CHAPTER - V

AESTHETICS

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the discipline called aesthetics may be described broadly as the study of beauty and, to a lesser extent, its opposite, the ugly

There have been many theories and philosophies concerning the discipline of Aesthetics, and their authors have largely been philosophers and thinkers—not practitioners of Architecture. Thus their notions of Beauty, and assertions concerning it, are highly speculative.

For Plato, an object, to be beautiful, must possess order and proportion. But order and proportion do not define “beauty”, they are simply the conditions for the occurrence of beauty.

The main basis for the discussion of Aristotle’s views on aesthetics is the Poetics, which is primarily a contribution to literary theory than to aesthetic theory. Aristotle follows Plato in concluding that art is a productive process that initiates its various subject matters. Saint Augustine said: Beauty is one of the forms, and the beautiful in art and nature is thus related to religion. He thought of beauty as derived from the unity that varies with the order and proportion of the object.

St Thomas Aquinas thought that goodness and beauty were basically the same, both being derived from a form or species. The good, which all seek, is what calms desire, but the beautiful calms desire and pleases simply by being seen or known. The experience of the beautiful is a matter of recognizing the form in an individual thing. Something is beautiful if it is an unimpaired example of its form or species, is proportional or harmonious, and is bright or clear.

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1 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 1, p. 149.
2, 3, 4 Encyclopaedia Americana, Vol. 1, p. 236.
According to Balram Srivastava, the theory of architecture though requires logic, but it requires none the less, an independent sense of beauty. For this reason, interwoven with practical ends and their mechanical solutions, beauty comes as a significant factor of Indian architecture, culminating in a purely aesthetic result. This feature of architecture is unique and singular. It is only this form of art in which a purely aesthetic impulse is simultaneously satisfied along with quite a distinct and almost a contrary impulse of utilitarianism. It becomes sometimes by way of suggestion and sometime direct for the reason that the element of delight as well as the aesthetic impulse is itself inherent in the Indian concept of architecture, particularly when the utility itself is judged under the concept of religious sensibility5.

FUNCTION AND AESTHETICS

At this juncture, it will be necessary to introduce briefly the two parameters which are customarily used, among a few others, to criticize Architecture and to pass evaluative judgements on it: Function and Aesthetics. Aesthetics is the most misunderstood single word among the vocabulary of architects. The Greek word from which it is derived means to feel or perceive. Thus Aesthetics is philosophy of the fine arts, and lays down principles of taste and art. The word without 's' is Aesthetic (an adjective) and means: generally relating to possessing, or pretending to, a sense of beauty. Therefore, my preference is for the word 'Beauty'. By this token, 'Aesthetics' is NOT opposed, as is erroneously supposed, to Function.

As a matter of fact, Function has two aspects: Utility and Beauty. Utility takes care of comfort, efficiency, etc. and pertains to the performance of Architecture. Beauty emerges from Utility

having been imaginatively designed for. It is not a cosmetic treatment to cover an otherwise ugly visage. Unfortunately, many architects are creating ungainly monsters in the name of what they believe to be Post-Modern "Aesthetic"! One will have learned the most important Fundamental of Architecture if one can grasp this point to the point of making it an altered state of a healthy perception. Buildings in the nude look more charming than those which are overclothed.

It may be helpful to be reminded that the three basic components, which comprise Architectural Aesthetics, are: (1) honesty of expression, (2) integrity of expression, and (3) sensitivity to the intrinsic beauty of building materials. As may be readily seen, there is no room for any cosmetic treatment in such a concept of aesthetics. Accordingly, nothing can be called beautiful, in this strict sense of the word, unless it is intrinsically so. In fact, something can be beautiful, in the strict sense of the word, only when its beauty has been revealed by reducing it to its elemental Form. In other words, such beauty is created by the subtraction of the superfluous rather than by the addition of the decorative.
SRI HARMANDAR SAHIB: AESTHETICS
[Ref.: Plate No XI, and Diagram No II & III]

Srivastava further says: On purely aesthetic considerations, architecture in India, as elsewhere, has rightly been perceived as a combination of light and shade, spaces, mass, lines, balance, and rhythm. All these elements are not merely the 'appearance' but are also the 'beauty'—the source of delight.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that "Aesthetics, a not very tidy intellectual discipline, is a heterogeneous collection of problems that concern the arts primarily but also related to nature."

We will tackle the metaphysical aspect of the problem after we have first familiarised ourselves with the physical form of the Holy Shrine. The following is a description of the building 'mass' as it has sprung from the temple's 'plan'.

The cuboid structure of Sri Harmandar Sahib is ingeniously expressed on the north and south elevations by recessing the half-side of the half-hexagon eventually accentuating the part of the covered parkarma at the rear. However, the visual continuity of the whole hexa-square building is maintained by running an unbroken deep eaves all round at the roof-level of the second floor. Equally ingenious is the way in which the parkash asthan, crowned by the domed pavilion, has been expressed on the west, north, and south elevations. This cardinal feature, with three windows at the level of the first floor, has been defined by a projecting panel framed by pilasters. The first-floor gallery for devotees finds its individual expression by means of the projecting windows with their own chhajjas at each end, thereby adding a marked architectural significance to the sanctum.

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6 *ibid*
sanctorum. An entrance door in the middle of each side of the main sanctuary at the ground floor imparts a visual accent to the strong bi-axial Plan which has been expressed symmetrically on the main vertical axis (ie the west entrance side). A projecting window has also been provided at the first floor, each in the inclined sides of the half-hexagon. The eastern side, or the middle part of the half-hexagon, has a balconied window with half-dome atop and a half-lotus at the bottom, repeating the shape of this part of the building as if to suggest that a half-hexagon has been added to the square plan of the main sanctuary. The covered part of the parkarma shows upon the north and south elevations as a multi-cusp elliptical archway topped at the first-floor level by a group of three windows.

The entire building up to the level of the first-floor slab has white-marble cladding with the upper storey copper-gilded. To make the upper and lower parts look integral, the copper-gilt finish tucks into the upper part of the entrance doors. The main dome and its supporting structure repeats the same scheme so that the elliptical dome, with its embowel eaves on four sides of the square-room which drop and meet at the corners to support a columnar domelet, is copper-gilded leaving the cuboid below of white marble.

A four-foot-high parapet encloses the terrace and is accentuated at the front two corners, as well as the inclined sides of the half-hexagon, by the staircase structures. Thus each of these visually cardinal points has a kiosk as a crowning feature. The parapet intervening between these four architectural features has a series of domelets so that the front (ie west side) has seven, north and south 19 each, and the rear (ie east side) 13 of them. On the main entrance, the central domelet has been adorned with a tasselled umbrella. Keeping the parapet at normal height does not obstruct the view of the main dome,
thereby dispensing with the much-used device of an excessively-raised drum that supports the dome in other historical styles of religious architecture based on the arcuate structure system. The ornamentation in the copper-gilded portion is essentially repoussé work i.e., raised in relief by hammering from behind or within, while in the lower part it is inlay work of semi-precious coloured stones inserted in white marble. Despite its obvious extravagance, the overall effect of the outside decor of the shrine is one of studied self-restraint and austere piety.

The eastern door of the sanctuary faces the approach to the water of the Amrit-Sarovar by a series of steps called Har-ki-Pauri, or God's stairs. A kiosk at each end of Har-ki-Pauri marks the width of the steps to which the devotees have access for taking charan-amrit (literally, ambrosia of God's feet) as parshad (sacrament) for the atonement of their sins and blessings for righteous living. Such a kiosk embellishes the six corners (including these two) of the hexa-square podium of the holy shrine. A staircase on each side of Har-ki-Pauri leads to the upper storeys.

The causeway from darshani deorhi to the sanctuary has on each side a series of eight marble-pillar lamp-posts crowned by a copper-gilded lantern. In the centre of the fourth and fifth posts a sun-clock has been provided. Two such lamp-posts also adorn the north and south sides of the podium of the Golden Temple. The causeway as well as the podium has white-marble parapet comprising balustrades and trellised panels. In the middle of the causeway there is provision for erecting demountable brass tubular railing so as to provide a segregated passageway for devotees carrying offerings of karhah-parshad (a preparation of wheat flour, clarified butter, and sugar) on festive occasions when milling crowds throng the precincts to pay their obeisance at the Holy Shrine. The sharp corners of the causeway and the
podium have been modified by extending the parkarma at 45 degrees to facilitate movement of peak-festival rush.

The development of Amrit-Sarovar from an existing water pond, in the midst of Ber trees, is an evidence not only of the architect's utmost sensitivity to the Ecology of the site but also speaks volumes for the unregimented approach of Sikh Architecture to the problems of location and orientation. The Dukh Bhanjani Ber, now preserved as a sacred reminder of the Sarovar's genesis, marked the eastern edge of the existing pond. The Holy Tank was developed towards the western side of the site, for the Sikh Faith respects all the cardinal points everywhere as God's own divine creation. The shrine thus faces the West contrary to the prevalent practice of siting mandirs so that their main façade would face the East. Ber Baba Buddha has similarly been preserved on the northern side of the Amrit-Sarovar as the spot from where the holy personage supervised the construction of the project. Sri Harmandar Sahib is sited in the midst of the Holy Tank, as a solution to the existing Ecology, and in obedience to the scriptural injunction "Pani Pita" (Water is the progenitor). Also, the existing site was developed at the original level, although it was about two storeys lower than the surrounding area, even when it meant that the devotees would have to come down, rather than go up as in the case of Mandirs, to reach the Holy Shrine. Conservation of the Ecology thus overrode manmade design criteria, like orientation and elevated plinth, in deference for Nature which the Sikh Faith regards as God's divine might (qudrat) indispensable to the psyche of a Gurumukh (The Guru-oriented).
STUDY OF PROPORTIONING SYSTEM

Sri Harmandar Sahib : Main Façade
[Ref.: Diagram-I and II]

AESTHETICS, the Expression of Visible Beauty, is manifest in Built FORM—and, therefore, amenable to exact Geometric Ordering. In establishing his case in favour of the need for precise Geometric Ordering, Le Corbusier has deployed the system of Regulating Lines in his book: Towards a New Architecture.

He says:

"A regulating line is an assurance against capriciousness: It is a means of verification which can ratify all work created in a fervour, the schoolboy’s rule of nine, the Q.E.D. of the mathematician.

The regulating line is a satisfaction of a spiritual order which leads to the pursuit of ingenious and harmonious relations. It confers on the work the quality of rhythm.

The regulating line brings in this tangible form of mathematics which gives the reassuring perception of order. The choice of a regulating line fixes the fundamental geometry of the work; it fixes therefore one of the “fundamental characters.” The choice of the regulating line is one of the decisive moments of inspiration, it is one of the vital operation of architecture."

"Here are regulating lines which have served to make very beautiful things and which are the very reason why these things are so beautiful."

136 CORBUSIER, op. cit., p. 71.
UNIT AND UNITY

He further avers that "A unit gives measure and unity; a regulating line is a basis of construction and a satisfaction." (emphasis added).

I have followed his example in the study of the Proportioning System of the main façade of Sri Harmandar Sahib by the use of Regulating Lines and Primary Shapes like the square in conjunction with the identification of a 90° (i.e., right) angle at crucial points on the shrine's front elevation.

The door width constitutes the basic UNIT, which has been named 'A'. [see Diagram-II]. From the floor-line to the top of the kalasha, the measure is twelve-and-a-half units. The width at base is eight units. The intervening, and thus crucial, eaves in the middle of the height is half unit. The six units above and below it resolve into equal measures of three units each. Their basic unit is one-third of the total height from the base of the main dome to the top of kalasha, or top of eaves to bottom of the main dome. They are marked 'B' on the diagram. Their meeting points are important locations on the shrine's elevation. Starting from floor upwards the first three units mark out the header course of the mezzanine level, which is expressed as gilded façade. The next three units reach the underside of the eaves, which is a strong visual feature, and sets the lower and upper parts of the shrine as distinct elements constituting the main elevation.

The extreme points of the chajjahs of the chhattris (kiosks) and the corners of the floor-line describe a perfect square whose diagonals intersect at the centre of the lintel of the middle window at the mezzanine level just above the main door at the ground floor. The three windows at the mezzanine's middle part are given visual treatment quite different from the ones, each of
which appears on their left and right. The latter windows’ placement and design mark out the circumambulatory at the mezzanine level.

A perfect square (marked in orange colour) is formed when one joins the four points: the base of the kalasha of the main dome, centre of the lintel of the main door, and the extremities of the upper edge of the eaves where they intersect the cuboid shape of the front elevation. The squares of the mezzanine circumambulatory windows (shown in pink) have their diagonals intersect at their inside lintel corners. Their inward diagonals intersect the main square’s lower side at points on the windows’ inner pilasters. This divides the pink square into the golden ratio of 1:0.618. The inner edge demarcates the three mezzanine windows into a rectangle marked ‘x’ by ‘y’ in yellow colour. The sides x:y are in the golden section ratio of 1:1.618.

The main dome with a point in the middle of its base under the multifoil-arch projection and the base-centre of the domelets (numbers one and seven) forms a triangle with a 90° (i.e., right) angle at its apex. It shows the Geometric Ordering of the lowering of the parapet to permit the view of the main dome without the hackneyed device of an exaggeratedly-high drum. The height of the chhattris is resolved into three equal units (B): bottom part with three arches; the dome; and the kalasha; as a shown in the diagram.

The foregoing illustrated analysis shows without doubt that the Building Design of Sri Harmandar Sahib is, indeed, based on Regulating Lines whose “choice and the modalities of expression given to it are an integral part of architectural creation”, to use Le Corbusier’s succinct phrase. Since the composition is based on axial symmetry, the resulting balance is a perfect visual equilibrium of Unit(s) and Unity. This aspect of AESTHETICS is crucial to the FORM- al expression of the intent of the Holy
Shrine that is *Sachch Khand*: Lord God's Divine Realm with its chief characteristic of imperturbable equipoise. This emerging truth corroborates Le Corbusier's axiom: *The primordial physical laws are simple and few in number. The moral laws are simple and few in number.*

This study prompts me to reflect thus: all houses (the Sanskrit word for them is *mandirs*) have the same components: drawing/dining rooms, kitchen, bedrooms, toilets—yet we call one beautiful, but not the other houses. All humans have the same body parts: head, ears, nose, eyes, face, etc.—yet we call one person handsome or beautiful, but not the others.

The question, therefore, arises:

What is that single crucial secret that uplifts one thing to the realm of AESTHETIC enchantment well above the deadly sameness of innumerable other things?

The answer is: PROPORTION—the Principle of relating one thing to another in quantity, size, emphasis, etc; relation of a part (UNIT) to the whole (UNITY), which creativity ties up in a soul-stirring composition, thereby striking a perfect Balance in terms of visual equilibrium.

Diagram-III has been produced by removing from behind the image of the Holy Shrine thereby leaving an unadorned pattern of Regulating Lines and the underlying Geometric Ordering. The resulting composition, which has created the FORM of the main façade of Sri Harmandar Sahib, is a work of Art irradiating soul-stirring Aesthetics, unique to the Building Design of the Holy Shrine. The eventual visual experience makes any further scholarly interpretation or philosophic justification absolutely redundant. Diagram-III is the strongest support for this averment, and explains everything that the graphic medium has the potential to do!
The other dimension of AESTHETICS of Sri Harmandar Sahib is the Holy Shrine's Scale or relative size vis-à-vis that of the Amrit-Sarovar and the vast parkarma. The building is about one-fiftieth of the area of the water-body, and much less when further compared to the enormity of the open space around it. It is the SCALE as its intangible dimension which underscores Humility as the Cardinal Principle of the Sikh Faith. The total ambience of the Holy Shrine states the case of Aesthetics as a launching ground from which the human soul takes off for a flight into the realm of Higher Consciousness without which mystic absorption in Godhood is not possible.

FROM THE MARBLE SLAB FOUND IN 1882:

FACADE OF THE ARSENAL OF THE PIRAEUS