

DEMETRI PORPHYRIOS, "CLASSICISM IS NOT A STYLE" (1983)

SOURCE: *DEMETRI PORPHYRIOS: SELECTED BUILDINGS AND WRITINGS*, (LONDON: ACADEMY GROUP, 1993).

The predicament of contemporary architecture . . . stems from our twofold inheritance: on one hand, the symbolically mute elements of industrial production inherited from Modernism, and on the other the expendable historicist and high-tech signs of industrial kitsch inherited from Modern Eclecticism. This raises, in my opinion, the crucial problem we face today: if there is an opposition between the economic priorities of mass industrial society and the yearning for an authentic culture that could sustain individual freedom in public life, under what qualifications is it possible to practice architecture at all? Paradoxically, the only possible critical stance for architecture today is to build an alliance between building construction and symbolic representation. To construct, that is, a tectonic discourse which, while addressing the pragmatics of shelter, could at the same time represent its own tectonics in a symbolic way.

It is from such a perspective that classicism should be re-evaluated today: not as a borrowed stylistic finery but as an ontology* of building. Classicism is not a style. Its lesson lies in the way by which it raises construction and shelter to the realm of the symbol.

The Constructional Logic of Vernacular

Despite the superficial associations with rusticity, that the word 'vernacular' brings to mind its essential meaning is different. The idea of vernacular has nothing to do with stylistics. It rather points to the universal ethos of constructing shelter under the conditions of scarcity of materials and operative constructional techniques.

By invoking vernacular, one does not seek the primitivism of pre-industrial cultures. The temptation to turn one's back on contemporary society in order to return to some pre-industrial order, when pursued, leaves us suspended amid the reverberations of Plato's ghost: 'what then?' Instead, the essential meaning of vernacular refers to straightforward construction, to the rudimentary building of shelter, an activity that exhibits reason, efficiency, economy, durability and pleasure. Certainly, varying materials and techniques attribute regionalist characteristics to vernacular. But beyond appearances, all vernacular is marked by a number of constructional *a priori*s† which are universal and essentially phenomenological.‡

To begin with, building – by its very nature – involves the experiences of load-bearing and load-borne, the primary manifestations of which are the column and the lintel. Secondly, it involves the experience of horizontal and vertical enclosure, the primary manifestations of which are the roof and the wall. The floor, since it repeats the original ground, is flat for it is meant to be walked upon; whereas the roof is inclined since, in addition to its shedding of water, it marks the terminus and should appear as such. Finally, since all construction is construction by means of finite elements, the act of building involves necessarily the experience of demarcation, the primary manifestations of which are the beginning and ending.

When applied to making of shelter, these constructional *a priori*s give rise to a set of constructional forms: as for example the gable which marks the sectional termination of the roof and thus point to the primary experience of entry; or the engaged pilaster, which manifests the confluent experiences of load-bearing

* [Branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being; a study of what actually is; contrasted with *epistemology* (*theory* of the knowledge of the thing); formalized conceptual knowledge about a domain.]

† [Previous to any special examination, presumptively, in accordance with one's previous knowledge or prepossessions; reasoning from causes to effects, from abstract notions to their consequences, from assumed axioms (and not from experience) – OED]

‡ [Dealing with the description and classification of phenomena, rather than with their explanation or cause. – OED]

and enclosure; or the window and door, which manifest the experience of suspending enclosure locally for purposes of passage; or the colonnade, which demarcates the experience of boundary ; and so on.

Classicism: The Symbolic Elaboration of Vernacular

Such constructional *a priori*s and their ensuing constructional forms can be identified – it would appear – beyond fear of interpretive dispute and could serve as the core of a common architectural knowledge.

Yet architecture cannot remain at this ‘starting point.’ Its vocation is to raise itself above the contingencies of building by commemorating those very contingencies from which it sprung in the first place. What distinguishes a shed from a temple is the mythopoeic[§] power the temple possesses: it is a power that transgresses the boundaries of contingent reality and raises construction and shelter to the realm of the symbol.

This is the sense in which we can say that classicism is not a style. The classical naturalises the constructional *a priori*s of shelter by turning them into myth: the demarcations of beginning and ending are commemorated as base and capital; the experience of load-bearing is made perceptible through the entasis in the shaft of the column; the chief beam, binding the column together and imposing on them a common load, becomes the architrave; the syncopation of the transversal beams resting on the architrave is rendered visible in the figures of the triglyphs and metopes of the frieze; the projecting rafters of the roof, supported by the frieze, appear in the form of the cornice; finally – and most significantly – the whole tectonic assemblage of column, architrave, frieze and cornice becomes the ultimate object of classical contemplation in the ideal of the Order.

The Order sets form over the necessities of shelter: it sets the myth of the tectonic over the contingencies of construction. The power of mythical fiction presides. It is the impossibility of such an act of mythical fiction that constitutes the prime aesthetic subject matter of classical thought. Classical architecture constructs a tectonic fiction out of the productive level of building. The artifice of constructing this fictitious world is seen as analogous to the artifice of constructing the human world. In its turn, myth allows for a convergence of the real and the fictive so that the real is redeemed. By rendering construction mythically fictive, classical thought posits reality in a contemplative state, wins over the depredations of petty life and, in a moment of rare disinterestedness, rejoices in the power it has over contingent life and nature.

Mythical thinking, of course, is not necessarily primitive or prelogical as common opinion might maintain today. It is true thinking for it reduces the world to order. Its truth is not less than that experimentally verified by science. Today, if it appears that the mythopoeic mind cannot achieve objectivity (and should therefore be doomed as an irrationality that can never attain consensus) this is not because it is incapable of dealing with the world, but rather because contemporary industrial life is dominated by vulgar positivism.** That is why architecture today is systematically denied its mythopoeic power. The vulgarity lies not in the search for objectivity but in the immanence with which consumer culture boasts of being the mere extension of production.

[§] [That creates or gives rise to a myth or myths; of, relating to, or characterized by the creation of myths. – OED]

** [Originally (now *hist.*): a philosophical system elaborated from the 1830s by the French thinker Auguste Comte (1798-1857), recognizing only observable phenomena and empirically verifiable scientific facts and laws, and rejecting inquiry into ultimate causes or origins as belonging to outmoded metaphysical or theological stages of thought; a humanistic religion based on this system. In later use: any of various philosophical systems or views based on an empiricist understanding of science, particularly those associated with the belief that every cognitively meaningful proposition can be scientifically verified or falsified, and that the (chief) function of philosophy is the analysis of the language used to express such propositions. – OED]