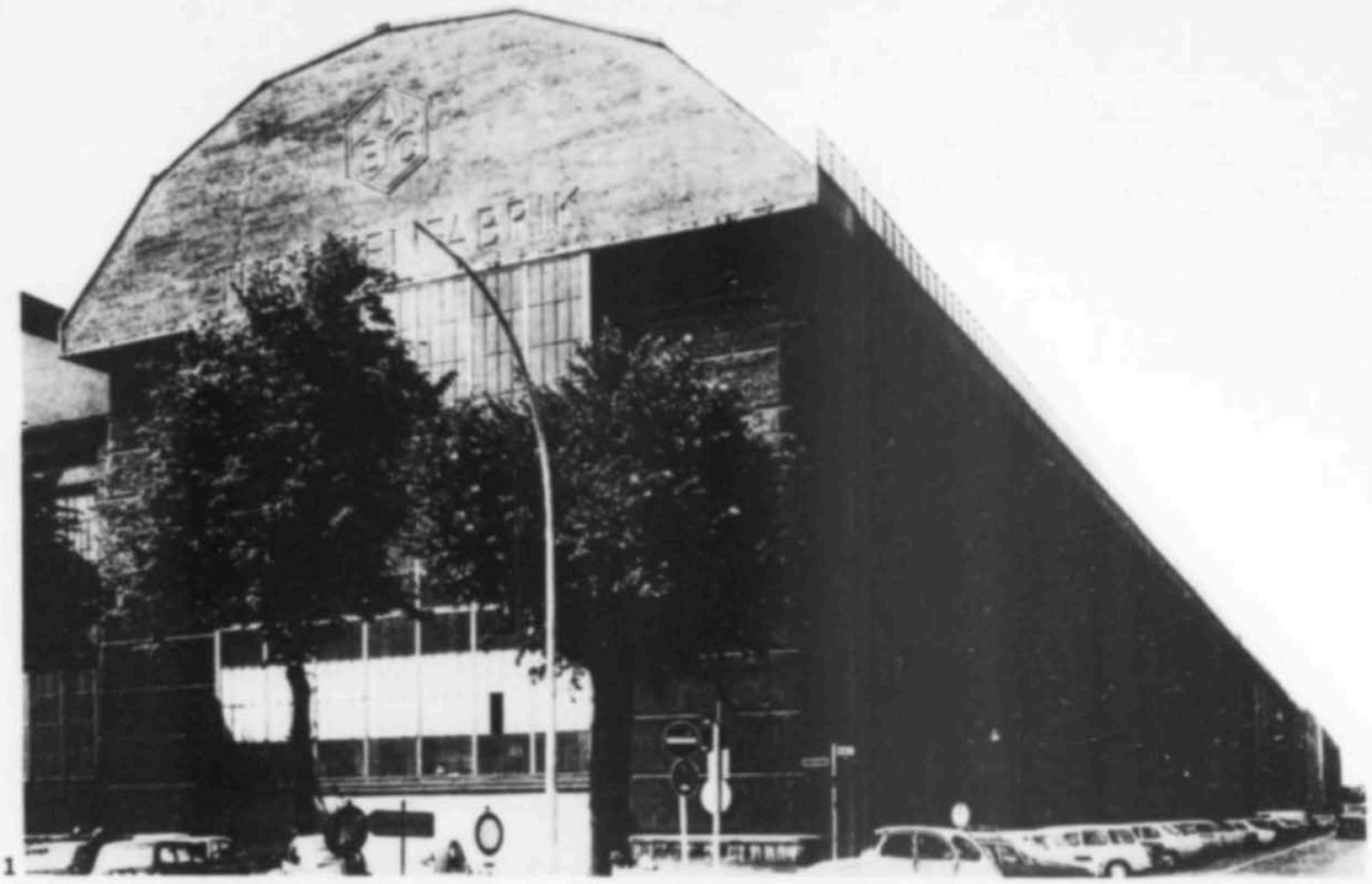
MODERN TRANSFORMATIONS

CLASSICISM AND BEYOND: ROOTS OF CLASSICISM

William Curtis



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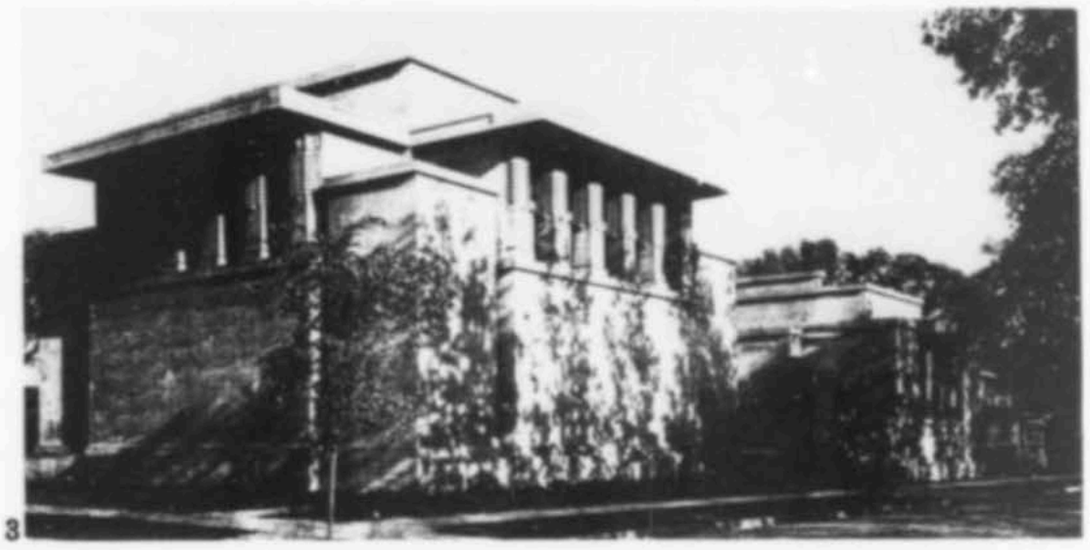
'The work of art must not be accidental, exceptional, impressionistic, inorganic, protestatory, picturesque, but on the contrary, generalised, static, expressive of the invariant.' LE CORBUSIER AND AMEDÉE OZENFANT, 1917



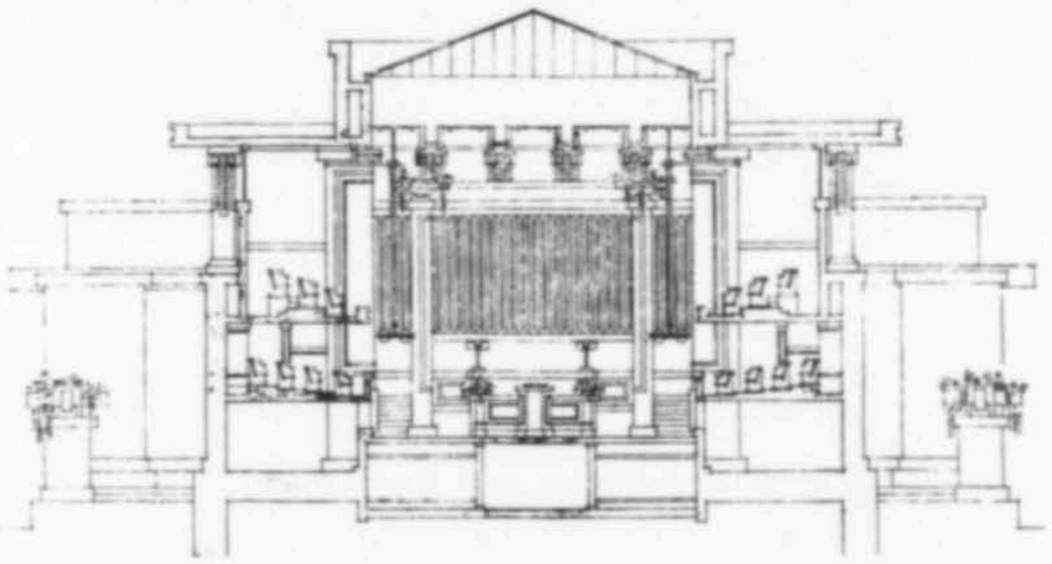
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The myth of rootless Modernism

It is not altogether surprising that Post-Modern propaganda has chosen to lampoon modern architecture as a monolith based on anti-historical premises since this is how Modernism was frequently dished up by its own historians, mythographers and practitioners. Pevsner or Giedion (the intellectual diet of many post-mods when students) told of a high moral vision triumphing over the disease of eclecticism and realising the true, rational style of the twentieth century with a little help from such historicist abstractions as the 'spirit of the times' and 'the machine'.[1] The manner in which each member of the *dramatis personae* actually came upon his architectural language was absolutely ignored; modern architecture emerged as a white-washed unified front untainted by precedent and prototype.



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1, Peter Behrens, turbine factory for AEG, Berlin, 1908-09.
2, Karl F. Schinkel, Schauspielhaus, Berlin, 1819-21.
3, Frank Lloyd Wright, Unity Temple, Oak Park, Chicago, 1904-06.
4, Frank Lloyd Wright, Unity Temple, section, 1904-06.

While the pioneer phase of modern architecture involved rejection of superficial eclecticism, it also embraced a re-evaluation of tradition. Many of the seminal buildings of Modernism drew on past examples as well as expressing a commitment to modern realities and materials.

Thus the Unity Temple, 3, an experiment in primary geometries fabricated from concrete, was also suffused with Classical overtones and recalls Schinkel. Behrens' commitment to industrial culture was backed by a yearning for the higher values of form he felt had inspired great Classical buildings of the past—a position that is partly illustrated by his fusion of factory and temple, 1. The 'Classicism' in question was grave, sober, controlled in mass, proportion and silhouette; the hope was to transcend the particular with the general, to unearth 'type-forms' appropriate to an industrial civilisation.

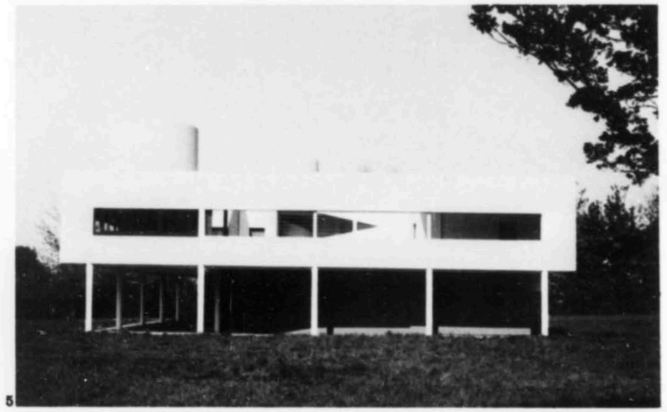
5, Le Corbusier, the Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1929.
6, Le Corbusier, temples and cars from 'Vers une architecture': 'The Parthenon is a product of selection applied to a standard'.
7, Le Corbusier, 'regulating lines', over Petit Trianon, from 'Vers une architecture'.
8, William Chambers, plate from 'Treatise' of 1759—essentials of Classicism in the primitive hut.
9, Le Corbusier, the DOM-INO skeleton, 1914—trabeation in a highly simplified form.
10, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the Barcelona Pavilion, 1929.

Le Corbusier's absorption of Classical ideals worked through a number of channels and periods. Maison Schwob (1916) blended Perret, Hoffmann, Behrens—possibly even Wright—with echoes of the Renaissance and Palladio in a Mannerist mood. During his earlier travels, Corb had immersed himself in Classical antiquity—the Parthenon, Pompeii, the Pantheon, the Colosseum, the Baths, etc—in the search for perennial qualities as a foundation for his own philosophy and vocabulary. He saw these buildings as correctives for the arid formulae of the Beaux Arts, which he felt had betrayed the vital spirit of Classicism. Clear proportions, tight expression of idea, gradation of intentions and axes, linking of spaces and volumes in procession, formulation of a systemmatic architectural grammer, enhancement of plasticity through the control of voids and profiles—these were some of the general qualities he attempted to translate into a vocabulary directed at twentieth-century realities. Simplicity comes in many forms, from the aridity of the functionalist diagram to the passionate force of a Villa Savoye or a Barcelona Pavilion, 5, 10. Ledoux comes to mind: 'Everything that is not indispensable tires the eye, disturbs thought, and adds nothing to the conception.'

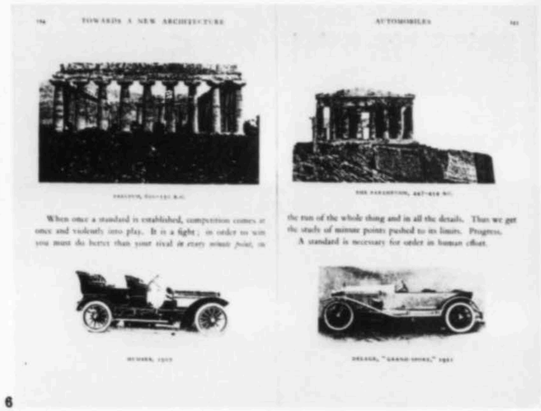
A number of other ideological props were used to support this mythical structure, including that brand of puritan functionalism that did in fact inspire one wing of the Modern Movement (Hannes Meyer *et al*) though it could not supply even that wing with forms. Even the avowed functionalist or futurist needs to draw on past forms if he is to make his ideals visible. And the fact remains that the majority of Modern architects aimed beyond functionalism in the way that Le Corbusier suggested in *Vers une architecture*:

'You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build houses and palaces; that is construction. Ingenuity is at work. But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good; I am happy and I say: "This is beautiful." That is architecture. Art enters in. . . . By the use of inert materials and *starting from* conditions more or less utilitarian, you have established certain relationships which have aroused my emotions. This is architecture.'[2]

However, it is much easier to teach the tangibles than the intangibles of architecture, and in the 1950s the dry functionalist diet was spread far and wide. An ideal of pure appropriateness unsullied by aesthetic or symbolic intervention was promoted and the word 'style' was outlawed. Students were supposed to study problems on 'their own merits' then to generate vocabularies on the basis of these merits, which were usually defined in advance in the driest programmatic and structural terms. Of course 'style' simply crept in through the back door in a reduced, watered-down and under-studied form. Architectural history was demoted to the parrotting of styles, names and dates rather than being treated as a basic means for understanding the nature of architecture. One does sympathise with someone denied architecture in this way: after years of bread and water candyfloss must seem quite appealing.



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Classical influences on early modern architecture

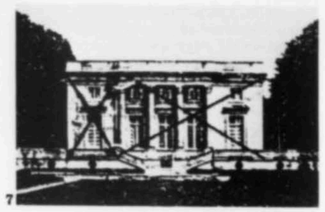
But it still is not sustinance. Despite functionalist and determinist rhetoric, most masters of the Modern Movement were deeply interested in tradition. They sought, not the banishment of history, but its re-evaluation at the level of fundamentals; they rejected the superficial manipulation of style and embraced the quality of Style in general which they perceived (following historians like Wolfflin) in terms of abstract formal structures and patterns rather than in terms of specific grammatical usages. The attitude to tradition was 'radical' since it embraced drastic innovation and the return to roots simultaneously. For the most part they would have agreed with Viollet le Duc's remark on learning from the past:

'I thus follow the same course of reasoning as was applied by the Greek architects; I employ the same means and start from the same principles, but arrive at results very different, because I have had to satisfy a very different programme'.[3]

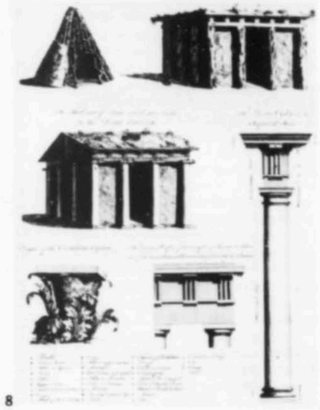
Even Louis Sullivan, a supposed grand-daddy of the functionalist point of view, actually argued that satisfactory architectural form could only 'follow' from function if the diagram suggested by need was transformed by the imagination into the stuff of poetic and symbolic forms: 'Let us heed the imperative voice of emotion'[4] he demands in his discussion of the appropriate form for the skyscraper. Tradition and abstractions of natural order both provided analogies for Frank Lloyd Wright in his formulation of a style. Wright sought examples of integrity in history and found them in Japanese architecture of certain periods, in the vernacular and in medieval architecture which he saw, following a curious nineteenth century opinion, as an 'unselfconscious' style. The Renaissance, about which he knew little, was taboo on the basis of its 'stylism'; however it is not sufficiently appreciated that he also abstracted aspects of Classical grammar. In his houses he returns time and again to the tripartite theme of pedestal, middle zone and over-hang. In more ceremonial and public buildings, where greater formality and axiality were deemed appropriate, the Classical reminiscences became even more apparent. The Larkin Building and Unity Temple are cases in point. The latter was based on the square, an ideal form chosen for symbolic 'unitary' reasons. The volumes projected above the axial plan make use of stripped bases and piers with reductive capitals; the crowning overhang functions in effect as a cornice; the temple is even surmounted by a simplified attic. Wright's generation in Chicago were interested in Schinkel and in the sort of primitive, abstract Classicism that is well represented by Soane, as an antidote to the florid excesses of the American Beaux-Arts.

In Europe both Auguste Perret and Peter Behrens drew on Classical example in the *rappel à l'ordre* that followed Art Nouveau (as did Hoffmann and Loos). Perret has been described as a 'Classical Rationalist': in defining forms based on concrete construction he transformed lessons of proportion and articulation from both timber buildings and seventeenth-century French Classical examples. Perhaps following Gaudet he turned to tradition for generic principles rather than particular forms. Behrens took a similar point of view but in his case Classicism was inseparable from the cultural and political programme of the Deutscher Werkbund.

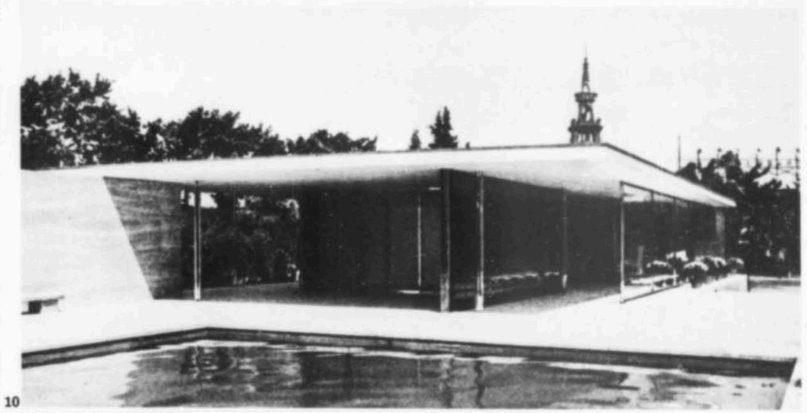
Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier passed through Behrens' office and the last two remained deeply committed to their own versions of Classical values for the rest of their careers. While Gropius argued that 'the New Architecture' was not opposed to the spirit of tradition he seems to have put great confidence in the idea that 'Basic Design' was somehow rooted in universal structures of the mind. When he went to America he pitted this system against the remnants of Beaux Arts method; the study of



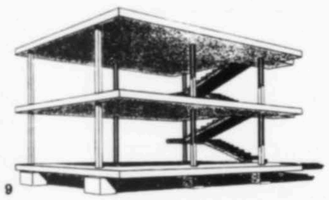
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precedent was in effect outlawed on the grounds that it was contaminating. By this means a severe mischief was perpetrated behind moral platitude: it is one thing to abstract from a pre-existing order of some kind, another thing altogether to rely on the virtues of heart-felt geometry on their own. The latter diet is extremely thin and exclusive. Arguably the recent obsession with historical forms in the USA can be seen as an exaggerated over-reaction against the 'Gropius complex'.

Classical values within the International Style

Le Corbusier, for all his pleas in favour of the 'New Spirit', sought constant inspiration in the past. His early education blended nineteenth-century rationalism with a species of idealism that led him to look for metaphysical certainties in the laws of nature, the higher meanings of symbolic geometry and the lessons of the great works of history. During his *Voyage d'Orient* the young architect sketched mosques, vernacular structures, Roman and Greek ruins. In the early '20s means were investigated for fusing together a commitment to the 'great constants'—the perennial values—and conventions related to cult of the new; *Vers une architecture* is surely a traditionalist tract as well as a Modernist one. The artist defines his role as the salvation of architectural essentials from the arbitrariness of the 'styles'.

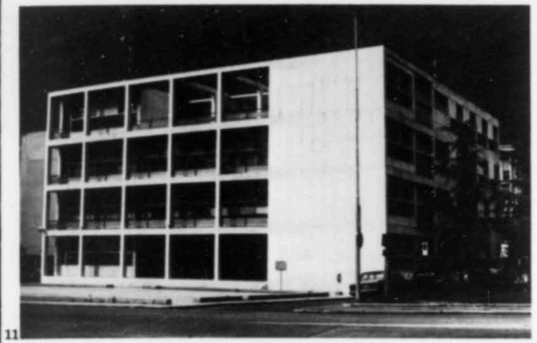
While Le Corbusier attempted to define systematic type-forms based on modern concrete construction—for instance the Five Points of a New Architecture—his capacity for transforming precedents transcended any merely rational procedure. This was a mind that could discover the most curious analogies and correspondences: between funnels, bottles, Platonic cylinders and stairways; between Classical temples, concrete skeletons and cars; between ships, monasteries and collective housing. Remembered fragments of Hadrian's villa—the lighting system of the Serapeum in particular—could prove their eventual value in the light towers at Ronchamp; the organisational principles of Schinkel's Altes Museum, when blended with cooling towers and the Jantar Mantar, would coalesce as the symbolic forms of the Chandigarh Parliament[5]. Puns might work formally or else functionally: invention consisted, in part, in the unconscious fusion of inherited fragments into the stuff of the artist's own vision and vocabulary. The resulting forms were nourished by both tradition and a societal myth.

The conception of the 'International Style' has probably done much to dissuade an accurate understanding of modern architects' debts to precedent by giving the impression of a shared language without internal variety. But there is a great difference between the routine box on stilts and a Villa Savoye or a Barcelona Pavilion. Part of the distinction lies in the compression of many ideas and levels of meaning; part may also be traced to a resonance with what Summerson has called 'the Essentials of Classicism'.[6] Whatever its debts to abstract art, the Barcelona Pavilion had the poise, proportion and nobility of a clean Classical idea: sophisticated materials such as chrome, steel, concrete and lustrous glass were tightly ordered in an elemental redefinition of podium, column and entablature that one might well associate with the Primitive Hut.

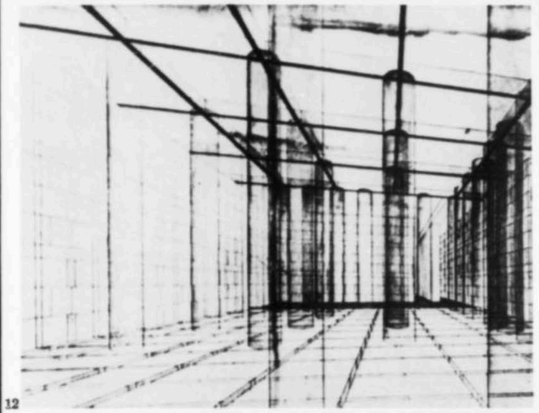
Authoritarian Classicism

The 1930s saw a renaissance of overt Classicism that had little use for this abstraction and finesse. The authoritarian regimes in Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union each found value in a more direct recall of the past, especially in the service of state propaganda. The Palace of the Soviets competition of 1931 was emblematic. The machine-age designs of the Modernists were rejected on the grounds that they were too mechanistic and too 'abstract'. Socialist Realism required more easily understood devices of communication. The prize went to Iofan's giant mausoleum in Italy was scarcely more impressive in aesthetic terms. Mussolini did not hesitate to manipulate Rome itself as a colossal propaganda instrument. His urban schemes sought to make the connection between his own empire and those of the past. But for all its *grandezza* the architectural production of the Third Rome had little lasting sustenance.

The liberal critic will claim that tawdry politics beget tawdry buildings. But Giuseppe Terragni's work flies in the face of this theory. Terragni tried to look beneath the surface of Fascist ideology for substantial content. Always convinced that modern architecture had no necessary conflict with the past, he sought to blend the futurist and nostalgic aspects of the culture of the '30s in his architecture. The Casa del Fascio in Como of 1934 might be called modern architecture in a Latin mode. The concrete frame is handled with tautness and precision to express the openness of the institution and its connection to the city; it is a sort of transparent version of a Classical façade. The plan is modelled on the type of a *palazzo*, with the inner atrium where the cortile would be, and the mass as a whole is governed by proportions related to the square plan. The project for the Danteum (1938) was a sort of anagram of the *Divine Comedy* as well as a compressed



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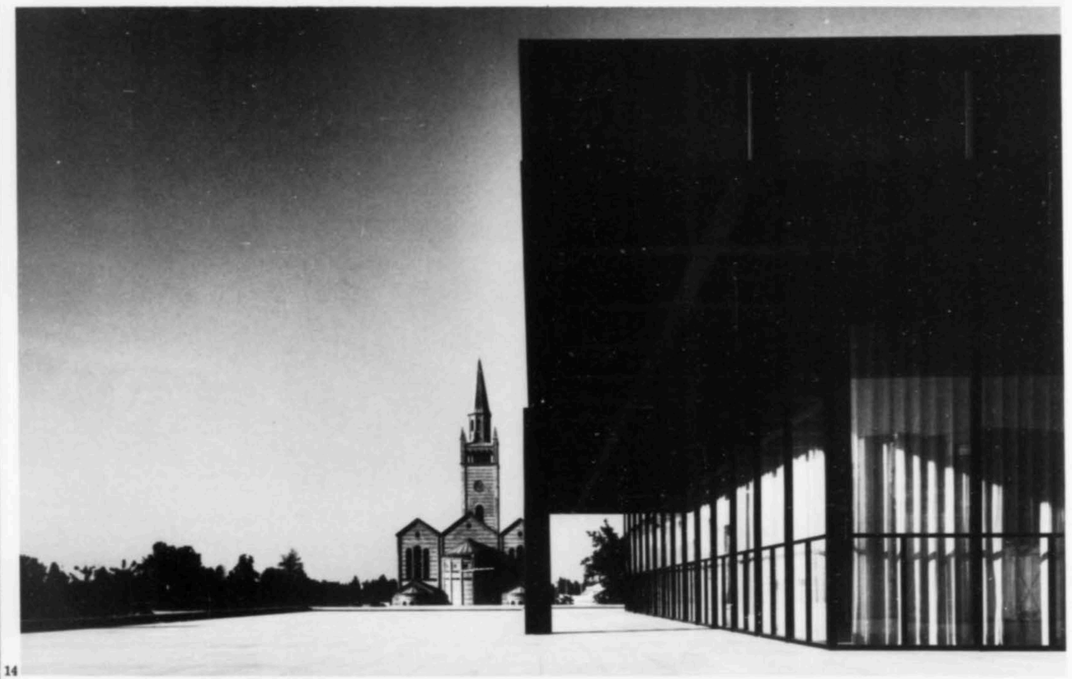
imperialist emblem blending many of the building types of cultures bordering the Mediterranean: thus basic elements like columns and walls came together to evoke porticos, rows, hypostyles, temples and palaces.[7] Abstraction here allowed the compression of a great number of ideas. The artist was able to enter a number of different past eras and then blend his sources together around a conception of deep cultural and personal meaning. Instead of ending up with an inventory of literary references, Terragni expressed these multiple meanings in a tight geometrical order controlling part and whole.

In the decade after the war the inheritance of the International Style proved inappropriate to monumental civic programmes. One way for dealing with the issues of size and rhetoric was suggested by the robust late works in *béton brut* of Le Corbusier. Edward Durrell Stone and Philip Johnson took the way of a thin historicism employing still-born Classical formulae and dressing them up in luxurious veneers. At Crown Hall, and later in the Berlin New National Gallery, Mies van der Rohe amplified his steel and glass vocabulary over plans with an obvious Neo-Classical pedigree. In the latter building the image of temple was invoked. Mies never really lost sight of Schinkel's example in the expression of passionate simplicity.

11, Giuseppe Terragni, the Casa del Fascio, Como, 1934.
12, Giuseppe Terragni, Danteum Project, 1938, view of glass columns in 'Paradiso'.
13, B. M. Iofan, winner of Palace of Soviets Competition, 1931-4.
14, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, New National Gallery, Berlin, 1963-68.
Classicism and institutional representation: in the '30s Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como (1934) re-cast a Classical facade in a subtle proportional handling of the modern frame, 11. The Danteum project (1938) combined an analogue of the Divine Comedy with an emblem of empire, and a radical re-interpretation of column, portico and hypostyle, 12. But authoritarian regimes generally preferred a more pompous and less abstract version of Classicism on the grounds that this would better communicate the state's ideals viz *Iofan's scheme for the Palace of the Soviets, 13. Totalitarianism left its taint on Classicism in the post-war period; nonetheless transformations of Classical monumentality have been attempted with greater or lesser conviction, in concrete, in travertine—or even in steel, 14.*



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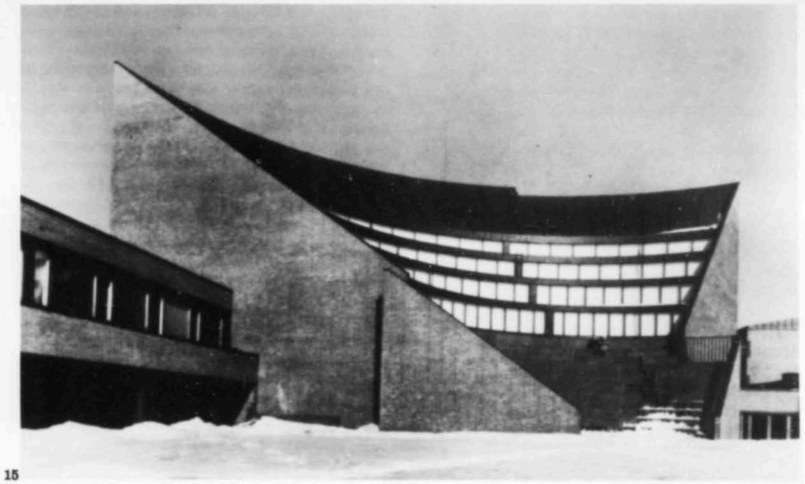
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Landscape and theatre

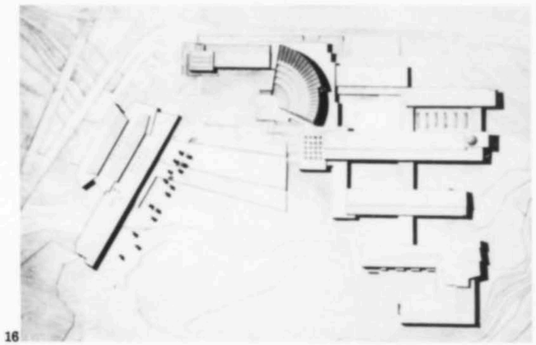
But Classicism did not have to mean symmetrical façades and orthogonal axes. Alvar Aalto's late works explored topographical orders and used platforms, steps, fragmented shapes and sinuous curves; a recurrent element was the fan shape which was set off against oblong flanges and usually made to contain communal functions. At Otaniemi the fan was expressed as a theatre which became the dominant symbol and hinge of the scheme. Inside it were the main auditoria, but on the outside it stepped down as a series of tiers that linked the building to the horizontal contours of the landscape. Perhaps this was Aalto's image for the academy, a place set aside for the exchange of ideas in a natural setting. In any case it is to the artist's sketches of ancient Greece that one must turn to understand what inspired him, particularly to the drawings of Delphi. In the Greek sites Aalto discovered an 'irregular' order linking focal points to routes, processional ways and landscape enclaves; especially in their ruined state theatres and stadia seemed enmeshed with natural platforms of the hills.

Within English architecture of the post-war period Classicism has played many roles. Wittkower's studies of Renaissance proportion and those of his student Colin Rowe on Classical aspects of the work of Le Corbusier, stimulated an interest in the Modulor and other symbolic geometries. The re-examination of the English Baroque disinterred Hawksmoor and reinstated Vanbrugh and lent a pedigree to emotive sculptural expression in the 1960s. A hankering after Palladian proportions tidied up the elevations of Leslie Martin and Colin St John Wilson's Harvey Court, Cambridge, while a Picturesque reading of the site of the Acropolis partly inspired the asymmetical massing and processional aspects of the Smithsons' Economist cluster. Even a supposed 'Modernist' housing scheme like Alexandra Road by Neave Brown, with its obvious debts to the *Unité d'habitation* (of which it was a critique), also rested substantially on an English Classical tradition for combining units into coherent urban wholes: the Georgian Crescent. In turn, the stepped section, raised walkway and tightly-handled hierarchies of elements in Alexandra Road echoed the archetype from which the crescent itself may have derived: the Antique amphitheatre. But the resonance with tradition was not forced on the form.

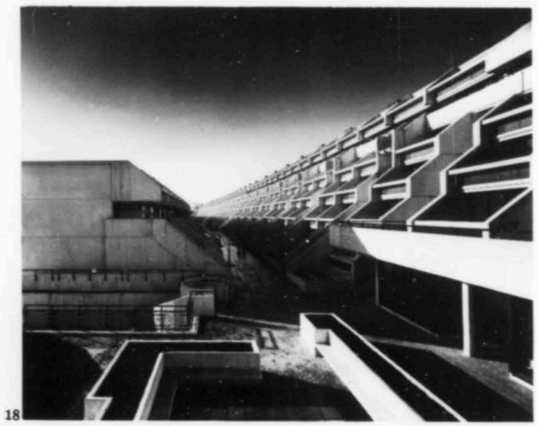
The architecture of Denys Lasdun has many touchstones in the Classical tradition.[8] There is a pervasive concern for proportion, hierarchy, repose and the control of ceremonial sequences with axes and grand stairs. As a student, Lasdun studied Geoffrey Scott's *Architecture of Humanism*, which stressed the tactile and spatial aspects of the Baroque. A deep admiration for Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh can perhaps be sensed in the massive polygonal towers that flank the entrance to the National



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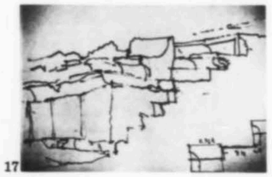


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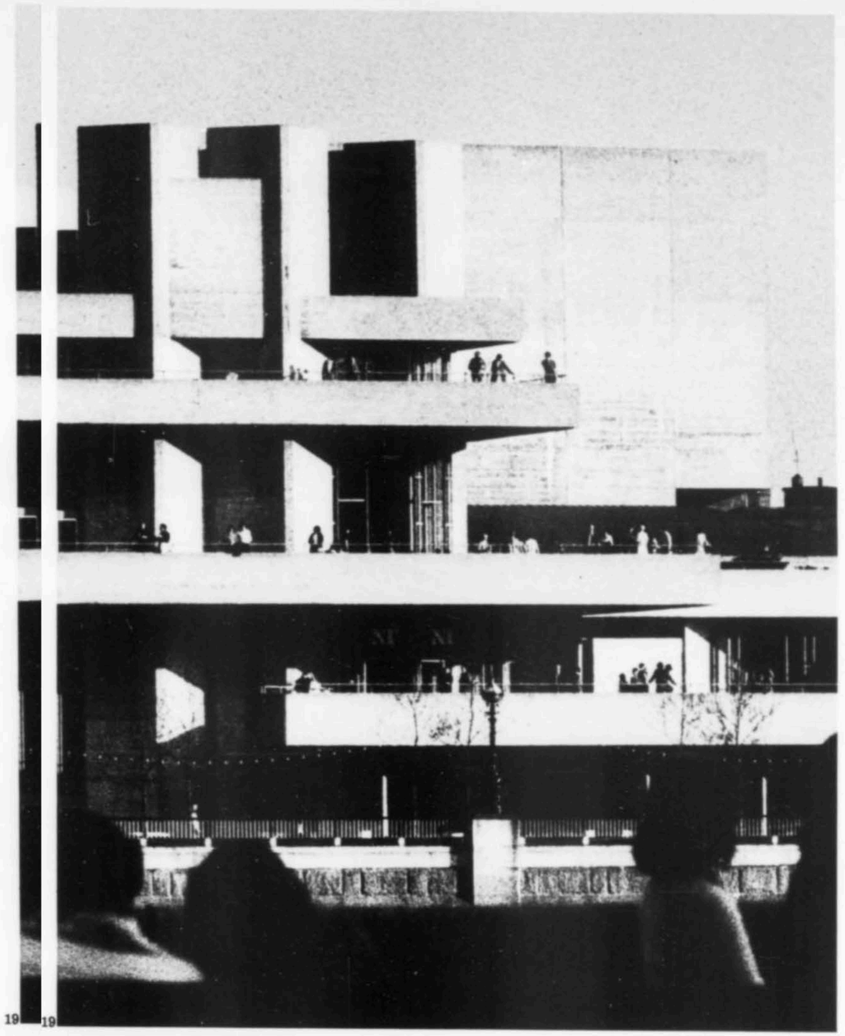
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15, Alvar Aalto, Otaniemi, Finland, 1955.
16, Aalto, Otaniemi, model.
17, Aalto, sketch of antique theatre, 1953.
18. Neave Brown, Alexandra Road housing, London, 1970-75.
19, Denys Lasdun, National Theatre, London 1967-75.
20, Nicholas Hawksmoor, St George in the East, London, tower, 1725.
21, Andrea Palladio, mouldings, from the 'Four Books'.
At several well-known architecture schools in the United States 'Classicism' is taught as a matter of: a box with a facade perforated by rectangular windows; an axis down the middle; a sequence of niche-like pochè spaces; columns, with or without capitals. Most of the Renaissance would not qualify and ancient Greece is not on the menu. At the Acropolis in Athens and at Delphi the primary elements are set in an irregular way so that simplistic axes are avoided: a harmony is created between geometry and landscape, architecture and nature, which makes the most of diagonal approaches and changing perspectives. Aalto grasped the link between step, seat, stage, auditorium and landscape platform in the stratified aesthetic of Otaniemi, 15, 16, 17. And the notion of a public building as a series of platforms and terraces linking institutional assembly to the surroundings is encapsulated in Lasdun's 'Urban landscape' vocabulary of strata and towers, 19. Vital Classicism is partly a tactile matter: proportions are sensed physically. A rhythmic pulse brings life to whole and parts, 20. Stratified details restate the overall theme of plan, section, massing, sequences and spaces in microcosm. The tiers of an antique theatre or the minute horizontal subtleties of the Classical cornice, 21, contain a similar abstract or tactile music.



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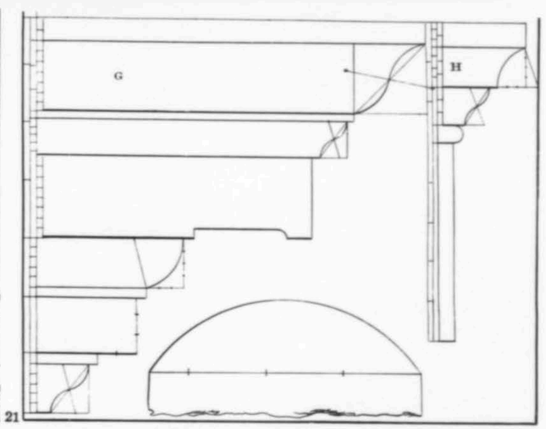
Theatre, or in the bold handling of horizontal ledges against shadows—much enlarged and exaggerated versions of horizontal Classical mouldings. At the Royal College of Physicians (1960) Lasdun attempted to rhyme with the Nashian setting spatially and formally, but without resorting to a literal or overtly representational contextualism. The terraces ('strata' the architect calls them) of his later schemes (the European Investment Bank, the National Theatre) have investigated the part that cantilivered platforms may play in enhancing public assembly and linking buildings to their settings. In these instances the roots of Classicism are intuited as lying in the



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steps, tiers and terraces of antique theatres. The basis of a social architecture is sensed as lying in the geometrical articulation of landscape levels in the service of ritual. Again there is an attempt at echoing supposed natural roots of Classicism.[8]

The ancient sense

Throughout the Modern Movement this concern with beginnings has been recurrent. It was a major preoccupation with Louis Kahn whose buildings possess an archaic and elemental force of their own. Kahn's formation occurred under Beaux Arts tutelage before the arrival in the United States of Gropius' rather arid version of Modernism. Early on he turned to the Classical tradition for support. At the same time he appreciated how weak and diluted revivalism in America had become. Richardson, Sullivan, Wright and Le Corbusier served to put Kahn in touch again with a bold and rigorous handling of form: industrial architecture and medieval fortresses were also stimulating reminders of the way that pure functional volumes could be handled monumentally. All these influences could have come together as an unco-ordinated collection of references; instead Kahn synthesised them into a personal style rooted in consistent strategies, geometry and a social philosophy that addressed the basic meanings of institutions.

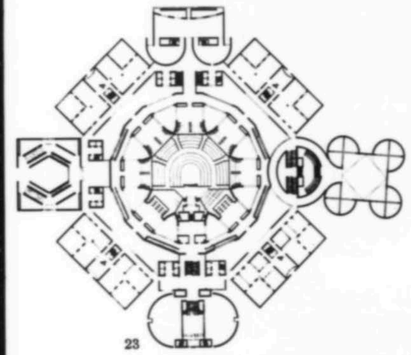
The richness of Kahn's sources and of his synthetic powers can be understood by examining the intentions behind the Parliament Building in Dacca (1964-73), in what is now Bangladesh. The building dominates its surroundings from a raised platform as a sort of fortified citadel. It stands as the 'head' of the body politic on a major axis; the secretariat is at the 'feet' and the extending wings containing hostels etc are the 'arms'. The vast cylinders and oblongs jostling around the main assembly space are gashed by enormous shaded openings. They provide slots for such secondary functions as the press rooms, the president's suite and offices as well as protecting the interiors from the rigours of the climate. A vital variation is achieved where the mosque breaks free from the governing geometry to inflect towards Mecca. The primary axis of the whole layout links the Parliament to its setting over the Presidential platform and through the entrance (treated like a monumental gate) but the axis of the assembly space itself is turned through 90 degrees. The gaunt and weathered cylinders and oblongs in brick, or else concrete with marble jointing, evoke the intended ancient character: this was the cult of the ruin—another essay in primitivism.

Classical inspirations were so embedded in Kahn's mind that it becomes impossible to single out a single source. Kahn's family of forms blended together organisational principles from several different periods. The anthropomorphic diagram of the whole complex recalls Palladio's grandest villa schemes.

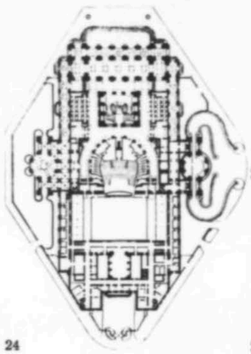
Kahn's instinct for sublime geometries was nurtured by Piranesi's reconstructions of ancient Rome as well as by Boullée and Ledoux. The planning distinction between 'served' and 'serving' areas, central to his style, was derived from Gaudet's Beaux Arts theories. In fact the similarities between Garnier's Opéra plan and the Dacca Parliament are striking. There is an affinity in the use of *poché* spaces, ceremonial sequences, and even in the handling of elements deviating from symmetry; the side ramp at the Opéra, the mosque at Dacca. Finally, of course, Kahn gained insight from Le Corbusier's vision of Roman antiquity as spelled out in *Vers une architecture*, an anti-Beaux Arts tract which attempted to probe to the underlying plastic values of the past. It was heroic ruins that so enthralled Kahn during his stay in Rome in the early 1950s and he later made no bones about the fact that the major inspiration of Dacca was the Roman Baths.



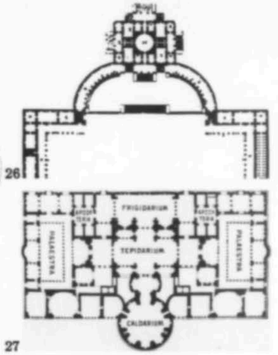
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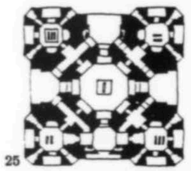
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But Kahn was also intrigued by the architecture of the Indian sub-continent.[9] His penchant for solid masonry cut by figural openings, for centralised forms and processional platforms may have drawn him to Islamic tombs and mosques, their elegant reconciliation of circular, polygonal and directional geometries. The Tomb of Hummayum, for example, might be seen as an Eastern cousin to the great Western examples Kahn revered. In fact, he found common denominators between the two traditions.

What elevated Kahn above pastiche of history was a rigorous personal style that was capable of distilling past principles and then transforming them to new purposes. This style was not a dry formula; it was nurtured by a philosophy and by the symbolic interpretation of the social order. Kahn conceived of a Parliament in terms of a centralised assembly seeking a concensus, and it was this that led to an emblematic plan like a mandala. For this was a form pregnant with significance that resonated with centralised types in the long history of state buildings. His plan was an abstraction blending a great many ideas together into an indissoluble unity. Through the penetration of tradition, a virtual archetype was unearthed and revitalised.

22, Louis Kahn, Parliament, Dacca, Bangladesh, 1964-73.
23, plan of Dacca Parliament.
24, Charles Garnier, plan of Paris Opéra, 1863.
25, Tomb of Hummayum, Delhi, sixteenth century.
26, A. Palladio, Villa Trissino, c1555.
27, Baths of Caracalla, Rome.
28, Louis Kahn, sketch of Acropolis.

Against the poverty of functionalism and the false 'richness' of fake revivalism, Kahn stands out like a sentinel of ancient sense and principle. His formal system blended together ideas from many periods, East and West, over an archaic core. He did not copy the externals of past styles, or indulge in Mannerist commentaries, but probed to the underlying principles. Like Wright, or Le Corbusier, or Aalto he tried to interpret social imperatives in a spirit that touched on 'the elemental law and order inherent in all great architecture'.



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