ON KING SOLOMON'S RULE

by Peter Lanken

MYSTERY: I

In Howard Pyle's image, the Knight is not the dashing *chevalier* of Medieval romance. He is older and wiser. He cares not for the ribands and glittering array of fabulous tournament. He has come from Jerusalem, and knows that the Holy City is only won through sacrifice and pain, and that it can be lost again through common human frailty. He understands the limits of military might, and the power that accrues to wordly wealth. He knows the Secret of Architecture.

The Crusaders finally entered Jerusalem in the year 1099. In 1118, a small group of them banded together to form the Order of the Knights Templar. This was a religious order, in that its members swore obedience, poverty and chastity. But it was also a military order, devoted to the protection of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. Its first headquarters were in part of the Temple of Jerusalem, hence the Order's name.

The Order grew rich, as any organisation must if its members are rich (as most of its knightly novices were), if they transfer all their wealth to the Order, and if they are sworn to personal poverty. It obtained the support of no less a personage than St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and increased its influence in Europe. After Jerusalem fell to Saladin in 1187, the Templars gradually moved all their operations to Europe, where their increasing wealth and power soon made them rivals to the Kings of France and England.

The Templars had returned from the Holy Land with something more important than organisation, and power, and money. During their sojourn at the Temple of Jerusalem, they had carried out certain excavations and investigations below the remains of Herod's Temple, below the second Temple built after the Babylonian exile, to Solomon's original structure[1]. They had there discovered the key to the construction of that earliest Temple: Solomon's Rule. This was the rule, or template, or module or proportion, by which God Himself had instructed Solomon in the original building of His Temple. It was the very basis of architecture.

Thus the Templars returned to Europe not just in time to participate in the marvellous renaissance of the thirteenth century, but with the knowledge to generate that renaissance. They directed the construction of their own superb castles (which inspired concern among the mere kings of Europe), and of the great cathedrals themselves.

The kings' fear and jealousy grew. In 1307, helped by the Dominicans and their newly-founded Inquisition, Philippe IV of France charged the Templars with heresy. By 1312, the Order was officially suppressed. Its extirpation was completed in 1314 with the burning of the Grand Master Jacques de Molay. Solomon's Rule, handed down through the Order for 200 years, disappeared in the smoke of that final fire.

REASON: I

Parts of this story are demonstrably true. The Order of the Knights Templar was founded in Jerusalem in 1118. It did become remarkably powerful in Jerusalem in the thirteenth century. It was wiped out by Philippe le Bel.

The story of Solomon's Rule, on the other hand, seems to have originated in the wishful thinking of the eighteenth-century founders of Freemasonry[2]. They wanted to form a secret society, with its own system of mystical knowledge. They wanted a link between their own time and biblical antiquity, and invented one, just as the early Kings of Scotland had traced their ancestry to Alexander the Great. The story they invented now persists in the literature of the lunatic fringe, between the volumes on Atlantis and those on astrology.

But clearly the story is attractive, and not only to those people who fervently hope that UFO's exist. Every architect has sat in front of some design problem and thought, "I wish I knew the rule for this one." Every thoughtful architect has looked at something he has built and wondered, "Was that the right solution?"

Our thoughtful architect, of course, might doubt the existence of a single rule covering all of architecture, attractive though that idea might be. But he would not doubt the existence of rules (he already knows a hundred of them), nor would he doubt that, if a rule had been found in the Holy Land, it could have been transmitted from one Knight Templar to another for two centuries.

Implicit in the story of the Templars, then, are two fundamental aspects of rationalism in architecture. First, rules of architecture can exist: there are correct ways of building. Secondly, and far more important, those rules can be communicated: that is, they can be enunciated and discussed.

ORIGINS: I

The story of Solomon's Rule illustrates a third aspect of rationalism: every system of architectural thought requires some unassailable, unquestionable origin[3].

Solomon's Rule comes as close to absolute authority as any rule is ever likely to. It has, as the art historians say, a good provenance. It was handed down to Solomon by God Himself. It was used to construct one of the few buildings described in the Bible. It was lost while the Infidel held Jerusalem, and was only rediscovered by the Crusaders.

Such a claim to historic justification is common in architectural theory.

The basic form, as usual, is defined by Vitruvius. In his *Ten Books*, he describes the discovery of fire, the beginnings of language, the construction of the first houses. Amongst many other anecdotes, he tells of the origins of the three orders and the derivation of proportion from the human body.

More or less related to these anecdotes, Vitruvius repeats rules that were a thousand years old in his time: those concerning symmetry, proportion, the uses of the orders. Symmetry and proportion are absolute rules. Once a square building was built, or once the idea of symmetry was demonstrated, they could never again be ignored by architects.

The forms the Vitruvius described — columns, pediments — were another matter. When these Roman forms were revived in the Renaissance, architects were confronted with a dilemma: could pagan forms legitimately be used in the construction of Christian churches? The resolution of this problem was achieved in the sixteenth century by two Spanish Jesuits, with reference to our story's touchstone of architectural thought, Solomon's Temple. Briefly, they identified the temple of Ezekiel's vision with the Temple of Solomon, and proved that it had been built under direct guidance from God. They showed that it accorded in every sense with Vitruvian doctrine, and that, indeed, it was the origin for Vitruvius's work.[4].

One can only imagine that kind of fusion occurring in the arcane and hermetic intellectual atmosphere of sixteenth-century Spain. But no matter. Solomon's Temple became a standard reference[5], and Vitruvian rules and elements remained (and remain) absolute. No subsequent architecture could ignore them, just as no previous one could.

PRINCIPLE:

In the mid-eighteenth century (when, not coincidentally, the story of Solomon's Rule originated), the Abbé Laugier took architectural theory one step further.

His invoking of the primitive hut is well known, as is his stern attitude concerning the use of classical elements of building. In other words, he accepted in his theory the fundamental concepts of rules and origin. But it is not because of these references that his work is important. He writes, with extreme brevity and clarity, the ideas which separated his theory from those preceding: "an artist must be able to justify by reasons everything he does," and "the parts of an architectural order are the very components of the building; they must therefore be employed in such a way as not only to decorate a building but to constitute it, whereby if a single element is removed, the whole building will collapse."[6]

These are more than ideas, they are principles. Against the background of the rococo, he insists on clarity and simplicity. Against mannerism, he insists on structural logic and consistency.

For Laugier, architecture is not the playground for personal whim, nor is it a showcase for random ornament. Behind every work of architecture, there must be a clear and consistent set of ideas, logically constructed, which incorporates the truths of construction, convenience and proportion.

This is the beginning of rationalism as an explicit principle in architecture. And just as symmetry, once demonstrated, or a column, once constructed, could never again be ignored, Laugier's principle became an essential part of architectural thought.

ORIGINS: II

Laugier thus added another necessary part to any new system of architectural theory. In addition to a basic set of transmissible rules, and a historic origin of some kind, a theory now required principles of logic, simplicity and clarity.

The works of Durand, Pugin, Viollet-le-Duc, and Le Corbusier all follow this pattern. But these writers don't explain the dedication of this issue of THE FIFTH COLUMN to rationalism. It was

Aldo Rossi who provided the theory, and the images which have revived interest in rationalism. And yes, he fits the form. He speaks of rules, of origins, of reason.

For Rossi, the origins of architecture are to be discovered in the city, in architecture itself[7]. The city displays all the elements of architecture, and all the rules by which they should be assembled. But the city is enormously complex, too complex for even mathematical analysis. The mechanism which Rossi proposes to distinguish the significant aspect of the city is memory. (Memory, as Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses; memory, the generator of most of the origins in architectural theory.) Once so identified, the elements can be combined through the application of Laugier's principles of logic and simplicity into a system of ideas, and then into a building which can be understood....

REASON: II

Thus we return to an aspect of rationalism mentioned earlier. The rules and elements which make up the intellectual framework of a building must be explicit, and susceptible of enunciation and discussion. They must be understandable to those who actually construct the building, to those who commission it, and to those who use it.

They must be assembled, according to Laugier's principle, into a coherent set of ideas before a design can be completed[8]. It is the architect's job to take that set of ideas through all the vicissitudes of the construction process, so that they are visible and understandable in the final building. This is the final objective of architectural rationalism. The single rule of the Temple has been replaced by a single, overriding principle.

MYSTERY: II

A last thought about Solomon's Rule, that previous guiding principle that disappeared in 1314. We are again living in a time when the Secret of Architecture has been lost. The great masters of the Modern Movement all studied architecture, in the sense that a philosopher studies philosophy. Many of their disciples, however, believed that the way to promote the modern was to destroy all that went before. They ridiculed the buildings, denigrated the books, destroyed the plaster casts. Three thousand years of learning were almost extinguished. Many architects now practising or teaching have little idea of what was risked during the past forty years of self-inflicted urban amnesia.

But the persecutors didn't destroy it all. Some of it is being rediscovered, and it is being rediscovered through the study of architecture, as Rossi postulates. Social science, or semiotics, or politics, cannot provide the answer.

Even the post-modernists — most of whose buildings will look silly in five years — helped. They showed that the old elements (columns, pediments and all the rest) could still be used, even if as a joke. Once used, questions inevitably arose about their appropriateness, and discussions of rules ensued. The Secret of Architecture is being discovered again.

Notes

1. Solomon's Temple is described in the Bible in II Samuel xxiv; I Kings vi-vii; II Chronicles ii-iv; and in Ezekiel's vision, Ezekiel xl-xliii.
2. A somewhat equivocal and confused rendition can be found in Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns: The Ar-*

chitects of the Eighteenth Century, Cambridge, Mass., 1980.
3. Joseph Rykwert has written a whole book on this subject: *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, New York, 1972.
4. Juan Battista Villalpando & Jeronimo Prado, *In Ezechielem Explanationes et Apparatus Urbis ac Templi Hierosolymitani*, Rome, 1596 & 1604.
5. See, for instance, Johann Bernard Fischer von Erlach, *Entwurff einer Historischen Architectur*, Leipzig, 1721 (No, I haven't read this either, but it nevertheless substantiates my point).
6. These readings are taken from Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, London, 1965; for the complete text in English, see Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, (translated and with an introduction by Wolfgang and Anni Herrmann), Los Angeles, 1977.
7. Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982. If you can't understand this, read *"Aldo Rossi: The Idea of Architecture and the Modena Cemetery,"* by Rafael Moneo, translated by Angela Giral, in *Oppositions* 5. If you still can't understand it, read it again. It's important. See also Vidler, *"The Third Typology,"* in *Rational Architecture*, Brussels, 1978. For examples of his memory in action, see Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982.
8. The danger, of course, is that the images are manipulated, not the ideas. This is especially likely with a lyrical architect like Rossi. See any number of student projects over the past five years.

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