

COMMUNICATION FORUM

Commentary

Visual persuasion in constructing buildings is often a part of business strategy. Architects, for instance, try to link corporate goals with management's desire for company buildings to represent, for instance, the mission, goal, and even the power and strength of the company. When one analyzes covert visual persuasion, it is clear that modern visual strategy mirrors ancient rhetorical concepts of persuasion. As oral persuasion takes into account source, medium, audience, and content, so too does the visual strategist. In the following statement, we link visual rhetoric with classical rhetoric, look at banks and shopping malls as exemplifying visual rhetoric, and conclude with several declaratives.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION AND ARCHITECTURE Is There a Parallel?

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It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.
—Oscar Wilde

Some business leaders and marketing gurus, if they think about the term architecture, believe that architects merely interpret and express our culture in building form. Some business communicators, when hearing the term rhetoric, think of artificial, blatant, overt persuasion. As a result, some architects feel marginalized as serious work goes to engineers and developers; some business communicators feel affronted when business communication concepts extend beyond communication as we now teach it in our schools, along with management and organizational theories.

Management Communication Quarterly, Vol. 10, No. 2, November 1996 227-242
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But visual architectural forms—as much as oral or written persuasion—carry strong, if poorly understood, influences on audiences—or customers, or consumers, or clients. “Historic architecture was a means, through visual metaphors, of establishing, proclaiming, and transmitting convictions—i.e., of making them held universally. Architecture both proclaimed and persuaded” (Gowans, 1977, pp. 38-39); architecture is a form of communication (Harvey, 1990). Perhaps, at the periphery, architectural persuasion may even be a part of managerial communication strategy.

At first glance, the terms *rhetoric* and *architecture* seem remote from each other. Rhetoric in a pejorative sense is empty verbiage; architecture broadly construed is constructed shelter. Yet architecture has also been considered the mother of all the fine arts; rhetoric in its ancient robes meant searching out the available means of persuasion. In light of these ancient origins, the distance between rhetoric and architecture does not appear awesomely vast.

Business communicators, marketing experts, and architects may actually find that linking the classical art of persuasion with architecture is not too difficult. To that end, we will review some statements that seek to link visual rhetoric with classical rhetoric, briefly mention major ancient persuasive canons of rhetoric, look at banks and malls and how they exemplify visual rhetoric, and conclude with some declaratives.

VISUAL RHETORIC

Several writers have identified communication theory embodied in classical rhetoric as an appropriate starting point for systematically studying persuasion in visual design. Buchanan (1989) proposes that a central component of design studies is communication, that is, the relation between communicators and their audiences. Krampen (1968) constructs his design views on rhetoric, namely, that the basic function of all human communication grounds itself in the desire of a source of communication to influence a receiver. Further, when a designer, as a communicating source, attempts to shape or change the attitudinal state of the receiver, he or she

engages in the process of persuasion. We have the right to conjecture: Can the academic limits of managerial communication be pushed to include visual persuasion as exemplified in architecture?

To address this question, we need to return to rhetorical foundations echoed in a number of visual theorists. Investigating methods of contemporary advertising, Bonsiepe (1965) suggests that “a modern system of rhetoric might be a useful descriptive and analytical instrument” (p. 23). Krampen (1968) forcefully reinforces the preceding conclusion: A “careful study of classical rhetoric could lead to a catalogue of rhetorical devices that is capable of visual duplication” (p. 18), thus implying that rhetorical tools are valuable to the study and practice of visual design.

Ehres (1989) deduces that because all human communication is rhetorical, communication via visual design simply cannot be exempt from that fact. Eco (1980) essentially acknowledges this view, suggesting that architecture is a system of rhetorical formulas rather than a strict language *per se*. Hattenhauer (1984), writing on a similar theme, explicitly reinforces the presence of rhetoric in architecture:

Architecture not only communicates, but also communicates rhetorically. Churches and shopping malls, doors and stairs. These architectural items not only tell us their meaning and function, but also influence our behavior. Architecture is rhetorical because it induces us to do what others would have us do. Architecture, then, is a persuasive phenomenon, and therefore deserves to be studied by rhetorical critics. (p. 71)

Thus, even though ancient rhetoric treated mainly oral communication, as Bonsiepe (1965) suggests, “verbal rhetoric paves the way” (p. 31) to the contemporary study of visual rhetoric. In other words, across the spectrum of architectural intent there is a conscious effort to let the visual structures carry a theme, make a statement, foster an image, persuade the viewer, or even create a citadel of pleasure—such as one finds in Walt Disney World or Disneyland.

Thus strategies for adapting buildings, or an entire urban mall, to the needs of receivers, for instance, bank customers and employees, are frequently directed to achieve several dominant purposes:

to produce economic value, to attract consumption, to create aesthetic worth, to impress, and to communicate (Britt, 1992; McCleary & German, 1991; Price, 1988). Such an overt visual appeal appears to be no less in innumerable other visual structures. Therefore, the needs of the customer, client, occupant, tenant, employee, or worker are in part met through the physical structure in which they work or where they do business. Architects and designers are therefore challenged to communicate with diverse groups, diverse tastes, and diverse interests. Indeed, those creative communicators find that status signs, history, commerce, comfort, and ethnic domains are all fodder for visual persuasion (Jencks, 1984).

In sum, preliminary statements suggest that there is a conscious rhetorical strategy behind a design, the situation or audience context to which it responds, and the means by which it attempts to realize its intentions. Put briefly, classical and modern rhetorical theory would look at design as always motivated, always purposeful. Rephrasing these assertions in the terminology of the classical Burkean (1945) motivational pentad,¹ design, as motivated, must involve a maker or agent with a purpose (a source), a context or scene which must be addressed or engaged (a receiving audience), and an act or agency through which the purpose is to be carried out (a medium). Or as Burke (1931) states in another writing, “eloquence is simply the end of art, and thus its essence” (p. 265).

CLASSICAL RHETORIC AND ARCHITECTURE

If one accepts the above premise—that rhetoric and architecture do have rational linkages—we must briefly mention how those rhetorical linkages occur.

Rhetoric, with its ancient genesis, ranged from the philosophical criticisms of Plato (trans. 1927) to Aristotle’s (trans. 1932) scientific view to Quintilian’s (trans. 1943) pragmatic view. But Aristotle’s (trans. 1932) definition dominated: “So let rhetoric be defined as the faculty [power] of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion” (2.2). Those available means can be viewed in five canons of persuasion.

Invention. *Invention* denotes discovery or finding arguments. What rhetoricians seek in invention is the content of the discourse, the substance and modes of persuasion effective in persuading an audience. Because invention establishes the basic elements of the rhetorical plan, it stands first among the five canons. The inventive process, in its search for proper content, looks specifically for usable argumentative premises and strategies (Cicero, trans. 1942a, 2.39.162, trans. 1942b, 2.5; Quintilian, trans. 1943, 5.10.20).

In architecture, as in rhetoric, as in management communication, invention dominates the first phase of the process, corresponding roughly to what is called the preschematic or conceptual design phase. As such, invention focuses on finding the ideas, concepts, and content that will serve as an effective starting point for the architectural design.

In bank architecture—perhaps a dominant example of visual persuasion—invention would seek to identify the basic strategy on which to ground the visual design. Should the architecture try to instill a sense of humility, awe, and deference in the potential customer? Should it be customer friendly and open or suggest solidness and endurance? Or should it strive to lure its clientele as a casino would gamblers? In the first two cases, the bank might be presented as a classical, enduring monument; in the second, as a glittering, customer enticing inducement. Each has a definite audience purpose.

Disposition. The canon of arrangement addresses the sequential parts of rhetorical discourse and the arrangement of its chief arguments. Although there was inconsistency in labeling the parts of a speech, six steps were most often accepted (Cicero, trans. 1949, 6; Quintilian, trans. 1943, 3.3; *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. 1945, 1.3): *exordium* or introduction; *narration* or the background and facts of the matter; *division* or an enumeration of the issues to be discussed or a brief exposition of each point; *confirmation* or offering the arguments; *refutation* or the rebuttal of potential objections; and *peroration* or conclusion.

Central here was the premise that the audience must be studied, and the sequence of the topic would therefore vary according to the

audience or even the type of speech being presented. Flexibility and audience adaptation were dominant. Indeed, principles of arrangement moved between macro and micro suggestions at all levels of oral discourse, even within the three genres of oral discourse: forensic, deliberate, and epideictic (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. 1945).

As rhetoricians positioned arrangement (disposition) second after locating suitable arguments for persuasion, architectural composition or arrangement likewise claims the second position for schematic design as the phase that follows basic conceptualization. Architectural composition arranges or organizes the ideas, concepts, contents, requirements, and architectural components generated from invention. Disposition proceeds to produce an overall arrangement of plan and massing that begins to satisfy the aesthetic demands of a coherent visual form. Ultimately, the goal is the welding of discrete ideas and elements into a unified, persuasive whole.

In this phase a bank designer, for example, will be concerned with the accommodation of the bank's spatial requirements plus the arrangement of rooms, lobbies, and offices, including their access and adjacencies. Considered also will be the aesthetic experience of the customer moving through sequences of architectural space. Care will be taken, for example, that when one moves from the exterior, through the main entry, and into the central banking area, this sequence of spatial experiences will be felt as pleasurable and meaningful. Function—for the external audience as well as the employee—is adapted to the customer (Britt, 1992).

Style. Of all the ancient canons, style received seemingly unending emphasis (Cicero's *Orator*, trans. 1939, a third of his *De oratore*, trans. 1942; the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. 1945, 4; Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, trans. 1932, 3; and Quintilian's *Institutes*, trans. 1943, 9.10). A succinct explanation of this canon is that once the information has been gathered and organized, it has to be put into words: "I will only give briefly my opinion, that it is impossible to achieve an ornate style without first procuring ideas and putting them into shape, and at the same time that no idea can possess

distinction without lucidity of style” (Cicero, trans. 1942a, 3.6.24). How is lucidity to be achieved? Via being clear, correct, and appropriate—terms as applicable to business communication as to architecture.

Moreover, the canon of style finds its counterpart in what is known as the design development phase of architecture. Chiefly concerned with stylistic issues, this phase looks at appropriate ornamentation, embellishment, and decoration; detailing and the design of joints; the choice of materials, textures, and colors; and the studied design of the building’s interior and exterior elevations.

Memory and delivery. It is not our intent to force a strict analogy of these fourth and fifth canons into visual design and communication. However, we could say that written and oral communication should carry along the purpose of the designer’s original intent, that the final document mirrors the author’s first purpose as derived from invention.

We’ve briefly suggested that three of the five ancient canons—invention, organization, and style—have parallels in both architectural planning and rhetorical persuasion. Each operates in the world of management communication and in the functional and aesthetic world of architecture. We now turn to specific examples that illustrate the use of rhetoric as applicable to visual persuasion.

A BANK AS PERSUASIVE ARCHITECTURE

To get a better idea of how architectural rhetoric aids an institutional self in satisfying its perceived need to attract and hold customers, in giving the proper image to the outside world, in establishing rapport with a community, we can look at bank buildings as strategic persuasion.

Banks have one major resolve: To survive, banks must attract and keep depositors, and they must draw solid borrowers who will repay profit-making loans. The visual rhetoric of architecture pragmatically functions to help potential depositors and borrowers reach a decision about the institution with which they will deal.

Nisbet (1990) notes that even though it is created by a private organization, “bank architecture at the same time turns a public face to its community in a vigorous attempt to communicate, persuade, assure, impress, and convince” (p. 8).

Bank architecture, over time, underwent a number of changes in suatory attire. Perhaps our most familiar image of American bank buildings was established almost 200 years ago by the classicist works of Benjamin Latrobe and William Strickland.² In a Greco-Roman guise with images of ancient imperial power, this architecture principally concerned itself with persuading potential and current depositors of the bank’s security, stability, and authoritative competence. In classical rhetoric, this is the strategy of establishing a persuasive sense of character, or *ethos* (credibility) with the audience:

[Before the advent of the FDIC,] even in prosperous times . . . banks would fail and people’s savings would be wiped out. This unfortunate possibility had to be disguised, if not expunged, by what amounted to cunning stagecraft. Whether a given bank was sound or unsound, it took care to put up what was literally a good front, a facade, that whatever happened to lie behind it, proclaimed an impregnable fiscal integrity. (Gill, 1990, p. 4)

While Greek and Roman architectural forms were thus used to bolster customer confidence in the bank’s solidity, they also conditioned consumer attitudes in other ways. Capitalizing on a puritanical bent in the American populace, the imperial grandeur of classical architecture deliberately presented an intimidating authoritative-ness and thus another important facet of the bank’s *ethos*. Austere monumentality was employed to create a clientele that would be a bit submissive and so perhaps less likely to question the bankers’ claims of competence.

Whether we approached a bank to deposit money or to borrow it, we were made to feel humbly grateful—indeed, that we were allowed to cross the threshold of the arcanum at all was in itself a reason for congratulation. Passing between majestic stone pillars and then through mighty gilded bronze portals, we would find ourselves at last inside a lofty chamber . . . How lucky we were to be there! In an awed whisper, we would make our wants known and then hope for the best. (Gill, 1990, p. 4)

As a side note, this same quest for an image of power is seen in office towers that house bank offices, hopefully at landmark addresses. A tower can signify dominance, economic success, authenticity, strength, and stature, perhaps translating into an image of financial dominance. Thus the soaring towers of the granite-sided banks at 1 Raffles Place in Singapore, those on Collins' Street in Melbourne, and the touted addresses of U.S. banks in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco evoke an image of towering over the competition.

The rhetorical ethos created by architecture in the preceding examples was stern, impenetrable, unmovable, and resistant not only to supposed adversities but also to the consumers' doubting inquiries. Although a sober, severe image served the banker well enough through the nineteenth century and even a bit beyond, the twentieth century eventually inspired a new strategy for attracting and keeping depositors and borrowers. The image of the bank as an imperial temple, Gill (1990) observes, changed over time. In place of austerity, conscious attempts were made to replace granite with flowers, walls with windows, and stoicism with sauciness. In place of a cowed depositor passing carefully by on the outside, the potential client could now become a voyeur, quickly determining what was occurring inside. Our guess is that most local banks have changed to reflect this increased emphasis upon the informal—carpeted floors, an absence of teller cages, soft chairs, displayed fruit, even smiling receptionists.

Such an overt architectural technique of guilt-free seduction carries with it a latent idea: One can now come and do business in this financial edifice without worrying about visual intimidation. Customers are invited to willingly lower their inhibitions. The exterior and interior ethos of the building has changed.

What should be noted is that the visual persuasive appeals embodied in bank architecture roughly correspond with attitudes and behaviors exhibited by bankers and some of their major clients. Whatever the precise degree of causality, banking institutions, attempting to advance their self-conceived interests, use their architecture to carry out various rhetorical, persuasive aims.

A MALL AS PERSUASIVE ARCHITECTURE

As bank architecture seeks overtly or covertly to persuade, so too does the architecture of spectacle found in shopping malls. In a shopping mall, architecture aims to create an ambient mood or atmosphere that rouses the target audience to action and decision. Via this approach, the visual aesthetics may seek, for instance, to relax clientele inhibitions or stimulate recreational activities.

We encounter this phenomenon perhaps more often than we realize. As Chase (1991) observes, pathos-oriented deliberative persuasion constitutes the key feature of what he terms the primary level of consumerist architecture. Primary level buildings are designed as "an integral part of the experience of consuming the goods and services offered inside. These buildings enhance the experience of consuming the product associated with the building" (p. 216). Under that concept are theme parks: Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and Knott's Berry Farm serve as canonical examples. Older examples include the lavish movie palaces and burlesque theaters of the 1930s, such as New York's Radio City Music Hall. Mood and fantasy figure as key ingredients in the packages being sold in such complexes.

What we are suggesting is that capital funds expended to create an aesthetic image add to the value of a building in excess of its primary function, namely, constructed shelter (Dovey, 1992; Mayo, 1991). Attempting to capitalize on a sensed need for visual persuasion in architecture, developers in Minnesota have created its ultimate American manifestation, the Mall of America, colloquially known as "the megamall." This piece of mercantile exuberance descends from one in Edmonton, Canada; in both cases, the developers have calculatingly tried to "create a space that can make the megamall a destination, an idealized community, fun" (Karlen, 1992, p. B-1). The mall uses various architectural maneuvers (bright lights, music, festivals, waterfalls, flowers, trees, dancers, skating arenas) that serve as visual and audio persuasion to retain its captive audience, arouse their spending mood, and create an area for delights.

Mall designs attempt to create a self-contained quasi-utopian town center, an almost autonomous village immune to urban strife and North American winters. Underscoring this utopian community theme are rumored plans for incorporating a hospital, church, and public school into retail complexes. Even without these additions, the mall's designers have played up its village-like atmosphere, achieved primarily through visual persuasion.

The West Edmonton Mall in Alberta enjoys perhaps even greater success; transcending the role of a retail complex, it functions almost as a therapeutic leisure and health resort. As well as serving as a "temple of consumerism," the West Edmonton Mall provides an "escape from ordinary life while structuring how the body and mind are recharged" (Karlen, 1992, p. B-3). The designers and developers at Edmonton have made a thoroughgoing effort to engage all the personal, emotional factors that motivate visitors at a shopping mall (Dawson, 1983). As a result, this mother-of-all shopping malls, along with its Minnesota offspring and other siblings in the United States, amply demonstrates the rhetorical power of architectural mood-creation to condition and stimulate the buying behavior of an experience-hungry, fantasy-starved public.

DISCUSSION

So, what are some conclusions? Five declaratives are possible.

1. Both rhetoric and architecture are inherently purposeful. Rhetoric in the ancient world persuaded through words, giving life to inanimate ideas through the oral medium. Architecture persuades through things, creating visual images—and meaning—through the medium of sight. Core to both rhetoric and architecture is the desire to influence, to move an audience, or customers, or clients, or readers, or listeners.

Rhetoric, as used in our statement, is inherently strategic: It has a definite end (Kellermann, 1992). Such a view also stresses the intentions behind architecture, the situation or audience context to

which it responds, and the means by which it attempts to realize its intentions. Put briefly, classical and modern rhetorical theory—and for that matter management communication, marketing, commercial advertising, and public relations strategies—look at design of a physical structure or a speech or a document as always motivated. Design as motivated must involve a maker or agent with a purpose (a source), a context or scene that must be addressed or engaged (a receiving audience), and an act or agency through which the purpose is to be carried out (a medium).

2. *Visual forms of persuasion carry strong, if poorly understood, influences.* In the case of architecture especially, uninformed customers are unaware of the persuasive effort behind the scenes to bring about a desired visual impact. Viewers, customers, clients, and passersby before a building are less aware of an overt purpose in an inanimate structure; indeed, their level of awareness of being persuaded may not rise beyond an unintelligible, unknown reaction. But quietly, and unknown to many, the structure is designed with some motive in mind.

Yet for many people, twentieth-century art and architecture, with their relentless avant-garde stress, seem indecipherable subjects. Indeed, modern architectural forms do not regularly elicit a feeling of spontaneous engagement. Unsuspected, for instance, is the feeling that *what* one spontaneously thinks of a piece of architecture is much less important than what one is *supposed* to think. Our focus in this commentary was upon banks and malls. But recall reactions to the visual impression of innumerable structures. Note the soaring halls and exterior patterns of airports: Dulles in Washington, D.C., the new Denver airport, or the aesthetically pleasing arrival hall in Singapore. Or consider some of the new banking structures: the tinkertoy Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in Hong Kong, the soaring structures of Chase Manhattan around the world, or the local branch in your neighborhood. Each communicates, each visually persuades, as does the soaring Trump Tower or the pink granite AT&T Building, or Rockefeller Center. Architecture, therefore, is public art, public persuasion. Buildings, unless they are shielded within restricted, private estates, are designed for public

view, a general audience, potentially including the full range of spectators from plebeian to elite.

3. Architecture and some forms of written communication serve as one of the chief media for making appeals to a public audience. Indeed, any persuasion on a large scale is rarely directed at a specific individual. Thus, while a speech is impermanent, directed at a specific group at a specific time on a specific topic, a building has more enduring impact. So too does the annual report, the news release, the 10-K report, the op-ed page in *The Wall Street Journal*. As a permanent fixture, a commercial structure, for example, shoulders the task of instilling continuing confidence in its present customer while at the same time seeking to add new ones. Buildings visually represent the results of a marketing, persuasive, communication strategy. Shelter is but one of a building's purposes.

4. Both business communication and visual rhetoric have their foundations in ancient rhetoric. Earlier (Hildebrandt, 1988), it was suggested that the ancient world focused on oral communication. It was the medium of expression, the dominant vehicle to move thoughts from a sender to specific receivers. The classical and modern canons of rhetoric, from initial location of persuasive material to its final presentation to an audience, tacitly occupy a place in business schools teaching business communication, marketing, or strategic planning. These classical principles are rarely known within those academic classifications, much less recited. Nor is it our intent to force them into the curriculum. But they are there nevertheless, simply under new labels.

Visual persuasion as seen in buildings and, even more particularly, in real estate properties such as malls, depends inherently on some of the same persuasive tools used in oral persuasion. Purposeful composition steps are used by architects or any creators using visual talents to influence people. As such, they too follow rhetorical principles similar to those of oratory to sway audiences—but visually.

5. Persuasion is rarely overt in either business or visual communication. Guess, for example, to which medium the following

apply: “It’s too blatant”; “that’s gaudy, even gross”; “it comes on too strong”; “you’re pushing me”; and “what’s the point?” Each is applicable to either architecture (visual persuasion) or written or oral persuasion. Thus business writers and speakers covertly locate arguments thought to be the most convincing; use a style or delivery which adapts to the size, friendliness, or unfriendliness of the message receiver; strategically position arguments within the communication so as to produce maximum effect; consciously select a style and tone in sync with the audience; and make numerous other rhetorical decisions. All of these strategies are covertly planned and, if done well, do not call attention to themselves.

Similarly, businesses give architects edicts that the building—or a series of franchise buildings—should “represent” the company. Micro signage details and their impact on the consumer take inordinate discussion time. In brief, persuasive elements such as user-friendliness, openness to the consumer, and solidness for the future are concepts companies wish to express through buildings. As with traditional forms of business communication, these architectural motives are covertly planned yet are to be given visibility through a building’s public appearance.

Thus the inevitable question arises: Is visual persuasion a form of business or managerial communication? There are parallels, there are signs of a rhetorical bonding between the two disciplines. Those willing to expand business communication’s purview would argue in favor, those opposed would be firm in their opposition. We leave you with the same uncertainty which typified O’Henry’s poem, *The Lady or the Tiger*. It’s for you to decide, for you to review. Our goal was simply to raise the possibility, to stimulate further thinking.

NOTES

1. What the classically accepted Burke means by pentad is the relationship between the *act*, that is, what took place in thought and deed; the *scene* or namely the background of the act and the situation in which it occurred; the *agent*, what kind of persons or person performed the act; what *agency* or instruments were used by the agent; and the *purpose* (1945, p. xv).

2. Benjamin Latrobe and William Strickland, early 19th century American architects known for introducing the Greek Revival style into bank architecture.

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