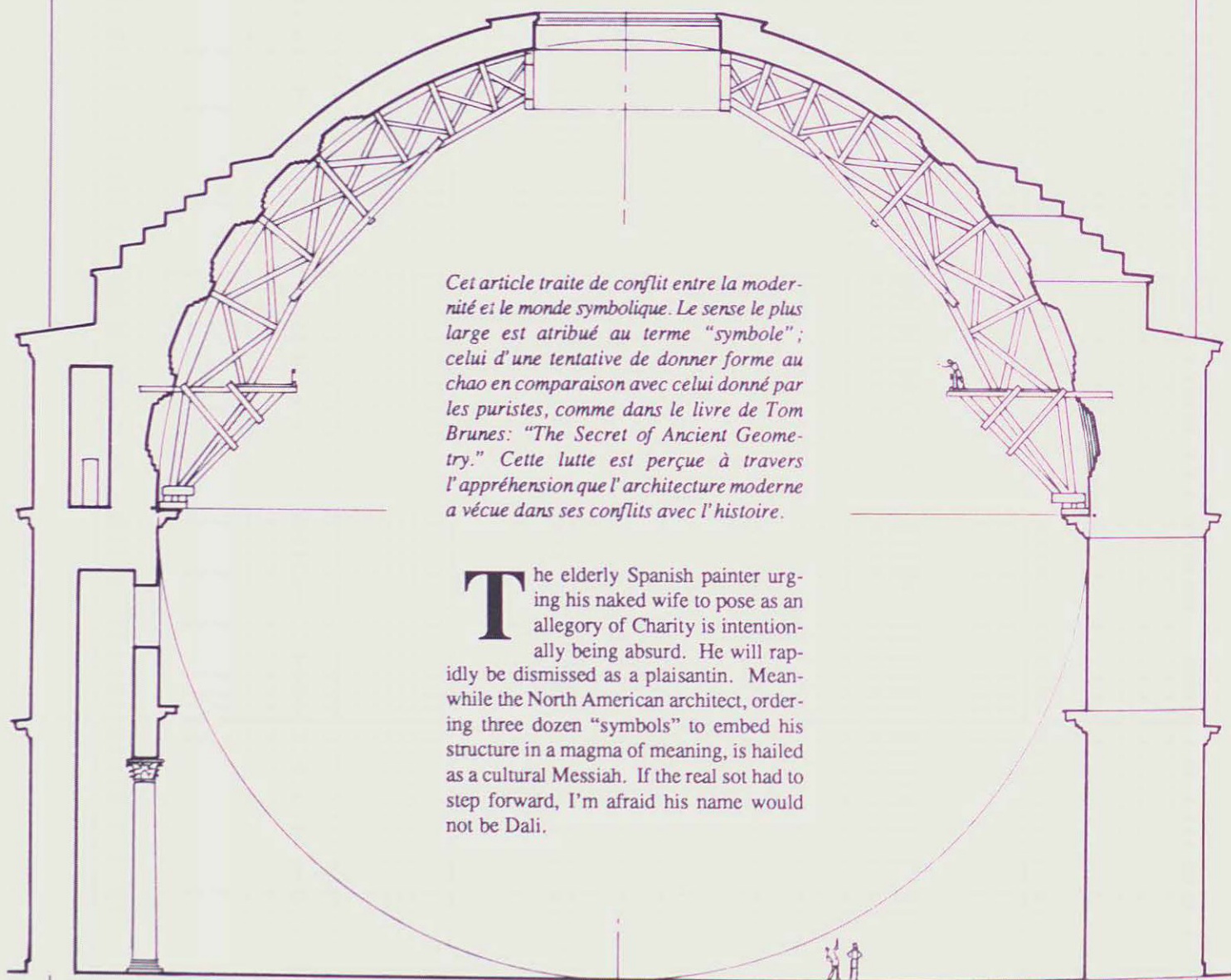


B R E A K I N G T H E P E R I M E T E R



Cet article traite de conflit entre la modernité et le monde symbolique. Le sens le plus large est attribué au terme "symbole"; celui d'une tentative de donner forme au chaos en comparaison avec celui donné par les puristes, comme dans le livre de Tom Brunes: "The Secret of Ancient Geometry." Cette lutte est perçue à travers l'appréhension que l'architecture moderne a vécue dans ses conflits avec l'histoire.

The elderly Spanish painter urging his naked wife to pose as an allegory of Charity is intentionally being absurd. He will rapidly be dismissed as a plaisantin. Meanwhile the North American architect, ordering three dozen "symbols" to embed his structure in a magma of meaning, is hailed as a cultural Messiah. If the real sot had to step forward, I'm afraid his name would not be Dali.

An architecture that is symbolic necessarily implies a precisely defined perimeter, inside which, at a precise point, at a precise moment, through an unchanging ritual, there is communion with the Absolute. Outside that high plateau, where the ancient priest and his tribe gathered to witness the sun rise, and mark the miracle by placing a stone in a half-circle, there is not one cubic inch of matter where symbols may dwell. Outside that naive gathering of bushmen, who regularly offered part of their hunt to an old magician manipulating circles, squares and triangles, there is no meaning, no dance, no myth, no architecture.

Symbolic thought is a process of synthesis. It concentrates the disorganized experiences of the world, of time and of space, on an object, a ritual or some other form of human activity. That lonely object becomes the ordering principle of the Universe. It is science and power, the master of oceans and of flowers. Amidst its precise limits, human thought, being confined and sheltered, is apt to blossom. However nothing must happen to those sacred limits. They cannot be trespassed, trampled or broken. Such an act, by disrupting the gradual accumulation of knowledge, would bring catastrophic ills to the community: loss of solar and lunar calendars, of hunting-rituals, of magic and so on. Therefore, in order to prevent this, ancient tribes devised complex ensembles of rules, taboos and behaviour codes protecting the edges and the sanctity of shrines. These laws were so broad that they also regulated the carrying and removal of altars. In the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Ernst Cassirer describes this second set of rules as "...transition involving rites of passage which must be carefully observed. Their rites govern moves from one city to another, from one country to another, from one phase of life to another." Baptism, First Communion and Bar Mitzvah are more recent, but obvious, examples of such rites.¹

Hence one may not know what a symbol is, but one must feel, when con-

fronted with a corpus of interdicts, that he is approaching the sacred perimeter where symbols dwell. One must feel that he is approaching something mysterious. And indeed he is, for that sense of the mysterious, that cumbersomeness and opacity of the rule is what symbolism is all about.

Those regulations not only protect symbols but ultimately define them. They are the cornerstone of mythical societies, their driving force. And, with time these same regulations will result in shaping the history of those societies. This has been the case in classical ages which have been legitimized by rites of passage such as those analyzed by Cassirer. Indeed those renaissances took roots by, at once, negating history and invoking divine will as the justification of their power. Hence Virgil's *Aeneid*, the mythical constitution of Augustan Rome, remains the great Roman tale of one man's struggle to restore the Trojan gods glory, to elevate them to new sacred perimeters:

His banished gods restored to
rites divine:
And settled sure succession in
his line,
From whence the race of Albans
fathers come
And the long glories of majestic
Rome.

However, even if the modern reader of these verses has initiated himself to the nature of those regulations, he will still be faced with a dilemma. While he acknowledges the beauty of Dryden's translation, and the metaphorical quality of Virgil's poetry, he nonetheless cannot ignore critical historical evidence indicating that Rome was not founded by Aeneas, but by war and slavery; that luck and greed were more involved in the Trojan wars than Homer would have us think. Briefly stated the reader is left torn between admiration and revulsion: between his sense of justice and aesthetic pleasure, between his love of ancient art and his knowledge that such masterpieces celebrated the exploits of ruthless tyrants.

If such mental lacerations sound a trifle passé one should remember that they

arise from Virgil's idea of history, which has little to do with modern analytical history. The same dichotomy being true in architecture. A temple means something for Vitruvius and Procopius, but quite the opposite for Giedion. However our purpose is not to determine whether Vitruvius' vision is superior to another. Our task is to acknowledge this difference and to understand its possible contribution to current architectural thinking.

As stated earlier, symbolic thought being a process of synthesis (the art of limits) it will systematically, and exclusively, try to objectify and to articulate finished forms against chaos. In order to do so it will ignore the existential consequences of this process. Hence if human sacrifices have to be offered to some divinity, the tribe will not question the ethical implication of the ritual. Against this stands modernity and its systematic erosion of that process. Its purpose is to base the origin of symbolic and mythical thought in relativity and subjectivity. Not in a pyramidal order with the Absolute at the apex.

This erosion began to manifest itself in the XVIII century. The *Philosophie des Lumières* saw critical reason as instrumental in questioning the validity of symbolic thought. The XIX century furthered this inquiry by using history, psychology and sociology as scientific tools for the same purpose. All along both movements were helped by successful revolutions and material conquests, each enabling the Project of the Enlightenment and XIX century scientific endeavours to "genetically" lead the Twentieth century to be absorbed in criticism. The determining actors in this third act being psychology and Marxism.

In the case of Marxist philosophy, if we wander outside hard-core economic analysis, it becomes obvious how extensively Marxism has been applied as a critical tool in all fields, including architecture. Indeed from quite early on architectural manifestoes and utopias such as Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class* in England (1844), up to Taut's

Arbeitstat für Kunst (1918) were exemplary of this. More recently this tradition was given new impetus by the publication of Manfredo Tafuri's History and Theory of Architecture (1968). This significant contribution examines how architecture, painting and the avant-garde participated, through the works of artists and thinkers, in the erosion of XIX century bourgeois values (in Marxist terms the ultimate and final manifestation of the symbolic and mythical world).

Although Tafuri limits himself to critical thought in the XX century, his method implicitly acknowledges that the avant-garde was working against a systematic and a real danger. Namely the possibility that bourgeois policies would erase liberties gained by two centuries of opposition. This danger unfortunately became a reality in Europe with a succession of totalitarian dictatorships.

Such regimes, in the language of symbolism, are worlds of pure signification. They avoid any real historical or recent cultural references, and replace beliefs in an a priori order of the Universe by brute force. Consequently, with time, their propagandic symbols, their new social structures, turn out as mere emblems, dead symbols.

This danger became the narrow line that architects and intellectuals of the modern avant-garde had to walk, being critical in their works by mounting an attack on ancient values, yet without producing new symbols or sterile ones (totalitarian emblems). A concern so profound that it still animates German Neo-Expressionist painting.

Somehow this ominous pitfall did sharpen their awareness. The artist became a Knight-Poet, always trying to fulfill his social mission without compromising his pure critical vision. Adolf Loos' writings are a good example of this sense of calling. Conrads writes that "his radical aesthetic

purism made him a zealous foe of Art Nouveau and the German Werkbund". The architect himself took a prophetic tone when he wrote in Ornament and Crime (1908): "See the time is high, fulfillment awaits us. Soon the streets of the city will glisten like white walls. Like Zion, the Holy city, the capital of heaven. Then fulfillment will become."²

Loos' head on struggle with ornament and his positive conquering attitude, were helped by a complete control over his designs. However this last possibility and this optimism were not shared by all. It was indeed a common concern of his contemporaries that the past would somehow deceitfully creep up and ruin their reforms. Loos' fellow Viennese Freud, when acting as social critic, often wondered about the purpose of psychoanalysis if, in the end, the patient was to be released "into an irrational society".

The same fears also concerned architects involved in urban or territorial planning. How was a revolutionary Constructivist architect to deal with Old Moscow? Could one juxtapose functional architecture into a Baroque palazzo? Wouldn't the later necessarily harm the social and egalitarian purpose of the former? The pristine virginity of modern architecture could not function if it had to cope with remnants of the old symbolic order. On this annoying presence of the past Tafuri writes: "...it carries the memory of an extinct way of producing values, a disturbing and dangerous memory because of the illusion of the possible return to a sacral conception of artistic activity. This is the reason why all avant-garde movements see in history a danger for modern art."³

This danger was particularly felt by Wright and Le Corbusier. Both, in their great projects, had to face this problem, and both came to similar conclusions. Essentially they espoused, as "the only alternative to radical destruction", the option of

"museographic mummification" or the neutralization of historical centers.⁴

Hence Jeanneret's Plan Voisin would mothball Paris, while Wright's Greenacres would do the same with old Boston, New York and so on.

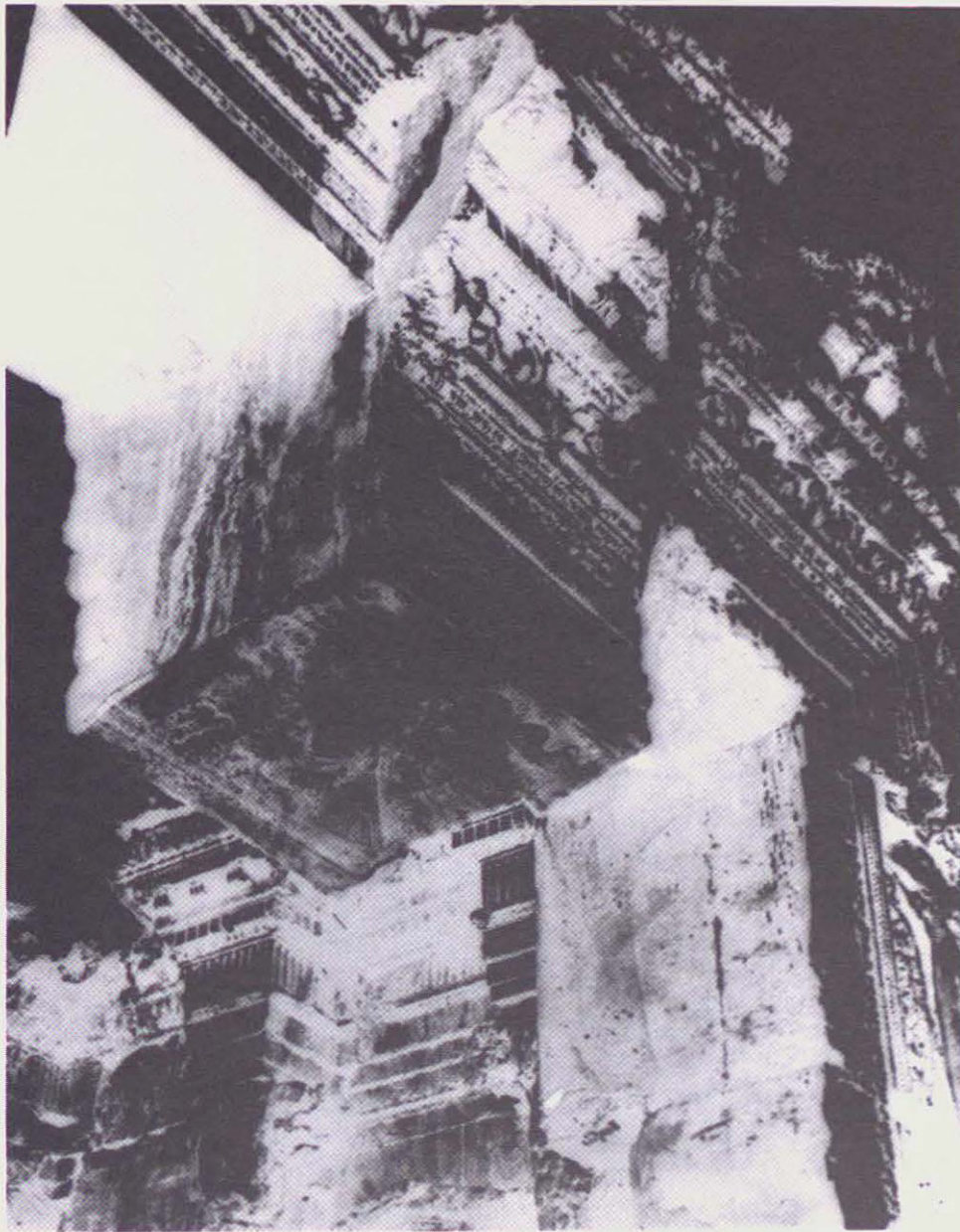
Seen in perspective both schemes appear hopelessly utopian. However one should remember that, in spite of their failures, they both inaugurated a new architectural disposition. Namely the translation in the Fifties and the Sixties of an avant-garde fear of history into a geographical distancing from this history.

What Corbusier's Chandigarh, Kahn's Dacca and Safdie's Habitat represent is not a disillusionment with High Modernism. In fact it is the very continuation of the aims of the avant-garde. India and Bangladesh, as developing countries, were articulated against Western democracies, against ritual consumerism. If architecture was to remain critical, it had to operate outside societies unable to cut their links with history. Doing otherwise meant accepting Mies' corporate modernism. However, since such distant projects weren't too frequent, other alternatives, still loyal to the idea of geographical distancing, became available.

One was to confront danger, to take the bull by the horns, and go at the deepest of Western history. This gamble was undertaken by Le Corbusier at Ronchamps and La Tourette.

The other was, in order to avoid any possible compromise, to design imaginary new worlds and landscapes. From this vein came forth all those Sixties' psychedelic-trip visions of orbital space stations, of molecular comic strip floating marinas, and of arcologies.

Unfortunately neither Jeanneret, Kahn, nor Soleri have enabled us to turn the page on history. So today we share in their



fears and apprehensions. We may research new means to make architecture symbolic, we may rediscover the purpose of modernism, or re-establish Asplund's and Aalto's intimate nordic dialogue with education, nature and death, but whatever we attempt, we will have addressed history as our first concern. For, ultimately, as the ancient symbol, it is the vehicle of Knowledge. A privilege it rather jealously guards.

Pierre Eduoard Latouche received his B.A. in Art History from McGill University in June 1987. He is now studying philosophy in France.

NOTES

1. Carsirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought*, p. 104.
2. Conrads, Ulrich. *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture*, p. 19-24.
3. Tafuri, Manfredo. *Theories and History of Architecture*, p. 45.
4. Tafuri, Manfredo. p. 45.