Architecture And Taste

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"De gustibus non est dispu-tandum". The Romans had a word for it: "In taste there is no argument."

A citizen of Acadiana might say, "There's no accounting for taste," or, "I don't know anything about art, but I guarantee you I know what I like."

Despite the grain of truth in each of these sayings, there comes a time, sooner or later, when all of us are faced with a decision based upon taste. In the case of the homeowner buying a house, the businessman planning a new building or the school board member selecting an architect, the importance of making a good decision can later be measured in terms of dollars, which language we all have no difficulty understanding.

How then can the layman discern what is good and what is bad in architecture?

Around the beginning of the 17th century, the English poet and diplomat, Sir Henry Wotton, had the last work on architectural design. He wrote, "Faire building hath three partes, Commoditie, Firmness and Delight." Today, 350 years later, Sir Henry's criteria are still the most appropriate we have for the evaluation of our art.

"Commoditie" meant that the building in question was designed to perform a certain task well. Today, we refer to this quality as "function" meaning that the number, size and relationship of spaces, means of access, mechanical facilities, relationship to the community, and all the thousands of other design considerations are appropriate to the use of the structure. This is the basic reason why hospitals, schools and churches do not look alike. Or should not, at any rate.

"Firmness" was the Elizabethan term for what we would call strength, or structural soundness, today. A building, to be well designed, must certainly be constructed of materials and with techniques that will enable it to withstand the rigors of usage and the passage of time with a minimal amount of deterioration.

The third part of "faire building", "Delight," is the most difficult to define. Today, we would call this the quality of esthetic content or artistic quality. This is the sine qua non of the designer's invention which lifts his design out of the ordinary and makes of it, a work of art. Without "delight," the most practical and sturdiest of buildings cannot be considered architecture.

It is interesting to note that Sir Henry Wotton was not an architect. In 1966, another non-architect, John Kenneth Galbraith, the former distinguished Harvard economist, stated: "We must explicitly assert the claims of beauty against those of economics. That something is cheaper, more convenient or more efficient is no longer decisively in its favor."

And therein lies a moral. Today, with our advance knowledge of building techniques and modern materials, we are able to build more strongly and functionally than Sir Henry could ever have dreamed possible. Yet, if we are to aspire to the creation of architecture, it is to his third condition, "Delight," that we must direct our most serious concern. Architecture without the quality of art is not architecture.