

## On Perfection

It's easy to confuse perfection of craft with a good idea in our consumer culture. This happens to consumers of architecture because the inexperienced client is accustomed to manufactured products fabricated in highly controlled environments. This is not how architecture is made. The making of a building should be thought to occur in a studio setting and not a factory floor.

A really good idea trumps polished craft. The pursuit of perfection is fine if it's aimed at a worthwhile idea. Hopefully an idea reads through despite inevitable less-than-perfect execution. Buildings are, after all, handmade. The things we make with our hands are bound by time but ideas are eternal.

There is something to be admired about objects that are seemingly perfect. (It must be clear that the term 'object' is important here because environments, places and architecture are even more prone to flaws.) But even objects that seem perfect have secret hidden flaws even if these are known only to their makers. When we see perfect things we inevitably arrive at the thought, after exhausting our amazement at the perfect thing before us, "This object will eventually chip, crack and decay."

Decay appeals to one part of our minds because decay represents the passage of time. Nature is the corrosive agent but this is hardly inspiring. The more useful approach to the march of time is the purposeful crafting of objects in quixotic defiance of natural decay.

I am reminded of the story of Japanese temple builders. The craft of creating the temples as objects had become so carefully developed that the builders seemed to create flawless temples. This was, to them, an affront to the gods. The builders then introduced visible flaws into the temple constructions as a show of humility. That's the way the story goes. Of course, introducing purposeful flaws is an even higher form of vanity. What might be more useful is to strive for perfection while allowing for evidence of the human hand.

This is not an apology for sloppiness but rather a letting-in of two other kinds of beauty – the contemplation of an idea and the recognition of human touch. The contemplation of an idea is never tiring – it is timeless. The beauty of the hand – the evidence of something having been made – suggests the 'timefulness' of experience. This pairing allows us to be connected to the here and now while also reaching for things beyond our time.

What does this mean during the design phase and, later, at the job site? Sophisticated clients should be asking their architect, "What is the idea for this project?" The design documents should strive for the perfect expression of an idea.

The idea is then used to question every decision. “How does this decision support the idea of the project?” This approach will take one away from the expectations of style and away from what one’s friends might expect. It’s amazing to see how often clients are affected by what others might think. The idea should be our guide.

During construction an acknowledgement of the limits of the hand does not mean something has been compromised. A good builder will still strive for the very best expression of the idea. Allowing the hand into the process, the evidence of human touch, establishes the wonderful pairing of a timeless idea and a celebration of the hand-wrought project. This is how the eternal and the everyday are linked.

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