

THE SHAPE OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

A Review of:

History of Architecture on the Comparative Method

By Sir Banister Fletcher

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News of the publication of a completely revised edition of Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* will have brought a pang of emotion to the heart of everyone in the English-speaking world who has ever been called upon to study architecture—especially if it was to pass an exam. For years it has been the handy reference book of every serious student and the last refuge of every dullard. Its authority has been accepted—though with decreasing enthusiasm on the part of the more enlightened—for generations, and indeed it has been in use for so long that its origins have become in certain respects forgotten or obscured. Who realizes today, for example that it was not the work of a single author, but (perhaps like the *Iliad*) was originally written by two men with the same name? For in fact the principal author of the first edition was not the future Knight Bachelor, Officer of the Order of the Legion of Honor, Commander of the Order of Leopold II of Belgium, Commander of the Order of Ta-Shou Chia-Ho of China, (Sir Banister very properly limited himself to five Orders), but his father, the Professor of Architecture and Construction at King's College, London. The latter's name was unostentatiously dropped as soon as the former achieved a knighthood (awarded in 1919 in recognition of the fact that he was the senior sheriff of London in the year the armistice was signed), and doubtless quite rightly, for many modifications were made by the son after his father's death. But the general organization of the text remained unchanged, and there is good reason for believing that this may have been the older man's idea.

Before explaining why this assumption can be made, and before discussing either the important modifications incorporated during his son's lifetime, or the results of Professor R. A. Cordingley's new and careful revision, it will be appropriate to distinguish the three types of general history of architecture which seem generally possible. Firstly, there is the type most common in the nineteenth century, but still occasionally produced today (as for example Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*), which is inspired by the distinctive theory of architecture its author seeks to propagate, and which thus constitutes what the French would call an *histoire à thèse*. Secondly, there is the type—best exemplified by Louis

Hautecoeur's monumental nine-volume history of French classical architecture—which might be described as encyclopaedic; a book which contains a number of critical observations and assessments, but aims primarily at collating and dissecting as many buildings as possible, so as to classify them, like biological specimens, into various species or groups. Thirdly, there is the type best exemplified by Nikolaus Pevsner's *Outline of European Architecture*; a book in which the text is critical without being doctrinaire or opinionated; discursive, though none the less precise and factual; and where examples and illustrations are in general restricted to buildings which illustrate the introduction or development of specific architectural ideals. This is the most readable kind, and perhaps the only kind which is widely recommendable as a means of comprehensively, objectively and thoughtfully studying the topic; but the other two are both invaluable and indeed essential in their own way, provided the books are properly used.

As first produced in 1896, the *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* clearly belonged to the first type. The pattern on which it was based was unquestionably intended to reinforce the mid-nineteenth century theory known as "Rationalism," and thus its form was most likely due to Banister Fletcher senior (who was very much involved with building construction and was for many years a district surveyor), rather than to his son. This Rationalist character is evident from the title alone, for the idea of a comparative history of architecture (analogous to those studies in comparative anatomy which had been made early in the nineteenth century by biologists such as Cuvier) had long been the dream of those who demanded a new architecture based on logical and up-to-date construction, and was one of the first manifestations of the idea of architecture as something "organic." It was first formulated in 1849 by James Fergusson, who put it forward six years before publishing his own great history of architecture which Banister Fletcher's eventually superseded; and it was given its most forcible expression three years later, in France, by Viollet-le-Duc.

"When," demanded the latter, in one of his periodic fulminations against the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, "will our poor school see the arising of its Cuvier to teach us the comparative anatomy of antique and modern monuments, and to

teach us not to put rabbit's feet on a monkey's body, or to cloth the skeleton of a lizard with fur?" The answer to this question we now know to be 1896; but in the meantime, Darwin had published his famous theory, so Banister Fletcher not only adopted Fergusson's notion of a comparative history of architecture, but also tried to demonstrate the *evolution* of architecture by showing the direct influence of environment (geographical, geological, climatic, religious, social and political) on changes in architectural form.

As revised by Sir Banister Fletcher after his father's death the *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* still maintained intact those divisions of the text dealing with environmental influences, though these were considerably tempered and (not always felicitously) enlarged. But it became evident, as edition succeeded edition, and as the weight increased to three and three-quarter pounds, that the author was now more concerned with the illustration of ancient buildings (of which over three thousand were eventually depicted and over a thousand more were either succinctly or superficially described) than with discussing ideas. The result was that the original theme of the book became gradually obscured. This was not necessarily a misfortune, since the efficacy of the "comparative method" as a means of throwing light on the evolutionary process of architectural development was always open to question, and the book, in its later editions, had seldom in fact done anything beyond provide a facile method of tabulating the characteristics of the various "styles." But the modified character of the book made the need for a radical revision more and more urgent, and we may all rejoice that after six years' painstaking work on the part of Professor Cordingley and his collaborators, this task has now been successfully fulfilled.

The principal changes needed, once it was accepted that the book had become irrevocably encyclopaedic in character, were such as would ensure a better balance between the various historical periods. Even within the context of the original framework, Sir Banister Fletcher's revisions had always been somewhat erratic, but since the original character of the book had been that on an *histoire à thèse*, its neglect of certain periods was at first relatively unimportant. For example, it was not entirely unreasonable that, in the original edition, the section on English architecture should terminate virtually with the death of Wren, since the elder Banister Fletcher's theories were incompatible with eighteenth-century Palladianism, and he, like Fergusson, considered that true architectural evolution had virtually ceased once the Renaissance had become an established fact.

He therefore summarily dismissed Lord Burlington's villa at Chiswick (which he then attributed to Inigo Jones) because it had, he said, introduced the "pediment and portico style" which had led to "the neglect of the fundamental principles of architecture, namely suitability of purpose, utility and appropriateness." But in its encyclopaedic form, with all the original moralizings deleted, the book's continued neglect of architectural developments after 1700 made the work ludicrously inadequate, and it was this, more perhaps than anything else, which caused the reputation of the work to decline.

Professor Cordingley's most urgent task was therefore to bring the book up to date chronologically, and this he accomplished by adding three entirely new chapters, of which two (entitled respectively "Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture in Britain" and "Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture in Continental Europe") were written by him and the third (entitled "Architecture of the Americas") was written by Frank Jenkins. But no less important task

was that of bringing the book up to date in the sense of making the earlier parts accord with recent scholarship. So well has Professor Cordingley matched his literary style to that of the late Sir Banister Fletcher that the full magnitude of these changes is not immediately apparent, and they can only be detected by carefully collating with the earlier edition. But once this is done, it is evident that the revised text is comparable to an elaborately embroidered modern tapestry into which more ancient fragments have been carefully, piously and unobtrusively woven. Even sentences which begin as Banister Fletcher and end as Banister Fletcher usually turn out to be substantially Cordingley in the middle. It is to be hoped therefore that future bindings of the book will follow the policy adopted by the publishers of *Simpson's History of Architectural Development*, and, by titling future copies of this edition *Sir Banister Fletcher's History of Architecture*, allow the name of the new author to be embossed on the spine.

The only reservations which architectural historians are likely to have will probably concern the amount of space allotted to the different buildings and periods. No one will quarrel with the increased allotment of eleven pages to Greek architecture (which brings the total number of pages to seventy-seven), especially now that Professor Cordingley's new revision makes it undoubtedly the most thorough, precise and readable architectural account (as opposed to an archaeological account) available. But when one considers the small number of important Greek buildings, constructed between 650 B.C. and 146 B.C., of which any vestiges, however fragmentary, remain, and then compares this with the number of important buildings constructed in Continental Europe from 1830 to the present day, it seems unnatural that only fifty-eight pages should be accorded to the latter.

Furthermore one may question the wisdom of respecting Banister Fletcher's classification whereby the Renaissance ends at 1830 (the end of the "Georgian Period") and modern architecture therefore has to begin at the death of George IV. Admittedly Sir John Summerson's *Architecture in Britain 1500-1830* terminates on this date, but here he was making no pretence of specifically studying the "Renaissance," and the fact that Henry-Russell Hitchcock, when writing the companion volume on *Architecture, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, felt bound to begin at about 1750 shows clearly where the most recent authorities on the subject consider the roots of modern architecture to lie.

For example, there is little doubt that the ideals of modern architecture were very much influenced by the buildings and writings of C.N. Ledoux (1736-1806). But the new *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* only mentions him twice (under the heading "French Renaissance"); once in order to attribute to him (erroneously) the *hôtel de Salm*, and once to remark that he was "fertile of progressive ideas." But clearly, unless a student of modern architecture knows what those progressive ideas were, his understanding of the subject will be seriously limited.

Such defects in an otherwise impeccable revision were presumably dictated by the obligation to keep as near as possible to the pattern of the original book. But as a result, the latest edition now starts as an encyclopaedia and finishes as a compendium. For the early periods, it is unquestionably more than adequate to fulfil the historical needs of an architectural student. But for the later periods, it is likely to be primarily of value to the laymen; and indeed, given the length, these chapters could hardly be improved upon as a concise and well-balanced account of the main architectural developments which have occurred during the last hundred and thirty years.