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OUR NEW ARCHITECTURE AND THE MANY WORLD CULTURES

An open letter to classicist and traditional architects

My dear colleagues,

In the last few weeks I have been reading many contributions to the TradArch listserv. I have not said anything, up until now, because I have simply been enjoying the community, the joy expressed in ancient things, and ancient wisdom, the renewal of the right to be careful with buildings and to take pains with details of buildings. Above all, I have enjoyed seeing the way many of you talk to each other, respect each other, and try, genuinely, to talk.

However, I have been genuinely puzzled by one thing enough for me to want to speak about it at least mention it. So here are my thoughts.

Some of you take seriously the idea of classicism (not merely classicism in the sense of something "classic" - a different use of the word - but in the sense that is anchored in the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, the Florentine renaissance, and the English and European styles from the 17th to the 19th century, that specifically used these details: egg and dart, Doric columns, Palladian windows, and so on) as a model for our building activities in the 21st century.

This became clear in recent TradArch discussions about classicism versus gothic, whether gothic could be admitted to "the canon," and the idea that Byzantine, anyway, could not.

The point of paying serious attention to traditional architecture is something very much larger, is it not? All traditional architecture - that is, almost all the architecture built in Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Africa, Turkey, Iran, India, China - this dazzling wealth of forms, representing building, and art,

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and design for several millennia, is our heritage; and it is important because, regardless of its particular style, nearly all these buildings exemplify, in one way or another, a deeper thing: the presence of living structure. It is this living quality which inspires us, and which we, rightfully, must consider as our heritage and our great teacher. It is great, and it is a great teacher, because it shows us the existence of a fund of living architecture and asks us and inspires us to emulate that fund, in our own way, and to become part of it with our own buildings, in our own time.

The problem with the production of the last 80 years is that much of it has turned its back on this heritage, often deliberately, and has therefore been on a deliberate course to substitute empty imagery for living structure in a way that harms us all, and harms all humankind.

That it seems to me is our common point, what we hold in common.

If we hold too narrowly to the pure historical classicist forms, we run a very severe danger that this could be perceived as an elitist game, not relevant to seven eighths of the people on Earth, and possibly colonialist in its meaning if not its intent. Yes, we might say that the classical forms of building, from a tiny sliver of culture in space and time, were exported, for example to Peru and Colombia. That is just the same as the export of the Spanish language, or the English language, which had both good and bad effects. I know

you do not mean to export the production of 18th century England and France as
a new kind of elitism. But it can be perceived this way.

The same will be true if we try to export Doric columns to Nigeria, or Queen-Anne window shapes to Uttar Pradesh.

Certainly, contemporary architecture represents economic colonialism at its worst; it exports monstrous towers and glass façades that erase local traditional culture the world over, whereas classicists fundamentally respect human values in both the scale of buildings, and in the way they interact with people. It is also true that the third world or, at least its governments and the ruling power elite, love to replace their timeless architecture by the latest avant-garde absurdities. Sensitive classicism has offered an alternative to this madness.

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The issue is, it seems to me, that we must renew our attention to forms that have life, and like nature, originate from life and joyfully celebrate life. This must be focused, above all, on the forms that we ourselves make from our contemporary technology. But it does have a great deal to do with what we view as proper models. We must eschew forms that fly in the face of the search for life (90% of the current modern canon); and we must try to learn how the shapes of living structure can come to our work, and to our hands, of their own accord. It is that deeper structure we must understand, celebrate, and search for in our projects so that ultimately we may learn how to construct a living world again, as people did centuries ago without even trying because it was so obvious to them.

But that is a very different activity from copying the shapes of classicism, in a literal sense. I understand that classicism has a well-defined set of rules, which can be learnt and applied, whereas the corpus of other traditional architectures has either been lost, or totally neglected in our times. In an emergency situation, the times of total architectural and social nihilism that we live in, it is possibly better to build classically than to follow the glossy architectural magazines and what is taught in architectural schools nowadays. It is now time to expand our scope, however.

I deeply love and understand the beauties of the classical tradition. I learnt Latin and Greek when I was eight years old, and was nurtured in the classic European tradition in England and Austria. My parents were both classical archeologists, and I grew up with respect for all these things. But I learnt anthropology, too, and have lived all over the world, and I have joy in the paintings of aborigines in Australia, and in the starry friezes of Islamic buildings, and in the beasts of Persepolis, and the long houses of Borneo, and the mud houses of the Cameroon.

We, as the architects of the new millennium, need to broaden our scope. Otherwise the fire that exists among the people who write to this listserv might be extinguished, because other people (at least 5 billion of the six billion on Earth) in the larger parts of the world will pay no attention, and might resent what is implied.

That would be a tragic misunderstanding. Of course, what classicists believe in is not meant to be slighting. It is meant to celebrate the reality of

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living structure as it has been observed, and loved, by many of us. It is that living structure, and the deep nature of what it is, and how it must be produced, that is what ought to guide us and lead us on.

It would perhaps be helpful for us to spend a little more time discussing the rules of deep structure which create life in buildings in general.

This is positive in intent, and will hugely broaden our base.

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