

Theories of Taste and Beauty in Architecture with Some Examples from Asante, Ghana

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine taste and beauty in architecture. It makes a contribution to the almost non-existent theoretical material in architecture and its related areas. The notion of taste in comparison with the other senses apparently does not invigorate the arts. Architecture as ‘the mother of the arts’ is the most ignored in the matters of taste even though architecture touches the lives of all. It is currently imperative to tackle taste in architecture today by asking questions amongst others such as: What is taste? Umberto Eco asserts that there are “no theoretical texts” regarding taste and beauty on Africa but “ugliness”; and, therefore, this paper seeks to spark discussion about the notion of taste in architecture and as means of seeking some answers to the aforementioned question to foster deeper understanding of how taste affects architecture. The architectural profession in Britain has revisited beauty in architecture to sustainably reshape architecture and the built environment of Britain (Ipsos MORI, 2010). Africa in general deserves a similar trend. This paper qualitatively focuses on philosophies as well as contemporary worldviews of theories and concepts of taste nuanced with the notion of taste in architecture and concludes with examples drawn from Ghana in West Africa.

Keywords: architectural taste, beauty, habitus, aphorisms, architectural theoreticians, Ghana.

Introduction

This paper acknowledges that taste is a priori subjective and universally regarded as the “lowest of the senses and in architecture and that it is “such a subjective subject”. Architecture as ‘the mother of the arts’ is the most ignored in the matters of taste even though architecture touches the lives of all. Architecture is often judged a thing of good taste and successful if a building looks beautiful (Hamlin, 1947). Yet people appear nervous when it comes to discussing taste and beauty concerning the built environment because taste may be “thought of,” “referred to,” or indicated” without there actually being qualities present in experience (Hamlin, 1947). Kronenberg (2001) and other writers assert that architecture is life.

It is deemed imperative to tackle taste in architecture today by asking questions such as: What is taste? Does taste relate to beauty which is platonic- good for all time and true to all people; who are the taste connoisseurs, does it manifest in architecture? What is the standpoint of architectural theoreticians on taste? Indeed, these are difficult questions; but recently, the architectural profession in Britain has revisited beauty in architecture to sustainably reshape architecture and the built environment of Britain (Ipsos MORI, 2010). Even though, it is asserted by Umberto Eco that there are “no theoretical texts” regarding taste and beauty on Africa but “ugliness” (Eco, 2004; 2007) and “beauty matters less for the black and ethnic minority poor” (Ipsos MORI, 2010; Greer, 2010); this paper seeks to spark discussion about the notion of taste in architecture and as means of seeking some answers to the aforementioned questions to foster our deeper understanding of how taste affects architecture in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper focuses on Ghana, a tropical country in the sub-region of western Africa.

Theoretical Sketch of the Senses and of Taste

The mention of taste is immediately associated with the art of gastronomy in any discussion of the notion of taste within the arts (Pallasmaa, 2008; McCorkindale, 1992).

Michel Foucault argued that sight is the dominant (and dominating) sense of the modern era; we live in a society of surveillance. In Foucault's account, there has been a steady progression in the power of the gaze to organize both knowledge and society. It was the reorganization of the space of the prison, hospital, and workplace in accordance with the principle of individualizing partitioning under the scrupulously classificatory eye of the master-disciplinarian that crystallized the tendency and laid the foundations for the scopic regime of contemporary Western society (Howes and Lalonde, 1991). There exists an expansive theoretical framework of literature on the senses but that of taste is terse. Philosophers have interpreted taste preferences as idiosyncratic, private and resistant to standards.

The identification and outline of debating the senses were set in motion by eminent Pre-Socratic Philosophers such as Leucippus (first half of 5th century BC) and Democritus (c. 460-c. 370 BC). Leucippus and his pupil Democritus formulated theories of the senses and their operation before Plato and Aristotle. The definition of what constitutes a Sense remains disputed (Plato Complete Works, 1993; The Complete Works of Aristotle, 1995; Gracyk, 2008; Kivy, 1983). Aristotle classified the traditional senses as sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Apart from the Aristotelian classification of the senses, there are introspective and extrospective consideration of the senses. There are the senses of: pain, balance, movement, time, place, direction, pressure and many more. Additionally, there is the sense of kinesthesia that enables us to touch the tip of our nose with our eyes closed or to know which part of the body we should scratch when we itch.

Platonian and Aristotelian views in brief

With the exception of the fairly extended discussion of the senses in the controversial dialogue of the *Timaeus*; Plato's views of the senses were generic and theoretical. However, Plato maintains that what we perceive with our senses are merely shadows, reflections of the forms in the world of Ideas and that there exists an eternal world of ideal Forms and Objects. Unlike his master, Plato, Aristotle was concerned with the world of the senses. Both of them recognised and dealt with the senses as divine elements of the human body. While the classification of the other senses is somewhat easy, the manifold and infinitude of taste renders any attempt at classification extremely difficult. Plato views taste with obscurity and disdain. To him, taste is 'bestly immoral' because it is bodily. Plato's ascetic position perhaps made him not engage too powerfully with Taste.

Aristotle, unlike Plato, treated the senses more scientifically with minimal idealism and ascetic interpretations. Aristotle believes in the totality of the senses and to this he says in *Nicomachean Ethics* that the healer of the eyes must generally know about the whole body for human excellence (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1102^b10-15). The difference between Plato and Aristotle partly stems from a difference in metaphysics. Aristotle acknowledges that the Senses are also sources of pleasures, and pleasure is an important dimension of human goodness when it functions as a component of phronesis-practical wisdom (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095^b20-30; 1098^b20-25).

Aristotle mentions that all the senses have their "special sensibilities"- Colour is the proper object – or special sensible – of vision and cannot be sensed by any organ other the eyes, sound is the special sensible of hearing; flavour of taste; odour of smell; and tactile qualities such as rough, soft, hot, cold are the proper objects of the sense of touch. For several reasons, Aristotle places Taste fourth just before touch in the hierarchy of his analysis of the senses. Whilst Plato is prudish towards taste as bodily pleasure in general, Aristotle is tolerant but both agree that good tastes are pleasurable and nourishes the needs of survival guided by temperance or moderation to protect against the dangers of taste. Following the foregoing, taste in the period of Enlightenment and contemporary eras is briefly explored in the ensuing sections.

Contemporary Distinctions of Taste as habitus

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), a French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher offer in contemporary times, a well known book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. It exposes judgments of taste and its relationship to social position. Pierre Bourdieu does not link directly to the eighteenth century French Enlightenment but bears some semblances with Voltaire with respects to attacks meted out to social thinkers (Voltaire, 1757; Hooker, 1934). Bourdieu's framework is an attempt to understand the subtle ways in which taste manifests itself in codes of conduct and the institutions that enforce them.

Bourdieu's theory of taste and habitus is probably the most influential and controversial of genre of cultural analysis in contemporary times (Turner and Edmunds, 2002). Habitus is "structure structured (opus operatum) predisposed as a function to structure structures (opus operandi)" (Bourdieu, 1984).

In other words, Habitus is “necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application – beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt – of the necessity inherent in the meaning conditions” (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus is acquired through childhood and therefore durable (Bourdieu, 1990). It is the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus: the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, the space of life-styles, is constituted (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu’s analysis has since inspired a wide range of sociological studies of consumption patterns and lifestyles in different countries (Lamont, 1992; Warde, 1997; Holt, 1998; Warde and Marten, 2000; Turner and Edmunds, 2002). Taste, for Bourdieu, is expressed through the habitus or lifestyle of the cultural elite. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classification, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (Bourdieu, 1984). Taste has the propensity and capacity to appropriate materially and symbolically a given class of classified and classifying objects and practices (Bourdieu, 1984). One of the most ubiquitous and ritually potent classifications of tastes in modern times is the distinction between high and low culture.

Bourdieu designates aesthetic taste into highbrow, lowbrow, and middlebrow. The highbrow is characteristic of the dominant class or bourgeoisie. The second in hierarchy is middlebrow taste made up of the middle class of the petty bourgeoisie. The lowbrow or ‘popular taste’ is characteristic of those at the low ebb of the cultural or economic capital. He adds that this designation does not simply claim social or aesthetic importance since habits, which divides people by class and occupation, is only a representation of the real taste. Bourdieu argues that based on formal aesthetic standards operationalised through objects such as museums, theatres and symphony halls, this distinction is not static and changes with time through education and practice (Bourdieu, 1990).

Additionally, the stratification of taste into good and bad, high and low goes beyond differences in social classifications in different cultural milieus.

For example, one and the same individual may have taste for extremely different types of artistic and aesthetic object (Korsmeyer, 2009). Between the social class-distinction of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow, others, like Gans have gone beyond this sharp distinction between high and low culture to identify that taste cultures are clusters of cultural forms manifest in, for example, art, entertainment, architecture, consumer goods and others which embody similar values and aesthetic standards (Gans, 1996). Though, Taste distinction is inherently paradoxical, it has the benefits of reconciling any divergence between immediate preferences and the work one genuinely perceives as eminent object of taste, perhaps, like architecture. Bourdieu was pithy with architecture but with aesthetic disposition he seemingly agrees that “...modern taste demands that architecture ...should be ‘functional’ (Bourdieu, 1984).

Taste habitus versus Architecture

Bourdieu’s theories and concepts of the distinction of taste appeared homogenous and observable in all classes of society and “fields” (Bourdieu, 2001). They transcend determinism and freedom, or the individual and society into infinite capacity for generating products-thoughts, perceptions, expression and actions (Bourdieu, 1990). However, they have not been overtly applied in the field of architecture. Perhaps, because Bourdieu recognizes architecture as a highly intellectualised field and architecture’s complicity with power and authority makes it a ‘no-go-area’ (Hillier and Rooksby, 2005). Bourdieu was not a student of architecture but of space. The closest he came to architecture was when he studied the habitat of the Berbers of Algeria.

He never publicly discussed architecture but inherently challenge the highly relative autonomy and the need to test the notion of architecture as a field through rigorous examination of specific historical moments. Bourdieu applies his concept of ‘field’ in areas of social life which involved strategies taking place with respect to valuable goods or resources (Baert, 2000). Even though Bourdieu did not directly consider habitus in the field of architecture; it is subsumed in most of his theoretical works.

For instance, he argues that habitus is systemic and found in all properties with which individuals and groups surround themselves such as houses, furniture, painting (Bourdieu, 1984).

Notably, before Bourdieu, Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) applied habitus in his *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1951) where he argues that the design and construction of Gothic Cathedrals reflect the same intellectual principle or ‘habit of mind’ as contemporary scholastics: both make their content and design clear (‘manifestatio’); both reconciling elements into a whole, often in a dialectical manner (‘concordantia’), and both systematically articulate their compositions with divisions and subdivisions (Crossley, 1988).

Panofsky says; “the methods and procedures of Gothic design, (borrowing a phrase from St Thomas Aquinas), ‘follows, as ever *modus operandi* does, from a *modus essendi*; it flows from the very *raison d’être* of early and high scholasticism (Panofsky, 1957; Crossley, 1988). Similarly, Geoffrey Scott (1884-1929) argues architecture has subsisted on a number of habits ... half-truths, unrelated, uncriticised and often contradictory, by means of which there is no building so bad that it cannot with a little ingenuity be justified, or so good that it cannot plausibly be condemned (Scott, 1914). Scott continues that the habit of taste is hardly favourable to an understanding of the Renaissance for order and subtleties of proportion require a habitual training in the eye. The Greeks, as some of the ‘optical’ corrections of the Parthenon have revealed, responded here to distinctions of which today even a practised taste will be almost insensible (Scott, 1914).

Taste and Architecture

Architecture became conventionalised and complicitous with power and authority as well as religion and morality. Hence the notion of taste became obscured and had no place in architectural discourses. Taste in architecture was ruled by the gentlemen who were brought up to believe in the rule of taste. It was just untouchable and building against the rule of the gentlemen’s taste was considered bad manners (Watkin, 1977). The influential critic, architect, and educator William Richard Lethaby (1857-1931) argues that, Gothic was natural because it evolved inevitably out of the technology of construction and materials, and Renaissance was discredited because of knowledge, taste, and connoisseurship (Watkin, 1977).

Human morality was transferred into architecture, leading Pugin and Ruskin to attack the illusionism of Renaissance and Baroque on the grounds that because man should not tell lies buildings should not. Pugin used religion and morality to defend and campaign for the revival of Gothic architectural styles. Le Corbusier in the opening paper of his book *Vers une Architecture* expressed that ‘architecture is of morality; lack of truth is intolerable, we perish in untruth’ (Le Corbusier, 1924). Ironically, other architectural theoreticians such as James Fergusson (1808-1886) considered the first architectural historian in the English world of architecture, deployed the whole Puginian armoury of arguments from human, and ultimately religious, morality to demolish the very position which Pugin had used them establish (Watkin, 1980).

Fergusson, The Royal Institute of British Architects gold medallist (1871) was never satisfied with the historic and aesthetic analyses of ancient buildings. Fergusson believed that ‘no perfectly truthful architectural building has been erected in Europe since reformation’ (Watkin, 1980). He undertook a historical and critical comparative survey of the whole subject of architecture in his book *History of Architecture* (1865-7). His treatise on *The True Principles of Beauty in Art* is subjectively a most thoughtful metaphysical paper. Fergusson unquestioningly accepted that architectural forms are so deeply and irretrievably rooted in particular ways of life that is impossible to re-use in a period later than that of their origin (Watkin, 1980).

Manifestation of Taste in Architecture

The Architectural theoreticians, who discussed taste, did so from gastronomic perspective: Jacques-Francois Blondel (1705-1774), an eighteenth-century French architect and architectural theoretician, defined taste as the “fruit of reasoning, a sequence of appreciation and fast judgment by which one achieves a nontrivial result ... It is the same procedure by which a gourmet, a person of taste, goes about food preparation” (Frascardi, 1986).

The a priori search for objective standards of taste in aesthetic theory is seemingly absent in architectural theories today. Frascari argues that Architectural theorists hardly discuss taste and contemporary architecture is almost entirely tasteless. Architectural taste has been ruled out by the moral standards of the Modern Movement rendering architecture meaningless (Frascardi, 1986).

The reason for this situation is difficult to explain. Nevertheless, Powers (2010) explains that the arrival on the architectural scene of the first modernist-architects with the exception of Inigo Jones (1573-1652) in the seventeenth century is the beginning of the alienation of “taste” from its tactile dimension, giving it a negative connotation.

Powers (2010) asserts ever since then; “taste” has been invalidated as a possible rule for architectural production. This tendency results, paradoxically, from the nefarious puritan ideology of the Modern Movement, which evolved into the visually dominated manipulation of meanings proposed by the Post-Modern condition of architecture. Both Style and Post-Modern strip away from architecture any pleasure to be had in either its use or conception and the rigorous design morality imposed by the form- function polarity of the Modern Movement reduced architecture to its untouchable structural and functional bones (Powers, 2010). Many schools of thought perceive Taste as not spatially coded and discussions of taste in architecture have been gustatory. The analogy between gastronomy and architecture is not only Isidor’s fanciful etymological interpretation, but continues even today: Richard Meier’s church at Tor Tre Teste, a suburb of the city of Rome with The three shells –arcs has been described as Maltese nougat with a taste of coconut or eggshells (Figure 1) (Anon., 2010).



Figure 1: Richard Meier’s Roman Catholic Church at Tor Tre Teste, a suburb of the City of Rome (Source: Authors, 2003)

By invoking the etymological interpretations of Isidor of Seville, can it be argued that the sense of taste manifest in architecture? Architecture stimulates, incites, entices and provokes through taste sensibilities of colour, texture and sound. Architecture is a ‘frozen music’ (Levinton, 2003). It is asserted elsewhere that the ancients used the word aedes meaning dwelling to refer to any edifice. It is the view of some that the word is derivative of the term edendo, for “eating”. Marie Antoine Carême (1784-1833), known as “The King of Chefs, and the Chef of Kings” carefully studied the architectural monuments of the past and designed elaborate table decorations called pieces montees (mounted pieces) as an outlet for his architectural passion. Those pieces were rotundas, temples, columns and arches, constructed with sugar, icing and pastry dough (Fracari, 1986). Each of these pieces was carefully designed with an architect’s eye. Carême considered confectionery to be “architecture’s main branch” (Figures 2 a & b).

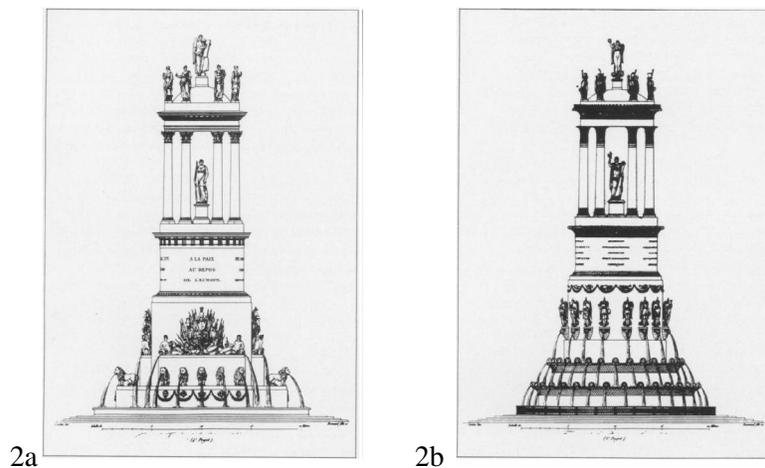


Figure 2a & b: Careme's design for a monument in Petersburg for the Czar (Source: Frascari, 1986)

One school of thought thinks of architecture as something that is presented to our intellect while the other side think of it as something that is presented to our senses. For example, the design of windows that are located high up on a building and which are most likely to be seen from below results in the question: is it aesthetically important that they are square or merely that they look square?

This question is an echo of some fascinating renaissance debates about architectural taste (See further Wittkower 1973/1998, Mitrovic, 1998). At this point, we take a look at how architectural theoreticians have handled taste and beauty. We focus on Siegfried Giedion (1888-1968) and Geoffrey Scott (1884-1929), for our purpose. Juxtaposing the writings of Geoffrey Scott and Siegfried Giedion may seem an unlikely pair for the topic-architectural taste/beauty. However, this paper contends that both present coherent alternative views of the conception and production of architecture. On one hand, Giedion at a point disliked the Renaissance and had strong affinity for modernity. On the other hand, Scott cherished the renaissance and stylistically leaned towards the Baroque to advance modernity (Kite, 2001). Scott asserts that baroque is in the highest degree interesting, because of its purely psychological approach to the problem of design, its freedom from mechanical and academic “taboos,” for its use of scale, its search for Movement, its preoccupation with Mass composition and Spatial values. The mastery of these elements was shown differently by baroque architects from Vignola to Bernini and entitles the styles they evolved to a very different estimate from that which was accorded to it by English writers (Scott, 1914).

Architecture and the Notion of Taste

Giedion’s Aesthetics Values as “Transitory Facts”

Siegfried Giedion progressively realised the danger the “ruling taste” poses to art and eventually to architecture (Georgiadis, 1993). However, his popular book *Space, Time and Architecture –the growth of a new tradition*, which had as wide a circulation and popularity as Banister Fletcher’s (1866-1953) *History of Architecture on the Comparative Methods for the Student, Craftsman, and Amateur* (1896) did not discuss the notion of taste. Giedion appeared explicitly undemocratic to taste and beauty. He adopted a bias position regarding aesthetics which later developed into a deliberate policy of rejection or destruction of aesthetics (Georgiadis, 1993). Consciously putting aesthetics on ice, he gave credence to the social argument of Neues Bauen (New Building) as its active proponent and aesthetics considerations were rejected in 1928 as was done in the La Sarraz Declaration of 1926/1927 amongst others that: “Urbanisation cannot be conditioned by the claims of a pre-existent aestheticism;...” where he considered aesthetics, he was unwilling to deal with the idea of corporeality (Georgiadis, 1993).

He made terse reference to taste and played it down when the question of aesthetics was broached in International Congress of Modern Architecture (Congress International d’Architecture Moderne - CIAM), Bridgewater, 1947. Giedion committed wholeheartedly to the aesthetics abstinences of the CIAM. The Congress was hugely influential. It was not only engaged in formalising the architectural principles of the Modern Movement, but also saw architecture as an economic and political tool that could be used to improve the world through the design of buildings and through urban planning. In his first report on the first congress he launched a vehement attack on aesthetics than any of the other architects. Whereas the La Sarraz Declaration made only two references to aesthetics subject, Giedion managed to draw attention to the “exclusion of aesthetics considerations”. Giedion’s rejection of aesthetics was more noticeable whenever he talked about housing problems (Giedion, 1958).

To him, economic interests were more important than aesthetics (style and beauty). To him, beauty means a house: that fits ...way of life (light, air, movement, openness); that provides lights (walls of glass) instead of shadows (window jambs); that allows living in contact with the sky and treetops; with rooms that do not give feeling of imprisonment; and, a house whose charm lies in the combined efforts of functions designed to promote well-being (Georgiadis, 1993). For twenty years, aesthetic values were considered personal, ‘intangible and emotional expression’ until Alfred North Whitehead – the great scientist and far-sighted philosopher, showed the fallacy of the belief that aesthetic values exist only within the personal and private sphere which was traced back to Descartes by Herbert Read (Giedion, 1958).

In 1935 Giedion supported Walter Gropius’ view to ‘humanise’ architecture. But he encountered a lot of theoretical problems due to his past. He talked about “hybrid construction of a Baroque modernity” that had already been encountered by Geoffrey Scott who seemingly did not receive mention by Giedion.

In the introduction to his book *Architektur und Gemeinschaft* (Architecture and the Community), Giedion acknowledged that aesthetic values had been undervalued to shape reality and stressed ‘Biological, social and economic considerations’ to give voice to his humanisation programme partially described as aesthetic model. Giedion’s acceptance of aesthetics could not be grounded philosophically to deal with issues of taste when one questions the entire CIAM history. Even his *Eternal Present* could not mend enough the damage his political (CIAM) activities caused to aesthetics.

Nevertheless, his life works is historically important for architecture and its history. Giedion made it clear that “the history of architecture is that material of architecture” (Giedion, 2008).

Scott’s Drive from Priori Aesthetics to the History of Taste

Geoffrey Scott relatively lived a short life but his book *-The Architecture of Humanism –A paper in the History of Taste* (1914) lives on. To him, there may be lack of architectural taste but no lack of architectural opinion. Scott (1914) believed that the essential nature of architecture resides in its humanistic value, as this has been expressed in baroque architecture. He did not contend for a moment, the assertion that “physical memory supplies *the whole* [italic in original] explanation of nature and appeal of architecture.” For Scott the architecture of the renaissance is pre-eminently about architectural taste. Renaissance architecture lay not in construction or materials or politics, but, chiefly and typically, in the form of taste (Scott, 1914). The men of the Renaissance evolved a certain architectural style, because they liked to be surrounded by forms of certain kind.

These forms, as such, they preferred, irrespective of their relation to the mechanical means by which they produced, irrespective of the materials out of which they were constructed, irrespective sometimes even of the actual purposes they were to serve (Scott, 1914). They had an immediate preference for certain combination of mass and void, of light and shade, and, compared with this, all other motives in the formation of their distinctive style were insignificant. For these other motives, being accidental, exerted no consistent pressure, and, consequently, were absorbed or thrust aside by the steady influence of a conscious taste for form. Turning to the limited interest of architectural theorists to notion of taste and the principles of aesthetics in general, Scott (1914) concludes that taste was limited due to negligence of aesthetic influence on purely architectural criticism for appreciation of contemporary things; for then appreciation was far perfect, and the past has been merely ignored. He assumes taste is in-born and consciously cultivated with time and exposure and then it is always not the same (Clark, 1974).

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, Scott defends taste as humanistic and renders it a *habitus*. Scott asserts taste is supposed to relate to beauty which is platonic - good for all time and true to all people and important to architecture and the arts. He argues that many have tempted to say that the aesthetic qualities of architecture and sculpture depend only on physical qualities, and that sensory and appearance properties drop out of the picture altogether. However, Scott views this as a mistake and that sensory and appearance properties are in fact of inescapable aesthetic importance in architecture and sculpture. On one hand, there is a renaissance Platonist tendency in those like Palladio, and a related modernist tendency in those like Le Corbusier, to emphasize spatial relations. On the other hand, there are their opponents who think that sensory and appearance properties are crucially important; Scott argued. Scott contends that there is in architecture the possibility of a beauty which lies beyond and cannot be reduced to certain terms.

Scott in anti-Kantian sense contended that Beauty is independent of Nature and subjecting beauty to the cult of Nature is a suicide of taste. Nature, he said, lead and can only lead, to chaos, hence a monstrous architecture.

As a purist, Scott judged architecture in symbolic terms and rejected picturesque aesthetics on purely formal grounds. His move is inherently rhetorical expression of personal preferences of taste. Scott’s treatise on taste is undoubtedly one of the classics in the modern literature on architecture and eloquent disquisitions on cultural history and taste. What he failed to deal with was taste connoisseurship.

Legislation and Taste: the Chandigarh Case

Le Corbusier attempted to create a taste policy in Chandigarh, called the “Statutes of the Land”. It was very prescriptive and it inevitably failed because it was overly non-consultative and imposing. The Statutes gave excessive powers to “the Chief Architect” of the City of Chandigarh (Chandigarh School of Architecture, 2002). Le Corbusier failed to realise that a house is a display of personal taste, however perverted; it is a glittering exhibition of personal status and most of all, it is an architectural representation of personal obsession, however demented, it is an important sociological statement and therefore cannot be dismissed easily (Bhatia, 1994).

That therefore makes any legislation of taste difficult to operate if people are excluded. Le Corbusier conceived Chandigarh to be a city of trees, flowers, and water, of houses as simple as those of the Homeric times, and of some splendid edifices of the most extreme modernism subject to mathematical rule and proportion to be verified in everything here by the poor and by the prosperous (Casciato, 2010). Whether or not Le Corbusier was cognisant of the mistranslations and controversies of Homeric houses in philosophical discourses is a question beyond this paper.

Corbusier, the “absolute master” of architecture conceived and designed the master plan from Paris to be implemented by Pierre Jeanneret. The “Statutes of the Land” aimed at aesthetics controls in Chandigarh’s design and growth and aspirations of the people was without the people and it “...turned out to be too rigid over time” for the people (Chandigarh School of Architecture, 2002). Critical reading of the Newspaper clippings and public reactions in the Chandigarh Aesthetic Legislation document suggest that the people were not consulted in the preparation of the master plan and the aesthetics by laws; for example: The Express News Service, Saturday-January13, 2001 reported that the people “...welcome the proposal of more covered areas for industry, but the changes are very high. Before fixing them, the administration should have consulted the industrial associations. Not too many industrialists are likely to opt for it, since business is already on a downward trend and property in the adjoining states is much cheaper” (Chandigarh School of Architecture, 2002).

Soon after the foundation of the new city was laid the peripheral areas of Chandigarh came under enormous pressure by the burgeoning moneyed class who for commercial ventures gentrified their ‘old buildings’ in the city and invaded the periphery for buildings in accordance with their personal taste; a scenario “The Punjab New Capital (Periphery) Control Act” enacted in 1952 could not contain (Chandigarh School of Architecture, 2002). So if the “Statutes of the Land” failed; and therefore, the question: can legislation ever direct taste? Our answer to the question is positive based on Humean “intersubjective agreement”¹ (Cooper, 1992). In the case of aesthetic taste, what is required, according to Hume, is the discovery of universal standards of taste that will reflect the intersubjective agreement. The foregone gives a clue as to why the notion of Taste seems divisive and easily dismissed as arbitrarily subjective and we agree to the argument that, explanations of taste require an understanding of the social and cultural contexts (McCorkindale, 1992).

Taste was at every moment developed alongside the creative arts. Yet, in some languages it is almost impossible to find distinctive names of taste experiences and the exactness of beauty even though there are clues for preference, acceptance or rejection of taste/beauty sensation. Studies have shown that taste names vary from different languages and communities (Burke, 1958; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). Myers in papering the taste names of the traditional people in the region of the islands of the Torres Strait found that they had no word for bitter (Hollingworth and Poffenberger, 1917). Against that backdrop this paper takes a brief look at some aphorismic/proverbial expressions of taste/beauty in Ghanaian context. Ghanaian languages are rich in proverbs, the use of which is taken to be a sign of wisdom. Proverbs embody philosophy, humour, symbolism and religion (Appiah, et al. 2007). Ghanaian proverbs are imbued with a deep knowledge of physical and socio-cultural worldviews. The next section, therefore, attempts to explore the use of proverbs as expressions of architectural taste/beauty in Ghana. We focus mainly on the Akan (Asante) society which has relatively developed linguistic culture in Ghana (Katzner, 2002).

Expressions of Taste: Some examples from Ghana

In Ghana, the social constructions of meanings in languages influence taste/beauty perceptions. In some languages it is impossible to find distinctive names for common taste experiences even though there are clues for preference, acceptance or rejection of taste sensation. The sense of taste constitutes one of man’s most interesting contacts with the outer world. The mobility of capitalism and consumerism at the threshold of the twentieth century introduced sweeping socio-economic adjustments throughout colonial Ghana especially in Asante society.

Anyone who wants to be successful in life must struggle for what is truly humane to attain a status of *ade-efe*, meaning ‘a thing of beauty, honour, prestige, glory and renown’. *Ade-efe* represents Ideas of Taste excellence or of aesthetically valid forms and proverbially put: *Ade a eye fe, ye fe, na ennye anibere* (A struggle for what is beautiful is not covetousness). Nevertheless, *Ade-efe* is determined by “economic capital”. To wit: *Kwaakye ade ye fe a, yede sika na eye* (If Kwaakye’s things are beautiful, it takes money to make them).

² Whereas idealist philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Schelling and Hegel have tried to objectify beauty with some higher truth, the usual procedure amongst empiricists has been to settle for intersubjective validity, as the best that can be hoped for. As we have pointed out earlier in this paper, Hume, the leading eighteenth century empiricist, happily admits that since no mere feeling can represent what is really in the object to seek the real beauty or real deformity is as fruitless an inquiry as to ascertain the real sweet of the real bitter nevertheless, in both cases, intersubjective agreement is possible. In the latter case, all that is required is to ascertain that the organ of taste is in sound state, since its physical constitution is the same in all human beings

The “Kwaakye things” (McCaskie, 1986), pure ethical or aesthetic judgments in Bourdieuan sense are illustrated through cultural goods or material goods such as residential buildings and furniture, cars and vehicles, clothing and jewelry or pleasurable goods –acquisition of these goods implies a sense of ethical aesthetic values. For most part, the Kwaakye things are residential buildings. Owning a building/house in Asante society and Ghana in general attracts respect and dignity, *ye bisa onipa no fie, na ye mmisa ne sika*, (we ask of a person’s house and not his wealth). Acquisition of property especially houses are used to judge the credibility of persons seeking to occupy traditional and to some extent political offices. Men seeking marriages are more acceptable to their prospective suitors and families if one owns a house or a room (McCaskie, 2000). Architectural taste in this sense is therefore based on prestige.

With architecture as a channel through which people choose to express their cultural (symbolic) capital, it has generally been everyone’s main ambition to build a house regardless of social-economic status. Today, in Ghana, people aspire to build a ‘beautiful’ house. The social class and origin of the individuals occupying the Kwaakye things as yet, remains unstudied. Though modernisation has impacted Ghana to a greater extent, it largely remains an egalitarian society. Therefore, there exists opposition to the pure ethical or aesthetic judgments pertaining in Ghana today. Apparently, it is the belief that tastes differs.

This is visible in the different types of architectural styles emerging in Ghana. Whilst some perceive the emerging building styles as ‘bad taste’ and vulgar architectural works, it suffices to quote an interesting local aphorisms in which the perceived tawdry architectural styles are justified as: *ade-foforo nye fe a, anka Ahemmaa mmo abia* (People in high place like the Queenmothers follow fashion by wearing seed beads for attractions) and it is said that *ade a obi mpe no, na obi pe to wit*, it takes all sorts to make a world. The mention of fashion at this point is not coincidental but beyond the theoretical consideration of this paper. Fashion is symbolic production whilst architecture is material production and fashion has always reflected the age (Laver, 2002; Fletcher, 2008; Callan, 2008; Edwards, 2011). The uses of architecture and fashion are indirectly intertwined with taste since they connect people in different ways. Fashion, dominated by clothes and dressings is an inherent determinant of architectural production and requires further research.

Conclusions

This paper has tried to sufficiently point out some theoretical facts of taste and architecture in general. It is historically clear that taste is morally capped *a priori*. Philosophical discussions on taste have been ignobly abstract. Taste is defined and perceived in a variety of ways. Many fields of human endeavours shy away from intellectual engagement of taste because any ‘accounting for taste’ is deemed personal, fashionable, pleasurable and immoral. Taste is part of life and admittedly, it is difficult to express taste of styles in architecture. Styles were not particularly analysed in terms of taste by influential theoreticians like Siegfried Giedion and those who did, like, Geoffrey Scott were poetically inconclusive. Discerning taste in architecture is difficult but it does not mean it is not there and modernism killed taste in architecture.

Bernard Tschumi (1996) asserts that for many generations any architect who aimed to or attempted to experience pleasure in architecture was considered decadent. What this paper finds is that architectural theoreticians apparently did not come clear on taste. Taste and beauty is transient, ephemeral and elitist and the notion of taste is of inescapable aesthetic importance in architecture. Taste demands information from sociological and cultural milieus. This paper has revealed that sociological milieu has an indirect but causal relationship with tastes. The cultural context is also crucial, as the social construction of meanings in languages influence taste/beauty perceptions. By this paper, it is now known that taste is inherently part of architectural production in Ghana. Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh has informed this paper of the importance of peoples’ taste in the production of sustainable architecture and planning, opening up avenues to explore theoretical subjects such as architectural taste in Ghana and the sub-Saharan Africa in general.

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