

The Armageddon of Architecture and Design

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By

Anthony Sully

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PREFACE

ANTHONY SULLY

"Now there is no more ideology," he said. "All the world is very confused, all the world is very violent. There are too many different possibilities." Alessandro Mendini, Dezeen, June 2015

My enquiry is about finding out why architecture and design are proving to be unpopular at the present time for so many people, in terms of straying away from the fundamentals of human need and comfort into the realms of egotism and financial greed that satisfies sensational goals. This is especially relevant when comparison is made to past historical styles since primitive times where excitement and appreciation is felt by the marks, patterns and designs that have meaning and attachment to those who inhabit that particular culture. We can but sit in wonder at these beautifully crafted works. Whether the bond was made through religion, wars or trade conquests, that strength of attachment seems to have deserted us in our present self-destructive world.

From time to time throughout history, individual styles, subjects and uses of art have been suppressed by religious and political movements, or even by radical shifts of fashion, but the modernist polemic against ornament is qualitatively different from anything that preceded it. Never before had so fundamental an expression of the creative spirit been singled out for elimination. James Trilling¹

This is not a history book detailing every aspect of life, kingdoms, wars, politics, trade and social unrest as there are many books that cover those aspects very well from which I draw the occasional reference. I intend to be selective and focused whilst raising questions that may not have been asked before. Whilst studying the origin and source of artefacts I may be guilty of dealing more with their image and effect rather than an in depth account of the full set of circumstances that led to their existence. This includes the omission of a full set of plans and sections of buildings in many cases as well as a "walk through" account of the building as that would exhaust any writer on such a mission as mine. I have been reliant sometimes on questionable sources whereby their authenticity maybe in doubt, or there is a competitive theory that rises as a challenge. If that is the case I hope the reader can draw his/her own conclusions. I also hope that I will be forgiven for concentrating mainly on Europe and Asia in this book as being the prime movers of the changes that have taken place in architecture and design over the centuries.

The meaning and expansiveness of ‘design’ like the ripples a pebble makes when dropped into water, takes on people as users and playmakers, and the political and social forces that determine our society.

Whether a design is successful in fulfilling the need identified is determined by the value of the forethought that went into it and the quality of its execution; any designed object, after all, is the realization of an idea, and throughout history when design thinking has been applied intelligently, through either a revolutionary or an evolutionary approach to problem-solving, the result has been life enhancing. Charlotte and Peter Fiell²

As our body of knowledge increases through time so is there pressure to expand the existing defining categories we have until they become unwieldy with so many sets and subsets that the original is in danger of becoming diluted by anarchic forces whose weapons of obscurity and intellectual barbarism are second to none. So, reviewing anything historical tempts one to take on the world, which I slowly discovered was neither practical nor helpful. If I do stray into worldly matters it is to set the context of my study and the focus of my endeavours. John Walker explains very well the wide context that design can be placed in the Introduction to his book “Design History and the History of Design”³:

Design is a particularly fertile and challenging subject for the historian because it occurs at a point of intersection or mediation between different spheres, that is between art and industry, creativity and commerce, manufacturers and consumers. It is concerned with style and utility, material artefacts and human desires, the realms of the ideological, the political and the economic. It is involved in the public sector as well as the private sector. It serves the most idealistic and utopian goals and the most negative, destructive impulses of humankind.

The popular assumption by most people is that the history of the human race reflects a graph beginning with primitivism and climbing at an increasing exponential rate to our present age of supreme accomplishment in all things by learning from the past – a better-than-ever, self-congratulatory belief. Unfortunately, we can all witness that this is far from the truth. One aspect that is quite frightening is that global population figures were about five million in 8000 BC, 3.7 billion in 1970 and currently 7.7 billion. More people mean more problems of survival and more potential differences occurring. Half of all refugees are children yet I do not understand why so many children are born into such poverty and deprivation. Over the centuries society has been continuously faced with problems of survival and conflict such as person to person, village against

village, region against region, and country against country, and when they are solved they are replaced with either remodelled problems or entirely new ones that have never been faced before. Henry Balfour⁴ when writing about primitive man suggests the following in his book “The Evolution of Decorative Art” published in 1893:

The first stage in the development of design as a fine art was purely what may be termed an ADAPTIVE stage. That is, man simply accepted and adapted effects which were accidentally suggested to him.

As opposed to the modern concept of problem solving by stealth and deliberation in order to improve a situation which has become weak, irritating or even dangerous, Balfour honestly admits that many early developments were by accident. So each generation experiences these changes sometimes with gratification that things have improved, or with exasperation that things have got worse. This is exemplified through the lives of families when the ‘generation gap’ raises its head. Teenagers and their parents are in conflict because they each accuse the other of not understanding their position.

Apart from the self harm to the planet that I refer to in Appendix A it would be unfair of me not to list the great achievements that have worked well for society. Namely, the internal combustion engine, the invention of electricity, the spinning jenny, the computer devices, advances in medicine and so on that have helped to preserve life, helped us to live more comfortably, and to be constantly entertained. These inventions were designed to replace an older product or system, whereas the railway was an entirely new concept of travel to carry many people and goods that competed with road transport but was never designed to replace it. Trains are faster, can carry more people and do not clash with pedestrians. Road transport offers more flexibility of choice of time of travel and direction of destination, with veins running throughout the body of the country for transporting one to fifty-six people. But those journeys can threaten the lives of pedestrians as shown in Fig. P-1. This road/pedestrian system is very common and standard practice in our towns and cities. But how has it survived when there is so much danger to pedestrians? The only separation between the two is a kerb to elevate the walkway. This situation has received much attention over the years with attempts to make a more severe separation such as raised walkways that can sail over the traffic, or placing all traffic underground leaving the ground above as being totally pedestrianized. These ideas have mostly been consigned to the waste bin due to either financial difficulties or simple logistic problems in providing

a healthy 3D solution. Another example, in relation to a more rural environment, of how the pedestrian has been neglected is shown in Figs P-2/3.

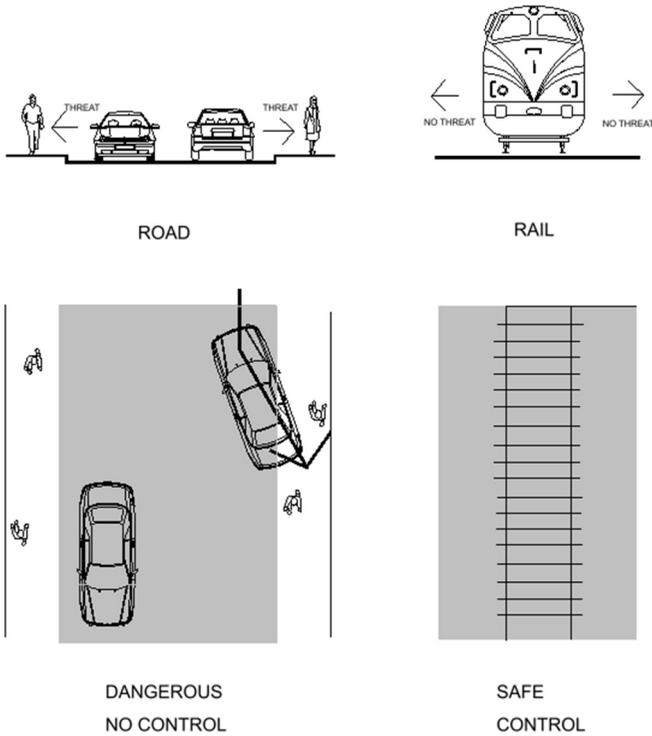


Fig. P-1 Plan and section showing simple difference between road and rail transport in relation to pedestrian safety

The dreamy uncluttered romantic idyll of the old street of Milton Abbas (Built 1786) in Dorset UK (below), sharply contrasts with obvious improvements to the buildings and the appearance of the intrusive motor car that has arrived without consideration.



Fig. P-2 Street in Milton Abbas, Dorset UK early 1940's. From "The Anatomy of a village" by Thomas Sharp. 1946 Penguin Books.



Fig. P-3 Milton Abbas in 2020 with same view as Fig. P-2. Photo author

The road has been widened to cope with two way traffic which resulted in pinching a few feet from the frontage of each house.

As compensation, each homeowner was given back a portion of land by the removal of the pedestrian paths, grown over and given to the homeowners as part of their “frontage”. The other intrusions are the driveways that slice through these green frontages.

We have inherited an environmental means of communication that offers choice of quality and speed that suits a particular individual, as well as goods. It all began with primitive paths of well-worn routes agreed by the resident tribes. Although these grew to be more permanent over the years, there was complete freedom of direction on offer without any forceful dictation. Gradually, we had to impose through legislation a system of roads and walkways for the safety of an increasing population and its varied forms of transport. The old freedoms disappeared and we had to adapt to directional guidance, just in the same way that national and local laws were created for the protection and continuance of a complex society.

My training, professional background as an interior designer and half of my career spent in higher education, has provided me with vital experience of who is building, what is being built and why over the past six decades. My design and teaching skills have given me the confidence to write books especially this one which draws on my own personal analysis of the current architectural dramas that face us. I have met so many highly qualified people who I refer to in this book, from my own teachers to practitioners who have inspired me in my work and in my current writings. Tackling history as a non-historian means that that I am out of my comfort zone by undertaking a personal selective exploration of subject matter that I hope demonstrates why an architectural style or period changed whilst making observations of any religious or associated ideologies and philosophies that could have influenced the designs of the time. This is of course accepting that climate and geographical differences in the world have imposed a method of building appropriate to those conditions and hence regional variations can be partially explained. Summarising, I would say the major forces for change have been:

Technology – invention, adaptability, discovery
Politics – leadership, titular head, ruler, power, authority
Religion – icons of worship
Personal health – self preservation, hygiene
Trade – buying and selling

This is because the broad aims have been for survival and acquisition of wealth and contentment, both of which have been expressed in the buildings we are familiar with. History inform us that wars and social unrest have taken place continuously over the centuries, with one country or region conquering or invading another, as they continue to do this present day. What is not made clear but I suppose is quite obvious, is that there is a constant in all of these confrontations: and that is that the bulk of the population in each country, probably in villages that are tucked away from the battlefields, remain insulated from such confrontations and as a result most of these peasant folk would have continued with their lives without interruption. How this influenced the evolution of customs and cultural outpouring of art and design is perhaps to be found elsewhere.

I am writing this book because I believe that a wholesome or integrated society is one where harmony exists between actions (design) and words (ideologies), whereas today I am afraid that we are heading towards a disintegrative society in so many ways, due to competitive greed, religious confrontations, a lack of care for our planet, but especially with regard to architecture and design where Modernism and Minimalism have reduced our environment to an emptiness never before experienced.

*The world has already experienced several manifestations of extreme anger against aspects of Western life not unconnected with architecture. The prognosis is not encouraging, as almost daily, Modernist architects inflict damage on the already weakened fabric of cities that have been subjected to nearly a century of ideological tinkering, and even export their outlandish computer-generated Parametricist fancies to places where their incongruities insult and contribute to the wrecking of what survives of indigenous cultures. **James Stevens Curl**⁵*

The first learning curve for primitive humans was the fight for survival. It begins with the selfish preservation instincts for oneself until one feels strong enough to use those means for one's immediate community. We are a learning species and can therefore be taught by our elders, but we also learn from our own experience. The second learning curve is defending ourselves against aggressors and natural disasters. The third learning curve is to satisfy our pleasures. The fourth learning curve is to acquire a skill or develop something that is innately felt in each one of us as being a contributory factor to our general wellbeing. In addition there would be the strong realization that for all of these to work, harmony and cooperative understanding in the community must be sustained. One overbearing aspect of modern life is the weight of responsibility imposed

upon all of us to absorb as much as we can of the rapid increase of information, facts and events that are made accessible through the media jungle that surrounds us. This state of affairs is mission impossible, and we are all faced with the stark reality of sifting through this morass and selecting those bits that we can understand and cope with, in the hope that we can be part of some process of unity of the human race as well as reinforce our own personal identity. The phrase “ignorance is bliss”⁶ comes to mind as being a tonic to anyone yielding under this tsunami of information overload. I mention the sense of community above and how we have relied upon each other for survival. **The stark reality of today is that it is entirely possible for an adult person to live in complete isolation, whether by choice or by forced circumstances, working from home surrounded by all mod cons. Food and clothing can be ordered on-line. The only reliance on an outsider would occur due to ill-health or old age, or for some aspect of household maintenance. This person is not a hippy or hermit rejecting society by living rough and not working. But because of the way society is structured we have created a system whereby this isolation is possible and that is most worrying especially as it can exacerbate the problems of loneliness and mental health.**

So I shall be relying on the scholarship of others and their references to help me with my task. Beginning with the ancient civilizations presented me with the unenviable task of finding out who were the first people to draw, make or form something that eventually mutated over the years to become a reliable and popular design choice. I shall be scanning the fields of architecture, art and craft for confirmation of any conclusions I may come to. I also accept that in the absence of any proof of a particular connection, I may have to take the risk of making my own conjectures and hypotheses. This may result, post production of the book, in many corrective or alternative suggestions from readers which are contrary to my own views and I would welcome such feedback.

*Of course, as soon as ornament becomes cheap, elite taste moves on. If decoration is suddenly cheap, then the plainer an object, the more valuable it suddenly becomes. This is, effectively, the birth of Modernism as described by Pevsner and others, the stripped aesthetic of the Bauhaus or the Arts and Crafts where the effort now goes not into ornamentation but into making the building or the product so that it appears simple. But with the added dimension of morality. The stripping-off of ornament suddenly becomes an ethical duty, which leads to the moralising (rather than necessarily moral) arguments of the Modernists.⁷ **Edwin Heathcote***

Denmark's National Museum in Copenhagen Vikings 400-600AD

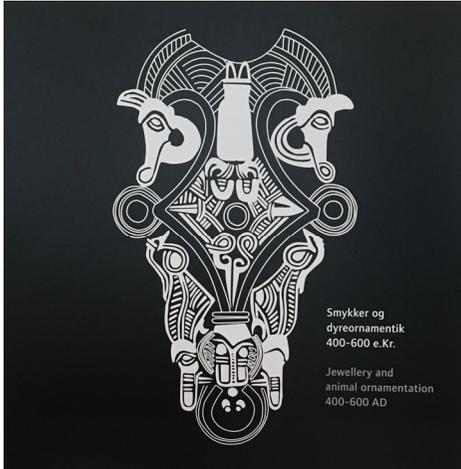


Fig. P-4 Viking design for jewellery and animal ornamentation

I was captivated by this reproduction of a design for jewellery on a visit to Denmark's National Museum in Copenhagen in February 2020. I was struck by how modern it could be with its abstractions and graphic composition. I see this as a clue as to how difficult my task is in wading through history in this book and aligning a design with the period of its production. At first glance this Viking piece appears like a horse's head but further examination seduces me into raptures about its abstraction of other possible creatures, weaving, rope, horns, eyes, ears, nostrils, bull ring and two motorbikes either side of the bull ring. Perfect emblem for a "Hells Angel" I would think!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I could advise the reader to read chapters 3,4,5 and 6 first to witness the break with tradition and the shock value of the last two centuries. Then use chapters 1 and 2 as references as to how essential design elements were born with great meaning. Whichever route the reader decides I hope that the historical sections will reinforce how bereft modern architecture has become and that a drastic revision of architectural training and research is required in order to redefine the priorities of what feeds the soul in order to return to a much more expressive architecture.

Notes

¹ *The Language of Ornament*. Thames and Hudson, London. 2001. P6. Author James Trilling who is a freelance art historian specializing in Byzantine art and the history of ornament.

² *The Story of Design*. Charlotte and Peter Fiell. London. Goodman Fiell. 2013. P9

³ *Design History and the History of Design*. John A Walker. London. Pluto Press. 1989. Introduction

⁴ Henry Balfour FRS (1863 -1939) was a British archaeologist, and the first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

⁵ *Making Dystopia* by James Stevens Curl. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2018. pxxv

⁶ *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* by Thomas Gray. 1742

⁷ *The problem with ornament*. Edwin Heathcote. Architectural Review. Sept 2015.

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