

OTTO WAGNER, *MODERN ARCHITECTURE: A GUIDEBOOK FOR HIS STUDENTS TO THIS FIELD OF ART* (1896-1914)
TRANS. HARRY FRANCIS MALLGRAVE (SANTA MONICA: GETTY CENTER, 1988).

Style

An opinion that is unfortunately very prevalent even in professional circles and is accepted, as it were, as a postulate is that the architect must create a foundation for each of his compositions through the choice of a so-called style. People then expect that he cultivate a special preference for that stylistic tendency for which he shows an aptitude. The advocates of this theory adhere to the stylistic foundation down to the smallest detail; it becomes a hobbyhorse and is ultimately advanced as the touchstone for judging the created or, more correctly said, the copied art forms. The thoughtful architect is indeed in the greatest of predicaments in deciding where he should apply the lever to pull down such a device of lunacy. It should first of all be pointed out that the word "style" in the sense indicated above invariably refers to the flowering of the epoch, therefore to the peak of the mountain. But it is always more correct to speak of an epoch of art as not so sharply delimited, and therefore as the mountain itself. I wish to employ the word "style" in this sense. Thus, for example, the Greeks in the formative period of their style were certainly not conscious of a contrast between their style and the Egyptian, just as little as the Romans were with respect to the Greeks. The Roman style developed gradually from the Greek, and the latter from the Egyptian. Evidence still exists today of the unbroken chain of transitional forms between the flowering of one style and that of the next. Nations developed and improved their individual forms according to their ability, mode of expression, and point of view, until the forms corresponded with the epoch's ideal of beauty. EACH NEW STYLE GRADUALLY EMERGED FROM THE EARLIER ONE WHEN NEW METHODS OF CONSTRUCTION, NEW MATERIAL, NEW HUMAN TASKS AND VIEWPOINTS DEMANDED A CHANGE OR RECONSTITUTION OF EXISTING FORMS. . . .

In searching and groping for the right course, our age, far from expressing ourselves and our viewpoints, has sought salvation in mimicry instead of in new creations and natural improvements. . . . The perception that many architectural problems, such as churches, should appear the same today as centuries ago, whereas others should be of the most recent date, has produced great errors. Thus it happens that laymen and unfortunately also many architects are of the opinion that a parliament, for instance, may be in Greek style, but a telegraph office or a telephone exchange may not be built in Gothic, although they demand that a church be built in the latter style exactly. They forget in all of this just one thing, namely that the people who frequent these buildings are all equally modern, and that it is the custom neither to ride to the parliament bare-legged in an antique triumphal chariot, nor to approach a church or a city hall wearing a slit doublet.

Construction

The need and necessity for protection against inclement weather and against men and animals was certainly the first cause and the original purpose of building. In building itself lies the germ of every method of construction, whose development advances with the purpose. The creation of such work corresponds to the idea of pure utility. But it could not suffice; the sense of beauty dwelling within man called on art and made her the constant companion of building. Thus arose architecture! . . . Need, purpose, construction, and idealism are therefore the primitive germs of artistic life. United in a single idea, they produced a kind of "necessity" in the origin and existence of every work of art. . . . No less a person than Gottfried Semper * first directed our attention to this truth (even if he unfortunately later deviated from it), and by that alone he quite clearly indicated the path that we must take. Need and construction keep equal pace with the aspirations of man, which art, majestically striding forward, cannot follow. A fear that the pure principle of utility will displace art therefore seems reasonable. Occasionally it has even led to a kind of struggle, founded on the erroneous belief that the differences between realism

* Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), German architect, critic and professor active in Dresden and Vienna at mid-century. Well known for his theoretical works, especially *The Four Elements of Architecture* (1851).

and idealism are irreconcilable. The error in this view lies in the assumption that utility can displace idealism completely and in the further inference that man can live without art; yet it is only to be supposed that utility and realism precede in order to prepare the deeds that art and idealism have to perform. . . .

If one examines all the art-forms from historical periods, an almost unbroken series of gradual developments from the date of their CONSTRUCTIVE origin until today can easily be proven, notwithstanding all the stylistic epochs. Logical thinking must therefore convince us that the following tenet is unshakable: EVERY ARCHITECTURAL FORM HAS ARISEN IN CONSTRUCTION AND HAS SUCCESSIVELY BECOME AN "ART-FORM."

Earlier, in the chapter "Style" and just now, it was emphasized that art-forms undergo change. Apart from the fact that the form had to correspond to the idea of beauty of each epoch, these changes arose because the mode of production, the material, the tools, the means available and the need were different, and further, forms came to fulfill different purposes in different places. IT IS THEREFORE CERTAIN THAT NEW PURPOSES MUST GIVE BIRTH TO NEW METHODS OF CONSTRUCTION, AND BY THIS REASONING ALSO TO NEW FORMS. . . .

Modern man immediately comprehended the enormous value of construction and assigned his most distinguished representatives to achieve its magnificent perfection. . . . The means available and purpose of the emerging object will always cause [the modern architect] to vacillate between the constraints of pure utility and artistic development; but with due consideration the influence of the architect or the engineer will be resolved. THE ENGINEER WHO DOES NOT CONSIDER THE NASCENT ART-FORM BUT ONLY THE STRUCTURAL CALCULATION AND THE EXPENSE WILL THEREFORE SPEAK A LANGUAGE UNSYMPATHETIC TO MAN, WHILE ON THE OTHER HAND, THE ARCHITECT'S MODE OF EXPRESSION WILL REMAIN UNINTELLIGIBLE IF IN THE CREATION OF THE ART-FORM HE DOES NOT START FROM CONSTRUCTION. Both are great errors. . . .

The enormous importance of construction and its decisive influence on modern art has probably been emphasized enough in our discussion yet it remains for me to recommend its study most urgently to the young architect. WELL-CONCEIVED CONSTRUCTION NOT ONLY IS THE PREREQUISITE OF EVERY ARCHITECTURAL WORK, BUT ALSO, AND THIS CANNOT BE REPEATED OFTEN ENOUGH, PROVIDES THE MODERN CREATIVE ARCHITECT WITH A NUMBER OF POSITIVE IDEAS FOR CREATING NEW FORMS—IN THE FULLEST MEANING OF THIS WORD. . . . It is scarcely necessary to add that rich experience should also come together with the application of the construction method; thus the following can be taken as a postulate: WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE OF CONSTRUCTION, THE CONCEPT "ARCHITECT" IS UNTHINKABLE!