

## AUTHORITY OF THE PAST

Today, it is a widely held belief that post-modernism in architecture (hysterical, historical retrospection<sup>1</sup>) is on its way out and is being supplanted by a reinvigorated modernism. However, those who would yell most loudly, "The King is dead, long live the King", are those that seemingly have the greatest interest in seeing the rapid demise of this most recent phase of architectural history. Quite to the contrary, modernism, by its very tenets, is incapable of resurrection. What we are seeing in architecture today is post-modernism entering a latter and more authoritative phase of its development.

As Henry Hope Reed - longtime president of Classical America - correctly says, the stylistic appellation "Secessionism" can appropriately be applied to virtually all of architectural production of the 20th century which we typically think of as modern. And although secessionism is normally applied to a much smaller and more cohesive group of architects practicing in Vienna around the turn of the century; modern architecture is secessionist by definition, because the leaders of the movement provoked a radical and irreversible break with the traditions of architectural design developed since the Renaissance.

Beginning with Pugin in England, Viollet-le-Duc in France, and finally with Pevsner (first in Germany and later in England), the theoretical foundations of the modern movement were laid early in the 19th century. Each of these critics perceived the architecture of their own time to be in a debased state; they were reacting principally to the stylistic eclecticism of the latter 19th century. While each man saw the salvation of architecture in different terms, what they shared was the belief that the salvation lay outside the purely formal concerns of architectural design. Pugin, with his romantic and sentimental attachment to the gothic, saw it as appropriately ecclesiastical and nationalistic in character. Viollet-le-Duc proposed an architecture which, while hardly modern as we think of it, was to be structurally rational. And Pevsner, championed first the English Arts and Crafts and later International style, as being unfettered by either stylistic or historical associations, and as therefore correctly representing the true spirit of the age.

Thus, in the period we have come to call the modern movement, architecture came to be understood as generated by these extra-architectural concerns and no longer seen as an autonomous discipline - self-referential and primarily visual in its origins. When architecture was seen to be derived from religion or politics it became a literary art, when architecture was seen to be the result of rational building it became the Engineer's art, and when architecture came to be seen as, "the

## AUTHORITY OF THE FUTURE

will of the epoch translated into space", the architect found himself reduced to a passive receptor of the mysterious murmuring of the zeitgeist.

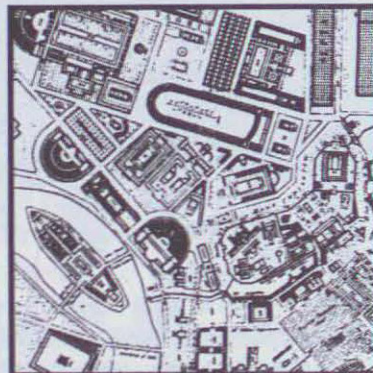
The multifarious roles which the architect has been forced to adopt in the 20th century - social engineer, political dogsbody, real-estate promoter, corduroy-suited guru, establishment pariah and re-inventor of the teaspoon - have left him little opportunity for the pursuit of his alleged vocation - creator of beautiful and sane, urban and individual environments. The *caesura* created by the modern movement separated the architect from his immediate past so that we are living in the production of several generations of architects who were, in effect, taught nothing about architecture. They were not taught how to draw it, certainly not how to look at it, in fact, were actively discouraged from doing so, and were taught nothing of composition or proportion.

While architects trained during the height of the modern movement may have learned something of commodity, they learned little of firmness and less of delight.

It is impossible to overestimate the degree to which these attitudes still suffuse the profession and the schools. Certainly, at a common sense level, much of the theoretical framework of the modern movement has a certain power; that architecture should only speak of its own time and it should be only the result of the rational application of building materials

and methods. However, as anyone involved in the creation of architecture will attest - regardless of their aesthetic creed - the creation of every building is a tremendous act of will, every line is under the control of the architect and there is nothing inevitable about the "look" of the result. Some materials and methods of construction lend themselves more easily to repetition and therefore standardization but to say that this is somehow rational or inevitable is preposterous. It is this repetition and standardization which is the real legacy of the modern movement. As Lévi Strauss has said - and although he was talking about modern philosophical thought, his comment applies equally to the visual arts: "the moderns built low but they built on solid ground".

The architectural movement which has run parallel to orthodox modernism for almost four decades, but has only gained ascendancy in the early to mid 1970's, is post-modernism. While almost all architecture produced after the end of the second World War is necessarily post-modern - its origins can in fact be found in most of the mature works of the leaders of the modern movement - with the exception of Mies van der Rohe - the term as it is applied here will employ its more popularly





# The eagle never lost so much time as when it submitted to learn from the CROW.

William Blake

understood usages, "defined mostly in terms of style ... with a return to the narrative, ornament and the figure - also proclaimed is the return of history (the humanist tradition) and the return of the subject (the artist/architect as auteur)".<sup>2</sup>

That post-modern architects employ the traditional elements of architectural design with little respect for their traditional usage needs hardly be mentioned. This is not surprising given that the chief proponents of this "new" architecture - Michael Graves, Charles Jencks, James Stirling, Paolo Portoghesi - were trained as modern architects; in the case of Graves and Stirling were modern architects of considerable distinction. It is unreasonable to expect that architects, who have been schooled in the entrenched modern pedagogy of the 1950's and who practiced for years as modern architects, could fully divest themselves of all their training and fully embrace the fodder of the traditional architectural canon (sic). Similarly, both Graves and Stirling bring to their post-modernisms highly personalized strategies - compositional collage, irony, strong colourization, fragmentation and a not fully developed distaste for certain aspects of orthodox modernism - which mediate between the suppression of personal idiosyncrasy required for immersion in the authority of the classical language of architecture.

As eclectic and idiosyncratic as most post-modernism is, its borrowing from and building on past architectures places it within an architectural tradition which separates it emphatically from orthodox modernism; separates it stylistically, but more importantly - ideologically. Most critics dismiss post-modernism for its lack of authenticity and problematic relationship to architectural history it would claim to champion. Curiously, they see the movement as forever trapped in its current relationship to the past - incapable of elaboration or evolution - and therefore dead in its infancy. What critics of post-modernism invariably have difficulty dealing with are the contemporary, authentic classicists - Leon Krier, Allan Greenberg, Quinlan Terry, John Blatteau. Usually dismissed as a harmless aberration operating outside the mainstream of contemporary architectural practice, I would argue that the increasing influence which these figures assert simply indicates the next step in the development of architectural post-modernism.

Paul Philippe Cret, a French-born, American Beaux Arts architect - unfortunately, chiefly remembered today as one of Louis Kahn's teachers at the University of Pennsylvania - was a great architect and a brilliant apologist of classicism during the rise of modernism in the United States through the 1920's and 1930's. Cret said, "If we are able to achieve anything as

architects today, it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants." The aforementioned contemporary classicists follow Cret's credo more closely than do the so-called free-style classicists of the post-modern movement. With the exception of Krier, they are a frustratingly silent bunch, choosing to build their beautiful buildings in silence and relative obscurity. The greatest disservice which can be done to these architects is to consider them foppish archaeologists; they are simply working within an architectural tradition which had continued unabated up until the middle of this century. Standing outside the cacophony of contemporary design discourse, these architects are carrying on conversations with the giants of the past - Alberti, Vignola, Palladio, Mansart, Gabriel, Wren and Lutyens. Today, forty years after Cret's wise words, most of us are just beginning to acknowledge the presence of these giants.

Discovering the presence of giants can be a humbling experience - it should be - it can also be a profoundly liberating one. Discovering that we are the inheritors of an architectural tradition which has the ability to endlessly delight and instruct us, which frees us from awesome responsibility and misguided belief that we alone can create an architecture for our times is nothing less than revelatory. Post-modernism opened our eyes again to this possibility; it should not be condemned because it lacks authenticity or authority, it is simply a beginning. Why should the meagre production of a few

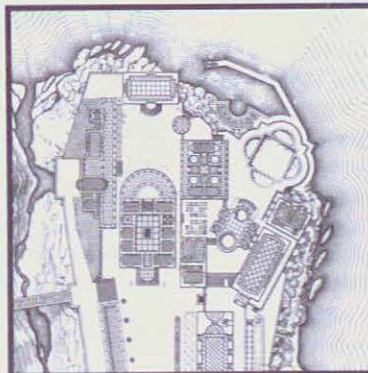
years, yielding only a handful of monuments, be judged the penultimate statement of an architectural movement. As post-modernism enters a latter, more mature phase, as it becomes less eclectic and more disciplined in its looking back to the past for inspiration, it can only become more authoritative. Given time and patience, those who will build and study architecture in the future will discover that the authority of the future will be the authority of the past ■

## NOTES

1. Foster, H. "(Post)Modern Polemics", *Perspecta* 21  
Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1984. Pg. 149
2. *Ibid.* p. 145

## IMAGES

Left hand side - Roman Forum Plan  
Right hand side - Leon Krier, Pliny's Villa Plan



Kevin Hanvey annonce la Bonne Nouvelle... que le "Post-Modernisme" entame une phase nouvelle et plus autoritaire, grâce au rétablissement du dialogue avec les "Grands" de l'histoire de l'architecture.