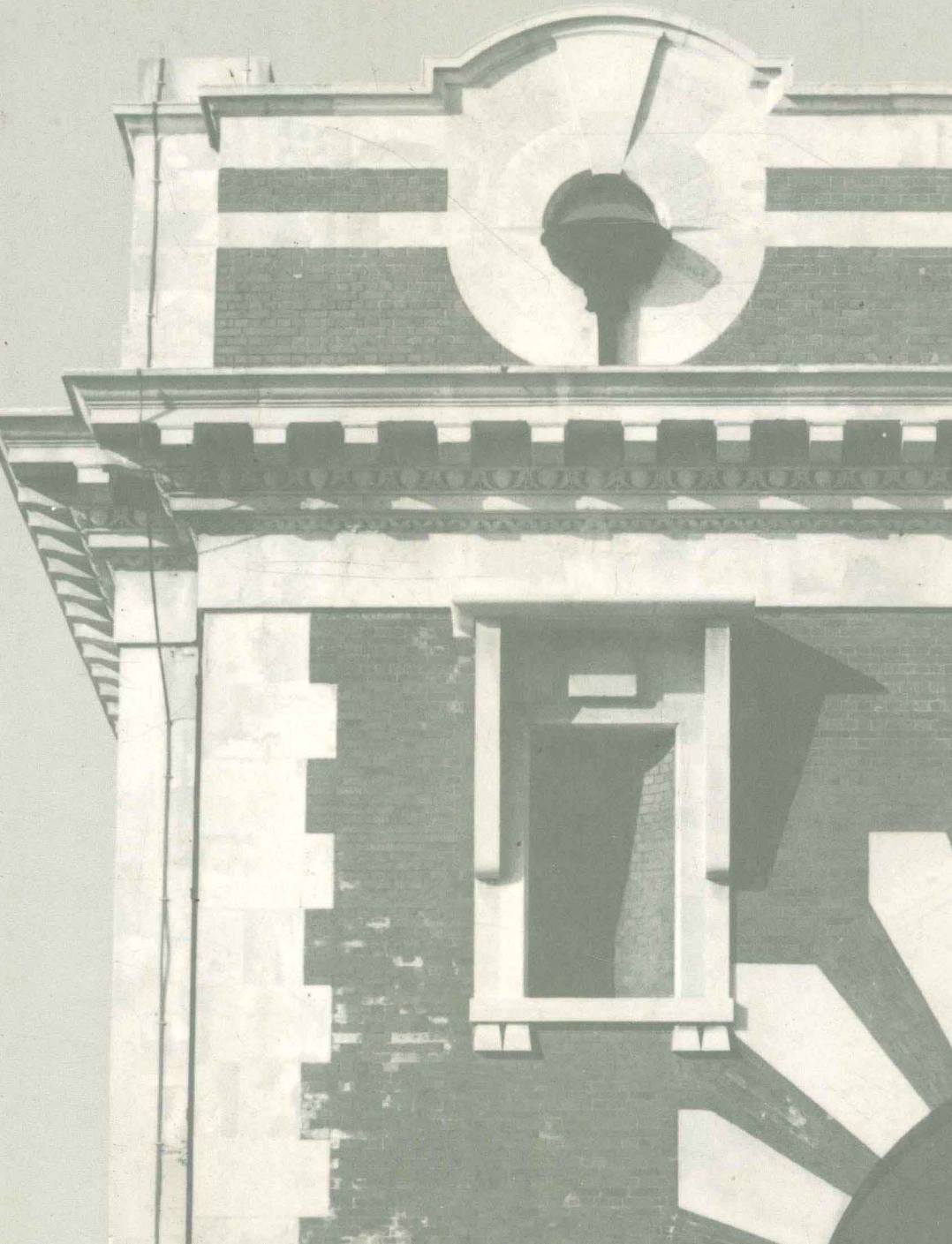
The Classical Vernacular

ROGER SCRUTON

Architectural Principles in an Age of Nihilism



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THE CLASSICAL VERNACULAR

Also by Roger Scruton from Carcanet

Fortnight's Anger
The Philosopher on Dover Beach

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Many of the chapters in this book are based on previously published material, though most have been revised for this edition, and some appear here for the first time. I am grateful to the various editors for permission to use the published material.

Introduction

When a fashion is about to collapse, a last chorus of established voices rings out in praise of it, and roars its abuse at the sceptics and iconoclasts. Then, overnight, the guardians desert their positions, leaving fashion to die at the first assault, and pretending thereafter that they never had anything to do with it, or that they defended it only with reserve and irony, and only for the sake of fair play.

So it has been with the centrally planned economy. And so it has been with modern architecture. Both received the protection of an establishment – and it was by and large the same establishment, of forward-looking, rationalist busybodies, impatient to sweep away the cluttered past of Europe, and to lead the masses forward into a regimented future. But architecture provides a more useful case-study of modern ways of thinking, and a profounder insight into our disorders, than do the received ideas of economics. Its virtues and vices are more immediate, and are revealed to us more constantly; at the same time, its subservience to fashion is less easily disguised by empty scholarship and pseudo-science.

The destruction of the built environment was not the work of the modern masters. Gropius, Le Corbusier and Fry built little, the Russian constructivists virtually nothing at all, and even Mies van der Rohe, perhaps the most prolific of the modernists, is known for a mere handful of buildings. Had modernism remained the property of such intellectual eccentrics, it would now be as much an historical curiosity as Regency Gothick, or the Manueline style of Portugal. Unfortunately, however, unlike the inventors of Regency Gothick, the modernists lived at a time when the culture of Europe had been entrusted to public institutions of learning, and when architecture

had become linked to educational programmes. Fashion was no longer dictated by the interaction of private fancy and public taste, but by doctrines imparted through the schools.

The initial effect of this was hardly to be regretted. The classical and Gothic styles were in the fullness of their vitality, and competed exuberantly for the right to civilise the new industrial materials. The aspiring architect was taught style and form, and an extensive knowledge of their past and present employment. His visual education qualified all else that he learned, including the engineering skills so magnificently displayed in the architecture of the great exhibitions.

Modernism, however, turned this educational tradition on its head. Impacting on the schools, it lost its character as a stylistic eccentricity, and became a doctrine, an educational programme, linked with those other ill-considered projects for the moral regeneration of mankind, of which international socialism was merely the most conspicuous. The principal effect, therefore, was a sudden loss of knowledge. A generation of architects was produced whose members knew absolutely nothing about real architecture, and their ignorance was transmitted to their successors. Here are some of the things that are no longer taught in schools of architecture:

drawing (whether of the human figure, of landscape, or of buildings);
the Orders of classical architecture;
the appearance, materials, manufacture and use of traditional details;
mouldings, their design and appearance;
light and shade, and how shadows fall on buildings;
façades, how they are composed, and how they relate to their neighbours;
the history and criticism of European architecture.

The diseducation of the modern architect is manifest in his clumsy attempts to remedy it. 'Post-modernism' is as far from the integrated styles of the classical tradition as is the modernism that it seeks to replace. The flippant and uncomprehending use of classical detail is precisely a negation of the classical spirit. To appropriate the classical attributes as surface decoration, without the discipline involved in using them as the shaping principles of architectural thought, is to go one stage further along the nihilistic road of modernism.

We moderns are guilty of many original crimes, and not the least of them has been our scandalous destruction of the public discourse of architecture, and our seeming indifference to the way our buildings appear to those who must live in their shadow or who pass them daily by. We no longer build façades; we have lost all sense of the street as a public thoroughfare; we regard squares and avenues as mere empty spaces among concrete piles. The causes of these attitudes lie deep: Ruskin had an inkling of them, when he suggested that the art of building has a religious origin, and could not survive the collapse of faith. Certainly, profound spiritual changes have eroded the feeling on which good building depends. We no longer build for eternity, but for our immediate uses; we do not try to imprint on our buildings the mark of some real or ideal community over which they are to stand as guardians; nor do we show any confidence in a public order to which buildings must defer. However large our projects, they testify to a collective loneliness and isolation. Lacking any sense of the public realm, we lack also a sense of the private. The very distinction between public and private is lost, in building styles which reflect the atomised nature of secular society. Perhaps the practices that I recommend in what follows will never be revived without the faith that gave rise to them. But they are worth discussing, since they contain knowledge and wisdom that can be understood even in an age which is unable or unwilling to act on them.

In several essays, I try to show the extent to which modern architects have defied the basic principles of design. Le Corbusier, for example, wrote and built as though in deliberate defiance of common sense. A house, for Le Corbusier, was not a part of the human world, but a 'machine'; its form and appearance were dictated by its 'function', so that no building constructed according to his maxims has ever changed its use (or, for that matter, fulfilled its original use). Appearance was not to be the priority of the builder, but only the consequence of 'correct' design, according to the five 'essential points' of construction. Finally, building was no longer conceived as the patient construction of a public realm; instead it involved – as in Le Corbusier's plans for Paris, Algiers and Stockholm – an assault on the whole symbolic townscape, which was to be replaced by inward-turning towers, whose meaning lay in the new, hygienic forms of life that would be contained in them. Streets and squares played no part in his thinking; the 'outside' was

conceived as air, grass, trees and parkland – not so much public spaces as areas where each of us could wander alone, nursing our inner solitude. And as for ornament, detail and façade – all these were to be swept away, as relics of a civilisation whose public values were to be deprived of every visible authority.

The arguments which follow derive partly from a theory of aesthetic experience. But they also lean on assumptions about human nature, and it is worth making these assumptions explicit from the beginning. Our nature can be considered from at least two different points of view: the biological and the social. Our social nature derives from the distinctive feature of our species, which is the capacity for reasoning. This capacity is co-extensive with the art of speech, and is manifest in everything that divides us from the animals: in science, morality, law and institution-building; in personal love, sympathy and laughter; and in aesthetic judgement itself. Observations that are made about the 'human condition' are therefore justified in two separate ways: by reference to our nature as organisms, and by reference to our nature as rational beings.

Our Nature as Organisms

Three important features of *homo sapiens* have helped to endow his habitat with the shapes and structures that are familiar to us:

(i) We orient ourselves visually. That is to say, we do not use our eyes merely to look at things, but also to negotiate a passage through them. Information obtained visually is richer, denser and more immediate than information obtained through the other senses. Hence visual cues play a far greater part in our understanding of the environment than any other, and we endeavour to convey the maximum of information in accessible visual signals.

(ii) We stand upright, and conduct our business in an upright position. Only the most traumatic experiences (birth, copulation and death) take place in a horizontal posture, and these experiences normally belong to the private realm.

(iii) We are vulnerable, and seek shelter from wind, rain, sun and predators. We are threatened by what is sharp and angular, reassured by what is regular and smooth.

Those three features of our condition act on one another. Visual cues are more immediate when they address us from an upright posture; things which appear to *stand* before us call us into their orbit. Things which offer shelter and protection invite our gaze, while those with sharp or angular devices issue a subliminal warning. We acquire a spontaneous sense of 'friendly' materials – such as smooth stone, polished wood and marble, weathered brick. And we measure buildings against our standing posture, subliminally responding to the joints and articulations that match our own construction.

Our Nature as Rational Beings

If we were merely animals, then we should have no need of architecture: a cave, or the hollow of a tree, would suffice to protect us, and we should be strangers to the public life which prompts us to build. In the public realm our rational nature is paramount. It dictates the forms of morality, law, religion, commerce, learning and politics. And this rational nature strives to imprint itself on the outward forms of architecture.

Certain observations about our rationality have a bearing on my arguments:

(i) We believe ourselves to be free. Whether we actually *are* free is another matter. But this belief in freedom is an assumption in all our practical reasoning. Art or architecture which portrays us as unfree, will always be received as alien. In an environment into which we can fit only as parts into a machine, we will not feel at home.

(ii) Unlike the animals we are not motivated only by desire and need, but also by values and obligations. These define the ends of our conduct and limit the means that we may choose to achieve them. To put it another way: our practical thinking is not merely instrumental; it is also teleological. We consider not only the means to our ends, but the ends themselves, and judge them in the light of moral, religious and aesthetic conceptions that define the meaning of what we do. Moreover, our values point of their own accord towards the public realm. We demand agreement from others in that which most deeply concerns us, and in

the pursuit of it we automatically envisage a community of like-minded people to whom our values are equally dear. (Sometimes it doesn't seem this way: sometimes we seem to allow a certain latitude, proposing the 'pluralist' society as a value in itself. But this is because we have ceased to *care* about the differences which that society encompasses, valuing tolerance far more than the moral legacy that speaks against it.)

(iii) Our means lie in activity, but our ends involve repose. Achieving that which we value, we wish to make it permanent, to rest with it, to make it one with ourselves. (We are wedded to the things we value, and not merely seduced by them.) A world of endless novelty would have no meaning for us: in everything important we strive for 'permanent things'.

(iv) Our rational nature is nourished by society, and also judged by it. Our conceptions of value enshrine what we really want from others, as well as what we really want for ourselves. Rational beings seek to make themselves acceptable in the eyes of others. Judgement and criticism are therefore inescapable.

To defend those observations is the task of ethics. In this book I hope merely to show their importance in the art of building. Architecture must make room for our nature as rational beings; it must acknowledge the belief in freedom, and engage in the search for a public realm of values. It must lift itself above the sphere of calculation and present us with a vision of the ends of life. And in doing so it must convey stability and repose. Our experience of architecture belongs, or ought to belong, to the general category of the aesthetic. This category is far wider than is often supposed; here, very briefly, is how I understand it:

(i) The aesthetic sense is not an optional addition to our mental equipment. On the contrary, it is an inevitable consequence of the fact that information comes to us in sensory form. We see things: but we also see the meaning of things; and the meaning saturates the appearance. Hence appearances cause intellectual pleasure and intellectual pain. They are the ultimate resting points of contemplation, as well as the starting points of thought and desire.

In contemplating them we bring ourselves into a lived relation with the world, and sense our own part in its design and order.

(ii) Hence there arises the practice of creating appearances for the express purpose of contemplating them. We use appearances as means of communication; but what is communicated is modified by, and fused with, the forms through which it is understood. The aesthetic understanding acts as a shaping hand in our public actions, adapting the world to our expectations and our expectations to the world, so as to overcome what is strange or threatening. (Think of clothes, for example; or such elementary aesthetic exercises as laying a table for guests, or furnishing a room.)

(iii) A beautiful object is one the appearance of which merits study for its own sake, and for the meaning that is revealed in it when we so study it. A beautiful object is not beautiful in relation to this or that desire; it is not by virtue of satisfying this or that passing function that it pleases us. It pleases us because it points to a satisfaction that lies beyond desire, in life itself. The beautiful object accompanies us on our journey, so to speak, and belongs to the moral community which is our 'kingdom of ends'.

(iv) That is why taste, judgement and criticism are essential components of the aesthetic understanding. To look at the world aesthetically, so as to find meaning in appearance itself, is simultaneously to judge the value of what we see. That which pleases us is then also approved. It is impossible to separate a concern for aesthetics from the pursuit of taste. We are creating works not for ourselves only, nor even for a circle of initiates, but for a public realm in which every rational being is a potential participant. Only criticism can equip us for this task.

As soon as we admit aesthetic considerations into the process of design, therefore, we are forced to yield to them. They must take precedence over all other factors – over function, structure, durability, even over economics. These other factors provide the constraints within which we work, rather than autonomous principles of construction. Even if you combine them, and solve the resulting

simultaneous equation, this will not lead to a rational design, nor to a building that is truly suited to human purposes. It is aesthetic value that contains the meaning of a building, and which creates the bridge between its reality as an object, and the experience of the rational subject who must live with it. By attending to aesthetic value, therefore, we engage with the true task of architecture, which is to create our home.

The constants of architecture are aesthetic constants. Aesthetic prescriptions are not laws: they may be violated with impunity, for they merely summarise the results of successful practice. Moreover, obedience to them does not guarantee success, which resides in the individual object, and is determined by no precedent. Nevertheless, the constants to which I draw attention have their own kind of authority, and owe their title to the long history of aesthetic experience. A genius may disregard them with impunity. But for the ordinary architect they are guides to good conduct that have no serious rival. If there is one lesson that we have learned from modernism, it is that genius is rare, and cannot be successfully imitated by those who lack it.

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