DOING LESS IS MORE

“Our thesis is that most architects’ buildings today are ducks: buildings where an expressive aim has distorted the whole beyond the limits of economy and convenience, and that this, although an unadmitted one, is a kind of decoration, and a wrong and costly one at that. We’d rather see the need admitted and the decoration applied... This is an easier, cheaper, more direct, and basically more honest approach to the question of decoration; it permits us to get on with the task of making conventional buildings conventionally and to deal with their symbolic needs with a lighter, defter touch.” Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, “On Ducks and Decoration,” Architecture Canada, October 1968, 48-49.

The drive to make every centimetre of a project sustainable can cause us to overlook the fact that the strategy of designing less can achieve more, suggests Toby Horrocks.

In 2011, most architects’ buildings are ducks. The term “duck,” which Venturi and Scott Brown coined after seeing a duck-shaped poultry shop in Long Island, USA, refers to a building that is a sculptural object; the often-convoluted underlying structure is hidden behind the elaborate outward form – the actual “duck.”

The duck may be a restaurant dressed as mutton or, in the modernist vernacular, a minimal box hovering in a field – any building that uses convoluted structure to carry the expression. Steel holds up minimalist outward effects or gravity-defying cantilevers; elaborate concrete profiles facilitate sculptural facades. Now, I like ducks, I just don’t think they are sustainable models.

In opposition to the duck, there is Venturi and Scott-Brown’s “conventional building” – a built result of economic and pragmatic decisions. Today we would add “environmentally sustainable” to the list. If you follow the principles, the conventional (sustainable) building is almost a readymade. It might have a pitched roof because that gives better insulation performance. There will be sunshades to the north, and the windows might not be floor-to-ceiling because that would cause additional heat loss in the winter. The building might be arranged on a regular grid, and produce less waste due to offcuts and being easier to deconstruct. Infill walls might be made from old car tyres because they were going to waste nearby and there was no new energy needed to produce them. The building will achieve a very high star rating. However, it might be ugly, and this is where architecture comes in.

Energy efficiency is largely seen as an engineering and auditing problem – R-values, orientation to the sun and local breezes, and low-embodied energy materials. It is nothing to do with expression. As architects, we are interested in art, aesthetics, sculpture, beauty, light and form. The question for architects is: How do we use our skills to create sustainable architecture? One way to do this is to synthesize all the requirements of a building into a single, unified solution. But synthesis requires enormous structural gymnastics – see the duck building – and takes too much embodied energy.

If we were to follow Venturi and Scott Brown’s suggestion, we would steer clear of synthesis, of a complete unity between structure and expression. Why not let the sustainable (conventional) building do what it wants? The effects of the elements on buildings – rain, wind, corrosion – can be dealt

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with by using timeless vernacular models that have been developed over centuries to cope with them.

We could treat every job as a refurbishment of an existing utilitarian building, except with slightly more control; start with the conventional (vernacular) building and, from here, discover its latent aesthetic potential. Architects should not do everything. Rather, they should do just a part, like directing the composition to an expressive focal point, for instance. When not every square inch of facade has to be “beautified,” the result might even be a more aesthetically pleasing city.

ARM’s Flemington Housing Commission tower refurbishment is an example of some sort. The competition that brought it into being called for a new lift and a low-budget upgrade to its public image. Rather than deal with the facade, ARM altered its skyline silhouette. The inhabitants only interact with it at ground level, so a foyer renovation was enough. The project is an example of deft aesthetic manipulation.

All of the recent additions that have been made because of the pressure to be sustainable or 5 Star Green Star rated neglect another form of addition. The role of aesthetics in sustainable buildings is not only about visual and psychological delight—it is also a powerful driver for change, when the expression is spectacular and when sustainable elements are clearly visible and working. It is a radical force symbolically representing an alternative future. Thinking along these lines might simply lead to putting wind turbines where we can see them, like on top of the Council House 2 building in Melbourne, or towards the ideas of Viennese architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, who introduced trees into urban environments to keep the community in touch with the natural ecosystems that keep us alive. Then, there is the proliferation of green walls and rooftop terraces. This is a good start, but these additions are seldom architectural in nature. We don’t want to become horticultural specialists, or arrangers of utilitarian carbuncles—architects have a greater spatial intelligence. The role of architecture in sustainability is untapped.

Spatial and sculptural experiences are the things that define architecture. Aesthetics are important, but we don’t have to design everything. Let’s take a new leaf out of Venturi and Scott Brown’s book. In the 1970s their theory led to postmodernism, but it can also lead elsewhere.

Toby Horrocks is an architect, cardboard furniture designer, and tutor in architectural design, history and theory at the University of Melbourne.