

How far does architecture reflect prevailing art and culture? Are all patrons of architecture self-aggrandizing?

First, we argue that architecture reflects prevailing art and culture by conforming to the zeitgeist of society, but often, such reflections are only clear in hindsight.

Architecture reflects the zeitgeist of society because architects are social agents. As society develops, the fundamental beliefs that shape that era change. In this context, “prevailing art and culture” refers to the dominant schools of thought which define aesthetic and functional beauty. The success and recognition of architects depend on society - people who commission their works, the media and the general public. Thus, architects whose works conform to the dominant intellectual school of thought are generally rewarded the most. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where architecture grows to reflect the prevailing culture of society. In Singapore, brutalist architecture emerged as a response to rapid economic advancement and urban renewal in the 1960s-70s. Architects like I.M. Pei dominated the architectural scene with designs that emphasised machine-like rationalism and simplicity that reflects the practical yet cutting-edge atmosphere. This led to the adoption of such designs for numerous institution headquarters like the OCBC Center and Temasek Tower. Hence, architecture reflects prevailing art and culture as architects function within a society that espouses such culture.

However, this framework categorizes buildings with the benefit of hindsight. Terms like “gothic” and “mannerist” were coined retrospectively, meaning that while this is a convenient method of understanding the plethora of architectural styles, it is merely an imposed structure. We cannot cleanly categorize *all* buildings designed during a certain era under the prevailing artistic styles of that time. Therefore, architecture does not always reflect society’s zeitgeist. For instance, with hindsight, modernism was made to sound like the prevailing artistic style since the 1930s. Yet, it was merely a movement contained within a small intellectual elite then. Most architects were still designing in traditional styles. Examples include the Chrysler Building and Empire State Building in New York, which were designed in the Art Deco style. Though these were public buildings that showcased the public consciousness of that time, they were simply dismissed by modernist architects, like Sigfried Giedion, as “insignificant”. Even statistically, the number of traditional American houses built in the suburbs during the 1930s outweighs the number of Modernist buildings. It was unfair to classify that time period as “modernist” and equally unfair to neatly classify architecture of a certain period as only of a singular architectural style.

Hence, while categorizing architecture under the prevailing artistic and cultural movements provides a rudimentary overview of the architecture of an era, such a characterisation lacks nuance and is thus imperfect.

Second, we argue that not all architectural patrons are self-aggrandizing and we are, in fact, witnessing a downward trend of self-aggrandizement due to the democratization of architecture. Here, self-aggrandizement refers to the process of enhancing one's own importance, power or reputation.

In the past, the commissioning of architectural projects was exclusively the domain of the social elite. This was because wealth and social power resided in them. In an environment where high society remained exclusive and had near-absolute power, it was easier for self-aggrandizement to flourish. This may perhaps be why prominent commissioners of architectural projects in pre-modern times, like the Medici family and the Vatican, regularly commissioned structures that enhanced their social prestige or perceived power, such as the Belvedere Fort and the Saint Peter's Basilica.

In contrast, architecture today is democratized, which results in a decrease in self-aggrandizing architectural projects. The social elite increasingly fall under the influence of the masses. In the case of architecture, the public is increasingly consulted when commissioning public structures, such as when the Danish government invited independent professionals and stakeholders to select the architectural design for the Royal Library of Denmark.

Furthermore, there is far less room for self-aggrandizement today since such egocentrism is seen by many as distasteful. In 2011, Chinese microbloggers launched the "Photograph your area's government building" campaign which sought to reveal instances of self-aggrandizing government architectural projects. In July 2013, President Xi Jinping issued a directive banning the construction of new glitzy Party buildings. Indeed, there is a decline of megalomaniacal architectural projects that are the hallmark of 20th century dictators, such as the Palace of the People in Romania built by Nicolae Ceaușescu. Hence the buildings of today, while modern and very much reflective of the corporations that reside in them, no longer ring of the self-aggrandizement of yesteryear.

Therefore, it can be seen that not all patrons of architecture are self-aggrandizing and they are getting less so with time.