

Parthenon — Architecture's most precious possession; timelessness.

Architecture

Au delà du pluralisme et des modes actuelles, l'auteur a entrepris une recherche des fondements de l'architecture. Cet essai étudie les facteurs qui ont façonné l'architecture dans le pass aujourd'hui et dans le futur.

There is much deliberation these days as to the course that architecture should proclaim for itself. At times, the search appears to be more an exercise in coining *style-isms* than formulating deeply rooted convictions. Having dashed from Modernism to Late-Modernism to Post-Modernism in a mere two decades, architecture is obviously in a state of transition. This state of continuous change implies the lack of a comprehensive theory. More importantly, it demonstrates the fragility of frivolous attitudes.

Attitude and architecture! It may be argued that architecture is initially set on a distinct course by an attitude

which moulds its conception into being. If so, what then is the appropriate attitude for architecture? Several possibilities come to the fore: to be subservient to fashion or to fashion an architectural truth; to merely reflect society or to bestow upon society a purpose for existence; to quietly acquiesce to what is acceptable or to rise up in the pursuit of ideals; in essence, to be a follower of fancy or a pursuer of purpose.

The significance of these three issues lies in their far-reaching implications for architecture. History provides vivid illustrations of this significance. A closer examination of the contrasting attitudes within each will hopefully reveal the intention of architecture while attempting to shed light on the direction it should take.

The first issue is that of submission to fashion's momentary pleasures. By definition, fashion is the prevailing custom, taste, craze, or mode. It carries with it a temporal air of vogue, seeking novelty for its own sake. Hence, fashion

denies architecture its most precious possession; timelessness.

By subjecting that which should be noble and timeless to fanciful whims, fashion transforms serious work into a commodity, or rather, disposable packaging, as is evident in our contemporary society. Is architecture to be merely skin-deep, to retreat behind an appealing mask, or to be placed in the realm of decal-labelled shirts? As Peter Smith, a current writer on aesthetics, points out, fashion "is transient and has immediate appeal of shine and pristine freshness. The movement of fashion is more an indication of the human appetite for change than for the deeper experience more usually associated with aesthetics."¹ In short, the concerns of fashion abandon for the sake of vanity the underlying purpose of an eternal architecture.

The second attitude deals with the relationship between architecture and society. Many view architecture as a reflection of society or, more specifically,

as a reflection of a particular age. Out of this arises a question concerning the extent to which this premise is true. Obviously, the answer is bound by our visions in a given society. As long as we seek truths beyond ourselves (as had been the case for centuries), our society and our architecture inherit a deeper significance. However, being content to merely accept the arbitrary, the superficial and the trivial (as has been the practice of our modern materialistic age), we are destined to a meaningless and purposeless existence. So, too, will our architecture be meaningless and purposeless.

Finally, there is the question of conformity. There is a tendency, for most, to flow with the mainstream. At the same time, there are those who prefer to deviate from the norm simply to attract attention. Both attitudes are as evident today in society as they are in architecture. Homogeneity is induced, whether consciously or not, by the many instruments within society which

explain and understand all; an attempt by the created to comprehend the creation. It is a search for a metaphysical truth, a truth of ultimate reality, wholly transcendent of actuality and experience. Albert Einstein once profoundly stated that "human nature always has tried to form for itself a simple and synoptic image of the surrounding world."² Thus, in order to place existence in perspective, humanity has set its sights on a greater vision, a vision bestowed with a sense of purpose.

During periods in which relevance was found in concepts of universal meaning, several analogies were developed to explain them. They became the basis for rational and creative intentions, especially in architecture since it was the most public of all artistic endeavours. Three such analogies — the universe, nature, and the human being — will be briefly discussed here.

The *universe*, of course, represented the highest level of order imagined, as it was believed to be a creation of God.

and whose possessions were placed in a basket then, unknowingly, set over an acanthus root. As the plant grew, its leaves are said to have sprung into volutes around the basket's outer edges. Seeing this one day, the artisan Calimachus was inspired to imitate the natural pattern.

A most cherished belief, advanced for centuries, was that the presence of the *human being* was an essential part of the composition of the heavens. Within the grand scheme, one considered oneself as representative of perfection, in keeping with the belief of having been created in the image of God. As the *microcosm* epitomizing the *macrocosm*, humans sought to build according to the relationships established by their own physiogomy. Witness, for example, Vitruvius' association between man and the design of temples, and that of the Gothic architects, between the human body and cathedral plans.

Without question, artistic doctrines were based on a higher order until the

with Purpose

guide the majority to think and act alike, while divergence primarily reflects a wish to disassociate from the status quo. Both attitudes are equally shallow for neither is concerned with the wholistic fulfillment of human ideals.

It becomes imperative that one of the fundamental aspirations be to achieve the ideal through an adherence to universal principles. One must search within and without to discover and understand the purposes which shape one's existence and which, in turn, find their expression in every act, in every creation.

While this search remains only a matter for reflection in our day, history portrays it as a quest whose fruits have very much been realized. The human race has consistently set its vision on the attainment of the ideal, believed to exist within a *universal order*. This abstract notion, however different the interpretation from age to age, has become an unrelinquished attempt to

This was in part due to Plato's influential claim that the body of the world was created by "The Ordering One through the action of Ideas and Numbers."³ Not surprisingly, he had envisioned a perfect Creator whose creations were also perfect. Plato philosophically implied that any creative act, albeit an intellectual one, should reflect such perfection so as to be in complete harmony with the universe.

Since *nature* was perceived as the first tangible reality of this harmony of the universe, it was granted the same significance as that of the contemplated ideal of the universe. As such, *nature* became subject to imitation by way of abstraction. The capital is but one example of this. Ancient Egyptians, for instance, looked to the papyrus bud, lotus flower and palm branch to create their column capitals. And then there is Vitruvius' account of the origin of the Corinthian capital based on the story of a young girl from Corinth who died

Renaissance. The search for harmony in all that is created led civilizations to formulate a concept of order founded on clearly defined *principia* derived from a pervasive purpose. Indeed, there existed an underlying notion of artist as co-creator with God, thereby establishing complete union between the universe and human being. Such beliefs were likely understood by the public at large at once endowing the creations of an age (architecture being one) with meaning, making them symbolic of a people's interpretation of a universal vision.

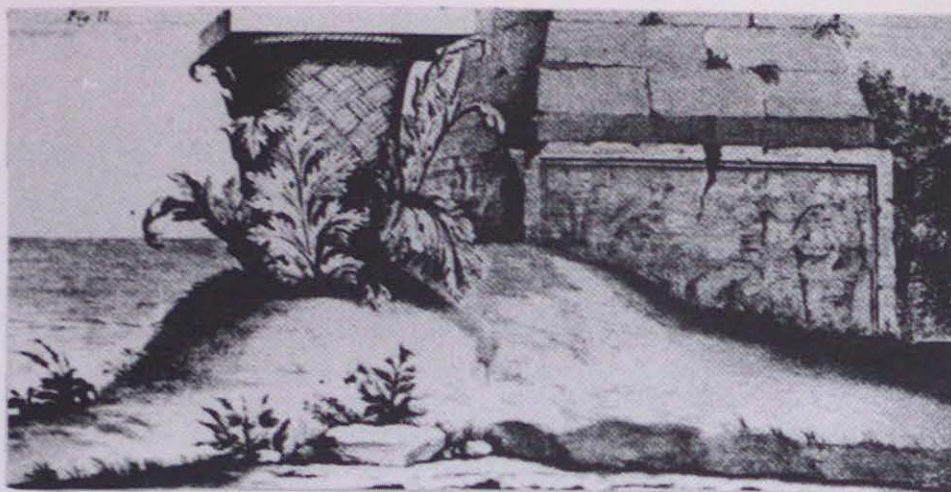
In this century, Le Corbusier echoed this metaphysical/actual relationship when he declared: "Architecture is the first manifestation of man creating his own universe, creating it in the image of nature, submitting to the laws of nature, the laws which govern our nature, our universe."⁴

With few exceptions, after the Renaissance the desire to represent the metaphysical in human creations was

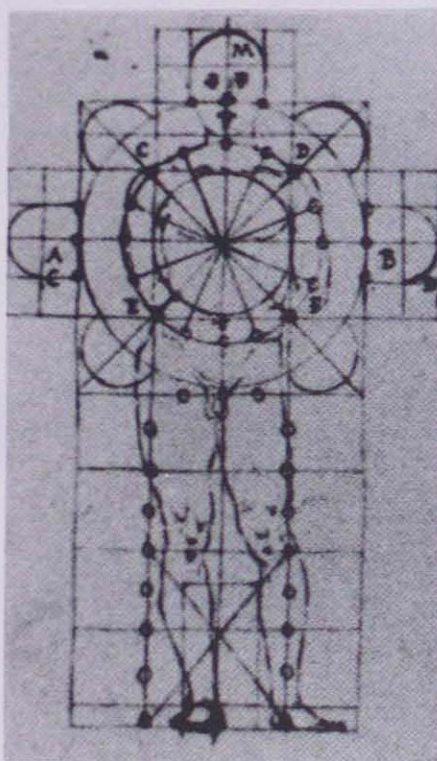
diminished or even abandoned, the outcome of which is the predicament of architecture today. Put simply, prior to the Middle Ages, the concept of an ordered cosmos and ultimate universal truth was believed to be a result of divine revelation. During the Renaissance, a transition took place in which mortals, conceiving themselves symbolic of God, became the focus.

This move from the divine to the mortal was further characterized, in later centuries, by the desire for freedom from all metaphysical concepts, whether divine or secular. As Christian Norberg-Schulz remarks, there was a longing "to be free to explore reality unrestricted by dogmas and traditional ideas. Instead of belonging to the world, man put himself rationally and critically opposite to it... The real driving force undoubtedly was the dream of one day being able to face the world 'as it is'."⁵ Collective ideals, which had been of indisputable significance prior to the fifteenth century, were questioned not so much during the Renaissance as afterwards. They were consequently replaced by increasingly personal views which then enabled creators to immerse themselves in empirical and emotional attitudes. In time, most would become no more than followers of fancy.

Architecture, as a notion of timelessness, cannot subject itself to fanciful whims; timelessness, by its very nature, requires the realization of ideals which exist universally. The interpretations may differ yet the essence of each creative act will remain. Kahn, Le Corbusier and Wright were notable examples of this; for, although varying in style, they shared a common conviction that *architecture emanates from the very essence of life, which itself emanates from the purpose of eternal existence*. And herein perhaps lies the foremost intention of architecture, namely, the manifestation of fundamental truths.



Vitruvius —
Origin of the Corinthian capital.



Francesco Di Giorgio —
Symbolic rationalization of cathedrals.



Le Corbusier —
Creating architecture in the image of nature.

If we are to accept Friedrich Achleitner's assertion that, "every generation has to live (with) the buildings its predecessors have left,"⁶ then our task is clearly one of establishing universal beliefs. This will enable architecture to once again, rightfully and in all its splendour, be re-established as a visible realization of a universal vision. Only through the attainment of a world view — that profound embodiment of the metaphysical and the actual — will we restore our dignity as pursuers of purpose. ■

NOTES:

1. P. Smith, *Architecture and the Human Dimension* (London: George Godwin Ltd., 1979), p.178.
2. A. Einstein, in R. Wittkower, *Idea and Image: Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p.123.
3. Quote from Plato's *Timaeus* by Matila Ghyka, *The Geometry of Art and Life* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), p.ix.
4. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. by Frederick Etchells (London: The Architectural Press, 1946), p.69-70.
5. C. Norberg-Schulz, "Meaning in Architecture", in *Meaning in Architecture*, ed. by C. Jencks & G. Baird (London: Barrie and Rockliff, The Cresset Press, 1969, p. 215-229), p. 216.
6. F. Achleitner, in *Rob Krier on Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1972), p.6.

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