

For Many Public Buildings, Form Doesn't Follow Function, Study Finds

November 28 2005

When you look at the exterior of a building, can you tell whether the building is a city hall, an art museum, a library, or a live theater? Most people can't, according to a new study. And those results suggest that many public buildings don't follow one of the most famous dictums of architecture: Form follows function.

Residents of three different cities were shown pictures of city halls, libraries, art museums, and live theaters in a distant city and asked to guess which of those four uses applied to each of the buildings.

Respondents were correct 32 percent of the time – not much better than random guessing, which would have led to correct answers about 25 percent of the time.

“If form follows function, then you should be able to look at a building and have a good idea about what goes on inside,” said Jack Nasar, co-author of the study and professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State University.

“That didn't happen in our survey, which suggests form is not following function in American architecture.”

These findings are more than just academic, Nasar said. When buildings clearly show their purpose, it can help visitors more easily find their way, and make life more comfortable and understandable for everyone in a city.

“If you can make sense of a place, it should make life in the city more pleasurable and comfortable, and help people figure out where they are,” he said.

Nasar conducted the study with Arthur Stamps of the Institute of Environmental Quality in San Francisco, and Kazunori Hanyu from Nihon University in Tokyo, Japan. Their results were published in a recent issue of the Journal of Environmental Psychology.

Nasar said the research was prompted by the words of American architect Louis Sullivan, who coined the phrase “form follows function” in 1918. This dictum has helped guide modern architecture since then. Sullivan wrote that if “a building is properly designed, one should be able with a little attention, to read through that building to the reason for that building.”

Nasar said he and his colleagues wanted to know how well the form of public buildings actually do communicate their function. So from a list of building functions, the researchers randomly selected the four types of buildings included in this study. They then looked in a local telephone book for the San Francisco area to find three examples of each of these four types of buildings.

One of the researchers visited each of the 12 sites, photographed the buildings and digitally retouched the images to remove all signage.

They then selected 160 people from three distant cities – Columbus, Ohio; Montreal; and Tokyo – to view the 12 photos and guess if each one was a city hall, live theater, art museum or library.

If they guessed completely randomly, the participants would be expected to choose correctly 25 percent of the time, Nasar said. So the fact that they were right only 32 percent of the time means form didn't follow

function for these buildings.

For example, participants were more likely to say the city halls pictured were libraries than any other use. Museums were more often thought to be city halls or live theaters than they were museums.

The results showed there was little difference between the responses of Americans, Canadians and Japanese in the survey.

The researchers also checked to see if the buildings had been built for purposes other than what they were currently being used. While a few buildings were being used for new purposes, Nasar said they found that reuse or original use did not make much difference in conveying function through form. The age of the buildings also didn't matter, Nasar said.

Other studies have shown that people already “read” buildings to judge the status of people who live or work inside, and to determine if the buildings are in a safe neighborhood, among other things, Nasar said.

“Buildings convey meaning, whether they are meant to or not,” Nasar said. “So it makes sense that buildings be designed to indicate their use. But our results suggest it doesn't often happen.”

Source: Ohio State University

Citation: For Many Public Buildings, Form Doesn't Follow Function, Study Finds (2005, November 28) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-11-doesnt-function.html>

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