

GIVING NEW FUNCTIONS TO OLD FORMS: THE AESTHETICS OF REASSIGNED ARCHITECTURE

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In modern cities, many old or abandoned buildings occupy valuable land without providing a comparably valuable service. In the past they have often met with the fate of being demolished and replaced, but modern day sentiment, be it foolhardy nostalgia or legitimate concern for architectural heritage, often leads to a building's refurbishment. As a result, buildings save themselves from the wrecking ball by providing a service that satiates modern day demand. This process, however, has been challenged on aesthetic grounds, specifically the sometimes heartbreaking "trendy boutique-izing" and subsequent lack of fit between function and form that occurs to many proud landmarks and mundane buildings alike. In terms of utility, we are tempted to save historic buildings in any way in which we are able, but the aesthetic consequences of doing so have not been thoroughly examined. This paper will survey both the negative and positive consequences of reassignment and suggest that, in order to avoid the former and accentuate the latter, we need to make sure that old form and new function "fit" together as well as possible.

I. THICK, THIN, AND GETTING FIT

To view architecture exclusively in classically artistic terms is, according to contemporary theory, to miss vital aspects of the work. More recently the distinction has been made between "thin-type" and "thick-type" aesthetics in architecture: thin-type involves the recognition and contemplation of superficial features, while thick-type considers context and meaning, taking into account the function of a building, its role in

society, its physical placement and its existence *simpliciter* (Carlson, 49). Thick-type considerations have led to what Allen Carlson has called the different types of “fit” of a building. A building can fit in several different ways: to name a few, in terms of a correspondence between its placement in its surroundings, in terms of its interior to its exterior, and between form and function (Carlson, 152-156). A lack of fit in any of these senses is a potential aesthetic negative. My focus will be on the last item, namely that when a structural form does not seem to match its function, we feel that something “doesn’t look right.” The issue of practical aesthetic importance, then, is to try and make sure that “things fit together.”¹

But once the form of a building is created, who is to say what its function *should* be? Or that it shouldn’t be changed? As a child may take an empty cardboard box and create of it a spaceship or a fort, giving new function to old form, we are wont to do the same with architecture. And it does not seem, *prima facie*, that we are doing anything aesthetically vicious by doing so. As Roger Scruton asks,

[A]re we to think that the Round House Theatre, which presumably goes on ‘revealing’ or ‘following’ its past function as a railway shed, must for that reason be compromised in its present employment? Such examples show that the idea of ‘the function’ of a building is far from clear, nor is it clear how any particular ‘function’ is to be translated into architectural ‘form’. (Scruton 1973, 330)

The guiding question becomes: what are the aesthetic consequences of imposing a new function on a pre-existing form? I will examine some of these consequences via the first case study.

CASE 1: THE ROUNDHOUSE THEATRE

The Round House Theatre to which Scruton is referring was built in Camden, England, in 1847 when it served as a railway turnaround and repair centre, was later converted into a warehouse, and finally became a theatre in the 1960s, when it served as a venue for rock concerts. Currently further renovations and additions are being made to help facilitate its latest transition into a community theatre.

¹ The notions of “fit” and “not looking right” have been left intentionally vague for the time being, but will be discussed later in further detail.

While this particular instance of the reuse of architecture does not seem overtly concerning, what are the aesthetic consequences? First, the building no longer serves its original function, that for which it was designed. As a result, its proper *classification* has become confused: should we aesthetically appreciate it as a theatre, a railway station, or a former railway station-turned theatre? Second, the exterior of the building has remained structurally unchanged, whereas the interior has changed drastically. Does the original building still exist in the same form any longer, or merely as a façade? What are the aesthetic or moral consequences that result from the subsequent lack of fit between outside and inside? Third, there may be a lack of fit between the building’s historical role (or how it has traditionally been experienced) and its reassigned function. How should we feel about using once “noble” architecture for “mundane” purposes? These questions indicate potential aesthetic negatives that can arise from the process of reassigning architecture, and I will address them in turn. The purpose of this investigation, however, is not to condemn the process of reassignment, but simply to indicate potentially aesthetically hazardous areas into which reassignment may tread. To conclude the essay, I will introduce three aesthetic benefits that can arise, guidance as to how buildings may be reassigned in an aesthetically responsible manner.

II. OLD FORM AND NEW FUNCTION: WHAT IS IT?

I will use the term “reassigned architecture” when referring to a building that has the following characteristics:

- (1) It was originally built with some form F in order to serve some function X,
- (2) It has been, for some reason(s), modified such that it now serves a new function Y,
- (3) Enough of the original structure has been maintained (usually the exterior) such that it is still, in some way, the original form F, and not something new.

I think it uncontroversial to claim that when we build we do so with some function in mind, and thus buildings are naturally able to be categorized according to certain types.²

² Examples of these are obvious and mundane, viz. “house”, “church”, “school”, etc.

With these classifications in mind we are then able to assess the quality of a building according to what each classification entails; in order to make a proper judgment, we must know what it is that we are judging.³ Being able to make such identification is a crucial component of a thick-sensed aesthetic appreciation because it helps us define the parameters in which we are appreciating: whether a function fits with its form is directly dependent on having a notion of *what it is fitting with*. The problem is that reassigned architecture creates confusion as to what exactly it is that we are attempting to appreciate. I will attempt to clarify this point via the second case study.

CASE 2: GOODERHAM & WORTS

Near the shore of Lake Ontario in downtown Toronto there exists a series of buildings that once belonged to the Gooderham & Worts Company, dating back to the early 20th century when it functioned as a distillery. Long since abandoned, the complex has always held a sentimental place in the hearts of local residents, mainly as a curiosity to be gawked at from the highway. Recently it has been transformed into “The Distillery District”, housing stores, restaurants and cultural spaces, catering mostly to expensive tastes and tourists. And while the complex was no doubt saved because of its appealingly quaint features and sound structural form, a problem arises when we attempt to make an aesthetic judgment. Are we, for example, to apply the criteria of a brewery or a restaurant to a certain section of the complex, a loading dock or a boutique to another? The minute we begin to evaluate any of these areas we are immediately faced with aesthetic and conceptual hurdles. Scruton, in his essay “Architectural Aesthetics”, outlines the basis of these problems:

In general we might say that our sense of the beauty of an object is dependent on a conception of that object...Features that we would regard as beautiful in a horse...we would regard as ugly in a man, and this aesthetic judgement would be determined by our conception of what men are, how they move, and what they achieve through their movements. In a similar way, our sense of beauty in architectural forms cannot be divorced from our conception of building and of the functions that are fulfilled by buildings, and it is according to this conception that we *see* buildings. (Scruton 1973, 336)

³ Note that this is not necessarily a demanding criterion, and that we may, if we wish, specify further subtypes of function or style and evaluate more acutely, i.e. as a good or bad “gothic church” or “retirement home”.

So are we, to use Scruton's example, applying the aesthetic criteria of a proverbial horse to that of a man by attempting to aesthetically appreciate a restaurant within the shell of a distillery? To extend the metaphor, the reassigned building would take some intermediate form, say of the architectural centaur, and in such cases, neither the aesthetic criteria of man nor horse seems appropriate. I explore further consequences of this issue in the sections that follow.

III. FITS AND FAÇADES

For a building to be properly called "reassigned" as has been defined, it must maintain the majority of its structural features prior to, during, and after its reassignment. This is often accomplished via violent reconstruction of a building's interior, and can, in some situations, cause the exterior of the building to become an elaborate façade, serving no other purpose than "looking nice". In fact, many old buildings are gutted to the point where all that exists is its street-facing side, a façade being created by carving out everything except the most exterior wall, a new building being built behind it. Certainly, in these extreme cases it is difficult to make an aesthetic judgment of the original building beyond the superficial since the façade is not meant to serve any functional purpose; it is merely cosmetic, an artwork attached to a new building. But the reassigned building does not go so far as to become relegated to a merely artistic role, as it still serves a functional and structural purpose. What is of deepest concern seems to be the incongruity between the building's exterior and interior. We return to the notion of "fit": the idea is that if the exterior and the interior do not in some way "correspond", things end up "not looking right".

A word of clarification: for something to "not look right" means that some sensorial aspect of that thing does not match up with conceptions we have or are led to believe. In the case of architecture, the exterior of a building will create in us certain assumptions about the nature of its interior. As expressed by Scruton, "A man who enters a church, a crypt, or a memorial prepares himself for what he will find there" (Scruton 1979, 192), and "our enjoyment is mediated by thought...[a]rchitectural enjoyment is governed by a conception of what we see." (Scruton 1973, 335-336) Scruton also notes John Ruskin,

who says that “a building can tell lies about its structure, and this is a species of dishonesty as offensive as any we might discover in a man” (Scruton 1973, 335).

While we may not completely agree with the severity of architecture’s offense as according to Ruskin, the point is made clear: we approach architecture with a set of expectations, and if these are violated then we often feel that something has gone aesthetically wrong. Our expectations may have many sources: from our conception of what the building should be like as belonging to a certain classification, from the nature of the exterior leading us to assume qualities of the interior, etc. The fit of our expectations with reality is another type of fit that should be taken into account: we feel that an aesthetic violation has occurred if we are led to believe something about the nature of the building that is not true. We are being lied to, although perhaps not to the degree expressed by Ruskin. The task for reassigned architecture, then, is to try and make the degree of deceit as mild as possible, by making reality and our expectations as congruous as possible. I will return to this issue in the final section.

IV. DOING BAD THINGS TO GOOD BUILDINGS, AND VICE VERSA

The last aesthetic consequence I wish to examine is the potential lack of fit between a building’s history and its function. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, it is questionable as to whether older buildings are reassigned as a result of sentimentality for anything that is “old”, or as a result of legitimate concern for architectural heritage. Two examples serve to illustrate opposite extremes of this practice: the Gooderham & Worts complex as has already been introduced, and the Edmonton Post Office, a building completed in 1915 which served for a number of years as a hub of communication, escaping demolition in 1985 when it was declared an historic landmark.

The case of the Gooderham & Worts complex makes it difficult to believe that the buildings saved were done so out of any legitimate concern for their historical role: the company produced various types of alcohol, a function that many would deem necessary but few would deem virtuous. The Edmonton Post Office, however, once served as a vital landmark for a fledgling town; in this instance, it seems more likely that the building was saved due to legitimate concern for heritage. Here we have two buildings with very

different histories, yet they are reassigned with the same function, namely as centers housing restaurants and boutiques. In the case of the distillery-turned-tourist locale, we have given the building a (perhaps) nobler function, and because of this we may very well feel that the reassignment is justified. In the case of the post office, however, there seems to be a distinct stepping-down in nobility.⁴ Have we done something aesthetically vicious by forcing the post office to serve a base function?

Of course, talk of “good” and “bad”, “noble” and “ignoble” buildings in the moral sense has led us somewhat down the path of anthropomorphism. At this point in the discussion, it may very well occur to someone that buildings are “machines for living”, and since they serve a practical purpose then they should be treated practically. Nevertheless, it does not seem that mere sentiment exclusively guides the intuition that it would be inappropriate if, say, a prison were converted into a daycare. Indeed, the process of converting once noble buildings into centers for undignified commercial purposes, the aforementioned “trendy boutique-izing”, is often heart-breaking, and as a result, we feel it is aesthetically vicious. A building, due to its history, carries with it an air of the dignity or baseness of its previous function, whatever that may have been, and to ignore it is to ignore an important aspect of the building.

V. THE BRIGHT SIDE OF REASSIGNMENT: SOME AESTHETIC GUIDANCE

That the exposition thus far has carried with it a distinctly condemning tone is not to imply that the practice of reassigning functions always definitively results in aesthetic negatives. Rather, the reassigned building brings with it a number of potential aesthetic benefits, and indeed if executed correctly, its impact could be tremendously positive. I conclude with a short exposition of an admittedly incomplete list that should help to show that things are not all bad.

Strong Thin-Sense Positives Justify Minor Thick-Sense Negatives

In mundane examples it is often forgivable that we should risk thick-sense aesthetic negatives if it means the preservation of a significant thin-sensed aesthetic positive. An

⁴ Perhaps ideally, we would simply “upgrade” a building to try to use it for some purpose somewhat related to its original function, but this is not always a viable option, especially when the building’s original function has become antiquated.

old, very attractive house reassigned as an office, for example, would not raise the ire of many people. The thin-sense qualities of an unassuming or unimportant building may then “override” the lack of fit that might be experienced, and we may think that if we are being lied to, the consequences are not damaging. This is perhaps the “little white aesthetic lie”, where aesthetic benefits are obtained with the unfortunate but forgivable side-effect of some degree of deceit.

A Better Way to Maintain Heritage

In ideal cases, buildings are preserved due to perceived importance of the historic roles they once played. If these buildings are “important enough”, or are judged to have the potential to generate revenue, they are sometimes converted into historical landmarks which are often maintained in something close to their original state. One might feel that were it not for economic concerns that *every* old building we felt was deserving of being spared demolition should be converted into a similar type of preserved cultural landmark; this practice, however, has been criticized, most directly by Pauline von Bonsdorff. “In renovation and reconstruction there is...the real risk that areas could be transformed into historical images,” says von Bonsdorff, “where the complexity of the processes that took place and the imperfection and heterogeneity of time are hidden.” (von Bonsdorff, 61) Thus by reassigning a building a new function, it is still being used in some way, and can avoid the potential aesthetic taxidermy that is described by von Bonsdorff. While perhaps not ideal, it may be, in certain cases, the best option available.

VI. CONCLUSION: REASSIGNMENT THAT FITS

The lesson to be taken from this discussion is that if we wish to reassign architecture in an aesthetically responsible way, we must try to maximize the amount of fit between old form and new function in terms of its internal and external physical characteristics, its new function and its historical role, and our expectations with reality. Consider the first case introduced, what is now the Roundhouse Theatre. This grungy old railway turnaround was converted into a venue that has hosted a number of influential rock concerts, a similarly “grungy” function. The building is attractive because of its down-to-earth construction and history, and indeed the reassignment that took place in this

instance seems somewhat “fitting”: its old function had cultural connotations that were shared, at least in part, by its reassigned function. The building’s historical role combined with its physical appearance instilled certain expectations, and these seemed to fit well with the nature of the building in its reassigned form. Time will tell if this fit is preserved throughout its latest transformation.

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