

Noah Waldman

On the Meaning of the Classical Movement in Architecture

1. Architecture, Man, and History

What is the *meaning* of what we now generally refer to as the “New Classicism” or the “Classical Movement” in architecture? As I want to consider the underlying meaning or significance of this New Classicism rather than its formal characteristics, this essay is not going to be a listing of the attributes which appear common to this movement. Such descriptions have been undertaken many times before.¹ Besides, any catalog of what we might consider to be classicism’s salient features—such as the desire for a human scale, clarity in plan, and the use of the classical orders (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian)—are all features any modernist architect could accept. The modernists, too, claim that their works are attuned to a human scale (though they alter the meaning of “human”); they claim a desire for clarity in plan (though they alter the meaning of “clarity”); and they claim that the essence of their design method (by their appeal to geometrical “purity” or the use of “pure” forms and materials) captures the “authentic spirit” of whatever is true and beautiful in the classical orders.²

To argue in this way is, of course, a nominalist move on the part of the modernists. But as it happens, this nominalism

points to a genuine difficulty. No definition in the strict sense can be offered for the classical movement for the simple reason that it is a movement *in history*, and it is impossible to treat of any movement or epoch in human history—whether it be theological, philosophical, political, or artistic—as having a distinct *nature* or *form*. Ascertaining a nature or form is possible only in mathematics and in those sciences based upon mathematical models which allow for the abstraction of ahistorical truths. As for historical periods and those works of human art and invention that arise out of a historical matrix, they do not have an *essence*, strictly speaking. For as Aristotle taught us, we cannot speak of any part without the whole, and as the whole of history has not achieved its final end, history as yet has no *form*. And what has neither form nor shape cannot be subject to definition according to the univocal categories of any science. In fact, the essence of history and of the artifacts of history is antipodal to the essence of sci-

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ence, since historical meanings cannot be indicated by a neat positivistic formula. Uniquely human expressions are pierced with an irreducible uncertainty, their meanings akin to a perpetually open question, the corresponding answer to which is adumbrated but never attained—since what is really grasped at is a glimpse of the Infinite.

Such a manner of speaking is metaphorical, but it strikes at the paradox involved in aesthetic understanding—namely, that its unfailing attribute is *incompleteness*.

Man remains *in medias res*, within history's flow, so all he can hope to grasp are epiphenomenal contrasts bounded within time—indicating, perhaps, that in the broadest sense we are experiencing a cultural high or low, a period of stability or shift, an era of expressive asceticism or of unbridled possibility. Man's desire for absolute understanding of the whole of history and all its parts in an intelligible vision would not be possible until history's end. But what man can bring that to pass?

These considerations may seem abstruse, but that last question brings into view the underlying flaw with the modernist movement in architecture which dominated so much of the twentieth century. It is not simply a flaw with respect to the manipulation of architectural form. In fact, many early works of the modern movement such as Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion (1928–29) evidence real mastery of formal manipulation and

of the use of materials. Rather, the flaw was in the modernists' desire to create an architecture whose formal power would be so persuasive, and its meaning so clear, that in its impossible perfection it would be able to transcend and transform history. The modernist architects saw themselves as self-enlightened poets and mystics whose new pronouncements on what architecture "is" would open for them, and for all, a route to a wholly new world. In one modernist polemic after another, it is not just that we find new definitions of architecture; rather,

we find a new way of speaking about architecture—as possessing a power to redefine man and to escape the flow of history.³ All modernist architecture—whether that of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Alvar Aalto—ultimately stems from this impulse: the desire to create new

worlds and new men, beyond history.

Le Corbusier sought a new architecture, a "free plan" of sensuously flowing interior spaces unconstrained by supporting walls and the onus that comes with gravity. Mies reinvented the classical orders according to the logic of the steel beam—so it was said. He dissolved exterior walls into blank sheets of glass. "Less is more" was to be the New Order for the New Man who would live a minimal life in a minimal glass house. The Finn Aalto for his part promoted an organic approach to design that relied on the "truth" of biological models rather than the truth enshrined in human tradition, suggesting that man's



Modernism at its "best":
Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion

escape from history would come with his return, or reduction, to a biological ideal.⁴

When we engage the writings of these and other giants of the modern movement, we discover a strange fixation on architecture's *transformative* power. These men really believed that their "new forms" would give birth to a new world. Their view was a logical, though by no means necessary, extrapolation of the idealist chimera: under man's power, to bring a final order to history. Art was to remake reality, and reality was to imitate—indeed, to become—art.

The artist, elevated to sacerdotal status, was already the creator of ideal worlds. If a pure and perfect form were devised and executed, could not the particular idealism it represented usurp reality's foothold? The artist-as-superman had the

power to create such a perfect art. At his command, by a single aesthetic act, "what is" would be usurped by "what could be"—indeed, by what *had to be*. Of course, what "had to be" turned out to be as subjective and anomalous as each architect's aberrant fantasy.

But history bends to no idealism, whether German, French, or Finnish. No aesthetic form or intellectual system by its mere introduction into history can become history's master or its altering sacrament. Modernist architecture failed—on its own terms as well as on other terms. Except for an elite who could afford to live in a fictional reality, the common people were not happily living in their house-machines whistling tone-rows by Arnold Schoenberg: quite the opposite. The peo-

ple recoiled from and reviled the sheer ugliness of what the modernists built. In the United States, modernist buildings were also found to be ideal breeding grounds for social dissipation and increased crime. In fascist and communist states, modernist building projects were employed to advance the cause of state control. The world in its political, social, and human dimensions did not change for the better with modernist buildings. Ironically, this architecture that was meant to free man from history imprisoned him in an environment of drab despair.

From the unavoidable realization that something had gone terribly awry, architects the likes of Robert Venturi⁵ and Michael Graves⁶ sought an architecture that would speak once more in the lan-

guage of history. About the same time, Alan Colquhoun, one of the leading architectural critics of the modernist movement, pointed out one of its central fallacies. Colquhoun observed that because any new language would have to be based upon some previous language for both its grammar and its intelligibility, there could be no such thing as a wholly *new* architectural language—most certainly not one that could speak new worlds into being.⁷ With this single insight Colquhoun introduced a radical disjunct between modernist architecture's purported meaning and its actual meaning. Modernist architecture, it turned out, was not—could not be—ahistorical at all. Even more embarrassing to the modernists, their so-called new languages, logically considered, were



Modernism at its not-so-best: Corbusier's Chandigarh

nothing more than highly undifferentiated, minimalist, or disproportionate subsets of the old language: in effect, cartoons of architecture. For this reason much of modernist architecture was impossible to understand on its own—not because its ideas were too rarefied or lofty but because, much like very bad poetry, it had no *intrinsic* meaning: its meaning could only be divined in relation to the traditional modes and techniques it was rejecting or usurping, a relation which it could not admit.

But if this was the reality of the situation, then the language of classicism had never really died after all: it was just hidden beneath various permutations of ugliness. From the dunghill of modernist architecture, traces of the New Classicism can be seen budding forth timidly in the 1970s in the designs of the antimodernist movement called postmodernism, notably in the work of Michael Graves. By the late 1980s, the modernist taboo of using old forms was also addressed head-on with some robust (if awkward and adolescent) attempts at a classical revival in the designs of Quinlan Terry and Leon Krier. Today we can see a mature classicism in the works of many architects who are building private homes, educational and civic institutions, and churches. Some are true masterpieces. As for the many others, they have become familiar to us now as we see them in our cities and towns—so familiar that they often bear, much like those who have reached middle-age, a mark of the commonplace, the comfortable, and the routine. What was unthinkable during the modernist movement—the use of the classical orders—is now accepted by many architectural practitioners. Only in the architecture schools (with the exception of the University of Notre Dame) is modernism still held as dogma.

2. Classical Architecture: A Symbolization of *Virtue*

Hence, we can begin to define the New Classical Movement by contrasting it to the modernist impulse to escape from history. This would suggest, of course, as a first approximation, that the meaning of the New Classical Movement stems from a desire to *return* to history. But once this is asserted, the difficulty of our original problem of definition resurfaces as a new paradox: An “escape from history” is so foreign to our actual experience that it becomes, oddly enough, intelligible—as dreams are intelligible. But a “return to history” is wholly unintelligible. Man is already *in* history, whether he knows it or not, and a return to a place where one already is seems a contradiction. How can art bring one closer to a reality that already is?

This perplexity can be resolved once we consider that the facts of man’s being a subject in the world and in history, though these are facts about man, are nonetheless facts that man comes to only reflexively, by a rather complex process of symbolization of *self* and *other*. Man needs to represent himself *to himself* in order to know himself. By necessary implication, his need for self-symbolization requires the correlative symbolization of man’s *context*—as *world, time, history* (we may give this context any name we wish). But the fact remains that there is, in the awareness of man’s own being, a tension between these two symbols: between man’s *subjective awareness of self* and the *objective other*. And these two symbols require a resolution in a *final symbolization* for their intelligibility.

The lines of the dialectic, then, come into view. At one extreme, the subjective pole, is *man*—not in his nature, necessarily, but man as he understands himself. At the other extreme, the objective pole, is man’s *situation in the world*, understood as history, space, and time. (Of course, the

conceptualization of his situation will depend upon man's own awareness, for man is the confluence of actuality and possibility, the pole of creativity and subjectivity.) Now it is this final symbolization that we are interested in. As it is meant to bridge the simultaneous interrelatedness and distinctness between man's awareness of self and the objective other which is the historical "horizon" of the world, the final symbol must share in the attributes of both, but in a way that transcends them without yet becoming *absolute* transcendence. For there is no consummate resolution between man and history—at least not while man remains in *this* history and in *this* world.

This approach has a universal application in grounding the foundational principles of many diverse sciences, for the final symbolization of the dialectic expresses itself in the four main divisions of human intelligence: in the realm of pure thought, the resolution to a final symbolization is the order of *philosophy*; in symbolic thought, the resolution emerges as *logic* and *mathematics*; in the realm of action, *morality*, both individual and social; and in the realm of production, it resolves to the order of *art* and *representation*, under which falls the category of architecture. Since Plato's *Parmenides*, these four fundamental expressions of the dialectic have remained within the philosophical tradition.

What we find in this method is the working through of a dialectic which is not unlike the Aristotelian procedure of defining virtue as the mean between two extremes. The only difference is that in the case of classical architecture, the "virtue" we seek is not the immanentization of the transcendental notion of goodness as a moral principle, but as a *symbolic* mean between two extremes, and so, the immanentization of the transcendent category of beau-

ty. As this mean, like all virtuous means, in a certain way exceeds or transcends its extremes, its definition is perpetually open ended and incomplete; it cannot be defined positivistically, since the harmony of any mean is not to be confused with a quantitative or qualitative averaging of the two extremes. A mean is more *unlike* than *like* its extremes, and is better thought of as a positive notion that rests at the intersection of two negative notions. Thus, Aristotle defines the virtue of bravery as the mean between rashness and cowardice, not because bravery is rash cowardice or cowardly rashness, but because bravery achieves an indefinable balance between non-rashness and non-cowardice.

By analogy, classical architecture is not the sculptural equivalent of some "humanlike nature" or of some "natural man." It is not a *one-to-one representation of "man"* (no, it is far less incarnate and more "abstract" than that), nor is it mere mimicry or imitation of the diverse forms found in nature (no, it is both more human and less "random" than that). Its definition is open ended because the mean of which we speak is a synthetic mode of representation *in search of a new meaning*. This symbolic language—this virtuous mean which is also the "means" through which man understands his being in the world in three-dimensional space—is the provenance of classical architecture.

How this new language came to be and how it came together the way it did is something that no one can explain. The grammar of this new language is entirely the invention of man's powers of self-reflection and self-representation. Some trace antecedents can be found in Attic pottery and in common Mediterranean motifs. We know only that once this new language was born, its syntax seemed to spring fully formed like Athena from the head of Olympian Zeus: column and pi-

laster, molding and architrave, pediment and cornice, and these arranged in hierarchy along the lines of some symbolic tension (e.g. interior/exterior, public/private, sacred/profane).

Of course, depending upon one's view of the world (e.g. hostile versus benevolent, fallen versus ideal) and one's view of man (e.g. potentially open to grace versus totally fallen and forever vile), the specific mean that is achieved between extremes will vary one from another. In fact we can trace, and thus explain, the subtle shifts within the long history of classical architecture to a modification in what the extremes were held to be. Certainly a nineteenth-century Rousseauian Romantic would proceed from a very different worldview than that of a sixteenth-century Catholic.

Depending upon how one understands the extremes, one will come up with a nuanced shift in the balance of the resolution. By the twentieth century, nature was imagined according to the pattern of the natural sciences, and modern man was conceiving himself as the synthetic result of the forces of history. So it is not too surprising that so many of the classical works of the twentieth century (such as Nordic classicism) reveal a coldness and rigor that would have been unthinkable to the Greeks.

Yet classical architecture is a grand force which, like tonality in Western music, is more the norm than the exception. Western music can include within its provenance the tonal canonicity of Bach

and the atonal tendencies of Messiaen. Analogously, Iktinos' Temple of Apollo at Bassae, Apollodorus' Pantheon, Andrea Palladio's Il Redentore, Sir John Soane's Dulwich Picture Gallery, and Erik Asplund's Stockholm Public Library are all architecturally "tonal" works, though each bears the stamp of a unique time and personality. Iktinos' temple is expressly about the birth of the Corinthian order. Palladio's church on the Giudecca is a masterpiece of Corinthian counterpoint. The works of Soane and Asplund have hardly a trace of a column or pediment, and Asplund's work tends toward an analogical "atonality."

Still, all of them bespeak a certain balance. All are works in the classical tradition because their view of man and history has a common meaning. The uniqueness of the

works of Iktinos, Palladio, and Asplund is simply due to a diversity in the shadings of meanings. The sober architecture of Iktinos suggests a more earth-bound view of man and of the historical horizon than the vertical and many-layered architecture of Palladio, whose architecture is as contrapuntal and synthetic as his Catholic age; Soane's Dulwich is as playful and strange as a pre-Victorian comedy, and Asplund's library seems to announce on its blank face the coming threat to the dignity of man portended by modernity's advent.

As for the New Classical Movement, a similar analysis can be applied. Thomas Gordon Smith and Duncan Stroik, the two architects at Notre Dame whom his-



Thomas Gordon Smith's audacious classicism

tory books will regard as being most responsible for the direction of the contemporary classicism in the United States, are also its bookends. In a pluralistic society such as we have in the West, it stands to reason that a certain pluralism would be reflected in the New Classicism as well. So, the serenity that characterizes Stroik's work is a universe away from Smith's inventive and almost shocking brilliance. For Stroik, all architectural elements tend to coexist in a delicately exquisite balance. For Smith, even the modernist palette is tamed by his masterful command of the classical language; and then there is also Smith's penchant for mixing typologies and pushing the boundaries of the classical language.⁸ The anthropology suggested by Smith ascribes a marked audacity and daring to man's situation in history, while Stroik favors

a more restrained and sober view. Still, the two men are more in agreement than not, since both share a common desire to work out the symbolic tension between man and the world and man and history without doing symbolic violence to either.

Of course, gaining a sensitivity to this architectural language is not really possible without great familiarity with the buildings, and without knowing something about the history, the people, and the personalities of the architects of the eras that produced them. Again, there is no form or language in art that has a meaning that can be abstracted from history. But the symbolization which classical architecture represents

of the dialogue between man and reality is, nevertheless, like a language which, once learned, can be read. It is certainly possible (for many lovers of architecture have experienced this) that after spending time to achieve great familiarity with the visual meter and cadence of classical architecture, the particular kinds of classicisms can evoke particular *feelings*—strong feelings about man and his place in the world. Classical architecture is like poetry that way—a human expression that can place the soul of the observer in touch with something

real beyond himself. Herein lies the emotive power of classical architecture to move the soul to discern in those subjective feelings an attempt at *objective meaning*. A great work of architecture can stir feelings of courage or lassitude, peace or anxiety, exultation or desolation.



Duncan Stroik's serene classicism

3. Beyond Classical Architecture

Sadly, the strength of these feelings and meanings are fleeting, their impulse intangible. Again, this is akin to poetry. For what the observer can know is as incomplete and uncertain as any product of another's imagination. There is only an *attempt* at a particular empathy, which never quite results in an achievement. The feelings evoked by architecture quickly yield to a stronger and deeper emotion: a wonderment that cannot be resolved in the architecture. The final meaning of classical architecture, with all that it tries to say about man and his place in the world,

is muteness. And its accompanying final feeling is the *privation* felt after the experience of pleasure. While this is not the meaning proper to classical architecture, it is nevertheless its most final end. Like any true symbol, architecture connects the finite meanings and feelings of this world to the infinite and unknown meanings of a transcendent order. The incompleteness in the symbolism of classical architecture is like a lingering potentiality which calls out for completion, for perfection. As the virtuous mean between man and history, classical architecture, for all its beauty, cannot tell us about the transcendent nature and destiny of man; it cannot speak of the end of history or the consummation of all things. And although classical architecture declares man's dignity to man, its ultimate word bespeaks human finitude. There is a sadness that pervades all classical architecture for this very reason, a sadness that is lacking in those more joyful architectures that embrace the transcendent within their symbolization, such as the Romanesque and the Gothic, which expressly point toward a hope in another world.

Classical architecture is thus a sign of profoundest humility which, in its sad beauty, expresses what Virgil called *lacrimae rerum*, "the tears of things." From what this architecture cannot say is born a suffering in the soul of the one who contemplates its beauty as something unrequited in the here and now of the human condition. If the suffering is to be redeemed and achieve a resolution in hope, the soul must turn to the transcendent One whose "symbolization" truly is beyond man and beyond history. Hence, the openness of this architecture, its incompleteness as symbol, can become the occasion for contemplation of the life of the world to come, as well as the possible future of this world.

Here we come to an end in our attempt to define the meaning of classical architecture, that movement in which the New Classicism participates. In its symbolization which respects man and history, its meaning is, ironically, most profoundly human and historical when we understand that its fundamental meaning resides in its own insufficiency. Still, such insufficiency, it must be remembered, is the reason why art moves the soul. Privation is, in a round-about way after all, the "essence" of human existence; so, beauty's essence is loss. Man is most man when he knows in his heart his deep longing for an eternity that is beyond his strength.

How the New Classicism as a whole understands itself in relation to this fundamental incompleteness remains to be seen. The voices within the movement are too diverse at present to know, but we can trace two possible futures with some clarity. If the New Classical Movement ideologically asserts a dogmatic formalism in its approach, then it will most certainly come to an end. The sign that this will have happened will be a slavish copying of the past (really, itself, a timid "escape from history"), an adherence to a formulaic design method, and a lack of innovation. A healthier sign will be to see the New Movement embrace its past and present, to begin to address the problems of our times with inventiveness. There is nothing within the classical mean that would exclude linguistic innovation on a grand scale to allow for adaptation to indigenous cultures, new environments, and new technologies. If this happens, the New Movement will continue, because it will not lose its power to speak to the soul of mankind.

If such a dynamic form of classicism begins to take hold of the world's visual and virtual landscape, a new hope can arise. Barring the peaceful advent of a new

worldwide Christendom and so of a Gothic revival which expressly speaks of the world to come, the New Classicism offers a common language for the pluralistic world-culture now coming into being. The beautiful sadness which is the spirit of this architecture can become like a message written in the world, urging all human beings of the third millennium to retrieve and recognize what was lost at the end of the second: the human need for transcendent meaning beyond history, beyond all that human hands can build, beyond the realm of symbol and representation, when instead we shall see beauty itself, face-to-face.

1. Two indispensable modern works are Sir John Summerson's *Classical Language of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), and Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre's *Classical Architecture: The Poetics of Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).
2. See Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982). Rowe argues, often by appealing to confluences in geometric analysis, for a fundamental similarity between the masterpieces of Palladio and Le Corbusier. The argument is brilliant, but fallacious. Architecture involves geometry, but its manner of representation is not reducible to it.
3. See, for example, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1975).
4. We have here an echo of David Watkin's thesis in *Morality and Architecture: The Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
5. See Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966). This book challenged modernist architecture's desire for purity, declaring architecture's essence to be rooted in a representational "ambiguity" which can at best result in an incomplete work—what he would call "a difficult whole." Venturi called for a return to the historical language of architecture, especially the Baroque. However, because of Venturi's indiscriminate embrace of contemporary historical trends such as Pop Art and the very ordinary architecture of commercialism and the strip mall, he must be considered more of an architectural eclectic than a classicist.
6. Graves' sense of architectural plan is quintessentially classical. His facades, however, tend to eschew a full-blown classicism in favor of "quotation" of classical motifs which he hangs upon a blank modernist canvas, so his buildings evoke a Matisse-like dreaminess. See Marian Moffett, Michael Fazio, and Lawrence Wodehouse, *A World History of Architecture* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2004), 547.
7. An unobvious application of Colquhoun's reasoning would suggest that architectural language, having no beginning in time, must assume a category beyond history. Such a view of architecture was favored by some in the Enlightenment, such as Marc-Antoine Laugier who hypothesized a "primitive hut" as architecture's foundational archetype. (Of course, the modernists inverted the order of history, seeing in this archetypal origin an eschatological goal.) While Colquhoun's argument proved a point about the necessity of continuity in the development of any architectural language, it made no pronouncements about its origin. See Alan Colquhoun, "Typology and Design Method," in *Perspecta*, 12 (1969): 71–74.
8. See Thomas Gordon Smith, *Classical Architecture: Rule and Invention* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1988).