

THE ENLIGHTENMENT:

Après le Siècle des Lumières, le concept du beau changera radicalement. De la définition classique où il est absolu et incompréhensible aux hommes, il devient soumis aux changements sociaux et philosophiques. L'auteur explore les opinions de différents théoriciens.

Architecture (is)...the image of the changing metaphysics of man.

Charles Jencks

Before the Enlightenment, one of the basic principles of traditional epistemology was the belief that Truth and Beauty could only be known by approximation, through the imperfectly understood symbolic acts and emblems of the ancient authorities. The real world of everyday was itself but a screen that separated the fallen self from the presence of a higher reality. Truth and Beauty had a dual nature. On the one hand, Truth presented a configuration that was given its meaning by its cultural and associative structure. On the other hand, Truth presented a configuration that had an absolute God-given meaning. It was the particular function of the church, through dogma and rhetoric, to resolve contradiction between the two planes by persuading the individual to perceive the reality of the absolute beyond the mask of everyday events and sensations. Truth was the truth of persuasion and uncertainty. The individual was capable of only an imperfect awareness. As St. Augustine wrote with respect to the resurrection of Christ: "It is impossible and must be true".

Deprived by Cartesian doubt of its faith in the received culture, the seventeenth century was a time of new anxieties.¹ The classical conception of a universal unchanging Nature, answered by an almost equally stable world of practical convention, was being replaced by a sense of convention as a historically developing entity. It became more difficult to believe that the two orders were internally coordinated by the pre-ordained act of Divine will.

While the stability of Nature itself remained uncontested, the authorities of the Ancients and the architects that maintained their traditions began to be questioned critically. Classicism was based on primacy of the Ancients and was rooted in the conception of Revealed Truth. It was Cartesian, deductive and dependant on largely unexamined assumptions and beliefs. Neo-Classicism (and later modernism) was Newtonian, egalitarian and objective and emphasized rationalism, and scientific examination, rather than acceptance of inherited traditions.² Among the first to question architectural theory in this way was Claude Perrault.

In abandoning the idea of a pre-ordained agreement, Perrault sought to reaffirm the truth of the Classical conventions at a more profound and secure level. If Nature could not be known directly, he believed, at least Reason itself, since it was a human creation, could provide a basis for certainty. In place of ancient theoretical truth, of which we could hold only uncertain opinions, there was "positive beauty;" mechanical and inevitable, which was obvious to all. Instead of practical convention, there was "arbitrary beauty" which depended upon individual delineation.³ Instead of the

VISIONS OF UTOPIA

Frank Berçarich

rhetorician who served as the reconciler of Truth and Convention, there was the architect as an arbiter of good taste. This conception of a progressive architecture replaced a reverence for a mythical past with a vision of a future Utopia that would be as perfect as Reason itself.

The doctrine of "arbitrary and positive beauties", which relegated architecture to the shifting fortunes of "good taste", proved to be dangerously reductionistic. Since the positive beauties of architecture lay in the domain of common sense, their presence in the building was not so much due to the architect's skill as it was due to the proper disposition of material and structure. The proper skill of the architect was seen to stand outside the realm of science and objectivity and within the realm of taste and fancy.⁴ By tracing the evolution of Perrault's doctrine through the revisions of Boullée, Laugier, Daly and Durand, etc., it can be observed that after an initial feverish burst of activity, the restructuring of architectural theory led to an unintended but continuous erosion of the role of the architect.

"Beauty is the result of the simultaneous interplay between the arbitrary and the positive. Architecture results from the conjunction of social meanings and natural geometrical forms."

In his writings, Boullée set forth the laws of the beautiful as derived from nature in his "theory of bodies:"

Circular bodies please our senses because of their smooth contours; angular bodies are displeasing because of their harshness; bodies that crawl over the ground sadden us, those that rise to the sky delight us, and those that stretch to the horizon are noble and majestic.⁵

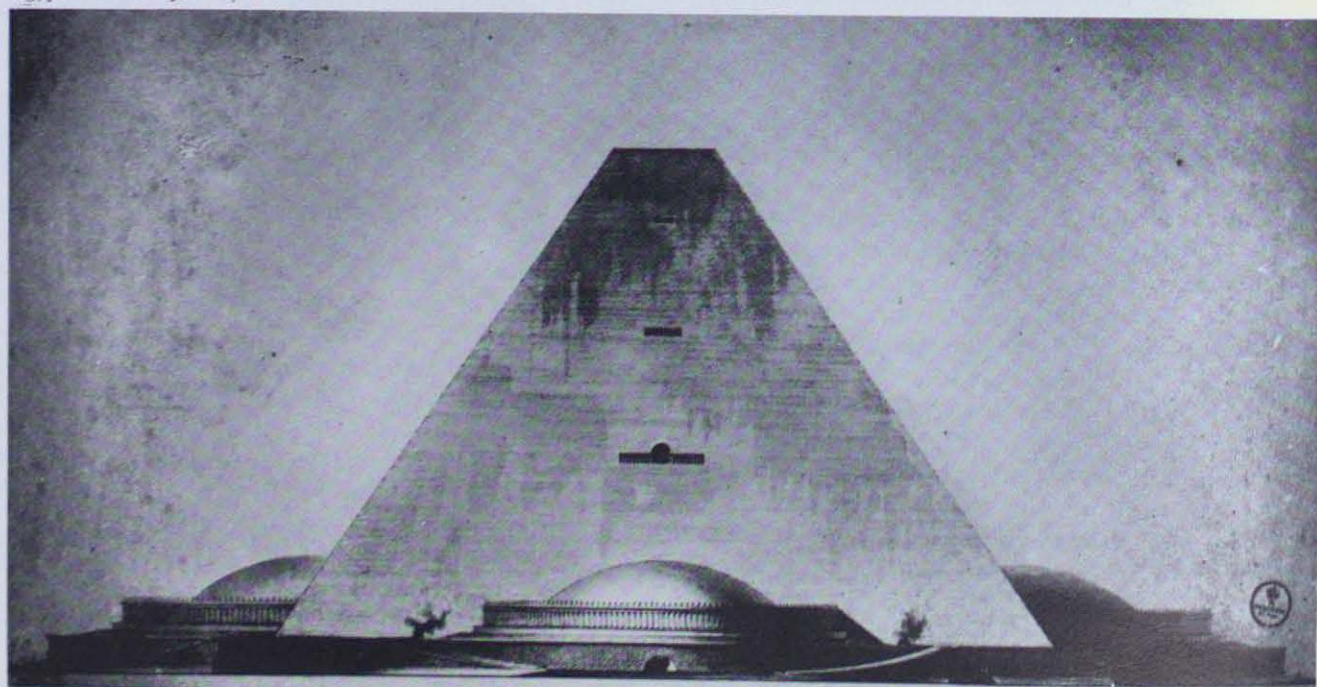
Boullée felt that the great superiority of architecture over the other arts lay in the fact that architecture was capable of imitating nature more directly and, as such, was closer to the source of all that was true. Since the architect could not reproduce nature exactly, it was necessary to enhance the built forms by means of symbolic forms that informed the spectator more precisely. For Boullée, architecture itself was only symbolic of the beauty and power of nature. As such, the proper choice of the site was held to be of primary importance in the establishment of the proper coordination of nature and building.⁶

Fully confident that appearance and essence of form were internally consistent and that language itself transparently mediated reality, architectural types consisted simply in the enumeration of the possibilities that were already known.

As such, Boullée's architecture was destined to become essentially conservative and static, as he sought to magnify existing architectural programmes to scales that began to rival the natural landscape.

The conservative nature of architecture, not only a reflection of existing social structure, is symptomatic of an inherent instability and arbitrariness within the method. In the design of a particular programme, conflicts that would arise between geometric form and social meaning would have to be mediated by recourse to a "criteria for choice". The nature of the criteria would, however, be itself a product of natural and social meanings. Therefore, such decisions could not be resolved simply by referring the question to a more abstract level of discussion. In this way, it was seen that the decision making process could never be fully rationalized. For this reason, the connection between form and social meaning could never be rationalized to form a series of consistent types. Each building tended to become an isolated element that could not be related to an urban fabric. Architecture, therefore, became an architecture of the isolated monument, deriving its meaning from an alliance between form and figure that could maintain its stability only within a static and unchanging Utopia.

Egyptian Cenotaph—by Boullée



"Beauty originates in arbitrary or positive beauty. Architecture results from the adherence to the structure of a primitive model whose origins are either social or natural."

We must return to the source, to the principles and to the type.⁷

Ribard de Chamouss

Just as for Perrault, it did not matter methodologically if the search for the origins of architecture was pursued through an intuitive or experiential approach since both would produce the same result. As Anthony Vidler wrote, "the architectural type was at once 'pre-existent germ' origin and primitive cause. Thus the type of architecture was the 'primitive hut' which either from inherent nature or human design had certain specific qualities".

As the drawing by Laugier, "The Natural Model", illustrates, the trees that make up the four corners of the building are trees that are growing and could have been placed there either by man or nature. Similarly, the branches grow in such a way as to form a triangular pediment that surmounts the tree-columns. In this way, Laugier hoped to illustrate that the origins of architecture could be either social or natural since in the final analysis the source of fundamental principles could only be identical.

Difficulties arose when the principle of the primitive hut was put into practice. If the primitive hut was primarily an artefact of a particular culture, its particular characteristics could change and evolve to meet new circumstances and techniques. If on the other hand the primitive hut was an essentially true model of architecture, deviations from its structure would undermine the quality of the project.

Quatremère, in attempting to strike a mediating position, insisted that such a model should serve as an abstract

model or ideal "which is like a nucleus about which we are gathered, and to which is coordinated in time the developments to which the object is susceptible."⁸ The effectiveness of this approach, however, depended on the very quality that it sought to evoke—a unified and consistent architectural culture. By the late eighteenth century, this culture had long ceased to exist if in fact it ever had.

The Primitive Hut—by Laugier



Wolfgang Hermann, *Laugier and Eighteenth Century French Theory*, A. Zwemmer Ltd., London, 1962, plate 4.

"Beauty is derived exclusively from the discovery of the fundamental principles by means of science. Architecture depends on the time and place of its invention as it evolves toward a progressive perfection."

I will assert that monuments, pictures and carved images are discourses which are heard with the eyes; that they are symbols which represent the diverse states of the soul.⁹

Cesar Daly

The idea of an evolutionary progress toward superior types, as reflected in the theories of Charles Darwin, Emile Durkheim, etc., was with very few alterations re-interpreted and put into the service of an evolutionary theory of architectural styles. As in the natural sciences such as biology, an insight into the architectural expression of the future could be gained by the style of the past periods as they evolved through time.

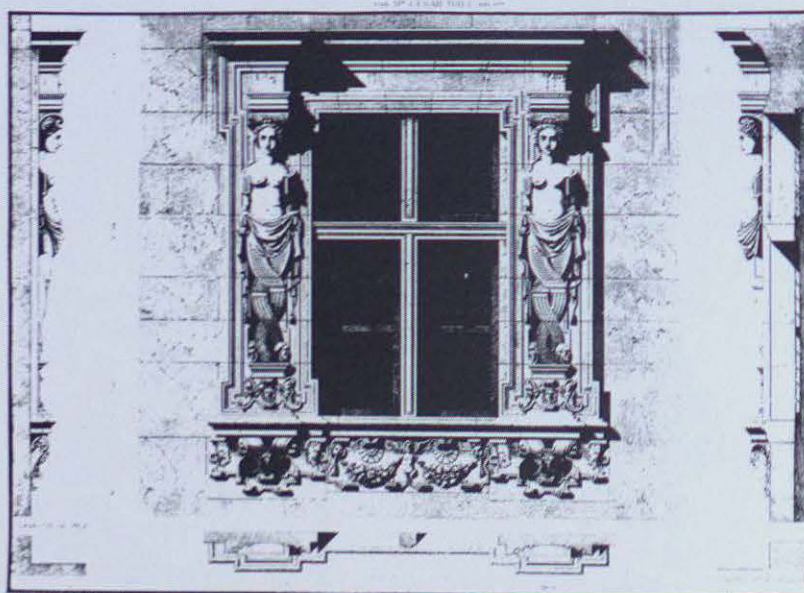
The danger in this approach, particularly in a period without a strong sense of its own identity and values, lay in the production of an architecture of "eclecticism" in which the styles of previous architectural periods could be used and discarded in the same way as one disposed of outmoded clothing. Architecture, being stable and lasting by definition, seemed to be necessarily undermined. For Cesar Daly, however, eclecticism was seen as a necessary stage of development that would eventually be abandoned once the true direction of the future was established. For Daly, the study of past styles was a means by which the movement of the idea could be traced in order to extrapolate its movement into the

future. Daly believed that society evolves through distinctive stages that are each marked by qualitative differences in style and attitude. As society and its institutions became more complex, its architecture would reflect the increasing complexity. Underlying this gradual evolution lay principles and elements that remained constant and capable of recognition and analysis. Wrote Daly:

In the universality of these figures, the proof that at the base of human instinct exists the conscience of a permanent relationship between, on the one hand, certain considerations of lines, and on the other, the static and dynamic condition of bodies?¹⁰

With the aid of the new tools of classification and analysis that science was providing, it was believed that the underlaying principles could be brought to full consciousness. Daly fully expected the nineteenth century to give rise to an architecture that was fully superior to those of the previous ages.

However, such a system contained an inherent contradiction that limited its claim to the inevitable certainty of truth. Once a goal is stated as inevitable, the system will remain evolutionary; any goal that is set immediately ceases to be final and inevitable. While Daly never abandoned his project, it was clear that as a system it could never produce the kind of absolute and predictable knowledge that was originally intended.



STYLE HENRI II

Hotel Lasbourdes, Place des Carmes, Toulouse—by Cesar Daly

"Beauty is derived exclusively from the discovery of the fundamental principles by means of science. Architecture depends on the adherence to the necessary principles of material and construction."

Revision IV

The engineers...in constructing a ship or a locomotive produce works that have their own proper character...in the sense that they indicate purpose.¹¹

Viollet-le-Duc

With the growing power and efficacy of technology and engineering, many architectural theoreticians began to believe that it was logically necessary to distinguish surface ornament and considerations of style from the building underneath.¹² One seemed to be a product of imprecise and subjective factors while the actual structure seemed to be the product of inevitable laws of material physics. Once it became possible to separate social meaning from the constructed object, it was inevitable that in the continuing quest for certainty, an attempt would be made to root the meaning of the building in material and construction itself and to dispense with aesthetics and metaphysics entirely. For the first time, it seemed possible to strip away what seemed the arbitrary and artificial social meanings by aligning the nature of the building to the nature of process of its fabrication. "Architecture begins," wrote Mies van der Rohe, "when two bricks are carefully placed together."

By being true to the process of construction, the building would be true to the laws of nature itself in a transparent fusion of figure and form. In this way a style that would transcend style itself would emerge and bring an end to the confusion and ambiguities of the past.

In forming this alliance with science and technology, it was believed that a solid base had finally been found. It would lead to an absolute knowledge of the nature of the world.

Bolstered by the brilliant successes of the science and technology of Newton and Leibnitz, utilitarianism and the bourgeois ideal of social regulation gained dominance. Everything imaginative and fantastic was suppressed in favour of a heightened and materialistic realism that sought precise and certain answers even in matters of taste. As primarily "arbiters of taste," the existence of the architect as a significant member of society was endangered.

The alienation of the architect from his craft...seemed to involve the rarifying of his work beyond the reach of reason. As the appeal of the past weakened, the criteria by which the buildings were judged attenuated to the snapping point.¹³

Joseph Rykwert

By the late nineteenth century, the conception of an architecture that could stand on purely aesthetic principles apart from scientific and objective laws was no longer tenable. The Modern Movement, as championed by the functional fundamentalists such as Hannes Meyer, argued that aesthetics and science, architecture and technology had

merged once and for all time into a perfectable science of building. The final product, by the simple and rigid adherence to the facts of a rationally generated programme and method, would be a logical and transparent expression of function. The Neo-classical concept of the distinction between "arbitrary and positive beauty" was eliminated, and many theoreticians understood this as the end of architecture as an art form.

It is no longer possible to do anything about it...to modify the misery of modern culture...the misery of modern architecture is the expression of this knowledge.¹⁴

Aldo Rossi

At the core of Modernism, there existed a critical scepticism which, in principle, put all traditions—and the idea of tradition itself, under corrosive scrutiny. But Modernism gave birth to traditions of its own which derived their creative vitality from the tension between a stable order of Nature and an evolving order of Reason. Its Utopia would be a place of future invention and freedom that would reveal itself within the continuous breaking or restricting social conventions.

Yet, such freedom can only mean the freedom to have a meaning of one's own. Freedom is illusory unless it can be achieved against a prior plenitude of common meaning. Without the continuing presence of the burdensome conventions that modernism sought to undermine, the essentially reductionist nature of its program has recently become clear. The legacy of Modernism can now be seen as a continuous diminishment of the Architect's power to act.

NOTES:

1. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present*, Architectural Design Profile, pg.10.
2. Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns*, M.I.T. Press, pg.34.
3. Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, M.I.T. Press, pg.36.
4. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Beam Press, pg.191.
5. Jean-Marie Perouse de Monclos, *Etienne-Louis Boullée*, Braziller Press, pg.38.
6. Ibid, pg.39.
7. Ribard de Chamouss, *L'Ordre François Trouve dans la Nature*, (Paris 1783), pg.5.
8. Antoine Quatremere de Quincy, *Encyclopédie Méthodique d'Architecture*.
9. Cesar Daly, "Du Symbolisme dans l'architecture", *Revue*, Vol.7, 1847.
10. Ibid.
11. E.E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Etudes sur l'Architecture*, Vol.1.
12. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present*, A.D. Profile, pg.22.
13. Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns*, M.I.T. Press, pg.153.
14. Aldo Rossi, "A Scientific Autobiography", *Oppositions Books*, pg.23.

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