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ARCHITECTURAL AESTHETICS IN THE 20th CENTURY

The dramatic changes in architecture and town planning that took place during the course of the 20th century are the result of complex processes in both the technical and the political and socioeconomic sectors. It is, therefore, very difficult, and probably beyond the capacity of any single individual, to analyse these separate factors and to determine the role played by each one in working towards the final result. On the other hand, we must not forget that much of what happened in the 20th century had its roots in the 19th century, or maybe even earlier, and that the effects of some of the events of this past century will certainly continue to make themselves felt in the new one. So, what can we do?

We can try to describe, as succinctly as possible, the major changes of the past hundred years and to assess their impact on the environment and on our lives. Perhaps the first thing we see as characteristic of the architecture of the century just ended is the total predominance of two new building materials, steel and concrete, and of a third - reinforced concrete - which is a combination of those two. While these materials were developed in the 19th century and began even then to be applied to new constructions, they did not dominate building construction until the 20th century, as they will in all likelihood continue to do in the 21st.

The three principal building materials that had been used by man for thousands of years – stone, brick and wood – were thus shunted aside, and with them went a number of very specific things. First of all, the scale of buildings changed, and their aspect as well, not only because of the new dimensions but also because of the very structure and texture of the new materials. Buildings with dozens of storeys, rooms hundreds of metres long, bridges with spans of thousands of metres. This implies, apart from anything else, new relationships between man and his natural environment, new and unimagined capabilities for intervention in that environment and, in many cases, an arrogance with respect to it (Fig. 1).

These tremendous changes inevitably led to the creation in architecture of new forms that came dynamically to replace the familiar historical ones and, in the end, to reject them, since they were not able to come to terms with the new materials, either in their technical capacities or in their logic. Thus, neither the architecture of the classical period (and its revivals in the Renaissance and the Neo-Classical) nor the architecture of the Middle Ages and more recent periods has any connection with the architecture that was emerging from the new circumstances. The cut was deep, decisive and irreversible. These changes, of course, required considerable time to win acceptance, to become complete and to create a new aesthetic perception, to be seen as expressing the 20th century and even, in some cases, to acquire the nature of a symbol (Fig. 2).

Many decades would have to pass before, in the years following World War II, it could be accepted that reinforced concrete, a poured building material, could yield new and unimagined architectural forms whose beauty would lie in form itself rather than in any embellishment that might be sought by overlying it with other materials, as was the case with its very first applications, something like the constructions of the Romans, who hid the concrete of their buildings behind painted plaster and marble facings. How, indeed, would it have been possible to conceal these new, these marvellous and dynamic structures, the vaults and shells and folds that sheltered these new, changing spaces? these structures that appeared to have thrust themselves up out of the soil to spread their wings, or to be poised on tiptoe, or to be floating above the earth? (Fig. 3, 4, 5)

How could anyone have enhanced the boldness and the elegance of these structures, or their strength and vigour, or that it could be achieved without the slightest additional decoration to justify their existence and to root them in our awareness, shaping a new perception of aesthetics? (Fig. 6, 7)

Here, we must certainly reflect upon the fact that in earlier ages architectural form was expressed in naked and perfectly worked material as well. Marble in the classical period and granite in the Gothic. Except that marble and granite are two precious and noble (so to speak) materials, which can hardly be said of poured concrete. It is, I think, obvious that these constructions were not simply the fruit of developments in the building materials industry. They were also the answer to the new circumstances engendered by the explosive growth of the cities, itself in part at least a result of the mass urbanization of the equally explosively growing world population, to the major changes in the production process

and the development of the economy. The result, in other words, of the emergence of entirely new socio-economic conditions that, inevitably, would lead to the revolution that proclaimed the modernist movement.

The modernist movement, you see, was not simply an artistic and architectural phenomenon. In reality it was a movement with an ideological content that sought to respond to social demands. New cities, differently organised, more functional, with better sanitary conditions and spacious open areas. Houses with proper lighting and ventilation, with modern comforts, simple comfortable dwellings for the generations to come.

How far and to what degree all this was in fact realised, and what constitute today's impasses, are other important questions that would merit discussion at some other time. But what I think we can retain here is that this new and original architectural morphology grew out of the synthesis and the interaction of all the parameters we have noted so far, rather than out of the arbitrary ideas of individual architects.

One final question remains: are these structures, as well as bold, dynamic and functional, also beautiful? Or, to put it another way, to what do they owe what beauty they may have?

In fact, I am not sure whether it is possible to speak of beauty, in the classic sense of the term.

However this may be, one cannot deny that these structures have successfully managed to incorporate and express a new spirituality and to create a new "world", a new "cosmos", if I may use this greek word, a world which creates a new sense of beauty, a world which is the product of the human intellect if not of human hands, as we were accustomed to using them before the invention of machine. (Except that the machine is itself a creation of human hands).

While all this was happening, there began to develop in Europe a movement for the protection of monuments and historic cities, a development that also has its roots in the 19th century. Camillo Sitte wrote in 1889 about the need to draw inspiration from old cities in order to create new ones that are beautiful as well as functional. And the Athens Charter, which is a categorical codification and powerful declaration of the principles of the modernist movement, states the need to protect historic neighbourhoods, as long as they are fit for habitation.

This movement took on a new lease of life in the aftermath of World War II, when Europe looked in horror at the ruins of its historic cities – Munich, Dresden, Warsaw, to name only a few – and saw the danger menacing the rest from uncontrolled use, excessive economic development and tourism.

The texts and international declarations that have been adopted by the various organisations are very well known, the most important being the Venice Charter (1964), the European Charter of Architectural Heritage (Amsterdam 1975) and the Granada Convention (1985). This latter, indeed, has passed into the legislation of the signatory countries, of which Greece is one.

This means that the development of modern architecture and the acceptance of new standards for everything, from the scale of the city to the scale of household furniture and appliances are now accompanied by a re-assessment of the forms of the distant and the recent past, and therefore of the values contained in and projected by these forms, and thus of their inherent aesthetic.

It is clear that the term "architectural heritage", as a sub-division of the more general "cultural heritage", is difficult to define and, moreover, raises the thorny problem of the role that this architectural heritage is called upon to play in the modern age and in modern society. As we all know, this term no longer embraces just the familiar monuments of the great ages of civilisation, so indelibly imprinted on our awareness, but much more besides, including works that are monumental neither in character nor in intent. These may be buildings or residential complexes created in previous centuries and still surviving, many of them abandoned by their inhabitants, structures with an original and unchallengeable beauty that creates a certain nostalgia for a past that is daily more remote but that does not cease to be dear and to have something to teach us. Or they may be buildings or installations from the relatively recent industrial age, built for manufacturing or other associated purposes, or again they may be structures from an older, pre-industrial, era, such as windmills or oil presses. We regard all of them as precious witnesses to our history, and therefore feel that they must be preserved. The obvious sequel is that there are a large number of buildings that can only be preserved if they are integrated into modern life, and used: if, in other words, we implement the principles of integrated conservation. This means converting these structures to serve modern needs, which are frequently quite different from those for which they were built. Despite the obvious contradictions created by this paradox, the rehabilitation of older buildings to serve present needs is now current practice. It is, moreover, the only practice that is capable of furnishing solutions to the demand that all these buildings be preserved. The

result is that, alongside the works of modern architecture, however expressed, the works of past ages are returning to life and claiming an equality of place in the urban environment (Fig. 8, 9).

This means accepting the simultaneous presence of a variety of styles of expression – contemporary and historic – that creates a unique aesthetic pluralism. Whether (and to what degree) this is an expression of our contemporary developed societies, whether it means a new return to the values of the past or a conscious confrontation with the values of contemporary architecture, is another interesting subject for discussion.

In closing, I want - very briefly - to describe what took place in Greece during the century just ended. My country, a small country on the fringe of Europe, continued right up to the beginning of the 20th century to live under the influence of the neo-classicism that prevailed when the modern Greek state came into being in the early part of the 19th century. An agricultural country for the most part, and up to the eve of World War II a slow-growing one, Greece inherited from the 19th century a wealth of handsome neo-classical buildings, many of which still ornament Athens and other Greek cities (Fig. 10). At the same time, by the 1920s the first talk of change, of new directions, of the quest for a certain “Greekness” and a “return to the roots” was beginning to be heard.

This period saw the growth of a fairly strong middle class, saw efforts to develop the country’s economy, saw an influx of capital by expatriate Greeks (mainly from Alexandria), saw the appearance of a whole new generation of intellectuals and artists (the so-called “30s generation”), all of which were powerful and very positive factors. 1921, it is interesting to note, was the year when the School of Architecture in Athens, founded in 1917, turned out its first graduating class. The modernist movement was thus enthusiastically welcomed by Greece’s architects –I might remind you that the 4th C.I.A.M., where the Athens Charter was formulated, was held in Athens in 1932 – and was the basis for the development of a new architecture in Athens, particularly, and to a lesser extent in the provincial cities as well.

The modernist movement was seen as striking the shackles from the country’s architects, liberating them from the theories of neo-classicism and giving them an opportunity to move towards a neo-Hellenic architectural renaissance. The new building materials were used throughout Greece, and the manufacture of cement rapidly became a major national industry. During the 1930s Athens experienced remarkable development, which found expression in a considerable number of apartment buildings (and a smaller number of office blocks and public buildings) that were clearly influenced by the Bauhaus movement (Fig. 11). This was also an era when a vast – by the standards of the day – programme of school building was being implemented throughout the country: these “30s schools” are still in use today (Fig. 12).

A new architecture was thus born in Greece, and it grew and developed hand in hand with a more general spiritual and artistic movement, leading to the adoption of new standards and of a new aesthetic perception. All this was to be rudely broken off by the outbreak of war, with all its tragic - particularly in Greece - consequences. It was not until 1950 that the country entered its post-war period, and its reconstruction, both material and spiritual, could begin. It is, I think, worth pointing out here that in 1960, at the initiative of the late Professor Panayotis Michelis, Athens hosted the 4th International Congress on Aesthetics, which assembled some of the greatest figures of the age. That same year also saw the founding of the Hellenic Society for Aesthetics, again by Professor Michelis, who was also responsible for publishing, in 1962, the first volume of the *Annales d’Esthétique*. These events, of course, are mainly related to the development of aesthetics studies in Greece in the 2nd half of the 20th century.

In architecture, things were somewhat different. The problems that had to be dealt with included coping with urgent housing requirements for whole population groups and with the unexpected growth of Athens and other urban centres, as well as finding new means of expression. Greece’s architects, both those with some experience from the pre-war period and those who graduated after 1945, tried to address the architectural project within a functionalist framework, while at the same time endeavouring to make the best use of the lessons of tradition, chiefly of course the values contained in this tradition rather than actual forms, although this is not unknown.

Architects strove to exploit the properties of various materials, principally reinforced concrete but also brick and stone, which were local and familiar materials and could, they felt, be used in successful

combinations. In this period, in the 60s, 70s and 80s, Greece acquired a considerable number of excellent architects and, correspondingly, a considerable number of fine architectural works (Fig. 13, 14, 15). Since then, however, things have taken a different direction. The abandonment of the principles of the modernist movement, the criticism meted out to these principles everywhere, the desire for something new and striking, the return to the architectural vocabulary of older periods have, I fear, brought about confusion rather than a new vitality. And this, I think, is something that is not confined to Greece alone. The century just ended was, as we have seen, one of dramatic changes, changes that had an inevitable impact on art and architecture, on the way we organise our lives and our thinking, on our behaviour, our perception of aesthetics, of the beautiful and the ugly, the useful and the superfluous. And any attempt to predict the future is, I fear, fraught with difficulty.

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