

A Return to Humane Architecture

I had the opportunity a few years ago to hear a talk by Peter Eisenman, indisputably one of the world's leading figures in architectural theory and practice. Eisenman painted his own vision of what architecture is, was, and should be. Drawing from sources in philosophy, art history, psychology, and literary criticism—as diverse and seemingly unconnected as Plato, Piranesi, Munch, Jung, and Derrida—he advanced the notion that man's primal architectural experience, deeply rooted in the subconscious, is that of the cave. Though humanity has ascended into the civilized and civilizing light, this primeval and chaotic image still moves the collective memory. Our fascination with the occult, the modern psycho-analytical technique of reliving the Primal Birth, our nightmares and fear of the dark, and our intrigue with grottoes and dark Gothic imagery, find their power in this primal, cavernous experience.

To confront and exorcise these primal fears, so Eisenman argues, that which is subliminal must be made manifest (to use his term "liminal," that is, brought to the "threshold"), in an expression of this grottoesque experience. In short, Eisenman was arguing for the grotesque as the basis for architecture.

Eisenman is in the singular position of working out his psycho-traumas on the

unsuspecting public through the medium of architecture—as well as furthering his reputation as a major world architect and securing many lucrative commissions. But he is by no means the sole voice crying out in the cultural wasteland for an architecture of disintegration. Other architects have pointed to the fragmentation of society and consciousness (witness the fragmentation of video imagery on MTV), the multiplicity of cultures and consequent pluralism, and the logical consequences of nihilism as justification for the fractured and disjointed imagery of their work. They take their delight in creating disturbance in the signifier—*différance*, to use their jargon—such that the result both *differs* and *defers* from the anticipated reaction.¹ Charles Jencks has neatly pigeon-holed this movement by borrowing the term "Deconstruction," and in allusion to the Russian Constructivists of the early twentieth century, the practitioners are called "De-Constructivists."²

How tragic it must be that Peter Eisenman, the dean of the Deconstruction movement in architecture, cannot escape from the eternal law. Much as he would deny the place of beauty and negate a sense

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of order in his buildings through randomness and caprice, much as he may wish to convey the sense of the post-atomistic fragmentation of the human condition through an architecture of the grotesque, he must still work within a universe that speaks of order. This order binds even a brilliant thinker such as Eisenman, as well as the lesser practitioners of Deconstruction. They cannot escape the law of gravity, nor the constraints imposed by the nature of materials. They cannot afford to ignore the ordained chemical and electrical and hydrodynamic principles, nor the laws of thermodynamics, that allow the buildings they design to be resistant to earthquakes, or to be warm in the winter, cool in the summer, lighted in the night, and sanitarily cleansed of waste products through a sewer system. Despite all their contrivances to express the alienated and disenfranchised consciousness of the modern human condition and their contrived and unduly complicated organizational machinations, DeConstructivists must do so in a highly ordered cosmos.

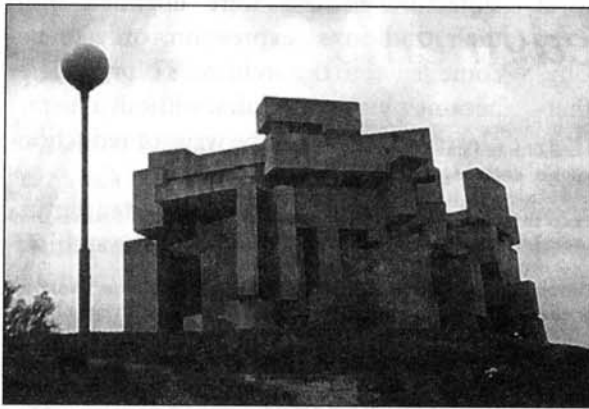
Eisenman, and other DeConstructivists, are working in reaction to the philosophic simplicity and architectonic poverty of the Modern movement in architecture. Eisenman writes, "Architecture has never had an appropriate theory of Modernism, a set of ideas which deals with the intrinsic uncertainty and alienation of the modern condition. Architecture always believed that the foundation for its Modernism lay in the certainty and the Utopian vision of nineteenth-century science and philosophy. Today, that vision cannot be sustained."³ The Modern movement, an architectural expression of philosophical modernity that sought to reduce the knowable to first principles, tried to reduce architecture as well to first principles. Implicit in such systems, notably Le Corbusier's "five points" of Modern architecture (the *pilotis* or col-

umn, the free plan, the ribbon window, the free façade, and the roof garden), is the expression of man's conquest of the created order. The architectural elements—the wall, the window, the column, the door—were stripped of symbolic meaning and reduced to elemental forms. Thus the free plan, the free façade, and the ribbon window were employed to suggest that *venustus* need have no relationship to *integritas*; architectural elements were "liberated" from their traditional expression, only to become slaves to the architect's caprice. They became plug-in modules, without a hierarchy of values.⁴ Alas, the wage of reductionism is boredom.

The designers of the last quarter century have searched for remedies to the architectural poverty that created the barren and often dangerous urban environment. Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) sounded the first death-knell of Modern architecture. Numerous movements have flourished in a "post-modern" reaction that seeks to fill the void: historicism, regionalism, contextualism, rationalism, the *Swiss Tendenza*, various revivalisms, high-tech expressionism, and so on. While there have been many notable and (time will tell) even truly progressive buildings built since the advent of Venturi's book, the novelty of historicism—the most significant postmodern movement—has now worn thin, while the architecture of Deconstruction has only exacerbated the sense of alienation of the architectural community from the public it has traditionally served.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and man searches for meaning. This search for the infinite, for transcendence and purposefulness, has led some architects and academics to reexamine the roots of Modernism, and others explore the traditional foundations of order, looking afresh at the Classical

Orders which were widely discarded after the First World War. Notably, Prince Charles of Wales has advocated such classical study, and has underwritten a summer school program (and soon a full graduate course) to advance the cause of "Civil Architecture." It is in such a milieu that Carroll William Westfall and Alan Greenberg similarly advocate a return to a traditional view of man in society. Taking different tacks,



*Heiligsten Dreifaltigkeitkirche, Vienna,
by F. Wotruba, 1965.*

Mssrs. Westfall and Greenberg both argue that architecture is integrally related to the objective human condition.

Westfall, in his 1993 article "Architecture as Ethics," builds his case on the ground of unchanging human nature. Tracing the problem back to Giambattista Vico's model—derived from Vico's study of custom, law, and language and holding that human nature is constantly changing—Westfall says that, "architects who work within this Modernist complex of thought believe they are designing for modern man who is a different person with a different nature from the nature of, say, classical man, medieval man, and Renaissance man and others who built in the past."⁵ No, he insists, contingent circumstances of being white or black, Jew or Christian, an Elizabethan Englishman or a modern American in no wise affect that our common "realm"

of existence is human nature, and "human nature does not change."

Westfall understands architecture to be a form of rhetoric in the public discourse, and he clearly states that he is taking a position: that human nature does not change. He thereby seeks to build an architectural position that has some claim to objectivity in this pluralistic public forum, in place of our modern architecture thinly rooted in some "impulse of passion." Therefore, he looks to what Leo Strauss calls "the legitimate queen of the social sciences"⁶—Ethics—on which to build a philosophical foundation for architecture and architectural dialogue. "How ought I to live my life?"; "What examples enable me to know a general proposition?"; "What reasons can I give for choosing to conduct my life in one way rather than another?" Out of these questions he seeks (not, to my mind, successfully) to extrapolate a basis for objective architectural discourse in the public forum.

Alan Greenberg, in his article "Making Architectural Judgments," takes a different approach. He, too, sees the problem of muddled thought in the architectural dialogue, observing that, "The focus on subjective questions of taste, ideology, and personality tends to discourage constructive debate and to ignore more complex and pertinent questions of how to protect the public interest." He, too, is familiar with the "subjective criteria that often pass for considered, objective judgment," and suggests that "this haphazard, emotion-laden way of defining architectural standards has created incoherently planned cityscape, the suburban sprawl, and the suburbanized countryside we see around us."⁷

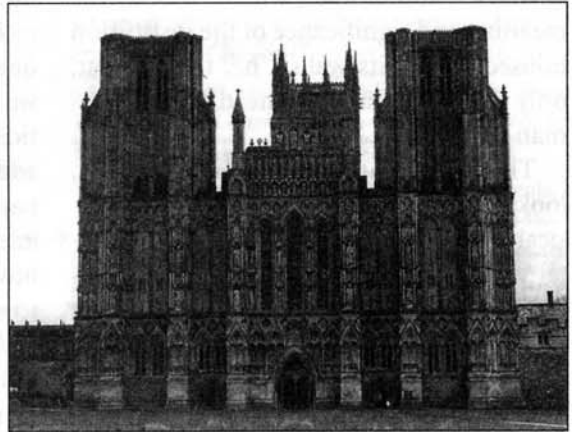
Like Westfall, Alan Greenberg wants some fixed standards for the architectural debate, especially for assessing the impact of

new projects in historical contexts. Not too much to ask it seems, given that, “Architecture is a liberal art that is taught at our great universities, and is a discipline that should be amenable to rational discourse.”⁸ He therefore lays out his own five-point framework for dialogue: architectural language, syntax, context, symbolic content, and paradigmatic precedent. He then considers the potency of deliberated *continuity* and *contrast* with each of these five points for both “foreground buildings” (usually certain specifically public, institutional, and religious buildings), and for “background buildings” (“those which...lack special importance or public significance”).⁹ His goal is “to provide a means of structuring discussion and articulating differences in order to make more informed evaluations and studied decisions about proposed new architecture,”¹⁰ and capably articulates a well-reasoned framework for such a discussion.

Both Westfall and Greenberg are to be highly commended for their contributions. Leo Strauss correctly criticized the scientific social scientist for studying his subject *ab extra*, as a scientist (hence a detached observer of an observable reality), rather than first and foremost *as a person*. The other sciences traditionally had the luxury of detached observation, although now Quantum Physics raises the question of whether we can know *anything* as detached observers by Pure Reason. To look at social phenomena, especially, in terms of abstractions and artificial constructs is a nonsense. The social scientists (as well as others involved in the liberal and fine arts, including architecture)—because they deal with issues of the human consciousness—must consider their subject *ab intra*, as human beings participating in the process. As Strauss points out, “If [the social scientist] wishes to be loyal to his task,

he must never forget that he is dealing with human things, with human beings. He must reflect on the human as human.”¹¹

Because they are working in this tradition, Westfall and Greenberg, have not betrayed their humanity. They remind us that we are dealing with profoundly human issues—ethics, values, politics, architecture in society, etc.—and they are reflective both as architects and as humans. They seek to understand their art, their science, not from some detached analytical position, but as participants in the human condition. Alan Greenberg, for instance, comments on the entry door of the Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis, Maryland, that, “The human form of the two attached columns supporting the pediment allows the viewer to imagine being at home in the house.”¹² This sort of sensitivity to what



Wells Cathedral, c. 1185-1239.

touches the heart of the person is far too rare in modern architecture.

Both Greenberg and Westfall understand the Classical tradition: that the built environment is integrally linked with the prevalent societal view of mankind; that in Mr. Greenberg’s words “Architecture is a public art;”¹³ and that politics and architecture and urbanism are linked. As Mr. Westfall puts it, the role of the architect is “to design the city as a place where the

public life can be conducted in the way required to live as one ought to live—no matter who the person is.”¹⁴

Mr. Westfall, in his opening paragraph, asks for agreement with his thesis, but acknowledges the dialectical process of “discussion and healthy, fruitful disputation.”¹⁵ With this invitation, I would suggest that both these gentlemen are precariously hanging their respective arguments on an unshored frame. For Mr. Westfall to appeal to “unchanging human nature,” and to ask “How ought I to live my life?” (and then his other questions), without first asking “what is man?,” is far too vulnerable in the public forum. Mr. Greenberg has his own vulnerabilities. In giving his working definition as, “Architecture, simply and immediately perceived is a combination, revealed through light and shade of spaces, of masses, and of lines, which embody the meaning and significance of the institution housed within its walls,” he, too, at best, only obliquely implies the distinctly human element.

They do not, at least in the articles cited, look deeply enough. By turning to the Classical tradition in looking for transcendental values, permanence, meaning, and objective standards, without fully embracing the transcendental view of mankind, they are in danger of becoming mere stylists, and reactionary ones at that (as the British press labels them, “New Fogies”). It is not surprising that Mr. Greenberg, a canonical classicist *par excellence*, defines *form* in architecture only in relation to the five Orders: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite, and Tuscan. Likewise, Westfall cites Vitruvius, the ancient Roman source for Renaissance classicism, in defining architecture. But the modern problem of alienation, confusion, and obfuscation in architecture cannot be resolved by any appeal to the Classical building tradition alone, for it is not a stylistic question. It must also hang

on a comprehensive view of man and the order of his being, and of society and the political order.

G. K. Chesterton once remarked that the only honest position for a nihilist was silence. Today we are beset by a breed of post-modernist who, perhaps in seeking to maintain some semblance of their intuitive sense of human dignity, argue that we operate in a community of discourse that is arbitrary from the outside. They hope to argue that there is no natural order to the soul; that there is, therefore, no objective standard of behavior outside of the man-made constructs of society that allow us to eat and drink, to breed, and to pursue pleasure and minimize pain; so there can be no positively knowable and objectively better values on which to base life, politics, society, art, or architecture. And yet their very being cries out for dignity!

Blaise Pascal suggests that the ultimate question we must each confront is whether we have transcendental souls. This question is foundational. For only by grappling with it can we give true meaning to human nature, ethics, beauty, politics, even life itself. Only then can it have any bearing on how we *ought* to live our lives, how we *ought* to structure our politics, how we *ought* to order our cities, how we *ought* to design and judge our buildings. Only if we do have transcending and transcendent souls—that we can know the truth and love the good outside of ourselves—does my writing and your reading this essay have any meaning. The fact that I am *inclined* to write it, and you are *inclined* to read it, and we have any inclination at all to discuss its merits or values or coherency or cogency, suggests that we do.

This evidence should be sufficient, at least, to investigate the question. And I would recommend that Westfall and Greenberg, and all women and men of good will seeking validation for objective

ethical, economical, political, and architectural positions, pursue it. The Classicists seek to restore the ancient and timeless order of architecture. Whether or not that is possible depends on whether or not they can restore the ancient and timeless understanding of humanity in society. They have a great advantage, as they are asking the same questions. Whether or not the answers lead us necessarily and objectively to the Five Classical Orders remains to be seen. But at least they are seeking to return to the same path. In this regard, Eric Voegelin offers us that, "Today, just as two thousand years ago, *politike episteme* deals with questions that concern everyone and that everyone asks. Though different opinions are current in society today, its subject matter has not changed. Its method is still scientific analysis. And the prerequisite of analysis is still the perception of the order of being unto its origin in transcendent being, in particular, the loving openness of the soul to its transcendent ground of order."¹⁶

It is with this understanding that I offer my own contribution to the dialectical process; namely, that "Architecture is the fine art of designing buildings for both the body and the soul." It is an art, like simple building, because it requires right reason in making that which is to be made; but it is a fine art (in contradistinction to simple building *per se*), because in addition to providing for the utilitarian and functional needs, its end is the making of something beautiful. That which is to be made is a building, a building which not only houses and protects and accommodates the body, our physicality, but one that is intended to nourish our soul with meaning, symbolic content, and beauty. This implies the transcendental aspect of our humanity, our capacities to know what is true, to love what is good, and to be pleased with what is beautiful.¹⁷

Notes

1. Andreas Papadakis and Maggie Toy, *Deconstruction: A Pocket Guide* (London, 1990), p 6.
2. To the best of my knowledge, all the architects who are labeled "Decons," including Mssrs. Eisenman, Tschumi, and Gehry and Ms. Hadid, eschew the title. Of course, no one canny enough to be in their positions would ever want to be catagorized, or even identified, as being a partisan of any given camp. The same goes for Mr. Robert Venturi and Ms. Denise Scott Brown, who disclaimed the appellation "Post-Modernist" when their books, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, precipitated the movement back towards the Classical forms and architectural language, as well as dubious interpretations of the same.
3. Peter Eisenman, "Blue Line Text," in *Deconstruction: A Pocket Guide*, p 12.
4. One sees similarities in other disciplines: Socialism saw man as interchangeable social atoms devoid of necessary relationship with others, and modern music tried to give equal value to any note apart from its relationship to other notes.
5. Carroll William Westfall, "Architecture as Ethics," from *Building Classical* (London, 1993), pp. 182-187.
6. Leo Strauss, "Social Science and Humanism," from *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. by Thomas Pangle (Chicago, 1989), p 6.
7. Alan Greenberg, "Making Architectural Judgments," *Architectural Design*, vol. 62, No 5-6, 1992, p 64.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.
10. *Ibid.*, p 72.
11. Strauss, p 6.
12. Greenberg, p 65.
13. Greenberg, p 64.
14. Westfall, p 185.
15. Westfall, p 182.
16. Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Washington, D. C., 1968), p 21.
17. Whether or not it satisfies these criteria would determine whether it is good architecture or bad architecture. But to be considered architecture, properly speaking, the building must make a claim beyond its merely material constraints.