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Aesthetics and Architectural Education

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Abstract

Architectural aesthetic problems such as unpleasing forms, shapes, and styles which create disordered environments have impacts on city dwellers visually, mentally and psychologically for centuries. The layout of buildings with monotonous repetition, lacking in characteristic urban fabric and harmony are accepted as the signs of poor aesthetic understanding (Gabr, 2009). When the architectural education is discussed, considering all the concerns about the problem of aesthetics in cities, the adaptation of study of aesthetics in architectural education curriculum seems inevitable. In this paper, the method developed for the aesthetics course in architectural education curriculum of The Department of Architecture in Near East University will be discussed.

Keywords: Architectural education, aesthetic education, aesthetics in architecture;

1. Introduction

Architectural problems such as unpleasing forms, shapes, and styles which are creating disordered environments have had their impact on the city dwellers visually, mentally and psychologically for centuries. The layout of buildings with monotonous repetition, lacking in characteristic urban fabric and harmony are accepted as the signs of poor aesthetic understanding.

As being aware of such environmental problems, aesthetics introduces some essential questions such as: What are the criteria of “visual quality” in cities and who decides on these criteria? In this stage some of the factors should be considered as; governmental authorities responsible of these issues, regulations, social and cultural level of the society, efficient technological/industrial support, etc. Among these factors, another fundamental one is the professional education and training which will give the ability of responding to visual quality as far as function and construction to architects. Despite all sorts of legal restrictions and other negative factors a well educated architect can create functional and aesthetic living environments.
As aesthetics is important for the physiologically and psychologically well being of humans, the importance of finding ways to make the environment “livable” and more pleasing through aesthetic approaches should be understood by the architects and designers. The understanding of aesthetics also assists them to discover these ways as considerable factors contributing to the acceptable standard of living for people and how to solve the problems to make the visually pleasing environments (Gabr, 2009).

Architecture is a design process as shown in detail in figure 1. It involves programming, designing and constructing phases in general and brings the functional components together for creating a built environment that is functionally efficient, economically viable and aesthetically pleasing. In architectural schools these are considered as main evaluation criteria for architectural design education.

According to UNESCO/UIA Charter for Architectural education, the point “An ability to create architectural designs that satisfy both aesthetic and technical requirements” is included among the objectives of education. The Charter indicates that the architectural education should also involve the acquisition of the following capabilities among the others (UNESCO/UIA, 2004):

- Ability to act with knowledge of the fine arts as an influence on the quality of architectural design.
- Awareness of the links between architecture and other creative disciplines.

Architects create buildings and buildings form cities. At the same time, the designer is in the position of a decision- maker about the future of that environment (See figure 2.) When the architectural education is discussed, considering all the concerns about the problem of aesthetics in cities, the adaptation of study of aesthetics in architectural education curriculum seems inevitable. The reason for including aesthetics course in the architectural curriculum is to awaken the aesthetic senses of architectural students and make them be aware of aesthetic problems. In this course, students also understand how to deal with these aesthetic problems and create a desirable mental image for the built environment. Development of aesthetic senses which is fundamental for all art forms will equip the students to pursue any art form besides architecture depending on their personal interests.
Before discussing the main subject of this study, it will be useful to show the relation between aesthetics and architecture.

2. Architecture and Aesthetics

The term aesthetics comes from the Greek word "aisthetike" meaning "to perceive". The philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten defined it as "the science of how things are known through the senses." in 1735. The term aesthetics was used in German, shortly after Baumgarten introduced its Latin form (Aesthetica), but was not widely used in English until the beginning of the 19th century.

Following Kant’s work “Critique of Judgment”, the term "aesthetics" has placed its position in modern aesthetics.

Aesthetics is considered as one of the main qualities of architecture according to Roman architect Vitruvius (15 B.C.). His definition of good architecture depends on three criteria as venustas (beauty), utilitas (utility) and firmitas (firmness). Recently, these aspects of architecture were interpreted as form, function and construction (See figure 3) (Cho,2011).

Here, form refers to the aesthetic aspects of buildings. Aesthetics is one of the important principles of architecture to be understood by the students and professionals as a philosophy behind a pleasing appearance.

There are some rules, principles, guidelines for achieving aesthetic feelings in art and architecture. Architecture makes use of them in order to create effective forms, interesting, exciting spaces, volumes, surfaces and masses. Artistic composition takes place according to aesthetic principles such as; proportion and scale, unity, variety,
balance, rhythm, emphasis and focal point, contrast, hierarchy which have large impact on architectural design (Aydınli, 1992, Ching, 2002).

3. “Aesthetics” Course in Architectural Education

Architectural curriculum in The Department of Architecture at Near East University basically involves the disciplines of “Building Science”, “Construction Science”, “Historical Conservation and Restoration” and “Art History”. Architectural Education is framed with the above main disciplines’ core courses and with their sub-branch courses. There are also some elective courses from different fields supporting the architectural education included in the curriculum. It can be said that, Architectural Design Courses are the synthesis of these theory based disciplines. Architectural Design Courses are prerequisite courses and each semester students study on a building project according to their levels (There are seven architectural design courses in different levels) and finally studies are concluded with “Graduation Projects.” In all project studies which are supported by the above disciplines, evaluation is done by the concepts of “Form”, “Function” and “Construction.” At the same time these concepts are basically the evaluation criteria of any architectural design in a universal sense (Uzunoglu & Uzunoglu, 2011). Some examples of fourth-year students’ projects are shown in figure 4.

Students can take four elective courses other than the obligatory courses during their four-year education according to their interests. These courses give students opportunity to improve themselves in different fields.

This study explored the method of aesthetics education in architectural curriculum through an elective course called “Aesthetics” in the Department of Architecture. The purposes and the method of the course will be explained below.

3.1. Purpose

The purposes of the course are:

- To awaken the aesthetic senses of the architectural students’ by using visual and auditory materials in class.
- To make the students understand the most common terms of aesthetics referenced in the discussions of beauty in art/architecture.
- Broaden the students’ abilities of seeing and understanding art from different perspectives.
- To prepare an ideal education environment for the students by providing them the opportunity to discuss various aspects of art and architecture besides the traditional teaching methods.
- To make the students understand the philosophy of aesthetics behind architecture to reflect it in their project designs two dimensionally and at the same time three dimensionally.
3.2. Method

UNESCO-Department of Advancement of Science Division of Science Teaching (1966), defined the educational methods as the “Ways of organizing the learner’s cognitive activity to ensure the acquisition of knowledge and skills of the student in the process of instruction”. Effective teaching methods at higher education levels change and are determined according to the aims and content of the education.

There are some different teaching methods used in the educational environment like; lecture method, group discussions, individual presentations, assignments, seminars, workshops, conferences, brainstorming, role play, etc. Every medium and method has advantages in itself and can expand its boundaries when used in combination with other media.

It is also important to use visual and auditory materials in education, especially in architectural education. The proper use of visual and auditory materials in education medium can make the process of instruction more effective and enjoyable. It helps the students to acquire better understanding of the subject by rousing interest in them.

During the execution of “Aesthetics”, interactive education is used. As shown in figure 5, all phases of the program involve students’ participation in open discussions and brainstorming sessions besides lectures.

Being a free verbal exchange of ideas, discussions allow every student to participate in an active process and provide an effective learning. Another advantage of the method is that it develops creativity among the students.

As another technique, brainstorming is a form of discussion for generating ideas which provides equal participation of group members and develops listening skills. It is used for problem solving, decision making and creative thinking. Brainstorming also encourages team building (Sajjad, 2011).

Listening to music is also an effective method for awakening the senses. It is important for experiencing and exploring the aesthetic feelings. Reading/listening poems of famous poets, reading sections from classics are also valid for stimulating the senses, watching films is another way of understanding aesthetic experience. All methods are also useful for sustaining the interest of students. (See figure 5.)

“Aesthetics” course was composed of seven phases (as shown in figure 6); each includes two class days having three hours at every class day. There were twenty students participating in the course.

The course program started with discussions and brainstorming about art by introducing some questions like; “Did you read a book which impressed you deeply?”, “Why were you impressed, what features impressed you the
most?”, “Have you ever seen a famous artwork? If yes, what was your reaction?” etc. Students were expected to join the discussion to discover their aesthetic senses and explore them to find out why they are impressed by X and why not by Y.

In continuation, discussions in the basis of subjects of aesthetics such as aesthetic recipient-aesthetic object relationship, aesthetic value are done. Aesthetic experience and feelings were also discussed by providing visual and auditory materials with historical and contemporary examples. Aesthetic theories and ideas of philosophers through the history were also considered as guidelines behind the philosophy of aesthetics.

When it comes to Architecture and architectural design, it is through the senses that people appreciate the architectural products. They like to live/work in spaces which aesthetically pleasing to their eye besides the other features like function and construction. For architects, it is also through the development of aesthetic senses to be able to create aesthetically pleasing environments. For architectural students, developing these senses also gains importance in preparing themselves for designing buildings. They should realize that it is through the senses people feel architecture. Leon Battista Alberti (1485) says that:

“The architecture affects our eyes and minds like sounds affect our ears.”

This quotation is directly related to aesthetics in architecture. It is a good explanation of how architecture influences the people psychologically.

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Figure 6. “Aesthetic” course subjects and execution
In order to combine the philosophy of aesthetics with architecture, architecture should be considered as an art. Architectural students should understand that aesthetic decisions on building developments influence the whole society from the individual to more collective mentally and psychologically. Even a single building aesthetically influences its environment. Regarding all these, design principles of architectural compositions, perception and grouping principles of Gestalt, formal aesthetics and symbolic aesthetics were introduced in class discussions to emphasize the philosophy behind the aesthetics in cities through buildings. See figure 6 for the phases and execution of the course. All these phases included visual and auditory materials and presentations during lectures.

At the end of the program, students were asked to make research and presentation (poster and power point presentation) about well known artists/architects in the light of the aesthetics education they gained. They were expected to design their posters in 70x100 cm. sizes.

When the process of the “Aesthetics” course was regarded, the results were found to be pleasing. The participation of the students to the group discussions and brainstorming activities (which they found interesting and informative) were quite well. They listened to others’ opinions respectfully and expressed their ideas freely. They indicated that these sessions of brainstorming and discussions on art/architecture which were very new for them were very useful for exchanging their ideas.

They also found interesting and relaxing to listen music, to read poems and books in a course that they have never experienced before.

The results of presentations were quite impressive. Students succeeded in reflecting the styles and aesthetic approaches of the artists/architects they have chosen on their presentations. It was also observed that they tried to add their creativity to posters and powerpoint presentations which were quite informative at the same time visually pleasing. Some examples of poster presentations are shown in figure 8 below.
As a conclusion, for architectural students, project courses are the synthesis of the other supporting courses as mentioned above. As one of the supplementary courses, it is observed that “Aesthetics” extended the architectural knowledge of the students by making them gaining significant values like the philosophy of aesthetics and its importance in architectural design. It was also pleasing to observe that the students who took the “Aesthetics” course considered these values afterwards on their projects in architectural design courses.

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