HISTORICISM

Reprinted from the August, 1960 issue of ***Architectural Review.***

The historians of modern architecture, by the very nature of their subject, cannot resist the temptation to be up to date. Henry-Russell Hitchcock finishes his *Architecture Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1958) with buildings constructed in 1956: Jürgen Joedicke's *History of Modern Architecture* (1959) includes photographs of models, such as that of Utzon's Sidney Opera House, yet to be built. The result is that architects are incessantly being reminded that everything they create forms a link in the chain of architectural development, and that their own work must therefore have some classifiable elements of novelty if the theory of evolution is to have any validity in the domain of art. The art historians, to use Gerhard Kallmann's phrase, are breathing down the architects' necks.

Hitchcock faces this problem squarely in the last chapter of his distinguished book. "The very extent in time of what should be considered 'the present' is a subjective matter," he writes. "I have known American architectural students whose present was so limited that they had never heard of Perret! To anyone under thirty the effective present will hardly extend backward more than five or ten years." Yet even ten years is a precious insulation against Historicism, and one which is essential if architecture is to develop in an uninhibited way. It represents the distinction between the history and theory of architecture. Recent developments in architectural historiography seemed at one time to be encouraging the assertion of this distinction by showing a greater objectivity as compared with the histories of a century ago. Indeed, so objective have architectural historians now become, that they rarely permit themselves any qualitative assessment at all beyond "crisp" or "jolly." Yet there are greater dangers than partiality in historical writing, for partiality can at least be perceived and refuted, whereas up-to-dateness exerts a subconscious influence which only advertising agents can claim to assess. History undoubtedly ends with the present, but historical studies must end sometime before then if we are to avoid confusing history with prophecy. One only has to look at the buildings admired twenty years ago to see how hazardous it is to anticipate the historical values which should be set on what we are now building ourselves.

It is not, I suspect, sufficiently realized that the distinctive character of modern architecture, or in other words the essential difference between architectural ideas before 1750 and architectural ideas since 1750, derives almost entirely from a new kind of awareness of history. It would be quite wrong to assume that the study of history is a natural, inherent, inevitable kind of human activity, or that it has been regarded in all ages as a distinctive form of thought. The Greeks were not interested in history because it is concerned with what is transient and changing, with facts in a space-time location, whereas the scholars of Antiquity were more concerned with what was permanent and immutable, such as is expressed by mathematics. The Roman historians such as Livy did begin their histories at a more remote period of the past than the Greeks (whose histories were little more than contemporary chronicles) but their aim in doing this was to show the Eternal City as having existed ready-made from all time, so that they could hold up the mythical morality of its first citizens as an example to their contemporaries. Mediaeval scholars had no more critical awareness of history than the scholars who preceded them, since they merely substituted the authority of theology for that of mathematics, and thought it incumbent on them to interpret the past entirely in terms of the Divine Plan.

With the advent of the Renaissance, historical thought followed Greek and Roman traditions, although it was soon to be modified by the influence of Descartes, whose scientific method was applied to historical research. It was in this age that manuscripts were first accurately dated and scientifically evaluated, and that non-literary documents, such as inscriptions and coins, were first used to check the narratives of early writers, thus leading the way to the archaeological researches of the modern age. But it is a curious fact that although the study of ancient buildings and ancient manuscripts had formed an inevitable counterpart to the revival of Antiquity, history itself had little influence on seventeenth and early eighteenth century thought, because people then, like those of Antiquity, were more interested in the present than in the past. History was rarely taught in schools before about 1760, when it was introduced into the Dissenting Academies by such teachers as Joseph Priestley. Chairs of

modern history had been founded at Oxford and Cambridge in 1724, but no lectures were delivered at Cambridge until 1773, whilst at Oxford the chair was usually occupied by such people as Thomas Gray, the poet. No chair of history was established at the Collège de France until 1769.

The first modern history ever to be written, according to Eduard Fueter, was Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV*, published in 1751. The first history of architecture was that included as the first section of J. F. Blondel's *Architecture Françoise* of 1752. Others had written biographies of architects, and numerous travellers had published descriptions of ancient buildings, but apart from Fischer von Erlach's highly fanciful collection of engravings entitled *Historical Architecture*, there was no other book which assembled in chronological sequence a description of buildings from the time of the Egyptians, nor were there any lecture courses on the subject before Blondel opened his school of architecture in the rue de la Harpe.

Blondel had contributed all the articles on architecture in the *Encyclopédie*, so that it is not unnatural that he should have undertaken a task so much in harmony with the theme of that work.[1] But being, like the other *Encyclopédistes*, a rationalist, he did not think of the past as a collection of disparate styles, but as a progressive series of improvements, interspersed by occasional retrogressions, which had culminated in the architecture of his own day. Graeco-Romano-Renaissance architecture was for him simply "Architecture" ("It was in the reign of Francis I," he wrote, "that architecture began to regain favour in France"), and since architecture thus meant for him the forms invented by the Greeks, improved by the Romans, perfected by the French, and used more or less correctly by every architect in Europe and America, he was incapable of seeing any Roman or Renaissance modifications as either current or obsolete, but only as either good or bad. He was in fact not a historian at all but a theorist (which was all he ever claimed to be), and since there could be no theoretical value for him in studying primitive or non-classical architecture, he confined himself to recounting the literary descriptions of ancient buildings extracted from the most celebrated authors of the past.

It was not until about 1820 that any general illustrated histories of architecture, such as we know them today, were published, and these were made possible only by the large number of monographs on Greek, Gothic and Oriental architecture published during the previous seventy years. Most of these general histories have the distinctive characteristics of Voltaire's historical works; they are critical, scientific, evolutionary, concerned with all eras and countries, and designed primarily to trace the origins and progress of varying manners or styles. Also, like Voltaire's histories, they aim at radical reform, and display, for all their occupation with the past, a dissatisfaction with the present and a great concern for the future. It is in these historical surveys, published between 1820 and 1850, that the demand for a New Architecture first appears.

One of the earliest expressions of this demand occurs in James Elmes's *Lectures on Architecture, comprising the History of Art from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, first published in 1821. Elmes was a successful practising architect, but though he sided with what he calls "the Greek faction," this did not blind him completely to the dangers and frustrations which the co-existence of stylistic factions entailed. "An indiscriminate patronage of ancient or foreign art is not the encouragement now required by the British School," he proclaimed; "had the Greeks fostered alone Egyptian art, they would certainly never have become the inventors of their own pure style. The Romans, on the contrary, by their exclusive patronage of Greek architects, are known only as degenerators, instead of inventors or restorers."

Another architectural historian to profess dissatisfaction with current architecture was Thomas Hope, whose *Historical Essay on Architecture* was published in 1835. Being an amateur, he was under no obligation to demonstrate the practicability of his speculations, and was therefore free to propose reforms without restraint. "No one," he wrote, "seems yet to have conceived the smallest wish or idea of making the new discoveries, the new conquests, of natural productions unknown to former ages, the models of new imitations more beautiful and varied, and thus of composing an architecture which, born in our country, grown on our soil, and in harmony with our climate, institutions, and habits, at once elegant, appropriate and original, should truly deserve the appellation of 'our own'."

The culmination of the first great age of architectural historiography was James Fergusson's *Illustrated Hand-Book of Architecture*, first published unsuccessfully in 1849, revised and re-issued in its complete form in 1855, and eventually enlarged and extended in 1865 to form his famous *History of Architecture in all Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. Fergusson's main purpose in publishing his *Handbook* was to effect a return to "the true principles which might guide us in designing or criticising architectural objects" by means of the study of all buildings constructed before 1500. He had no doubt that a New Style could be created, because, as he explained in his introduction, no nation in any age or in any part of the globe had failed to invent for itself a true and appropriate style of architecture whenever it chose to set about it in the right way. "What that process is," he announced, "may perhaps be best explained by an example, and as one of a building character, though totally distinct, let us take ship-building," which he did. He confessed that no architect had shown any ability to put the philosophy he recommended into effect, but found satisfaction in contemplating the Crystal Palace which was, he claimed, "at least one great building carried out wholly in the principles of Gothic or any true style of art."[2]

In the past century, the reforms which Fergusson demanded and predicted have come into effect, but Historicism, the curse of the nineteenth century, has not for that reason been exorcised, mainly because architectural historians are deliberately or unconsciously keeping it in being. Sigfried Giedion goes so far as to assert that historical self-consciousness is a good thing, and that the trouble with the nineteenth century was that "it lost all sense of playing a part in history," people then being either indifferent to the period in which they lived or hating it. It is undoubtedly true that nineteenth century architectural historians did not think many buildings of their own century worth recording, but then, neither does Giedion. Auguste Choisy, in his *History of Architecture* published in 1898, only mentions two buildings constructed in France since 1780 (namely the Halle au Blé and Labrouste's Bibliothèque Nationale), but then Giedion himself does not mention many more. It is all very well to lament the fact that nineteenth-century documents concerning urban development or new mechanical inventions were not scrupulously preserved for historical inspection, but this would seem to me a very healthy defect; for as Parkinson's Law seems to indicate, as soon as organizations start deliberately filing their records with a view to future historical research, there is every probability that their organization has ceased to be of any historical importance whatsoever. If the architectural innovators of the nineteenth century omitted to preserve their records, it was perhaps because they strove to

emulate a tradition for which there were virtually no contemporary documents left.

The term "contemporary history" was invented by Giedion, and its meaning explained by him in the opening pages of *Space, Time and Architecture*. It does not mean, as it would for a political historian, the history of his own times, but a selection of those structural and spatial developments of the past few centuries which seem to him relevant to the creative needs of the present age. But this is precisely what the late nineteenth-century architects understood by "theory." If we compare *Space, Time and Architecture* with Julien Guadet's *Elements and Theory of Architecture*, published in 1894, we find that the former treats the development of forms in much the same way as the latter. When Guadet discusses the spatial and structural possibilities of masonry stairways, he does so by exemplifying all the various masonry stairways constructed since the Middle Ages, just as Giedion explains the steel frame aesthetic by tracing its development from the cast-iron factories of Boulton and Watt.

There are of course major differences between the philosophies inspiring these two books. One is that whereas Guadet, lecturing so soon after Viollet-le-Duc's disastrous course on aesthetics at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, considered it wise to be ostentatiously impartial in his selection of historical examples, Giedion's analysis is frankly tendentious, even within the limits of the Modern Movement itself. Neither Mies van der Rohe nor Alvar Aalto were included in the first edition of *Space, Time and Architecture*, which was essentially a justification of the doctrines of CIAM, of which he was secretary. But there is a more important difference than this. Whereas Giedion very rightly keeps revising his book to bring it continually up to date, Guadet, from the first, rigorously excluded all mention of the works of living architects because he thought it indecorous for a professor to comment on his colleagues' work. "Amongst the works of your masters," he announced in his inaugural address,"there are some which, luckily for our epoch, will not only be classics in the future, but are so today. But you will appreciate that I cannot instruct, indeed must not instruct, by taking examples from among the works of living architects, because no professor wants to risk being accused of flattery." As a result, the *Elements and Theory of Architecture* went through five editions in ten years with the text unchanged.

We thus find the paradoxical situation that whereas the twentieth century tries to give its histories of architecture the up-to-dateness of theory, the nineteenth century tried to give its theory of architecture the objectivity of history. Both attitudes are wrong, but they represent little more than a demarcation dispute, and it is to be hoped that theorists and historians will soon be able to settle the matter by direct negotiation, without subjecting contemporary architecture to the inconvenience and disruption of a crippling aesthetic strike. We cannot escape our awareness of history; of what Le Corbusier calls "*L'homme* dans le *temps* et dans le *lieu*" but we can mitigate its more harmful effects on architectural creativity by maintaining a clear distinction between the history and theory of art. It is becoming less and less easy to do this because Historicism, after having imposed itself on biology a century ago by means of the theory of evolution, has now begun to control our basic thought-processes as a result of the importance now attached to psycho-analysis. Psychologists and sociologists have discouraged the nineteenth-century emphasis on abstract moral judgements of goodness and badness, right and wrong, in favour of the accumulation of *case-histories* of those who appear to express their emotions in an unusual way, and so architectural historians may well feel that they, too, are able to provide a substitute for traditional principles, and the value-judgements these require, by simply analysing, classifying, and tracing the origins of the newest architectural forms backward into the past. Architects have certainly many advantages in knowing the precedents for any forms they use, but none in seeing the forms themselves prematurely pigeon-holed; indeed, nothing but frustration can result from labelling nascent developments with catchwords, and categorizing their first expressions as paradigms, before the creators themselves are clearly aware of what they are aiming at, and before it is certain that the forms produced are of any historical worth.

NOTES:

1. The article on "History" had been contributed by Voltaire.
2. In view of the publication in the AR for April 1960 (pp. 280-282) of a detailed description of Marshall's Flax-Mill in Leeds, it may be remarked that Fergusson considered that this revolutionary industrial structure (less the facade) would have been more suitable for the British Museum than the building constructed by Smirke (see J. Fergusson: *Observations on the British Museum, &c.* (1849), pp.39-48).