

“FIRMNESS, COMMODITY, DELIGHT”

Firmness, commodity and delight are the three watchwords first enunciated two thousand years ago by Vitruvius, Roman architect under Augustus Caesar, and taught to every student of architecture even today. “Firmness” means that a structure shouldn’t fall down – be it a house, church, office building, bridge or dam – unless collapsed intentionally. “Commodity” is how humans use a structure, whether in its original form or reused for some other purpose. Many lovely old train stations, like ones in Duluth and Minneapolis, have been converted to accommodate new functions. “Delight” reflects how we react when we encounter a structure. For “delight” some architectural critics focus on the aesthetic, ‘beauty,’ while others speak of that feeling we get when we love the place we work or live in: the proportions of its rooms, the way the light falls, or the warmth or tactility of its materials.

“Why Buildings Fall Down” is the title of a remarkable book by Matthys Levy and Mario Salvadori. The authors note that the Egyptian pyramids of Giza have made it through five thousand years; the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia-Herzegovina lasted for 429 years before being bombed to rubble. The 35W bridge over the Mississippi, one I’ve crossed often, was just forty years old. How shall we prevent future disasters? Condolences first to the families of the ones who died, and then answers. The answers may not simply be in smarter design, but as well in understanding and carrying out our civic and social responsibilities, or else how can we ever trust our public structures to be firm, to be safe?

“Commodity” – how we use a structure – necessarily changes over time. Sometimes a house designed for a life style of seventy-five years ago no longer matches what we need now. My wife and I owned a typical Twin Cities two-storey house built in the 1920s with a formal living room and separate dining room; we ended up doing most of our socializing in the cramped kitchen! Newer homes now have open-plan kitchen/dining areas, oversized family rooms, media rooms, kids’ playrooms, home-offices; all trying to meet the expectations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But how well will these new domestic structures adapt to needs and desires of their inhabitants in fifty or a hundred years?

What we find ‘delightful’ is influenced by the fashion of the time. But sometimes we love our great-grandparents-era buildings better than what is currently the rage: aged wood floors, exposed brick, cozy rooms. If we had to try further to define “delight” we might use the words happiness, pleasure, inspiration. The most enduringly delightful public buildings display harmony, symmetry, and a stateliness at total ease with itself. Look at many of our college campuses, city halls, federal post offices, the portico of the White House, Jefferson’s Monticello or Washington’s Mount Vernon, and you see the classical proportions proposed by Vitruvius and renewed by Andrea Palladio in 16th century Italy. Beautiful buildings need not be of the classical ‘style’ but they will possess many of their underlying compositional rules. Will the titanium swirls of a Frank Gehry building, like

the Weisman Art Museum on the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus, produce enduring delight? It's too soon to tell.

Not every structure is simultaneously solid, functional and beautiful. That's the great challenge to an architect or engineer, and one not always met. Palladio warned that no building could be called *perfect* if it was useful, but only briefly; or if it wasn't durable; or being both durable and useful, if it wasn't also beautiful. This truth surpasses any temporary structure.

Norbert Hirschhorn
August 18, 2007