

How far does architecture reflect prevailing art and culture?

Discuss the idea that all patrons of architecture are self-aggrandising.

Architecture does reflect prevailing art and culture, yet it can also shape people's ideologies in art and culture. Architecture represents the lifestyles and values which are associated with a culture. The culture of a country or area dictates the way the buildings are designed and so, this must mean that they reflect it in turn. For example, if the cross were not a prominent symbol in Christianity, cathedrals and churches would most probably look nothing like the way they do now: there would be no transept cutting across the nave.

In the past, there was always a dominant style which would stick for a long time, slowly developing and evolving, for example, the Renaissance style characterised by its resemblance to classic Roman architecture. However, although styles might spread from one place to another, each country's architecture from the same period would still look vastly different from one another. These styles were designed the way they were due to what was 'trending' at the time and trends were based on prevailing art and culture.

In the present day, much has changed. Culture is reflected differently in modern architecture. These styles are no longer present. Due to technological advancements, much more can be done with buildings and so they are being built in a variety of shapes and sizes. Globalisation means that cultures are having less of an impact on the world as a whole. Nowadays, culture is not reflected by styles spread across nations but rather, by individual works of individual architects. Frank Lloyd Wright reflected American idealism at the time with his 'Darwin D. Martin' house in Buffalo, New York state built between 1903-05. With its long, flat floor plan and overhanging roofs and eaves, it was trying to emulate the large prairie-house feeling of the midwest - sitting outside on the veranda at dusk, looking out across the land.

Patrons of architecture are just as self-aggrandising now as they were then. If you look around, nearly all the buildings we see preserved are great and very expensive buildings. Patrons in the past were extremely wealthy: the Church, monarchs, governments and the upper class. They would commission architects to build them vast buildings and monuments as a way of asserting their dominance over the population or prove their magnificent. Architecture was a status symbol, a symbol of wealth and power.

For example, for the likes of the Medici patronage, the construction of their palaces and private villas were most importantly for show. They were in constant competition with other hotshot 'baby-boomers' of the Renaissance: eminent families like themselves. One of the Medici's greatest accomplishments was their patronage of architecture. The first patron in the family was Giovanni di Bicci de Medici who commissioned the reconstruction of Basilica de San Lorenzo, Florence. After this, several other buildings were commissioned by the family over the centuries including the Uffizi Gallery, the Boboli Gardens, the Belvedere and the Palazzo Medici, Medici Chapel. These commissions all had one thing in common, they were built to celebrate the House of Medici, or to protect its rule over Florence. They commissioned buildings in much the same way that Russian oligarch's and Arab oil tycoons show off each others' fast cars and super-yachts today. It would be false to say that patrons aren't even a little bit self-aggrandising, as they always have been.

We live in a very corporate world now, and this is reflected in how patrons of architecture aggrandise themselves. Various companies such as banks have vast, advanced buildings built as their headquarters in order to stand out amongst the rest. For example, the 'Gherkin' in London or the HSBC Building in Hong Kong. In the oil and gas rich Middle east, a display of your own or your companies wealth could be interpreted by how tall or technologically advanced your buildings are. Take the Burj Khalifa for example, it towers over other very tall 'super-skyscrapers' in Dubai, asserting its architectural dominance. Nowadays, rich families or monarchies have been replaced by large companies as patrons in the world of architecture. Nonetheless, they are still self-aggrandising.

Society has changed. Yes, architecture is still very much a reflection of art and culture and yes, patrons of architecture are still self-aggrandising, just, in a different way.