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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FORM AND CONTENT IN ART AND  
ARCHITECTURE**

**SAEID IZADI<sup>1</sup>, SOMAYEH NOROUZI<sup>2</sup>, MEHDI DADASHI<sup>3</sup>**

1-PhD student of architecture, Lecturer at Azad University of Noor, Noor, Iran:

[saeidizadi832@yahoo.com](mailto:saeidizadi832@yahoo.com)

2- Master of Architecture, Lecturer at Ghodsieh University of Sari: [somiarchitect@yahoo.com](mailto:somiarchitect@yahoo.com)

3-PhD student of architecture, faculty member of Sama Technical-Vocational College, Islamic  
Azad University of Babol, Babol, Iran: [Mehdi\\_13s@yahoo.com](mailto:Mehdi_13s@yahoo.com)

**ABSTRACT**

Content and form are two factors involved in the world of art and architecture. Given the plurality vote, the question is that what is the relationship between these two factors? In the present study, by investigating this issue, it has been seen that in the tradition, content and form, both are important, but the content is the cause of form. What is created and its content is important and the way to show it is also very important. In this way, models have been created based on existing concepts. With entering the modern era, various types of relationships between form and content were created. This consideration varies from attention to form in Rob Krier works to attention to content and reach a content theory in architectural creation theory of John Lang. The research hypothesis is that content is presented with a new face at any period that could include a wide range. In the present paper, investigating this range and content analysis of different contemporary design methods indicated that addressing content is useful to reach a scientific theory. The present study is a qualitative research with descriptive-analytical approach. Library sources have been used.

**Keywords: Content, Form, Art and Architecture, Tradition, Modern**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Architecture is the knowledge that one of the most essential human needs, i.e. having a shelter, as well as stirring up the highest human emotions are achieved through it. In different periods, architecture has followed certain principles that existed in the society or architects' collective unconscious and different architectural styles have been created. Today, based on the works remained from the traditional period, some hypotheses can be made on their existential content and then the accuracy of these hypotheses can be investigated. In fact, architecture is a medium for what existed in those communities or their content. This old medium had specific form in each period and architects as those who were present in these communities, were the creators of this form on the one hand, and they had to follow it on the other hand. These forms were changed only after a long time. By entering the modern era, the special form of this period was created. International Style Modernism has tried to integrate these forms. Mies van der Rohe states that there is no need to buildings which have unique characteristics to distinguish them from each other. "In fact, I totally disagree with the idea that a special building should have a unique characteristic. Instead, I believe that a universal characteristic raised from all issues

should be emphasized"[1].By passing through the modern era and entering the postmodern era, pluralism and diversity were taken into account. But this diversity did not reach the unity of traditional period. But architects have used a selection of contents or forms raised from them. In this period "rather than a fundamental change of thinking, providing new aesthetic methods" [2] is considered. For example, the influence of Greek culture could also be used in Iranian architecture. This growing diversity continues since the postmodern era, as far as humans in the third millennium are like disconnected islands in an ocean. In fact, the relationship between form and content in modern period has been confused. The present study addressed the issue that how should be this relationship?

Many people have spoken about the relationship between form and content, including in the Plato art field. In contemporary times, Tolstoy largely agrees with him. Kant is one of those who states the issue in the form of aesthetic principles. Diversity is very high in contemporary times. Modern architecture suggests a new version of this relationship. John Lang is one of those who criticizes this relationship and tries to achieve substantive theory in architecture. In

the world of art, Baudelaire, Hanslick, Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater have studied the relationships between form and content and form has been taken prior to content. Destructors have also paid attention to content with a particular view and many unfamiliar forms were created in this way. Dr. Mehdi Haeri Yazdi is one of those who accompanies these two together and confirms their mixture.

In this study, presenting a new form that is consistent with the spirit of its time and is influenced by concepts that may have had a permanent presence in cosmological relationships since the beginning of creation until now, is considered. This research states that creating new concepts is not considered. Because the concepts levels in the world are not added, but new forms are born.

### **The beginning of art and architecture creation**

The issue that what is the reason of architecture existence, can be an entry into the discussion. The first men, after leaving caves, created the most basic architecture to meet the need for shelter. That was a need. Artworks remained from these people had not meant to create art. "Works of these primary cultures that we keep in our museums today, were not created as an artwork in the modern interpretation, but

were the ritual objects that have been produced to replace a special action" [3]. At the time of creation of these works, there was not still such a thing as art, and as a category apart from people routine life. Customs had an active presence in those communities. "Probably some of the customs and rites were gradually excluded and were replaced with objects that had symbolic value" [3]. This man created these objects without knowing that this symbolic objects are the beginning of something that in the next periods until now will be considered as a specific field of human knowledge.

### **Form and content**

What is understood from the history of architecture is that some characteristics can be outlined for different architectures in different communities and at different times, since ancient times until now. These characteristics can be accessed in a variety of references that have been discussed the history of art and architecture. The point that is understood from this matter is that this confirms that some principles must exist so that based on them, this art and architecture could be understood. In fact, we could become familiar with their architecture language, learn their phrases and create based on them. For example, "Islamic mysticism world human, ..., has a special attitude

toward the Creator and its components. In this world everything except the Almighty God are moving toward him. This human lives in a society that is ruled by the principles of tradition. In this traditional society architect should create his work based on the principles of tradition"[4]. Principle is something that began to be formed for a variety of reasons and took various forms in later periods. Obviously "the architecture which is only for architecture sake, does not exist" [3]. Architecture works all have been created for a specific purpose that is certainly not architecture, and is distinguished seriously from other arts in this term. By entering the modern world and before it, in Renaissance, all aspects of human life were seen professionally. Its subsequence was separation of all aspects of human. "In the modern world the common assumption is that any artwork has a degree of autonomy and its own range and must be judged based on its own values and criteria" [5]. The fundamental difference between traditional and modern times from the principles perspective is that in tradition, principles are raised from the society and are generally unwritten, and individuals realize it through social presence. However, in the modern world, experts who were leaders of this period have written principles based on

their analyses of society which can be quite abstract and in accordance with the modern age and be not in full compliance with the reality. Isms in the early twentieth century and the two world wars asking which ism is true, are the consequences of these modern laws. Dividing human knowledge in the world of art and architecture in this era introduces the new matter that form and content of the work can be discussed separately, and many people with different approaches have studied them. Something that existed at the traditional era was that these two cannot be considered separately. In the tradition "the way of showing and what is shown both are considered. These two cannot be separated from each other, certainly"[5]. But today, "we admire most of artworks for the qualities of form and the consistent pattern seen in their components relations"[5]. Creating beautiful composition is a matter. "If to review a message (whether artistic or non-artistic), we pay attention to understand the form of the message and try to know its concept or range of effects through knowing the manufacturer semiotic elements and do not pay attention to its sender, its implications fields, and historical, social and psychological conditions of its creation, then we will learn its aesthetic function" [6]. In the nineteenth century the

idea of addressing the form became a specific issue that Russian formalists were born from it. This was the century when critics like Baudelaire knew the form prior to anything else in art world. Baudelaire "in his critical works ... paid attention to formalism review" [6]. Or Oscar Wilde said that: "The beauty is the symbol of symbols, it makes clear everything, because it does not express anything" [6]. In architecture "Doran and Rob carrier both used formalism boundaries as the difference between two architectures" [4]. Walter Peter is one of the other critics who said "the golden word of aesthetics authenticity followers" [6]: "The goal is not the result of experience, but is the experience" [6]. Kant also expressed three steps in aesthetic procedures, that can be interpreted as paying attention to form instead of the content. The first step is nice, the second step is beauty, the third step is perfect. In the nice step, eyes are stared at form and its effect is intense, but temporary. In beauty there is more contemplation and in perfect more attention is paid to content [7]. Hanslick was also one of the art critics who "knew music as the highest art... and gave general aspect to his sentence... and said that the essence of art is achievable in form" [6]. He believed that what a music states, i.e. the music contents are the "animated phonetic

forms" [6]. In criticizing a music work "a normal person asks does this music make me happy or sad? while a musicologist asks has this music a suitable form, or not?" [6]. In modern times form becomes a specific matter individually. Gestalt theory includes principles that consider the whole form of an architecture work and believe that "the whole is more than the sum of its elements" [3]. This theory was used in Bauhaus school which was one of the main schools of modern thought in the first half of the twentieth century to teach architecture and its effects have already seen in architecture. Considering the totality of architecture and building study models with aesthetic basis in which based on Gestalt rules it has been tried to create forms that can induce specific concept or not, and be applauded because of a certain beauty that cannot be said. Even if Bauhaus artistic training concerned about development of architect to achieve a totality, the approach that has may been chose was entirely based on visual observations and concerns" [8]. In the first half of the twentieth century, formalists works were also based on aesthetic functions. Their attention was focused on "structure or form which is a set of elements and relations between them" [3]. This amount of attention to the form despite all the works that can have high value in this

field of thought, two different matters can be derived from it. First, without content and with just a beautiful form that satisfies emotions, artworks, including architecture can be created. Second, if the content does not have value, then an ugly matter can be adorned with a beautiful form and still have a sense of satisfaction to it. In the first case, "many criticisms that have been made on the art, have stressed the importance of form and considered form qualities of works and sometimes even other qualities have not been taken into account as relevant in terms of aesthetics" [5]. What eventually is understood from an art work or architecture (if it is accepted that it has certain content) will be its form. "The concept that gives identity to an architectural work, are expressed and transmitted just through the form" [9]. In the field of literary criticism, from the perspective of formalist criticism "criticism, is associated with this theory -or even influenced by it- that forms and structures create the identity and nature of literature and literary research is basically nothing but study these forms and structures"[5]. This form of addressing the form becomes an important issue in the field of art and architecture, as far as "artistic expression or artistic expressing is important not what is expressed" [6]. Parnasyanysm

works based on artistic expression. Art for art is the main motto of this school. The main idea was that art itself has value and should not be influenced by any external factors. Art only have to deal with the aesthetic issue and beauty is important not what is showed. Victor Hugo was the first person who use the term of art for art. Tolstoy in modern times and Platonic in traditional times are strongly opposed to this theory. They "both believe that the type of art that we see can affect who we become" [5]. They believed that there is a direct correlation between the art subject and its impact unlike critics such as Oscar Wilde. But Oscar Wilde in introduction of Picture of Dorian Gray writes: "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That's it ... no artist does not seek to prove something ... and no artist has no moral empathy"[5]. In fact, the artist commits to nothing and the potential impact of his art on the audience does not matter. Even if the artist accepts that there is a moral content in his art, the artist only creates and his creation can be anything artistic. From this perspective, he could violate ethics and introduce unethical issues beautifully by appropriate presentation.

#### **Content and study it against the form**

In the field of architecture, if we consider that architecture is the main issue unlike

traditional age, i.e. addressing aesthetics issues be considered as the basis and spiritual issues that there was in traditional age, as understood in traditional buildings, such as the effect of light on spirituality of spaces or colors, forms which had a spirituality in their inherent, such as circles that in Iran, according to the particular process we reach circle from square or mandala Japanese culture. If these, that have a kind of content effects, are ignored, then these areas residents how will understand them? Indifferent to content and concentrating only on aesthetics issues can indirectly create this thought that there is no need to maintain the previous concepts. Because these forms are more important. As a result, the previous concepts can be deconstructed, and reach new concepts that attract many attentions in their new forms. "Deconstructivism... was a nihilistic rejection of all possible concepts. Constants and transformations were not the issues and what was important was to stimulate and encourage new discoveries"[9]. Charles Jencks believes that the theoretical basis of this deconstruction is based on modern science, such as "complexity theory, self-organizing systems, fractals, nonlinear dynamics, new-build and self-similarity"[10]. But the issue is that those who use this theoretical basis for deconstructing how

much have understood these modern sciences. In fact, the procedure, which benefits from these sciences so that finally deconstructing architecture is formed, is important and ultimately audiences speak about these unfamiliar forms. "It seems that there is a fundamental confusion in contemporary architecture issues between the processes and final appearances. Because while scientists study production of complex forms of the processes guided by the fractal growth, upwardly mobile, adaptation, and self-organization, Junks and deconstruction oriented architects can only see the final result of such processes and impose these images to buildings"[10]. Another issue that can be study in deconstruction is that "these philosophers and their followers' destructors, start their work with a great truth, and the truth is that the world is a complex and intertwined structure. But then they deduce one of the greatest fallacious results in the history of the West. That the universe is nothing but the algebraic sum of its components" [10]. This idea decomposes the universe and analyze each of its components without considering live impact of other components. "Upwardly mobility of life is raised from small-scale adaptive processes that each of them respond to previous processes cooperatively" [10]. But

deconstruction without knowing and being able to examine these effects and ultimately deal with it in architecture, created unfamiliar forms with detailed analyses. "What is clear is that they are incompatible with human needs and are based on fully form concerns" [10].

### **Comparison of content and form prioritizations**

Facing with a design issue, if content is considered as the basis, at first, content levels raised from context design subject must be determined. The content levels can belikened to an aura that comes from the problem of design site that generally is mentioned as energies in the site or design subject at the beginning of the design. These energies appear in forms of forms to be available. Over time, content levels that created architectural forms can be changed. For example, Naghsh-e Jahan Square is built in this form due to the socio-political content of the Safavid era. Mosque and state building and market are three pillars that indicate concepts of that time. Alighapoo came a little forward in the square and Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque has been sent backward as the same size. However, Shah mosque is strong enough. Caesarea is the symbol of economic streaming at that time. It's all in the form of a city ensemble called Naghsh-e Jahan by

architectural forms. But today, due to new socio-political system, those forms found a tourist-recreational content, or in the contemporary era all high-rise towers that are set up around the world to show the authority of governments, indicate the current content of the technological authoritarian society. In existence pyramid theory proposed by Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi doctoral thesis, the content and form are discussed in the philosophical form of existence and nature. The existence and nature are placed in a pyramid without overtaking each other where the transverse lines indicate essences and longitudinal lines indicate existence."The existence is the object content and nature is the appearance of this content" [11]. When the existence or content disappears, the form of nature appears. In architectural word, when energies understood from design subject or design context in architectural design find a formal response, i.e. the energy disappears, then architectural forms are emerged. But the content and the form are present in both of them. Because no form can fully respond to existential content and forms content expression powers are not the same. Therefore, content and form are always present in these buildings. When this energy or political-religious-economic content of Shah Abbas Safavi era disappears, Naghsh-e

Jahan Square emerges in familiar forms. Also, when authoritarianism equipped with advanced scientific technology of the twentieth century emerges, high-rise towers appear around the world in different forms. But if the form be considered as the beginning of a design process, form can be physically placed in the design context in an aesthetic composition in dealing with design subject and site. But responding to other content cases of context as well as the design subject remains unclear. Under which

process the communication between what has been created in the form of form and design content platform can be created?

### Study of some design methods in contemporary times and comparing them in terms of addressing content and form

Various methods can be followed in the field of contemporary architecture. Here are a few important cases in contemporary period and their consideration of form and content will be discussed.

Table 1: Study of some design methods in contemporary times and comparing them in terms of addressing content and form, source: authors

Architecture design approach	Characteristic	Case study	Content/form
Rational architecture [12]	Use of forms that exist in nature in order to produce function to the respondent faster.	The cows for a dairy store	Form prevails over content
Pop Art (Las Vegas) [13]	People-friendly characteristics, advertisements, paying attention to short and exciting things	Las Vegas where the business content uses signs with a pop art method. These signs can even be a form which has the external reality. Like a chicken in a restaurant design	Form as a direct translation for business and commercial content
Sculptural architecture such as T.W.A airport or the Sydney Jørn Utzon Opera [14]	Using abstract natural forms which exist in the world	A jumping bird in T.W.A airport Shell-shaped Sydney Opera House	Abstracted form for a visual content
Squaration and Triangulation [12]	proportional systems and geometric networks are used to achieve appropriate forms	Peter Barlach artworks, Amsterdam	Form prevails. However, since this method has a direct correlation with geometry that is a characteristic of any architecture, it enters into the content area.
Musical models and proportions [12]	Converting musical and sound compositions into spatial and architectural configurations	Steven Holl design for prayer house in Dallas, Texas	Form prevails. Most of these forms are random and complex and generally are direct translation of notes to form in architecture.
Accident and unconscious [12]	Anti-method approach, specific creator order	Wolfsburg Cultural Center, Alvar Aalto	Form serves functions. For example, the form of the main part of the building is more specific.
Surrealistic tool [12]	Considering accident as artistic or architectural creativity driving force was very popular in the twentieth century.	Joseph Frank, random Architecture	The forms are completely random, and this is very close to the idea of art for art.
Rational approaches, efficient forms [12]	Architecture is not a part of Fine Arts family, so the architect should not work based on subjective intuition or creative inspiration.	Hugo Haringey, cattle project	Form is often created based on reason.
Field-oriented architecture [15]	Architecture based on existing context including cultural, geographical, and existing forms is created at the design site.	Townhouse, Park Avenue, New York City, Robert Stern	Form serves existing context including content or form.

		[15]	
Parametric Architecture [16]	Using existing parameters in design context and putting them together in the design process and creating forms that are derived from it.	London City Hall (Foster et al.)	Contents are discussed in the form of parameters and designer selects some parameters which are entered into design process as forms, and finally forms that are the results of the selection of parameters in the design process are created.
Deconstructing architecture [10]	Creation of new concepts by deconstructing the former concepts, creation of generally complex and unfamiliar forms. Modern science, self-organizing etc.	Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim Museum	Form is seen more than content.
Lang, John, 1391, the creation of architectural theory, [2]	substantive architecture theory. Content can be influenced by behavioral sciences.	Field observations and designing behavioral places [2]	Form serves content and form is created based on concepts such as cognitive maps and behavioral bases.

The comparison between methods shows that form has a very high place in contemporary times and is often considered by designers. It seems that among mentioned methods, the methods that used content more than form, had more ability to become a theory in the field of architecture. For example, field-oriented architecture has a greater ability to become a scientific discussion compared to architecture inspired by surrealistic concepts. Even in the case of Las Vegas design model that at first seems full of empty forms, but in a deeper look it can be seen that these pop art forms serve the city's business content. Robert Venturi with the same approach scientifically studied Las Vegas and wrote the valuable books of learning from Las Vegas. Mr. John Lang also criticizes modern architecture using a substantive approach and criticizes the main motto of the modern architecture that says form follows function. "If the rest of the human purposes that provided by the built environment are taken

into account, buildings were not functional enough" [2]. He utilized the behavioral sciences to create a substantive theory of architecture. Concepts such as behavior base that he could analyze architecture based on it and use it to make improvement [2]. Human needs models were the cases that have been used to achieve this issue. But "due to the lack of choosing the right model to meet human needs ... knowledges related to architecture in the early modern era have not yet met architects' demands to explain the nature and human needs" [17].

### **The relationship between content and aesthetic composition**

If unlike destructors, it is accepted that concept levels are constant in the world, i.e. the new concepts are not created but a new form of constant concepts can be found then it can be said that in architecture creation, the content is provided in a new aesthetic combination. Tadao Ando as the architect who updated Japanese concepts about Fort

Worth project states that: "people come here to find themselves" [18]. Museum of Fort Worth must have a great content that its residents can find themselves, on the other word, can find their relations with the universe. Ando in did not use any of the traditional forms in his works and the most important material that he used in his works was concrete, i.e. one of the two main modern architecture materials. The architect creates a new form based on his understanding of concepts according to different circumstances.

Christian Norberg-Schulz, proposed this matter in terms of continuity and transformation. "Continuity and transformation implies that despite all the changes and transformations, something remains stable and constant" [8]. Regardless of what he mean of these constants,

continuity focuses on the concept and content and transformation focuses on new aesthetic composition. This transformation occurs over time. For example, "the concept of space that has been known a modernism characterization has been discussed previously in Baroque architecture movement". In Iranian architecture Persian, Parthian, Khorasan, Razi, Azerbaijan and Isfahan styles that Dr. Pirnia have discussed them were associated with a continuation of concepts that were emerged from Iranian life and the transformations that were dependent on their previous methods. For example, in Razi approach, "Persian style beauty, Party style glory, Khorasan style intricacies appear together" [19]. New forms via the creativity that can be mentioned as technology, offers concept in a new combination [20].



**Figure 1: Two different combinations in an Iranian building architecture over time. Continuity and transformation can be seen very well. Source: [15]**



**Figure 2: Two buildings that are built over about two hundred years and in the new building the content of existing context have been seen in new design. Source: [20]**

## RESULTS

In this study after investigating the ideas in the field of art and philosophy, from people like Plato (wisdom), Kant (philosophy), Tolstoy (literature), Victor Hugo (literature, parnasyanism), Hanslick (music), Peter Walter (literature), Oscar Wilde (poet), Baudelaire (poet), Dr. Mehdi Haeri Yazdi (philosophy) and in the field of architecture from people like Mies van der Rohe, Falamaki, Salingaros, Junks, Kari Yormaca, and comparison of the various architectural methods including Rational architecture, Pop Art in Las Vegas (Robert Venturi), monumental architecture, parametric architecture, emphasis on geometry and golden proportions, use of squaration and triangulation, use of other arts, like music in the architecture, field-oriented architecture, efficient forms, deconstruction architecture

etc., it has been seen that there was a wide range of the amount of attention to form and content in different periods. With an analytical approach to this range the reason of any part of the range can be obtained using other parts. For example, perhaps Las Vegas is where the most direct form translations exist, such as the restaurant in the form of a chicken (chicken is an object in the external world). However, an analytical approach indicates that this is systematically for a business goal in the city. Or in field-oriented architecture, attention to content can be seen as attention just to the form or content. Or in monumental architecture works in the late modern period, it was concluded that architecture cannot be regardless of the form as was said in the early modern period. As a result, monuments emerged in architecture to give identity. Each of the other parts of the

range paid attention to one of the two cases of form and content with considerable insight.

## **CONCLUSION**

Art including architecture that a part of it is dependent on art, always has the presence of content and form. Form as the appearance of content has an entity that without it no content can be read. Forms in different periods have been presented with different content expression powers, and sometimes had the power that residents and even those who arrived in next periods were very impressed by it, typologies that have been done by people like Krier in modern times, confirm it. The danger of these typologies is that regardless of the content that is its creator, are used as patterns that their contents are not understood, and therefore cannot be the creator of spaces that patterns have been created of them. One of the other criticisms in the field of paying attention to form was paying attention just to aesthetic issues and ignore other aspects of human existence in architecture, so that the criticism to modern architectures were the same. Modern architecture was not functional as it was claimed and paid more attention to aesthetic issues. Another criticism that can be said on the formalism is the relationship between created work and ethics. In fact, no

accountability of creator to ethics, in this art and architecture with a loss of the concepts that created its existence and its deconstructing changed human lives basis which is not familiar to him and its strange form is discussed more than changes content. In this study it was stated that concepts are constant in universe and of course it is possible that in different periods take a new concept, like Naghsh-e Jahan Square. But the new concept is not added to the universe. Also in the creation of new forms in any period, forms become new and express the content of their universe according to the spirit of their time. In nature which is the existential content, always and at all times there is change, and every creator with its own expression, enters a part of the content into the material world. Creativity in form is in the expression of content and not in adding new content to the universe. From a period to another one, concepts could be changed, but the amount of them is constant.

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