Cafés

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The question whether architecture is an art has produced some conflicting answers. Adolf Loos denied it emphatically; Josef Frank considered it pointless to wish to settle that question: "The architect must have the ability and the desire to make something beautiful that is not a work of art".

However, if architecture is art, it is certainly not restricted or debased in that people can use it or that it may not collapse. The idea that 'applied' art is in some way inferior to art 'proper', was already incorrect in classical art theory – architecture does not just have building materials, structure, light or space as its means, but, first and last, people's actual sensation and behaviour. 'Function' is not something given, determining the design, but it is only created by design.

A café sets conditions for the guests' behaviour; it is the means of expression of the person who addresses them – the host. By means of the food and the space he has the guest under control.

The landlord does not have to cook himself, but delegates that to a chef, and similarly he can delegate the café idiom: to an architect, or whoever plays that part.

Sometimes a proprietor can cook, but hardly any entrepreneur is capable of sketching accurately his customary workspace – and even less of assessing the spatial relationships in a café for a conversion, let alone a new construction. And, like every layman, he mainly sees the architect's achievement as awaiting ideas, comparing the remuneration with the fee for an evening performance. Only when he witnesses the work does he know why he needed to delegate it.

The principle of delegating – familiar to every yuppie – for a building client is hard to accept, as this role is seldom performed. It means establishing <u>what</u> you want, but not <u>how</u>. (Yet even this distinction is always concrete and often contentious.) The client can fall back on supervision and control, but must also accept that the architect's solution is something unpredicted – incidentally, for the architect himself as well.

What is yet unpredicted has to consolidate into something obvious, so obvious that the guest may ask: <u>for this you really needed an architect?</u> Which indeed is the greatest compliment possible. After all, a café is not to be noticed, but remembered. It should be precisely to the point, and not annoy by pretentious ambitions.

This applies for architecture in general; however, there is hardly any other job that would confront the man (and woman) more directly than a café. It will be immediately apparent what is accepted and what is not. Nevertheless, designing a café always remains a risky undertaking. Only an interior decorating company will know beforehand what the café will look like – uninteresting! The effect of profound obviousness that makes a deep impression only comes about when every problem has been worked on with blood, sweat and tears, and none is hushed up on behalf of preconceived 'ideas' – although one is never certain before seeing the result. So there is no scope left for considerations on how to make something 'cosy' or 'cool'.

After all, the prerequisites for people's behaviour are problematical and perplexing; and once you become involved you will soon find 'design' decisions heartily stupid. Just consider the most elementary condition to be realized in a café (apart from the temperature): seating – the unstable position of the pelvis when one is seated, the necessity to support it in order to avoid rolling backwards or forwards, the contour-shaped classical upholstery of the 19th century, which was rediscovered in the 1960s as a result of ergonomic research – who would be interested in a 'designer' chair, with legs you stumble over as you walk behind it?

Not forgetting the ability to stand comfortably – how high is the bar, where is the footrest located? How wide is the bar? In spite of the customary deep chiller cabinets, is contact possible between the guest and the barkeeper? How close together can tables be placed? You have to know the rules of the design manuals if you want to break them, because what can actually be tried in practice is always a matter of experiment. The acoustics of a catering establishment – not the intelligibility of a speaker in a silent auditorium which is what the discipline of room acoustics addresses, but that of the person with whom you are conversing when everyone is talking. Why especially are small spaces often too noisy? Because punctual signals of noise – bursts of laughter, chinking glasses, moving chairs – stand out covering individual syllables of speech, which in turn leads to raised voices.

Mirrors in the room – the difference between a mirror hung on the wall like a painting and one creating the illusion of space. With the latter, it is not a matter of size, but of plausibility of the opening: its lasting appeal is due to the ambivalence between knowing it is a mirror and the repeatable illusion of the opening. Mirrors do indeed have a physical effect: the eye, for which any short visual distance requires effort, is able to adjust to the mirrored distance. And then fatigue and feelings of oppression occur less rapidly in small spaces.

This is a random series of subjects from the many behavioural elements that make up an everyday occurrence like a visit to a place. A cognitive psychological approach rightly questions if a computer ever could perform a visit to a restaurant – from entry, taking a seat, the menu and ordering, to payment and departure (which indeed is not an urgent demand). The freedom of choice in these behavioural elements has little to do with innovation, but much to do with continuity; and the many criteria for that can be summed up on one umbrella term: comfort.

Modern architecture which has undoubtedly started out with the claim that it would make life easier has only made limited progress in our everyday surroundings. For some it may seem dim and unilluminated to take the 'mere' comfort of the user as a constituent of architecture. In fact, anyone who is not prepared for that must be accused of an inferior definition of architecture. For, if its intellectual content only existed beyond commonplace purposes, architecture after all would be an 'applied', contaminated art, since commonplace purposes can only rarely be by-passed.

However, it is just a mistake to deploy the purpose as a requirement enforced from outside. The 'function' does not precede the design, but is always only mediated in the design. Prior to that it does not exist – on a par with space and structure. – In the same way as music must be perceivable by the ears, architecture in its essence is usable.

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