

THE LESSON OF THE EAST

Guest Editorial by Isaac Lerner and Peter Scriver

What is the fascination of the East? The fiction of Joseph Conrad or of Somerset Maugham reveals an almost helpless, but knowing, obsession with that question. In a more introspective vein, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* probes the cultural entanglement of East and West with a most lucid understanding. In our day, V.S. Naipaul pursues the query with a clarity of perception which is as harsh as it is brilliant. Rudyard Kipling, one more luminary in a pantheon of literary figures who have shown a remarkable sensitivity for the nature of the 'East', put it the most succinctly (if perhaps inaccurately): "East is east and West is west, and never the twain shall meet."

What the novelist holds over the architect, as Western artists confronted by the East, is the natural predilection to respond to the experience in a most fundamental, sensual manner. The exotic completeness of Eastern culture, which he observes and senses so lucidly, is precisely the force of contrast and perceptual challenge that he seeks to inspire a creative literary reaction in himself. The architect, on the other hand, denies himself that urge to spontaneous experience-reaction; he clouds his perception with notions of universality and human cultural equivalence. But far less than the freelance intellect of the wandering writer, does the actual built work of the architect offer any such universality. In ironic paradox to this belief in a pan-cultural ideal, so firmly maintained in the West in this century particularly, architecture must be seen as the most obvious materialization of the disparate cultural perceptions, aspirations, and self-images which characterize human civilization.

What, then, can the Western architect learn from the East? Paramount must be a sense of humility that one can scarce suppress when confronted with the dazzling architectural achievements of many Eastern cultures. Although alien in form,

symbol, and space conception, of a degree a Western mind might never conceive, there is an undeniable wholeness, sophistication, and beauty to the architectural and urban 'languages' of the East which is easily comparable to the highest Renaissance flowering. The fact that the East remains so completely distinct in this sophistication challenges our coveted belief in the cultural supremacy of the West. But, rather than dampen the creative spirit, the appreciation of parallel cultural evolutions should open the mind to the possibility of still more modes of meaningful perception and architectural expression. If one truly wishes to 'see', the diversity of this world cannot but dispel the narrow, intangible notion of an 'ideal' architecture.

The experience of the East thus enlightens us to our own perceptual narrowness as Westerners. This should humble us to tread more prudently in those cultures where experience, past and present, speaks disturbingly of good-intentioned cultural imperialism on the part of the West. On the other hand, when we respect it, the East presents us with an exotic foil, against which the Western understanding of itself and its cultural sources may be all the better honed and consolidated. There is a very rich dialectic of this sort which can be observed throughout history. We need only to think of Moorish Spain, or of Venice in its seafaring heyday, when the fruits of the East-West cultural exchange were literally crystallized in its architecture. Conversely, in a far more ancient epoch, the conquering sweep of Alexander's Greek Empire dramatically 'hellenized' the dormant cultures of north-west India to spur a fascinating new Hindu-Buddhist artistic flowering. While these are examples of rather conscious cultural intercourse, the most fascinating of such historical encounters was perhaps the least obvious; the subliminal seduction from within of the Western architectural aesthetic by that most Oriental of space conceptions, the 'International Style'.

The 'space conception' is probably the most fundamental distinguishing factor between the West and the Far-Eastern cultures in particular. From the vaulted chambers of the earliest Roman period to the late nineteenth century, the Western space conception, as Gideon states, is one of "space-containing volumes." There is little perception of the void and its dynamics, but rather a cartesian compulsion to see and understand only the container; an absolute entity divorced from time and movement. The fixed view of the Renaissance-invented perspective drawing epitomizes this static space conception while equally expressing the paradoxical indeterminacy of radiated space - the mind-boggling infinity of 'outer space'. The Oriental space conception is, very simply, the antithesis to that of the West; an 'inner space' defined by the dynamic relationship between objects and the observer in time. It is clear that we have not yet come to perceive in this Oriental manner. However, a certain visual fascination with the diaphanous, shifting parallax and transparency of the 'International' form language has carried our industrialized culture deep into an alien architectural limbo whose mechanics are decidedly Western, but whose source is Oriental, as assimilated from the Japanese in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. That such a remarkably violent and all-encompassing movement should stem from such a singular and passive influence is an irony not easily dismissed. There is the suggestion of a deeper-rooted process, the ultimate cultural union of the modern East and West, of which the twentieth century architectural momentum is only a symptom. But, for the moment, the traditional Lesson of the East appears to renew itself at the last. While the Japanese, through innate understanding, continue to explore the 'International' idiom with profound, if increasingly alien, results, we have begun to recoil from an exotic trend misunderstood, seeking to rediscover the architectural touchstones of our essential Westernness. □

