

Dr. Ben Baruch Blich

Design and Architecture as a philosophical question



Design and Architecture as a Philosophical Question

Author:
Ben Baruch Blich

Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design
History and Theory
Jerusalem

We live in a world of constant and rapid change. Values, ideologies, beliefs, regimes, institutions, etc., etc., have transformed their identity beyond recognition. Among them are objects of design and architecture. The problem I want to discuss in my paper has to do with this rapid and unprecedented changes: how do we identify and classify design and architectural artifacts vis-a-vis their new and frequently unrecognizable appearances.

In fact the problem I point at goes back to Aristotle who was the first to note that in a world of constant growth and change, one has to ask whether there are necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing to be considered as such; is there an idea, a definition, a thing should comply with in order to be properly identified.

Aristotle's epistemological question is still relevant today, especially in the context of design and architecture, which are constantly changing and growing, but also in linguistics as the father of generative grammar (syntax) developed by Noam Chomsky. According to Chomsky it is necessary to assume the existence of a deep structure to languages if we want to give a rational meaning to the proliferation of languages, which he labeled as surface structure. Adopting this idea to Design as well as to Architecture one has to look at a common object of design – a chair, and compare its lexical definition to its numerous real appearances in the course of its history. Or refer to the lexical definition of a building, and put it next to buildings around you. Having performed this gedankenexperiment, i.e.: comparing the lexical definition of the relevant category to its diverse appearances in reality, is in fact an epistemic dilemma as well as a methodological query. On the one hand we have an idea of an object, i.e.: of a chair or of a building, and on the other hand chairs and buildings hardly fit nowadays to their lexical established definitions. Moreover, due to the growth and rapid developments of design and architecture, their objects and products simply do not resemble each other any more. Look at chairs designed by Eero Aarnio, Alessandro Mendini, Ron Arad, Marcel Breuer, Nana Ditzel, and the chair prototypes sketched in the Bauhaus by Erich Dieckermann – the differences among them are unbridgeable, eliciting the question why and how do we cluster them all under the same family of objects and treat them all as chair. The same goes with Architecture. Buildings designed by Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, Le Corbusier, Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano, Bernard Tschumi, Frank Gherry, Daniel Libeskind, and many others, who have contributed to the proliferation of the language of Architecture, and have enriched our experience of structure and design, have challenged by the same token the merits of architecture and its foundations, expanding the notion of buildings beyond recognition. Guggenheim's museum by Frank Gherry has 'violated' traditional concepts of architecture, the same goes with Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, Renzo Piano's Nemo in Amsterdam, and the Pompidou Center designed by Rogers and Piano. And still, they all belong to the same family of architecture in spite of the fact that each one of them hardly relates to the other, as well as to buildings in architecture at large.

In light of my examples, it is vital to discuss the question originally raised by Aristotle: how do we classify objects of design and architecture, and furthermore - which of the many instances of design and architecture are the most paradigmatic; the one we would prefer as the most representative, fully exemplifying values of design and architecture.

A partial answer to our dilemma is given by two philosophical approaches: the first is Quine's theory of natural kinds, which rigidly bases similarity (of objects, phenomena etc.) on induction. The second philosophical approach is Wittgenstein's family resemblance, which treats similarity in the context of games, interpreting classification as an open texture endeavor. With these two theories in mind we can explain and eliminate some of the problems put by modern and post-modern design and architecture, and make sense of their diversity.

baruchbl@013.net.il

Keywords: Design, Architecture, generative syntax, natural kinds

Design and Architecture as a Philosophical question

Ben Baruch Blich

History and Theory

Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem

1

We live in a world of constant and rapid change. Values, ideologies, beliefs, regimes, institutions, etc., etc., have transformed their identity beyond recognition. Among them are objects of design and architecture. The problem I want to discuss in my paper has to do with this rapid and unprecedented changes: how do we identify and classify design and architectural artifacts vis-a-vis their new and frequently unrecognizable appearances.

In fact the problem I point at goes back to Aristotle who was the first to note that in a world of constant growth and change, one has to ask whether there are necessary and sufficient conditions for a *thing* to be considered as such; is there an idea, a definition, a *thing* should comply with in order to be properly identified.



Aristotle and Plato in Raphael's painting "The School of Athens" 1509

In his 'Categories' which is an excellent prelude to our problem, Aristotle discussed ten categories in the light of which he defined the essence of things based on his observations for the purpose of establishing a theory of order. According to his theory, an animal can not be called a 'horse' without manifesting its 'horsiness' and in order to do so, it must fulfill definite criteria.



In other words, Aristotle basically determined that all things, animals, plants and objects, exist only by fulfilling certain qualities. One can not even think of an unclassified or uncategorized object; it simply would not exist for us, it would have no essence or shape.

To illustrate Aristotle's point, allow me in few words address Terri Schivo's case.

Terri was a woman who suffered brain damage fifteen years prior to her death in 1995, leaving her paralyzed, totally disconnected from her surroundings and dependent on constant help and support. Her husband appealed to the US courts to end Terri's life, which had indeed ruled that Terri was in a permanent vegetative condition, claiming that her life had no purpose as she could no longer fulfill basic human functions.



Terri was no longer in the same category as other human beings, and yet in spite of the courts' ruling, she was not a plant either, but a human being living in special conditions which were denied from her.

Could she not have continued to be fed and sustained as someone who represented another aspect of human existence? Does the human category denies a place for anyone different? And the most important question of all – what is the boundary between the human and those who are found not fit into this definition?

The lesson to be learned from this case and other boundary cases, is that objects that go beyond accepted categories undermining accepted views, are cases which compel us to re-examine our categories and classifications. Applying this lesson to Architecture and Design, we should ask ourselves whether Aristotle's rigid principle of classification is relevant and helpful.

- Since we are all surrounded by designed objects as well as spaces planned by architects, which have gone dramatic changes in the last century, both in terms of content, appearance, material and mostly in terms of the growing public awareness, it is only natural if we question their identity and essence.



Centre Georges Pompidou,
Piano and Rogers, 1971

- When Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers built the Pompidou Centre in 1971 it seemed to resemble a brewery or an oil drill site far more than a center for the arts. The question was - how should we look at this odd and unfamiliar building in view of our past experience with museums and public buildings in general? Must this contemporary building bear true resemblance to similar institutions erected in the past, namely museums? Must our acceptance of new appearances depend on having seen similar things already? And furthermore, did Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers only change the paradigm of museums or can this amended paradigm be applied to other public buildings such as legislative offices, hospitals, and airports. How is the compatibility between the style of a building and its public function determined?

The same goes with other buildings designed by • Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, Le Corbusier, Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano, Bernard Tschumi, Frank Gherry, Daniel Libeskind, and many others, who have contributed to the proliferation of the language of Architecture, and have enriched our experience of structure and design, have challenged by the same token the merits of architecture and its foundations, expanding the notion of buildings beyond recognition. Guggenheim's museum by Frank Gherry has 'violated' traditional concepts of architecture, the same goes with Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, and Renzo Piano's Nemo in Amsterdam. And still, they all belong to the same family of architecture in spite of the fact that each one of them hardly relates to the other, as well as to buildings in architecture at large.

Guggenheim, 1959



Nemo, Amsterdam 2000



Berlin Jewish Museum, 2001,

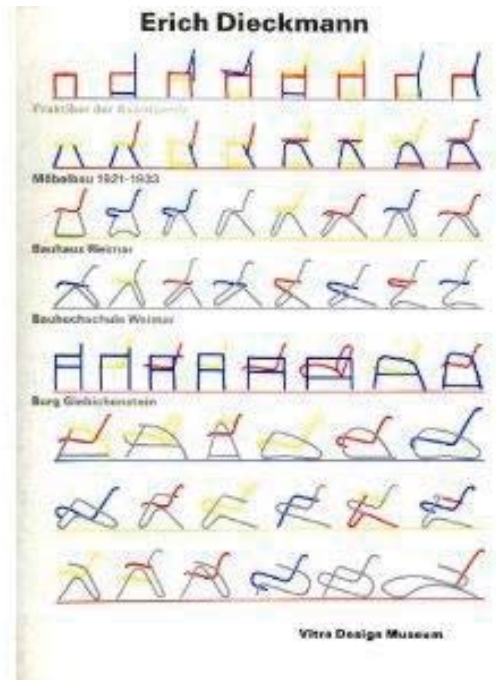


Similar questions could be asked in reference to design. The chair, the table and many other objects have all been altered dramatically over the years and one wonders at observing their development and transformations should they all belong to the same family tree? Indeed, a look at the history of chairs shows how far designers exceeded the usual prototype predicted by Erich Dieckmann. Dieckmann taught at the Bauhaus school and sketch out a linear, gradual development of chairs with each new addition fulfilling the potential rendered by the chair preceded it. According to Dieckmann's model, which reminds Mendeleev's periodic table of elements in chemistry, one can predict any evolution of form in the new model of chairs.

Erich Dieckmann 1896-1944



Going from left to right the location of each model presents the options of the chair design: it begins with the most basic and simple model on the left and then moves on to the bold and complex on the right. In other words, Dieckmann's chart drew several categories of design, in this case of chairs, to present the range of possible chairs as well as its limits. Any deviation from this model is ipso facto a realization of the potential inherent already in one of the options portrayed by him.



One could say that each of these examples, and many others, 'pulls you' towards a unique design direction, yet they all maintain the familial model advocated by Dieckmann.



Rafael Rossi, 1936



Gerrit Rietveld, 1924



Ron Arad, 1989

The question is how do we explain the dissimilarities in design and architecture, and further more, how do we explain our recognition of this dissimilarity?

The answer I intend to forward is based on • two theories of similarity: the first was elicited by the American philosopher – Quine, and the other was suggested by the Austrian philosopher – Wittgenstein. Both of them are analytic philosophers whose main interests were in language and logic. I will skip, with your permission, their methodological insights on language and logic, and concentrate mainly on their approach to the question of clustering.

11

Quine based his understanding of similarity • between objects on what he labeled as *natural kinds*, i.e.: if a, b, and c, are of the same manifested feature (let us say black ravens), they are all ipso facto a group. In order to identify objects as belonging to a group one should point at a certain generative feature with the help of which he can inductively put a, b, and c under the same group. Clustering objects into one group is a non-open game, and it practically means that objects of architecture as well as objects of design should comply to certain inherent rules. To identify a raven as belonging to the group of black ravens means that it should comply to their black generative feature in such a way that the new raven in question does not break the chain of induction. According to this theory a collection of chairs would be considered a group if their manifested features such as size, colour, function, shape, etc. can be identified.



William van Orman Quine 1908-2000



For example, chairs whose function is to sit on near a table, would not 'tolerate' a medical chair, the one used by dentists, as an equal member in their group. The same goes with decorative or experimental chairs, chairs placed in an airplanes, chairs whose function is to teach student of design how to build chairs, etc, etc.

In other words, objects of design as well as buildings in architecture, are identified, according to Quine's theory of natural kind, by their categorical manifested features.



The Eames chair, 1941



A leather dining room chair

Chairs to sit on and an experimental chair intended to represent a new and unconventional model.

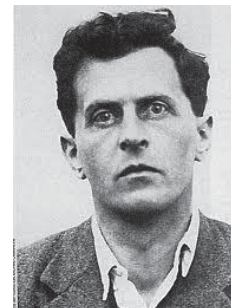


A commercial Italian chair



Chris M. Todd, Tripartite, 2006

The second philosophical approach to the problem of clustering was advocated by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's theory is much more democratic, tolerant and less rigid. He has denounced induction as a scientific method, introducing instead his concept of *Family resemblance*. According to Wittgenstein members of a family should not consider themselves members of the same family only on one inherent basis, such as similarity, size, height, etc. Belonging to a family is based, according to Wittgenstein, on the member's wish and desire to become a family. An adopted child would be considered an equal member of a family if he complies with the fate and interests of his fostered family, even though he does not resemble them whatsoever.

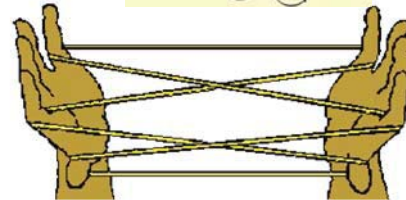
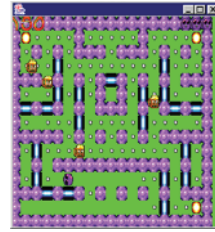


Ludwig Wittgenstein 1889-1951



A family with adopted children

The same goes with games: ball games, doll games, computer games, string games, etc. are all considered a family in spite of the fact that they do not resemble each other. English, Italian, Hebrew, Chinese etc. have no external common features, and yet they all belong to one family due to their function in communication, expression, etc.



Design objects of various kinds, • buildings of various styles, are, no doubt, of different kinds (have different appearances, different functions, different histories etc.), and yet according to Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory they all belong to the same cluster. Considering them as belonging to a family means that categorization is based on human interests and decisions and not on their inherent hidden traits.



The bottom line is that Wittgenstein • puts emphasis on deliberation, brainstorming, decision making, and not so much on the principle of induction, as Quine did.

Design and Architecture, as •
other artistic disciplines,
provoke within us
philosophical questions. One
main question concerns the
problem how do we classify
objects in the fields
discussed, and what are the
criteria for categorizing an
object in the bounds of
Design and Architecture. I
have pointed at two ways of
categorization, and now we
should make our minds which
of them suits us well.

References:

Quine, V. W., 1969, "natural kinds", in:
Schwartz, S. P., (ed.), *Naming, Necessity
and Natural kinds*, Ithaca, London

Wittgenstein, L., 1963, *Philosophical
Investigations*, Oxford U. pres