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TASTE

A World of Difference

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Summary

Aesthetics are a well discussed aspect of bridge design but the influence of regional culture, ie *taste*, is not. The subject of subjectivity is inherently difficult to define but for bridge designers working across geographical and cultural borders, an awareness of cultural context is an essential if inaccurate tool. Variances in regional thinking significantly alter the way a design is perceived and cultural pitfalls abound. This paper examines issues of taste observed through the experience of an 'international' designer working across disparate locations and diverse cultures. The nature of the subject is such that the discussion can serve only to highlight the significance and wildly varying nature of taste, not to act as a field guide. A key observation is the broad correlation between climate and taste articulated in the 'couplet' "latitude = attitude"

Keywords: aesthetics; taste; regional; international; modernism; latitude

"It is not my argument that every bridge in England is under-bred and crapulous; here and there an engineer has made an effort to be architectural, but the usual level of taste is exceedingly vulgar"

A Book of Bridges Frank Brangwyn ARA and Walter Shaw Sparrow 1914

Introduction

As bridge designers our professional skills are universally applicable and highly exportable. Very many bridge designers operate internationally and all of us are participants in a global knowledge exchange that informs the parameters of our profession. This, and the typological constraints that restrict all bridges to a handful of structural arrangements, inevitably leads to a high degree of generic commonality in the design of structures worldwide. Very few, if any, new bridges are truly unique. Yet there are inherent variances in regional culture that can markedly influence the way that a bridge appears and is used, if not the way that it is structured; physics do not recognise borders but 'taste' does. Yet *taste*, as distinct from *aesthetics*, is a largely ignored subject in the narrow focus of bridge design. The reason for this is perhaps the almost unquestioning acceptance of the maxims amongst designers of form-follows-function modernism. The conventions of international modernism- contemporary, serious, *tasteful* design- are almost universally applied but are not universally applicable.

For an 'international' designer, an awareness of cultural context is an essential but elusive tool; it is a complex, nuanced, shape-shifting subject that defies accurate definition. Nonetheless, at the risk of cultural stereotyping, the sometimes glaring but often subtle changes in attitude between locations bear scrutiny in order to inform both the design and appreciation of 'bridge culture' worldwide.