

# THE HISTORIAN AS AN ARTIST



by Peter Collins.

Peter Collins is a Professor of Architecture at McGill University.  
He wrote the following article in honour of Vincent Scully's 60th birthday.



Vincent Scully is undoubtedly the greatest architectural historian of the generation born in the 1920's. For over a quarter of a century he has been an inspiration to all those who have attended his lectures and read his books. Every year the largest auditorium in Yale University is packed with undergraduates taking his lecture-course on American architecture. They are drawn partly by the brilliance of his mind, partly by the acuteness of his sensibility, partly by the inspiring poetry of his eloquence, but mainly, I suspect, by his passionate sincerity and probity. His description of New England colonial architecture as "decency made visible" seems to me to express not only his view of what American architecture was in the past, but what he thinks it should be in the future.

Future historians will have to recognize that his lectures and publications are one of the principal influences shaping American architecture today. The nature and extent of that influence is something which will be assessable only in retrospect; but his insistence on an architecture of taut surface-patterns untroubled by structural systems, and adorned by whimsical details which "look as if they could be sliced off with a razor" conforms to current trends; and he certainly anticipated them.

All I wish to do here is comment on a description of his eloquence published in **Architectural Forum** twenty years ago: "quickly, surely, he translates visual images into verbal images". The relationship between "things", "pictures of things" and "verbal descriptions of things" has received considerable attention since these words were published. One of the leaders in this field of research is Roland Barthes, and his book **Systeme de la Mode** comes closest to providing us with guide-lines for studying the problem of adequately speaking about buildings. **Systeme de la Mode** is concerned with magazines specializing in fashions in womens clothes. More specifically, it is a detailed analysis of every issue of **Elle** and **Jardin des Modes** which was published between June 1958 and June 1959. The

general conclusion seems to be that the words have little intrinsic relationship to the pictures they accompany, and that the pictures have little intrinsic relationship to the clothes portrayed. The text is in fact simply an exercise in merchandizing, like the words which accompany advertisements in architectural magazines.

In architectural magazines a similar impression is often created by some of the comments which accompany the featured buildings. By contrast, Scully's words are always intensely apt. Occasionally the adjectives are so profuse, or the metaphors so unexpected, that it seems as if they are at times over-contrived. Yet every word proves to be just the right word, the only possible word in its context which could produce in the reader the thoughts which their author intends: thoughts which illuminate their subject with a magical intensity, and follow each other with such rapidity that attention never wavers.

It is in this respect that **The Earth, the Temple and the Gods** is the most distinguished book of its kind to be published in the English language since the publication of Ruskin's **Stones of Venice**. Scully was in no way influenced, either consciously or subconsciously, by Ruskin. But their writings share the same intense acuteness of observation both of nature and of architecture, and the same deep sense of the affinity between the two.

These qualities are also apparent in such a concise text as Scully's **American Architecture and Urbanism**. Describing the general layout of towns in New England, and with specific reference to the tree-lined streets in Litchfield, Connecticut, he writes of "the elm forest marching in dark pillars and arching and interlocking over all". Compare this eloquent metaphor with part of Ruskin's description of the waterfall at Schaffhausen:

"...while the shuddering iris stoops  
in tremulous stillness over all,



fading and flushing alternately through the choking spray and shattering sunshine, hiding itself at last among the thick golden leaves which toss to and fro in sympathy with the wild water..."

and with Ruskin's description of St. Mark's square in Venice:

"...the vast tower of St. Mark seems to lift itself visibly forth from the level field of chequered stones; and, on each side, the countless arches prolong themselves into ranged symmetry, as if the rugged and irregular houses that pressed together above us in the dark alley had been struck back into sudden obedience and lovely order, and all their rude casements and broken walls had been transformed into arches charged with goodly sculpture, and fluted shafts of delicate stone. And well may they fall back, for beyond those troops of ordered arches there rises a vision out of earth, and all the great square seems to have opened from it in a kind of awe, that we may see it far away; - a multitude of pillars and white domes, clustered into a long low pyramid of coloured light..."

The stylistic differences are evident: differences which necessarily distinguish the works of different authors and the literature of different ages - in this instance separated by a hundred years. But the main and most important difference is of technological origin. Scully's medium is the commentary about photographs projected on a large screen. His mastery of dramatic declamation (whereby his spontaneous premeditated utterances possess a musical modulation and a passionate insistence transcending the bounds of rhetoric) requires that visible images be constantly before his audiences' eyes.

For this latter reason, more than for any other, I would question the accuracy of the statement quoted above, to the effect

that he **"translates visual images into verbal images"**. This is no more true or characteristic of Scully's prose than an assertion that a musician "translates" a libretto into music. It may or may not be true that Beethoven's **Missa Solemnis** was "an interpretation of the spiritual meaning and imagery of the Mass". But it is a fact that this music was, and still can be, widely appreciated by persons ignorant of the significance of the words, and even hostile to their meaning. In so far as the music is an "interpretation" or "translation", these terms can only be metaphorical. Words can be enhanced by music, and images by words, but enhancing is not translating, if only because once past the threshold of genius, the music or the words take on a complete artistic life of their own.

I sympathize with the plight of professors of English who, seeing their colleagues in other language departments busily translating English into French, Spanish, German or Greek, feel obliged to translate English into English. But some architectural theorists seem oblivious of the fact that academic English studies only began to flourish in England and America after World War I, and originated in Scotland as a "second language study" when that country was amalgamated to form the United Kingdom. The first person to teach it publicly was Adam Smith, who began doing so three years after the Scottish nationalist cause had been obliterated in the disastrous uprising of 1745. In France, the new academic discipline developed initially as a result of Louis-Philippe's educational reforms. Henceforth all Frenchmen, whether their mother tongue was Corsican, Alsatian, Provencal, Breton or Basque, had to learn to speak and write like Parisians. It was only after the Second Empire that the **explication de texte** was born.

Today, **explications de texte** favour abstruse techniques based on structural linguistics; and these techniques for explaining poetry are now being applied by historians and theorists of architecture to explain buildings. The trend probably



began when Robert Venturi wrote **Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture**; a book explaining buildings by reference to the literary theories of T.S. Eliot and William Empson. The trend has now developed by adopting methods developed by Roland Barthes. But whereas Eliot was himself a poet, Barthes is not; nor has he ever pretended to be one. What then is the role of architectural critics or historians who similarly make no pretence of being poets? What purpose does their work serve, and to whom should their words be directed?

Architectural criticism has recently been classified taxonomically in a bewildering catalogue of species and sub-species, all of which presumably serve some of the people some of the time. But it seems to me that the basis of any really meaningful verbalizations about architecture must initially reside in the explanations which, in any given era, practising architects give to their pupils. A teacher of design must, of necessity, be able to talk to them about what they are trying to do, and discuss with them what they eventually achieve. Since the drawings and models made in design studios are an essential and integral part of the process whereby all genuine architectural concepts get built, the words used to describe them are equally essential.

It is perhaps here that Scully's lectures and writings can most easily mislead the unwary. Consider for example his description of the way Thomas Jefferson designed Monticello, and of the complex intentions which he says, "prefigure forms which were to be characteristic of American architecture during its most original phase in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". Jefferson, he tells us, took a Palladian prototype and then "thinned out" the containing walls, "pushed out" the columned porches on the entrance axis, "popped out" polygonal bays, and "thrust" the flanking wings underground to "embrace" the hill under its summit. The resultant mass, he concludes, is "locked in tense combat

between vertical and horizontal". The reader may therefore be forgiven if he also assumes that the reason why the University of Virginia's library "swells", and its stairs "spill down to the lawn", is because these were Jefferson's actual thought-processes when designing it. Indeed Scully specifically asserts that "Jefferson slides the horizontal range of columns past the pavilion's restricted cube" when discussing the buildings which flank the library.

It is possible that Jefferson did indeed push, stretch, slide, swell, and in other ways manipulate Palladian, Baroque and Neo-Classical compositional motifs. Perhaps, as Scully implies, Louis Kahn did the same thing. But the Herculean anthropomorphism which pervades Scully's vocabulary seems to me of little relevance to solving design problems today, however relevant it may have been in ancient Greece.

Thus Scully's marvellous ability to infuse life, meaning, and his own deep affection for the buildings of the past is in serious danger of being misapplied by his most fervent admirers. To teach architecture, words must be used to discuss visual images, and visual images must be devised to give a realistic approximation of the buildings designed. Similarly, it is essential to illustrate this process in reverse: to speak eloquently about buildings of the past which the lecturer has studied in their environmental context, and about buildings whose design-processes he can accurately describe. The rest is at best poetry, and at worst merely entertainment or advertisement: a bonus which helps the student pay attention, or helps the lecturer enlarge his clientele. Once or twice in a century, this totality sometimes attains the status of great literature, and we should pay homage to the uniqueness of the talent which, by using architectural masterpieces as its raw material, can create such marvellous and memorable sequences of words that these become works of art in their own right. □