

# THE ARCHITECTONICS OF PURE TASTE

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In a lecture on "The Principles of Design in Architecture," given on 9th December, 1862, to the cadets of the School of Military Engineering at Chatham, James Fergusson, the architectural historian, explained to his astonished audience that the process by which a hut to shelter an image is refined into a temple, or a meeting house into a cathedral, is the same as that which refines a boiled neck of mutton into *côtelettes à l'Impériale* or a grilled fowl into *poulet à la Marengo*. "So essentially is this the case," he continued, "that if you wish to acquire a knowledge of the true principles of design in architecture you will do better to study the works of Soyer or Mrs. Glass than any or all the writers on architecture from Vitruvius to Pugin."

No other architectural theorist, either before or since, seems to have used this analogy; a very curious fact when one considers the general cultural significance attached to the word "taste." "Taste," as early dictionaries make clear, meant originally only "the sensation excited in certain organs of the mouth," and its metaphorical adoption in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the standard term for what we now call "aesthetics" (a neologism invented in Germany in 1750) implies a clear recognition of the importance of this faculty as a key to understanding the nature of human discernment. As Addison pointed out in *The Spectator* of June 19th, 1711, "we may be sure this metaphor would not have been so general in all tongues, had there not been a very great conformity between mental taste and that sensitive taste which gives us a relish of every different flavour that affects the palate." Yet few of the various treatises on aesthetics published in the second half of the century even discuss this parallel, and the most exhaustive of them, namely the *Essay on Taste* published by Archibald Alison in 1790, does not mention food and drink at all.

One reason for this curious omission (apart from another, more important reason, which will be discussed

later) may be that gastronomy was then in its infancy. Until the end of Louis XIV's reign, eating habits were extremely coarse, and it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that modern refinements in cooking were widely adopted. The word "gastronomy" itself was not introduced into the French language until about 1800, and we are told by Brillat-Savarin, the first modern writer on the subject, that even in 1825 it was still sufficiently novel to bring "a smile of hilarity to all countenances." The general appreciation of fine cooking was due mainly to the establishment of restaurants, the first of which was founded in Paris in 1770, and it was not until the Napoleonic era that these had multiplied sufficiently to give French cooking its universal and popular prestige. But it is still difficult to explain why the analogy between architecture and fine cooking should have been so persistently neglected during the last century, considering the urge experienced by so many architectural theorists to justify their ideas analogically with reference to other sciences and creative arts.

There is no doubt that if one wishes to demonstrate the distinction between architecture and plain, ordinary, straightforward building (and this is clearly what Fergusson was trying to do), the distinction between gastronomy and plain, ordinary, straightforward cooking possesses many close similarities not displayed by music, literature, biology, mechanical engineering, or any of the other arts or sciences with which architecture has so often been compared. Firstly, it is concerned, as Brillat-Savarin observed, with the conservation of mankind, and is thus, unlike the other arts, a necessity rather than a luxury. Secondly, unlike all those analogies just listed, it concerns something which is both a science and an art. Scientifically, gastronomy demands the combination of a number of prepared materials of known strength, arranged according to an ideal sequence or plan, the efficacy of which can be analysed and tested. Artistically, it goes far beyond the dictates of scientific analysis, for gastronomy, like architecture, requires intuition, imagination, enthusiasm, and an immense amount of organizational skill. Gastronomy is also more expensive than plain, honest, straightforward cooking, since it usually involves lengthier preparation and richer ingredients. It seems reasonable to suppose that there



may also be other, more subtle, similarities between gastronomy and architecture, and that these may help us to visualize what the essential virtues of architecture ought to be.

Perhaps the most instructive way to seek out these similarities is to compare gastronomy and modern architecture in the age in which they both originated, namely the mid-eighteenth century, and then compare them as they are today. This first era, according to John Steegman, can only be fittingly described as the era of the Rule of Taste. This title is most appropriate, he says, because it implies a régime in which taste—the only word expressing both an immutable quality of discernment, criticism and perception, and an active sensitivity to temporary fashions—is paramount, and a time when fashions in taste are governed by universally acknowledged rules. These rules were not in fact very easy to determine, but there is no doubt that the leading architectural theorists of the period were constantly trying to formulate them, and that they did this by studying not only the buildings of antiquity, but the best buildings of their own day. The first regular meeting of the French Academy of Architecture began its discussion in 1672 with the question: "What is good taste?", and although the problem was never satisfactorily resolved, it was generally agreed that "the true rule for recognizing things which display good taste is to consider what has always been most pleasing to intelligent persons, whose merits are known by their works or their writings." In other words, the supreme rule of the classical artist was that his work should please.

This desire to please was also, and still is, the principle aim of a good chef, but it is doubtful whether it is the aim of all the leading painters, sculptors and architects today. For whereas a good chef is concerned only with the whims of his clientele and the appreciation which his artistry will receive, artists like Henry Moore boast their refusal to fulfil commissions requested by connoisseurs they respect. A good chef does not, after competitions, write abusively of experts who prefer some other artist's work. He does not feel that he is prostituting his art by creating something which resembles a work created two centuries before. If ever he says to a client: "take it or leave it" (and there are ways of saying this in French with considerable force), it is because he realizes that his client has no standards of taste, not simply because the person's tastes differ from his own. On the contrary, it is in the vicarious adaptation of his own tastes to each different customer's appetite that his supreme artistry resides; hence his art is always essentially human, because it keeps in the closest contact with the subtly varying moods of mankind.

Today, taste is no longer synonymous with aesthetics, because the modern theoretical approach to art takes no account of the public at all. The eighteenth century philosophers, though fully aware of the distinction between what they called "active taste" and "passive taste," were essentially concerned with the latter, i.e., with art from the point of view of an observer's reactions. Today, however, as a result of the influence of Benedetto Croce, aesthetic theories are usually only concerned with the act of artistic creativity itself. Art is considered to be essentially a form of expression, and it now irrelevant to enquire whether or not it gives pleasure, since this is not its aim. It is as if an omelette were judged simply by the genuineness of the chef's passionate urge to go around breaking eggs.

The architectural theorists of the mid-eighteenth century tried to establish classical recipes for good architecture in much the same way as the chefs of that period were trying to establish classical recipes for *haute cuisine*, and the criterion of

both was that the results should be widely enjoyed. Not just enjoyed by other architects and other chefs, or by the editors of the *Almanach des Gourmets* and *l'Architecture Française*, but by all persons of cultivated taste. Now this very word "cultivated" implies that taste can not only be trained, but should be trained according to certain universally accepted standards. If those who teach the arts do not believe in such standards, or if they claim, like Paul Rudolph, that they are still searching for such standards, it is clear that whatever the merits of their instruction, they are concerned essentially with fashion, not with taste.

The standards of gastronomy have remained unchanged for two centuries, and are uncontested. The standards of architecture would also be uncontested if romantic influences had not, for two centuries, vitiated its theoretical basis, and spread the germs of its debilitating criteria like phylloxera throughout the western world. It is no coincidence that anglo-saxon cooking is proverbially bad, for bad food and bad architecture both derive from the same philosophical disease.

This disease is, quite simply, romanticism, or the refusal to accept the fact that, in the highest art, sensation must be subordinate to reason. For two centuries, western art has been divisible into two antagonistic categories, which may be described either as romantic versus classical, or emotional versus rational. Now the essential nature of the revolution which took place in French cooking in the mid-eighteenth century was that the coarse and purely sensual methods of Roman, Mediaeval and Renaissance eating were *rationalized*. "Gastronomy," explained Brillat-Savarin, the father of the new art, and whose only defect was an over-fondness for improper jokes about sausages, "is the rationalized knowledge of everything which relates to man in so far as he nourishes himself." "Only intelligent men," he continued, "honor fine food, because the others are not capable of an operation which consists in a sequence of appreciation and judgments."

In conformity with Brillat-Savarin's philosophy, the leading French architectural theorist of the mid-eighteenth century similarly defined taste as "the fruit of reasoning," and added, in words which almost paraphrase Diderot's definition of a true philosopher, that "taste founded on reason accepts neither ready-made systems nor the authority of private opinions." But in England at this time, the writers on Taste were already rejecting classicism in favour of romanticism, and it is doubtless mainly for this reason that Alison, in his *Essay on Taste*, did not mention food at all, since gastronomy clearly did not fit into the romantic aesthetic theory of "the association of ideas."

According to this theory, man's awareness of the beauty of proportions is due entirely to a mental association of the relationship between form and function, and the appreciation of... the beauty is due... entirely to the stimulus given man's imagination by (in the case of Gothic Revival, Greek Revival or Classical designs) the evocation of the lost glories of the Middle Ages, Greece or Rome. Today, we also seem to consider that architectural beauty is based on the idea of functionalism and romantic associations, although nowadays we romanticize the future, rather than the past. In both instances architectural appreciation, being subjective, is primarily governed by fashion, which to the classical theorist was "the tyrant of taste." "Taste, once aquired, should exclude every kind of fashion from architecture as so many obstacles to its progress," the professor of architecture at the French Academy told his students two centuries ago, and



went on to criticize young architects for neglecting sound principles in favour of new inventions, which must inevitably be superseded by other novelties in their turn.

Novel recipes for preparing food are, of course, frequently invented, but the old recipes still retain the same authority and prestige which they had before, because they are, literally, what Frank Lloyd Wright called "in the nature of materials," and thus their aesthetic properties never become stale. The recipes in Viard's *Cuisinier Royal* (a book already printed in ten separate editions by 1820) are all to be found in the latest edition of *L'Art Culinaire Français*, and the latter only supersedes the former because in the latter, there are three thousand recipes more. In gastronomy, there is no prestige attached to novelty *per se*, and nobody asks a chef if he can be guaranteed always to provide something "contemporary." Nor would any gastronome ever refuse *filets de volaille à la Bellevue* simply because they were invented by Madame de Pompadour, or angrily ask why he was not getting the latest recipe from the *Ladies' Home Journal* instead. In cooking, as in any art which really flourishes, the only values recognized are those concerned with degrees of excellence, and the decline in architecture occurred when architects forgot this, and started worrying about whether they were being "contemporary" or "reactionary," instead of whether their work was good or bad.

There are several factors which encourage this attitude, but there is one which is particularly obvious, namely the fact that whereas the eighteenth century recognized the rarity of a creative artist, the twentieth century, convinced of the operation of some universal law which equates supply and demand, and deluded by a combined faith in the virtues of a college education, and an equally solid faith (fostered by exhibitions of Action Painting and juvenile art) in the virtues of no artistic education at all, is convinced that everyone is potentially some kind of an artistic genius, and that anyone can become a

creative architect once he can use a set-square and pass the technical exams. Yet it must be obvious that in architecture, as also in gastronomy, drama, and music, there are two kinds of artist; those rare spirits who can create original compositions, and those, less gifted, whose vocation is to adapt, interpret or assist.

Creative genius is in fact extremely rare in all the arts, but it is demonstrably rare in gastronomy, drama and music because it is the general public, rather than a few avant-garde connoisseurs or magazine editors, which decides whether the artist's originality is worth anything or not. Any contemporary musician can get his compositions broadcast, but with rare exceptions, the only public auditorium in which he has a chance of hearing his work twice is, according to Sir Thomas Beecham, the Albert Hall in London (the echo of which has long been notorious). Theatre-goers and music-lovers, as well as gourmets, know from hard experience that even the most favourable conjunction of circumstances rarely produces more than half-a-dozen original geniuses in each generation, however generously they may be subsidized by the Ford Foundation or the Fulbright Fund. Most artists are condemned by Fate, whatever their ambitions, to be executants who adapt and re-interpret (with greater or lesser sensitivity and appropriateness) the basic ideas created by someone else; yet all young architects regard themselves as creative artists, because our whole system of architectural education is specifically organized to give them this idea.

In English, the word "chef" is synonymous with "cook," but this title, like that of "architect," should belong by right to those who have not only fully mastered every known aspect of their art, but were endowed at birth with the divine gift of the Muse. "*On devient cuisinier, mais on naît rôtisseur*," wrote Brillat-Savarin, in Aphorism No. XV. "*On devient ingénieur, mais on naît architecte*," wrote Auguste Perret a century later, and listed it as Aphorism number one.

