Hannah Hall

Mr. Speice

ISM

14 September 2017

Architectural Theory and Vitruvius

This week I decided to look more into what an architect would study while majoring in architecture at most high level universities. Last year I visited Rice University during a school week and was able to attend an Architectural Theory class. The material was very interesting and the lecture was engaging, but I still did not really know what exactly architectural theory was. My inferenced definition was "Architectural Theory is the study of how and why architecture evolves over time." After doing some research, I was able to construct a more specific and accurate definition of "Architectural Theory is the thoughtful consideration and writing about architecture." It is really a quite broad definition that could cover many topics related to architecture.

The beginning of architectural theory is traced back to a man by the name of Vitruvius (15BC). He was the author of *De Architectura* which is a book on the foundations of classical architecture. In this text, Vitruvius presents his three principles of architecture: "firmitas," "utilitas," and "venustas." From the stems of these words, one can loosely translate these principles to mean structure/solidarity, function/utility, and visual/beauty. These principles have clearly stood the test of time as most people today take these principles into consideration when

talking about a building. The most common time for non-architects to take these three things into consideration would be in buying a house. The three things home buyers are most concerned with are the structure and stability of the house, the flow and functionality of it, and of course the aesthetic.

Vitruvius's *De Architectura* is relevant today in more ways than one. It has been likened to the Bible for architects. It has been translated into most of the major languages of the world and many people who study architecture are required to read it at some point or another. For the majority of architects, it is looked upon as the most basic textbook or the first stepping stone to not only architectural theory, but architecture as a whole. Like the Bible, there is more than just one English translation. The earliest one, which was completed in 1914 by Morris Hickey Morgan, is seen by some as excessively verbose and grandiloquent, losing too much of the original intent of the author in the literary style of the era. A newer translation by Ingrid Rowland clears up many of the discrepancies of Vitruvius's intent in the Morgan translation and provides better illustrations.

Although architectural theory is very interesting, for what other reason should architects study it? They should study it for the simple fact that it is very relevant. The "founder" so to speak may have lived thousands of years ago, but some things about architecture will never change. Vitruvius's three principles were relevant then, they are relevant now, and they have been relevant every day in between. From era to era, architects pay attention to what went wrong and what went well in buildings constructed before their time, and they learn from the mistakes of those who came before. For example, during the classical period between 600 BC and 600 CE architects used technologies such as ornately carved columns, which were functional and

visually appealing, to hold up heavy ceilings. Over time, the weight on the columns just got to be too much and the stone of the columns crumbled. The architects who came along in the post-classical period (600 CE - 1450 CE) noted the weaknesses of these structures and came up with better technologies in structure and stability to keep their buildings standing longer. Born from this period were pointed arches, flying buttresses, and more. These new innovations in architecture redistributed the weight from upper floors and sent it outward more than downward so that the building would not cave in on itself so quickly.

Architectural theory is applicable across all ages, from Vitruvius to now. "Firmitas," "utilitas," and "venustas" have remained the three main principles of architecture for thousands of years and not without reason. Stability, function, and beauty are so general and yet so accurate which is why they have endured for so long. Architects learn from each other from age to age using as a frame of reference these three principles and architectural theory.

Works Cited

Fisher, Saul. "Philosophy and the Tradition of Architectural Theory." *Stanford Encyclopedia of*

Philosophy, Stanford University, 2015,

plato.stanford.edu/entries/architecture/tradition.html.

HAWKES, DEAN. "ARCHITECTURAL THEORY." *The Architectural Review*, Oct. 1999, p.

97. *Academic OneFile*,

go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=j043905010&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA58

310689&it=r&asid=414da9cc25ef70be4b18a02f5899d854. Accessed 15 Sept. 2017.

TAVERNOR, ROBERT. "VITRUVIUS 'TEN BOOKS ON ARCHITECTURE': a New English

Translation with Commentary and Illustrations." *The Architectural Review*, Dec. 1999, p.

94. *Academic OneFile*,

go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=j043905010&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA59

177298&it=r&asid=d8de634fbbc4601442a755d7458f2698. Accessed 15 Sept. 2017.