Commentary and Reflection on Contemporary Graphic Architecture through Kant's Aesthetic Critique Theory

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, a wave of innovative graphic architecture has emerged. However, these architectural works seem to have failed to inherit the profound aesthetics and sense of beauty associated with classical graphic architecture from history. Instead, they often exhibit superficial and exaggerated qualities, sparking widespread debate and criticism. This paper aims to integrate Immanuel Kant's aesthetic critique perspective, as presented in his work "Critique of Judgment," into the discourse on contemporary graphic architecture. By incorporating Kant's analyses and arguments regarding "agreeable," "beauty," and the "sublime" into discussions of contemporary architectural aesthetics, we seek to analyze and compare the similarities and differences between these new graphic architectural works and their classical predecessors. Ultimately, we arrive at the conclusion that these contemporary graphic architectural works, which often appear superficial and clichéd, are not deserving of admiration. At the same time, we propose recommendations for the design of future graphic architecture based on these insights.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant; Graphic architecture; Aesthetic theory; Architectural commentary

1 Background

1.1 History of Graphic Architecture

Graphic architecture is an architectural style with a rich and ancient history, dating back to the tribal civilizations that emerged even before the formation of cities. It is a form of architecture that carries symbolic and representational messages, often conveying specific cultural, social, religious, or political themes through the appearance, structure, decorations, and arrangement of buildings. Graphic architecture represents a category that downplays the functional utility of a structure while maximizing its sculptural attributes. Throughout history, it has played multiple crucial roles, serving not only as a physical manifestation of architecture but also as a reflection of the culture and era in which it thrived.

The Egyptian Pyramids: The iconic pyramids of ancient Egypt serve as a compelling example of graphic architecture. These monumental structures were symbolic of pharaonic power and eternity. Their distinctive triangular shape was interpreted as a symbol of the sun because the outline of the sun bears a resemblance to the shape of the pyramids. These architectural marvels were closely associated with beliefs in resurrection and eternal life. Gothic Architecture: Gothic architecture is another notable example that emphasizes the sublime and the mysterious. Its towering spires and pointed arches symbolize the path of ascent to heaven, and the stained glass windows with their divine radiance represent the sacred. Gothic cathedrals, such as the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, evoke a sense of divine connection and spiritual transcendence through their graphic forms.

Islamic Architecture: Islamic architecture, known for its intricate geometric patterns, minarets, and blue ceramic tile decorations, reflects several core concepts in Islamic culture, including purity, heaven, and the cosmos. These graphic architectural elements play a role in conveying the Islamic worldview and spiritual beliefs. The beauty of Islamic architecture is often found in its complex geometric patterns and harmonious designs.

It is evident that graphic architecture excels in communicating information through visual aesthetics. It has a unique ability to materialize abstract concepts and utilize the powerful impact of architectural visuals. This medium allows elements such as geometric shapes, material choices, lighting, and shadows to be interwoven with cultural and religious concepts. Over time, this fusion creates collective memories that strengthen the cohesion and rationale of culture and religion, forming an enduring connection with the human experience. The prevalence of graphic architecture in various cultures, epochs, and religions underscores its significance as a means of cultural expression and identity. It is not surprising that throughout history, almost every illustrious human civilization, culture, or religion has had its distinct graphic architectural style, often characterized by visual symbols and motifs that encapsulate their core values and beliefs. In essence, graphic architecture stands as a testament to the inseparable relationship between culture, aesthetics, and architecture. It serves as a tangible representation of the intangible aspects of human existence, weaving together the visual and the conceptual, the earthly and the divine. Contemporary graphic architecture, with its ever-evolving forms and styles, continues this tradition of conveying meaning through visual language. The architectural landscape of the 21st century boasts an array of innovative and iconic graphic buildings that convey diverse messages, ranging from the symbolic to the pragmatic. These modern structures continue to influence our collective memories and challenge our perceptions of space, culture, and identity.

In conclusion, graphic architecture is a form of architectural expression that transcends the boundaries of function and serves as a visual storyteller of cultures and epochs. It embodies the aesthetic values and beliefs of societies, making it a powerful tool for preserving and communicating cultural and religious heritage. The history and contemporary practice of graphic architecture remind us of its enduring role in shaping the physical and spiritual landscape of our world.

1.1 Appearance of contemporary graphic architecture

In the 21st century, a new breed of architectural design has become increasingly prominent - the contemporary graphic architecture. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors, including a potential fatigue with the late 20th-century post-modernist emphasis on the intricacies of architectural volumes and façades. Furthermore, advancements in architectural construction techniques have expanded the realm of possibilities, allowing for the creation of previously unimaginable structures. In addition, the advent of the globalized information age has empowered individuals with the ability to broadcast their creativity and ideas to the world. As a result, people are passionately striving to create their own iconic "graphic architecture."

These contemporary graphic buildings are characterized by their visually striking and thought-provoking designs. They often deviate from traditional architectural norms and venture into uncharted territory. Examples of such innovative structures include the Crab Exhibition Hall, the Teapot Museum, and the Little Lotus Flower Stadium, among others. These buildings seem to perfectly embody the essence of "graphic architecture" - architectural forms that evoke associations with various concepts and objects.

The rise of contemporary graphic architecture has sparked intense debates within the architectural community and among the general public. Supporters of this architectural movement argue that subjective judgments of architectural form and aesthetics hold greater importance than objective analysis. They contend that there is no universal standard for beauty, and what might appear awe-

inspiring to one person may not have the same effect on another. In their view, diversity in architectural design is not only natural but also essential, as it reflects the unique perspectives and ideas of architects and the cultural and societal contexts in which they work.

On the contrary, critics of contemporary graphic architecture adopt a more professional stance, emphasizing the importance of the relationship between architecture and its surroundings, particularly within urban environments. They utilize graphic analysis tools to scrutinize and demonstrate the inadequacies of certain architectural designs. Their critique is grounded in the belief that architecture should harmonize with its urban and natural settings, respecting the context within which it exists. They argue that some graphic buildings prioritize form over function and may neglect the critical aspect of place-making and contextual integration.

To better understand this phenomenon, it's essential to delve into the key attributes and implications of contemporary graphic architecture: Subjective vs. Objective Aesthetics: One of the most significant points of contention lies in the evaluation of beauty and aesthetics. Supporters of contemporary graphic architecture place emphasis on subjective aesthetic judgment. They believe that a building's appeal is deeply personal and that there is no single universal standard for architectural beauty. Beauty, in this view, is in the eye of the beholder. Architectural Integration and Contextual Harmony: Critics of graphic architecture emphasize the importance of architectural integration within the urban landscape. They argue that buildings should not be seen in isolation but as part of a broader ecosystem. Failing to consider the surrounding environment can lead to structures that disrupt the urban fabric rather than enhancing it. Innovation and Creativity: One of the driving forces behind contemporary graphic architecture is innovation. Architects are pushing the boundaries of traditional design, utilizing advanced construction techniques and materials to realize their unique visions. They challenge conventional norms and foster a culture of architectural experimentation.

In conclusion, contemporary graphic architecture has ushered in a new era of architectural diversity, fostering a spectrum of creativity and debate. The subjectivity of aesthetic judgments continues to be a point of contention among proponents and critics. While supporters applaud the uniqueness and individuality of these designs, critics highlight the importance of architectural integration and contextual harmony within the urban landscape. As contemporary graphic architecture continues to evolve, it will be fascinating to observe how it shapes the architectural landscape and cultural identity of the 21st century.

In this article we try to introduce Immanuel Kant's concepts on aesthetics from his work "Critique of Judgment" into the discussion of contemporary "graphic architecture" in this new century. The goal is to analyze whether this phenomenon is reasonable and to determine the appropriate stance we should adopt towards it.

2 Summary and Analysis of Kant's Views

2.1 Kant's aesthetic theory

In his "Critique of Judgment," Immanuel Kant discusses three primary forms of aesthetics: the Agreeable, the Beautiful, and the Sublime.

Agreeable: "Agreeable" is the term Kant uses to describe aesthetic experiences that bring pleasure, comfort, or a sense of enjoyment. Kant views these aesthetic experiences as highly subjective, as they depend on individual feelings and sensory perceptions. These experiences are closely tied to the subject's personal preferences and emotions. Beautiful: Kant considers the "Beautiful" to be the highest form of aesthetic judgment. It transcends individual emotions and sensations, possessing universality and objectivity. Beautiful aesthetic experiences are considered to be universal, extending beyond individual subjectivity. They are seen as having objective qualities of beauty that can be appreciated by a broad audience. Sublime: The Sublime in aesthetic experience involves the grandeur and magnificence of beauty. It invokes a sense of awe, making individuals feel both insignificant and yet connected to something infinite.

Sublime aesthetic experiences also contain an element that transcends sensory perception, as they evoke rational reflection and aesthetic enjoyment.

Kant's framework of aesthetics provides a valuable foundation for understanding and evaluating different types of aesthetic experiences, from those that are purely pleasurable and subjective to those that are universally appreciated and have a sense of grandeur and profundity. The Agreeable, Beautiful, and Sublime serve as categories through which we can assess the nature and impact of aesthetic encounters, offering a nuanced perspective on the diversity of aesthetic experiences in both art and architecture.

2.2 Analysis and Comparison

We can compare these three concepts as follows:

Agreeable: This concept emphasizes immediate sensory pleasure, such as the scent of flowers, delicious food, or melodious tunes. It operates more like an instantaneous, reflexive response to received information. For instance, when we taste delicious food, our taste system transmits information to the brain the moment the food touches our tongue, and the brain promptly judges it as tasty. The rationality, universality, and comprehensiveness of this pleasure are not within the scope of Agreeable's assessment. Factors such as the food's popularity or its health implications, beyond sensory information, are overlooked.

Beautiful: Beauty is a more universal and objective concept. It should be a feature that can be quantified and analyzed. We can analyze the reasons something is considered beautiful based on its form and structure, such as having good internal proportions, symmetry, and harmony. However, because it transcends individual emotions and sensations, it cannot fully encompass the realm of the Agreeable. For instance, many beautiful things may not be agreeable, such as bitter medicine that is beneficial for health.

Sublime: The core of the Sublime lies in its sense of awe and aesthetic pleasure. Unlike the Agreeable and the Beautiful, which receive positive feedback within their respective domains (taste and aesthetics), the Sublime emphasizes the degree to which it triggers rational thought after receiving sensory information. When we encounter natural wonders, we might not directly experience visual pleasure (ignoring some composition and color aspects), and it can be challenging to quantify how much we benefit from such wonders. Nevertheless, they invariably induce a desire for contemplation and reflection. Kant labels this as "aesthetic pleasure" (Aesthetic Pleasure), closely related to the aesthetic experience. It represents a form of pleasure associated with the process, rather than the ultimate outcome. Kant believed that aesthetic pleasure is distinct because it involves not only sensory pleasure but also the pleasure of thought and reason.

In summary, the Agreeable, Beautiful, and Sublime each offer unique dimensions of aesthetic experience, ranging from immediate sensory pleasure to universal beauty and the profound awe that sparks contemplation and rational enjoyment. These distinctions provide a rich framework for understanding and evaluating a wide array of aesthetic encounters and responses in various fields, including art, architecture, and nature.

2.3 Architectural aesthetic

Incorporating these three concepts into the discourse of architectural aesthetics, we can make the following interpretations: Agreeable in Architecture: In the context of architecture, the Agreeable represents the visual impact of a building as a colossal sculpture. It's related to the direct sensory experiences brought about by architectural elements such as light, shadow, composition, and materials. This sensory pleasure is detached from the functional and utilitarian aspects of the building. It views architecture as a form of sculpture and totem. It focuses on the immediate sensory delight and the emotional response that architecture evokes, often related to its aesthetics rather than its function. Beautiful in Architecture: The Beautiful,

within architectural aesthetics, can be seen as an objective evaluation of a building's aesthetics, which can be quantified and analyzed. It encompasses a set of aesthetic criteria that can be derived through rational analysis, providing a basis for quantifying the architectural beauty. For instance, this could involve geometric calculations for elements like the arches in Chinese ancient architecture or the proportions of classical Greek or Roman columns. It represents a form of beauty that is not solely based on individual, subjective, or momentary experiences but rather derived from an analysis of architectural principles. Sublime in Architecture: The Sublime in architecture signifies the building's ability to induce aesthetic pleasure and provoke rational thought. If a building not only offers a direct visual impact and can be objectively proven as beautiful but also has the capacity to elevate the observer's thinking beyond their immediate sensory experience, it can be considered as having the Sublime. Such architecture pushes observers to transcend the mere appreciation of beauty and encourages them to engage in deeper, rational reflection.

It's important to note that these three terms do not have a hierarchical relationship or mutual exclusivity. They can be independently applied to assess the aesthetics of architecture along three distinct dimensions: the Agreeable, the Beautiful, and the Sublime. Each concept provides a unique lens through which to analyze and appreciate the aesthetics of buildings, recognizing the multifaceted nature of architectural aesthetics and its potential to encompass a range of experiences and responses.

3 Analysis of Graphic Architecture

3.1 Case study

In this chapter, we will employ the criteria of the Agreeable, the Beautiful, and the Sublime as principles for evaluating the symbolic aesthetic significance of architecture. By doing so, we can address the rapid proliferation of contemporary symbolic architecture mentioned earlier. We will compare the "Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière" and the "Tianzi Hotel" and analyze their aesthetic characteristics.

Figure 1　Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière

Figure 2　Tianzi Hotel

The Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, constructed in 1872 in Lyon, France, is renowned for its distinctive features including spires, domes, and flying buttresses. This edifice exemplifies the quintessential elements of Gothic architecture, prominently characterized by its spires and intricate ornamentation, which align with the architectural principles of "ascent" and "upwardness" inherent in the Gothic style. Located in Hebei Province, China, the Tianzi Hotel pays direct homage to traditional Chinese mythology through a concrete representation. It features three Earth Gods standing side by side, symbolizing prosperity, wealth, and longevity. This symbolic representation is intended to bring good fortune and prosperity to travelers and nearby residents alike.

Agreeable in Architecture: Both of these buildings

communicate a strong visual impact through their forms. The Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière achieves this through abstract elements, such as soaring volumes that reach towards the sky and the delicate proportions of Gothic architecture, emphasizing verticality and the concept of ascension. The decorative reliefs of the basilica are concentrated mainly in the upper portions, employing smooth and simple materials that emphasize the upward trajectory while maintaining the overall balance of the facade. The Tianzi Hotel, on the other hand, abstracts controlling lines from the character lines, neglecting a more in-depth exploration of traditional Chinese attire. It mechanically magnifies a character image, with its visual impact primarily derived from the image itself. Consequently, the Tianzi Hotel did not engage in a rational discussion and argument about facade forms during the design process, relying more on the inherent "agreeable" characteristics of the three land gods' images.

Beautiful in Architecture: The Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière is considered "beautiful" in its aesthetics as it carefully considers the impact of facade proportions and design language on the visual experience of the audience. It adheres to a sense of balance and harmony by using small pointed windows arranged vertically and elongated lancet windows, which emphasize the building's verticality. In contrast, the Tianzi Hotel did not engage in a rational exploration and argument regarding facade form and instead relied on the inherent "beautiful" characteristics of the three land gods' images, neglecting a deeper analysis of Chinese architectural principles.

Sublime in Architecture: Both the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière and the Tianzi Hotel have the potential to evoke the Sublime as they touch upon concepts of reaching for the heavens and paying homage to traditional Chinese culture. However, the direct representation of specific concepts in the Tianzi Hotel lacks the mystery, infiniteness, or sublimity that one might expect. Instead, it tends to evoke feelings and thoughts of luxury and vulgarity, rather than profound awe. In contrast, the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière eschews the overt glorification of specific grand

scenes to create an abstract sense of approaching the divine, cultivating aesthetic pleasure and inspiring contemplation of the core meanings of sublimation and ascension.

In conclusion, many classic iconic buildings throughout history possess the characteristics of the Agreeable, the Beautiful, and the Sublime. However, contemporary symbolic architecture often, in pursuit of the Agreeable, tends to overlook considerations of the Beautiful and the Sublime during the design process. As a result, it often becomes extravagant and vulgar, rather than achieving the intended aesthetic impact.

3.2 Conclusion and Suggestion

Through our analysis in the previous sections, it becomes evident that one of the most significant differences between contemporary graphic architecture and historical iconic architecture is the lack of consideration for the Beautiful and the Sublime. To create aesthetic qualities of beauty and sublimity, designers need to adhere to three fundamental principles:

(1) Rationality Prevails over Sensibility:

Architectural design is a complex process that involves the interplay and collision of rationality and sensibility. Graphic architecture represents a type of architecture that pushes the sculptural and sensory aspects of architecture to the extreme. However, in this process where "form surpasses function," designers cannot be solely led by sensibility. Graphic architecture often gives the impression that an entire building is designed in a moment, as if a single inspiration would naturally shape its structure. However, in reality, only after great creative ideas have been born, can an excellent architecture be designed through thorough rational thought and comprehensive argumentation of details such as architectural specifics, material composition, and changes in light and shadow.

(2)Avoid Excessive Pursuit of the Agreeable:

The agreeable characteristics of graphic architecture are inherent, but outstanding graphic architecture should

not solely provide agreeable sensory experiences. When designers excessively pursue sensory experiences, they may easily fall into a vicious cycle that emphasizes exaggerated forms. This is a significant reason for the emergence of buildings like the Tianzi Hotel and the Teapot Museum. Designers might become content with the pleasure brought by sensory experiences, to the extent that they may overlook the fact that this fast-food-style design can ultimately lead to superficiality and vulgarity, something that designers should avoid.

(3)Create Aesthetic Pleasure:

Aesthetic pleasure primarily arises from the mystery of the architecture, and all great architecture harbors profound "enigmas." Zaha Hadid's architectural creations primarily aim to evoke aesthetic pleasure by abstracting specific formal elements and utilizing her exquisite formal language shaping skills to create a semi-abstract state that evokes aesthetic pleasure. Observers will perceive this semi-abstract state in the process of interpretation, leading to contemplation. The key to achieving this goal lies in precise control of the architectural form, subtle adjustments of form that allow the entire building to express core design concepts in a multi-layered manner, giving the building sublime characteristics.

In contemporary graphic architecture, the pursuit of pure sensory pleasure and the neglect of the Beautiful and the Sublime have become a prevalent issue. Many architects seem to be preoccupied with creating instant visual impact, neglecting the intellectual and emotional depth that architectural masterpieces of the past possessed.

Particularly, the Tianzi Hotel in Langfang, China, while visually striking with its exaggerated images of the three land gods, lacks the depth of thought and the rational consideration of form that could elevate it to the level of the Beautiful or the Sublime. It leans heavily on immediate sensory appeal, and its connection to traditional Chinese culture, while evident, is presented without the necessary subtlety and depth that would evoke deeper contemplation.

On the other hand, the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière in Lyon, France, stands as a testament to the successful fusion of form and content, where its Gothic architectural elements are not only visually pleasing but also convey profound spiritual and cultural messages. Its architecture encourages viewers to contemplate the concept of ascension and connection to the divine, showcasing the potential of graphic architecture to possess both beauty and sublimity.

In conclusion, the contemporary era has witnessed a proliferation of graphic architecture, and while these buildings often excel in providing immediate sensory pleasures, they frequently fall short in terms of embodying the Beautiful and the Sublime. To achieve true aesthetic greatness, architects must balance sensibility with rationality, avoid excessive sensory pursuit, and create architecture that elicits aesthetic pleasure and contemplation. This delicate balance is essential in elevating graphic architecture beyond mere visual impact and towards enduring significance in the world of architectural design.

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