

THE INAUGURAL THOMAS CUBITT LECTURE

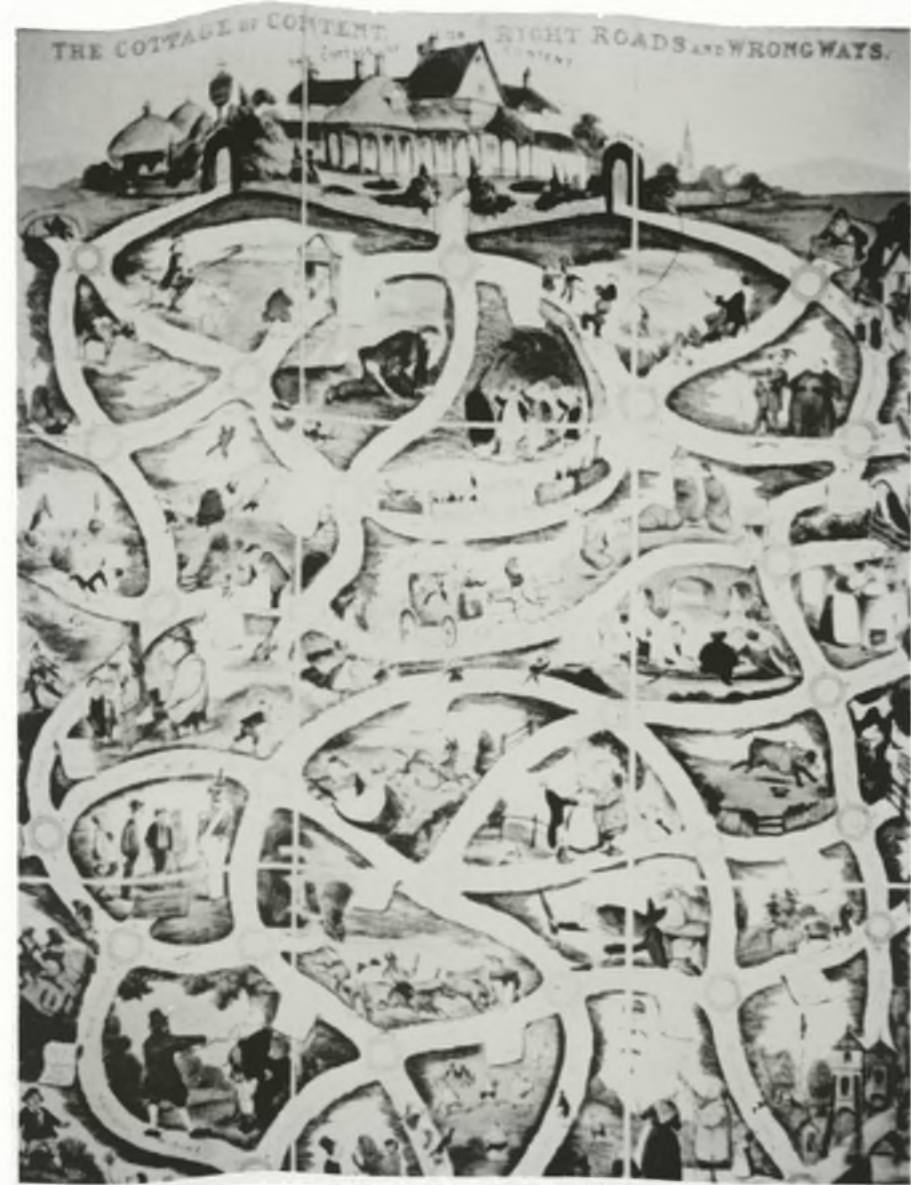
REFLECTIONS

ON THE PRESENT STATE OF ARCHITECTURE

Giancarlo de Carlo



Thomas Cubitt, almost as important in Great Britain as Baron Haussmann was on the Continent



The Cottage of Content, or Right Roads and Wrong Ways

The Inaugural Thomas Cubitt Lecture by Professor Giancarlo de Carlo at The Royal Institution, London, May 1978

When, a few months ago, I was invited to give this evening's talk, the choice of the subject was kindly left to me by my hosts. It was only agreed that I was to talk about architecture and possibly about some of its present problems.

Architecture, however, can be discussed in two different ways: either as an autonomous activity which is self-defining by its own specialisation; or as a system of communication and expression that can be deciphered only if one knows the context in which the messages are emitted and received. In other words, it seems that one can talk about architecture either by analysing its objects or by interpreting its process.

In my opinion, both ways can give interesting information, but I'm inclined to believe that the second results in more significant understanding, even though I'm quite aware it involves difficulties. For example: the risk of losing the centre of the problem by mistaking ideological

assumptions for actual facts; and also the temptation to shift understanding to areas outside architecture – areas which are regarded all the more clear the more they are unknown.

On the other hand, it seems to me – that to decipher relationships between architecture and society is more difficult today than it was in the past. The surface of architecture is once more ruffled by the changeable breezes of eclecticism and it is hard to perceive underneath any basic trend revealing actual intentions. As for society – one has a feeling that it has changed from a crystallised to an amorphous state, in which we can't yet make out any pattern heralding the development of a future structure.

This two-fold hypothesis is meant only as a pointer for what I am about to say: for the time being I prefer to leave it in suspense, since I do not want to sound as though I were concluding when I have just begun.

I will therefore start anew by saying that the choice of the subject I was to discuss this evening took me a very long time. Every single element I was exploring looking

for a clue, seemed hazy and frail as soon as I isolated it. So I kept changing my point of observation for a long time – until, spontaneously, almost without realizing it, I focused on Mr Thomas Cubitt, the illustrious and unknowing cause of my being here this evening.

So it happened that my thinking took a path quite different from the one I, and probably my audience, expected. In fact, I will consider a few problems of contemporary architecture, not according to a pattern arranged by myself, but according to what was suggested by my recent and casual acquaintance with Mr Thomas Cubitt. Instead of giving a talk, I'll try to retrace the itinerary I followed in its preparation.

I will start with a brief outline of Mr Thomas Cubitt. My British listeners will perhaps find this preface unnecessary, and in a way they are quite right – for it seems to me, that Mr Thomas Cubitt was important in Great Britain almost as Baron Haussmann was on the Continent. The fact is, however, that tonight there may be some non-British people, born in a Continent that was still isolated in Victorian times. If these persons (and me too, until a few months ago) have heard of a Mr Cubitt in the histories of architecture, this was probably not Thomas but William, mentioned as the identifiable author of the large undertakings promoted by his senior brother.

We may note, in passing, how in histories of architecture more importance is usually given to professional qualifications than to the real substance of architectural events; to the persons who signed the plans than to those who conceived and carried them out; to the person who established the base and height of the pyramid than to those who organized the transport of the stones or raised them up to the summit.

But let's go back to Mr Thomas Cubitt. He lived from 1788 to 1855: from the time when the first contradictions of the Industrial Revolution had begun to explode to when all these contradictions seemed to have found a solution in the apotheosis of the 1851 Great Exhibition. His first job was as a journeyman, a carpenter; then he spent a period as a ship's carpenter; at the age of twenty-one, he settled in London; at twenty-seven he became the owner of a building company, perhaps the first that was able to carry out all kind of building operations and had a workforce employed and paid full-time all the year round. When he was about fifty he brought to fruition three ideas of his that were to have very important effects on future building activity. The first was 'contract in gross', that's to say, a form of undertaking of construction work that from the start decided all the operations to be carried out right down to the last detail, establishing the overall cost in such a precise and binding way as to leave the client with no margin of risk. The second idea was the industrialisation of site operations in order to lower production costs and reduce waste of time and human energy. This was achieved by rationalising the sequence of operations and introducing the division of work.

His third idea was to link building production with land speculation, in such a way as to make the one both motivation and result of the other. The shrewd use of these completely new tools gave his construction business unprecedented stability, and in 1828 he was already employing more than a thousand workers. Having acquired the capacity of carrying out an enormous

amount of work – very promptly executed, to high standards and at competitive prices – he undertook a series of very important works, destined to form the new structure of London, at that time rapidly expanding under the pressure of a strong immigration. When already famous for his excellence as a builder and for his financial strength, he was given several prestige jobs for rehabilitating Crown buildings and as consultant for a series of public town-planning and administrative operations.

In October 1850 he became supervisor of the construction of the Crystal Palace, and it is not unlikely that he may have had some influence in the decision to abandon the international competition and give the project to Joseph Paxton.

I have tried to sketch a profile (a mere outline) of the ideas and deeds of Mr Thomas Cubitt. Those from the Continent who wish to learn more, may read the biography by Ms Hermione Hobhouse (*Thomas Cubitt, Master Builder*, MacMillan, 1971). Those (from Britain or the Continent) who wish to go deeper and discover the nuances of the man, may look through the newspapers of the period, and in particular *The Builder*. Here, unlike in most books on the history of architecture the facts have the exciting smell coming from contact with reality.

The brief information I have given should be enough, however, for the purpose of my talk, and should give a point of reference for the four subjects I wish now to develop. These are:

Architecture and Morality

Architecture and the Client

Architecture and Large-Scale Programmes

Architecture and Language

In the profile I sketched, I talked of building operations, never once using the word 'architecture'. However, I would like to premise my arguments by saying that I consider many of Mr Thomas Cubitt's operations to be works of architecture: not so much because they are rich in formal values, but because, above all, they perfectly express all the phases that an architectural event has to pass through in order to exist in physical and social space and to survive its physical existence living on in the collective memory.

1 Architecture and morality

Mr Thomas Cubitt became widely known because his buildings satisfied the needs of his clients, due to the meticulous construction, the punctual following of building programmes and the scrupulous observance of the estimates originally supplied.

Mr Thomas Cubitt was, therefore, endowed with solid professional morality. Using a very 'canonical' word, we may say that he was the founder of a 'deontology', not only because of his irreproachable behaviour but also because through this behaviour he established a code of norms that from that time would have to be observed by anyone involved in building. But professional morality is only one, and very limited aspect of architectural morality. Indeed, the recent dispute over 'morality' in some academic architectural circles has not even touched on the question of 'professionalism'. One might say that it has been overlooked on purpose, so that the debate could be taken straight away into the field of conjectural philology, where delight in launching hypotheses on the origin of



ideas is equalled by horror at recording actual facts. So, along with the question of professionalism some of its important ramifications have also been excluded from consideration: such as the question of knowledge of the trade (both in training and in practice), and the question of how to bring to a minimum level of civil decency the large amount of three-dimensional space which is daily produced with complete disregard for any moral problem. We should not be very surprised at this: the eclecticism, which I mentioned at the beginning, is a signal that unfailingly lights up whenever Academia takes over. And Academia is always ill-informed on what happens outside its carefully secluded sphere.

Yet, one is tempted to wonder how the various parties arrayed in the debate on Architecture and Morality would judge the model of morality proposed by Mr Thomas Cubitt. Probably none of them would concentrate their interest, nor find anything to say, on the professional commitment suggested by the model; but the model would very likely be vigorously challenged by two opposed groups for what it implicitly suggests about the objectives

Architecture and Morality: fighting off the fires of destruction

a work of architecture should aim at.

One of these groups – including many of those who like to call themselves Post-Modernists – would say that the model is over-conditioned by consideration for the receiver of the work. Another group – including those who Post-Modernists like to call Modernists, namely the surviving upholders of rationalist teleology – would say that Mr Cubitt's consideration for the receiver is quite inadequate. For the first group, in fact, the receiver is an accidental event which the work has to transcend in order to gain subjective tension and become a 'symbol', all the more enlightening for society the more it is estranged from it. For the second group, on the contrary, the needs and expectations of the receiver must be brought to the objective dimension of a standard human being, belonging to a standard and perfectible society which architecture aims to create through significant representations of its most meaningful features: development, greater-number, mass-production, technology, industrialisation and so on.

This second group is now scanty and has hardly any more voice. The first group is meagre too, but has various voices – and many amplifiers – with many different tones, from a threatening bass to a peevish treble. But the curious fact is that, apart from their different acoustic intensities, Post-Modernists agree on one point with the surviving teleologists of Rationalism: on the belief that architecture can induce an exorcising power on society.

Mr Thomas Cubitt doesn't seem to have believed this fairy-tale, which of course doesn't mean he wasn't considering architecture to be very important, both as a specific activity and as a reflection of society. Society in his time was undergoing amazing changes. When he was thirty-one a steamship crossed the Atlantic; when he was forty-two the first train linked Manchester to Liverpool, running at 30 miles per hour; when he was forty-nine the telegraph had begun to weave a network of instantaneous communication between the main cities of Great Britain. In the same period, after the violent shock of the Reform Bill, the political structure was re-arranging in a new pattern where the Bourgeoisie was firmly holding power and the Aristocracy still exercised its skill in the technical management of the State. Outside the borders of this pattern was growing the mass of the poor, living in the most oppressive conditions of misery and alienation, still unaware, at that time, of being carrier of the most rending contradiction of the very political and economic system which was rejecting them.

The Great Bourgeois, aspiring to a new style of living and of representing themselves in the city, together with the Aristocrats who were still powerful and wished to transfer their landed wealth to more profitable investments, were those for whom the work of Mr Thomas Cubitt was destined. He did not bother himself at all with the mass of the poor except to recommend sanitary and technical measures aimed at better protecting the city from the degradation of the new spread of indecent slums.

Should we therefore conclude that his proverbial professional morality was standing out against a background of a deep political, social and human immorality? Judging by today's value systems we would be tempted to say this was the case – but we would probably be committing an error in historical evaluation.

Indeed, for all we know, Mr Thomas Cubitt – like many others of his illustrious contemporaries – sincerely believed that, letting loose individual energies, 'laissez-faire' would accelerate progress, and that in the long run 'progress' would free even the poor from need and alienation, finally compensating for all the cruelties 'laissez-faire' had unleashed on them. So, we can only conclude that the operations of Mr Thomas Cubitt, and even his professional morality, were functional to the requirements of the power of that time.

This conclusion would not surprise our hero nor whoever earnestly tried to explore the motivations behind the most significant architectural events in any social system, in any age and in any country in the world. Just to mention one of these earnest researchers, Vincent Scully said in 1968:

'Only power makes architecture, and architecture always faithfully reflects the nature of the power than created it.'

After all, even the Modern Movement faithfully reflected the requirements of the power of its time.

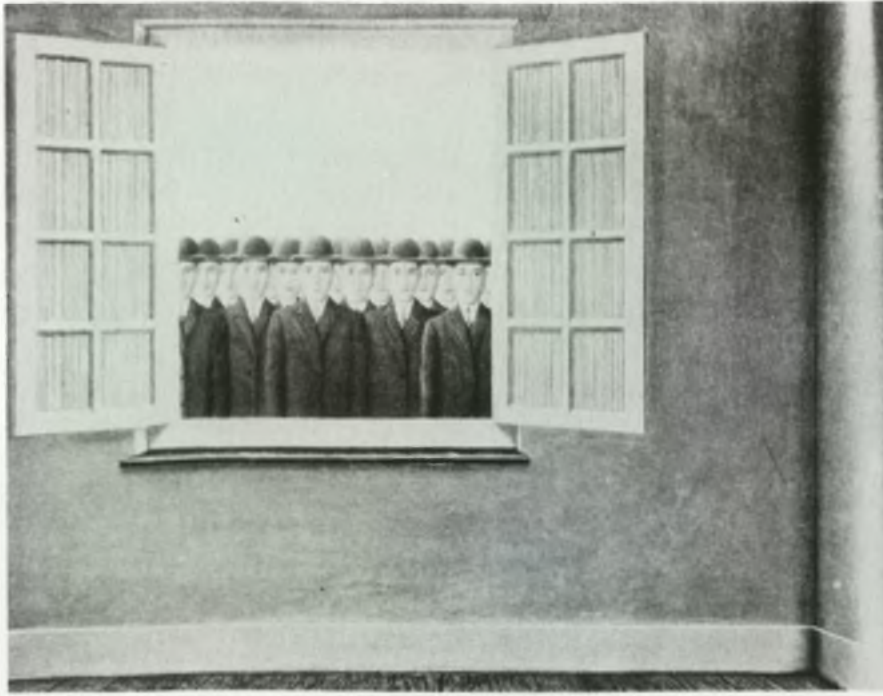
It had promised a New Jerusalem founded on justice, on freedom and on regaining the right of expression for all. Instead it ended up by studying how to reduce to an 'existential minimum' the space destined for the dwellings of the poor and even the less poor (with the good intention of course, of making better use of available resources, but never once asking whether the available resources were adequate, whether their scarcity derived from the diversion of wealth towards stupid or violent goals, whether the imposed restrictions were not perhaps aimed at confirming in the organisation of physical space the segregating pattern established by the power in the social body.)

The Modern Movement had promised social Harmony through the Unity of the architectural environment. It ended up, instead, by adopting the practice of dividing up the city in zones, and by separating – in every urban, suburban or rural area – residence from production, work from play, movement from relaxation, use by consumption from use by contemplation, the private from the public sphere, (with, of course, the good intention of bringing some order into an environment that was becoming chaotic, but without really considering that the order they were suggesting was linear and mechanical, quite similar to the order apparent in police regulations, in bureaucratic files, in the division of work and in the principles which lead to fragmentation of human life.)

The Modern Movement promised to spread a new quality right to the most remote and spoiled articulation of three-dimensional physical space. It ended up, however, by accepting the logic of the market, which entailed the stabilisation and manipulation of the values of building-land and real estate. (With the good intention, of course, to get involved with reality, in order not to be confined to the sanctuaries of the superfluous and be able to intervene in every situation; but without realising that applying the logic of the market to physical space means reducing it to a mere instrument of production, a mere commodity: so that quality ceases to be a necessary inherent value and becomes a fluctuating feature, mostly aimed at stimulating trade.)

We could go on for a long time listing the targets that the Modern Movement didn't reach. We could consider the hypothesis that its instruments were ineffective; or that it didn't aim at its target carefully enough; or that those who aimed concentrated more attention on the subjectivity of performing than on the objectivity of its reason, thus wandering in narcissistic spells; or that the target was so resilient as to absorb every blow. We would probably end by deciding that each of these hypotheses is plausible, and so would add one more voice to the chorus who today, with increasing insistence, announce the failure and death of the Modern Movement. But conclusions reached in this way would be rather insignificant.

Perhaps, then, we need to go beyond the more marginal and superficial appearance – the delight of society gossips – and discover the basic reasons for this failure. As far as death is concerned, we should remember that it occurred long before the time established by the many journalists now interested in the case. The Modern Movement died when silence was imposed on Tatlin when he designed an ornithopter, when Le Corbusier wrote a letter to Mussolini, when Lofan won the competition for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow, when Rietveld built his first chair,



above (upper):
Architecture and the Client: Magritte

above (lower):
The Modern Movement died when silence was imposed on Tatlin for designing an ornithopter

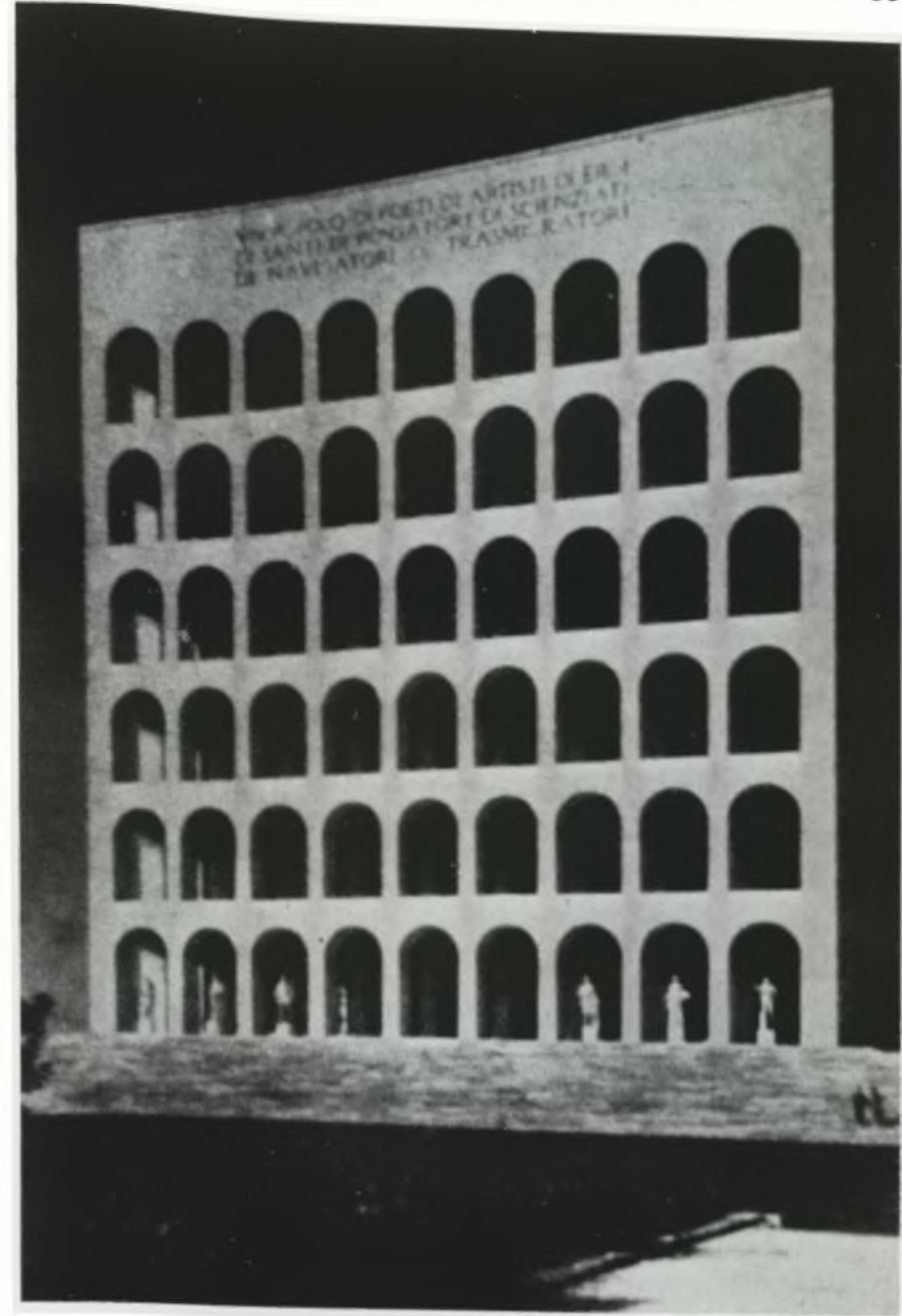
right:
The long shadows of Neoclassicism: 'only power makes architecture'

when the drawings of the Chapel at Ronchamp were published, when the conclusions of the Congress of Dubrovnik were drawn up, when Gropius built the Pan-Am Building, when the CIAM was disbanded at Otterlo, when the Lincoln Center was opened, when Premier Pompidou gave way to the operations at La Defence, and so on, and so forth.

Therefore, the Modern Movement died many times. And each time it was reborn, because, despite of the blow received at each death, under its ashes the matrix that had generated its previous existences remained intact: this was the principle that architecture, if it is to find again its most authentic essence, must be disentangled from the requirements of the power.

The question is that of founding a new relationship between morality and architecture: a relationship which doesn't yet exist and perhaps will not be reached for a long time.

After all, if architecture is to be disentangled from the requirements of the power then it needs to find or even invent a new type of client.



This leads me to the second of the subjects I proposed to discuss.

2 Architecture and the client

Mr Thomas Cubitt offered his skill to a society that was growing and had faith in its growth. It's true that the living conditions of the working class horrified Frederick Engels on his visit to Manchester in 1844. But it is also true that in the very same period the average human life span was lengthening rapidly, wages were increasing, the price of bread was falling in relation to the purchasing power of money, working hours were decreasing, roads and public transport were improving, and, after the reduction of the newspaper tax, the press was becoming a means of information open to all.

The Bourgeoisie, now firmly in command, was anchoring the bases of its authority to two principles that were elementary and therefore immediately understandable. The first of these was individual self-interest – an inexhaustible reserve of energy, enough to change the world. The second was a universally-accepted value system, capable of neutralising the contradictions emerging from the unleashing of the first.

The purpose, thus, wasn't only that of producing and making profit, but also that of giving an ethical basis to production and profit. The idea of Progress – remifying in the various branches of human activity and freeing them, one after the other from their original damnation,

beginning with the noblest down to the humblest (in due time) – released in terms of actual immanence the same pandemic force the great religious movements had derived from the myths of transcendence.

Progress was believed in not only by the Bourgeoisie, the Aristocracy and Civil Servants, but also by professionals, workers, farm labourers, and even by architects and builders.

The Victorian ruling class, riding the wave of industrialisation, used to be – and still is – described as dedicated solely to exploitation and accumulation of wealth. It is when we meet people like Mr Thomas Cubitt that we realise how theatrical such description is. Though taking for granted that exploitation and accumulation of wealth had full sway, we can't help agreeing with the passage in *The Communist Manifesto* where Karl Marx gives one of the most vivid eulogies of the Bourgeoisie.

But when kind of society do we offer our skills to?

The contradictions of the early nineteenth century have not been absorbed – on the contrary they have multiplied. Moreover, the idea of Progress has vanished together with the value system that was to be universally accepted. Forces opposed to the Bourgeoisie have grown with the aim of crumbling its dominance, which was becoming increasingly exclusive and unjust as the assumptions of its ideology were increasingly seen to be barren.

But the struggle has gradually moved into the area chosen by the Bourgeoisie, and among the opposed forces prevailed Socialism, which, like the Bourgeoisie, saw the 'economic factors' as the fundamental motivation and consequence of every human event. All other aspects of human events, from material expectation to the need for expression, were seen as accessory, dependent, and subject to change automatically at every transformation of the productive structure. The confrontation between the two ideologies was bitter. It continues today and it seems due to last a long time in the future.

However, it has come about that the two opposed sides, worn out by the effort and cunning invested in the fight, have come to resemble each other. The political structure of both Capitalism and Socialism have gradually shrunk into two rigid power concretions: respectively, oligopolistic power and state power. Meanwhile, the middle class and the working class have begun to flow into a large common vase, uniting and mixing together in the Low-Middle-Class Universe.

The two power concretions seem to be without aims, or rather, as though the aims are insignificant abstractions in comparison with the assumed concreteness of their behaviour; which is similar in both cases and similarly tends to self-preservation.

The Low-Middle-Class Universe continues to expand and seems the most coherent materialisation of the principle which sees the economic factors as the exclusive generator of individual and social dynamics. However, the idea of 'economic foundation' seems to have changed too, since it no longer refers to the whole cyclical process of production but only to one of its aspects: that of consumption. As a result there is no more room for free enterprise, which is a risk not only for the poorest classes but also for those who exercise it. Nor is there any room for careful programming of the use of resources with relation to the real needs of the community.

Unlimited room, however, is given to the slow convolutions of bureaucracy, which continues to grow and to increasingly assume the role of secular arm, equally disposed to serve one or the other power concretions. Bureaucracy in fact passes over every physical or ideological frontier showing itself to be the first really international institution in history. It oppresses by refusing to act, and it declines responsibility, because it is not interested in governing but only in lasting.

If the Low-Middle-Class Universe continues to expand, so will Bureaucracy, and vice versa; since the two phenomena are complementary and concomitant. If this happens, attention will be entirely focused on the question of Quantity. And Quantity will be more and more incorporeal and dimensionless to become adjusted to the simulacra of consumption. The question of Quality, on the other hand, will be diverted to the search for decorative consolation that is suited to the sluggish and immobile state of affairs and which, unlike the search for Quality, does not involve taking decisions, assuming responsibility or running risks.

There are many symptoms that make us think that this is not a totally improbable conclusion. Some hints may be found in architecture, which, as we know, has the virtue of anticipating and registering imminent social crises, and has also the weakness of prostituting itself in advance to emerging powers. The present, flourishing eclecticism doesn't seem to have anything to do with the eclecticism that flourished from the end of the nineteenth century to the First World War. The latter can be seen as the last attempt by the declining Bourgeoisie to unify culture on the basis of its own values, proposing the intemperance of a mixture of styles after having failed with sanctimonious Neoclassicism. (I realise that this intemperance can also be seen as the expression of decline itself, or of the instability induced by decline, or of the conflict situation that emerged parallel with decline.) The present eclecticism, on the other hand, seems to be a headlong and inauspicious flight in search of a role allowing survival to the dying out of the demand for architecture. If we accept this interpretation, then it is easier to see why the followers of the new eclecticism maintain that the use of an architectural space (and even its construction) pollutes the purity of the subjective design.

As a result, they prefer to concentrate on drawings, working on them to produce art pieces that cannot be reproduced, manipulating them to make them as uncommunicative as possible, and finally putting them on sale in art galleries. In this way consumption is sublimated, by putting language on the market in its pure state, before it is organised into its own particular structures that give it significance.

I apologise for having gone so far with this worrying prediction, but I thought it was necessary to pass through the tunnel of pessimism in order to make the emergence to optimistic prospects more convincing.

Antonio Averlino, known as Filarete, tells of how Adam, on a stormy day, faced with God who was chasing him from Eden, linked his hands over his head as if to form a roof, to make a form that would protect him from divine anger and from the rain. At that moment, and through that gesture, the first architecture appeared on the Earth.



Riding the wave of industrialisation, the Bourgeoisie smile and wave farewell

In my opinion, this image contains the most vivid definition ever given of architecture. It is a dazzling synthesis which established that architecture deals with three-dimensional physical space, organised in order to satisfy a need, using means that achieve universal significance the more they are simple and intense.

I also think that the image is deeply reassuring, because it shows that architecture will continue to exist as long as there are at least two human beings left in the world. (Eve is near Adam, and his gesture would have no sense if she were not there.)

But, besides this, it seems to me that the image gives other important hints.

The linked hands form a concavity that follows the form of Adam's head. They also form a convexity that deviates the rainflow outwards. They configure an image that asks for tolerance, while maintaining that humankind will survive, even though it won't be able to count on divine grace any more. They are a sign transmitted to Eve, who probably receives it and repeats the gesture in a similar way, proportioned to her features and her bent.

They also define a spatial situation that not only exists by itself, but also opens up a circuit of relationships between interior and exterior, between who experiences and who observes, between who immediately repeats the sign adapting it to new circumstances and who mentally registers it, to repeat it in the future, according to the needs and experiences gained in the meantime.

The image of Filarete says, therefore, that the aim of architecture is not to produce 'objects' but to give organisation and form to the space in which human events occur; to develop 'processes', which eventually give rise to physical configurations, but in fact begin before these configurations materialise and continue after their dissolution, living on in the memory and projecting themselves on other processes.

The image of Filarete also says that architecture consists essentially in the relationships between its configuration, the surrounding physical world, and whoever experiences it through use, contemplation or even casual encounter.

Finally, the image says that architecture is the most complete and significant system of communication available to human beings to express and represent themselves.

These three definitions settle the limits of architectural activity, and indicate also where the perimeter has to be held in tension to prevent it falling inwards thereby reducing the enclosed area. In some periods of history this area has reached its maximum extent; in others it has contracted under the external pressure of totalitarian power; and in other periods it has been distorted by the intrusion of ideological diversion inconsistent with the equilibrium of the internal tensions.

In the past, however, any kind of distortion, even of a profound nature, was compensated for by spontaneous productions – by peasants, mountain-dwellers, fishermen and nomads – who continued to hand down a comprehensive notion of architecture.

In our time it hardly happens to see the birth of a 'space' which becomes a 'place', in other words a physical configuration which is intensely used and experienced by people. It is equally rare to find human beings still capable of expressing and representing themselves through architectural language. It's as if mankind has been treacherously expropriated of its right to communicate the reasons and events of its existence through the form and organisation of its environment.

And so, conjecturing about the gesture of Adam, we have returned to our point of departure. Right from its remotest origins, the Modern Movement has been conscious of the expropriation of architecture that was being carried out in the world. This consciousness has weakened and picked up again in continual alternation during the course of its development; and if we really want to refer to the gossip column again, we could say that each weakening corresponded to a death and each strengthening to a resurrection. The alternation will probably continue until the consciousness becomes active and results in a choice of sides: either the requirements of power or else the restoration of the right to architecture for everybody. The second alternative is consistent with the Modern Movement's original motivations but entails profound changes in concepts, methods and instruments; and even before this, it requires the radical demystification of a heap of clichés at present

littering the scene. Among these is the assumption that every transformation of the physical environment – as a result of the complexity that has been reached – involves long, large-scale and codified programmes. And at this point I would like to pass to my third subject.

3 Architecture and large-scale programmes

The programmes of Mr Thomas Cubitt were not of immense size, nor did they require a long time to build, nor were they obscure.

On the contrary, they were well-known for their limitation in space, their concentration in time and their comprehensibility by anyone. Despite this, they had a basic importance in the nineteenth-century development of London.

From the scattered information that I have been able to gather, it seems to me that he only once conceived a programme of dimensions similar to those pursued by our present institutions: this was for a large site between Chelsea and Millbank inhabited by gardeners who had long supplied the city with excellent early produce. On 5 November 1825 *The Times* reported that Mr Thomas Cubitt had a project ready for the construction of 5 000 houses and that the gardeners in the area had already received eviction orders. I don't know what happened to that programme, but it seems rather large for the time and would have required many years to be carried out. As to obscurity, I have the impression that it was thoroughly impenetrable to the gardeners: they probably didn't understand the motives behind the operation, and they probably were unable to foresee the consequences, apart from those that would directly affect their own unexpectedly-devastated futures.

On every other occasion, however, those for whom Mr Thomas Cubitt worked not only understood all the implications of the proposed operation, but also had perfect liberty to directly intervene.

Lord Grosvenor participated in every phase of the programme for Belgravia and even discussed the minutest construction and stylistic details. Here, he was moved by the desire (shared by his builder) to achieve results that corresponded exactly with his needs and were representative of his ethical and aesthetic convictions. During the construction of the royal residence of Osborne House – an exceptional case, I appreciate – the Prince Consort participated in the drawing up of the plans. This is testified by the Royal Archives and by the entry made by Queen Victoria in her diary on 12 May 1845:

'It does my heart good to see how my beloved Albert enjoys it all.' (that is to say, the various phases of the project)

We may therefore suppose that, apart from the episode of the gardeners, Mr Thomas Cubitt applied in his work those principles and those methods that today are curtly summarized in the word, 'participation'.

Many would probably accept the hypothesis favourably; especially those architects who consider themselves 'participative' par excellence because they receive their programmes from their clients, to whose approval the projects are later submitted.

The point is that the problem of the gardeners, possibly historically unimportant in the Victorian era, has become in our days historically very important indeed. Hence if

we talk of participation, we must refer to gardeners, and not so much to royal families.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I ought perhaps to say that I have been referring to gardeners, only because I happened to come across them in my readings, and not because I consider them to be the only representatives of humankind hit by the calamities of uncontrolled development. On the contrary, I believe that these calamities affect an enormous number of people who do not have the fortune – or the arrogance – to possess marketable land and are hence excluded from the process of decision concerning the transformation of the physical environment.

I also believe that the decision process has two different areas of application: one concerning the functional aspects of the transformation, and the other concerning its qualities.

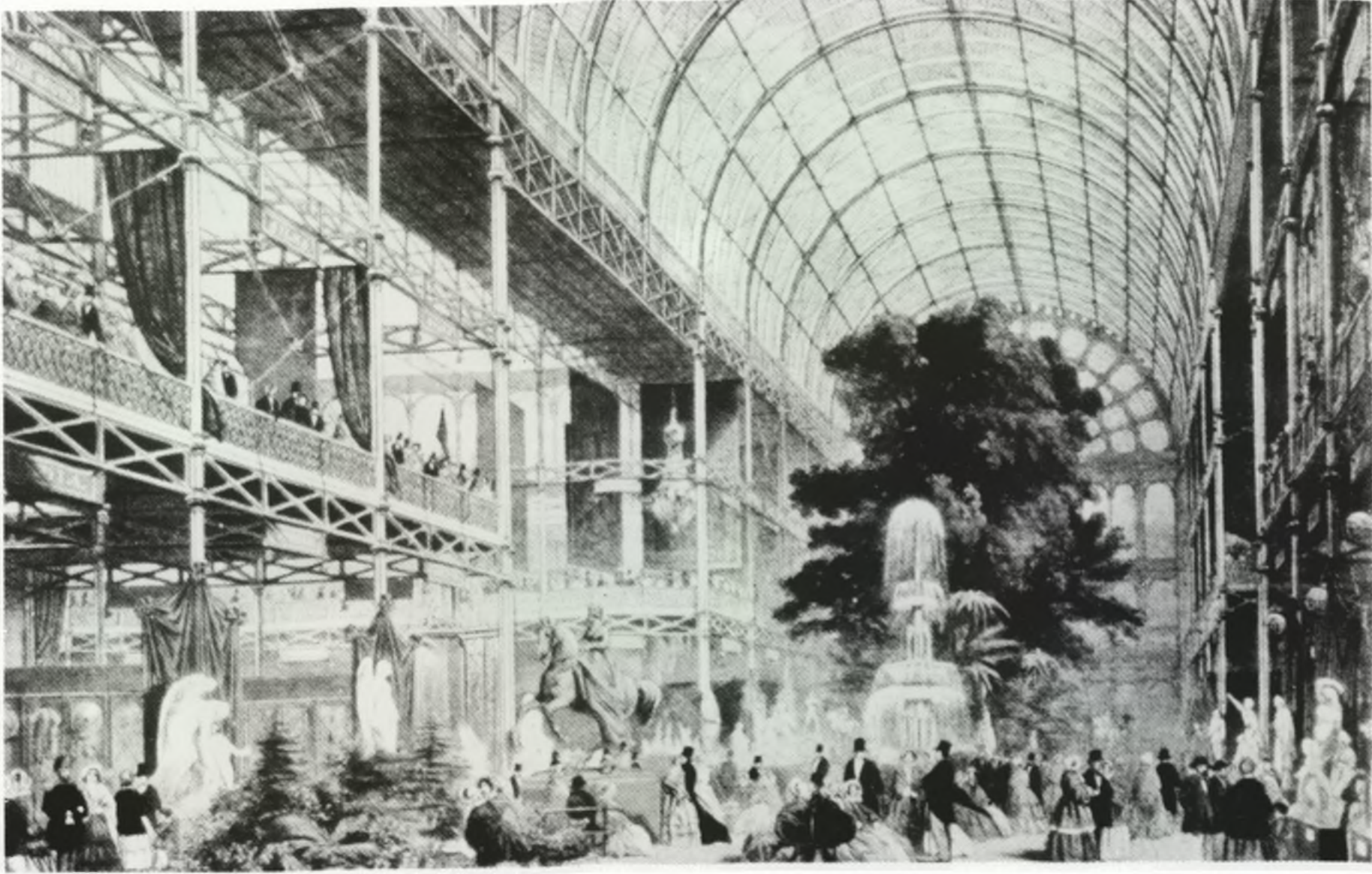
Hence, by 'participation' we should understand the involvement of those social groups, at present excluded, in the decision-making process, and in both its areas of application.

Indeed, by limiting action to the first area there would be a displacement into the field of social action. Here – as advocacy planning proved – the questions in dispute are basically political, sociological and juridical. On the other hand, limiting action to the second area, would mean sliding into vernacular gratification. This – as shown by recent experiences, some of them in Great Britain – replaces the search for suitable solutions with the passive adoption of obsolete models, whose only merit is that of belonging to the most banal iconography. The integration of the two areas – of the functional structure and of the formal and organizational quality of the environment – brings back the question into the real field of architecture, because it restores the circuit of relationships between physical configurations, their real motivations and their concrete consequences.

From this last point we may derive another series of observations concerning the changes that participation leads to in concepts, methods, actors' role, architectural instruments.

The process of organising three-dimensional physical space passes through a series of consecutive stages: the working out of the programme, the assignment of resources, choice of site, definition of the organisational system, decisions concerning form, technological choices, building, use, maintenance, technical obsolescence, re-use, and physical obsolescence, in terms of demolition or ruin. Other stages might be identified; the sequence may become cyclic, especially when the architectural event is very significant and persists in the collective memory beyond the time of its dissolution, thereby influencing other events. However, all this doesn't change the fact that in the present architectural system of producing, the stages are quite distinct and separate from each other and at each stage actors hardly communicate with each other.

On the other hand, it is assumed that the 'project' concerns only a specific moment corresponding to a few intermediate stages: the definition of the various aspects of physical configuration and the choice of means to realise it. However, the moment of the programme, of the assignment of resources and of the choice of site, these are



Architecture and Large-Scale Programmes: the saga of the city

also 'project', because they involve the establishment of coherent relationships between forecasts and actions. And even the moment of use is 'project', because it involves changes suggested by critical evaluation. These three aspects of the 'project' are however separated because of a hierarchic system that concentrates all power in those who decide and finance the operation, puts the moment of the configuration in a subordinate position, minimises or restrains the moment of use, and makes the recognition of the state of obsolescence slide forwards or backwards according to reasons of convenience which have nothing to do with the organic structure of the process.

The introduction of participation breaks this hierarchy between the operation's various stages and moments, and brings them all back to the same logic: the problematic logic of the 'project'. The programme, the assignment of resources, and the choice of site become hypotheses that must be tested, and even be radically changed if they prove to have inappropriate causes or undesirable consequences.

The architect's role shifts from the idiocy of specialisation to the responsibility of competence, because his job is no longer limited to 'how' to carry out a system of decisions made by others, but involves understanding and revealing the causes and effects underlying these decisions.

The user becomes the real receiver of the operation, thus gaining the right to make his needs and values felt by competing in a dialectical confrontation with all the other actors at every stage of the process.

In addition, many false problems vanish – problems that have distorted the methodological structure of architecture since perhaps the Age of Enlightenment. The assumption vanishes according to which every specific activity corresponds to a specific typology. (This assumption used to be maintained by Beaux Arts and was inherited by the Modern Movement, although we know that every activity reflects the character of the social and cultural context in which it takes place, and so may give rise to an infinite number of different typologies.) The assumption vanishes, according to which technology is expressive in itself, so that an artifact becomes more representative of the present age when the technology is more sophisticated. (Though it seems quite clear that technology can only be a support of expression; that our age is marked by various contradictory aspects, so that a situation of technical underdevelopment is not only 'contemporary' but may even be advanced. It also seems quite clear that if technological sophistication is not appropriate to the level of technical development and to the cultural tradition, then it generates standardising and even monstrous effects.)

The fallacy according to which form follows function becomes exposed. (In fact we know that functions, being

pre-conceived schematisations of human behaviour, actually do not exist. We also know that human behaviour not only is manifold and manifests itself in a variety of forms, but can also be generated by new formal configurations or adapt itself to forms that already exist and have survived the aim for which they had been shaped.)

The list of false problems that vanish when faced with participation could be continued; but I fear that it would result in a long digression, so I prefer to leave it open.

Anyway, I intended to focus my third argument on Large-Scale Programmes, and I wish to do this with a few brief observations.

I hope that what I have said so far has made it clear, even though indirectly, that the question of Large-Scale Programmes is the falsest of all the false problems around. (It is also the most stubborn opposition that participatory architecture has to fight against.)

It is maintained that our age is marked by phenomena of Greatest Number and that the equilibrium of the physical environment can only be achieved through Large-Scale Programmes covering large areas of land and long periods of time. Phenomena are usually described in dramatic terms: the advance of the desert, environmental pollution, the decline of transport systems due to exhaustion of energy sources, and the spiralling growth in demand for dwellings and services. And the Programmes are equally dramatic, because they imply the use of enormous resources, the involvement of vast areas, and the extension of operations over limitless time.

But everybody knows now, from experience, that these Large-Scale Programmes regularly fail: however much the objectives of the operations are widened, the desert will continue to devour cultivated land, two petroli tanker wrecks a year will suffice to pollute hundreds of miles of coastline for years, fuel consumption will accelerate its growth along rapidly-rising parabolas, and the gap between demand and supply of dwellings and services will continue to widen. Many, as a result, are beginning to ask themselves if this paradox is not perhaps due to the fact that it is effects, not causes, that are being dealt with. And so the causes, remaining untouched, continue to reproduce themselves, multiplying the effects and carrying them to dimensions that are too great to be covered by any programme, no matter how Large-Scale it may be. Few, however, are able to understand the connections between the proliferation of Large-Scale Programmes and the fact that society tends to dissolve into an amorphous state; between the stubborn search for every larger intents, and the wish to make immobilism seem legitimate; and between the diversion of attention from the human-scale temporal and spatial sphere, and the abandonment of the search for quality.

We probably ought to meditate a great deal on these connections and try to discover how to ward off the threats and risks of Large-Scale Programmes, though reaching the great size and the long time, through a linked series of small-scale, short period and limited resource actions. Which means, after all, bringing back the curiosity and passion of individual and social groups to the expression of daily events that fall within the sphere of direct action and perception. It means, in other words, giving architecture its original essence again; which is the generation of continuous participation opportunities, by means of the

irresistible communication power of its particular language.

This is not an easy goal – I feel it is necessary to say this, in order to guard myself too from the fallacy of ascribing the same clearness possessed by the point one wishes to reach to the path that one must follow to get there. It is not easy also because, when the changeable breezes of eclecticism are blowing, it becomes difficult to distinguish what is peculiar to the language of architecture from what is necessary.

I come thus to my fourth and final subject.

4 Language and architecture

It doesn't seem that Mr Thomas Cubitt was tormented by problems about language. From this point of view his buildings appear quite confident and relaxed. As a reference he used the syntax of the age, which, naturally, was Neoclassical; but he did not hesitate to adopt redundant or unadorned phrasing, or to construct composite or vernacular periphrases, according to the case.

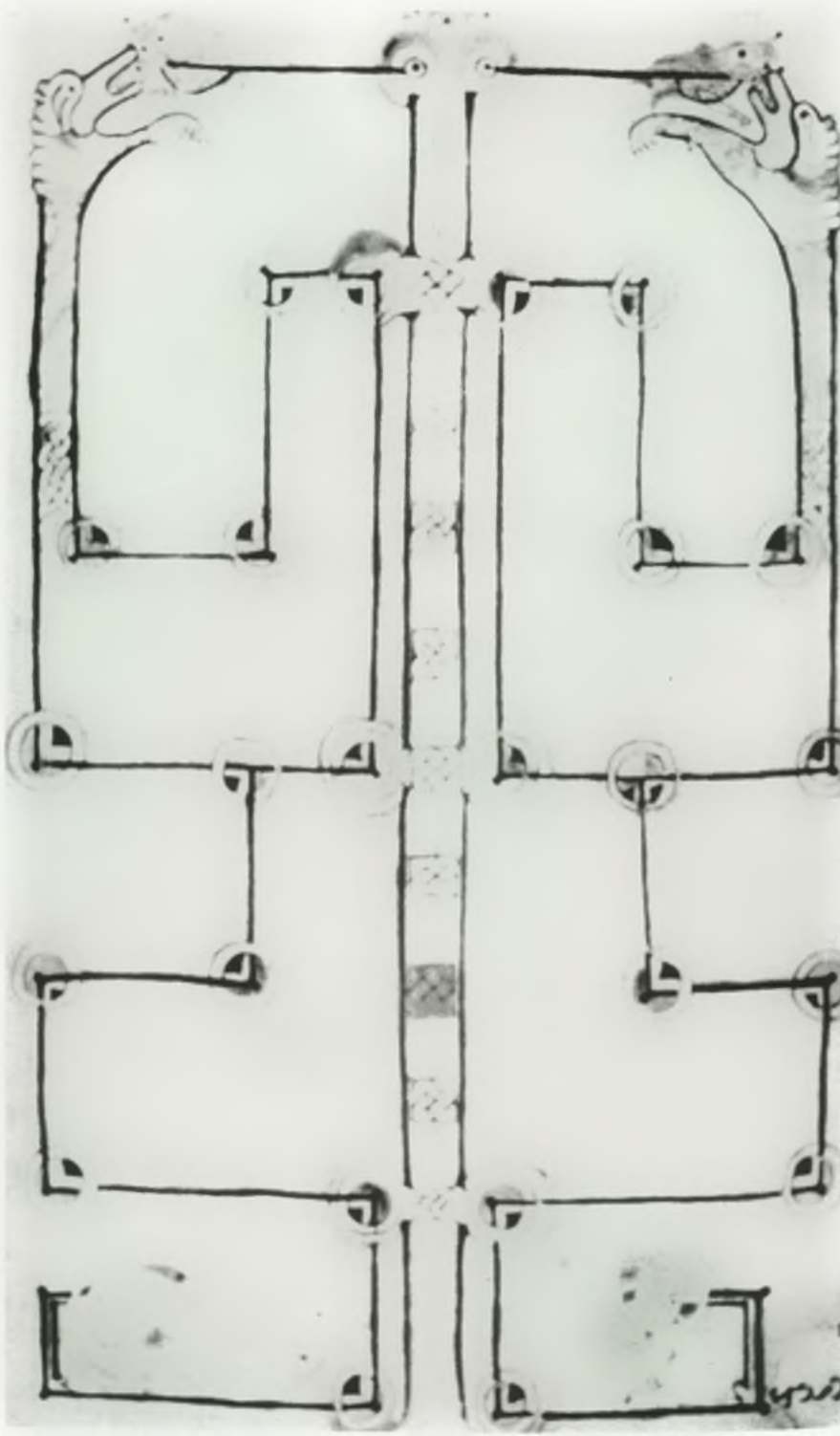
He accurately graded the quantity of messages (or, better, allusions) to the importance of the work and to the prestige (generally equal to wealth) of the client. We often see a rather extreme level of lexical simplification, possibly due to the need to save on work-time to honour the tight deadlines that had been promised. Possibly Mr Thomas Cubitt preferred to give up a little eloquence for the sake of his credibility; but it is also possible that he persuaded his client that eloquence was less important than rapidly putting capital to profit.

It must be said, however, that sacrifices were rarely made at the expense of the interior organisation or of the quality of materials or of the technical execution, since comfort and durability were unquestionable goals and had first priority.

It is interesting to note also that when the lexical simplification is taken furthest, facades are cut according to simplistic rhythms of solids and voids, that much later were brought to the extreme both by German Rationalists and the Late-Neoclassicists of the 1930s.

This last version is much quoted and adopted by the Neo-Classical trend of contemporary eclecticism.

The analogy, however, is rather superficial because languages take on a meaning in relation to their contexts, and in the cases mentioned, the contexts are completely different, so that any possible lexical consonance means little more than the same tempo in four different sonatas, by four different composers of four different periods. Mr Thomas Cubitt's short-cuts, like his Revivalist and Romantic diversions, are the expression of such deeply-rooted self-assurance that it allowed canonization and experimentation to co-exist in every aspect of life, architecture included. The sharp cuts in the plastered walls as well as the Tuscan order findings, are grafted onto spatial structures that reflect the solidity of principles common to the architecture and society of the age. Namely, the projection of individual success in the private sphere (the interior) and in the public sphere (the urban space); the respectable expression of the owner's self-interest, offered as a model for others, to follow if and when they reached the same level; a scale of values openly stating all its rules and permitted exceptions, to show the advantage of adopting it and abandoning others less rigorous or secure.



Language and Architecture: eloquence or empty gesture

The case of Rationalism was different because it was based on a break between an architecture lured by the sirens of ideology and a society in crisis, guided by a ruling class who no longer believed in their role, yet survived by radicalising their own contradictions. Thus, the final aim of architecture became the creation of a physical environment brightened by sincerity, clarity and order: essential ingredients of a new virtue destined to exorcise the vices of a society corrupted by hypocrisy, obscurity and disorder. But sincerity is not a value in itself but for what it reveals; clarity is desirable only if it doesn't lead to an arbitrary impoverishment of the complexity of the image; and order may be – and often is – the result of repression freezing the dialectic of human events. If we are not aware of these ambiguities, our search for sincerity, clarity and order results in the same effects brought about by hypocrisy, obscurity and disorder. Indeed, behind the chaste facades of Rationalism there is a physical space modelled on the principle of the 'Existenz minimum', dictating that surfaces and volumes must be adapted to what is assumed to be essential

behaviour, thereby making impossible any behaviour considered superfluous. But to sort out the essential from human behaviour, we must first reduce its elements to standards, that is to say, adjust them to the standard human being who produces 'standard actions'.

Thence a series of problems arise. First, the 'standard human beings' have no experience, and therefore no values and consequently are outside society and history, since by definition their artificial existence doesn't go beyond the envelope defined by the rotation of their limbs. Also, standardisation is an inherently objective operation which yet cannot avoid the subjective judgement of the performer; hence the performance always has questionable legitimacy.

Finally, we can only separate the essential from the superfluous when there is general agreement about the value of both; otherwise we may consider superfluous what is essential and vice versa, depending on the social groups concerned.

We cannot deny the Rationalists had the merit of bringing attention back to the significant components of physical space and the variety of connotations that a spatial configuration may take when planned with scientific commitment. But the principle behind the method was basically authoritarian so that it actually resulted in the first serious attack – precisely because it was scientific – on the freedom of human beings to give their own image to their dwellings, buildings, and neighbourhoods.

It was an attack parallel to that brought to the work environment by the introduction of the assembly line. In fact, elimination of superfluous doesn't necessarily mean abolition of waste. Instead, it may mean the loss of those breaches in conformity that allow for adaptation and change, and may produce, in the organisation of space, the same alienated condition affecting those who are no longer able to grasp the unity of the productive process in which they are involved.

As for language, it couldn't avoid being affected by the ideology behind its content; indeed it has been so affected as to become an ideology itself. The intent to restore to forms an identity fitting the nature of materials and – symmetrically – to sublimate the nature of materials to make it fit the assumed identity of forms, has ended up at the repudiation of 'materiality' and at the acknowledgement of a 'metaphysical immateriality' that is incompatible with use and the wear of time.

Rationalist architecture was therefore possessed by a vocation towards the irrational, homologous to the latent madness of the society it meant to improve. This homology helped to restore an unconscious solidarity with the intemperance of the very power which was seen as the source of every possible corruption.

In the Late-Neoclassical architecture of the 1930s and 40s, on the other hand, solidarity with power was not unconscious at all: on the contrary, it was explicit and resolute. This seems clear, and it would be pointless to talk about it; except that, among the various models proposed by so-called Post-Modern architecture, there is Albert Speer's New Chancellery, the EUR in Rome and the Stalin Allee in East Berlin.

We know, of course, that these exhumations are only a way to scale the pyramid of the Academia and to feed Mass Media: however, we can't ignore the nature of the



Perhaps we had better make sure if we can still count on the gardeners

objects exhumed since they certainly are among the most arrogant tokens of an idea of power that pushed architecture to the lowest rank of servitude it ever reached.

At that time, more than ever before, power had achieved a total control maintaining the principle – differently interpreted according to the political system – that changes in the economic structure would automatically change all human relationships, including those made actual by architecture. As a result, while waiting for everything to change, everything and specifically architecture, could be enslaved or exploited for the glory of power.

Late-Neoclassical language is a metaphysical assembly of large plazas, colonnades, pediments, pillars, parastades, rhythmical sequence of sinister voids, and so on. Its basic aim is to exhibit the incommunicability of a boundless force, whose location is unknown because it is beyond human events, living space and nature. It is the representation of an absolute void, stagnating in front of the buildings, and even behind them, where space has no connections or branches because utterly unrelated to use.

The Late-Neoclassical vocabulary, encrusted with

findings from the lexicon of Rationalist architecture, has become a part of contemporary eclecticism, and is indeed its most obscure and threatening component. By chance it is compounded by other components, more fatuous or more subtle; such as : the 'vernacular' in all its rhetorical variants, from that of the suburban tradition to the new one of the American gamble-towns; or the 'historicism' either producing images which look as if they were already aged, or restoring old images to give them the assumed appearance of their early youth; the 'neocolonial' namely the mimicry of exotic styles, especially destined to developing countries rich in petrodollars. Finally, in a position apart, there is a sort of affluent nihilism that doesn't use language, except for the verbal one, and only in just the amount necessary to publicise and market its withdrawal.

Taken all together, the components of eclecticism create such a cluttered scene as to make the gossip columnists declare that the 'edifice crumbles' and by 'edifice' they mean the architecture of the Modern Movement. But actually the 'edifice' they talk about never got further than the erection of the exterior scaffolding; and it couldn't go further because no agreement could be reached on how to express a comprehensive idea with unity of language. So that, thinking of fruitless efforts invested, we may conclude the real point, perhaps, is that architectural form is no longer able to produce a genus, a kind or a type; in other words, it is no longer able to generate 'styles'.

The future for architecture may be the foundation of systems of consistency that are still able to generate quality, through languages that become specific by suiting the specificity of contexts.

This could well be the case; many signs seem to prove it.

So far as one can understand, however, architecture – as many times since that gesture of Adam – once more finds itself at a fork-road.

I think I have come to the end of my four subjects. Still, I would like to add one brief observation, which is meant more as an introduction than as a conclusion to what I have said.

5 Introduction (instead of a conclusion)

It seems that Mr Thomas Cubitt, possibly when he was in a bad mood, said to a friend of his that whenever he needed to operate effectively, he tried his best to free himself from architects. Perhaps the same anxiety led the Royal Commission to pass over architect Horeau, who had won the Competition for the Crystal Palace, and entrust the undertaking to the gardener Paxton instead.

A few years later, Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine, considering the layouts of the rue de La Reine, decided to dismiss the architects who had made the plans, and in their place called in the gardener Alphand.

Today, architecture is at a fork-road: on one side there is a future of withdrawal, and on the other there is a future of deep commitment.

If architects choose the first path, who will be able to follow the second and keep the idea of architecture alive? Perhaps we had better make sure if we can still count on the gardeners.

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