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JKWIS Essay II

How far does architecture reflect prevailing art and culture? Discuss the idea that all patrons of architecture are self-aggrandizing.

It is valid to infer that architecture depicts culture of certain societies. One can notice certain patterns which can be connected to certain origins and cultures in architectural pieces, such as the embellishments consistently found on Chinese buildings and the rest of north-eastern Asia including places like Japan, Korea and Vietnam; curved roofs. In China, the Buddhists curved their temple roofs because they believed it helped ward off evil spirits. The roof of the temple is made of glazed ceramic tiles and has an overhanging eave, distinguished by a graceful upward slope. This indicates the religious inclinations of ancient China. Curved roofs can now be seen on many buildings of different functions other than religion. The Liuhe Pagoda of Hangzhou-China, built in 1165 during the Song Dynasty and the Kinkaku-ji in Kyoto-Japan built in 1397 are both examples of buildings with this feature. Images of red dragons on buildings and artifacts are also associated with Chinese culture. Different patrons contracted these buildings but they all bear similar embellishments, therefore, this shows the influence of culture over the desires of the patrons.

However, architecture is gradually losing its ability to portray culture because of globalization. People may imitate architecture from other cultures or may be reluctant to explore modern forms of architecture. Emerging works usually conform to conventional styles that existed centuries ago. For instance, churches usually have a tower at the main entrance with a cross on

top. Although this style might still have very important functions in many church denominations today, it is important to recognize the reason why catholic cathedrals were built like that long ago. The tower was for the church bell which barely exists in churches today. The bell was used to call people to prayer/mass and the higher the tower, the farther the sound would travel.

Architecture is undoubtedly influenced by what the patrons want to exude, hence leading up to the suggestion that the patrons of architecture are self-aggrandizing. Commissioning art and works of architecture during the Renaissance era was a status symbol common among the merchant classes and somewhat competitive wealthy families. The Medici family was one such families whose patronage gave rise to the Renaissance art and architecture.

Many of Florence's most recognizable buildings and features exist because of the influence of the Medicis. Magnificent structures such as the Uffizi Gallery, the Boboli Gardens, the Belvedere, and the Palazzo Medici were all constructed under patronage of the Medici family. Michelangelo, considered one of the greatest artists of all time, actually grew up and studied in the Medici palace, and was contracted to design the Medici public library as well as the Medici chapel. One has only to look at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence to attest to the influence the family had over renaissance art. The Gallery houses one of the greatest collections of Early and High Renaissance art in the world; most of which was owned and commissioned by the Medici.

The contributions of the lower class citizens who worked long hours carrying out unpleasant tasks in the shadow of the wealthy merchants is somewhat ignored. The city of Florence is filled with exhibitions of the wealth of the upper-classes. They inform us about the high class' preferences in art and living culture, yet saying very little about the masses of lower class

inhabitants of this city. One could say that the Medici family's intention in commissioning the works of art and architecture was building towards a legacy of their family, one that would be remembered forever. However this legacy neglects several other aspects and stories of the city, and does not truly showcase the culture of the people of Florence.

In present day architecture, whoever contracts an architect to design a building, usually does so bearing a vision in mind. There is a necessary relation between a piece of architecture and whoever commissioned it. It is because of this relation that a building cannot be seen as inanimate but rather bearing character; the character of whoever built it as well whoever owns it. The self-aggrandizing nature of patrons is therefore somehow justified. Functionality envisioned for buildings constantly limits the symbolic and aesthetic desires of the patrons commissioning the buildings. This is because the buildings are only useful to the society if they can serve the purpose for which they are built. In conclusion, architecture does reflect prevailing art and culture—although it is gradually less able to do so—but is somewhat affected by the self-aggrandizing nature of the patrons.

Sources:

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