

How far do you agree with Frank Lloyd Wright, that architecture is the truest record of life as it was lived in the world yesterday, as it is lived today, or ever will be lived?

Whilst the debate on architecture is both varied and controversial, consensus has been reached on one point; that architecture is not a static concept. Like any form of cultural expression, architecture evolves with the wheels of time. Architecture moulds itself to the changing times and hence, to a certain extent, architecture does in fact act as a record of life. However to call it the 'truest record' will require more exploration.

If one examines history, one can see that the prevailing culture of a certain place is made cognizant through the architecture of that time. Infrastructure has been used not only to echo social norms but also as a vibrant mouthpiece for the dissemination of themes and ideas in society.

A prominent example of this is the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, France. The idea of the arch was conceived and designed by Jean Chalgrin in 1806 and falls under 'neoclassical' architecture which draws on classic works of Ancient Greek and Roman art and architecture for its inspiration. This monument was conceived in the background of the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) where Napoleon had achieved imperious military victories. These successes re-established France's military prestige after a period of revolution weakened its geo-political strength. The construction commemorated not only the military victories but celebrated France's ascendancy as an influential European power.

The Arc recorded changing social landscape of France. By glorifying Napoleon's military victory it not only increased Napoleon's cult of personality but highlighted the Grand Armee as the most powerful institution in France. Names of all the military victories and the generals inscribed on the surfaces of the arch, along with intricate depictions of young French soldiers valiantly fighting the over powering German army encouraged devotion of the French public to support future military action and in doing so enshrined the creation of the state where the needs and goals of the military were paramount- which is what France evolved into under Napoleon.

In dissent, the use of the word "truest" does prove a little hard to justify. To fulfill this criterion, it must follow that architecture is also the most comprehensive form of cultural expression. Architecture would have to be representative of all strata in society and their views. Not only that but it would also have to prove itself to be more true than other forms of record such as literature, music, art etc. Both these assumptions prove to be problematic.

Firstly, it can be argued that architecture is purely the intellectual domain of the elite. Only the elite have the resources to fund the construction of monuments and they seem to have a greater inclination to extend their hubris by using monuments to preserve their legacies. This can be noted in the examples of the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs commemorating their immortality with pyramids (built with the very purpose of forever withstanding the barren, desert landscape) or Pope Julius II in the 16th century, completely replacing the old St. Peter's

Basilica with something more grand and regal to accommodate his tomb and “aggrandize himself in the popular imagination”. These cases show how architecture is molded by the agenda of a plutocracy of the wealthy and powerful. Neither of these examples can be said to holistically reflect the norms and ideas of society, or be an accurate record. Rather, they are the brain child of a privileged few who were in a position to construct reminders of their positions of privilege and power. (Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg funded the construction of the Basilica by promoting the granting of [indulgences](#) in return for contributions).

Building on the previous idea, architecture is not the most representative form of cultural expression. In fact, literature and art can be seen as more egalitarian forms of cultural expression. For example Alex Haley published the infamous “Roots: The Saga of an American Family” in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and Frieda Kahlo’s paintings highlighted the problem of indigenous Mexican cultures that were dying out of her society. The realities of the time are not encapsulated in majestic towers and fortresses but in the written word and other mediums which accurately record the progress of social discourse & movements in society

Yes, architecture can serve as a record of life as it was, is, or ever will be known but it cannot singularly fulfill this purpose. In order to craft the most cogent picture of life through history, it must work in tandem with other forms of cultural expression.

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