GENIUS LOCI:

The Historic Continuity of Cities

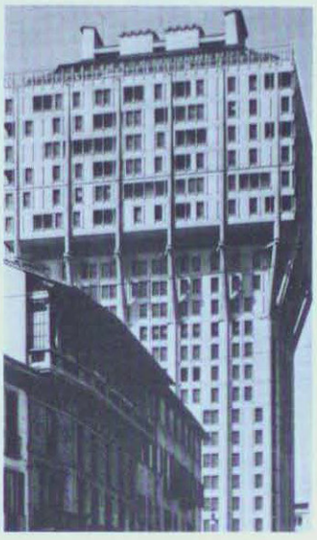
Reprinted from the July, 1963 issue of ***Progressive Architecture,*** *copyright 1963, Reinhold Publishing.*

One of the most striking and perhaps most disquieting paradoxes of modern architecture is that whereas the "Pioneers of the Modern Movement" as Nikolaus Pevsner called them—"that generation of giants who created a new style independent of the past"—considered that their principal victory lay precisely in the overthrow of the 19th-Century concept of *styles*, no generation of architectural historians has ever classified its contemporary architecture into so many stylistic divisions as our own. "The styles," wrote Le Corbusier, caustically paraphrasing Viollet-le-Duc, "are a lie. Style is a unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch." Yet despite this perspicacious definition, and despite Walter Gropius's vehement assertion that "a Bauhaus Style would have been a confession of failure," the works of these men, like those of their contemporaries, are now being classified stylistically by architectual historians with such chronolgical exactitude that Pevsner has detected at least 18 recent examples of what he calls "a Return to Historicism" involving "the imitation of styles which had previously never been revived;" that is to say, of recent buildings constructed in *styles* presumably to be considered authentic only in the first quarter of this century. There is already, he explained in a lecture to the Royal Institute of British Architects, "neo-Art Nouveau (which includes neo-Liberty and neo-Gaudi), neo-de-Stijl, neo-School-of-Amsterdam, neo-German-Expressionism, and finally to a certain extent neo-Perret;" and he hinted darkly at the prospect of a Ronchamp Revival and the imminence of neo-Maison-Jaoul.

It must be said at once that the essence of Pevsner's total argument is an entirely convincing plea for the return to the principles of "form related to function," and as such no practicing architect could possibly quarrel with it. On the contrary, most of those who have read his lecture as published in the April 1961 issue of the *R.I.B.A. Journal* will have fully endorsed his general thesis, especially his tacit admission that Art Nouveau and German Expressionism are not only bad in their revived form, but were bad in their original form, and always will be bad, since neither "share with the early Modern Movement the regard for function." But one may wonder whether some of his examples of "Historicism" really are revivalistic (for that is what "historicism" means for him), or whether these returns to earlier forms are not occasionally justifiable within the principles of modern architecture.

Let us take, for example, one of the most striking buildings included in Pevsner's lecture, namely, the Torre Velasca in Milan by Belgiojoso, Peressutti, and Rogers. Since this building is constructed of reinforced concrete, with an exposed, cast-in-place frame, with intermediate precast mullions spaced at regular intervals, and with precast infilling panels, it might fittingly be included in the category he entitles "neo-Perret," especially in view of its structural similarity to Perret's apartment block in the rue Raynouard, Paris, built 30 years before. Moreover, the fact that one of the three architects responsible for the Torre Velasca published a biography of Perret in 1955 would seem to give weight to such an interpretation. Yet not only does Pevsner not classify it as "neo-Perret" (a term he reserves for Edward D. Stone's Raincid precast tracery); he labels it "neo-Art Nouveau" because it bears a superficial formal resemblance to a metal framed office building constructed by G.P. Chèdanne in Paris in 1903.

The formal similarity between the upper part of the Torre Velasca and the upper part of the Le Parisien office building in the rue Rèaumur is indisputable; but it can be fully justified on on purely functional grounds. The top six stories of the Torre Velasca are apartment floors, whereas the lower part of the building consists of office space, and the enlargement of the upper part corresponds quite rationally to the increased size of floor area demanded. Consider, for example, how the shape of the Torre Velasca was justified by G. M. Kallman, the exponent of "Action Architecture" (and now one of the architects of the Boston City Hall), at the time of its completion. "It is not a self-sufficient structure that could be located anywhere," he wrote in the *Architectural Forum* in February 1958; *"instead it is a valiant essay in the neglected art of fitting modern architecture into a historic continuity of building, within which it seeks its own status.* Unlike most modern architecture, which is displaced, rebellious, and alien to im-



Torre Velasca, Milan

Auguste Perret: rue Raynouard—Apartment Block

mediate environment, the Milan tower shows a definite response to the forms and figuration of its surroundings... The giant mushroom shape of the tower recalls medieval machicolated defense towers. The cagelike appearance of the exterior frame is more reminiscent of Gothic structure than it is of skeleton frame and curtain wall...*But the tower does not have a deliberately historicized silhouette...* The more closely the tower is studied, the more apparent its complex dialectic becomes—between function and form, construction and ornament, new technology and ancient forms." (Italics mine).

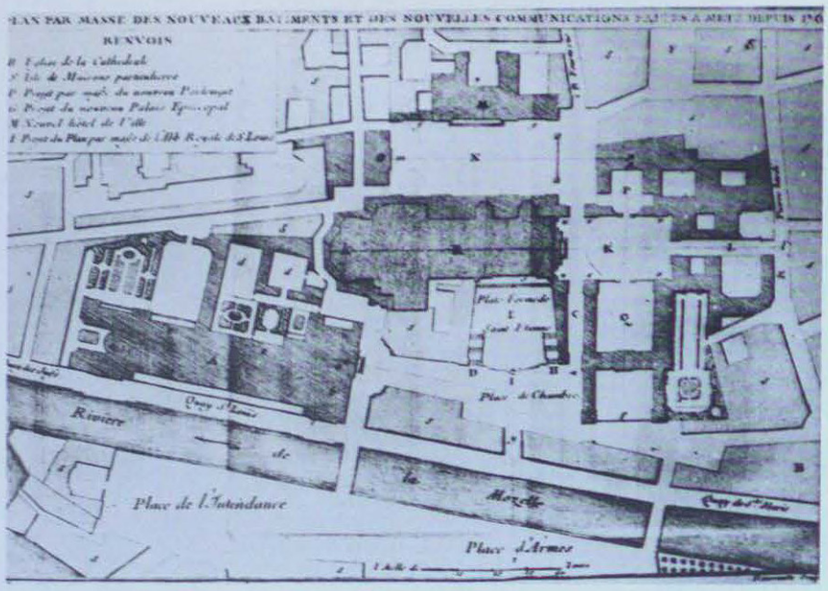
It seems therefore opportune to consider the whole question of "stylistic" imitation in the 20th Century, because it may well be that the depressing conclusions of modern art-historical analysis result simply from a refusal by art historians to distinguish between changes *of* style and changes *within* a style; to distinguish in other words, between what biologists would call mutations and variants. In architecture, this corresponds to buildings which are stylistically of a different species, and to buildings which, though stylistically of the same species, are unfashionable or archaic. I shall try to show that whereas stylistic imitation is as reprehensible as ever, variations within a style (that is, within "the unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch") constitute simply what William H. Jordy aptly calls "the overlapping gamut of expressive possibilties."

First, let us consider the meaning of the word "archaic." The notion that all living styles develop like living organisms, "and have their birth, growth, maturity and death," is at least as old as Vasari (from whom this quotation is taken), and seems a commonplace of every phase of architectural history except our own. Now archaism (birth and early growth) has two meanings in architecture, since architecture is both a science and an art. Either it means that a form has been scientifically or technologically superseded, in which case we say it is obsolete. Or it means that a form has been artistically superseded, in which case we say that it is unfashionable. The first kind of archaism is purely objective, in that what is technologically obsolete can never cease to be so for a given state of society (though it can nevertheless legitimately be employed—indeed, in my opinion should be employed—whenever architects are obliged by circumstances to build with traditional building materials and methods). The second kind of archaism is purely subjective, since what was fashionable 20 years ago may well become fashionable again tomorrow. Thus architects should feel no shame at adopting archaic forms and techniques in order to harmonize new buildings with an existing architectural environment, *provided that they do not betray the contemporary principles of stylistic unity;* a unity which, in the 20th Century, is best defined by what John Summerson calls "obedience to the programme" (or as we usually say—functionalism) but which is also to be defined, to my mind, as the notion of the honest expression of the structural means employed.

This problem of creating environmental harmony with new buildings was the subject of a most interesting lecture given at the AIA Seminar at Cranbrook in 1961 by Dean Holmes Perkins. Why, he asked in effect, can we not learn the lesson of Assisi, of Venice, of Paris, where all the buildings, of whatever age, seem infused by some *genius loci* so as to exist in harmony with one another? Why, he asked, as he projected a sequence of splendid coloured photographs of these cities onto a screen in rapid succession, do we not still consider it our duty to fit new buildings into existing urban patterns and textures, as was done so successfully in the past? He gave no examples of how anyone had achieved such harmony in the 20th Century, and when questioned specifically on this point, with respect to Paris, said he did not know of any work by a reputable 20th-Century architect which fulfilled this condition.

Now it is not surprising that he was unable to give examples of harmonious modern buildings in either Assisi or Venice, since these cities are in no sense modern, and indeed for this reason were poor examples to take. But in Paris there is surely a very striking example of this kind of harmony to be found in all the later works of Auguste Perret, and perhaps in years to come, when architects are more concerned with creating humane environments than with becoming Form-Givers, his achievement in this respect may attract the attention it deserves.

There is no need for me to waste time justifying the 20th-



Metz Cathedral—Blondel's Plan

Metz Cathedral—Blondel's Portal

Library, Venice

Century character of 51-55 rue Raynouard from a structural or a functional point of view, since I have already done this in my book, *Concrete: The Vision of a New Architecture.* I would simply observe that by designing the building in accordance with the absolute limitations imposed by the Municipal Building Code, and by proportioning the fenestration in accordance with local traditions, Perret produced a building which is so unostentatious that those who travel through this old suburb of Paris would hardly appreciate that it was designed by a "Pioneer of the Modern Movement" unless their attention were specifically drawn to the plaque recently affixed to the wall. In this respect, it is vastly different from Perret's earlier and universally extolled apartment building in rue Franklin. Everyone knows the practical reasons why he was led to encase the reinforced concrete frame of the latter building in coloured tiles, and why he recessed the facade in the centre. But though this building is "stylistically" acceptable to the art historians (presumably because it is covered with the Art Nouveau decorations of the era, and possesses spatial qualities shared with some of Victor Horta's houses in Brussels), it is, from the point of view of urban environmental harmony, deplorable, since it is completely alien to the other apartment buildings in the same street.

Perret, who in his later years was accused by Le Corbusier of betraying the Modern Movement, undoubtedly lacked that abstract vision of a New Architecture which enabled Le Corbusier to envisage destroying the whole of Paris north of the Seine, and substituting a symmetrically arranged group of widely spaced cruciform glass prisms, 600 feet high. He was conservative, even prosaic, and he may well have inherited too many inhibiting traits from the parsimonious peasant stock from which he sprang. But he was a Parisian who loved Paris; who delighted in its character, its traditions, its atmosphere, and the way of life of its people; and it was in Paris that he mainly built.

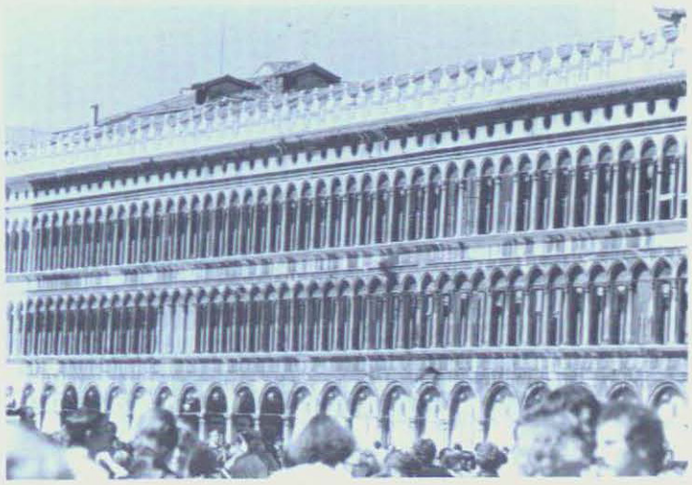
If we return to Parisian architecture of the Renaissance period (the period, that is, which Perret's "frozen classicism" is usually accused of "reviving"), we also find examples of delberate archaism, the most notable beng the successive additions to Lescot's Louvre, and the alterations, made by Fran-

Piazza San Marco, Venice

çois Mansart in the 17th Century, to Lescot's 16th-Century Hotel Carnavalet. When describing the latter building a century later (in 1754), Jacques-François Blondel, the future professor of architecture at the Academy School, wrote: "How many architects inferior to Mansart have buried excellent works in oblivion through fear of comparison with their own products, or through the ridiculous vanity of believing that nothing except that which is produced in their own time, or executed under their own orders, is worth preserving?"

Blondel himself later had practical experience of the same problem, and indeed, one of the most instructive examples of deliberate archaism in the interests of environmental harmony is to be found in the porch he added to the west facade of the medieval cathedral at Metz in 1764 (later destroyed to make way for a pseudo-Gothic porch during the German occupation of Alsace-Lorraine). Blondel's problem was to design a porch which would harmonize not only with the medieval cathedral, but also with the new buildings facing it which he was constructing as part of an urban renewal scheme. Now for anyone familiar with the surviving works of Blondel (who was among the leading French architects of his age), the resultant design must seem at first sight inexplicable, since, although it obeys all the principles of classical architecture, it in no way corresponds to the forms normally used by him, or by his more famous contemporaries such as A. J. Gabriel, the architect of the Petit Trianon. But on careful examination, it will be seen that his strange combination of elements (notably the Corinthian columns combined with a Doric entablature—an arrangement admitted by Vitruvius but never normally used—and the rather archaic pediment) are all attempts to create the impression of what we now call "Early French Renaissance," but which Blondel himself described on several occasions as "semi-Gothic." "Thus in its ensemble and its ornaments," he wrote, "the porch at Metz offers a composition in some way analogous with the upper part of this ancient edifice. My drawings will make clear the means used to conciliate this new structure with the ancient Gothic, as well as with the new surrounding buildings."

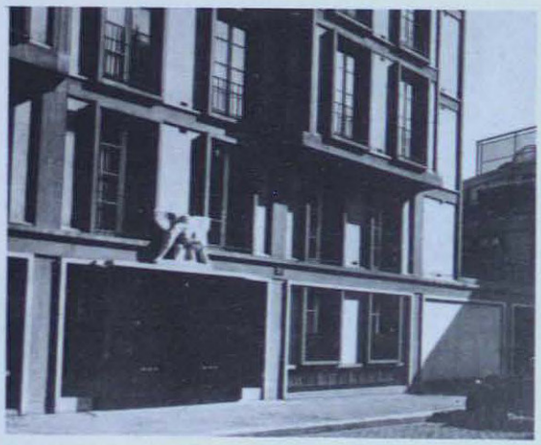
Admittedly, the porch at Metz is an obscure example. I shall conclude therefore, with the best known example of ar-



Procurazie Vecchie, Venice

Procurazie Nuove, Venice

Piazza San Marco, Venice—Early Stages



Auguste Perret: rue Raynouard—Detail

chitectural harmony given in the textbooks, namely the group of facades constituting the Piazza and Piazzetta S. Marco in Venice. These plazas are the classical historical examples of successful urban spaces; yet I have never yet seen any precise explanation of how the success was achieved, nor do I know of any author who clearly indicates that the whole sequence of facades is one of the most subtle examples of deliberate archaization ever built.

The basic civic building around which all others were consecutively assembled was naturally the Doge's Palace, built during the Gothic era. The new buildings, as they stand today, were successively the Procurazie Vecchie, 1520; the Library, 1536; and the Procurazie Nuove, 1584. Now if one inspects them carefully, it is obvious that all these later buildings were deliberately modelled on the Doge's Palace, which, it will be recalled, has two superimposed arcades, the upper arcading being provided with twice as many columns as the lower. The facade of the Procurazie Vecchie copies this rhythm exactly, by simply substituting semicircular Renaissance arches for pointed and trefoiled Gothic arches. The facade of the Procurazie Nuove copies the Library (which it adjoins), and substitutes only the upper story (required for functional reasons) in place of the heavy entablature used by Sansovino. It is the Library itself which is the most brillant solution of the problem, for not only does it manage to reflect the Palace's top-heaviness and crenellations by means of a classical entablature of unusually heavy proportions, and by means of classical statues, but it recreates the double rhythm of the Palace's upper story by the introduction of a sequence of "Venetian windows," cleverly syncopated by means of small Ionic columns spaced at half the intercolumniation of the larger Ionic columns within the upper superimposed Order of the main colonnade. Interestingly enough, Sansovino's archaism is never regarded as slavish "historicism" by today's architectural historians; on the contrary, his building is widely regarded as one of the greatest buildings of the 16th Century, and it was so regarded by his contemporaries, such as Palladio, who unashamedly "revived" it at Vicenza 10 years later by adopting the "Venetian window" motif for environmental reasons of quite a different order.

The means adopted in order to achieve harmony at Metz and Venice are thus basically identical with those used by Belgiojoso, Peressuti and Rogers in Milan, and by Perret in Paris. Without in any way compromising contemporary principles (which in the 16th Century were based on the classical Orders, and in the present century are based on rational structures and functional plans) all these architects deliberately disciplined their architectural forms to harmonize with earlier buildings nearby. They did not produce anything which art historians could recognize and classify as a new "style." On the contrary, they produced work so unostentatious as to be positively banal, especially if one uses the word in its strict etymological sense of as meaning as "common to all" the buildings around them. Nevertheless, it might not be a bad thing if more facades in our cities were as banal as the facades of Metz and Venice; for a Perret once remarked: "He who, without betraying the modern conditions of a programme, or the use of modern materials, produces a work which seems to have always existed, which, in a word, is banal, can rest satisfied. Astonishment and excitement are shocks which do not endure: they are but contingent and anecdotic sentiments. The true aim of art is to lead us dialectically from satisfaction to satisfaction, until it surpasses mere admiration to reach delight in its purest form."