. He also states that the artist generally creates his work with the idea that the viewer has the contextual knowledge. In addition, to understand the artist, the viewer needs to be conscious about what else was going on at the time of creation. Looking back at the Santa Susanna: perhaps the design of the church was a new innovation, or it was a return of an earlier prototype.

The allure of information seems to be deeply rooted in our psychological system. And we seem to overestimate the necessity of knowing a lot of facts. Information can operate as a cover when one feels too uncertain to give a personal opinion - or even when one has no opinion. In such situations, it can be reassuring to mention facts. It can be embarrassing to express a passionate attachment or an aversion from a work of art. Nevertheless when we visit

⁷ Ibid, p.10

a gallery nothing is more impressive than the ability to recite names and dates, schools, and other influences.

Seeing the Santa Susanna, one may feel unsure whether he or she dislikes or likes the facade. as a result, people take comfort in knowing who build it and knowing the types of columns which are used. And what makes it even more special is that the great German art-historian Heinrich Wölfflin used this church as a central example in his studies about Baroque architecture. Knowing the latter, we now get the feeling that the Santa Susanna truly must be important and special. This factual basis seems to be the way we develop a personal feeling towards a building.

Knowing how one develops feelings towards architecture, we will now look into how personal this information actually is to us. When reflecting studying an art piece on getting to know a person, we can note several similarities. Imagine looking at a person's resumé. This resumé only provides us with basic information, but does not explain about how the person's personality at all. "[...] A conversation which restricted itself to CV-like topics would leave us feeling we hadn't come to know the person intimately" ⁸

Feeling nervous with a stranger is common. It is not strange that we fall back to the basic questions. In the Uncertainty Reduction Theory ⁹, it is even stated that in order to feel less uncertain and develop a relationship, one requires information. This information may be gathered in various ways, but key is that one requires the information. Despite that we do not always know which information we are aiming to find, we do require it. This intrinsic need appears to apply to works of art and therefore architecture as well. Since one is not able to ask a building questions, one may look up what its costs were and when it was build. This may however not be the best place to start.

We have now discovered what humans like to do when talking about art pieces. We do not only like to gather information, but we are set to appeal to information that is confusing. It is natural that we check the facts before we look at the works themselves. It is natural that by doing so, we feel we are getting more serious with the piece. We tend to feel superficial if we only concern ourselves with the primary features of the work that anyone can see. Armstrong (2000) concludes from this that being preoccupied with the information, for example when it was made or who the designer or artist was, can be a way of avoiding a more personal relationship with the object. The external information can be so absorbing that it draws our attention away from from the element it was initially supposed to serve. "Above all, information does not foster affection." ¹⁰

We can find a facade beautiful - we can love the proportions, its colour and so on, all without knowing when something was build. The information we have learned from books can lead us to neglect the information which can be seen by the eye. We underestimate the information we gather by eye, because we are mistaken in that the significance of the work must lie elsewhere. The collection of information can obstruct personal response, but perhaps we can have both. Information we gather has to change and guide the way we see. Knowing the Santa Susanna was build in 1603 can bring us back to the information we have about this time periode. We are then able to draw a comparison with the trends we know from that periode. This leads to the fact that someone who knows nothing about the Roman architecture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would not be helped by giving a date. Without this

⁸ Ibid, p.13

⁹ Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. *Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication*. unknown, *Human Communication Research* (unknown, unknown, 1975), pp. 99-112

¹⁰ op cit, Armstrong, James, p.14

information we can in general still enjoy a work. By merely focussing on the beauty of the shapes and compositions etc.

Knowing that humans intrinscely like to collect information, we can turn our attention to the Santa Susanna once more to define how this information can change perception. Even more so, it cannot only change it, it can even surpress our personal feelings. When comparing Santa Susanna with the Santa Caterina de' Funari, a church also located in Rome and built 40 years earlier, we can not see many diffirences although at a first glance, the two churches look very much the same. Each of the columns at the lower level are from the Corninthian order, decorated with leaves to create a play of light and shadow. The earlier church has the same kind of capitals as the Santa Susanna, however they differ in the depth of the decoration on the capitals. Moreover, the Santa Susanna has a rare combination of Ionic horns and Corinthian leaves. This changes the weight of the work and shows more of the tradition to which the spectator can relate.

Examples like these tend to strenghten the feeling that knowing the background of a work of art or architecture is the main important fact. This is however a wrongful conclusion. Arguments contradicting this conclusion will be provided in the next section.



Figure: 2 Santa Caterina de' Funari. Designed by Guidetto Guidetti.
Picture taken by Georg Schelbert (unkown)

A dramatic change of perception is described by Arthur Koestler in *The Act of Creation* (1969)¹¹. Koestler (1969) gave a friend a drawing of Picasso. His friend asumes that this drawing is a print and hangs it on the wall in the staircase. Later, the friend is told that the drawing is an original and promotes it to her drawing room. She explains that when looking at the drawing she now sees it differently. Although she cannot define any specific qualities of the drawing which she had not noticed before, she then knew it was an original.

Koestler thinks the change in seeing is due to the impact of an interference system. Or, as he may call it; snobbery. This influences the character of perception by bringing in a new concern which, in turn, brings satisfaction. This satisfaction is mistaken for satisfaction generated by the look of a building, or in this case the drawing, but in fact it is brought on by

¹¹ Koestler, Arthur, *The Act of Creation*, (United Kingdom, Hutchinson, 1964)

a completely different source. Namely, this slow and fluid process of uncovering the perceptual elements and piecing these together is roughly disturbed by the information of "I've got a real Picasso". The process is then halted and will lead to a too quick and abrupt conclusion.

We might state that all perception is corrupted because of the external information we gather. This information interferes with our own perception of the visual aspect. Consequently, one might conclude that we need to try and suppress the information that we are looking at a masterpiece or celebrated building and continue our natural process of uncovering perceptual elements.

Thus, it all depends on what the individual spectator does with the available information. When the friend of Koestler got the information about the Picasso, she could have taken a closer look to take in the work more fully. If she had then claimed to see it differently, it would have been engagement and not snobbery.

Now we know that most of the information we need to process a work of art is based on "book learning". Armstrong tells us that this cannot be the only element we need to consult when forming our view on a piece. Quite often we already possess background knowledge, a type of knowledge we are not always aware of. This background information can exist of many things such as, how it is made, what it is made of and how many eras it survived.

Italian Hours (1909)¹², Henry James tries to bring the information about Venice to the attention of the reader. He talks about the age of the city and its history. He then starts to talk about the San Marco basilica. We only then realize how old it is and start to recognize that the soft harmony of the surfaces is not the creation of a short time period, but one of centuries and created by the air of the salt sea. James also talks about the statues that were taken during the deprecation of Constantinople. What do these thoughts contribute to our feelings for this building?

A long time has passed and the hard truth about the deprecation is softened by history. Together with the age we can see in the texture of the building, we see the building as a gathering of many results, and no longer as the realization of a single creative person. Background knowledge like stated before thus appears to develop appreciation.



Figure: 3 Piazza of San Marco with in the back the San Marco basilica. Designed by unknown
Picture taken by unknown. Source library of Congress

We have spoken about gathering information and later on about background information. We can take a small step from the background information to characteristics of architecture and art.

¹² James, Henry, *Italian Hours*, (London, William Heinemann, 1909)

Getting to know a painting or building is more than memorizing some compositions. It also requires a feeling of the physical qualities of the materials and the way they are manipulated. Of course this feeling is based on a personal experience of the spectator. And it is a feeling that is created inside. It is ill-found to suggest that personal knowledge creates affection; at least it is not staggering that such information can foster an attraction.

Every person is different and has a personal view on a piece of work like paintings and architecture. Although we are different we seem to be influenced by the information we collect from external media. A book, film or another medium offers us a glance at the masterpiece we had only heard of. How is possible that we look at the same piece, but when we see it in real life or when we visit it sometime later we have a different feeling about it. Various scholars conducted studies about how our perception works. They are still unable to tell with certainty why our perception changes. However, they do all agree that it has to do with our personal engagement with the piece.

People seem to be pleased by gathering large amounts of information. Gathering information resembles the feeling of knowing a lot about the object. Having the ability to recite the names and dates might be impressive, although most of the information does not directly tell anything about the piece. The same as a person's resumé does not directly tell us anything about who that person truly is. Nevertheless, having that information makes us feel like we have a connection with the person or object. Armstrong (2000) states that we tend to feel superficial if we only concern about the primary features of the work, because anybody can see those.

The information we gather should provide guidance on the way we see. Knowing the exact date a building was built can help us to understand why it is shaped and formed like it is. Although without that information we can still enjoy the work. The two are not mutually exclusive.

We previously discussed the Santa Susanna and the Santa Caterina de' Funari, of which the former was built in a later period. After getting into the background information of both churches we know why the Santa Susanna is named in the Michelin Guide and the Santa Caterina is not. Bluntly said it is because of the fact that that church was more special seeing the time it was built in. It had more eye for detail and had a combination of elements we do not see in other buildings or at least not the majority of buildings from that time. If you have this information, then visiting the church is completely different from visiting it without that information. You now see why this building is said to be special.

The question is, did the content of the information change your perception of the building? Or was it the story about it being a special building that changed your perception? If we are to believe Koestler (1969), then addressing the importance of the work certainly changes how we see it. He states that our perception tells us that we have the real thing in front of us, so it should bring us satisfaction. It feels as though the art work provides us with a feeling of satisfaction, but actually, the background information did. This information interferes with our perception of the visual aspects. Does it mean we need to suppress this information?

Aside from book knowledge, Armstrong talks about background knowledge. When addressing the difference between these two types of knowledge, he talks about Henry James who wrote about Italy. It is true that the information Armstrong points out is information we can gather by visiting. Nevertheless, it can also be information you collect from a book. So is there really any difference in what the source of the information is?

If we use this knowledge to reflect on architecture, we can see a similar process of gaining appreciation for a building. In architecture school, there are many architects that are subject of the education. One of these architects is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who designed the Seagram building. When seeing this building you have the feeling that it blends in with the rest. Although personally the color, the placement, and the horizontal and vertical lines give a different feeling than the surrounding buildings. This brings the personal affection as an architect. And by gathering the background information we learn that it was an influential building. It is connected to the International style and it shows that by articulating the building

structure on the facade. This information does change our perception and collecting more information would change our perception even more. As an architect we have more background information about buildings in general and this can indicate that for us, shapes and colors bring more depth in our perception, albeit that still, the new found information can change our perception. Which means we have to accept that our perception with every glance can be different and can change. And this counts for every person architect, artist and others.