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Style

The Massive Style

I propose the existence of *a style*, rather than simply *style*, to distinguish between the latter term, which describes the general notion of the rationale behind artistic form-creation, and the former term, which instead suggests that a style is a singular element in a larger set of styles. Each element in such a set provides some basis for a grouping of elements from a set of artistic creations. To conjure a style out of thin air, according to this definition, it suffices to identify among artworks a set of shared attributes—*generators* of the style. The Neo-plasticists identified a priori the basis of particular versus universal; instead of grouping art works after they had been created, they first identified the axis along which beauty was found (representation of the universal) and then created art to match the style.¹ The same is true for the modernists of Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, which was influential in formalizing the architectural principles of the modern movement. Historically, many styles have evolved from a conscious declaration of generating principles. Other styles have evolved organically, only being assigned a label after having run their course. Hegel's identification of the classical and the gothic is of the latter type: he posited the generators of each style based on empirical observation.² My declaration regarding the massive style fits squarely in this category.

The Massive Style is a style of architecture that I have observed to unite certain buildings that would otherwise not be united. It is not a style in which architects consciously chose to work; it is not brutalism, nor modernism; it is multinational, spanning both continents and centuries; the kernel of the

¹ Jaffé, H. L. C. "De Stijl 1917-1931."

² Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Aesthetics Lectures on Fine Art: Volume 1."

style, rather than a set of principles on the part of the architects involved, is simply a set of emotions with which buildings belonging to the Massive Style engender the feeling of beauty in observers. This style, therefore, is defined in psychological terms. As said by Gottfried Semper, “The magic that affects the soul through art—enabling art to captivate the soul completely—is called beauty. This is not so much an attribute of the work as an effect.”³ It is an effect that is perceived and felt; the artwork, in a sense, generates a psychological state in the minds of observers. There are two terms for which a clear definition will prove helpful. Mass is that which is created by architects; it is consciously put in certain places and removed from other places. The first half of this paper will discuss various techniques that architects employ to accentuate mass such that it becomes a dominant part of a building’s character—this is one of the criteria for membership to the Massive Style. Weight, on the other hand, is that which is felt by observers of buildings belonging to the Massive Style. A structure’s mass conveys weight, which in turn produces a distinct psychological effect in the minds of observers. The second half of this paper will discuss the emotions that form the core of the Massive Style.

Techniques for Accentuating Mass

There are several architectural techniques that are commonly used to accentuate mass: scale, symmetry and tessellation, isolation, and materiality. These techniques are not unique to the Massive Style, but all buildings belonging to this style exhibit a minimum of one of the aforementioned characteristics. Several architects employ multiple techniques simultaneously; the features build upon one another, working in harmony to accentuate their host building’s massive effect.

The scale of a work, if used appropriately, can concisely convey an intense feeling of weight to the observer. Take, for example, the Breuer Building in New York City (Marcel Breuer, 1966).

³ Semper, Gottfried. *Style in the technical and tectonic arts, or, Practical aesthetics*.



Figure 1.A. The Breuer Building (exterior), Marcel Breuer 1966.

In essence, the building is a cube: it appears to be a solid block of material, rectangular in shape aside from a series of oversized, inverted steps cut out of the front; its surface is a uniform grey or brown concrete-like material, entirely unadorned aside from a handful of protruding windows. The entrance is low, dark, and subtle—to enter the building, observers must walk underneath the oversized steps, towards the dark shadow created by their overhang, and into the belly of the cube. The technique employed here is a trick of scale to convince those who interact with the building that they are small in size, and that, in contrast, the building *must* be massive.

The weight of the Breuer Building is conveyed through a diminution of observers. The human mind naturally assumes objects that possess fundamental forms—cubes, pyramids, spheres, cones—to be human scale. When a fundamental form is blown out of proportion, as is the case with the Breuer Building, observers feel a stark sense of conflict: the nature of the form, that is, the essence associated with their mind's recollection of the form, is small, whereas the physical form before them is large. Such a conflict is not experienced as strongly when observing skyscrapers in the international style, such as the

Seagram Building (Mies van der Rohe, 1958), because the architects of that style do not work to accentuate the fundamental form. Rather, they puncture it with windows and vertical lines, so as to express volume, light, air, and verticality, instead of expressing the fact that the building is simply a rectangular box. With the Breuer Building, every feature is purposefully not human scale. The steps carved into the front are ten feet tall instead of ten inches tall; the windows are few, far between, and at odd angles; the door is deeply recessed, not an afterthought, but rather a conscious attenuation of its presence in the building's appearance to the street. The building looms over observers, asserting its size by making onlookers feel small.



Figure 1.B. The atrium of the Breuer Building.

Upon walking inside the Breuer Building, people are not free of the weight of the structure. It is not an oppressive weight, as is the case with many fascist works, but rather a weight that sits silently, dignified, and commanding of respect. The interior of the Breuer Building conveys weight not through scale but through symmetry and tessellation: the ceiling of the atrium consists of circular lights, each

roughly two feet in diameter, placed in a compact square lattice that extends across the entire building. In a sense, the large scale repetition of lighting fixtures does play with scale, but the technique that most expresses mass and weight in this instance is symmetry. The repeated pattern on the ceiling expresses a sense of infinity to the observer: this infinity is the antithesis of well-defined surface beginnings and endings. While the exterior of the building firmly delineates the edges and corners of its bounding volume, the interior appears as vast and as vague as the vacuum of space. While the exterior form of the building diminishes observers by asserting, “here I am,” the interior diminishes observers by conflating the symmetrical, spatially-massive grid pattern—lacking any point of origin onto which observers might try to grasp—with the very essence of the building itself. Observers, so localized in space and in time, feel minuscule compared to this ceiling that has no sense of space or time. In the same manner as the feature of scale, symmetry expresses massiveness through the diminution of observers.

Isolation of elements is another technique used by architects to accentuate the massiveness of a structure. This technique involves the intentional separation of fundamental shapes—squares, rectangles, circles, triangles—from the mass of a building. The psychological effect of such a spatial arrangement is similar to that generated by symmetry and tessellation. A prime example of isolation is Hunstanton school (Alison and Peter Smithson, 1955). The western façade of the main school building consists of several sand-colored brick walls, outlined by black steel beams. Two of the walls rest on the ground; the others rest on top of those. Between the suspended rectangles are windows and other beams, all of which are either dark grey or black, so as to visually recede into the background. In the case of Hunstanton School, the brick walls are the isolated feature. Upon perceiving the plane in which the walls have been isolated, observers experience feelings of vastness. The plane, in this instance, is oriented perpendicular to the surface of the earth: vastness gives way to an observation of immense visual weight commanded by the isolated surfaces. Physical weight is suggested to the observer through the interaction between this visual weight and gravity.



Figure 2. Hunstanton School, Alison and Peter Smithson 1955.

Similar to the paintings of Piet Mondrian, the façade of Hunstanton School appears as a collection of fundamental two-dimensional forms: rectangles suspended in space, separated from one another by dark lines (the steel beams supporting the walls). In both Mondrian's abstract paintings and Hunstanton School, there is a feeling of aloneness. Not loneliness, which refers to a feeling of isolation on the part of the observer, but aloneness, which refers to isolation on the part of that which is observed. The suspension of these rectangular surfaces in space emphasizes their visual weight; their isolation lightly suggests that the rectangles are *all* that exist in the plane on which they live. The façade is not a snapshot of the plane, it is the complete picture—in that sense the rectangles are alone. This aloneness is the key insight that generates the afore-positated feelings of vastness in observers of Hunstanton School's western façade.

There is one additional architectural technique that suggests mass and conveys weight: materiality. With this method, architects use the material quality of the building's structure to convey to observers the weight which is being borne. This technique was often employed by practitioners of the Renaissance style, since it also expresses rationality: the form of the column recalls the distribution of axial forces within it. An example of this method is the Palazzo Medici Riccardi (Michelozzo, 1472).⁴ The façade of the building is divided vertically into three sections: the walls bordering the ground floor are built from a coarse stone, stacked like a rudimentary stone wall; the walls of the second floor are semi-smooth, consisting of large cut sand-colored blocks; the walls of the third floor are made from the finest cut stone, the gaps between which are nearly imperceptible to observers located on the street. The gradation in material roughness conveys the gradient of force that is distributed throughout the load-bearing walls of the building. The stones on the ground floor bear the most weight, so they are the roughest and the heaviest. The stones at the top bear relatively little weight, so they are fine and dainty. Heinrich Wölfflin describes the impact of this on observers: "This effect of yielding to an oppressive weight is sometimes so powerful that we imagine that the forms affected are actually suffering."⁵ As their eye falls from the cornice to the ground floor, the gradation in materiality convinces observers of the building's own massiveness. Because of the rational means—the visually evident small, medium, and large stones—by which observers come to understand the force the building exerts on itself, the weight of the structure is communicated intellectually, rather than emotionally.

⁴ See figure 3 in the appendix.

⁵ Wölfflin, Heinrich, Guy Ballangé, and Bernard Teyssèdre. *Renaissance and baroque*.



Figure 3. Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Michelozzo 1472.

Psychological Effects of Weight

The massive style, presented here, is unified by a common psychological affect on those who experience it. While the techniques presented above serve as the medium by which architects imbue their works with the essence of massiveness, it is the psychological effects, generated by weight, that instill a sense of beauty in observers. Beauty, in this context, refers to the definition proposed by Gottfried Semper: “what we mean by terms like ‘sense of beauty,’ ‘delight in beauty,’ ‘enjoyment of art,’ and ‘artistic instance’ is analogous to those instincts, pleasures, and gratifications that govern the way in which we maintain our telluric existence. Strictly speaking, these can be traced back to the momentary removal, numbing, or forgetting of pain.”⁶ The beauty of the massive style is coherently captured by a short list of feelings which serve to remove and numb pain; upon perceiving a work that belongs to the massive style, observers might feel any number of them. The feelings are: naturalness, excitement, harmony, and majesty.

The first feeling I wish to discuss is naturalness, which, in the scope of this paper, refers to the feeling of connection to nature. This feeling arises most easily when immersed in a natural environment—when hiking in the forest, when swimming in a natural body of water, when walking through a field with no man-made structures in sight. Architectural historicist Adrian Forty likens the massive concrete landscapes of post-urban-renewal America to an “urban nature.” He finds evidence for this description through a comparison of modern cinema to old spaghetti western films: similar to how the desert was used as a harsh natural environment in which characters were tested, modern films use massive urban sprawl as a harsh backdrop against which characters undergo struggle. He says, “we reinterpret concrete environments as being a second nature.”⁷ Forty makes this comment in a discussion about the influence of concrete as a modern building material, but the idea of a connection between the built environment and the natural world has implications for buildings that belong to the massive style as well. The genesis of the

⁶ Semper, Gottfried. *Style in the technical and tectonic arts, or, Practical aesthetics*.

⁷ Forty, Adrian. *Concrete and culture: a material history*.

mind's connection between organic landscape and build landscape is the shared element of massiveness; it is not the physical massiveness that is immediately felt, but rather the psychological effect of that mass that creates a commonality in experience between the two environments.



Figure 4. Jewett Arts Center, Paul Rudolph 1958.

Feelings of excitement are closely related to naturalness: both arise, in part, from the phenomenon of spatial complexity, which is a side effect of certain implementations of massiveness. Spatial complexity—which I am referring to here as both a feeling (a psychological product of a building's weight) and a descriptive term—is the emotion that is felt when perceiving a spatially diverse, mentally stimulating, three-dimensional configuration of objects in space. The Breuer Building is not very spatially complex because it is straightforward to comprehend. It is a cube with windows and a door; it has very few spatial elements that remain hidden from observers. The Jewett Arts Center (Paul Rudolph, 1958) at Wellesley college has a high degree of spatial complexity: it contains stairs that connect different levels of courtyards;

part of the building serves as a bridge over a dark tunnel; there are outdoor walkways that suddenly transition to indoor spaces; elements start at one point in space, trace a spline path through three-dimensions, and end abruptly in a different part of the building. Such a work compels observers to physically move around and explore its various aspects.

The building stimulates and excites the mental faculties of those who perceive it. The careful creation of massive elements in the plan of the building is what creates spatial complexity. It creates spaces of pressure and vacuum which push and pull observers. Not only does the visual weight of these pressure and vacuum spaces force the movement of the eye, but their essence of weight provides complimentary inviting and hostile spaces that intrigue and comfort visitors to the building. For example, a visitor to the Jewett Arts Center might initially be drawn to the dark tunnel that offers no view of what's on the other side. They experience the vacuum created by such a space, and are physically drawn towards it. The experience of passing through the unlit tunnel provides them a sense of danger and excitement. As they cross the centerline of the tunnel however, the tunnel turns into a pressure space. The excitement cannot last long, as the darkness, now at their back, feels cold and uninviting. They are comforted, however, by the light airiness of the courtyard that is in front of them. Warm light and bright colors serve as a safe haven from the sinister undertones of the tunnel. The observer is pushed out of the tunnel and into the courtyard, as the sharp feelings of excitement slowly morph into feelings of relief and relaxation. And this cycle continues in perpetuity as observers wander around the site, drawn towards one vacuum space, repelled as they pass through it, and brought back into the comfort of a neutral space, all the while engendering oscillatory feelings of excitement and relief. Such a cycle is a common psychological effect of massive architectural works that choose to play with spatial complexity—not all do, but those that choose to often find mass accentuation to be an effective tool.

The feelings of majesty and harmony are linked and often arise together. Majesty is a direct consequence of the technique of scale, presented earlier in this paper. The diminution of the observer by

the scale of the building creates an implication of spatial insignificance—that the space occupied by the observer is inconsequential compared to the volume and mass of the building. Such a feeling is heightened the closer in proximity one comes to observing a massive work. From far away, a work may look massive, but it is only upon approach that the work begins to feel massive. That is, it begins to occupy more space in observers' visual horizons, until it is all that they are able to perceive. The natural analogy to this architectural feature is a canyon, with walls that slowly rise on either side of a person passing through the middle of it, until the walls soar above their head. The importance of their self shrinks under the spatial and visual domination of the massive building, and the only consonant thought that remains in their mind is of awe and majesty for the structure that holds such power over them. In a sense, majesty is the opposite of spatial complexity; it is the one-ness versus the multitudes. While spatially complex environments excite observers through the diverse spatial distribution of mass and of the absence of mass, a majestic environment demands observers attention through its centralization of mass.

Harmony, on the other hand, is a purely visual phenomenon. Where a building demands awe from observers, it gives to observers a harmonious release of visual tension. In practice, this release of tension arises from long-distance visual connections. Consider, for example, the Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, 1975).⁸ The building is made from concrete; it consists primarily of a large rectangular block, roughly two stories in height and two hundred meters long, sitting atop six massive columns, each of which is roughly thirty feet tall and has a V-shaped cross-section. The six columns are in a line, sitting opposite from an exterior wall that runs the length and height of the building. Together, the columns and the wall bound a rectangular volume of space; a tunnel. When viewing the Fine Arts Center from an oblique angle, a mild frustration begins to develop in observers due to the clear non-optimality of their vantage point: they are able to see that a tunnel exists, formed by the gaps in the columns, but their view-point awards them only partial clarity. To attain full visual

⁸ See figure 5 in the appendix.

satisfaction—which the mind deduces will occur when the columns are perfectly lined up in the their visual frame, and the volume bounded by the tunnel presents itself most clearly—they must move to the center axis of the tunnel. When they arrive and direct their eyes along the axis upon which they now stand, all former tension is released. It is from this vantage point that the building is most justified in demanding awe from observers, but also the point in which the structure is most generous with the visual harmony it provides.



Figure 5. Fine Arts Center, Kevin Roche & John Dinkeloo 1975.

The framework of the Massive Style is similar in construction to that of Brutalism. Many works of architecture that can be categorized into one of the styles can also be categorized into the other.

Assignment of style to a building is not exclusive, as it is possible for one work to simultaneously meet the requirements of several different styles, or none at all. The Brutalists sought honesty and objectivity in their work. In their manifesto describing the New Brutalism, Alison and Peter Smithson write, “Any

discussion of Brutalism will miss the point if it does not take into account Brutalism's attempt to be objective about "reality"—the cultural objectives of society, its urges, and so on." The emotions that characterize the massive style—naturalness, excitement, harmony, and majesty—are linked to honesty. Nature itself is perhaps one of the most honest builders that has existed; evolution requires that the form of a tree is that which most evenly distributes forces throughout the limbs; there are no curtain walls, no false façades in nature. Harmony and majesty are related to honesty through sincerity.

While it would be impossible to present the Massive Style without properly attributing its constituent buildings to their Brutalist creators, there are several key differences between the two styles. Brutalism deals with the ethics of society as a whole, the Massive Style concerns only the emotional state of an individual. Brutalism is analyzed, discussed, and critiqued at the national level; the Massive Style acts over an intimate distance. The farther away one stands from a Brutalist housing block, the more evident its spatial-economic statement becomes; the closer one stands to a building belonging to the Massive Style, the more intense the feeling of beauty grows. There is the possibility that the Massive Style I have described is not limited to art in the form of architecture. The emotions evoked by the weight of a massive building are fundamental: naturalness, excitement, harmony, and majesty are evident in works of visual art, literature, music, and film, as well as in life itself. It is a connection to our natural existence—to the truths found in beholding the magnificence of nature and the simple pleasures of daily life—that grant art belonging to the Massive Style power over the human soul.

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