Art In Architecture Essay, Research Paper

Architecture is undeniably one of the most powerful forms of art. Buildings have the ability to loom in the distance when seen from afar. As you approach it more and more details can be seen. Minute intricacies such as stone quality, texture, and perhaps some ornate detailing become apparent. Even standing at a doorway can provide some involved feelings. Does the building seem to invite the viewer inside with elaborate carvings and an open view to the interior? Or does it intimidate the viewer with its massive proportions making them feel insignificant and trivial? When inside the architecture as a medium the viewer is surrounded by and grasped within its walls and ceiling. This quality is one unique to architecture because it is the only form of art to totally surround its viewer with such magnitude. Whether one turns to the left or right, looks up or down, ceilings or walls are constantly presented to the viewer who stands amidst the intended space and substance.

A line is drawn between buildings erected to serve a mere function and those which are made to integrate an influential quality into all who happen to see them often through use of extravagance. The latter can be propelled into greatness based on whether or not they are successful in carrying out with this vision set forth by their creators. This is what sets apart an ordinary building from an impressive and monumental wonder. It is interesting to note how a building is set apart from others of its time when this building is made to represent the people as a whole. Of course this building will surpass the more ordinary ones juxtaposed within the city. Of course the society or ruler would like to put their “best foot forward.”

The architectural wonders to be spoken of in these pages are just that because, on the simplest level, something about them has been intriguing to the world. This captivation has endured through the ages so as to elevate these structures beyond mere buildings and to the status of art. In this light, the buildings can now be admired quite like a painting or a sculpture in respect to the composition and placement of key components that come together to make the glorified whole.

One significant part of any building is its door. How the interior is transferred into the exterior is very important. Stepping through the doorway of a door is much like the thought of stepping between a portal in between two realms. One of the most graceful examples of this transition is illustrated through the Cathedral of Notre Dame of Paris’ north transept.

A string of events and thoughts occurs to the viewer when approaching the gothic cathedral’s northern transept. We see the gigantic fa?ade of the Church. Curiosity invites us into the structure through the tremendous stained-glass rose. We see the rose, darkened because of the absence of light not coming from the inside of the church. Automatically, the mind imagines the point of view one would have from inside the cathedral while witnessing the light pass through the beautifully colored glass. Another way that we are invited to step through the portal is through the fact that the portal offers a space that is not totally outside nor inside, providing a smooth transition. The portal has a roof so that if we walk under this roof we are not subjected to the elements and are not yet fully exposed to the splendor awaiting us inside. The portal becomes just this: a doorway between two universes, one of heavenly proportions and the earthly one that we leave behind as we walk in.

Next, we are presented with the north transept door. As we look up we see the tympanum containing the story of the early life of Christ and the legend of Theophilus. The tympanum is made in a traditional style as far as tympanums go in the sense that it is made up of three layers, with the characters getting bigger as you go up. The history contained in this tympanum is important to the churchgoer because it is the first narrative that they see. It is a reminder of their religious history that they can ultimately be a part of. It helps to establish a sense of purpose in their minds as they proceed into the church.

Then the viewer is ushered through the door by the Trumean figure of Virgin and Child. We are reminded that Mary is holding Christ and therefore becomes the church. The Notre Dame houses Christ both as seen demonstrated in the statue and in the edifice. Mary is the tangible connection between those on earth and Christ. The viewer ponders this as they walk past the statue through the door.

If one were to turn around after walking in, they would see the rose mentioned above in its entire splendor. A seemingly endless array of colored light shines through the glass. The light is the medium. This is arguably the most impressive stained glass rose in all of the gothic cathedrals. When one looks up to it, they feel awestruck and overwhelmed by its beauty and the intellect inherent in it. This intellect is seen by the perfect organization of the many pedals surrounding the center depiction of Mary and the Christ child. A hierarchy is displayed through a circle of pedals that surround her featuring the prophets of the Old Testament and another around them showing the kings and patriarchs. The complexity of the design alludes to a higher power at work. The lancets below the rose structure underline its beauty and further help to guide our eye back up to the “Rosary” dedicated to the Blessed Virgin.

Another structure in which light is very much a part of the intended architecture is the Pantheon. Though it does not have any windows, the Pantheon does have the famous oculus that directs a beam of light across the interior with the passing of the sun. This would remind worshippers inside that in this building, there was a direct connection between the heavens and the earth. The light becomes very much as important if not more so than the palpable structures within.

Though there are no windows, the building is designed so that there are no feelings of constraint while inside. This is accomplished through the great space within. The space is what actually overwhelms the viewer making him feel small and thus creating the relationship between himself and the superior power of the gods. The unique circular shape allows the viewer to stand in the middle of the structure and have the all the walls equally distant, therefore creating a sense of total freedom within the massive area. On the floor there are repetitions of large squares and circles. These shapes become subject to the laws of perspective and recede accordingly, therefore helping to create the feeling of great distance between the viewer and the wall.

As one looks up within the Pantheon, Heaven and Earth are connected through the dome. The five rows of coffers perform a pattern that is very pleasing to the eye. The higher the row, the smaller the coffers get. This also helps to create a feeling of enormous space. The act of perspective is imitated through the receding coffers adding to the effect that the oculus is far away as well as carrying through with the technical benefit of lightening the weight up top.

The Pantheon is a building in which the artistic emphasis is on the inside rather than the outside. This common quality is shared with the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Interestingly, this greatness of the interior is accomplished not so much through ingenious architectural design as in the Pantheon, but through two-dimensional paintings. The organization of these paintings is wonderful, both the composition of each individually and the placement of each in relation to all the others in the room. Compositional mastery is illustrated, for example, in Joachim’s banishment. He is ushered off the platform towards the abyss of his fate. Again in the scene depicting the meeting at the Golden Gate, Giotto’s magnificent compositional technique shines through the reunited figures of Joachim and St. Anne. They come together to form a beautiful definition of marriage. Our attention is not stolen by any one of the paintings because like colors run throughout the chapel. Golden colored walls guide the eye in contrast to the purple ceiling.

The scenes relate to one another to create a linear (most of the time) story of important events surrounding the lives of both Christ and Mary. The chapel becomes a pictorial Bible. Giotto’s organization and presentation to the viewer is ingenious. Interesting ironies occur when one studies the chapel’s walls. The format that the rows of images are presented in allows for juxtaposition of scenes that contrast in the story line. For example, the Adoration of the Magi is placed directly on top of the Washing of the Feet. This allows the viewer to witness Christ in opposite roles. We see both sides of Christ, the divine King and the Man. Giotto defines Christ in the juxtaposition.

Giotto understood that he controlled what the people would see. This is seen through the organization of certain paintings. He places the pact of Judas out of sequence so that it is directly across the Annunciation. These two scenes are direct opposites. In the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel contacts Mary sealing her fate as a blessed and venerated being. On the other hand, Judas’ fate of damnation is shown by his contact with the devil clutching him.

A final statement is made in the Scrovegni Chapel on behalf of all the buildings discussed here. God is depicted at the top of the altar dispatching Gabriel. God is placed at the top to honor Him and show His superiority to all that enter the chapel. Man’s yearning to glorify God (or gods in the case of the Pantheon) has been the key driving force in the construction of many fabulous buildings. Granted there are those that deviate from this pure motive in order to satisfy self-glorification through the artwork, but basically the root of all these wonders is the chance to glorify the Supreme Being. It is wonderful to see the end results now and witness how art is so much a part of worship and of the success of architectural organization.

Bibliography

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