

# Comment

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*Dans ce court essai, l'auteur tente de démontrer que l'emploi d'images et de symbolisme en design n'est efficace que dans la mesure où certains facteurs pertinents, tels le raisonnement et le procédé, sont tenus en ligne de compte dans le programme.*

The discussion of imagery or symbolism alone as a theme is not terribly useful. It points out clearly our unbalanced concern for the visual end-product or visual identity. The creation of place, if it is to be good design, calls for a concern for process and reason as well. This is not to imply that one is any less important than the other, rather that a full understanding of both is necessary in achieving a healthy balance.

The issue of "symbolism" and "imagery" relies on the premise of an architectural vocabulary, which in turn relies on universality of human reaction and interpretation (in this case, the built form). Universality does not exist; reaction and interpretation vary greatly from individual to individual and in more statistically predictable ways from culture to culture. Anthropologists can demonstrate that the only universally understood symbols are in fact not created, but instinctual symbols of social and bodily gestures and expression. Any expression, be it corporeal, spoken or physically made, that can be learned or created is necessarily open to individual interpretation. The concept of an "architectural vocabulary" with its attendant symbols and images is therefore not generally applicable, and so a conceptual red herring.

In creating or adapting solutions to an architectural problem rationalism is employed. Specific temporal and regional situations may result in unique and satisfactory solutions. These may be celebrated by local designers and builders and become objects in themselves; symbols are born as end products of a rational (not to imply purely functional) process. If the same symbol or image

is applied in another place or another time by a different builder, it may be in response to the original conditions or perhaps a very different set. Its original *raison d'être* may or may not be understood by observers or even by the designers.

Does it really matter? The answer is yes it does, to those who approve or disapprove; and no, not at all, to those who take no notice. To argue the merit of the use of symbols is therefore of limited value. Of much greater concern, however, is the rational issue of whether or not it solves the problems at hand, creates new ones, and serves as an asset to the total project. The issue, therefore, as to whether the symbol is created (from scratch) or evolved (from prototype) is naive and misses the more important point: is it an asset?

For instance, if a designer were to borrow the ancient Maecenean symbol for "everlasting life" and applied it to a frieze over a doorway in hopes of attracting attention and celebrating entry, he/she may find that its recent borrowing by Albert Speer and his colleagues has totally changed its meaning, and consequently its quality of attention-getting. If, on the other hand, celebration of entry is made through creating an indirect path once admired during his/her trip to a cave in the Andes, it will be so subtle as to be missed by everyone, save perhaps their guide. It may, however, be entirely successful if it is enjoyed as a wonderful entry by the very people the designer had intended. The symbol of an Andean cave is, in this case, irrelevant.

It would seem, therefore, that a full understanding of both the qualitative and absolute values of imagery is just as important as a full understanding of process and reason. Perhaps then, in these image-conscious days, we would best give due attention to both symbol and reason relative to the program or terms of reference, lest an imbalance should deny good design.

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