

Why is the Golden Ratio so satisfying?



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IN A PREVIOUS article we proposed that if good design is a matter of opinion then it is better if it is informed opinion and suggested that it is important that the experts are heard.

We also asked what makes an expert? If it is someone with extensive knowledge and experience of their subject what is there to know?

There is a tendency to believe that design is governed

by rules deciding what is 'right' and 'wrong' – that experts know about them which leaves those who do not feeling at a disadvantage even if they still know what they like.

Are there really these rules? To some extent there are. It seems that we need them to bring order to a disorderly world, order which can be expressed visually as patterns and proportions (musically as scales and harmonies). It can also be expressed mathematically.

To take just one example the Greeks – and the Babylonians and Egyptians before them, the Romans after them – were fascinated by mathematical rules to govern the system of proportions which included the classical Orders and the Golden

Ratio.

Shapes, together with political, economic, practical features are the warp and the weft of the fabric which we call a style; it is surprising how deep the influence of a style can run and how long it can last. Does this suggest that it is a response to some subconscious needs?

For example, 2,000 years ago the Roman Vitruvius – a man of great learning – wrote his book *On Architecture* to guide the design of buildings. It was copied from time to time and then it was eagerly picked up by a young Italian stonemason, the soon to be admired architect Palladio (1508-1580).

It was introduced in Britain by Lord Burlington, architect

and patron, on his return from the Grand Tour and today an exhibition at the Royal Academy celebrates the 500th anniversary of Palladio's birth.

Unfortunately what worked so well in the Italian sun worked less well under leaden English skies though its influence, not least the importance it attached to symmetry and proportion, is still with us – and we know it as the Georgian period.

There have been many other styles in which the experts have played their part and will continue to do so and I believe we are entitled to wonder whether there are some deeper influences at work.

My guess is that there are and those of us who study design over the years

subconsciously absorb something of them without, as yet, identifying them.

However deep they lie in our neural systems the new brain scanning techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, are giving us glimpses of what may be going on.

One day I hope to find out, if not in this world then in the next, just why the Golden Ratio is so deeply satisfying.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the town's past, present and future and seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces.

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