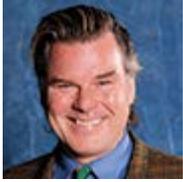


Clenn Labine's Traditional Building & Period Homes

The Neuroscience of Architecture



Dear Friends,

Once is a fluke, three time a trend. Recently, I have heard from three different architects, each makes the same convincing case: traditional architecture relieves stress, releases our endorphins, causes neurological pleasure and registers in our brain as something beautiful.

This is a departure from the idea that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Beauty is not subjective, according to my sources, it is a human response within the science of our brains. I avoid the us versus them debate between the modernists and the classicists. But I will admit... that the beauty and craftsmanship of a 14-century duomo in Sienna will bring me to tears of emotion. A Daniel Libeskind building will not.

Mehaffy, McNicholas and Ruggles is not the name of a swanky architecture firm. Michael W. Mehaffy, Portland; Matthew McNicholas, Chicago; and Donald Ruggles, Denver are three different distinguished architects and authors who through their books, papers and lectures argue that traditional architecture is good for your body, mind and spirit. The ornament of architecture is not, as Walter Gropius suggested, superfluous to good design. It IS good design... more beautiful, and better able to evoke human emotion.

[Michael Mehaffy](#) and [Nikos Salingaros](#) wrote in our [February TRADITIONAL BUILDING Forum](#), “biophilia demonstrates the importance of characteristics like plant and animal forms, water, fractal patterns, coherence and legibility and mathematical complexity. Through eye tracking devices, we learn that most people look at the same features of a building or street scene, often in the same sequence. In a remarkable verification of traditional insights, we apparently gaze only at regions with contrast, curves, detail and ornament, and other specific biophilic features.”



The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto: "The new addition on the right is very strong on excitement and stimulation, elements of the autonomic nervous system's sympathetic inputs. The original museum building's architecture draws on parasympathetic forms, a quieter, more comforting approach." --Beauty, Neuroscience and Architecture

New science casts a new light on the topic of beauty: we see beauty in nature. When the built environment copies nature's shapes and materials, our brain tells us, it is beautiful.

This point was well articulated in [Matthew McNicholas'](#) presentation at the [Traditional Building Conference](#) last month. His topic, “Architectural Detail Inside and Out: The Details of Well Being by Design,” fascinated the audience with color slides of floral patterned stain glass. His images made design professionals gasp with delight. McNicholas asserts that good proportion, human scale, symmetry and ornament are the most pleasing, to most of us. Looking at architectural ornament soothes our senses and lifts our spirits.

Don Ruggles has written a new book titled *Beauty, Neuroscience & Architecture, Timeless Patterns and Their Impact on Our Well Being*, a well-researched work. It quotes, among others, Professor Harry Francis Mallgrave: “Beauty is a neurological activity, an urge for, and feeling of, pleasure, emanating from the brain’s most primal reaches and associated with awe and wonder. In this regard we judge certain forms to be beautiful because they mirror the basic conditions of organic life.”

In his chapter six, titled “Emotional Bonding,” Ruggles tells us there is a facial pattern that new-born infants prefer. This pattern bears a remarkable resemblance to a nine-square pattern. Ruggles writes, “The nine-square pattern was intuitively developed over thousands of years because of the facial pattern recognition skill that all humans are born with. This geometric pattern is a representation of a parent’s face, and the face represents the empathic bonding that happens between parent and child, pleasure and love.”



Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome was described by Ralph Waldo Emerson as "an ornament of the earth...the sublime of the beautiful." --*Beauty, Neuroscience and Architecture*

I've often thought about how most people cannot articulate why they think a building is beautiful. I once proposed that we do a seminar for laymen which demonstrates a beautiful human face side by side, with an ugly one. I was told this was politically incorrect, downright inconsiderate of ugly people. I was overruled. But the handsomest face is the one with the best proportions! Whereas a bulbous nose with big floppy ears and eyes too close together, would be analogous to outsized gables on a bad roof with five disparate exterior materials and window sizes of wide ranging dimensions.

The importance of architectural proportion is well articulated in Don Ruggles' book. He writes “Humans can detect symmetry within about 0.05 of a second. This stimulus duration is too brief for eye movements to be completed. This implies that human symmetry processing is a global, hard-wired activity of the brain.”

Parasympathetic and sympathetic design forms are both illustrated in *Beauty, Neuroscience & Architecture, Timeless Patterns and Their Impact on Our Well Being*. Sympathetic design, I've just learned, stresses me out. Parasympathetic design helps me chill-out and relax.

I'm going to stop taking high blood pressure medicine and spend more time instead, appreciating traditional architecture.