

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

JKWIS Block 2 Essay

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In our ongoing research on architecture, we have noted that, despite it epitomizing the significance of tangible objects, architecture also thrives on its intangibles; the emphasis on aesthetic beauty, projection of power and elucidation of cultural context. But, moving away from its lofty cultural pursuits, one must also distill the creation of buildings and monuments as a business venture like any other; tied inextricably to patrons, both individuals and organizations, who choose to seek both a tangible and intangible return from their investment in architecture.

The questions explored in this essay will be, firstly, whether the vested interests of said patrons express themselves solely by appraising the patron, and secondly, whether the conditions set by the patrons create architecture which reflects prevailing art and culture.

With regard to patronage, the same relationship between patron and architect carries through history, with nobility, religious leaders, and merchants tapping architectural talent to give opportunity and, in many cases, a sense of legitimacy to their achievements. One can explore the patronage of the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt (1204-1517) where a survey of extant monuments from this period indicates a pattern of patronage dominated by the nobility, religious and military elite, who commissioned buildings to explicitly serve their own ends. Religious foundations, which helped the ruler legitimize his rule, were the primary focus of patronage by the sultan and his amirs. For the Mamluks political power was acquired and legitimized by an Islam-centric ideology. As a result, the Mamluk rulers arranged and rearranged their public buildings to project and maintain an image of themselves in harmony with the expectations of the the religious elite and the masses. The patronage of religious buildings such as the **jami'**(type of mosque) for instance, was regarded as part of the ruler's duties, and in this period, every effort was made by the Mamluks to associate their names with the largest number of religious buildings, a prime example being Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad, who embarked on a large program of building and rebuilding mosques.

The example of the Mamluks serves to underline the nature of patrons as solely self-serving; however the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a changing landscape in architecture, where two prominent examples exist to show how patronage serves as a catalyst for great design on a

societal level, rather than a self-aggrandizing statement. The first is the example of Jonathan Rose, a New York-based developer whose mission is not simply to turn a profit, but rather to profit by transforming communities in a socially responsible way. He oversees the development of mixed-use, green communities with a cultural program. He operates by entering wealthy resort communities, such as the Hamptons in New York, to reconstitute the regions so that the local, lower-income workforce that serves the weekend vacationers has access to affordable housing. The second example is that of London developer, Igloo. Igloo accommodates its pursuit of profits with several principles, namely “environmental sustainability and the social progress for its inhabitants.” These principles seek not to project the influence of the developers but to promote prosperity and create cohesive living spaces that benefit the surrounding communities. Both examples, however, are not simple acts of altruism. Instead, they capitalize on a community-centric approach that, as Chief Executive of Igloo Chris Brown states, “works successfully in a market niche.” Both have struck a balance between profit and societal interests to reap the best of both worlds, and have dispelled the notion all patrons are self-aggrandizing.

In regard to the second question, comes the patronage of Carlo Borromeo (1538 – 1584), the archbishop of Milan, whose commissioning of hundreds of churches, seminaries and clerical residences in his archdiocese provides ample evidence both for and against the notion that architecture reflects prevailing art and culture. One of his most famous projects is the Collegio Borromeo, whose intricate pattern of the ground floor, and the complicated relationship between parts of the façade, indicates the Mannerist form of architecture prevalent at that time. Yet, he also approved buildings in the Classical style which predated the Renaissance, such as San Fedele in Milan. Borromeo, it seems, was not tied down to one architectural language, but prioritized those buildings which most adequately served as an architectural sign for the presence of the Divine.

Conclusively, the landscape of architecture has changed- patrons of architecture are no longer using architecture to reach certain socio-political ends but accommodating configuration where self-interest, though still kept in mind, is balanced with other objectives. We agree with architect Rem Koolhaas, when he says that “Today’s architecture is subservient to the market and its terms,” although we feel that not only is the market expressing architecture in more ways than a commercial interest, but that the market has moulded architecture for centuries due to which architecture has not always been able to reflect prevailing art and culture.

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