

# MEDITATION ON ARCHITECTURE AND THE WORD

by Alberto Perez-Gomez

The precondition of meaning is not an intellectual or associant operation. Meaning *appears* firstly in the world of everyday life, the world of the vivid present which is at arm's length *here and now*. All universes of discourse, including architecture and language, have their common roots of meaning in that world, in which we are engaged primarily through our embodied perception. In the realm of primordial reality, most explicit in the world of primitive people, the order of words and the order of building have profound analogies. The sacred mountain which was the pyramid created a place for the deployment of ritual, and action that followed closely from the order of myth. The myth articulated reality in the universe of language while architecture did the same in the universe of the physical world. The distance between the things of the world given in our experience and their names was very short, immediacy was crucial to meaning. Similarly, the circle of stones at *Stonehenge* was the circle of the heavens, the universe of man reflected in a cosmic place.

Plato already realized that writing brought about a loss of memory. The clarity which language and architecture seemed to gain from a greater distance from the perceptual reality of lived experience came about through the loss of connections. Thus Vitruvius (already a late-comer in this development), could rationalize the reality of architecture and talk about its materiality, its proportions and requirements, keeping mostly silent about the archetypal human situations or rituals which the architecture necessarily framed in order to be meaningful.

The development of architectural theory spanning from Vitruvius to the end of the 18th century can be perceived as an ever increasing rationalization. This was, of course, not a linear development. It is clear the Suger's *Gothic Theory of Architecture* was in fact a theology, and that even in the 18th century a *mythistoire* founded a rational theory that still fulfilled its

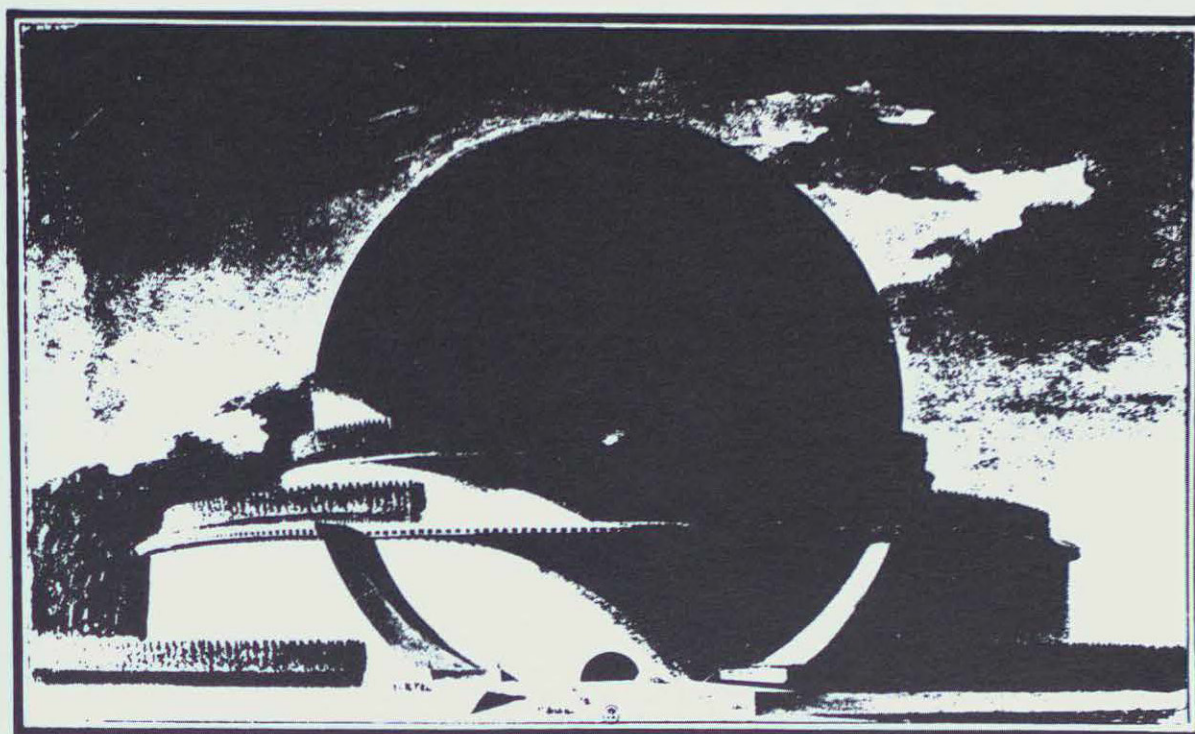
inveterate task as a metaphysics of architecture. The process initiated with Vitruvius, however, seemed to culminate with Durand in the early 19th century.

Following the development of this process through architectural treatises, this insistence on the importance of theory, i.e. words, to elucidate the reality of practice, becomes explicit during the Renaissance. Ever since architecture became a *liberal art*, its possession of a specific theory has been considered essential. The prescriptive dimension of theory was present very early on, but the words were meant to justify a practice which was meaningful, as it framed a residual ritual, a surviving public life. The rationality of the treatises, therefore, is not to be confused with positivistic reason. The rationality of architectural treatises from the 15th to the 18th century is still the rationality of perception, at one with the architect's poetic intentionality, a *mimesis* of the rational order of a harmonic cosmos.

Reason became insufficient to elucidate the meaning of architecture towards the late 18th century, this is particularly evident in the writings of two well known French architects, C. N. Ledoux and E. L. Boullée. In contrast to the sharp rationality of their immediate predecessor Abbé Laugier, Ledoux and Boullée point out that previous theories of architecture addressed the *scientific part* of our discipline, not its true essence. Their writing is no longer a *prose* in its intention to refer directly to the reality of *praxis* (like Vitruvius, Palladio or Laugier), but a *poetry* creating its own reality that related metaphorically to their architectural visions.

It is well known that this condition of self-referentiality become a paradigm of modern art and architecture. Reason itself, functionalized and uprooted from reality, was systematically applied to the material aspects of architecture until it was reduced to engineering. In Durand's writing, positive reason become an instrument of control and domination





Jean-Marie Pérouge de Montclos, Etienne-Louis Boullée

E.L. BOULLÉE: PROJECT FOR A CENOTAPH TO NEWTON (1784)

in an architectural theory reduced to prescriptive rules, devoid of interest in meaning and metaphysics.

By the same token, many architects became suspicious about the relevance of such theories transformed into methodologies, and the links between literature and architecture appeared more clearly. The sharp distinction between prose and poetry, between the first truly scientific, non-speculative, specialized and reductionistic use of words and the word understood as belonging in an autonomous universe of discourse, in a metaphoric connection to the primary world of perception, is at the very origin of the romantic reaction. Science (like Newton's cosmology) could no longer be simultaneously a poetic thought and a philosophy. To the eyes of the Romantic Victor Hugo, architecture in the traditional sense, as an embodiment of knowledge, as a symbolic order revealing the essence of reality, could no longer exist. Building had become prose. The text in which he posits the fact that the *book* has killed architecture is well known: the *Encyclopédie* embodied in a gothic cathedral was lost forever. Victor Hugo disclosed a dilemma that still haunts contemporary architecture.

The romantic novel however, was intentionally referential; subjectivity was glorified and forced to bridge the gap between man and the world. And a referential architecture in the modern world devoid of cosmos and ritual, where knowledge is perceived as an open-ended task governed by positive science and technology, was obviously at a disadvantage. We cannot be surprised any longer at the many failures of 19th century historicism. Flaubert was perhaps the first author to recognize the power of the self-referential world of literature. In more recent developments one can hardly fail to realize that through its emphatically self-referential world, the French new novel violently recovers the engagement of the reader and draws from intersubjective meaning as given in

our common perception of the world. See, for example, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, where an objective world is described precisely through geometric coordinates, avoiding in the narrative any explicit human polarization through feelings or opinions. Modern architecture, when successful seems to have a similar effect, which, if understood superficially, is bound to seem paradoxical: witness Ronchamps.

Today we know that the word cannot reduce architecture, that systems cannot prescribe it and that theory and history have become the same body of knowledge only relevant *vis-à-vis* what we make *i.e.* our design questions. Living in a world of words, the architect has problems understanding that his primary universe of discourse is architecture itself, not information about buildings. A building or a theoretical project is not *read* like a book. Embodied perception is more profound and significant precisely because it is not articulated in the way language is. Without wishing to deny some illuminating connections, we must still emphasize that the understanding of buildings as *texts* can be a dangerous fallacy. As knowledge, a piece of architecture is obviously more like a gesture or expression of a time, place and word-view, and less like a piece of writing. The intended '*metaphor*' is never *read* literally, but the intellectual articulation of the architect's intentions through a statement that, *in the nature of mytho-poetic thought*, engages his intended intervention in the world at large, is still crucial.

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