

SOCIAL MEDIA: THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTIONS OF ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract. Perceptions of architecture vary depending on the reader. This study is based on an experiment involving social media. A provocative architectural photomontage is shared on Facebook without using the sponsored feature. Inputs, notably 'Likes' and 'Comments', received within 24 hours from posting were analysed. Unlike respondents who are involved in architecture, the general public is afraid of innovative design, departing from the prescriptive formal and informal norms, the comfort zone. The emphasis of the public is the utilitarian rather than the aesthetic dimension of architecture.

Key words: Facebook, third-person effect, perception, values, design values

1. Introduction

Architecture is neither restricted to architects nor to clients. It is in the public domain and thus impinges on society. Civil society has a voice, often silent, but sometimes loud. This voice had long been acknowledged and nowadays is more pronounced and secured through legislative frameworks and directives. Member States of the European Union have to abide by, say, the EIA Directive 2014/52/EU which endorses public consultation in environmental impact assessments with respect to development planning projects. This applies equally to the SEA Directive 2001/42/EC. It is nowadays the norm the all development planning and planning control

applications are publicly advertised by the competent authorities for the general public to review them and submit any suggestions and objections. This became more pronounced with the emerging civilly militant environmental Non-Governmental Organisations especially though their numerous lobbying networks.

Values in architecture and the way they are evaluated by architects has been the subject of a doctoral thesis completed nearly four decades ago at the Royal College of Art, London (Lera, 1980). Based on this research Ukabi (2015) had developed a classification for architectural design values in terms of

aesthetic, social, environmental traditional, economic, gender-based, novel and mathematical/scientific values (Table 1). Comparative qualitative research proves that values and perception of contemporary architecture by architects significantly differ from those of civil society (Bianco, 2018). Whilst the emphasis of the former is on aesthetics, the latter highlights the experiential utilitarian dimension.

Table 1. Objectives of architectural design values (Based on Ukabi, 2015 and reproduced by Bianco, 2018)

Design value	Intentions
Aesthetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artistic aspects and self-expression • The spirit of the time • Structural, functional and material honesty • Simplicity and minimalism • Natural and organic • Classical, traditional and vernacular • Regionalism
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social change • Consultation and participation • Crime prevention • The 'Third world'
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green and sustainability • Re-use and modification • Health
Traditional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tradition • Restoration and preservation • Vernacular
Other	Includes economic, gender-based, novel and mathematical/scientific values

The aim of this study is to get feedback from the general public on architecture by analysing the citizen's perception through a post on Facebook, one of the most popular social media with over a billion active users. This medium "provides us with a public forum to express our views, but it also facilitates a

deeper connection with a satisfying, personalized world of subjective feelings and emotions" (Marichal, 2012). Consequently the purpose of this research is to identify the reactions of users of Facebook to an architectural photomontage. Through information shared by the users on their respective Facebook profiles, which are public, a profile of the respondents could be drawn up. Unlike anonymous questionnaires, the identity of the respondents is known.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Post on Facebook

The response of the public was gathered through a 'provocative' post on Facebook which included an image of a residential unit hanging off a ridge. The post was uploaded on 13 May 2014 on the Facebook page of Cambria Hebert (2014), the official fan page for author Cambria Hebert, with the comment "Would you live in this house? Yes or No?" (Fig. 1). It was shared by the author on the wall of his Facebook page on 8 May 2015 with the comment "Very interesting ... certainly it has a view" (Prof. Perit Lino Bianco, 2015). At the time, the author had circa 3,500 friends on Facebook. The post was not 'sponsored', a marketing feature available in Facebook.

2.2. Considerations

The use of Facebook as a research tool is quite innovative. The seminal publication on this social medium is by Marichal (2012). Although it puts forward several investigative research questions, no in-depth discussion on Facebook as a research medium is included.

The usefulness of Facebook as a research tool for the social sciences was addressed by Kosinski *et al.* (2015).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Responses

Most of the friends of the author in Facebook are from Malta where social media and social networking are popular. In a span of just over 24 hours, the post had an organic reach of 3598. It received 477 post clicks, 83 likes, 67 comments and 0 shares. 18 individuals who commented also liked the post. Furthermore, two individuals each posted two comments. Engagement amounted to 10% of the total reach. The number of respondents is given in Table 2. A graphical representation of their distribution is given in Fig. 2. A snap shot of the comments is shown in Fig. 3.

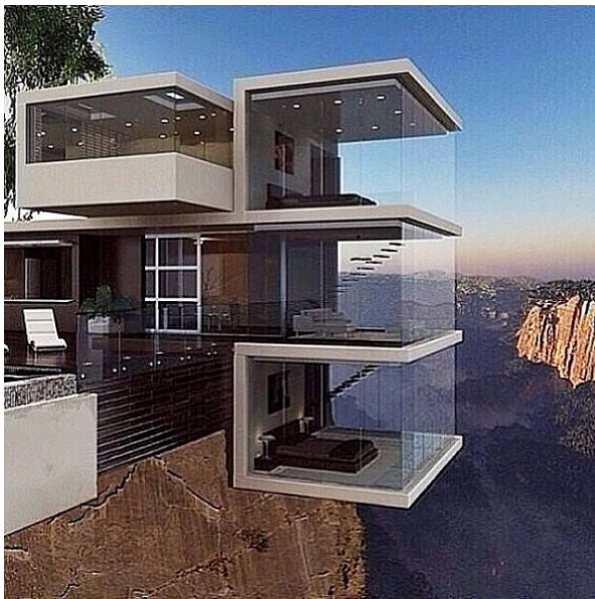


Fig. 1. The image of a residential unit (Cambria Hebert, 2014)

Table 2. Respondents to Facebook post

Gender	Likes (L)		Comments (C)		Total	
	Friends	Other	Friends	Other	L	C
Male (M)	23	6	2	10	29	12
Female (F)	45	9	8	45	54	53
M + F	68	15	10	55	83	65

To ensure accuracy of the results, the profile of the respondents was individually checked in order to determine whether it was fake. All respondents, including those who were

'not friends', were authentic as all had several friends common with the author. All females who were not friends on Facebook at the time were over 50 years of age, mostly over 60. The same holds for female friends except for one respondent. In the case of male respondents, the average age was 15 years lower than that of the females.

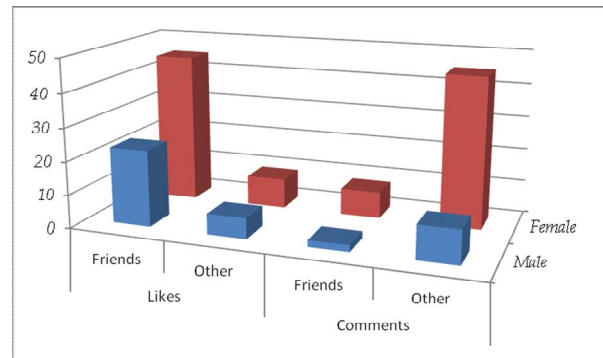


Fig. 2. Distribution of responses to Facebook post

Regardless of gender and age, and irrespective of its perception by a few as "very interesting" and having "fantastic views", over 95% of the respondents refuse to live in such a house. The following responses sum up the overall spectrum of their reactions: "Never and never ... seeing it only makes me shiver ... how come anyone so courageous to live like this ..."; "Nice; something different. It is a bit scary; no privacy, but yessss"; and "No for sure. By the way who is going to clean the glass?"

Phobia of heights is a major response, and a few expressed concerns relating to the structural stability of the overhang. Some perceive the house as dangerous and are afraid that it may not be able to take the live loads associated with habitation such as furniture. Most of the respondents who found no problem to live in such a house are mostly involved in the architecture profession. Their typical answer is "Yes I would" and an architecture student read the internal steps as a "levitating staircase to heaven".

None questioned whether it is a photomontage. This is comprehensible for individuals not involved in the profession of architecture or an allied discipline. The question arises with the remaining respondents. Their reading of the image can be interpreted as conceptual, a self-evident detail when looking at the design by a trained eye.

3.2. Discussion

The purpose of Facebook is social communication. Its primary features

common with other social networking sites are profiles, friends list and comments (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). These sites are a form of space comprising what Boyd calls 'mediated publics', that is, "environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology" (Boyd, 2007). The four properties of mediated publics which he identified, namely persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences, are defined in Table 3.



Fig. 3. A screen shot of comments received

Table 3. Properties of mediated publics (Based on Boyd, 2007)

Property	Definition
1 Persistence	Content of communication is accessible over the years
2 Searchability	Ease of information about one's hangouts
3 Replicability	Conversation/s may be cut and pasted into another place/context thus rendering difficult to establish whether the content was edited.
4 Invisible audiences	Persistence, searchability, and replicability introduce audiences that were not present when the expression/opinion/comment was created

Is the Third-Person Effect (TPE) an issue in Facebook? Its causes have long been noted (Brosius and Engel, 1996). The TPE hypothesis, a term coined and defined by Davison, “predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others. More specifically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. ...

“The phenomenon ... has been called the ‘third-person effect’ because third persons are involved from two different observational standpoints. In the view of those trying to evaluate the effects of a communication, its greatest impact will not be on ‘me’ or ‘you’, but on ‘them’ - the third persons” (Davison, 1983).

TPE assumes that media users are inclined to believe that media influence them less than others. Davison’s theory gained momentum in the 1980s and was applied to various genres ranging from marketing to on-line social media. Tsay-Vogel (2016) noted that TPE had received substantial scientific endorsement over

the years through the work of Cohen *et al.* (1988), Gunther (1991, 1992, 1995), Gunther and Mundy (1993), Gunther and Thorson (1992), Paul *et al.* (2000), Perloff (1989) and Salwen and Driscoll (1997). Although a leading study in 2009 concluded that it is less pronounced in Facebook and Twitter (Zhang and Daugherty, 2009), a more recent one shows that this effect is substantial among users of Facebook. Such users have a higher tendency to report this social networking site for “exerting a stronger effect on others than on themselves” (Tsay-Vogel, 2015).

‘Sponsoring’ is a comprehensive strategy for a post to reach a larger public. Through this feature, “the advertisements that are shown intuitively depend on the preferences or ‘Likes’ of the individual’s friends. This leads the Facebook user to believe that the product or service featured is worthwhile since it has already been endorsed by his[/her] friend/s with whom he[/she] shares common values and interests with. This may subsequently entice him[/her] to click on the link and even ‘Like’ it. Nobody ever wants to be the first to arrive at the party, but if you are accompanied by a friend or two, it will be significantly less embarrassing” (Yavetz, 2012). Given that the image posted was not shared, the information/question raised was not disseminated by the viewers. The tangible feedback was ‘likes’ and ‘comments’. There were no comment/s versus another; the only cross-comments were made by the author of the study. One comment read: “Great reactions. Some architects design ... but forget the end user(s). It may be [an] interesting building ... but there is a difference between seeing and feeling architecture. Architecture is not just about thoughts and concepts ... but about

feelings. Friends, your reactions are so valid ... and yet so many designers forget to take into account". On Facebook individuals revealed themselves through their emotions, such as excitement, fear, suspense etc.; each respondent voiced his/her opinion rather than not sharing it.

It has been argued that Facebook is a form of 'false fraternisation' because relationships occur in a habitual setting: "Facebook is a form of *false fraternization* [italics as in original] not because the relationships we are engaged in on Facebook are false, but because they occur within a routinized setting, one that allows us to 'safely escape' from the difficulty *private work* [italics as in original] of friendship into a setting that is familiar while allowing us to engage in the nonymous identity play that appeals to our sense of the 'specialness of inner life'" (Marichal, 2012). Social media increase intimacy between friends and narrow the gap between public and private life (Broadbent, 2009). The issue of presenting one's actual self without the fear of being rejected, a point raised by Marichal (2012) in his discussion on Facebook and the decline of the public, is not an issue in this study. Respondents are individuals who freely shared their opinion without fear of being rejected. Irrespective of gender, the response of friends for 'Likes' was four times greater than the response of others. With respect to 'Comments', the responses were inversely proportional: for both genders the feedback of others was circa four times the response from friends. Furthermore, TPE was not noted in the study. The results with respect to the 'Likes' and 'Comments' received highlight the traditional stereotypical gender of persons mostly at home, the 'housewives'.

3.3. Limitations of this study

With respect to the Facebook post, only individuals who saw the post reacted to it. The number could have been significantly larger if the post had been boosted for a larger estimate reach. If it were undertaken selectively, one could have secured a representative sample of a given age group and/or a given location.

4. Conclusions

An individual's response to architectural design gives an insight into his/her intrinsic values and perceptions of architecture. Further to pragmatic concerns and acrophobia, other results of this study include the following:

1. Only a fifth of the respondents were male;
2. TPE was not pronounced in respondents making use of Facebook;
3. Facebook friends 'Likes' are four times greater than the number of others who are not friends on Facebook; and
4. The inverse of (3) above applies to 'Comments'; only a fifth are Facebook friends.

The fear of change, of venturing away from the 'prescriptive' formal and informal norms, the physical and psychological comfort zones, is pronounced. The emphasis of the public is on the utilitarian aspect rather than the aesthetic one; it is imperative that the building stands and functions.

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