
A report from the front

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All around us facades are becoming more figurative and flamboyant. They are sprouting gables and pediments, columns and arches, cornices and voussoirs, string courses and colour banding, even towers and turrets, all in a polychrome palette and in a promiscuous mix of varying textured materials from flashy modern to warm or noble (or reconstituted) traditional. This is justified as respect for context, history and human values, and as concern with communication (symbolism) and self-recognition (anthropomorphism). But despite all this, and despite the money and design time lavished on them—even if only by keen and callow year-out students—facades are not seen as a fit subject for serious and unembarrassed discussion.

Though not without good reason, most architects associate facade design with sham and cynicism, with hiding the complex yet banal realities of contemporary life, and with pandering to the lowest-common-denominator populism that pleases planners, councillors and now, possibly, Prince Charles. Compounding unease at such expediency, architects also feel that elaborate and self-conscious facade design betrays the moral spirit of Modernism. Though this constitutes a profound misunderstanding of Modernism (Le Corbusier and Aalto, to name but two, were brilliant facadists), the lack of recent deep thought about, and practice in, facade design means that most of those now being built are clumsy, confused and unconvincing.

But the reasons for facades becoming more richly composed and modelled are legitimate and compelling. We are witnessing a fundamental change in the urban architecture of commerce as facades once again become a major, if not the crucial, concern in design. That they are usually so badly designed may

be cause for embarrassment but not for ignoring them, or for treating them only with the contemptuous mirth or despair that so many provoke. With care and critical attention things can only improve. It is in this spirit that this article faces up to facades and treats them to serious but, we hope, entertaining discussion as something more than gaudy gift wrappings.

Back to the street

Renewed concern with decorative and figurative facades came initially from the rediscovery of the street, and with it, context and history. CIAM and the Charter of Athens had grossly oversimplified the city into little more than an agglomeration of separately zoned functions, freestanding and formally minimalist buildings, and isolated nuclear families, linked only by transport and communication systems. But inevitably the essence of the city was rediscovered in what was being lost—its complex continuities in space and time, in both physical presence and lingering associations. The seamless fabric of the traditional building-lined streets and squares sheltered citizens and their communities psychically as well as physically, and also proffered, in addition to visual delight, all sorts of images and messages with which to furnish meanings and memories.

Dismayed and disoriented by the destruction and discontinuities of reductive Modernism, the public, then the planners, and now the Prince all demand conservation and some reconnection of buildings to each other and to recognisable and memorable convention. The more thoughtful of these people want substantial, tactile and decorative materials which