# NEW CLASSICISTS

# ROBERT ADAM

THE SEARCH FOR A MODERN CLASSICISM

by Richard John Foreword by H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES

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Nigel Anderson

Paul Hanvey

Hugh Petter

Robert Adam

George Saumarez Smith



'Inspiration does exist but it must find you working'.

#### Pablo Picasso

When Robert Adam was studying architecture in London in the late 1960's the idea of taking an interest in 'traditional architecture' was not exactly encouraged but, clearly, something fascinated him about it. Perhaps it was being part of the continuity of the culture and language of building that had been refined over millennia and the peculiar fact that this knowledge was so close to extinction?

It was in keeping this flame alive that Robert found himself studying in Rome as a scholar at the British School and being inspired as much by the cultural and social elements of tradition as by the buildings themselves. Those early seeds saw the growth of a quest that some 35 years later has led to the formation of the largest practice of traditional architecture and urbanism in Europe.

Core to the practice is social and environmental sustainability and it is within this spirit that the firm is carefully structured around a lineage of directors varying in discipline and age so that, as Robert finds more time for disseminating his ideas, the practice can continue to grow and develop with new blood and inspiration.

I have often said, and will carrying on doing so, that architects ought to have acquired a basic "grammar" that is related to the fundamental structure and proportions of Nature before they move on to more complicated narratives in building and that, over their lifetime, they should first learn, then practise and finally teach. I only hope Robert can find time in his busy schedule to inspire others with what he has learned and practised so that, once again, a creative and truly living tradition in architecture becomes the spirit of the age and the heritage of tomorrow.





Bust of Robert Adam by Alexander Stoddart

## PREFACE

Robert Adam has practised architecture in Winchester since 1977. In 1986 he co-founded Winchester Design, a firm that has been known as Robert Adam Architects since 2000 and in 2010 became known as ADAM Architecture. In an unusual move for an eponymous architectural practice, Adam has been joined by four fellow directors. Their names, and the years in which they joined the firm and were appointed director, are as follows: Nigel Anderson (1988, 1991), Paul Hanvey (1982, 1996), Hugh Petter (1987, 1997), and George Saumarez Smith (2003, 2004). Three of these are architects, the fourth, Paul Hanvey, is the technical director of the practice.

Adam talks about the involvement of these fellow directors as the realisation of what he calls the *schola* principle. Schola in Latin means the disciples of a teacher, though in fact all four of them had completed their training and worked in other practices before joining the firm. It is important, also, not to confuse the term with the art historical concept of the 'school' of an artist, because there are very clear stylistic differences between the work of each of the four design directors and it is unlikely that the designs of one could be confused with those of another. The 'schola' concept is, rather, a visionary approach to the expansion of the practice to ensure its continued vitality through the infusion of new blood. The work of the other directors is noted in what follows but the principal subject is the work of Robert Adam. Each director has a body of work that could be studied in its own right. The practice is unique both in the wide talent among the directors, all designing in the same tradition but with an individual character, and in its size. At more than 90 strong in 2008, with offices in both London and Winchester, the firm is currently the largest wholly traditional firm in Europe and possibly in the world.

#### C H A P T E R 1

### INTRODUCTION

'Throw away Respect, Tradition, Forme, and Ceremonious dutie.'

William Shakespeare, Richard II, III. ii. 173

By the mid 1960s the orthodoxy of the International Style was being challenged in Britain by a generation of architectural practitioners still in their thirties. Two diverse reactions to the slick uniformity of corporate Modernism can be identified. On the one hand, a fetish was made of technology by architects such as Jim Stirling, whose engineering faculty building at Leicester University was completed in 1963, and by Archigram, the self-consciously avant garde group based at the Architectural Association. While the members of Archigram had no actual buildings to their name, they nevertheless proved hugely influential through a stream of pop-culture manifestos and polemical projects. These drew for inspiration on the imagery of contemporary science fiction and the futuristic fantasies of Buckminster Fuller. Thus they produced visions of modular cities, such as Peter Cook's 'The Plug-in City' (1964), and mobile robot-like habitations, as in Ron Herron's 'The Walking City' (1964).

A quite different response to the banality of the International Style can be seen in the New Brutalism of Peter and Alison Smithson. Moving away from the restrained idiom of their Hunstanton school (1949–54), they enthusiastically embraced the language of *béton brut* first in their Economist building in St James's (1959–64) and then, with much less success, in the large public housing project of Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar (1966–72). This was how the architectural scene looked in Britain when, in 1967, the auspiciously named Robert Adam enrolled in the architecture school at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London.<sup>1</sup>

Adam, a doctor's son who had studied English, History and Art at 'A level', did not find the Polytechnic the most congenial of learning environments. During his third year at the school he lived with a group of 'normal middle-class people', as he later described them, who were lawyers or wine merchants. Their grounded pragmatism provided a refreshing counterbalance to his pretentious and utopian classmates whom his flat-mates saw as being 'completely bonkers'. His tutors at the Polytechnic included the now-fashionable Rick Mather, an Oregonian expatriate who had studied at the Architectural Association after moving to London in 1963. In general the tutors there were not supportive of his interest in tradition, though the arch-Corbusian Bernard Lamb said: 'I don't like what you're doing, but you're the only person that is and I think it's very important.'

<sup>1</sup> The Regent Street Polytechnic merged with the Holborn College of Law, Languages and Commerce in 1971 to form the Polytechnic of Central London, which was renamed the University of Westminster in 1992.

Adam wrote his dissertation on the subject of probability theory, entitling it 'Chaos and The Enigma of the Environment'. For this he was awarded the Bannister Fletcher dissertation prize in 1972. Ostensibly it was about the mathematics of chance and philosophies of perception and began with a Borges-inspired short story about the philosopher Oakeshott witnessing a fatal car accident. Its main thrust, however, was rather an attempt to explain why the most satisfying human environments have not been specifically designed for certain activities, that is, where 'form follows function', but have grown up haphazardly over time, so that they come to fulfil very different requirements from those originally intended.

Though 'Chaos' featured prominently in the title, the substance of the text did not touch at all on the mathematical 'chaos theory' which was to become such a fad in architectural theory in the 1990s<sup>2</sup>; in fact 'chaos' would not even be coined as a term in mathematics until 1975.<sup>3</sup> Adam's attempt to yoke mathematics with analysis of the built environment was inspired in part by an essay published by Christopher Alexander in 1965, 'A City is Not a Tree'.<sup>4</sup> Another recently published work that clearly influenced Adam, particularly in the short final section of his dissertation where he attempted to transfer some of his theoretical concepts into the realm of actual architecture, was Robert Venturi's book, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.<sup>5</sup>

Mainly as a result of the success of his highly original dissertation, Adam won a special Rome Scholarship offered by the Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom (ARCUK), and spent 1973–74 at the British School in Rome studying the urban morphology of the city, focusing specifically on the period from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages. He was fascinated by the continuity that he found in Roman architecture from the fully canonical classicism of the Imperial period, through the early Christian use of antique *spolia*, to the archaising forms of Romanesque architecture. The language was always classical, but there had been a gradual transformation. In turn the Romanesque style of the eleventh and twelfth centuries heralded the Renaissance revival of classicism and to such an extent that art historians even described it as 'proto-renaissance'. In Adam's eyes Rome provided the perfect example of a tradition continuously evolving over some twenty centuries, from the second century BC through to the flowering of the Baroque in the Seicento.

His studies of later Roman architecture were to provide him with invaluable precedents when later, wishing to work in a simple brick idiom but anxious to avoid the banalities of the neo-vernacular, he adopted the bold and simple typologies of late antiquity for projects such as Sheridan House, an office building in Winchester, and the new public library at Bordon in Hampshire.

During his time at the British School, Adam researched and wrote a number of essays on Roman topics, concentrating on the buildings and urbanism of the Campus Martius, the low-lying marshy area in the bend of the Tiber which during the Republican era had been a military exercise ground, but later became a locus for imperial iconography from Augustus through to the Antonines. What fascinated Adam more than anything else was the relationship between politics and architecture, and he sought to trace how the

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Charles Jencks, The Architecture of the Jumping Universe, Academy, London and New York 1995.

<sup>3</sup> It was first used in the context of mathematics by T.Y. Li and J.A. Yorke in their article 'Period Three Implies Chaos', American Mathematics Monthly, 82 (1975), p. 985.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Alexander, 'A City is Not a Tree', Architectural Forum, vol. 122, no. 1, April 1965, pp. 58-62 (Part I), vol. 122, no. 2, May 1965, pp. 58-62 (Part II).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, New York, 1966.

early emperors developed the site to achieve particular political goals through architectural symbolism and urban iconography. This caused Adam to ponder the way in which buildings can be a vehicle for meaning: 'A building has no meaning whatever. It is a vessel which can have meaning put into it – and just as easily tipped out again. Any interpretation or symbolism that I will use is modern. It may relate to old things but it cannot be anything but modern.' Later he concluded that 'it has been necessary to impose a meaning on the buildings. This meaning was not an inherent quality of the buildings themselves, it is just a way of understanding them, and therefore understanding the direct relationship between political, social and economic realities, ideas and buildings.' Embodied in this line of thought is a crucial idea: that the meanings associated with buildings or styles are not fixed, but are fluid and dependent on context, thus changing from century to century and place to place. This concept would prove valuable in the following decade as Adam developed his arguments to defend classicism from that old chestnut of Modernists, that classical architecture was somehow fascist because of its associations with the Third Reich.

A second essay traced the decline of Rome during the third century until the new imperial capital was established in Constantinople. He paid particular attention to the rapid transformation of Rome under Constantine, with the construction of his triumphal arch, the completion of Maxentius' basilica next to the Sacred Way, and the creation of the first Christian basilicas, a newly invented typology often incorporating *spolia*, elements plundered from earlier structures. Finally, he attempted a spatial analysis of the Campus Martius as it exists today, following its complex and haphazard transformation during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. He took special delight in the urban ambiguities that he discovered there: 'I am excited and interested in muddled surroundings, I like to be surprised and meet the unexpected, I enjoy the challenge of being lost and finding hidden places. I do not want to know exactly what lies around the next corner ... I do not like clear and explicit statements – I find them rather boring ... I think that variety, change and difference are a good thing.'9

While in Rome he met Quinlan Terry who had returned there for a visit having been a Rome scholar four years earlier. A comparison of their differing attitudes to the city is instructive. Following in the great tradition of architects from Palladio in the 16th century to John Russell Pope in the 20th, Terry had spent his time in Rome almost exclusively in making measured drawings of antique and renaissance buildings, providing him with a mother lode of architectural details that he continues to mine for his projects to this day. By contrast, Adam, while he certainly kept a sketchbook during his time in Rome, used his sojourn at the British School primarily to engage in original historical research and to investigate the fundamental relationship between architecture and urbanism on the one hand, and politics and society on the other. These different approaches to the fountainhead of classicism may be seen reflected in their bodies of work. Terry, eleven years Adam's senior, has practised with a quasi-religious conviction in a focused neo-Georgian mode, occasionally adopting slight regional variations where appropriate; for instance, turning to Schinkel for inspiration for a house in Frankfurt, and essaying, most convincingly, an American Colonial idiom for a row of shops in Williamsburg, Virginia. On the other hand, as will become apparent, Adam in his work has drawn fully on the entire classical tradition from Ancient Greece and Rome up to the neo-Baroque of Edwardian Britain and the Beaux-Arts skyscrapers of the American Renaissance. In addition to this wide-ranging exploration of the varied idioms

<sup>6</sup> Robert Adam, Rome: The Image of Empire, unpublished essay, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> ibid., p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Adam, 'In Defence of Historicism', RIBA Journal, December 1981, pp. 39-43.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Adam, Campus Martius Rome: Spatial Analysis, unpublished essay, p. 1.

of classicism, he has also unhesitatingly engaged through his buildings the most pressing issues of technology and society as a whole. The one area of practice where Adam and Terry are perhaps closest is urbanism: both have drawn on their experiences of Italian cities to design townscapes of great richness in Britain and America.

#### THE RADIANCE OF THE PAST

In 1980, the year of the *Strada Novissima* exhibition at the Venice Biennale, Adam wrote an essay entitled 'The Radiance of the Past', which was published in a much abbreviated form three years later in the *Architects Journal*. The title is taken from Petrarch's epic poem about the Roman general Scipio Africanus, the *Africa*. At the very end of the epic, Petrarch addresses the poem itself, lamenting the current state of letters and predicting that, 'This sleep of forgetfulness will not last forever. After the darkness has been dispelled, our grandsons will be able to walk back into the pure radiance of the past.' This passage, generally taken to be a harbinger of the rebirth of antique culture in the Italian Renaissance, was cited by Adam in his title to indicate the significance he attached to the recent reappearance of historic forms in British architecture. Perhaps the most prominent example of this new phenomenon was Terry Farrell's shop for Clifton Nurseries built in 1980–81 on a parcel of vacant land in the heart of Covent Garden and designed to occupy the site only temporarily while the Royal Opera House made preparations to build its planned extension. This ephemeral structure was, in essence, a greenhouse masquerading as an archaic Doric temple, though Farrell had wittily designed some of the squat columns to be constructed out of *treillage* giving an ironic post-modern twist to the supposed solidity of the primitive Doric forms.

Adam's essay, concerned as it was with revivals and revivalism, represented a marked maturation in his contributions as a theorist. Previously, he had sometimes seemed to struggle to make solid connections between his researches in fields such as probability theory, political history and early Christian theology, and the actual practice of architecture. In 'The Radiance of the Past', however, he was dealing directly with a contemporary architectural issue, and every time he cited an example from the history of literature or art it was specifically used to bolster his central argument. In making his points he was clearly motivated by a focused polemical intent; again and again he addressed the attacks being made on the emerging architectural 'historicism' from an unimpeachable philosophical high ground and dispatched them one by one as fallacious.

He began by identifying the crucial element in a revival as being the designer's *intent*; it didn't matter if references to historic buildings 'occur several times or once ... [are] done well or badly ... [are] done wholly or partially, it is still a revival.' He illustrated this with a range of examples drawn from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries, including Michelozzo, Vignola, Palladio and Hawksmoor. He then dealt with the criticism that an architectural revival is mere mimicry, 'contemptible enslavement to the past' in Le Corbusier's words, <sup>13</sup> pointing out that the history of western architecture is mostly composed of periods of revivalism, which are more often inventive or erroneous than dry or pedantic. The difference between 'survival' was clarified, and he established that even a lapse of only a few decades was sufficient

<sup>10</sup> Architects Journal, 16 November 1983, pp. 71-3.

<sup>11 &#</sup>x27;non omnes veniet Letheus in annos / Iste sopor! Poterunt discussis forte tenebris / Ad purum priscumque inbar remeare nepotes.' Petrarch, *Africa*, IX, 455–7 (ed. Festa, p. 278). For the context of this passage see Theodore E. Mommsen, 'Petrarch's Conception of the "Dark Ages" ', *Speculum*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 226–242.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Adam, The Radiance of the Past, unpublished essay, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture, London, 1923, p. 97.

to draw a distinction between one and the other. This was a crucial point because fewer than thirty years had passed since classicism had been taught in British schools of architecture, and the survival of the classical tradition through the 1950s in actual buildings was evident from prominent buildings such as Bracken House (1955–59), Sir Albert Richardson's headquarters for *The Financial Times*.

In order to illuminate the phenomenon of revival in the late 20th century Adam examined in depth some of the characteristics of revivals in previous eras. First he considered those inevitable anachronisms in the depictions of historical events which are painfully obvious to later viewers, but were invisible to their creators. One excellent example he gave was the range of different costumes seen in representations of classical figures from the Middle Ages to the present, so that Julius Caesar can often be seen wearing medieval armour in manuscript illuminations. In architecture these anachronisms can, in time, take on a validity of their own: Palladio's use of porticos for private houses, for example, was erroneously based on his belief that, 'the ancients made use of [porticoes] in their [public] buildings ... it is very likely that they took the idea and the reasons for it from private buildings or houses.' Adam observed that Palladio 'made porticos on houses fashionable and it is a practice that continues as a consequence of his error'. 14

While Palladio's reinterpretation of the temple façade as a domestic type was a result of his erroneous understanding of ancient buildings, many architectural reinterpretations were quite conscious variations on the original theme. Adam cited the relationship between the Propylaea in Athens built by Mnesikles in the fifth century B.C. and the Greater Propylaea at Eleusis of the first century B.C. whose designer copied the central section of the Athenian propylon for specific symbolic reasons. Alberti's use of the Roman triumphal arch motif at Sant'Andrea, Mantua, Sansovino's elaborate Doric order on the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice and even Hawksmoor's defence of Castle Howard as following ancient precedent all served to illustrate his notion of 'progressive reinterpretation'. Adam noted that the power of architectural symbolism was such that even the most abstracted forms could carry a heavy freight of meaning, so that 'the only stylistic condition that Mies van der Rohe placed on his chosen contributors to the 1927 Stuttgart exhibition' was to abjure pitched roofs.<sup>15</sup>

Adam's profound studies of Roman architecture and its influence allowed him to identify an even more subtle phenomenon, erroneous revivals of revivals. Here a designer was looking back, not to what he thought was the origin of a motif or style, but rather to one of its later revivals. Brunelleschi was clearly inspired by the Romanesque buildings of Tuscany, such as the Florentine baptistery and San Miniato al Monte; but, in common with all his contemporaries, he had believed that the baptistery was an Ancient Roman temple of Mars and so mistakenly thought that he was reviving authentic Roman architecture. In this case the Russian doll-like nesting of revivals went even further because, as Adam pointed out, it is likely that much Romanesque architecture developed directly from the Ottonian revival of classicism, and so was based not on genuine antique buildings but, rather, was dependent on the classicising Carolingian revival of only two centuries earlier.

While advocates for the modern movement had often tried to suggest the motive for revival is simply nostalgia, in fact there was generally a range of different reasons. At the base of all of them, Adam maintained, was a 'deep-rooted reverence or respect for the revived style' and this was apparent in

<sup>14</sup> Robert Adam, The Radiance of the Past, unpublished essay, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> ibid., p. 27.

attitudes to Ancient Rome in the Renaissance, and to Ancient Greece in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He emphasised that this reverence did not deny a designer the opportunity to be original; in fact, in many cases, the revival of past forms was acknowledged as consciously innovative, whether in the purity of Bramante's *all'antica* work or in the austerity of Wilkins' Grecian houses. Adam concluded with a forceful call to arms: 'Revivalism has been a complex and extraordinarily persistent architectural phenomenon ... [It] has provided Western architecture with a visual vocabulary of remarkable richness, constantly regenerating itself from common sources ... It would be extraordinary to claim that a break of only about thirty years in this evolutionary process should negate either its validity or the significance of its imagery. Turning technology into a master rather than a slave hardly seems to be a satisfactory substitute.' <sup>16</sup>

Within a year of the publication of the article based on 'The Radiance of the Past', the tone of the public debate about the revival of traditional architecture was transformed by a single incident: the speech given by HRH The Prince of Wales at the Mansion House on 30 May 1984. The occasion was doubly significant: the presentation of the Royal Gold Medal to the Indian architect, Charles Correa, and the 150th anniversary of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The Prince used the opportunity to attack the proposal to erect a tower designed by Mies van der Rohe on a site adjacent to the Mansion House describing it as 'a tragedy if the character and skyline of our capital city were to be further ruined and St Paul's dwarfed by yet another giant glass stump, better suited to downtown Chicago than the City of London.'<sup>17</sup> He also meted out harsh criticism of the proposed extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square designed by Ahrends, Burton and Koralek, famously saying that it was 'like a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend.' Almost immediately it was as though lines had been drawn in the sand between the architectural establishment, whose members through education and force of habit advocated a Modernist approach, often in a self-consciously 'high-tech' idiom, and a small handful of practitioners who espoused a revival of traditional forms, materials and techniques.

The new combative tone of the debate is evident from Adam's article 'The Paradox of Imitation and Originality', which appeared four years later in *Architectural Design*. This magazine, published by Dr Andreas Papadakis, functioned almost as a house journal for post-modernism and the new classicism throughout the late 1970s and 1980s with a roster of guest editors that included luminaries of the movements such as Charles Jencks and Demetri Porphyrios. In this piece, illustrated by his recently completed house in Salisbury Cathedral Close, Adam lamented the illogical suppositions and undefined assumptions that were bandied around in the discussion because 'in the emotional atmosphere of current architectural sectarianism this lack of clear thinking can close the minds of credulous students and practitioners alike.' He focused on the word 'pastiche' and the phrase 'of its time', particular favourites of Modernists engaged in the counter-offensive following the Prince's speech. He showed that borrowings from past styles, disparagingly referred to as 'pastiches', were a marked characteristic of all architectural periods from Ancient Rome onwards, and that to suggest that this type of emulation was artistically invalid would eliminate most of Western architecture from serious consideration.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Adam, 'Radiance of the Past', Architects Journal, 16 November 1983, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speeches/architecture\_30051984.html, accessed August 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Adam, 'The Paradox of Imitation and Originality', Architectural Design, vol. 58 (1988), nos. 9-10, pp. 18-19.

<sup>19</sup> ibid., p. 18.



The phrases 'of its time' or 'of our time' were often used as code words for Modernism through the implication that any building that was not Modernist could not be 'of our time'. Here Adam was emphatic: 'Any building erected today, regardless of what it looks like, expresses some aspect of modern society and is, in this sense at least, a building "of our time".'20 The issue, which he correctly identified, was that Modernists wanted desperately to avoid their buildings being judged from the point of view of style or aesthetics, and therefore their arguments were pitched beyond the notion of personal taste or judgment, appealing instead to some higher authority like the *zeitgeist* or to some spurious moral code such as 'truth to materials'. David Watkin had kicked away Modernism's philosophical crutches as long ago as 1977 in his essay 'Morality and Architecture', but still, more than a decade later, these tired incantations were being repeated. It is even more ironic that today, when much of what passes for Modernism is an exercise in historical revival, the same hollow arguments continue to be echoed.

<sup>20</sup> ibid., p. 19.