

# UGLIFICATION AND DERISION

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"Art," the Director of the National Gallery of Canada was reported as saying recently, "is not beauty. The purpose of art is to enlarge our emotional experience, and this includes the emotions of horror, disgust and pity." Here we have, succinctly expressed, what may now be regarded as the most conventional and widely accepted art theory of the twentieth century. It was the Italian philosopher, Benedetto Croce, who first, some fifty years ago, created a philosophical system which justified the artistic exploitation of ugliness (already made fashionable by Victor Hugo and the French Romantics at the beginning of the previous century) and finally discredited the earlier assumption that the creation of beauty was the purpose of art. Since then, his views have been upheld by philosophers and art critics alike, and nothing could better illustrate this general acceptance than the fact that since 1929 the article on Aesthetics in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has been contributed by Benedetto Croce himself.

It is noteworthy however that neither Croce nor R. G. Collingwood, the most distinguished English philosopher to elaborate this theme, have had very much to say about architecture. Indeed, so obvious is this omission that it recently prompted a lecturer in architecture at Durham University to publish a book on the architectural implications of Collingwood's *Principles of Art*, though without any marked success. The dilemma is fairly obvious. Either one must deny that beauty—Vitruvius' *venustas*—is necessary to architecture, or one must deny that architecture is art.

Resistance to the rejection of architecture as a form of art comes most strongly from the Art Historians. To some extent this is due to the accidents of an academic system whereby in most universities the "History of Art" courses include architecture automatically, and thus painting, architecture and sculpture are dealt with together in classroom texts. This tendency is evident in the latest and most sumptuous series of the type (edited by Nikolaus Pevsner), the *Pelican History of Art*; nor is the exceptional publication of a volume devoted exclusively to architecture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries any indication that the general art-historical attitude is modified when dealing with contemporary design. On the contrary, the whole basis of the editor's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter*

Gropius indicates, by its title alone, that the art of design, "*commune padre delle tre arti nostre, architettura, scultura et pittura*," is still, as at the Renaissance, considered to be the common discipline uniting all three. Siegfried Giedion even extends the intuitive process of artistic creation to engineering. "If Maillart can claim to have developed the slab into a basic element of construction, modern painters can answer with equal justice that they have made surface an essential factor in the composition of a picture," he explains in *Space, Time and Architecture*. "This is no longer a fortuitous optical coincidence, as might be objected, but a definite parallelism of method."

There are art historians who do not merely regard contemporary architecture as contemporary art, but even as the mistress art. R. H. Wilenski considers architecture the art *par excellence*, since it is non-representational, and contends that the typical function of the architect as artist is the typical function of the sculptor and painter as well. The architect's business, he says, is to contribute to the definition, organization and completion of his formal experience by creating a concrete object symbolizing his actual or imagined perception of certain lines, balances, recessions, and so forth. "If he can do this he is what we call an artist, and if he cannot he is just a builder and nothing else."

Since it may thus be generally accepted that in the most advanced, as well as the most reactionary circles, architecture is still regarded as art, it may possibly be asked whether, since art is not beauty, architecture is compatible with ugliness. To such a question, the reply would doubtless be that there is here a misunderstanding of the problem altogether, since Croce's definition of art is less concerned with the object produced, than with the emotions involved in producing it. The statement "art is not beauty" does not mean that works of art cannot be beautiful, but simply that it is immaterial whether they be beautiful or not. "Ugliness," in common parlance, is merely the opposite of "beauty," so that in such circumstances it is irrelevant to judge a work of art (and hence a work of architecture) by either term.

The persuasiveness of this argument is undeniable, and yet it seems contradicted by the fact the Siegfried Giedion finds no alternative but to use the terms "beauty" and "ugliness" in his text. Of Maillart's bridge near St. Gall, to which passing reference has already been made, he explains that "To appreciate the full plastic beauty of the form of this

bridge" it is necessary to view it from beneath, and goes on to deplore the fact that its slanting columns with splayed-out heads are bound to appear, to eyes that are blind to the vision of our own day, "somewhat ugly."

It seems evident, therefore, that the only tenable line of argument is that whilst beauty is a permissible and even frequent characteristic of architecture, it is not as essential as was at one time supposed, and that there are occasions when architecture, like the other arts, may appropriately enlarge our emotional experience with the emotions of "horror, pity and disgust." Such a view has undoubtedly a long and hence presumably respectable ancestry. Anthony Blunt has suggested that Mannerism was an expression of the despair experienced by Michelangelo and his friends after the Sack of Rome. Kenneth Clark has thoroughly expounded the reasons why Gothic was used as an effective means of inspiring melancholy during the second half of the eighteenth century. There is at least one historical precedent for the use of architecture to inspire horror and disgust. J. F. Blondel, being an exponent of French Classicism, disliked Gothic ornament, but between 1750 and 1770 he recommended it to his students as appropriate for prisons, as a means whereby the architecture could "express externally the disorderliness of the lives of those detained within."

A deliberate search for ugliness similar to that analysed by Lydie Krestovsky in *La Laideur dans l'Art à travers les Ages* can only with difficulty be paralleled in architecture. But Kenneth Clark justly refers to Butterfield's "sadistic hatred of beauty," whilst Robert Kerr, a contemporary of Butterfield and Professor of Construction at King's College, London, even considered "The Ugly" to be an established architectural style of the period. It arose, he explained, as a reaction against the effeminacy of the Gingerbread Style, and was an extreme manifestation of the rationalist creed of structural honesty. But just as the seventeenth century puritans suppressed bear-baiting "not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators," so the nineteenth century pursuit of ugliness in architecture was more the expression of a sour sense of righteousness, than a sensitive interpretation of "life-enhancing" ideals.

The Ugly Style has however a certain indirect relationship to twentieth century art theory, in that it anticipated the deliberate use of deformity as a weapon with which to combat conventional artistic prejudices. As Robert Kerr pointed out, "If the architect be an advocate of mere muscular ugliness, his work will probably set common criticism at defiance." John Summerson has observed that the ugliness of Butterfield's buildings was a systematic and calculated assault on popular taste. "In this imagination there is something of the *fauve*, something of the contemptuous joy of distortion and destruction." He might even more aptly have described Butterfield as a Dadaist, since there is apparent in his work that same savage urge to deride accepted canons of beauty which prompted the Dadaists to exhibit a reproduction of the Mona Lisa adorned with a moustache. Butterfield, in fact, has more right to be considered the father of the Modern Movement than William Morris if we really wish to make a close parallel between modern architecture and modern art.

The triumph of the Modern Movement is now complete. There are few architects today under forty years of age who display any craving to design Ionic capitals or Gothic finials; nor could they draw them if they wanted to, since it is long since there were any schools where such detailing was taught. The Ugly is thus only possible nowadays in terms of Contemporary design. Perhaps we still occasionally need buildings

which express horror, pity or disgust, if merely to stir us from lapsing into apathy. It is doubtless for this reason that "The New Brutalism" has been given such publicity by the Architectural Press. In general, however, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that whether art is, or is not, beauty (or whatever modern euphemism one may prefer to substitute for this outmoded word) there is a social obligation to construct beautiful buildings, and a healthy satisfaction derived from so doing, which overrides any conflicting abstract principles which philosophers and art historians are prepared to defend:

*But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: "This is beautiful." This is Architecture. Art enters in.*

Yet however much we may disregard Croce's theory, it has inevitably had disastrous consequences for architecture, since the fear of seeming to judge a work of art by whether or not it has beauty—*id quod visum placet*—has created a situation whereby architectural criticism is virtually dead. Whereas fifty years ago architectural periodicals printed acid comments about buildings they considered unpleasing, and editors wrote trenchantly about contemporary practices and taste, today the profession is merely presented with so many fashion plates, and what little editorial comment there is, is relegated to the back page. With relatively few exceptions, the only criticisms ever published are of art exhibitions; speculations on the significance of paintings or expatiations on the art-historical sources from which the artist's style has been derived. More and more, the architectural magazines have come to resemble *Vogue*; photographs of the latest models sandwiched between brightly coloured advertising material frequently reproducing identical illustrations.

As a counter-measure, the profession is in urgent need of a periodical comparable to *The Times Literary Supplement*; that is to say, a collection of criticisms, published anonymously, which comment on new buildings as they appear. Since only a small proportion of those completed each month throughout the continent could ever be selected, an architect might well consider it a compliment to have his work singled out, for clearly no building would be discussed unless it was of obvious interest and merit. The commercial press would have little reason for being interested in such an undertaking; but it is a project entirely within the sphere and competence of a professional society. If the RAIC were to empower its *Journal* to include this amongst its other duties, it would not merely be fulfilling a public service; it would be creating the most powerful and influential force for improvement to which architecture is susceptible in the present day. There would be no need to begin ambitiously. One review a month would suffice to establish some sort of tradition, set an example, and evolve a suitable technique. But there would be no limit to the scope of such an endeavour if it proved initially successful. By concentrating upon the *effect* of architectural designs upon the public, rather than upon the *motives* of the architect creating them (as is presupposed by Croce's aesthetic doctrines) it might well remove the main cause of that instability which is bogging us down in romanticism and individualism, and which prevents the emergence of that true classicism to which industrial standardization naturally tends.

*Les artistes romantiques cultivaient la solitude, douloureux privilège de l'élu, et, du haut de leur tour d'ivoire ou de leur rocher d'exile, ils criaient à la foule indifférente que le poète devait être et le mage le pilote de la société. L'auteur classique, au contraire, ne croyait pas déroger en s'adaptant à son auditoire lorsque celui-ci le méritait. Aussi se donnait-il comme règle suprême de PLAIRE.*