Beyond Buildings

Designed Spaces as Visual Persuasion

J. Donald Ragsdale

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By

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LIST OF FIGURES

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PREFACE

This book is a natural extension of previous ones which I have written or edited on the subject of visual persuasion. Those books addressed the visual impact of structures. Two, for example, focused on art museums and demonstrated how a museum's collection and its arrangement of the collection were deliberate means of visual influence. Additionally, those books examined the museums' architecture as a separate type of visual persuasion. The most recent book assessed architecture in general, considering a wide range of buildings and structures such as skyscrapers, palaces, places of residence, government buildings, universities, and, again, museums.

Assessing architecture necessitated a consideration of design elements that were not part of the structure itself. An important element of architecture, for example, is a building site. It is as important to note the placement of a structure such as the Louvre as it is to consider its architectural style. The location of the Louvre at one end of the grand axis known as the Champs Élysées, as well as the museum's centrality in the city of Paris, are both elements which contribute powerfully to the visual power of the building. The grounds of such palaces as Versailles and Schönbrunn equally illustrate the visual power of site.

This book focuses specifically on the designed spaces which are a part of buildings as well as spaces, such as parks and gardens, which have been created as means of visual influence in and of themselves. It seeks first to find those visual images, elements, and communication principles which would be appropriate in answering the questions of how designed spaces influence viewers and to what degree. Secondly, it considers a variety of such spaces, such as parks, gardens, national parks, zoological gardens, battlefields, and even cities. Finally, the book examines a sample of especially notable interior spaces as examples of visual persuasion.

In the four previous books, I focused on those places I had actually visited, studied at first hand, and photographed, believing that there is no satisfactory substitute for the writer's actual presence. In this book, however, it was not possible to visit every place. Time and limited funds precluded that, especially with respect to US national parks and American battlefield memorials, cemeteries, and monuments outside the US. However, each such place assessed within was studied carefully through photographs and videos readily available online.

Also like my previous books on visual persuasion, this is a scholarly work, which concerns itself principally with theory and its application in the assessment of specific items. However like the previous books, this one should also be of value to the casual reader and especially the traveler as a point of reference to enhance visits to one or more of the designed spaces examined within.

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CHAPTER ONE

THREE APPROACHES TO STUDYING SPACE
AS VISUAL PERSUASION

"Space is an exceedingly common commodity: It fills the universe and surrounds us throughout our lives. It can appear so thin and extended that the sense of dimension is numbed or so richly infused with a three-dimensional presence that it endows everything within its fold with special meaning. Intensely three-dimensional space has the remarkable capacity to enhance our lives. It imparts our surroundings with a pleasing sense of comfort and security that is as important to the enjoyment of life as sunlight and a place to rest. It is a basic component of good urban design" (Hedman & Jaszewski 1984, 53). An examination of designed spaces is the central concern of this book, which assessment has the purpose of determining how such spaces impact the viewer visually. The power of space to affect viewers noted by Hedman and Jaszewski is akin to that of buildings and other structures and falls into the general concept of visual persuasion. This book is a natural and direct extension of previous studies of structures in general (Ragsdale 2007), American art museums (Ragsdale 2009a), Western European art museums (Ragsdale 2009b), and architecture as a whole (Ragsdale 2011) as visual persuasion. For that reason, it is appropriate to begin here with a brief account of how scholars with diverse backgrounds have approached the evaluation of visual persuasion. There are generally three such approaches: the visual rhetoric approach, the semiotic, and, for want of a better term, the elemental.

The study of persuasion has been the purview of scholars, especially those in communication studies, since Classical times and perhaps earlier. It has been overwhelmingly a study of verbal behavior under the rubric of rhetoric. Rhetoric has usually been associated with speakers, and at its heart has been about finding, as Aristotle put it, "the available means of persuasion" (1954, 24). Persuasion, in turn, referred primarily to changing someone's way of thinking or behaving or both.

Examples abound. A common one would be found in those speeches, advertisements, and tracts which seek to convince smokers that smoking may lead to lung cancer or emphysema and to get them to quit. The process by which persuasion takes place is one which at its heart is quite simple: someone offers an assertion, which is to say makes a claim. Then this person provides some form of warrant or proof for that assertion or

claim. The proof may be a fact, an example, testimony, and the like. Usually, there are several warrants provided.

Of course, the actual process of persuasion is not so simple. Sometimes, an appeal to an emotion such as patriotism substitutes for the logical warrants mentioned above, and sometimes assertions or claims may be made without providing any proof but which are effective because of the credibility ascribed to the source by the audience. There is also an awareness by students of persuasion that efforts to persuade depend almost entirely on how that audience's prior attitudes, values, and beliefs interact with the claims and warrants, a recognition that one cannot be persuaded unless one wants to be.

Especially helpful in understanding certain forms of visual persuasion is an awareness of what might be called incidental or unintentional persuasion. An example might be a single fact encountered by an auditor in a news report or overheard among friends. Let's say it is a statement that a principal cause of gum disease is the failure to use dental floss twice a day. That fact alone may be sufficient for the auditor to begin systematic flossing. It is not necessary that there be a full-blown persuasive speech or an ad campaign for persuasion to take place. In visual persuasion, a viewer may encounter an image completely separate from any kind of specific effort to have influence. Architecture is a good visual analogy of incidental persuasion. Subsequently, the issue of just what kind of response it is that one has to a standalone visual image will be explored, but clearly the response is not merely passivity. Previously, the response has been called compelling (Ragsdale 2011).

Although strongly committed to the position that rhetoric is at heart a verbal discipline, there have recently been those in the field who have embraced the notion that visual phenomena are also persuasive. Studies of visual persuasion by these scholars are called visual rhetoric. Although often referred to as rhetorical theory, the rhetorical approach is not theoretical in any scientific sense. To the layman, it might be described as the application of some philosophical perspective to the explanation of rhetorical phenomena. Aristotle (1954), for example, identified what he observed to be the essential components of oral persuasion, identifying such things as logic, emotion, and source credibility to mention the most fundamental ones.

Through the centuries, scholars not only have adapted Aristotle's views to the teaching of public speaking but have also used his categories as an analytical tool for assessing speeches. In the 20th century, Kenneth Burke (1955) observed that seeking to ingratiate oneself with an audience was an essential ingredient of persuasion and that assessing rhetorical

events required proper consideration of all of the elements of the events. Of course, scholars have engaged in an extensive set of Burkean analyses of speeches and speakers. Almost anyone who has written philosophically about communication may be used to provide some kind of insight into rhetorical events, and thus one regularly encounters assessments based on the texts of such recent writers as Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Chaïm Perelman to name only a few.

The observation that the rhetorical approach is not theoretical in a scientific sense is not meant to be disparaging. Rather it is intended to explain the wide diversity which characterizes visual rhetorical studies as well as traditional verbal ones. Visual rhetoric, however, is not only characterized by varied approaches but is also diverse in the targets it examines. A recent volume of essays, *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (Hill and Helmers 2004, 21), acknowledges quite a variety: "political conventions, editorial pages, movie theatres, art museums, suburban food stores, government documents, as well as the Victorian drawing room and, as in Goggin's examination of needlepoint, orphanage schools in the 19th century."

While there is no typical approach, studies by Edwards (2004) and Tange (2004) give some insight into the point of view of visual rhetoricians. Edwards was interested in how "images disseminated in connection with newsworthy events become attached to the event in the form of cultural remembering. . . . some images are routinely re-presented long past the time when they are actually 'happening,' creating through visual equivalence a new experience that calls forth the reminder of the depicted event" (179). Edwards's prime example of this phenomenon is the photograph of John F. Kennedy, Jr., age 3, saluting the coffin of his slain father as it passed on its way to Arlington National Cemetery. She provides evidence of the enduring power of this image through newspaper editorial cartoons which appeared many years later at the death of JFK, Jr. She concludes that "the frequent invoking of the 'salute' photograph as well as other historical images of Kennedy and his family members served to justify coverage [of the death] by positioning the plane crash as part of a larger narrative that involved a nation, as well as a family" (193).

Tange (2004) was interested in how the concept of home among the middle classes in Victorian England "was defined in large part through the imaginative value of domesticity, [where] the physical images presented by actual homes were complemented with print images in texts that participated in creating domestic ideology" (277). To illustrate her premise, Tange provides paintings of domestic scenes, floor plans of

Victorian homes showing the residents' "places," illustrations of work tables and chairs, sketches of drawing rooms, and drawings of table settings and menus. With the proliferation of these print images, Tange points out that "readers could consume as many works as it took for domestic ideals to become second nature, so that eventually the well-read, middle-class consumer . . . might 'naturally' be able to display a properly domesticated identity" (296).

Recently, in addition to the Hill and Helmers (2004) collection of essays, other works with a visual rhetoric approach have appeared, which illustrate how the approach is developing and how interest in visual rhetoric is growing. One of these is a reader with a collection of 20 recently published essays (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 2008). The essays "investigate a variety of visual forms—photography, editorial cartoons, public monuments, tattoos, mural art, television news and advertising, stamps, prints. They describe images doing the work of social control and of social protest or political change" (Benson 2008, 416). The editors reveal that they had in mind a textbook for a college-level course in visual rhetoric. The essays are very much in keeping with the pattern established in the Hill and Helmers collection.

Another book represents a bit of a departure from these two collections by focusing on displays, including iconic photographs, national park landscapes, Budapest's Stalin Monument, public demonstrations, and tattoos. In fact, however, the use of the term "display" is only for the purpose of emphasizing the choice rhetors make when deciding what to reveal visually and what not to. In practice, the displays under consideration are the same or quite similar to the images in the two earlier collections, and "the rhetorical study of displays proceeds from the central idea that whatever they make manifest or appear is the culmination of selective processes that constrain the range of possible meanings available to those who encounter them" (Prelli 2006, 2).

A third book is entitled *Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions* (Kostelnick and Hassett 2003), but it is quite different from the previous ones mentioned here in the visual images with which it is concerned. This book is more narrowly focused on the nature of visual language itself rather than rhetoric and in particular on the charts, graphs, icons, and the like which are used as the conventions of textual illustrations. This book is a descriptive one which traces the historical development of visual images used as illustrations. Since it does not seek to provide a rhetorical perspective to the use of visual images, it is an interesting but tangential contribution to the visual rhetoric approach.

Studies of visual rhetoric provide many meaningful insights into the phenomena they examine and help in understanding the purposeful use of visual images and its likely effects. Typically, however, visual rhetoric does not delve into the semiotics of images nor the elements on which the images are based. Again, this observation is not meant to disparage studies in visual rhetoric so much as it is to distinguish them from two other approaches to the study of visual persuasion: the semiotic and the elemental. Both of these approaches are rather more interested in visual images *qua* visual images. They seek to dissect images themselves to see how they function as available means of persuasion. The second or semiotic approach focuses holistically on visual signs, while the third concerns itself with the basic elements of visual imagery—dots, lines, geometric figures, and the like—and their organization into communication strategies.

The semiotic approach to visual persuasion was developed by Paul Messaris (1997) and was primarily targeted at the wide use of visual means to influence consumers in advertising. In an effort to explain the role of visual images in influencing consumers, Messaris took a semiotic approach, specifically an adaptation of the sign system of Charles S. Peirce (Buchler 1955). Pierce's system included a wide range of signs, some of which were visual in nature. From these, Messaris selected two for a typology of visual persuasion. They were icons and indexes. Icons are *representational,* in that they look like that for which they stand. Icons are abundant in the portal sculptures of Gothic cathedrals as well as the paintings hanging in the world's art museums. Indexes are *documentary*. They are direct evidence of a thing, such as unaltered photographs and artifacts like a cannon acting as a battlefield memorial. Messaris recognized also that how a sign is interpreted often depends upon its juxtaposition to other signs. The theory of *montage* in film is an example of this juxtapositional effect. Messaris termed this phenomenon syntactic indeterminacy, and it has been used to explain such persuasive effects as those of the great dinosaur skeleton in the rotunda of The British Museum of Natural History (Ragsdale 2007) and the location in the Louvre of *Nike of Samothrace* at the head of a grand staircase (Ragsdale 2009b).

How do icons have a persuasive effect? How do they influence consumers to purchase an advertised product, or to switch from one brand to another, or to maintain their brand loyalty? Messaris (1997) begins his answer to these questions by pointing out that advertisements are unwanted forms of communication, i.e., they are not sought out by ordinary persons. For this reason, then, the first function of an icon is to get attention, and Messaris devotes considerable space to providing