

Architect Ideology and Politics

Dr. Wagih Fawzi

Abstract

Current architectural discourse could be classified into four 'isms': Productivism, Rationalism, Structuralism and Populism. These categories correspond to the principle intentional trends in architecture today. Altogether, they are of critical relevance to the present cultural confusion which could be characterized as Regional; nonetheless, a non-reductive architectural culture that parallels the concept of the interstices of freedom. Regionalism changes from place to place, resistant to civilization, and can easily degenerate into a nostalgic case. Regionalism manifests itself in terms of ideology, climate, topography, material resources and technique that depend on small scale local industry. The urban consequences of applying such criteria at economic densities would be to spontaneously create the boundaries of a negative urban form. Wherever architecture will ever be able to return to the representation of collective value is an important point.

Keywords: *Regionalism, hidden mythos, inner image, authentic innovation, tradition*

Introduction

Architects are pathologically addicted to change. That is why they tend to sever the past from the future with the result that the present is rendered emotionally inaccessible, without temporal dimension. Let us discover first the unchanging condition of man and what antiquarians and technocrats have in common.

When we talk about space we are concerned with a tiny part of the infinity that surrounds the earth, and each building marks a unique place in this infinity. There are two basic possibilities of spatial composition in architecture; the closed architectural body, which isolate space within itself, and the open body which embraces an area of space. Buildings that have a strong impact convey an intense feeling of their spatial quality. They embrace the void called space and make it vibrate. The logical development of a work of architecture depends on rational and objective criteria. The design process is based on a constant interplay of feeling and reason. To a large degree, designing is based on understanding systems of order.

Designing is inventing; we have to look for a new solution to every problem. It is important to be avant-garde. Architecture creativity goes beyond all historical and technical knowledge. It reflects the spirit of its inventor and gives its own answers to the question of our time through its functional form and appearance, its relationship with other works of architecture and with the place where it stands. A good building must be

capable of absorbing the traces of human life and thus of taking on a specific richness. Form and construction, appearance and function are no longer separate. They belong together and form a whole. Everything refers to everything.

Good design lies in us and in our ability to perceive the world with both emotion and reason. A good architectural design is sensuous and intelligent. The roots of architectural understanding lie in our architectural experience, lie in our childhood, in our youth. Students of architecture have to learn to design with their personal biographical experience of architecture. In order to design, to invent architecture, we must learn to handle them with awareness. This is research; this is the work of remembering. Architecture needs to be executed and come into being, which is always sensuous of its materials. To experience architecture in a concrete way means to touch, see, hear, and smell it; to discover and consciously work with these qualities. Every design needs new images. When designing, thinking in images is always directed towards the whole. With the sudden emergence of an inner image, a new line in a drawing, the whole design changes and is newly formulated within a fraction of a second. At the beginning of the design process, the image is incomplete so we try to rearticulate and clarify our theme, to add the missing parts to our imaged picture. To put it in another way, one must not indulge in arid abstract theoretical assumptions which may let one lose track of the concrete qualities of architecture or fall in love with the graphic quality of our drawings and confuse it with real architecture quality.

When we look at buildings which seem to be at peace within themselves, our perception becomes calmed and dulled because it has no message for us. It is as if we could see something on which we cannot focus our consciousness, and yet it is impossible to imagine the place where they stand without them. Buildings only become accepted by their surroundings if they have the ability to appeal to our emotions in various ways. If a work of architecture consists of forms and contents which combine to create a fundamental mood, it may possess the qualities of a work of art! It is concerned with insights and with understanding truth.

Tradition and Innovation

Works of objects of art change their meanings as we change our angle of observation because they develop layers of meanings for each perspective, so that we can enjoy the indeterminate that offers us the contemplation of the lighting and atmosphere of poetry that comes out of the precision of the vague, which possess the potential of a primordial force that reaches deeper than the mere arrangement of stylistically preconceived forms, good architecture should enable man to experience it, not talk to him rhetoric. The successful things pertaining to building can only oscillate between the reality and the imagination when attempting to design a building for a particular place and purpose. We are never in an abstract world but in a world of things since the relationship of man to

places and through places to spaces is based on his dwelling in them. When one concentrates on a specific site or place for which one is going to design a building (if he tries to bump its depths, its form, its history, and its sensuous qualities), images of other places start to invade this process of precise observation of images of special places that one carries with him as inner visions of special moods and qualities.

When an architecture design draws solely from tradition and repeats the dictates of its site, a sensation of a lack of a genuine concern with the world because it speaks only of contemporary trends and sophisticated vision without triggering vibrations in its place. Such a work is not anchored in its site and missing the specific gravity of the ground it stands on. The trouble is, it has no soul.

One is confronted with the problematic relation between authentic innovations on the one hand and tradition on the other. Such an opposition between architecture and building came to the fore in the 1st half of the 19th Century. Herein lays the initial paradox with regard to innovation and continuity. It emerged in the conflict between the positive classic system advanced by Jean Nicolas Louis Durand and the intrinsic resistance of Gothic culture, as this was nostalgically formulated in the polemical stance adopted in England in 1841 by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin. Pugin sensed the bond linking classicism to utilitarianism. For while classicism seems to have been involved with the reification of the monument, it can also be claimed that the more rooted culture of building realized, in its own way, another order of continuity. In fact, European architecture was divided between two different interpretations of Durand, one with, and one without, the rhetoric of iconography. The former was the case with the prefabricated production that took place, in both the Soviet Union and the Third Reich between 1933 and 1945. These anti-modernist decorated and modernist versions of Durand were variously experimented with in Holland and Sweden. This has led to the implosion of progressive culture upon itself with a total division between the aesthetic and the political avant-gardes.

For Pugin, architectural principles, moral values, and faith were interdependent, each one depending for its authority on the other two. As far as he was concerned, the degeneracy of modern Catholicism was signaled by its equal indulgence in Classicism utility and industrialization. Durand's detached manipulation of empty classical elements in order to accommodate and represent the new institutions of the rationalized and universal state was countered by Pugin's conviction that the authenticity of rooted culture could only be grounded in faith.

The Rise and fall of Modernist Movements

The avant-garde responded to the advanced instrumentality of the 1st decade of the 20th Century by breaking decisively with all past cultures. Time and space were negated to be replaced by speed. The avant-garde saw itself as a millennial-istic impetus, as a natural

force which had no choice but to break with all prior history in order to enter into the future of the Golden Age; a new naked instrumentality free from any referential constraint. For example, Italian Futurism, the Neo-Plasticism (De Stijl) founded by Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg and the Russian Suprematism by the painter Kassimir Malevich, and, finally Russian Productivism by the sculptor Vladimir Tatlin (1920), and the artistic Culture in Moscow. Neo-Plasticism, Suprematism and Productivism movements are intended only to rupture with history. They sought to develop a new rooted culture based on the production of the people in a state of revolution, assuming an optimized science fiction technique, for the full realization of their environmental vision. However, some of those movements were unacceptable because they sought to dissolve the split between the artist and the engineer. Other movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism have been eliminated for their lack of application in architecture. While other strictly architectural movements such as Mies van der Rohe's reinterpreted Romantic Classicism of the 20th century or the Italian Rationalist movement, have been omitted because they were essentially variants of classicism. In the case of the English Archigram group, who began to project Neo-Futurist images, their attitude was closely tied to the technocratic ideology of the American designer Buckminster Fuller and to that of his British apologists John McHale and Reyner Banham. For example, the Centre National d'Art et de Culture is a realization of the technological and infrastructural rhetoric of Archigram. The work of Archigram was close to that of the Japanese Metabolists, who followed the mega structural lead given by Kenzo Tange's Tokyo Bay scheme of 1960.

The Italian Neo-Rationalist movement, the *Tendenza*, which has come into prominence over the past decade, is clearly an attempt to save the discipline of architecture from being undermined as a discourse by the all-pervasive forces of megapolitan technique and economy¹. The architects of the *Tendenza* thought that functionalist organization of residential units into strictly subdivided areas for living, dining, cooking, washing and sleeping is in itself a tyranny and that we should attempt to return to the pre-industrial norm of interconnected rooms, offering an altogether looser fit between volume and activity². This return to reason has meant a return to the concerns of the prewar Italian Rationalist movement. This rationalist reaction was initiated by the publication of two singularly seminal texts: Aldo Rossi's *L'architettura della città* of 1966 and Giorgio Grassi's *La costruzione logica dell'architettura* of 1967. The first stressed the part to be played by established building types in determining the morphological structure of urban

¹ The most effective influence of the *Tendenza* outside Italy has been in the Ticino, where a rationalist school had been evolving since the early 1960 which has been touched in the interim by Le Corbusier, Kahn, and certain aspects of American Conceptual art.

² Are the individual living patterns prototypes which make individual interpretations of the collective pattern possible? It is practically impossible to make the individual setting exactly suitable for everybody. We have to design things that can be interpretable.

form as it develops in time; the second attempted to formulate the necessary combinatorial rules for architecture – the intrinsic logic by which Grassi himself has arrived at his own highly restrained expression. Both men rejected the principle by which form is supposed to follow function and asserted instead the relative autonomy of architectural order. Rossi has also recognized that most modern programs are inappropriate vehicles for architecture and for him this has meant having recourse to a so-called analogical architecture whose referents and elements are to be abstracted from the vernacular.

The unifying concept with which Dutch Structuralism hoped to overcome the reduction aspect of Functionalism was characterized by Van Eyck as labyrinthine clarity, a concept that has since been fully elaborated by his pupils³. Aldo van Eyck was responsible for the most consistently sustained and significant critique of modern architecture as an inseparable part of the Enlightenment. In 1962 Van Eyck delivered one of his sharpest attacks on Europocentrism and on the bankruptcy of imperialist culture. Western civilization identifies itself with that which is not like it; it is a deviation, less advanced and primitive. Van Eyck observed that “Man after all has been accommodating himself physically in this world for thousands of years. His natural genius has neither increased nor decreased during that time”.

Interpreting the past

The history of architecture proper is flanked by two pillars, one the pre-history of the Modern Movement, and the other is its critical evaluation. To these the sources of Modernism lie in the Enlightenment (Kaufmann, Collins, Benevolo) and also lie in social and political developments following from the industrial revolution (Benevolo).

The early historians of the Modern Movement used history in the service of propaganda. They were trying to create a future by means of a particular interpretation of the past. Later historians of the movement, like Leonardo Benevolo, assumed that this future was assured, and that they could leave its consummation to social and political institutions. The fact is that modern architecture has been transformed into something radically different from what was originally intended. The historian of the Modern Movement therefore is confronted with special problems. His object of study is fluid and fugitive, and because he is investigating the past as it merges into the present he is faced with the problem of history as ideology.

And so, in this kind of context one can hardly be expected to exhibit the enthusiasm for that old modern architecture shared by Giedion, Pevsner and Summerson. Nor does one share the polemical enthusiasm for technology which suffuses Banham's Theory and

³ On the other hand they would no doubt reject outright his concept on the grounds that such an introverted type of form is incapable of providing representative public space at an urban scale.

Design in the First Machine Age, nor the wise hopes of Scully's Modern Architecture, so tellingly subtitled Architecture for Democracy.

Kenneth Frampton has opted for a different methodology which views the history of modern architecture as a fragmented, ruptured discontinuous reality. For him, it suffices to pursue a theme, a school, an architect, but it is not necessary to fit all the pieces of the historical puzzle together. In as much ideas create and destroy buildings, Frampton makes an attempt to show the meaning of an architecture connected to the world in which it is produced, thus providing once again the synthetic quality of this condition; synthetic in that one finds in this state the key to understanding the prevailing and dominant ideology in the period under consideration.

Following the road explored by Tafuri and the School of Venice, Frampton attempted to condense in a single quotation the significance of the work of an architect, thus Loos is understood only through the crisis of culture, and the later Le Corbusier is only to be comprehended if his work is seen as the 'monumentalisation' of the vernacular. Therein, for Frampton, lies the importance of interpretation in history, without which it would be difficult to comprehend its significance. Frampton's way of dealing with the problem has been to superimpose three historical approaches and to use these to create a balance between objective history and a perspective point of view.

The history of modern architecture has been constantly misinterpreted by historians and critics who sharing several 19th Century prejudices, have attempted to describe its inception and development in either of two ways. The majority have attempted to look at architecture as a purely material that is specialized set of phenomena. Although paying lip-service to the cultural context, they have in fact tried to explain buildings only in reference to other buildings or styles. Other less numerous groups have been concerned with ideas. But such analyses become equally fallacious as ideas are forced through preconceived ideologies that do not derive from the world-view that originates architectural intentions.

Neither an independent history of form nor a history of ideas would be sufficient to deal with the development of modern architecture and its meaning that it could become a true source of orientation for the contemporary critic or designer. To reveal intentions in architecture demands much more than good pictures and a knowledge of the texts. Architecture, being a primordial form of embodied culture, demands to be interpreted on the basis of profound interdisciplinary knowledge. Without this solid understanding of a world view, of the structure of beliefs that constitutes the foundation of thought and action, any speculation about meaning in architecture remains conjectural and superficial. The depth and understanding of modern culture, a contextual setting form a thorough grasping of the ambiguous nature of architectural intentionality. The inception of technological values as the only universally acceptable values, and the peculiar position

of architecture between the fine arts and the sciences, has exacerbated the difficulties of modern architecture. The architect is made to respond as either engineer or decorator under the pressures of a technological world view. The hidden mythos in architecture design is precisely the dimension that reveals the humanity of building as dwelling, as a form of poetry. This mythos appears in the best examples as the true driving force behind architectural decisions. Simply, the potential of architecture as art resides in what amounts to the most critical period in the history of mankind.

Conclusion

Modern technology does not only serve to solve quantitative problems, but, if properly understood, may help us to substitute the devalued motifs of historicism with forms which give our environment character, and thereby make it become a real place. Construction is the art of making meaning a whole out of many parts. Construction details when successful are not mere decoration; they do not distract or entertain. They lead to an understanding of the whole of which they are a part. Architecture has its own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, for the silence of sleep. Architectural works represent an attempt to give a voice to something which has not yet found its place in the concrete world for which it is meant.

Modern architecture wanted to play its part in the liberation of mankind by creating a new environment to live in. Those futurist architects have taken technology to its logical conclusion. Architecture is evolutionary as well as revolutionary; figuratively speaking: Enlightenment lying there like a science-fiction transposition in the midst of the desert. Pioneers of modern architecture thought that architecture should be an art of the people. They wanted to satisfy the requirements of the community. They wanted to build dwellings, matched to human needs. Utility became synonymous with profitability. Recent developments show the ingenuity of the architectural concept to exploit the maximum profit from a piece of land. Buildings get heavier, more monstrous in scale to express power with greater flexibility and change-loving structures.

Architecture as the symbolic representation of ideological and political changes suffers this continuous process in which construction and destruction intermix, making any attempt at conventional description difficult (Rafael Moneo). With such a view it is neither possible to approach the history of architecture as a gradual conquest of the idea of space nor is it possible to systematically describe facts while placing more emphasis on causes than on effects through an overwhelming list of figures and dates. The contradiction of architecture is such that it does not admit a singular reading and it is overlaid by such a conglomeration of realities that any intent at a linear and continuous history may have meaning with regard to invention but it will hardly help to interpret facts.