Aesthetic Movement Ideals in Contemporary Architecture

The President Garfield Historic Site Visitor Center

By Julie Redenshek  Thesis Defense: May 11, 2006 - Blacksburg, VA
The James A. Garfield National Historic Site in Mentor, Ohio includes numerous structures of mid 19th century Victorian Era architecture. After the grounds became a national landmark in 1945, all new additions conformed to the existing historic style. This Thesis proposes that the existing visitor center be relocated from the carriage house to a new structure on site. This new visitor center is sensitive to the existing however, visually different. This architectural position is contradictory to previous additions in the past 50 years. Therefore, to draw a parallel and in an effort to allude to the past, the contemporary visitor center contains the same philosophical ideals of the Victorian reform Aesthetic Movement. Three of these ideals that are present in the visitor center include horizontality, dynamic space and honesty of structure. For the Aesthetes, horizontality was an influence from Japanese design, while the creation of dynamic space was meant to create an emotional response. Honesty of structure meant that a building should possess a clear and evident expression of its structural system and materials. In other words, using materials for their own sake. Even though over one hundred years have passed since the beginning of the Aesthetic Movement, this thesis is an exploration and continuation of those main ideals into contemporary architecture.
The 19th century was a time of rapid change throughout the world. The industrial revolution was in full swing in the latter half of the century and information was traveling faster than it had ever before. It was only a matter of time that the design and architecture would also be going through a revolution of its own. The International Exhibitions of 1851 and 1862 showcased the cluttered and busy designs of the Victorian Era, which inspired numerous designers and philosophers to think in a new way. Many reform movements sprang from this hatred of Victorian design, one being the Aesthetic Movement. The participants of this movement wanted more simplified and regulated designs not only for architecture, but also for all aspects of design.
The multiple ideas propelling the Aesthetic movement take root in the writings of art critic John Ruskin. Many of Ruskin’s writings were significant, but *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* is one of the most influential. No specifics or scheme was given by Ruskin for designers to follow, only his philosophy was presented to the readers.

“No theorist writing on the principles governing materials in architecture has had a greater appreciation for the inherent qualities of building matter than John Ruskin.”

A large part of what Ruskin is known for is his theories on the use of materials. He believed that a good building is one that clearly shows people how it was put together and this expression of materials can make the building’s atmosphere poetic. According to Ruskin, the “honesty of materials” follows five basic principles:

1. Materials should be of highest quality possible.
2. “No material should ever be disguised as another,” unless it is blatantly obvious that it could not be that.
3. Use materials for their natural, physical or structural properties.
4. “A structural element should not be made in a given material with a technique that has not traditionally been used for that purpose.”
5. Use materials that have been established in previous buildings.

**Influences**
Another important source of inspiration for the Aesthetic Movement came from Japan. The small Pacific island had a huge impact on the design world of the United States and England because Japan had been closed off from the rest of the world until the 1850s. Once the doors were open, American and British designers were exposed to something new and different and many became fascinated with the simplicity of Japanese artwork. Since these objects were easily accessible, Japanese objects and artifacts were put on display in a “Japanese Section” at the 1862 International Exhibition, further exposing the world to a different style of design. However, the obsession was more for crafts and design than for Japanese fine art. It was the simplicity of the color, symmetry, and the use of horizontal lines in the designs that fascinated the Aesthetes.

The designers and painters wished not only to work in a new way but to convince the general public of the rightness of their views. Our person that took on the role of battling the public was Ruskin’s student at Oxford, Oscar Wilde. Because the “extreme” aspects of the movement prevailed in the public’s knowledge, a lot of ridicule and satire was applied to the Aesthetic movement. Wilde was an Aesthete that received a lot of this ridicule, but his intransigence may be a modern one. He was very flamboyant, theatrical, and fashion oriented, leaving him open to criticism. For example, Aesthetes like Wilde included, were viewed as “morally (if not immorally) promiscuous, self-indulgent, and irresponsible.” Many caricatures and spoofs of Wilde came out in magazines and newspapers in the early 1880s during his tour of America. But the negative attention was attention so fine and Wilde was given enough exposure to coin the phrase, “art for art’s sake.” First and foremost, art was more important to the Aesthetic movement than moral or sociopolitical ideas. Regardless of the criticism from the public, Oscar Wilde is known as “the Aesthetic movement’s most successful popularizer.”

E.W. Godwin, 1872-73

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Finally, the Aesthetic Movement position on structure and materials reflects the ideals of John Ruskin. As stated before, Ruskin transformed "structural formulation into a principle of architectural design by obligating it to the expression of honesty." Two keywords that help explain "honesty": structure and materials are explicit and manifest. The building should possess a clear and evident expression of its structural system and materials. "It did not have to display every aspect of structure necessary to assure stability, but it could not appear to be constructed in one way and actually be assembled in another." Along with the display of structure and how the building was put together, the materials of the building should be used in an appropriate manner. For example, stone or brick should not be used in a tensile manner; the material’s natural properties should be taken into consideration when the structure is designed.

The architecture produced by the Aesthetic Movement designers formally differs from the previous Victorian buildings. The Aesthetes thought less of space as room, but as interconnected volumes. This new way of open planning and putting together volumes of space was more of a classical idea rather than Gothic or medieval. The Japanese horizontality also had an effect opposite to the verticality of Victorian High Gothic. Room heights and levels were varied to create an emotional response for the visitor. James Kornwolf states, "rooms projected over porches; walls and roofs interlocked in amazing ways. Forms were much began to follow functions and a variety of forms were used - circular, octagonal, and even irregular spaces joined more conventional square and rectangles." All of these new architectural expressions of dynamic space were used to evoke feeling from the visitor, the ultimate goal of the Aesthetic Movement.

**Principles**

The Red House by Philip Webb and William Morris is considered to be one of the first houses of the Aesthetic Movement. 14 15
The interior of the house is quite different than the stark white exterior. The placement of the functions and their relationship to each other played an important role in Mackintosh’s design. He wanted the house to evoke feeling in order to create a unique experience. Howarth states, “…Mackintosh played upon a whole range of emotion. Each room was considered not as a box, a thing complete in itself, but as an element in a larger pattern, a pattern of related experiences.” These “experiences” begin in the small, confined entry that is followed by a tall, two story grand hall. Branching off the hall is a series of one-story spaces for the dining room, reception room and music room. All of the spaces have moveable partitions that can be opened to the main hall, creating a very open plan. The hall and dining room are finished with dark woods and paint, while the surrounding rooms are naturally lit and are very light colored. Along with the room heights, the color and design of the rooms creates a dramatic physical and emotional contrast from room to room.
The interior of the Frank Miles house contains even more Japanese motifs and influence. For example, the rooms have pale walls, wood floors with carpets and minimal furniture. Japanese forms and devices were more integral in the design than they appear now, but the patrons requested that Godwin not use as many Japanese motifs. All the furniture was also designed by Godwin, which has been described as “harshly rectilinear with minimal embellishment and decoration.”

Susan Weber Soros excellently sums up the impact of Godwin’s designs, “Victorian artists lavishly appointed their working quarters with luxurious fabrics, elaborate pieces of furniture and profusion of antique casts, books and assorted bric-a-brac. In contrast, Godwin’s studies with their plain walls and uncluttered appearance prefigured the stark, light-filled studios of the twentieth century.”

**Case Study II**

44 Tite Street House for Frank Miles by E.W. Godwin, 1878

The house for artist Frank Miles on Tite Street went through many transformations during the design process. The original elevation, which embodied more Aesthetic ideas, was never built and a more “Queen Ann” style façade exists today. This is the case because the Metropolitan Board of Works would not approve the first design. When discussing the final façade design, Godwin stated, “the thing was pronounced charming. This is very odd.” However, he could not carry out his design to the full extent as proposed. However, the original design is still recognized because of its innovation: The façade is an arrangement of rectangles with an off-center vertical window in a projecting balcony, and horizontal windows just below the roof line. All of these geometries were basic in Japanese designs, but were mixed with Godwin’s excellent sense of proportion. Even though the plans dictated the placement of windows, the façade is still balanced.
The James A. Garfield National Historic Site is a 7.82-acre plot of land located in Northeast Ohio in the Cleveland suburb of Mentor. President Garfield purchased the land in 1876 and made some improvements and additions to the property up until his death in 1881. His wife, Lucretia, continued the updates throughout her life as well, with the last addition to the house in 1904. The family gave the property to the Western Reserve Historical Society in 1936, and finally became a National Historic Site in 1980. Since then, a visitor center was added to the existing carriage house and a small restroom building. Other historical structures include a campaign office, windmill, tenant house, chicken coop, horse barn, granary, and tenant house. The site is now open for tours and field trips as well as for summer markets, civil war reenactments, and other small group activities.
Existing Site and Buildings
The new visitor center is to be located on the northeastern corner of the site. This location allows for a continuous area of historical buildings that would be uninterrupted by the new building and provide better circulation for the site. The existing restroom building and parking lot will be removed with these functions within or adjacent to the new visitor center. The four limestone walls of the new building line up with two of the existing buildings, the horse barn and granary, while the interior volume is rotated to the same axis as the main house. Flanking the new visitor center are three, low stone walls that act as a progression element from the new building to the historical buildings.

THE PROPOSAL
THE BUILDING
Planes, Sections, Elevations
PERSPECTIVES
The plan has many different levels that are visible to each other. The entry is on the ground level, whereas the exhibit space is below grade. From the museum shop that is adjacent to the ticket booth and ramp, one can view the museum below. The ramp to the museum contributes to the dynamic quality by allowing for a slow progression down and through the walls.

Restrooms, office, and classrooms are located in the solid form that passes through the two middle stone walls while a screening room is located on the lower level. Exterior, yet covered spaces are located on the east and west ends of the buildings. The western space flanks the entry and serves as a waiting area. The eastern space is three feet above grade and is accessible by two ramps. This area serves as a location for summer markets and other public gatherings.

Floor Plans

Ground Floor Plan

Lower Level Floor Plan
ELEVATIONS
The form of the roof and walls butterfly to open up the interior, while horizontal lines are emphasized by the coursed stone.
Entrance View into exhibit space from market level

Stone Walls, West end Roof System and Stone Walls
Expression of the honesty of materials and structure is seen in the use of stone for its inherent compressive strength in the four limestone bearing walls. To aid the stone in spanning long distances over openings, steel is used because of its strength in crossing long distances. The walls are solid on the exterior while inside the building a cavity is placed within the wall for better thermal properties. On the ends of the wall, there is a reveal in the stone with a wood infill to express the void within the wall.
Detail 6: Handrail
Detail 7 & 8: Top and Bottom of Steel Lintel
Detail 9: Seating in Screening Box
Detail 10: West Exterior Wall and Floor
Detail 11: Roof System

Building Details
The fixed louvers block northern light while the operable louvers block sunlight from the east and west.

The building has many levels for people and light, all contributing to the movement and dynamic quality of the building.
The hanging acrylic panels help diffuse the light even more. The panels are pulled away from the wall to expose the structure and connections above.
A light study of the roof system was conducted to investigate the frame positions and the hanging panels.

Study I

The first light study used cable hung, semi-transparent panels with lines in a series of modules.
The second light study investigated the use of a continuous, curved, perforated metal panel.
Study III

The third study used one long panel of semi-transparent acrylic and perforated metal. This study is what is used for the visitor center.
This thesis is not an application of Aesthetic ideals, but a continuation of those principles. Those ideals are taken into context within contemporary terms and are incorporated into the design. Horizontality, dynamic space, and honesty of structure all take part in contributing to the intent of the visitor center. The entire design does not encompass every aspect of the movement, but the ideas and philosophy behind visitor center is rooted in the Aesthetic standards.
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I would like to thank all the people who have helped in the creation of this thesis.

To my entire family, especially Mom, Dad, Brian and Jennifer, for all of your unconditional love and support.

To Brian Troie, for your love and for just being there for me every day. Also, to Nerissa McCoy, for all of your advice and endless friendship.

And to my committee, Michael, Maureen, and Bill, along with Dave and Steve, for all your advice and guidance along the way.
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