

Marcus Vitruvius Pollio - "Utilitas, Firmitas et Venustas"
and
Sir Henry Wotton - "Commodity, Firmness and Delight"

Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639) was a distinguished Elizabethan: an ambassador, a courtier, a philosopher, a poet, writer and wit. Queen Elizabeth I (1533(1558-1603) banished him from court for a term upon hearing his definition of an ambassador as "an honest man, sent to lie abroad for his country". She was not amused !

In the world of architecture, Wotton is remembered for the definitive declaration made in his book 'The Elements of Architecture' published in 1624. The declaration is powerfully expressed, but flawed in one vital aspect of meaning which this note explores:-

"In Architecture, as in all other Operative Arts,
the End must direct the Operation.
The End is to Build well.
Well Building hath three Conditions: Commodity,
Firmness, and Delight"

Wotton, like many before him and afterwards, was referring back to the trilogy of virtues identified by Vitruvius, a Roman architect and engineer of the First Century BC, in his book 'The Ten Books on Architecture' which survived to become the first source of enduring authority on Classical architecture, and is still in print.

The first and second qualities of the trilogy translate with ease into English, but 'Venustas' is another matter and Wotton's choice of 'Delight' presents a difficulty because it conveys an effect resulting from the experience of 'Venustas' rather than the property itself capable of producing such effects as delight.

The meaning of 'Venustas' is loveliness, comeliness, charm, grace, beauty; and Vitruvius develops this in architecture to mean, "of grace when the appearance of the work shall be pleasing and elegant, and the scale of the constituent parts is justly calculated for symmetry" and "of eurhythmy, proportion and symmetry". These are basic properties of form, to do with the shape, order and relationship of parts in a greater, connected whole.

Wotton's 'Delight' also embraces the effects of ornament and enrichment, for which Vitruvius uses the word 'decor'. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72) a leading architect and theorist of the Renaissance, explains this in his book 'De re Aedificatoria' (On Architecture) completed in 1452, published posthumously in 1485, "we may define Ornament to be a kind of an auxiliary brightness and improvement to Beauty. So that then Beauty is somewhat lovely which is proper and innate, and diffused over the whole body, and Ornament somewhat added or fastened on, rather than proper and innate".

To conclude, the question is what word in English will convey the concept of divine beauty personified in the Roman goddess of Love ? There is no simple answer and the question remains open.

Oscar Naddermier