

SUBJECTIVE NOTIONS OF BEAUTY IN GREEK ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

Victor Deupi, Assistant Professor,
University of Notre Dame School of Architecture

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What I would like to discuss this afternoon is in many ways contrary to the conventional wisdom of New Urbanism – it goes against the clarity and logic of prescriptive masterplanning and production building, it challenges objective norms of beauty and character, and most importantly, it defies architectural and urban codification. Yet what I wish to describe is central to the language of classical architecture, and was recognized as an indispensable principle of Classicism from Antiquity through the 18th and 19th centuries. I am referring, of course, to subjective notions of beauty in classical architecture and traditional town planning.

Bio: Victor Deupi is a Cuban-American architect, teacher and writer on architecture. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame.

Previously, he was the Senior Tutor of the Graduate Course at the Prince of Wales' Institute of Architecture in London. In that capacity, he was responsible for organizing and overseeing the Masters degree program, seminars, lectures, exhibitions and projects.

He has lectured frequently on the relevance of classical architecture and traditional urbanism, and his work has been exhibited throughout the U.S., England, and Italy.

Mr. Deupi received a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Virginia in 1986 and a Master of Architecture from Yale University in 1989.

Most Recently he was awarded a Ph.D. in Architecture from the University of Pennsylvania for his thesis *Architectural Temperance: Spaniards and Rome 1700-1758*.

For the purposes of brevity I would like to focus my discussion on the Greek notion of subjective beauty, what may be called *eurythmia* (meaning “good rhythm”). For Greek architecture, not just temples but the entire urban context, can be described as exemplary. This may seem strange to many because the Romans were far more capable builders, putting up 50 temples per annum, whereas the Greeks would often take 50 years to build a single temple. Yet it is precisely the sophistication of Greek building that we should strive to emulate, for New Urbanism is in many ways like Roman architecture and urbanism – it is mainstream, widespread, familiar, and increasingly abundant. This kind of success was precisely what led the Augustan author Vitruvius to write his *Ten Books on Architecture*, a plea to the virtues of Greek architecture, because he insisted that the modern architecture of Rome lacked that sense of rightness that the best Greek examples conveyed.

I believe that New Urbanism has a great deal to learn from Classicism, and in particular Greek architecture, especially now that it has achieved such a high degree of success and stability. Moreover, it is time to elevate the standard of New Urbanist projects by seeking higher design criteria, for in the words of Andres Duany, Lizz Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck in their recent book *Suburban Nation*, “design affects behavior.” The lessons drawn from an inquiry into the Greek notion of *eurythmia* could very well provide a useful analogy in confronting the current crisis of purpose and meaning in contemporary architecture and urbanism.

As early as Vitruvius, whose treatise described the architecture of the ancient Greeks, emphasis was placed on the notion of measure and moderation in building. Vitruvius described this quality as *eurythmia*, which not only implied good rhythm and direction but also a structured unity to the elements of a building. Beyond this, however, the primary function of *eurythmia* was to arouse a pleasant sensation in the spectator. He expanded on the idea by indicating that harmony and graceful semblance are achieved primarily through optical refinements. By making allowances for perspectival distortions one compensated for what appeared irregular to the natural eye. Adjustments (*temperaturae*), which included both additions (*adiectiones*) and deductions (*detractioes*)

to the proportions of a building, not only refined the established dimensions, but also neutralized the visual distortions of the building.

Additionally, Vitruvius frequently used the expressions *venustas species* and *commodus aspectus* when describing *eurythmia*, and these terms also meant first and foremost “pleasant appearance”. Both Plato and Aristotle discussed the primacy of sight extensively. Plato praised sight as the most exalted of the senses, providing a clear knowledge of the natural world and its underlying principles of order and harmony. Similarly Aristotle claimed that all men delight in sight and its capacity to differentiate between things. Vitruvius’ description of *eurythmia* proceeded from these pronouncements, ensuring that a building, in addition to being ideal in itself, appeared ideal to the viewer. That he recognized the primacy of sight not only supported these earlier accounts on the importance of sight for philosophical knowledge, but also suggested the value of sight in architectural practice, in dealing with the contingencies of building. For Vitruvius the ingenuity and judgement required in exercising *eurythmia* were not only essential for the creation of good architecture, but were symptomatic of the gifts distinguishing the good architect.

In other words, Vitruvius considered *eurythmia* as a kind of *giudizio naturale* (natural judgment), that quality which enabled an architect to express his or her own personal taste and direction. What is important here is that he maintained an approach to architecture that stated at least implicitly that the basis of architectural character was in moderation and adjustment (good rhythm), and that this was not simply an aesthetic problem but an ethical one too. The tempering of a building or urban setting relied to a great extent on relationships determined by aesthetic judgment; that is to say relationships that are conditioned by the judgment of sense rather than any specific rules or laws of harmonic proportion. David Summers has described this process as one that goes beyond the application of principles “by doing what seemed best to the eye”. In fact, he insists that “these ‘right’ relations [can] be found in no other way,” and that “[t]he deeper, metaphorical notion of point of view thus points to *maniera*, to personal style.” The business of tempering architecture, therefore, touches on such basic axioms as how artistic creation relates to truth and whether it is a defensible position to persuade a viewer simply through delight. The argument suggests that *eurythmia* did not simply spring up as historical necessity demanded, but was instead an adaptation, and transformation of an idea whose history may be traced to the “Pythagorean root” of Western civilization.

I have tried to show that *eurythmia* - an idea so neglected in contemporary architecture - was systematically related to the origins of aesthetic judgment in art. By examining the language of ancient architects and writers on architecture in their articulation of what may be called “good rhythm,” or “pleasant appearance,” I have tried to show that the subjective notion of beauty was intimately related to the available syntax of architectural form and meaning. This phenomenon was achieved in ways that shaped both the intention of the architect and the reception of the spectator, and in doing so located *eurythmia* in a vast web of custom, meaning, selection and transformation. And it is precisely this quality that represented the height of architectural ambition. Clearly, New Urbanism has a great deal to learn from the Greeks, but if the multitude of forms offered by classical architecture are to have any part in this process, we need to rediscover a rhythm that will give it endurance and smoothness.