

THE CLASSICISM OF AUGUSTE PERRET



Auguste Perret: Notre Dame du Raincy

Reprinted from a paper delivered to the Society of Architectural Historians, Washington D.C. on January 30, 1970.

It seems to me that the most useful contribution I can make towards a realistic appreciation of this well-known taxonomical theme is by concentrating on the extent to which the character of Perret's architecture was a synthesis of the concepts of antiquity and mediaevalism developed theoretically in the late nineteenth century i.e. in the era in which he received his formal education. In this way I hope to dispose of the assertion, (implicit in the phrase "dilute classicism") that Perret's reinforced-concrete architecture was "insipid," in the sense that it demonstrated his inability to liberate himself from the stylistic nineteenth century trappings of neo-classicism. It is true that Perret's classicism was never 160 proof by comparison with that of the Bourbons; but it was certainly not watered down into the industrialized monumentality fostered by Peter Behrens. It was in fact an uncommonly potent, if unpalatable tincture, for which the recipe was, roughly, 50 parts of Classical Rationalism, dissolved in a distilled essence of Gothic Rationalism, plus of course the inevitable slice of lemon peel. The lemon in Perret's later architecture was provided by the taciturn acerbity with which he tried to refute, by his example, the volubly propagated apocalyptic theories of Le Corbusier, an acerbity which deepened into calculated antagonism when Le Corbusier's influence, or Amedée Ozenfant's money, gained control of the periodical *l'Architecture Vivante*, then edited by Jean Badovici. When the magazine had been founded in 1923, Perret was at that time regarded as the leader of the progressive architects, and he had supplied the lapidary definition of a "living architecture" which adorned the first page of *l'Architecture Vivante*. The first issue also contained full coverage of Notre Dame du Raincy, which was clearly intended to illustrate that definition: "Living architecture," he had written, "is that which faithfully expresses its epoch. It will be sought in every domain of building. Works will be chosen which, being strictly subordinated to their usage, and built by the judicious use of materials, attain beauty by the harmonious arrangement and properties of necessary elements by which they are composed."

But at the end of 1926, Badovici announced in an editorial that "Le Corbusier, the last of the present generation of young architects, is at the head of the avant-garde movement," and the 1927 issue saw a complete take-over by Le Corbusier and his friends, to the exclusion naturally, of Perret.

Notre Dame du Raincy has been succinctly described by Henry-Russell Hitchcock as an attempt to provide "what the mediaeval builders of St. Urbain at Troyes or King's College Chapel in Cambridge had obviously sought to achieve, namely a complete cage of glass supported by a minimal skeleton of solid elements." This building must have seemed of particular significance at the time it was built, because Julien Guadet had asserted, in his published lectures on the theory of architecture, that it was *impossible* to design a contemporary church. Now Notre Dame du Raincy has no specific elements of either Gothic or antique reminiscences in the interior. It has, however, obvious mediaeval affinities, whilst many of its features (such as the repetitive use of standardized "claustra," as fenestration units) are also in harmony with the ideals of the late Roman Empire, and hence of the Renaissance. Perhaps it will not be extravagant to compare it to the palace chapel at Versailles, which seems to me to have been a 17th century transmutation of the ideals of the Sainte Chapelle. In this respect it seems worth noting, in parenthesis, that although Perret advised Le Corbusier to visit Versailles, he frequently expressed his disapproval of the palace on the grounds that most of it was shoddily constructed.

As regards Perret's antipathy towards Le Corbusier, this was due essentially to Perret's unshakeable belief—acquired by studying Viollet-le-Duc's Dictionary at an impressionable age—that architectural form is essentially structural form and that, to use his famous aphorism, "architecture is what makes beautiful ruins." This radical difference of viewpoint between the two men is well exemplified by comparing the exterior of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoie, as it appeared in 1966, with the exterior of Perret's church at Le Raincy, photographed in the same year. The comparison is particularly apt in the present context, because it will be remembered that lack of sufficient funds obliged Perret to leave the



Le Corbusier: Villa Savoye (1966)

concrete surfaces untouched after the removal of the formwork—thereby providing the first example of *béton brut* in a monumental building. In this building, we can see exactly what the relationship between construction and architecture implied for Perret and, by contrast with the dilapidated Villa Savoye, what it meant for his erstwhile pupil.

1923 not only saw the completion of Notre Dame du Raincy and the publication of the first issue of *L'Architecture Vivante* it was also the year in which *Vers une Architecture* appeared as a book. And in that book, Le Corbusier vigorously rejected the principles of Gothic architecture as interpreted by Viollet-le-Duc and Anatole de Baudot, by demanding a reversion to the visionary neo-classical principles of Boullée and Ledoux.

For Le Corbusier, the prototypes of the new architecture were to be found in those buildings of the past designed by sculptors, rather than by architects. The lesson of Rome was to be learnt primarily from Michelangelo—whom Le Corbusier claimed to be the equivalent, in our own millenium, of what the creator of the Parthenon had been in the heyday of Antiquity. Moreover, he asserted that it was Phidias, not Ictinus, who had designed the Parthenon. Ictinus, according to Le Corbusier, had been of little consequence in designing the world's greatest example of *Une Machine à émouvoir*—"a machine for arousing passion." Indeed, he had demonstrated his ineptitude by designing other temples which Le Corbusier describes as "cold and rather insensible"—a phrase which suggests that the Temple of Apollo at Bassae should also be classified stylistically as "frozen classicism."

Le Corbusier's total rejection of Gothic Rationalism is here emphasized because it is not always realized that in attacking the academic establishment, he was attacking the synthesis of Gothic Rationalism and Classical Rationalism (and hence the first victory over 19th century Historicism), which had been the great achievement of Julien Guadet twenty years earlier: "I am firmly convinced," writes Gaudet "that, in everything, and especially in architecture, all basic studies should be essentially classical. To be classical is not to give one's allegiance to a party. It is neither exclusive or prescriptive. It is neither wilful blindness, nor self imposed restrictive

prejudice. It is the doctrine that the basis of study should be those elements which have been consecrated by reason, by logical tradition, and by a firm respect for higher principles. The adjective 'classical' implies stable equilibrium..." (It will be noticed that Guadet does not use the noun "classicism" though he had no objection to terms like "liberalism") "But this fine title 'classical' which, in art is the definitive canonisation, is not a matter of origins or of dates, of eras or of geographical locations. Everything is classical which deserves to be so, *without acception of time, of country or of school.*"

It was this doctrine which, in the first quarter of the present century, had been established as the orthodox theoretical basis of instruction at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Indeed, 1970 is the first year in which Guadet's famous treatise has ceased to be the standard textbook for French architectural students—thus producing a crisis, not only in French architectural education, but also in the French second-hand book market.

Julien Guadet's great achievement—apart, of course, from the systematic analysis of building-types set forth in his book—had thus been his scrupulous refusal to evaluate architectural merit on a stylistic archaeological basis. For the first time in a century—for the first time since the school was reorganized by Quatremère de Quincy after the French Revolution—the criteria of antique sculpture ceased to be the basis of architectural orthodoxy. Yet it was precisely back to those shackles (from which Guadet had freed Perret's generation) that Le Corbusier seemed evidently intent on leading the avant-garde.

The insistence on a non-archaeological evaluation of architectural merit, and the reconciliation of Classical Rationalism with Gothic Rationalism, is particularly apparent in Volume 3 of Gaudet's Treatise, where he discusses religious edifices. After pointing out the difficulty of dealing with the *theory* (as opposed to the *history*) of church architecture, he expressed the view that, in his opinion, the problem of designing a "contemporary church" was insoluble. One could design, he said, a contemporary hospital or a contemporary law-court, since this involved research into the present and the future. But how, he asked, could one possibly design a



Affleck et al: Place Bonaventure—Detail



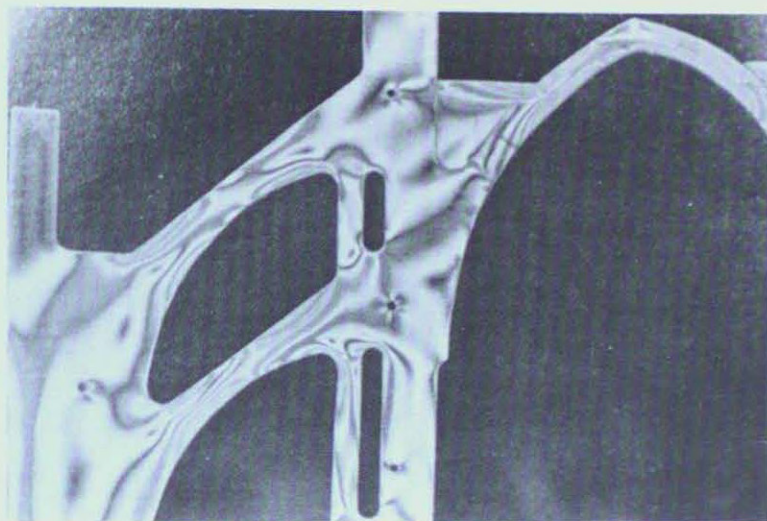
Auguste Perret: Mobilier National—Detail

church without falling back into the confusion between architecture and archaeology which had stultified architectural design for a century? Nevertheless Guadet, in accordance with his mandate, proceeded gallantly to give a general analysis of religious architecture, and it is worth noting that he not only devoted most of his analysis to *mediaeval* churches, but that he classified them by reference to the *structural systems* employed to roof them; concluding with a novel design for flying buttresses, which he and his colleagues had calculated in accordance with the most recent techniques of mathematical analysis. The example selected was the church of Saint Ouen at Rouen. Rather than show you his own drawings, I am here showing you the test models made recently by Professor Robert Mark of Princeton, who, at my suggestion analysed both systems by the most up-to-date techniques at the disposal of structural engineers. And though these photoelastic analyses seem to demonstrate that the *mediaeval* master-masons were as wise as Guadet, the significance of Guadet's academic exercise, and its relevance to the conflict between Perret and Le Corbusier, will be only too apparent.

The nature of the influence of Guadet's theory on Perret's architecture must surely help us to view the latter's work more sympathetically than as simply a superficial manifestation of 19th century Beaux-Arts classicism. Whether or not it is appropriate to describe the Mobilier National, built in the early 1930's, as "dilute classicism," I would certainly challenge the assertion made by our leading lexicographer of 19th and 20th century architecture that: "By 1930, Perret's architecture had definitely begun to date". Surely, the whole significance of Perret's contribution to contemporary architectural theory, at this time, is not that by the 1930's his buildings had "begun to date," but that on the contrary, his buildings had become virtually undateable. If, a thousand

years hence, the fragments of a building constructed by Perret or his pupils were to be excavated from the debris of a World War III, would it be possible for art historians or archaeologists to classify them stylistically to within five years? And would there, in fact, be any virtue in being able to date them thus, merely by inspection? Because if not, one may question the whole relevance of such terms as "neo-neo-classical" with respect to the evolution of twentieth century architectural forms in reinforced concrete and steel. The suppression of masonry and timber construction by the invention of new structural systems has, I suggest, made the continuity of such historical taxonomy entirely artificial and hence virtually meaningless.

Compare, for example, this detail of the Mobilier National with a detail of the Place Bonaventure in Montreal by Raymond Affleck and his partners. The superficial resemblance of the second building to Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale is only too obvious; and since this kind of detailing which Paul Rudolph made popular, has now, according to the latest architectural magazines, "begun to date," the Montreal building may presumably be attributed with safety to the period: circa 1966. But if, instead of enquiring as to its date, we enquire as to the logic of using 8" thick solid cast-in-place concrete walls as the infilling of what is clearly a reinforced concrete frame, (rather than using thin pre-cast slabs less than 3" thick, such as Perret used in the Mobilier National) we find that we are dealing not solely with an abstract problem of art-historical taxonomy, but also with the much more realistic problem of technological judgement. Whatever may have been the sub-conscious urges of the *Zeitgeist* which prompted Raymond Affleck and his colleagues to be so art-historically contemporary on their surface, there were several very practical reasons—based on the climatic



Robert Mark: Photoelastic Analysis—Amiens Cathedral

conditions in Canada, and the relative financial economy of poured-in-place concrete in this particular structure which (as compared with pre-cast concrete), made this kind of walling virtually inevitable, whatever the detailing of its modénature. But if economic considerations had dictated the use of lighter infilling elements, recessed within the minimal skeleton, and if the climate of the locality had permitted the structural system of the Place Bonaventure to be exposed to the atmosphere (and hence to view), the result must inevitably have been a building which Mr. Affleck, to his consternation, would have found classified by many architectural historians as “frozen classicism,” “pseudo-classicism,” “stripped classicism,” “dilute classicism,” or even “an archaeological reminiscence of the eighteenth century.”

I would suggest, therefore, that such problems of classification are more validly studied in terms of the distinction between load-bearing masonry structures, and structural systems which make more effective and more distinctive use of the building materials of the present century. Whatever the stylistic inadequacies of Perret's buildings after 1930 (as compared with “the more revolutionary modern architects of the second generation”), no architectural historian could possibly be so myopic as to confuse Perret's detailing with that of, Charles Garnier, whose Opera House, constructed basically of carved free-stone, achieves, we are told, “a generically Neo-Baroque effect with elements mostly High-Renaissance in origin...despite...a curiously un-Renaissance spikiness and lumpiness.” Yet Perret and Garnier had this much in common: they both had a scorn for archaeological classifications when disguised as architectural value-judgements.

Garnier's un-archaeological approach, referred to specifically by Henry-Russell Hitchcock is, I believe, worth

emphasizing in the present context, particularly in the light of Garnier's *bon-mot* (here quoted by Pascal in the preface to a posthumous edition of Guadet's treatise) to the effect that “for an architect, everything which has been built merits the title ‘classical’.” No one could seriously assent to such a broad architectural definition; yet anyone who attends a performance in the Paris Opéra today might be permitted the reflection that this building, which has worn so well for a hundred years, and still fulfills its function so superbly, has acquired an architectural dignity which reduces to trivia the unfashionableness of its ornamental details, whether they may be described as neo-Baroque or Second Empire. This type of classicism has nothing to do with the taxonomical concepts implicit in the terms “neo-classical” and “neo-neo-classicism”; for as Guadet asserted in his treatise: “*Le classique ne se décrète pas, il s'impose*”—“Classicism is not simply an awarded title, it is a quality which compels recognition.”

Muarice Besset, in his recent book, *Who Was Le Corbusier?*, states in his preface: “the stage of post-Corbusierism is not yet with us: the challenge, fierce as it is here and there, has not yet resolved itself into a sufficiently coherent movement to mark the opening of a new phase, and with it, to establish for Le Corbusier a definite place in history.” This assertion may well be true of Le Corbusier; but one of the lessons of Perret's buildings is that Perret, in his search for that structural immortality which is the essence of true architectural classicism, had already established a definite place for himself in history by the time he was thirty. Hence any phrase such as “the stage of Post-Perretism” can have no semantic significance, because Perret himself was apparently indulging in flagrant Post-Perretism during the last and most prolific decades of his career.