Thoughts on a Non-Arbitrary Architecture

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Caspar David Friedrich,
"Woman at the Window", 1822.

1
Hermann Broch, "Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit,"
Gesammelte Werke, Essays, vol. 1 (Zürich: Rhein,
1955), p. 43.

2
See Helen Searing and Henry Hope Reed, *Speaking a
New Classicism: American Architecture Now*
(Northampton: Smith College Museum of Art, 1981).

3
Arthur Drexler, *Transformations in Modern
Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art,
1979), p. 17.

1
Building at Linke Wienzeile 42,
Vienna, 1896-97, street façade.

4
William Hubbard, *Complicity and Conviction: Steps
Toward an Architecture of Convention* (Cambridge
and London: MIT Press, 1981), p. 5.

1
The Austrian novelist Hermann Broch
suggested that we may read the essence
of an age from its architectural façades.[1]
Applying this suggestion to what was
built in Vienna in the last decades of the
nineteenth century, he arrived at a very
negative judgment: only a decadent
society could have produced such an
arbitrary, eclectic, and theatrical architec-
ture. This had been the heyday of neo-
baroque, neo-renaissance, and neo-gothic
building. To Broch such a turn to the past
seemed the cynical attempt of a rational
age to cover up its own poverty. Reason,
and this meant first of all economic con-
siderations, determined what and how
one built. But reason proved not enough,
something was felt to be missing. So, an
ornamental dress was thrown over funda-
mentally utilitarian structures, and lacking
the strength and conviction to create an
ornament and a style equal to what ear-
lier ages had produced, architecture took
to borrowing. The riches of the past had
to compensate for the poverty of the
present.

Such negative comments on the eclecti-
cism of the nineteenth century are part of
the situation that led to the rise of the
modern movement. Think of Adolf Loos's
much more vehement attack on the same
architecture criticized by Broch, or of the
hopes that led to the establishment of the
Bauhaus: the modern world would finally
find its own proper style. Gropius prom-
ised to heal the rift between beauty and
reason, form and function; once more
architecture was to be all of a piece.

Today, those dreams also belong to the
history of architecture. We have learned
to look with different and more loving
eyes at architecture that to Broch dem-
onstrated cynicism and the decadence of
the age. But was he wrong? Or have we
grown only more resigned, not to say,
more cynical?

Today, the age that built Vienna's Ring-
strasse, the age of operetta and the *Back-
hendl* (the Vienna fried chicken), seems
quite wonderful if irretrievably lost;
slipped away into a past when the Dan-
ube was always blue (figure 1). And,
strangely enough, today we find archi-
tects returning to the eclectic architecture
of the nineteenth century somewhat as
the nineteenth century returned to the
stronger styles of the preceding centuries.
Eclecticism has been raised to a higher
power; so has arbitrariness. Historicism

has become meta-historicism. Consider
what has been called "post-modern
classicism."[2]

There is an important difference between
this post-modern eclecticism and the
eclecticism of the nineteenth century. The
nineteenth century took seriously the his-
torical paradigms it had adopted, just as
those who insisted on the neo-gothic ar-
chitecture of so many American college
campuses still took its medieval precur-
sors seriously, not only or even primar-
ily as artistic models, but because they
wanted to preserve at least a trace of the
ethos that produced the original. Today
such reverence for the past seems a bit
naïve. Not that we side with the harsh
criticism directed against nineteenth
century eclecticism by the Modern
Movement; we lack the conviction such
fervor requires. Today most would agree
that Gropius and his co-fighters failed to
resolve the tension between the func-
tional and the aesthetic as they had
hoped. As Arthur Drexler remarks in
Transformations in Modern Architecture,
"We are still dealing with the conflict be-
tween art and technology that beset the
nineteenth century."[3] Once more there is
a willingness to accept such tension and
an architecture of decorated sheds; once
again there is an attempt to relieve the
dreariness of functional architecture with
borrowed decoration, although today
there is little conviction in such borrowing
(figure 8). This may be put positively:
post-modernist eclecticism takes itself
less seriously than its nineteenth century
predecessors. It is freer, more playful, less
intimidated by the past. But, by the same
token, it is also less convinced by its bor-
rowing and less able to convince.

2
In *Complicity and Conviction* William
Hubbard writes that "If there is one
characteristic that links the diverse art
movements of the modernist period, it is
perhaps a hyperawareness of the fact that
one's personal sensibility could have
been otherwise. A modernist artist is
so deeply aware of this possibility of
otherwise-ness that he feels a deep un-
ease about simply accepting his own sen-
sibility. He feels a need for some reason
that will convince him that he ought to
feel one way and not another."[4] This
statement invites challenge: to be sure,
there is greater awareness of the "pos-
sibility of otherwise-ness," and it is not
confined to artists, but is simply a corol-

lary of our greater freedom. The less nature and culture determine what we have to be, the greater our freedom; the greater also the dread of arbitrariness. But does successful art not deliver us from such dread, and *not* because it gives us a reason to feel a certain way? As a self-justifying whole, having its telos within itself, the well-made work of art promises to banish the spectre of arbitrariness, quieting our restless freedom, if only for a time. Such a work should present itself as having to be just as it is. Do we need reasons to convince us of this? An artist who feels the need for such reasons would seem to be anxious about his own creative power. Has the glory of aesthetic experience not long been tied precisely to its ability to deliver us from the need for reasons?

One might thus insist that the answer to the problem of arbitrariness in architecture can only be given by architects who are first of all artists. But such insistence misunderstands the problem. Unlike paintings or sculptures, buildings cannot be autonomous aesthetic objects; architecture cannot just serve the demands of beauty. Indeed, if beauty is understood as self-justifying aesthetic presence, then beauty in architecture is essentially something beyond, or added on to, what necessity dictates. The autonomy that modern sensibility has granted to the aesthetic realm, an autonomy that calls for art for art's sake, has to lead also to a view of architecture as essentially caught between the demands of beauty and those of life. Venturi's claim that "architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional Vitruvian elements of commodity, firmness, and delight" must be taken seriously, as must its consequences.[5] The aesthetic approach, that for more than two centuries has dominated both reflection about art and artistic practice, has to lead to an architecture of decorated sheds. Given such an approach, the proper focus of aesthetic concern is in a deep sense never more than just decoration. But if so, the link between decoration and shed cannot but strike us as arbitrary, no matter how much the decoration may present itself to us as a self-justifying aesthetic presence—as arbitrary as the relation of a strong painting to the wall on which it happens to hang. The problem of arbitrariness in architecture has one root in our aesthetic approach; the other lies in our inability to view buildings apart from any considera-

tion of dwelling, just as sources of aesthetic delight. There can thus be no merely aesthetic answer to this problem.

Venturi does not seem to me to take his own insight into the complexity and contradiction of architecture seriously enough. He still subscribes to the traditional view that a successful work of art, while incorporating and becoming stronger because of ambiguities and tensions, must yet be an integrated whole. Venturi holds architects to the same standard: "But an architecture of complexity and contradiction has a special obligation toward the whole: its truth must be in its totality or its implications of totality. It must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion. More is not less."[6] But how can the demands of life and beauty be reconciled? Venturi's call for inclusion strong enough to master complexity suggests a renewal, albeit in a different key, of Gropius's dream of the complete building, a dream that amounts to a subjection of the demands of life to the demands of aesthetics, and harks back to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[7] Against this, I would insist on the essential difference between aesthetic objects and dwellings. The very self-sufficiency of the former, which bids us keep our distance, makes them essentially uninhabitable. An architecture of decorated sheds should give up all claim to the creation of aesthetic wholes. But to give up that claim is to give up also the claim to all merely aesthetic answers to the problem of arbitrariness in architecture.

3

I have linked the problem of arbitrariness to our greater freedom. To this, one may object that freedom has here been grasped inadequately, because only negatively: true freedom is not freedom from constraint, but rather to be constrained only by what one really is, by one's essence.

This suggests that the problem of arbitrariness might be met by returning to what is essential. Some such reasoning supported the modern movement. Loos condemns the aestheticizing architecture of his time for heeding merely subjective aesthetic whim, leading both the individual and architecture to lose their place in that larger whole to which they should belong. He likens a villa built at an Alpine lakeside to an "unnecessary screech."

6
Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, p. 16.

7
See Karsten Harries, "The Dream of the Complete Building," *Perspecta 17* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1980), pp. 36–43.

5
Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 16.

8
Adolf Loos, "Architecture," quoted in Joseph
Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise* (New York:
The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), p. 27.

"Why is it that every architect, whether he is good or bad, harms the lakeside? The peasant does not. Nor does the engineer who builds a railway to the lake or plows deep furrows in its bright surface."[8] The peasant is at one with nature. Hence the look of necessity of his dwellings. With its emphasis on the subject, modernity has broken that bond. The look of arbitrariness of its architecture testifies to that breach. The engineer, however, once more has to attune himself to nature and to her laws. From the engineer, Loos expects a healing of the rift that our subjectivism has opened up. Structures like Maillart's bridges prevent us from simply dismissing such expectations (figure 2).

But by now trust in the engineer and his attunement to nature is harder to come by. Our deteriorating environment has forced us to be suspicious of technocracy. And we have become less convinced of the functional character of the heroic architecture of the modern movement, which is often better described as having the look of functionality than as being truly functional. From the point of view of a strict functionalism, this look of functionality is as superfluous as any ornament. It might yet carry conviction if we could share the almost evangelical hopes in technology that many had when the modern movement gathered strength. If

we today are likely to be made uneasy by the look of functionality, this is not just because we see it as just another form of architectural decoration, but because the ethos that it communicates strikes us as one-dimensional and dehumanizing. Once again we are forced to acknowledge that the problem of arbitrariness in architecture is not first of all an aesthetic one.

The struggle between modernists and post-modernists is thus not adequately understood just as a struggle between aesthetic sensibilities, but between those who prefer less and those who want more. Aesthetic sensibilities carry ethical implications. The struggle becomes one between different determinations of how human beings are to exist. It is with good reason that in *Complexity and Contradiction* Venturi quotes August Heckscher:

> The movement from a way of life as essentially simple and orderly to a view of life as complex and ironic is what every individual passes through in becoming mature. But certain epochs encourage this development; in them the paradoxical or dramatic outlook colors the whole intellectual scene.[9]

Venturi would have us understand his theorizing and building as a contribution to-

9
Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, p. 16.

2
Robert Maillart, Salginatobel
Bridge, 1930.

ward an architecture for a world come of age. The question, however, is whether coming of age is understood here in a way that lets freedom become negative, ironic, and destructive. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard has given us an unsurpassed analysis of such an aesthetic life-style, an analysis that shows convincingly that such a life-style must suffer shipwreck on the reef of the arbitrary.

4

It is this charge of arbitrariness that Hubbard levels against the work of Venturi, Graves, Eisenmann, and Meier. "Looking at post-modern buildings, we become so aware of how easily the arrangement could have been otherwise that we feel imposed upon; the arrangement feels capricious and we are dissatisfied." [10] The same may be said of the use of traditional elements in novel, and therefore, interesting ways. Consider Graves's use of the keystone motif in the Plocek house (figure 3). Kierkegaard's discussion of the interesting illuminates this version of post-modernism. [11] Such aesthetic play with elements drawn from the past cannot lead to an architecture that carries conviction.

When thinkers despair both of freedom and of finding a natural measure, they tend to appeal to history. Heidegger, to cite just one example, writes in *Being and Time* that "the sole authority which a free existing can have" is that of "revering the repeatable possibilities of existence." [12] Historicism in architecture may be similarly defended. The difficulty with this suggestion is that history does not speak with one, but with many and often conflicting voices. Where do we find a non-arbitrary, i.e., binding, reading of history? If every individual has to offer his own reading, picking and choosing as he sees fit, then the problem of arbitrariness is raised to a different level. If history is to offer an answer to the problem of arbitrariness, it must be experienced not as a reservoir of more or less interesting motifs which we can pick up or discard as we see fit, but as a tradition that determines our place and destiny, in which we stand and to which we belong. This is how Hubbard would have us move beyond the arbitrariness of post-modern architecture. The history of architecture may be looked at as a history of changing conventions concerning what constitutes good building. In that history certain structures possess paradigmatic signifi-
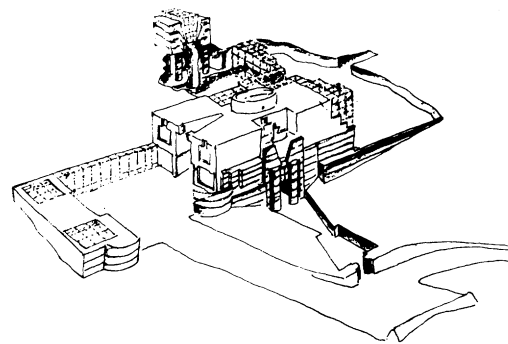
3
Michael Graves, Plocek House, Warren Township, New Jersey, 1977-81, perspective sketch.

cance. Implicit in these structures is an evolving ideal image of man. "The architect has in mind an ideal about how people ought to live, and he has chosen those particular conventions because he sees a way in which he can use them to express that ideal." [13] Relating his structure to precursor buildings, while yet attempting to make an original contribution, the architect adds a link to what is a continuing chain. Hubbard invites us to take Harold Bloom's interpretation of poetic achievement as a creative reading of precursor texts as a model for understanding achievement in architecture. [14]

The difficulty with all such views is that just as modern man has fallen out of nature, so he has fallen out of history. We may know much more about history today than ever before, but precisely in making the past an object of scientific investigation, the sense of belonging to the past is lost. We have removed ourselves too effectively from the past to still belong to it. Time has been reduced to a coordinate on which we move back and forth with equal facility. With this the past must lose much of its authority. It tends to become no more than a reservoir of material that we may incorporate in our constructions as we see fit. But with this, the problem of arbitrariness re-enters.

There is another, more serious question raised by Hubbard's Bloomian account: If we can look at great architecture as offering a creative misreading of some past structure or structures, and that is to say also, as departing from these precursor structures, what gives direction to the departure? Hubbard appeals to an ideal of how people ought to live. If that ideal were to be rejected, the architecture that communicates it would also meet with little sympathy. But Hubbard also believes

10
Hubbard, *Complicity and Conviction*, p. 7.

13
Hubbard, *Complicity and Conviction*, p. 155.

11
See Søren Kierkegaard, "The Rotation Method," *Either/Or*, vol. 1, trans. Walter Lowrie, D. F. Swenson, and L. M. Swenson (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), pp. 279–296. Also Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1968), pp. 49–60.

14
See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford, 1973).

12
Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 443.

that ideals are human creations and that one function of architecture is to infuse reality with such ideals. "We in society want to be able to believe in ideals about the places we inhabit, but we know that such ideals are indefensible." [15] The architect can count on this will to believe. Architecture helps to replace meaningless reality with a theatrically, or rather architecturally, transformed reality, which draws us in and, as we surrender to it, grants us an illusion of meaning. We become actors on a stage that lets us forget the reality it conceals. Somewhat like Sartre, Hubbard has faith in man's ability to create meanings in a meaningless world. This faith "says that of course the world, as given, doesn't make sense, but that we can make sense of it and we are the only ones who can." [16]

This is, I am afraid, a vain faith. Meaning cannot finally be made or invented; it can only be discovered, where such discovery will also be a self-discovery. All meaning that presents itself to us as freely created must seem arbitrary, and precisely because of this it cannot convince. Without an ideal or an essence to guide our manner of departure from precursor structures, such departures must lack di-

rection. The chain will be broken. Architectural theory cannot dispense with dreams of an ideal architecture, an architecture that would do full justice to the requirements of human dwelling.

5
Such a requirement is of course not at all novel. As Joseph Rykwert points out in *On Adam's House in Paradise*:

> The return to origins is a constant of human development and in this matter architecture conforms to all other human activities. The primitive hut—the home of the first man—is therefore no incidental concern of theorists, no casual ingredient of myth or ritual. The return to origins always implies a rethinking of what you do customarily, an attempt to renew the validity of your every day actions, or simply a recall of the natural (or even divine) sanction for your repeating them for a season. In the present rethinking of why we build and what we build for, the primitive hut will, I suggest, retain its validity as a reminder of the original and therefore essential meaning of all building for people: that is, of architecture. It remains the underlying statement, the irreducible, intentional core, which I have attempted to show transformed through the tensions between various historical forces (figure 4). [17]

The difference between Rykwert's claim and any conventionalism is evident. Conventionalists will seek to escape from arbitrariness by grounding practice in an on-going tradition. But we moderns have become too reflective, too critical, to simply entrust ourselves to what has been. No longer are we willing to repeat what has long been done, just because it has become part of a tradition. At the same time we are not satisfied with departures from tradition because of some merely subjective whim. We have no choice but to attempt to articulate what is essential or natural. Such articulation is the point of speculation about the appearance of the original or primitive hut. The primitive hut has played a part in architectural theory that parallels that of the social contract in political theory. Whether there ever was such a hut matters as little as whether there ever was such a contract. Both are

15
Hubbard, *Complicity and Conviction*, p. 153.

16
Hubbard, *Complicity and Conviction*, p. 158.

17
Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise*, p. 192.

4
Marc Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'Architecture*, 1753, frontispiece.
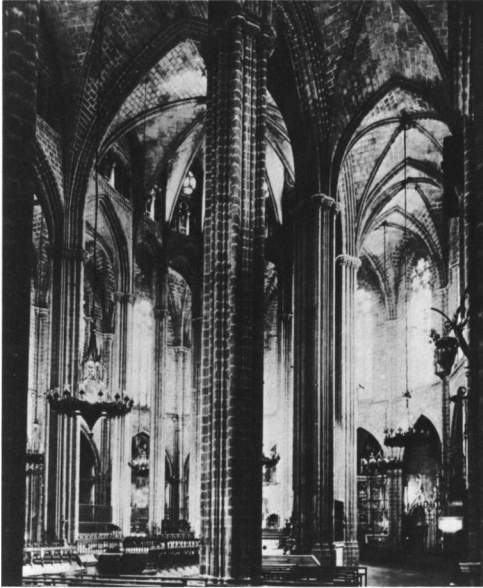
5
Cathedral of Barcelona, begun
1298, apse "forest of columns".

18
Marc Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture*, 2nd
ed. (Paris: Duchesne, 1755). *An Essay on
Architecture*, trans. and int. Wolfgang and Anni
Herrmann (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls,
1977).

20
See e.g. Hans Jakob Wörner, *Architektur des
Frühklassizismus in Süddeutschland* (Munich and
Zurich: Schnell und Steiner, 1979).

19
Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*
(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), p. 125.

constructs of reason meant to legitimate a
certain practice; in this they are charac-
teristic expressions of the Enlightenment
and of its confidence that the authority of
reason and nature could replace divine
sanction. And although we have grown
less confident about the power of reason,
our confusions leave us no reasonable al-
ternative to reappropriating the lessons of
the Enlightenment. We, too, have to try to
recover origins, where the return to ori-
gins is not so much a turn back to the
past as a turn to what is essential. In this
sense the speculation of the ex-Jesuit
Marc Antoine Laugier may be said to
present an abiding challenge.

Not that we are likely to be convinced by
Laugier's *Essai sur l'Architecture*.[18] We
have learned to be wary of appeals to na-
ture. All too often such appeals have been
unmasked as historical prejudice claiming
a dignity for what is proposed that does
not belong to it. Consider the way in
which Laugier arrives at his version of a
natural language of architecture. Laugier
begins with man in the state of nature.
Among his needs is the need for shelter, a
need which cave and forest meet only in-
adequately. The attempt to remedy that
inadequacy leads to the construction of
the first house, the paradigmatic building.
Architecture, in this view, may be said to
be both: the image of the cave and the
image of the forest. (In *Intentions in Archi-
tecture*, Christian Norberg-Schulz has of-
fered a version of the same view: "The
cave represents the first *spatial* element,
in contrast to the vertical-horizontal rela-
tion which is an ordering principle. The
unification of these two factors created
what we may call 'the first architectural
symbol system.'"[19]) As Laugier presents
this system, the forest is allowed to tri-
umph over the cave. Only columns, en-
tablatures, and pediment, representing
the supporting uprights, the horizontal
members they carry, and the inclined
members that make up the roof of the
primitive hut, are considered essential
parts of architecture. Walls, windows,
doors, and the like are permitted, but are
said to make no essential contribution to
beauty. The turn to the primitive hut does
not mean a functional approach to archi-
tecture. What lifts architecture beyond
mere building is its power of representa-
tion. Successful architecture represents
building. As a variation on the theme
stated by the primitive hut, all great archi-
tecture recalls us to an ideal of genuine
dwelling.

Supposedly born of the need for shelter,
and informed by the natural shelter pro-
vided by caves and forests, the primitive
hut turns out to look rather like the then
much revered and imitated temples of an-
tiquity. Not that Laugier thought the archi-
tecture of antiquity beyond criticism. The
past too has to be questioned. Only rea-
son can endow past structures with the
legitimacy that makes them models
worthy of imitation by showing that they
are representations of the archetypal
building. But was the Greek temple con-
structed in the image of Laugier's primi-
tive hut, or was that hut constructed in
the image of the Greek temple?

When Laugier thinks of exemplary struc-
tures, he is not only thinking of the
architecture of the ancients. Gothic archi-
tecture with its forest of columns is given
a similar legitimacy and takes its place be-
side the architecture of the ancients as a
second paradigm (figure 5). Laugier's *Es-
sai* has been shown to have encouraged
neo-gothic architecture.[20] But this only re-
inforces suspicions that his hut owes
more to cultural preferences, characteris-
tic of the region and the period, than to
the voices of reason and nature. It leads
to an architecture of sheathed skeletons,
appropriate to a heavily forested region,
rather than to an architecture of continu-
ous surfaces, appropriate to a region
where the natural building materials are
mud, brick, or stone. Laugier's "nature"
speaks with a very regional voice. And
Laugier's interpretation of this voice is
very much shaped by his historical
situation.

Region and history help determine what
we find natural and hence inevitable. But
the less an individual is bound to a partic-
ular place in space and time, the weaker
that determination, and the greater the
uncertainty about what is to count as nat-
ural. This helps to explain why the prob-
lem of the arbitrariness of architecture
is characteristically modern. We have
greater difficulty constructing our ideal
hut than Laugier did.

Nevertheless, if there is to be responsible
criticism of what has come to be estab-
lished and accepted, it must be possible
to challenge conventional wisdom by ap-
pealing to a more primordial understand-
ing, less subject to the prejudices of the
time. Even if ideals are never given but
precariously constructed, inevitably tar-
nished by cultural prejudice, this does not

mean that they are therefore arbitrary. What gives their construction direction is the tension between conventional wisdom, and what more profoundly claims and affects us, between what one says and does and what one feels should be said and done. Even if we can never seize the dream of a building that would do full justice to the demands of dwelling in such a way that we could say with confidence that we have provided architectural practice with a firm foundation, as a source of regulative ideals such dreaming is indispensable. Laugier's speculations have thus an exemplary significance, as does the Vitruvian account of the origin of building to which it harks back. We are still not done with the Enlightenment. That goes for its architectural theory as well as for its political theory.

6

To say that we are still not done with the Enlightenment is not to suggest that we can simply return to it. To appropriate it we have to question and rethink what it thought. One aspect of Laugier's account of the primitive hut that invites questioning is his tendency to equate the need for building with the need for material shelter. But the need for building cannot be reduced to the need to achieve physical control of the environment. Equally important is the need for spiritual control. We cannot live with chaos. Chaos must be transformed into cosmos. Building has thus been thought traditionally an analogy to divine creation: God as the archetypal architect.

Such analogies may mean little today, but one task of architecture is still that of interpreting the world as a meaningful order in which the individual can find his place in the midst of nature and in the midst of a community. Time and space must be revealed in such a way that human beings are given their dwelling place, their *ethos*. When we reduce the human need for shelter to a material need, we lose sight of what we can call the ethical function of architecture. I agree with Hegel's claim that the highest function of all art is not to entertain or to amuse, but to articulate a binding world view; to express to human beings who they are and who they should be. When works of arts come to be for art's sake, that is to say, when the point of art is reduced to that of furnishing occasions for aesthetic delight, that highest function is lost.

Architecture, by its very nature, resists such reduction. That is why, given a view of the art-object as a self-justifying whole, architecture has to appear as an impure, a compromised art. But just because architecture is not merely a source of aesthetic delight, but invites a fuller response, because it shapes the time and space of lived experience, it is unavoidable that we should judge it by how ill or well it carries out what I have called its ethical function. Hubbard is right to link the problem of arbitrariness in architecture to that of articulating ideals of dwelling. Any reappropriation of Laugier's primitive hut has to begin with a rethinking of the meaning of dwelling.

One modern philosopher who has thought deeply about dwelling is Martin Heidegger. His description of a Black Forest farmhouse may be read as his attempt to give content to the ideal house that haunts our dreams of genuine dwelling (figure 6). It deserves being quoted at some length.

> The nature of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature in the raising of locations by the joining of their spaces. *Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.* Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some twohundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope, looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it its wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter-nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead"–for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum*–and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse.[21]

21
Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 160.

22
Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, vol. I (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 95.

There is a sense in which Heidegger's farmhouse may seem to lie more thoroughly behind us than Laugier's primitive hut. If Laugier thinks of his hut in relation to the individual, Heidegger seems to be thinking in terms of the extended family, extended also through time. The farmhouse articulates "for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time." Not only space, but also time, are shaped by it in such a way that the individual gains his dwelling place as member of an ongoing community. Heidegger thinks of his farmhouse as located in a definite region. It is born of and a response to that landscape. This thinking of genuine dwelling is thus regional, as it is generational. But what power do such contexts have over us moderns? Must we not develop an understanding of dwelling more appropriate to our changed situation? Or does the shape of modernity threaten genuine dwelling?


6
Black Forest Farmhouse.

7
Heidegger understands genuine building as an interpretation of a more original being-in-the-world that strengthens man's natural sense of place. This being-in-the-world is misunderstood when we think of it, as Hubbard seems to do, in terms of a subject facing a mute world of objects, which the subject then has to endow with meanings. The understanding of the world as a collection of meaningless facts rests on a distorting reduction of experience that must lose sight of the significance of things. As Schopenhauer points out, first of all and most of the time,

things "do not march past us, strange and meaningless, . . . but speak to us directly, are understood, and acquire an interest that engrosses our whole nature."[22] First of all, things speak to us. That speech is silenced only by the reduction of things to mere objects, a reduction presupposed by science. But we have to learn to put science in its proper place; we have to reappropriate the truth expressed when we speak metaphorically of the language of nature or of natural symbols. If it is to recall us to a genuine dwelling, architecture must make use of these symbols.

By natural symbols, I understand symbols that can be derived simply from an analysis of man's being in the world. They are not tied to a particular culture or region, although, inevitably, different cultures will appropriate them differently.

The term being-in-the-world, which I take from Heidegger, already implies a rejection of interpretations that would reduce experience to a relation of a subject to objects. First of all, man finds himself not before the world, confronting it as if it were a picture, but in the midst of things, experiencing them from a particular place. Heidegger suggests that our first encounter with things is "ready to hand." The reference to the hand here is significant. I reach for something—it is too high. The body provides me with a natural sense of distance and proximity: what is in the back of me is less available than what is in front of me. Or we can say, the body provides me with what we can call a set of coordinates, very different from the x, y, and z coordinates of geometry, and different especially in that the different coordinates carry different meanings. Up and down, left and right, front and back, all carry value implications which are brought out when we think of the metaphors these terms have furnished.

Up, for example, has a very different significance from down. We can not simply turn a building upside down or rotate it; but we can design buildings to look as if they could be inverted or rotated rather easily (figure 7). The curtain wall invites such a look of invertibility; so do certain simple geometric shapes, such as the sphere, the cube, and the cylinder. We can also design buildings that seem to discourage all such attempts. Think of the gabled roof: its presence seems to resist inversion. I am not arguing here for either a look of invertibility or a look of rootedness. All I want to say is that whatever
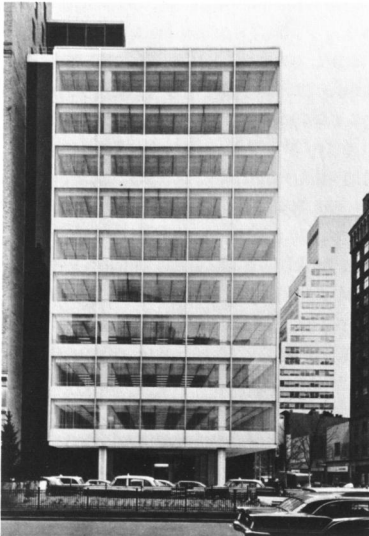
7
World Headquarters, Pepsi-
Cola Company (original client),
New York City, 1958-59.

choice we make when designing a building, such choice will communicate a particular ideal of being in the world.

And if up and down carry a different meaning, so do vertical and horizontal, inside and outside, dark and light. Light serves to remind us of the way the language of space is also a language of time. Natural light is essentially moving light; changing with the times of the day and the times of the year.

I cannot do more here than provide a few hints as to how one might go about developing an understanding of the natural language of architecture. Perhaps the term "language" is misleading, for if we can speak of a language at all, this is a language addressed, first, to sense and imagination. Before attempts are made to articulate it in words, it needs to be felt. The arts, and more especially architecture, are in a much better position to teach us to listen to this language than philosophy. I can imagine courses that would explore it, but such courses would have to rely on images. There might be, for example, courses just on windows or on doors, or on roofs; or on stairs; but the list is endless. Besides architecture, poetry and painting would help to teach what to listen to. From such courses would not flow prescriptions. They would teach something like a vocabulary. Learning that vocabulary is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the creation of buildings that are experienced as necessary rather than arbitrary.

Natural symbols are intertwined with conventional symbols tied to a particular time and region. Consider the cross. Given our tradition, the reference to the cross on which Christ died suggests itself. There are thus architectural motifs that have acquired quite definite meanings. Any pyramid we erect harks back to its Egyptian precursors and to the function of these structures. The pyramid form is thus particularly suitable for grave monuments. But although a conventional symbol, I would suggest that there is something about the simple geometry of the form that makes it not an accident that Egyptians seized on it as they did: the conventional symbol presupposes and builds on a natural symbol. The cross also illustrates this point. But let me give one other example: in church architecture we find quite commonly that the arch separating the nave from the more sacred choir is conceived of in terms that recall a Roman

triumphal arch. The analogy between the triumph of Christ and the triumph of an emperor like Trajan is deliberate, although intelligible only to someone who is familiar with the conventions involved. And yet there is something about the arch form that invites such use.

Often the conventional symbolism of architecture rests on the authority of particular texts. Thus the symbolism of a traditional church cannot be understood without the Bible. Beyond that, a quite specific understanding of things as signs is being presupposed. To interpret a gothic, and still a baroque or rococo church, we have to do something very much like decode a message that yields its secrets only when we understand the language in which it is written. This language was thought to derive from figures found in God's two books, the Bible and the book of nature; both speak to us of our life and death, condition and destiny. But do they still speak to us? How seriously can we take the stories of the Bible? And can we still understand nature as book addressed to man?

Between us and such a view stands the characteristically modern and, it seems to me, questionable privilege granted to univocity, to the simple and literal meaning of the text, and to an accordingly strict, or better, narrow, conception of meaning. We owe such insistence on literalness both to science and to the reformation. It is part of modernity, but with this it becomes impossible to make sense of anything like the medieval interpretation of the spiritual significance of things. I would, however, suggest that even if this particular symbolic language lies behind us, even if Scripture no longer offers us the key to decoding the hidden meanings of things, these meanings still speak to us. Indeed, even that conventional vocabulary has not become completely meaningless, for in it still lives a natural symbolism. If architecture is to illuminate and shape the space of everyday life, it will have to open itself to these natural symbols.

There is yet another kind of symbolization that deserves mention. A great deal of the symbolism we find in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture takes the form of a repetition of the no longer understood, or devalued, symbols of the past. Such repetition is raised to a higher power by much post-modern architecture. Instead of trying to recover what I have

8
Moore Grover Harper, Piazza
d'Italia, New Orleans, 1978-79.

called architecture's natural symbols, the architect represents and plays with the symbols of the past. Symbols now become representations of symbols; meta-symbols. The architecture of Las Vegas so praised by Venturi is rich in such meta-symbols. Or think of Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia (figure 8). Such play cannot escape arbitrariness. What we need is not meta-symbols, but something like an archeology of conventional symbols, an approach to symbols that is not so focused on what is merely conventional that it is unable to understand these conventions as particular responses to something more universally human. Such an archeological approach is also necessary when considering a metaphor like that of the book of nature. While it belongs to a culture irrevocably past, that metaphor can be understood as one attempt to articulate an aspect of human being in the world essential to genuine dwelling and to genuine building.

8
Our being in the world is a being with others. We need to feel at home in our natural, and in our social, environment. Architecture inevitably offers interpretations of both. An obvious weakness of Laugier's account is his neglect of the social dimension. Like the natural men of Hobbes and Locke, Laugier's primitive man is an atomic self, endowed with reason, facing natural needs. Laugier thus shares the subjectivism that is a presupposition of liberal thought. In this respect there is a noteworthy difference between Laugier's and the Vitruvian account. Vitruvius begins not with the singular but the plural, with brutish men brought together, and brought to language and building, by an accidental fire.

Like Laugier's hut, Heidegger's ideal building is also a house, although that house is now thought of as the dwelling place of a family, extending through different generations. But such emphasis on the house must be questioned. In this connection it is well to remember that architectural theory has turned not around one, but around two, paradigms: an ellipse that has one focus in the house, tied to the family more than to the individual, the other in the church or temple. Thus while the idea of the original house has haunted architectural theory, so has that of a divine structure of sacred origin. If the former addresses itself more to the need for physical control, the latter ad-

dresses itself more to the need for spiritual control. We should not forget that a good part of what is considered in histories of architecture is sacred architecture. Thus, through many centuries, the history of western architecture is reduced pretty much to a history of church architecture. The church building gained its legitimacy, not as a representation of the first house, but of real and imagined structures that were thought to have God as their real architect, including the Temple in Jerusalem and, even more importantly, the City in Heaven of which *Revelation* speaks. This reminds us of the fact that sacred architecture has traditionally had a public function as the house did not.

I spoke of an ellipse that has its foci in the house and in the temple. The distance between them is related to the distance that separates the private and the public. The ethical function of architecture is first of all a public function. Sacred and public architecture provides a community with a center (or centers). Individuals gain their sense of place by relating their dwelling to that center. We may thus think of private architecture as furnishing a ground illuminated by the figures furnished by public architecture. Think of a medieval town, dominated by its church, by the horizontal of an enormous sheltering roof and the vertical of a tower that the traditional consecration ceremony allows us to link with the ladder of Jacob's dream, a ladder that connects heaven and earth (figure 9). The traditional church is another Bethel, a place of divine promise of enduring community.

There is a temporal analogy: the everyday with its mundane concerns may be considered a ground illuminated by festive times. The ability or inability to celebrate festivals is closely tied to the ability or inability to establish structures or places that let a multitude understand itself as a community, joined by a common destiny.

Modern architecture, however, no longer knows building tasks to rival the traditional church, although we do of course continue to build churches. But the church has become just one building type among others, and hardly one to which most architects would grant terribly much importance. There is no single building type today that could claim to possess the public importance once possessed by the church, just as there is no institution which can claim to have taken over the

traditional function of the Church as guardian and interpreter of our vocation. Increasingly, value is located in the private. A corollary of this is the increasing emphasis placed on the house, which has often been discussed in terms that attribute to it almost the sacred quality of a church. Think of the Victorian conception of the house, which even knew its angels. Heidegger's celebration of the Black Forest farmhouse similarly represents a view of architecture that has replaced my ellipse with a circle, having its single focus in the house. Presupposed is the disintegration of genuine community into a multiplicity of individuals and families; a corollary is the formal approach to the law and to the state, both born of self-love and its remedy. And if the disintegration of community should extend to marriage, which threatens to be reduced to no more than a formal and increasingly temporary arrangement between individuals, the house, as Heidegger celebrates it, will also become an anachronism.

But being in the world is essentially both: being a self and being with others. We cannot sacrifice one aspect to the other without doing violence to human nature. Not that these two aspects of human existence will ever coexist without tension. Building must recognize and respect that tension. Every building distributes in its own way the weight to be given to the private and to the public: Each is con-

cerned not with just one, but with both foci of my ellipse, where energies once focused on the church, may today turn to public areas, such as squares, streets, and parks. Perhaps yesterday's church architects will be tomorrow's urban planners. Weren't churches thought to prefigure a city?

9

Problems of building and dwelling cannot finally be resolved by theory; theorizing can, at most, hope to call attention to possibilities and perhaps help to recall us to what matters. But without commitment, there is no escape from arbitrariness. The problem of arbitrariness in architecture is finally an ethical problem. It will be solved only to the extent that architects and those for whom they build are joined by an understanding of what human existence is to be. This is not to suggest that architecture should therefore subordinate itself to moral philosophy. The philosopher's formulations are necessarily abstract and one-sided. As Schopenhauer remarks, "Where it is a question of the worth or worthlessness of existence, of salvation or damnation, not the dead concepts of philosophy decide the matter, but the innermost nature of man himself."[23] The philosopher's words are less likely to touch this inner nature than the built environment. Architecture is at least as likely to edify as philosophy.

23
Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, p. 271.

9
Cathedral and city of Chartres, France.