

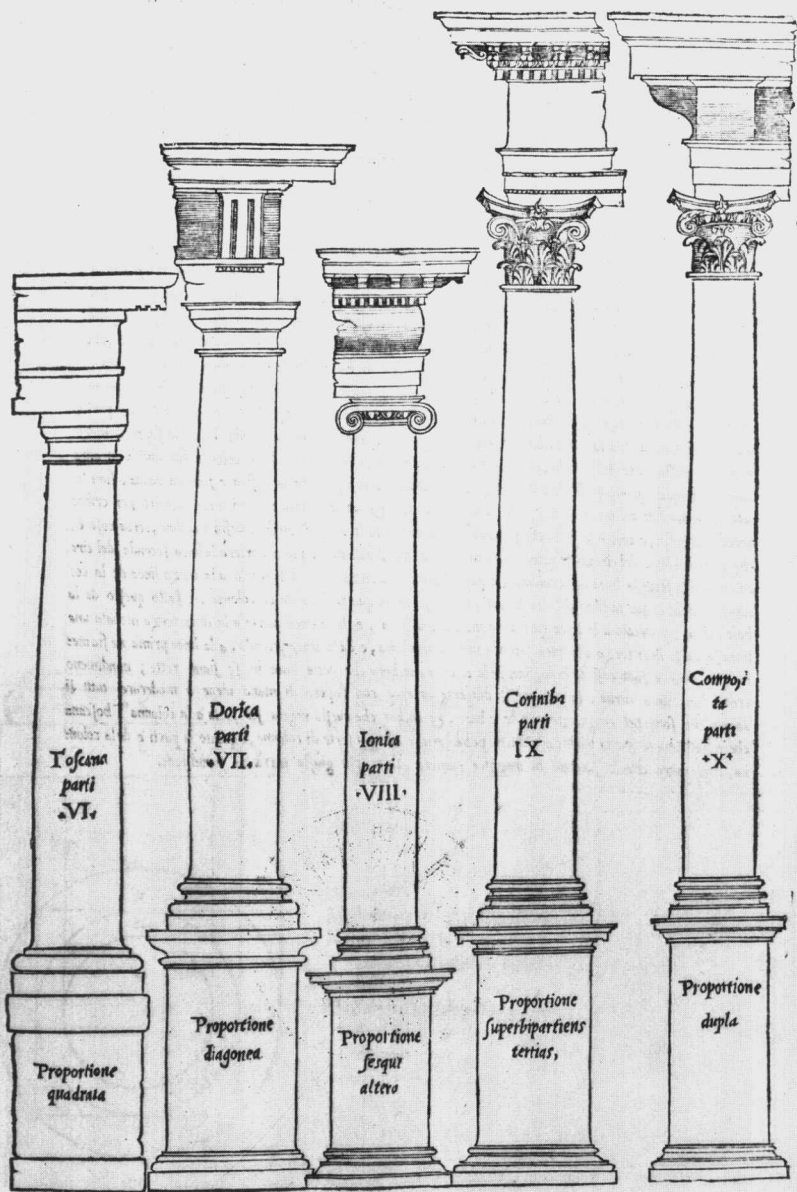
John Summerson

THE CLASSICAL LANGUAGE OF ARCHITECTURE



Revised and Enlarged Edition • 139 illustrations

THE CLASSICAL
LANGUAGE
OF ARCHITECTURE



John Summerson

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with 139 illustrations



Thames and Hudson

Frontispiece:

I The orders of architecture. With this woodcut of 1540, Sebastiano Serlio introduced his treatise on 'the five ways of building'. The Tuscan, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian orders had been named by Vitruvius. Alberti had named the Composite. Serlio was the first to exhibit the five orders as a closed series to which no additions were admissible.

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Preface

This book originated in a series of six talks broadcast by the BBC in 1963, and the text consists of the six scripts, almost unaltered. I make no apology for this because the pleasure I took in preparing the scripts seems to me inseparable from the pleasure I hope to communicate in the subject. Any conventionalizing of the broadcast idiom would be pure loss. One alteration, however, I have been obliged to make. In the broadcasts and the first edition of the book, the history of the classical language was made to fade rather ambiguously into that of the Modern Movement. In recent years, attitudes towards that movement, its nature and principles, and indeed towards the whole trend of architectural development, have profoundly changed and of these changes some account has been taken in paragraphs added to the final chapter.

As an accompaniment to the original series of broadcasts the BBC published an illustrated booklet. The illustrations it contained are all reproduced here and to these have been added nearly sixty more, serving to convey something of the depth, variety and richness of the subject.

J.S.

Sir John Soane's Museum, September 1979

The Essentials of Classicism

I must begin by assuming some general knowledge. Like, for instance, knowing that St Paul's Cathedral is a classical building while Westminster Abbey is not; that the British Museum is a classical building while the Natural History Museum at South Kensington is not. That all the buildings round Trafalgar Square – the National Gallery, St Martin-in-the-Fields, Canada House and even (just) South Africa House are classical, that all the public buildings in Whitehall are classical; but that the Houses of Parliament are not. Elementary distinctions, and you may think at once that I am going to deal in superficialities. When is a classical building not a classical building? Does it really matter? Are not the important qualities of architecture deeper than and independent of such stylistic nomenclature? They are. Nevertheless, I cannot reach all the things I want to say in this book without first isolating all the buildings which are, *prima facie*, classical from all the others. I shall be talking about architecture as a language and all I want to assume at the moment is that you do recognize the Latin of architecture when you see it.

The *Latin of Architecture* – that brings me to another general knowledge assumption. Classical architecture has its roots in antiquity, in the worlds of Greece and Rome, in the temple architecture of the Greek world and in the religious, military and civil architecture of the Romans. But this book is not primarily going to be about the architecture of Greece and Rome: it is not going to be about the growth and development of the classical language of architecture but about its nature and its use – its use as the common architectural language, inherited from Rome, of nearly the whole civilized world in the five centuries between the Renaissance and our own time.

Very well – from now on we can be more precise. Let us look at this word 'classical' as applied to architecture. It is a mistake to try to define classicism. It has all sorts of useful meanings in different contexts and I propose to consider two meanings only, both of which will be useful throughout the book. The first meaning is the most

obvious. A classical building is one whose decorative elements derive directly or indirectly from the architectural vocabulary of the ancient world – the ‘classical’ world as it is often called: these elements are easily recognizable, as for example columns of five standard varieties, applied in standard ways; standard ways of treating door and window openings and gable-ends and standard runs of mouldings applicable to all these things.

That, I think, is one fair description of what classical architecture is, but it is only skin-deep; it enables you to recognize the ‘uniform’ worn by a certain category of buildings, the category we call classical. But it tells you nothing about the essence of classicism in architecture. Here, however, we have got to be rather careful. ‘Essences’ are very elusive and are often found, on enquiry, not to exist. Nevertheless, embedded in the history of classical architecture is a series of statements about the essentials of architecture and these are in agreement over a long period, to the extent that we may say that the aim of classical architecture has always been to achieve a demonstrable harmony of parts. Such harmony has been felt to reside in the buildings of antiquity and to be to a great extent ‘built in’ to the principal antique elements – especially to the five ‘orders’ to which we shall come presently. But it has also been considered in the abstract by a series of theoreticians who have demonstrated that harmony analogous to musical harmony in a structure is achieved by proportion, that is to say by ensuring that the ratios in a building are simple arithmetical functions and that the ratios of all parts of the building are either those same ratios or related to them in a direct way. A vast amount of pretentious nonsense has been written about proportion and I have no intention of getting involved in it. The Renaissance concept of proportion is fairly simple. The purpose of proportion is to establish harmony throughout a structure – a harmony which is made comprehensible either by the conspicuous use of one or more of the orders as dominant components or else simply by the use of dimensions involving the repetition of simple ratios. That is enough for us to go on with.

There is, however, one point about this rather abstract conception of what is classical and it may be put as a question. Is it possible, you may ask, for a building to display absolutely none of the trappings associated with classical architecture and still, by virtue of proportion alone, to qualify as a ‘classical’ building? The answer must, I think, be

'no'. You can say, in describing such a building, that its proportions are classical, but it is simply confusing and an abuse of terminology to say that it *is* classical. The porches of Chartres Cathedral are, in distribution and proportion, just about as classical as you can get, but nobody is ever going to call them anything but Gothic. And one could cite plenty of other examples of the Gothic system being closely analogous to the classical. It is, by the way, a great mistake to think of Gothic and classical as *opposites*; they are very different but they are not opposites and they are not wholly unrelated. It is nineteenth-century romanticism which has made us put them in totally different psychological camps. People who say they 'prefer' Gothic to classical or classical to Gothic are, I suspect, usually the victims of this nineteenth-century misinterpretation. The fact is that the essentials of architecture – as expounded by the Renaissance theorists – are to be found expressed, consciously or unconsciously, throughout the architectures of the world. And while we must incorporate these essentials in our idea of what is classical we must also accept the fact that classical architecture is only recognizable as such when it contains some allusion, however slight, however vestigial, to the antique 'orders'. Such an allusion may be no more than some groove or projection which suggests the idea of a cornice or even a disposition of windows which suggests the ratio of pedestal to column, column to entablature. Some twentieth-century buildings – notably those of Auguste Perret and his imitators – are classical in this way: that is to say, they are thought out in modern materials but in a classical spirit and sealed as classical only by the tiniest allusive gestures. In the last section of the book I shall have more to say about all this. In the meantime the thing which it is quite essential for us to understand before we go any further is this question of the orders – the 'five orders of architecture'. Everybody has heard of them, but what exactly are they? Why are there five and not four, or sixteen or three hundred and twenty-six? 117

One thing at a time. First, what are the orders? On page 126 you will find a very clear diagram of the Doric order. It consists, you see, of a temple column standing on a pedestal and carrying on its head the architrave, frieze and cornice, those elements which are collectively called the entablature. Then, in plates 1–4 you see the Doric order again, with its four companions; it is the second from the left, with the Tuscan to the left, the Ionic, Corinthian and Composite to the right.

An 'order' is the 'column-and-superstructure' unit of a temple colonnade. It does not *have* to have a pedestal and often does not. It *does* have to have an entablature (columns are meaningless unless they support something), and the cornice represents the eaves.

Now, why are there five orders? This is a little more difficult and it is necessary to glance back to some origins. The earliest written description of any of the orders is in Vitruvius. The name of this Roman author will crop up frequently in this book and this is the moment to introduce him. He was an architect of some consequence in the reign of Augustus and wrote a treatise in ten books, *De Architectura*, which he dedicated to the Emperor. This is the only treatise of its kind to have survived from antiquity and for that reason has been accorded enormous veneration. Vitruvius was not himself a man of any great genius or literary talent or indeed – for all we know – of architectural talent. The thing about his treatise is that it rounds up and preserves for us an immense quantity of traditional building lore: it is the code of practice of a Roman architect of the first century AD, enriched with instances and historical notes.

In the course of Vitruvius's third and fourth books he describes three of the orders – Ionic, Doric and Corinthian – and gives a few notes on another, the Tuscan. He tells us in which part of the world each was invented. He relates them to his descriptions of temples and tells us to which gods and goddesses each order is appropriate. His descriptions are by no means exhaustive, he gives no fifth order, he does not present them in what we think of as the 'proper' sequence (Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian) and – most important – he does not present them as a set of canonical formulae embodying all architectural virtue. That was left for the theorists of the Renaissance.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, fourteen hundred years after Vitruvius, the Florentine architect and humanist, Leon Battista Alberti, described the orders, partly with reference to Vitruvius and partly from his own observations of Roman remains. It was he who added, from observation, a fifth order – the Composite – which combines features of the Corinthian with those of the Ionic. But Alberti was still perfectly objective and Vitruvian in his attitude. It was Sebastiano Serlio, nearly a century later, who really started the orders – the five orders now – on their long career of canonical, symbolic, almost legendary, authority. I am not sure that Serlio quite meant to do this but that is what he did.

Serlio was a man of the High Renaissance, an exact contemporary of Michelangelo, a near contemporary of Raphael and an associate of the architect-painter Baldassare Peruzzi whose designs he inherited. He built a few quite important buildings but his greatest service to architecture was to compile the first full-scale fully illustrated architectural grammar of the Renaissance. It came out as a series of books. The first two appeared in Venice, the later books in France under the patronage of François I. The books became the architectural bible of the civilized world. The Italians used them, the French owed nearly everything to Serlio and his books, the Germans and Flemings based their own books on his, the Elizabethans cribbed from him and Sir Christopher Wren was still finding Serlio invaluable when he built the Sheldonian at Oxford in 1663.

Serlio's book on the orders starts with an engraving – the very first of its kind – in which all five orders are shown standing side by side like ill-assorted ninepins ranged according to their relative slimness, that is to say, according to the ratio of lower diameter to height. All are on pedestals. The stubby Tuscan is on the left; then the similar but slightly taller Doric; the elegant Ionic; the lofty, elaborate Corinthian; and finally the still more elongated and further enriched Composite. In the text accompanying this plate Serlio explains himself. He says that just as the ancient dramatists used to preface their plays with a prologue telling audiences what it was all going to be about, so he is putting before us the principal characters in his treatise on architecture. He does it in a way which makes the orders seem as categorical in the grammar of architecture as, say, the four conjugations of verbs in the grammar of the Latin language.

This very effective and, quite literally, dramatic gesture of Serlio's was not lost upon his successors, and the five orders as a 'complete set', all deviations from which were questionable, passed from hand to hand. Nearly all seventeenth- and eighteenth-century primers of architecture start in the same way, with a plate of the five columns and entablatures ranged side by side – Bloem in Switzerland, De Vries in Flanders, Dietterlin in Germany, Fréart and Perrault in France and, in England, Shute, Gibbs and Sir William Chambers. George Gwilt's edition of Chambers carries us up to 1825 and if you go from this to the same author's *Encyclopedia of Architecture* and follow this work to its latest edition in 1891 you will find it still being stated there that 'in the proper understanding and application of the orders is laid the

foundation of architecture as an art'. When I was a student in the Bartlett School at University College, London, it was taken for granted that one's first task as a student was to draw out in great detail three of the classical orders.

Now there are two important points about all this. The first is to realize that although the Romans clearly accepted the individuality of Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, and knew about their historical origins, it was not they who embalmed and sanctified them in the arbitrary, limiting way with which we are familiar. The second point is to realize the immense importance, for the whole of architecture since the Renaissance, of this process of embalming, of canonization. The orders came to be regarded as the very touchstone of architecture, as architectural instruments of the greatest possible subtlety, embodying all the ancient wisdom of mankind in the building art – almost, in fact, as products of nature herself. And this is where the modern eye must often confess itself defeated. Unless you really *know* your orders and can recognize, at a glance, a Tuscan according to Vitruvius, a Corinthian from the Temple of Vespasian or an Ionic from the Temple of Saturn or the rather odd Composite concocted by Serlio from the Colosseum you will not appreciate all the refinements and variations which, from time to time, have been lovingly and assiduously applied to them. Nevertheless, even an 'O level' understanding of the orders is something, for it is by no means only in the handling of the orders themselves that the character of classical architecture lies. It is also – even more (much more, in fact) – in the way they are deployed; but that is a subject for another chapter.

Meanwhile, let us be quite clear about how variable or how invariable the orders are. Serlio puts them before us with a tremendous air of authority giving dimensions for each part as if to settle the profiles and proportions once and for all. But in fact, Serlio's orders, while obviously reflecting Vitruvius to some extent, are also based on his own observation of ancient monuments and thus, by a process of personal selection, to quite a considerable degree are his own invention. It could hardly be otherwise. Vitruvius's descriptions have gaps in them and these can only be filled from knowledge of surviving Roman monuments themselves. The orders as exemplified in these monuments vary considerably from one to the other so it is open to anybody to abstract what he considers the best features of each in order to set out what he considers his ideal Corinthian, Ionic

or whatever it is. All through the history of classical architecture speculation as to the ideal types of each of the orders has continued, oscillating between antiquarian reverence on the one hand and sheer personal invention on the other. Somewhere between the extremes have been the types composed and published by the great theorists: Serlio, of course, first in 1537, then Vignola in 1562, Palladio in 1570 and Scamozzi in 1615. These have had a normalizing effect all over the world. But in all the centuries there have been instances where architects have taken pride in copying specific antique examples. For instance, Jean Bullant at Écouen, the great house near Paris, derived the Corinthian with most of its ornaments from the Temple of Castor and Pollux; that was in 1540. Inigo Jones at Covent Garden in 1630 reconstructed the Tuscan on the basis of Vitruvius's text – almost an archaeological exercise. Then Sir John Soane in 1793 borrowed literally from the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli for the Bank of England. On the other hand, there have always been daring innovators. Philibert de l'Orme invented a new 'French' order for the Tuileries Palace; Wendel Dietterlin's orders in his book of 1594 are phantasmagoric variations on Serlio; Borromini's orders are outrageous and extremely expressive inventions, entirely his own. So it is a mistake ever to think of the five orders of architecture as a sort of child's box of bricks which architects have used to save themselves the trouble of inventing. It is much better to think of them as grammatical expressions imposing a formidable discipline, but a discipline within which personal sensibility always has a certain play – a discipline, moreover, which can sometimes be burst asunder by a flight of poetic genius.

Now, at this point I am going to ask you to look again at the Doric order. Because I think it may still puzzle you that the entablature has so many curious bits and pieces, all with names but with no particular decorative or symbolic value that you can see. Why mutules? Why triglyphs and metopes? Why the taenia and those odd little tassels called guttae? You may well ask. And I can only give you a very general answer. It is quite certain that the Doric order derives its forms from a primitive type of timber construction. Vitruvius tells us as much. When you are looking at a Doric order executed in stone you are looking, in effect, at a carved representation of a Doric order constructed of wood. Not a literal representation, of course, but a sculptural equivalent. The earliest temples in the ancient world were

of wood. Gradually some of these temples – those, doubtless, of special sanctity and which attracted wealth – came to be rebuilt in stone. It would be felt imperative to preserve in the more permanent stone version the actual forms round which so much sanctity had gathered. Hence, the carpentry devices of the wooden entablature, already, no doubt, somewhat stylized, were copied in stone or marble. Later on, no doubt, stone temples on new sites copied the copies, and so it went on till the whole thing became a static and accepted formula.

Look at the Doric entablature again in the light of this and it does, to some extent, explain itself. The *mutules* seem to be the ends of cantilevers jutting out to support the eaves and to carry the eaves, from which the rain drips, well away from the columns. Then the *triglyphs* could be the ends of cross beams resting on the architrave. The *taenia* looks like some kind of binding member and it appears to be secured to the triglyphs by the *guttae*, which are not tassels, of course, but pegs. I say ‘seem to be’, ‘could be’, ‘looks like’ because all these things are my own rough guesses. Some archaeologists have devoted much ingenuity to trying to work back from the formalized Doric to its last timber prototype. Their guesses are worth more than mine, but guesses they are and are likely to remain. All that matters for us now is that in the process of time a system of timber construction, copied in stone, crystallized into the linguistic formula which Vitruvius knew, and so we know, as the Doric order. This crystallization has a very obvious parallel in language. Words, expressions, grammatical constructions have all at some time had to be invented to meet particular needs of communication. Those immediate needs are long since forgotten, but the words and their patterns still form the language we use for a thousand purposes – including poetry. That is how it is with the five orders of architecture.

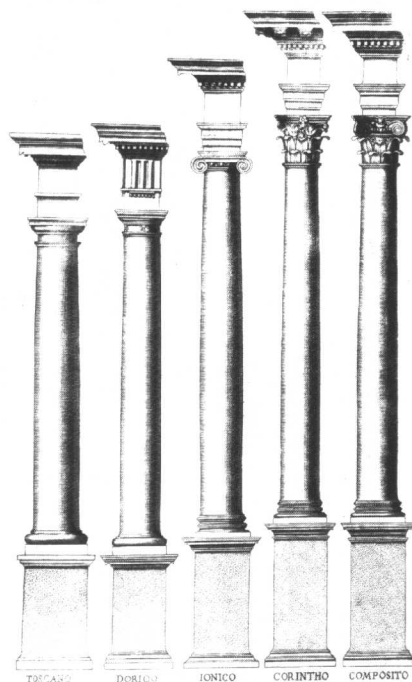
One more word about the orders. They are always supposed to have something resembling personalities; Vitruvius was perhaps responsible for this. The Doric he saw as exemplifying ‘the proportion, strength and grace of a man’s body’ – presumably an average well-built male. The Ionic, for him, was characterized by ‘feminine slenderness’ and the Corinthian as imitating ‘the slight figure of a girl’, which may seem not very different from the last. But Vitruvius having opened the door to personalization of the orders the Renaissance let in a lot more – often very contradictory. Thus while Scamozzi echoes Vitruvius in calling the Corinthian ‘virginal’, Sir

Henry Wotton, a few years later, distorts him by calling it 'lascivious' and 'decked like a wanton courtezán', adding that the morals of Corinth were bad anyway. Nevertheless, the Corinthian has always been regarded as female and the Doric as male, with the Ionic in between as something rather unsexed – an ageing scholar or a calm and gentle matron. Serlio's recommendations are perhaps the most specific and consistent. The Doric, he says, should be used for churches dedicated to the more extroverted male saints (St Paul, St Peter or St George) and to militant types in general; the Ionic for matronly saints, neither too tough nor too tender, and also for men of learning; the Corinthian for virgins, most especially the Virgin Mary. To the Composite Serlio awards no special characteristics, while the Tuscan he finds suitable for fortifications and prisons.

Now there is no need to take any of this too seriously. Certainly, there is no need when you are looking at the Corinthian columns of, say, the Mansion House in London, to wonder if the Lord Mayor who commissioned them thought of them as virginal or the other thing. The fact is that the orders have mostly been used according to taste, according to circumstances and very often according to means; building in plain Tuscan or Doric was obviously less expensive than building in richly carved Corinthian. There *are* cases where the use of an order has a deliberate symbolic significance. I think, for instance, that Wren must have used Doric at Chelsea Hospital because of its soldierly character. And there is the fascinating case of Inigo Jones and the Tuscan at Covent Garden. Tuscan and Doric are the two most primitive orders and architects have tended to use them when they wanted to express roughness and toughness or in the case of the Doric what is called a 'soldierly bearing'. At the other end of the scale the Composite is sometimes chosen because the architect wants to lay it on thick – luxury, opulence, no expense spared.

Anyway, the main point is this. The orders provided a sort of *gamut* of architectural character all the way from the rough and tough to the slim and fine. In true classical designing the selection of the order is a very vital point – it is a choice of mood. What you do with the order, what exact ratios you give its different parts, what enrichments you put in or leave out, this again shifts and defines the mood.

Well, so much for the five orders of architecture – five basic elements in the architectural grammar of antiquity. But what can you do with the orders? How does the grammar work?



The progress of the five orders

Each generation succeeding Serlio's studied the orders afresh and delineated them with carefully argued variations. **2** Vignola's versions, the first to be engraved on copper, appeared in 1563. Palladio's exposition followed in 1570 but gave no plate showing the five orders together. **3** Scamozzi's wood-engraving of 1615, however, is much in the spirit of Palladio. **4** Claude Perrault, the Frenchman, consulted all the Italian authorities and produced his own copper-plate versions in 1676, with a modular scale from which the proportions of the various parts could be read and memorized.

