



a Pelican Original

An Outline of European Architecture

Nikolaus Pevsner



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The first edition of this book was dedicated to my three children. Dedications, like books, should be kept up to date, and I therefore dedicate this edition to my three children, three children-in-law, and eight grandchildren

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Foreword

A history of European architecture in one volume can achieve its goal only if the reader is prepared to concede three things.

He must not expect to find a mention of every work and every architect of importance. If this had been attempted, all the space available would have been filled with nothing but names of architects, names of buildings, and dates. One building must often be accepted as sufficient to illustrate one particular style or one particular point. This means that in the picture which the reader is going to see gradations are eliminated, and colour is set against colour. He may regard that as a disadvantage, but he will, it may be hoped, admit that the introduction of subtler differences would have doubled or trebled the already considerable bulk of the book. Thus the nave of Lincoln will be discussed but not the nave of Wells, and S. Spirito in Florence but not S. Lorenzo. Whether St Michael's, Coventry, is really a more complete or suitable example of a Perpendicular parish church than Holy Trinity, Hull, the Palazzo Rucellai of the Italian Renaissance than the Palazzo Strozzi, is of course debatable. Unanimity cannot be achieved on matters of that kind. Yet, as architectural values can be appreciated only by describing and analysing buildings at some length, it was imperative to cut down their number, and devote as much space as possible to those finally retained.

Besides this limitation, two more have proved necessary. It was out of the question to treat European architecture of all ages from Stonehenge to the twentieth century, or the architecture of all the nations which make up Europe today. Neither would, however, be expected of a volume called *European Architecture*. The Greek

temple, most readers probably agree, and the Roman forum, belong to the civilization of Antiquity, not to what we usually mean when we speak of European civilization. But it will also be agreed that Greece and Rome are the most indispensable of all premisses for an understanding of European civilization. Hence they appear in the first chapter of this book, but appear only very briefly. The same is true of the Mediterranean civilization of the first Christian decades and its expression in the Early Christian churches of Rome, Ravenna, and the Near East and the Byzantine churches. They belong to a civilization different from ours but one of its sources. That again accounts for the way in which they are treated here. A different case is that of say Bulgaria. If it is never mentioned at all in the following pages the reason is that Bulgaria in the past belonged to the Byzantine and then to the Russian orbit, and that her importance now is so marginal as to make her omission pardonable. So everything will be left out of this book that is only of marginal interest in the development of European architecture, and everything that is not European or – as I thus propose using the term European – Western in character. For Western civilization is a distinct unit, a biological unit, one is tempted to say. Not for racial reasons certainly – it is shallow materialism to assume that – but for cultural reasons. Which nations make up Western civilization at any given moment, at what juncture a nation enters it, at what juncture a nation ceases to be of it – such questions are for the individual historian to decide. Nor can he expect his decision to be universally accepted. The cause of this uncertainty regarding historical categories is obvious enough. Though a civilization may appear entirely clear in its essential characteristics when we think of its highest achievements, it seems blurred and hazy when we try to focus its exact outlines in time and space.

Taking Western civilization, it is certain that prehistory is not part of it, as the prehistory of every civilization – the word expresses it – is a stage *prae*, i.e. before that civilization itself is born. The birth of a civilization coincides with the moment when a leading idea, a *leitmotiv*, emerges for the first time, the idea which will in the course of centuries to follow gather strength, spread, mature, mellow, and ultimately – this is fate, and must be faced – abandon

the civilization whose soul it had been. When this happens, the civilization dies, and another somewhere else, or from the same soil, grows up, starting out of its own prehistory into its own primitive dark age, and then developing its own essentially new ideology. Thus it was, to recall only the most familiar example, when the Roman Empire died, and Western civilization was born out of prehistoric darkness, passed through its Merovingian infancy, and then began to take shape under Charlemagne.

So much of omissions in time. As for limitations in space, a few words will suffice. Whoever makes up his mind to write a short history of European architecture, or art, or philosophy, or drama, or agriculture, must decide in which part of Europe at any time those things happened which seem to him to express most intensely the vital will and vital feelings of Europe. It is for this reason that, for example, Germany is not mentioned for her sixteenth-century but for her eighteenth-century buildings, that Italian Gothic is hardly touched upon, and Scandinavian architecture not at all. Spain also could not be granted the space which the exciting qualities of so many of her buildings deserve, for at no time has Spanish architecture decisively influenced the development of European architecture as a whole. The only bias towards the work of one nation that has been permitted (and needs no special apology) is towards British examples when they could be introduced, without obscuring the issue, instead of examples from abroad. The issue, to say it once more, is Western architecture as an expression of Western civilization, described historically in its growth from the ninth to the twentieth century.

London, January 1942 and Easter 1960

Foreword to this Edition

It is now twenty years since the first edition of this book came out, 160 pages long, with 60 illustrations on 32 plates, on brownish paper and with a photograph of the author looking a good deal younger than he does now. As book and author grew older, they both grew in bulk. The second edition (1945) offered 240 pages and 48 plates and gave Spain her due, which she had not received before. The third edition in 1951 added a certain amount on French Gothic, the French seventeenth century, and on Italian Mannerism, and came to 300 pages with 64 plates. The fourth edition of 1953 was changed only in minor ways, but the fifth of 1957 put more in on Early Christian and Byzantine and on the French late eighteenth century and reached 72 plates. Then, in the same year, at the hands of Prestel Verlag in Munich, the book received the accolade of a splendid bound edition with about six hundred superb illustrations, and this Penguin Books took over and provided with more English material than had been necessary for Germany. This Jubilee edition, as it was called, because it came out in the year of Penguin's twenty-fifth birthday, had as additions much on the German Baroque and a whole chapter on the years between 1914 and the mid twentieth century. Meanwhile for a Dutch (1949), a Japanese (no date), a Spanish (1957), and an Italian (1960) edition much material had had to be added on these countries.

For this seventh edition a change of format has been made and a style and technique of illustrating adopted which has proved satisfactory in some other recent Pelicans (including my own *Pioneers of Modern Design*). So the number of illustrations could once again be raised. It now stands at 295, and the number of pages

at 496. My chief additions this time are on matters French, and especially the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. But there are also plenty of other, smaller, changes, something like sixty of them.

The fitting in of such changes is always troublesome, and there is the danger that, as they go on from edition to edition, they could gradually encrust the original thoughts and render them unrecognizable. Overweighting with provisos and footnotes must be avoided. If ballast is not kept evenly distributed, there is disaster. However, it is not for me but for readers and reviewers to diagnose the present state of health of the book.

London, Summer 1962

Introduction

A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal. Now aesthetic sensations may be caused by a building in three different ways. First, they may be produced by the treatment of walls, proportions of windows, the relation of wall-space to window-space, of one storey to another, of ornamentation such as the tracery of a fourteenth-century window, or the leaf and fruit garlands of a Wren porch. Secondly, the treatment of the exterior of a building as a whole is aesthetically significant, its contrasts of block against block, the effect of a pitched or flat roof or a dome, the rhythm of projections and recessions. Thirdly, there is the effect on our senses of the treatment of the interior, the sequence of rooms, the widening out of a nave at the crossing, the stately movement of a Baroque staircase. The first of these three ways is two-dimensional; it is the painter's way. The second is three-dimensional, and as it treats the building as volume, as a plastic unit, it is the sculptor's way. The third is three-dimensional too, but it concerns space; it is the architect's own way more than the others. What distinguishes architecture from painting and sculpture is its spatial quality. In this, and only in this, no other artist can emulate the architect. Thus the history of architecture is primarily a history of man shaping space, and the historian must keep spatial problems always in the foreground. This is why no book on architecture, however popular its presentation may be, can be successful without ground plans.

But architecture, though primarily spatial, is not exclusively

spatial. In every building, besides enclosing space, the architect models volume and plans surface, i.e. designs an exterior and sets out individual walls. That means that the good architect requires the sculptor's and the painter's modes of vision in addition to his own spatial imagination. Thus architecture is the most comprehensive of all visual arts and has a right to claim superiority over the others.

This aesthetic superiority is, moreover, supplemented by a social superiority. Neither sculpture nor painting, although both are rooted in elementary creative and imitative instincts, surrounds us to the same extent as architecture, acts upon us so incessantly and so ubiquitously. We can avoid intercourse with what people call the Fine Arts, but we cannot escape buildings and the subtle but penetrating effects of their character, noble or mean, restrained or ostentatious, genuine or meretricious. An age without painting is conceivable, though no believer in the life-enhancing function of art would want it. An age without easel-pictures can be conceived without any difficulty, and, thinking of the predominance of easel-pictures in the nineteenth century, might be regarded as a consummation devoutly to be wished. An age without architecture is impossible as long as human beings populate this world.

The very fact that in the nineteenth century easel-painting flourished at the expense of wall-painting, and ultimately of architecture, proves into what a diseased state the arts (and Western civilization) had fallen. The very fact that the Fine Arts today seem to be recovering their architectural character makes one look into the future with some hope. For architecture did rule when Greek art and when medieval art grew and were at their best; Raphael still and Michelangelo conceived in terms of balance between architecture and painting. Titian did not, Rembrandt did not, nor did Velazquez. Very high aesthetic achievements are possible in easel-painting, but they are achievements torn out of the common ground of life. The nineteenth century and, even more forcibly, some of the most recent tendencies in the fine arts have shown up the dangers of the take-it-or-leave-it attitude of the independent, self-sufficient painter. Salvation can only come from architecture as the art most closely bound up with the necessities of life, with immediate use, and functional and structural fundamentals.