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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Architecture, values and perception: Between rhetoric and reality

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Abstract

Throughout history, design values have always underlined a given architectural style. The manner architects and architectural critics distinguish between them varies from that of the public. In fact a style well perceived by civil society was read as pathological by architectural academia. This paper examines the values and perceptions of contemporary architecture by architects and civil society. Through qualitative methodology, a project by each of the following leading contemporary architects - Renzo Piano, Norman Foster and Rem Koolhaas - was analyzed. The selected designs, all commissioned not more than a decade ago, vary in locations from Malta to Lebanon to India. The study concludes that design values and perceptions of architecture as read by members of the architectural profession do not tally with those of the public. The emphasis by architects is on the aesthetic whilst non-architects focus on the utilitarian dimension. Furthermore, the rhetorical language which architects use is not read as such by the public. The assessment of the public is based on the existential reality which they experience. The perception of civil society matters; it is at the core of architectural design values.

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1. Introduction

The theme of the XIV World Triennial of Architecture held in Sofia in May 2015 was “Values in Architecture”

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([International Academy of Architecture, 2015](#)). A Google search on architectural values leads one to the Wikipedia article entitled “Architectural design values.” Contents of this article, which classifies and lists the following design values – aesthetic, social, environmental, traditional, gender-based, economic, novel, mathematical, and scientific – follow that [Ukabi \(2015\)](#). On the basis of [Lera \(1980\)](#), Ukabi tabulated the values and intentions that historically

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Table 1 Architectural design values and respective intentions (Based on [Ukabi, 2015](#)).

Design Value	Intentions
<i>Aesthetic</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Artistic aspects and self-expression 2. Spirit of the time 3. Structural, functional, and material honesty 4. Simplicity and minimalism 5. Natural and organic 6. Classical, traditional, and vernacular 7. Regionalism
<i>Social</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social change 2. Consultation and participation 3. Crime prevention 4. The "Third world"
<i>Environmental</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Green and sustainability 2. Re-use and modification 3. Health
<i>Traditional</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tradition 2. Restoration and preservation 3. Vernacular
<i>Other</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gender-based 2. Economic 3. Novel 4. Mathematical and scientific

shaped architectural design ([Table 1](#)). A discussion of architectural values presupposes a contemporary working definition of architecture and architectural style, the language through which architecture is communicated.

Various definitions, historical and contemporary, were put forward and a recent publication included a list ([Quintal, 2016](#)). Architecture is often considered in terms of elevations and architectural elements, thereby failing to address its essence. Recalling [Celiker and Cavusoglu \(2005\)](#), [Cresswell](#) notes that "To illustrate this idea, Frank Lloyd Wright used to love using the example of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. Centuries ago Lao Tzu asked, 'What is the essence of the cup?' observing poetically. 'It is the space within that makes the cup useful.' It is the space that the cup contains that actually gives meaning to the cup - this is its essence. Paralleling Lao Tzu, Wright used to point out that 'the essence of architecture is the three-dimensional space(s) created for human habitation.'" For Wright, "All fine architectural values are human values, else not valuable."

Throughout history, architectural movements have represented differing values and have given rise to varying perceptions. Baroque was a style which was embraced by the public but took long to be respected by architects and architectural critics ([Bianco, 2016a](#)). These critics considered baroque as pathological. On the other hand, modernism features an ethic and an aesthetic aspect ([Bianco, 2000](#)). This style conveyed the values of innovative philosophy; such values were and still are respected academically. However, the public despised Modernism; with the absence of ornaments, this style was considered monotonous. The case of Post-Modernism was the contrary; it was well-received by the public and detested by architects ([Celiker and Cavusoglu, 2005](#)). This paper examines the values and perception of architecture by the public as contrasted with the value of works of leading contemporary 'star' architects whose projects place a country on the world map of architecture. Signature designs by these architects have rendered the world a global village of contemporary architectural dialect.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research methodology

This study is based on a qualitative methodology which performs the following:

- identifies three contemporary 'star' architects who succeeded in the architectural world contemporaneously;
- identifies a design proposal for a mega project by each of these architects with the following properties:
 - put forward in recent years (circa less than 10 years old);
 - generated significant engagement of civil society

Pritzker Architectural Prize was used as criterion in selection of the architects. This award, which was established in 1979, is the highest honor for an architect and is often considered the 'Nobel Prize' in architecture. Renzo Piano, Norman Foster, and Rem Koolhaas, the laureates for the years 1998, 1999, and 2000 respectively, were selected. Given that these individuals received the award over the same period, they were considered as world masters of architecture contemporaneously. All are members of the International Academy of Architecture (IAA) ([Diamandieva, 2015](#)). The selected case studies, listed in [Table 2](#), were critically reviewed and analyzed. These studies are about a decade old and generated significant engagement of the

Table 2 Selected case studies.

	Renzo Piano	Norman Foster	Rem Koolhaas
<i>Pritzker Prize</i>	1998	1999	2000
<i>Project</i>	City Gate Project, Valletta, Malta	Master plan for Dharavi, Mumbai, India	Development of Dalieh coast, Beirut, Lebanon
<i>Date of project</i>	2010-2015	2008	2013-2015
<i>Client</i>	Central Government, Malta	Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai	Private developers

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