# SIMPLE AESTHETICS: SEARCHING FOR A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR DESIGN RESTRAINT

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> "If you get simple beauty and naught else, you get about the best thing God invents."  --Robert Browning

Buildings should not rely on complexity for success; rather they should be the simple answer to a variety of complex questions. During a studio I took from Glenn Murcutt, he would say to us often, "Simple does not equal simplicity." He was telling us that the most simple and straightforward answer is better design than a complex solution.  Simple does not mean less studied, less valuable, or less intellectual. Architectural works such as Carlos Jimenez's Data Service Building at Rice University, Renzo Piano's extension to the High Museum in Atlanta, and Peter Zumthor's Thermal Baths can all be examples of this simple aesthetic.

In architectural discourse, there is a design spectrum with complex forms at one end and simple forms at the other end. Architects such as Greg Lynn, Zaha Hadid, and Frank Gehry are at the complex end of the spectrum and Peter Zumthor, Glenn Murcutt, and Rick Joy are at the simple end. Complexity-oriented designers tend to be more process based, evaluating their design success on the design process, whereas the simple form designers often emphasize the evaluation of the final artifact. Complex designers often use parametric modeling to generate complex geometric forms, which often necessitate the use of computer numerical controlled equipment (CNC) for building fabrication. Simple designers are often calling for design restraint, citing important governing issues such as clarity in form, constructability (both on and off site), integration, performance, and detailing.

The architecture community values these design constraints for their building performance, but they often do not speak of the constraints' potential resulting effects on building aesthetics. For example, this fall's 2012 ACSA conference, Off-site, which focused on prefabrication in the building industry, had theory listed in its call for abstracts, but does not suggest aesthetics in its list of potential topics . Off-site reduces theory to construction, production, and fabrication, without discussing the resulting aesthetics of those technologies. This lack of engagement with aesthetics appears to force a choice between aesthetics and reality of building construction methods.

The drawback of not discussing the art-form of architecture is that it appears that we assume that construction, production, and fabrication will dictate form. Although production methods can affect form, they do not dictate form. Frank Gehry's Experience Music Project and Sir Norman Foster's British Museum Great Court (both completed in 2000) make use of the same fabrication technologies, but result in different forms.  See Figure 1. Gehry's building uses complex, metal-cladded curves to form the building's five distinct volumes. Foster's addition at the British Museum is a simple section of a torus that resolves the Platonic geometries of the museum courtyard. As





Figure 1. Comparison (top) Foster and Partners' Great Court at the British Museum (Wikipedia, 9 Dec 2008 uploaded by Sennaista) and (bottom) Gehry and Partners' Experience Music Project (Wikipedia, 20 Oct 2008 uploaded by Baileythompson)

an addition, it does not complete with the original building. Foster's design allows people either to take notice of the addition's elegance or to ignore it all together. The examples demonstrate that the same construction technologies did not dictate form; rather Gehry and Foster have differing aesthetic values.

The concept of this paper germinated from my frustrations with teaching architecture design studios. As a studio professor, most of my most talented students—both graduates and undergraduates—flock toward overly complicated solutions for their architecture designs. The students seem to think that a complex solution is more architecturally valid than a simple solution. This may be because of the students' desire for distinction from their peers, their perception that complex projects receive more architectural press, or because of their inexperience with construction techniques or building detailing.

This paper offers a critique of current architectural discourses that value complexity of form. The paper suggests a distancing of architecture from art and proposes that we should be skeptical of architects who design for self-promotion. This paper searches for recent writings that support simple aesthetics as a design position in architecture. It is a vehicle, establishing characteristics of simple aesthetics and uses built projects as examples. This paper identifies two major themes with embedded sub themes. 1) Simple buildings are evaluated on the built product rather than their design process. Embedded within that theme is that simple aesthetic buildings have a high degree of craft. 2) Simple buildings are simultaneously separate from and intrinsically linked to their context. Embedded is that these buildings are designed with space for individual interpretation and are designed with humility by the designer.

### DEFINING ARCHITECTURE

Architecture is that which physically exists in the world, uses tangible materials, and creates space. It is delineated by physical boundaries and may exist at various scales, programs, or porosities. Architecture is designed by architects. Architecture serves a client's purpose, while at the same time affects the public realm. Robert Maxwell's Two Way Stretch discusses that architecture must stretch between two polarities. On one hand, it must meet the needs of the client, the users, and society while on the other hand contemporary architects strive for personal explorations of building form. Maxwell highlights architecture's inherent and necessary tension between usefulness and art.

### Rejecting the (hero)–isms

Giorgio Grassi wrote in Oppositions:
> Cubism, Supermatism, Neoplaticism, etc., are all forms of investigation born and developed in the realm of the figurative arts and only as a second thought carried over into architecture as well. It is actually pathetic to see the architects of that "heroic" period, and the best among them, trying with difficulty to accommodate themselves to these "ism"; experimenting in a perplexed manner because of their fascination with the new doctrines, measuring themselves against them, on later to realize their ineffectuality.

Although written in 1980, Grassi's statement is still relevant to today's seemingly highly stylized architectural expressionism. Today's architectural theory—as documented by the leading compendiums (e.g. Kate Nesbitt's Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture, Neil Leach's Rethinking Architecture, and K. Michael Hay's Architecture Theory since 1968)—engages with topics of aesthetic perceptions, psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics, poetics, and gender. There appears to be relatively little discussion in the appropriateness of those theories to architectural aesthetics. In a speech addressing the American Society of Aesthetics, Kendall Walton acknowledges aesthetics' relation to outside disciplines (e.g. epistemology, metaphysics, the philosophy of the mind, and the philosophy of language); however, he states that those areas of study are tangential to the study of aesthetics. In light of Walton's sidelining of these topics, perhaps architecture should re-consider the roles these theories have in architectural discourse.

In many ways the -isms gets wrapped up with individuals that perpetuate the idea. So much so that as Grassi points out the –ism is tied to the hero architect. The architect chooses an –ism as a means of self-expression. As Charles Eames said, "It is almost impossible to reconcile self-expression with the creative act." That is to say that within the design process, designers cannot put their self-expressive needs first. That design should never be about the promotion or the fame of the designer, but rather should be about the design itself.

This is perhaps in conflict with architecture's trajectory of prioritizing the architect over the architecture. In 1964, Progressive Architecture's cover published Paul Rudolf's projected face on top of and image of Yale University's new Art and Architecture building. The building, literally, was a screen for the architect's image. The building became a vehicle for the architect's fame. More recently, the term 'starchitect' was coined to define the phenomenon of the famous architect, often eclipsing the success of his or her buildings. When this happens, the architect may be more concerned with the promotion of him or herself rather than creating the best solution for the design. Later, this may have a negative lasting impact on the client and the public.

We examine this through Frank Gehry and his associated Bilbao-effect. The Bilbao-effect describes the positive effect that a building or set of buildings can have on a city's notoriety and its tourism. Ironically, the iconic nature of the Museum in Bilbao spurred other cities to build iconic buildings to increase their tourism (e.g. Libeskind's Denver Art Museum and Rem Koolhaas's Seattle Public Library). As more cities build architectural icons, inevitability this will reduce the global tourism to the Museum in Bilbao; thus potentially reducing the building's benefits to the community. Once the buildings' notoriety has been spent, only the artifact of the building remains.

Peggy Deamer, in an essay titled "Branding the Architectural Author" describes architects who seek fame through architecture. She uses Daniel Libeskind as an example of how fame functions in architecture. As an aside in the essay, she also recognizes less-famous architects and proposes why, despite their professional prestige, they may never be famous. She writes, "A figure like Robert A.M. Stern

will never be truly famous… We can't tell which buildings are his, and we can't conjure up any iconic building he has done." Deamer attributes Stern's lack of fame despite his professional prestige to his "historically referential and contextual work" . In this example, Stern rejects a particular –ism in his practice. According to Deamer, by doing so, he sacrifices his own fame for his designs.

### Societal Acceptance

Grassi's quote criticizes architecture for valuing newness over existing and tried doctrines. In George Kubler's The Shape of Time, Kubler argues that the design lineage of any object progresses in small and incremental steps. If the design step is too large, then society rejects the object. Because of the scale and the resources necessary for architectural construction, perhaps newness should not be the goal of the architect. Instead, architects need to balance pushing society while at the same time working within society's acceptance of designs.

In architecture, we do have to consider the perception of our work relative to society. Architecture is unavoidable for the public. It is in our cities, our suburbs, our countryside and it is accessible via our streets, our parks, or our squares. Architecture is not a selfish endeavor; buildings most often occupy the public realm. Architects rely on society to use and maintain our buildings, long after architects are gone. The public does not demonstrate much patience with what it deems as bad architecture. The buildings' users and the public immediately disliked Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe and Kevin Roche's Veterans Memorial Coliseum. Neither building lasted more than 30 years. In the case of the Coliseum, the majority of New Haven's citizens and government officials supported the building's demolition while noted local architects were calling for its preservation. As educators of future architects, we should highlight the potential dangers of designs that may disregard societal acceptance.

### SIMPLE AESTHETICS



Figure 2. Yale University School of Art Sculpture Gallery by Kieran Timberlake. Photograph by author.

The Yale University Sculpture Gallery by Kieran Timberlake is an example of simple aesthetics. The gallery's volume is a simple, bowed rectangle. By having a simple volume, the building both calls attention to itself and negates its importance. Kieran Timberlake placed a portion of the program underground to reduce the building's mass and respond to context. The gallery has a similar height and width to the surrounding Victorian houses. The unadorned volume, flat roof, and minimal windows contrast with the gables and bay windows of its neighbors. This demonstrates the building's independence from its context, while the simple volume keeps the building quiet and allows it to belong to the background.

The assessment of this project and others that value simple aesthetics follow themes that I have identified. First, there is the theme that simple buildings are intended to be evaluated by the quality of the final artifact rather than the design process. That is to say, that building is more important than the design concept. Embedded in this theme, is an increased value of craft in building. Second, simple buildings are simultaneously separate from and integrated within their context. This is similar to the example of the Yale Sculpture Gallery. Embedded with this theme are space and humility. Space has a double meaning; it is both the space of architecture, as well as the space for observes to apply their own interpretations. Humility refers to both the humility of the building and the humility of the architect.

### Judgment of the Artifact

Society is concerned with evaluating the final artifact rather than the design process used to conceive the artifact. It could be argued that society is often unaware of the architectural design process. Even if society was aware of a building's design process, that knowledge is more ephemeral than the building. That is to say, as generations lose written records or oral histories of a design process, the building itself will remain standing. Society may use a variety of criteria to judge the aesthetics of the architecture. The criteria may be personal, political, or may be some other filter. Regardless of the method of judgment, the profession should return to evaluating the aesthetics of the final artifact rather than the architect's design process.



Figure 3. Cranbrook Arts Academy by G. Eliel Saarinen. Photograph by author.

If evaluation of the artifact has greater importance than the evaluation of the design process, then the crafting of the artifact is important. Craft is inherent with simple aesthetics. Because the buildings tend to be simple in volume, form, and materials, there is less for the observer to see; therefore, the building's details have a greater significance. The craftsman may spend days designing the detail of how a stair tread meets a wall. (Figure 2) In this example of an exterior stair at Cranbrook, the heavy, round nosing transitions to a square step. This resolves the geometries of the stair and the wall. The transition happens within inches of the wall, where it will not interrupt traffic or become a tripping hazard. This stair would not be as beautiful if it did not have this detail. This single example of a stair tread demonstrates the value that craft has on simple aesthetics.

Glenn Murcutt, a well-known example of an architecture craftsman, states,

> To sit down and resolve problems takes depth. It requires love, care, dedication. Architecture does not emerge out of nothing. It doesn't happen overnight, it never did and it never will. … It requires an enormous effort to produce anything of quality.

One can certainly read the love of effort that Murcutt has for his designs. For him, the design must be considered until perfection is reached. The craft of perfection is the goal for every phase of his projects. Craft is the careful consideration of an idea during all of its phases: from initial concept to completed building. For the craftsman no phase of the project has greater importance than another phase. In Richard Sennett's The Craftsman, he identifies how the craftsman crafts his or her works. Craftsmen learn by doing and doing the work is its own reward. Sennett argues that since craftsmen are satisfied by the work itself, they do not stop until the product meets the craftsmen's expectations. In architecture, craft transform the design idea into reality.

## Context: Separate and Integral

The Yale Sculpture Gallery maintains a careful balance of being a part of its context through its scale, and yet is apart from its context through its massing. It also balances calling attention to itself through the juxtaposition of its modern aesthetic with its Victorian neighbors as it minimizes its importance through simple massing. Additionally, architects should balance the desire to create harmony with the surrounding buildings with that context's future development. For example, as a city's urban core expands, small residential houses may be replaced with larger buildings. A design in a transitional area must recognize that the context is not the future for the site. The negotiation between these seemingly conflicting polarities is what simple aesthetics does best.

Designing buildings within the local context does not necessitate that a building be historically referential. A new building can reflect a modern aesthetic—perhaps by construction, materials, aesthetic language—and yet respond to its potential surroundings. Designers need to balance the desire for a design to be timely, which often

causes a building to separate from its context, with the need to be contextual, which calls for a building to mirror its surroundings.

Embedded within this theme of being separate from and integrates within a building's context are two notions: space and humility. The space of simple aesthetics is found in both the creation of space by the architecture and the designer's conscious desire to encourage independent interpretation by the observer. Humility is the fact that simple buildings do not need to be a foregrounded personal statement by the architect. In simple aesthetics, the building is both background to the observer and foreground to an admirer.



Figure 4. Vietnam War Memorial by Maya Lin (Wikipedia, 22 December 2011 uploaded by SreeBot)

For those who represent simple aesthetics in their work, there is a universal desire to give space to the users. This can be done through architecture's inherent creation of space and the architect's design in which the users bring their own ideas, images, and interpretations to a building. Simple buildings support the life that surrounds it, but they do not define that life. As Peter Zumthor wrote in Thinking Architecture,

> Architecture has its own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life. I do not think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol, but as an envelope and background for life which goes on in and around it, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, for the silence of sleep.

Zumthor references the space that he creates as an architect. He discounts any implied symbolism or message that his buildings carry. Instead, for him, architecture is about creating a background to the user's life. This is what allows simple buildings to be both background and foreground.

> "The original design gives each individual the freedom to reflect upon the heroism and sacrifice of those who served."
> --Maya Lin, speaking of the Vietnam War Memorial

In the movie Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision, Lin speaks about the space she provided through the Vietnam Memorial. She discussed

the ritual of a mourner looking up a name in the key and then locating that name in the chronological listing on the wall. The process of doing so gives the grievers the space that they need to grieve their loss. Unlike the figural memorials that were typical during this time, Lin's memorial did not use symbolism to imply a message. It was not about any one action or one event. The memorial's design gave space so that observers could bring their own emotions to the memorial.

The user's participation is not deterministic. Simple aesthetics not only allows for individual interpretation but it encourages it. It is as if the success of the designs depends on the individual inhabiting the space. In this case, the architect is choosing the success of the project based on the individual interpretations rather than the singular sensibility of the designer. In simple aesthetics, it is as if the designer is less consequential to architecture than the user. That is not to say that these buildings are less personal to the architect than those buildings that are about self-expression. By designing a building that is about self-expression, architects give the client a piece of themselves, but by designing a building with simple aesthetics, architects give the client, what they think is best. In each scenario, the designer is important.

Simple aesthetics do not rely on theories or rationales from outside disciplines in order to justify form. Its value comes from its final built form. Simple buildings can be easily over looked, but they should never be underestimated. Simple aesthetics allow the building to be background to the observer while being foreground to an admirer. This is counter to current architectural theory and practice, in which architects use the global recognition of their buildings to create a brand. Simple aesthetics is not a foregrounded personal statement by the architect.



Figure 5. Kamppi Center by Juhani Pallasmaa

With simple aesthetics, architects must use personal control and restraint in their designs. In "Toward an Architecture of Humility" Juhani Pallasmaa writes, "Buildings attempt to conquer the foreground rather than to create a supportive background for action and perception. Our age seems to have lost the virtue of architectural

neutrality, restraint, and modesty." Pallasmaa also calls on the value that background buildings have within any site, and identifies the ethics of the designer to achieve that goal.

## CONCLUSION

> "When I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty but when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong."
> --R. Buckminster Fuller

For the simple aesthetic, values are placed on the tangible rather than the theoretical. Two themes of simple aesthetics include the valuing of the artifact over the design process and the separation from and integration within a building's context. Embedded within those themes are characteristics of craft, space, and humility. Many of the writings found in support of simple aesthetics were from practicing architects—such as Murcutt, Zumthor, or Pallasmaa. Perhaps this is reflective of the type of designer that values simple aesthetics, or perhaps it is reflective of the natural emphasis that simple aesthetics places on the real over the abstract.

The current architectural discourse seems to come from disciplines outside of architecture. Similar to the views of leading aesthetic philosophers, architecture might begin to see those discussions as being on the peripheral rather than at the center. As a profession, architecture should be skeptical of those that choose to follow –isms. Are they choosing them because it is new, because it is a vehicle for self-promotion, or because it serves society? Architecture must acknowledge that society judges the artifact over the design process. This is one of the central values of simple aesthetics.

## ENDNOTES

1.  It lists history of architectural production, modularization and prefabrication; production theory and criticism; postulation, speculation on future of architectural production; parametric modeling and CNC production speculations; and design case studies, prototypes and experiments. <http://acsa-arch.org/programs-events/conferences/fall-conference/2012-fall-conference/call-for-abstracts> Accessed 29 March 2012
2.  Both buildings use robotic cutting and welding for the steel frame. LeCuyer, Annette, *Steel and Beyond: New Strategies for Metals in Architecture* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhauser, 2003).
3.  Maxwell, Robert, *The Two Way Stretch: Modernism, Tradition, and Innovation* (London: Academy Editions, 1996)
4.  Grassi, Giorgio. "Avant-Garde and Continuity" (Trans. Stephen Santavelli) *Oppositions 21*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Summer 1980) pg 26-27
5.  Ibid, 147
6.  Deamer, Peggy, "Branding the Architectural Author", *Perspecta 37, Famous* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 44
7.  Ibid, 44
8.  Kubler, George, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962)
9.  Most notable architects include Caesar Pelli, Robert A.M. Stern, Herbert Newman, Elizabeth Gray and Alan Organschi
10. Murcutt, Glenn, *Tough this Earth Lightly*, ed. By Philip Drew (Potts Point, Australia: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2001), 76
11. Zumthor, Peter, *Thinking Architecture* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhauser, 2006), 12

12.   *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* (Ocean Releasing, 2003), DVD.
13.   Branding is not a new topic in architecture, but it is one that we do not often discuss. For a succinct summary on branding see Celento, David, "Innovate or Perish: New Technologies and Architecture's Future", *Fabricating Architecture*, ed. Robert Corser, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010) , 73-74
14.   Pallasmaa, Juhani. "Toward an Architecture of Humility", *Harvard Design Magazine*, (Winter-Spring 1999), 25