

Big Pictures/ Small Details

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Modern Architecture and Shopfronts

Graven Images is mostly involved in interiors and today my talk takes a selection of pictures which draw together different ideas. The thrust of the talk is about contemporary design of shopfronts so the best place to start was with Louis Sullivan, the founder of modern architecture - he coined the phrase, '*Form follows function*' or more properly '*form forever follows function*' a surprising notion idea for someone who uses decoration with such vigour. Decoration is, in itself, functional and Sullivan talked about the fact that the shops were designed to '*court unhurried femininity*'. In an era when retail has become one of our more popular leisure activities it seems appropriate. We do need to find uses for cities, so leisure facilities are important.

Frank Lloyd Wright came out of Sullivan's office and designed shopfronts with an incredible level of contemporary detail.

The whole idea of continuity of detail and communication at street level, the way the buildings touch the ground, the way retail units present themselves. An obvious point is the ribbon of glass which you experience in streetscapes in most western European cities. However, visiting St Petersburg, it seemed to have missed the retail revolution so had a different approach with the buildings existing separately, more individual and with less emphasis on the horizontal fascia.



Berlin

In Berlin as a kind of extreme, the shops have created glass exhibition cases which sit out in front of the shops on the wide pavement. It is like visiting a museum or gallery and you can browse around these fantastic cases lining the street. There is a close connection between the idea of a gallery or museum and a shop. If you visit a supermarket taking no money and instead just look at what is on sale you can cross over the divide between shop and gallery.

Windows

There is a whole industry in how to make shopfronts pull and draw in customers. The kings of this are Selfridges and their shops became international destinations in their own right. However, they were perhaps self-destructing because so many people were taking pictures of the displays that you could not see what was in the windows. Their artfulness and the energy that goes into them is amazing. Sometimes it is the product itself that makes the art, as in a window full of beer bottles.

Signage

We have somehow missed the opportunity to enjoy neon signage in Scotland's cities. In other countries it is where the safe streets are. Many are elegant and beautiful and cleverly juxtapose with a historic building.



Neon sign

Sometimes the sign is the shopfront, the whole shopfront. The thing about retail design is that if it is done with sufficient exuberance it can be successful. Sometimes there is a cross over between the sign and the architecture and it is hard to see where the sign stops and the building starts with the sign becoming a piece of architecture in its own right.

It is the quality of the material, regardless of age, that is important. There is a quality and continuity which endures. Some are so special and energetic that they cannot be improved upon.



Sign integral to the building, Barcelona

Public Spaces

Some shops are designed to stop people seeing in- usually bars and coffee shops where traditionally you don't want to let people be too visible and too exposed. When you visit cities you get to know them through the public spaces and cafes and bars; what happens inside and how people interact. The social space and the right kind of framework for it is of importance. The Tinderbox on Ingram Street was one that Graven Images did and the façade here is about the next layer in; it is that inside-outside view.



Tinderbox, Ingram St, Glasgow

Nolli's Plan of Rome was unique because it showed all the public spaces as well as the streets so it presents a different sense of the grain of a city. These public spaces are the ones that help you to get to know and understand a city.

However, a problem is that the brands are taking over and becoming incredibly powerful. Some recognise that they have a responsibility to the context but others do not and are just rolling out a standard design from a central designer in Milan or London. They are taking away something of the personality of the city. Glamour and wealth is attractive and the quality is often attractive but it needs to be carefully thought about because of the de-personalisation that it can bring.

In the new cities of Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong, the idea of the streetscape is very different from ours. Buildings are strong, stand alone elements with their own presence and energy.

There was hope that Toyo Ito Architects may design a building to replace the old Goldberg's site in Glasgow with a new shop for Selfridges. Although there were concerns about it, a strong city ought to be big enough and strong enough to withstand strong statements. There should be a balance between the impact of the brand and what they can take away from the city and against the idea that the city is strong enough allow it to absorb some unusual moves.

Toyo Ito- reflecting on museums and pavilions- the architectural pavilion is maybe not so different from a shop and maybe would have been the right thing to have done in Argyle Street.