

Traditions

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The last decade or so of economic growth: the vindication or the last hurrah of the global market economy, has seen the construction and demolition of an unprecedented number of buildings. The quantity and global reach of this latest boom is alarming, but perhaps if considered in relation to the world population or as a proportion of national GDPs, it is not so different from other periods of dramatic building production and urban expansion.

The first wave of industrialisation at the end of 18th century in England was such a time. While on a trip to study the new mill buildings in the Midlands and the North, Schinkel writes in his diary,

'Since the war there have been four hundred mills constructed in Lancashire. One sees buildings in places that were meadows three years ago. Yet the buildings are so smoke-stained they appear to have been used for a hundred years – colossal masses of building substance are being constructed by builders alone without any regard for architectural principles, solely for utilitarian ends and rendered in red brick'.

(Reinhard Wegner, Schinkel Lebeswerk, Die Reise nach Frankreich und England)

At a time when construction often matched the brutalities of an unbridled market economy, the leading architects of the Enlightenment were inspired by the enormous energy of scientific and economic advances. At the same time their work was able to impart a renewed relevance to the culture of classicism that for them embodied the best qualities of European civilization. The work of architects like Adam, Schinkel and Semper was remarkable in both the depth of its knowledge of the classical language and in its radical handling of that language in order to accommodate new techniques and uses. It was in distorting and adding to the architecture of the past that neo-classicism was so fresh and contemporary. It was by sustaining and progressing a cultural discourse that architecture, as a discipline, could continue to be socially significant in an increasingly complex and heterogeneous time.

Vast building programmes, extensions to the major cities of Europe and North America and the development of new typologies, also characterised the imperial economies at the end of the 19th century. While critics like Ruskin may have thought that only the reversal of this economic expansion could save civilized society, architects like Sullivan, Berlage and Wagner invented architectures that enabled them to engage with these new forces as well as sustain a cultural role for architecture. The formal language of this time was broadened in response to the expanded territories of empire. Sullivan transforms the closely knit repeated patterns of Moorish architecture via the new technologies of large scale terracotta cladding and steel framed construction. The potentially arid new typology of the modern office building is made significant through the delicate beauty of its facades and the sensitive consideration of its volume within the gridded structure of the 19th century city. In his Amsterdam Stock Exchange, Berlage uses the language of Northern European Romanesque to give civic qualities to a building that is both extremely modern in its use and in the wide spatial diversity of its interiors. This great generation of architects invented a contemporary architecture that served the political and economic powers of the day as well as developing the autonomous discourse of architecture.

Not so long ago, it was assumed that architects were the master of every aspect of their discipline, of the history of architectural form as well as the ability to build well and for the long term. The evolution of architecture as a liberal profession combined the technical capacity of the master builder with the erudition of the intellectual class. This elevated status, of speaking Latin and wearing fine clothing, once won, was jealously guarded. Although the pompous, bourgeois architect desperate to be an equal with his richer clients is an easy target of ridicule, there were always others like Semper, Viollet and Muthesius who applied enormous energy to expanding the breadth and the capacity of architecture so that it could continue to have an artistic and social relevance. This idea of the architect as the custodian

of an ever developing discipline has wide manifestations. It is evident in the work of Lewerentz, where a formal brilliance and a deep engagement with the classical and pre-classical traditions, is brought to bear on the design of a chair and a light, as well as to whole material assemblies that are infused with a moving spatial character. In Loos, this intelligence is in equal measure critical and synthetic. His acute sensitivity to social mores underpin the spatial propriety of the raumplan, and directs a perfect judgment in the selection of a chair, a rug or a wall covering. The corporate projects of Eero Saarinen and SOM in the post war United States, and Arne Jacobson in Europe were able to infuse enormous building programmes with the ethic of multinationals like IBM and General Motors, so that these were manifest in the new technology of curtain walling and equally in the meticulously designed deep plan interiors, furnished with specially developed office furniture

Today, the idea of erudition, of the architect as connoisseur has been rejected. It is curious that in a world of increasing specialisation, where artists and scientists are making dynamic new work from within their disciplines, architects have followed the lead of the management consultant, the ultimate example of the empty generalist. Rather than rise to the technical and artistic challenges of today, within the discipline of architecture, mainstream practice has embraced the rhetoric of the market to make work that is infused with brand recognition. Strategies of cybernetics, phylogenics, parametrics, mapping - each strive to generate completely original forms, unusual shapes, in plan, in section, sometimes both. These bold profiles can amplify or even replace corporate logos. Lacking the complexities and ambiguities that are held within the tradition of architectural form, these shapes quickly lose their shiny novelty and achieve a condition of not new, but also not old or ordinary enough to become a part of the urban background. This inability to grow old is all too resonant with an era of rebranding and cosmetic surgery. Architecture is now practiced at an unprecedented global scale, and the major players seem to be egging each other on. Who will produce the largest, and most formally outlandish project? Who will finally say stop?

Never has so much construction been based on so few ideas.

Our practice has always made work that is related to things that we have seen before. We are interested in the emotional effect that buildings can have. We are interested in how buildings have been built in the past and how new constructions can achieve an equivalent formal and material presence. We are confused by the laissez faire state of contemporary architecture. In this environment of excess we have found ourselves attracted to the more intimate artistic ambitions of past architectural traditions. We feel more comfortable than we once did to follow these traditions quite closely. Anything that can contribute to the fragile continuities between the contemporary situation and past architectures is worth the effort. It is only by understanding and reflecting on the past that architecture can continue to be a relevant social and artistic discipline.

'History has never copied earlier history and if it ever had done so that would not matter in history; in a certain sense history would come to a halt with that act. The only act that qualifies as historical is that which in some way introduces something additional, a new element, in the world, from which a new story can be generated and the thread taken up anew.'

(K F Schinkel, Das architektonische Lehrbuch)