

PURSUIT OF QUALITY **by Richard MacCormac**

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In his inaugural presidential address, Richard MacCormac describes his view of the landscape of conflicting ideas in which we practise today, and through which critics and the public understand or misunderstand the current practice of architecture - modern architecture.

My aim is to seek areas of shared understanding, to be open about what we do, for architecture as an art must re-engage public interest and sympathy by its evident relevance - its perceived ability to reconcile private and public interest, commerce and art, change and history. For this urgent understanding to occur, we seek an open-mindedness, that recognises that architecture is not just about style, but, like politics, is an art of the possible, forged out of necessity and driven by the weather of commercial, economic and political aspiration. It is a fundamental part of my agenda for the Institute over the next two years to involve a much wider public in our debates, to increase public understanding of architecture and, equally important, awareness of what constrains and holds it back, what environments cultivate architecture and what environments, in the widest political sense, wither it.

A paradox about architecture is that it is perceived to have changed more rapidly in the twentieth century than in any other period. Yet the change from medieval vernacular to Classicism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was far more fundamental and had no popular basis. Modernism was, of course, a startling event but it is now as far away from us as the Regency period would have been for the late Victorians and has become a part of history. Like the nineteenth century, ours has proved curiously reiterative, as though the fin de siècle requires a rapid, febrile replay of collective memory - vernacular revivalism, Post Modernism, commercial Classicism and neo-Modernism. As at the end of the nineteenth century, the same question remains about the relationship between our sense of history and desire for stability in our surroundings and the opposing urge to harness the terrific forces for change unleashed by science and technology which advance commercial and collective life.

The other arts - literature, theatre, music and painting - can offer consolation and respite from the consequences of these conditions. The architect, as artist, is uniquely an agent in the process. But our public responsibilities are often confused with those of planners and developers so that we are held responsible for forces over which we rarely have control - those which create great road networks, disperse urban functions, relocate work places and retailing in the countryside, and incorporate whole areas of towns into semi-private management.

In his brilliant examination of the evolution of the arts of America, Household Gods and Sacred Places, Vincent Scully writes: 'First of all is the question of place, still only partly our own and which, in some strange way, we tend to feel is threatened by us. We do not trust ourselves in relation to it. Twenty years ago we began to become aware that our modern architecture and urbanism were ruining it with enormous rapidity. Redevelopment followed with what came to

be one social and urbanistic horror piled on another. The towers rise with no one in the streets. The cars circle endlessly on the freeways around the blank and glittering slabs. The energy is enormous, the power overwhelming; everything of any age that stands in its way is swallowed up by it. The old, along with the poor, are helpless before it. There is no centre. The point of it all is hard to grasp because the relationships all seem to be by car, plane and computer with other towers far off in other cities out of sight and awareness.'

Everywhere, the traditional environment is threatened. Although there is opposition, there is no urban equivalent of the green lobby, no developed view of the urban environment as a kind of man-made ecology, to enable us to recognise how new functions affect what we already have. This is the objective of the work we have done to classify urban functions into what I have called 'local and foreign transactions', to distinguish between what belongs to the local community - such functions as shops and small businesses - and what belongs to the wider regional, national or international economy as epitomised by the office block and by that image of Houston. What was thwarted in my practice's Spitalfields project was our attempt to achieve balance between such functions. How extraordinary and dismal it is that this great complex debate should have got itself stuck as an argument about style at a level which evades many of the real factors which determine the character of public places. Style is being used as a kind of barter for public or client approval. I know an architectural practice which has a system of computer aided design which enables it to run up alternative Classical or Gothic styles for a client in a matter of minutes.

The view of style today is a curious composite of the eighteenth and nine-teenth centuries. Although a plural society, we are deeply attracted by a characteristic of aristocratic society: the rule of taste which, as Summerson has shown, devolved the Classical principles of Georgian London through the classes of house construction with pattern books. We are also infected by the moral imperatives of Pugin and Ruskin. I think they perceived, con-sciously or unconsciously, that with the demise of aristocratic taste aesthetics would only compete with industrialisation if it was given a moral significance - the true Christian architecture of Pugin and the Venetian Gothic of Ruskin's Stones of Venice. The British have not recovered from that idea of architecture as a moral cause~ rather than as an aesthetic, and consequently we have forfeited our ability to react intuitively to visual things.

The dangers of the indiscriminate and superficial application of style were poignantly summed up by Ruskin in a letter to the Pall Mall Gazette in 1872 in which he admits his failure and explains his departure for the Lake District: 'I am proud enough to hope that I have had some influence on Mr Street but I have also had some influence on every cheap villa builder and there is scarcely a public house near the Crystal Palace but sells its gin and bitters under pseudo-Venetian capitals ... and one of my principal notions for leaving my present house ... is that it is surrounded everywhere by the accursed Frankenstein monsters of my own making.' Ruskin would have been quick to recognise today's Frankenstein monsters, the barn-style supermarkets and the overscaled and incongruous shopping centres primped up with a ragbag of historic references.

The style war is based on a deep distrust of change with which modern architecture is associated. Architects cannot argue that the association is entirely unfounded - the modern manifestos, such as Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, envisaged wiping out whole city quarters and proposed forms of building which did not recognise historic ideas of urban space - streets and squares - and it has taken a long time for the counter polemic, notably that of Rob and Leon Krier, to establish itself.

But it is not as simple as this. Firstly, other styles, notably the Classical, have been employed by dictators to impose change - most recently by Ceaucescu. It is not difficult to imagine that in Eastern Bloc countries, like Romania, the Classicism of dictatorship is seen as a dread symbol of lost history and ruined hope. In countries like Czecholovakia, which has a lively modern movement and a marvellous tradition of modern design before the war, 'modern might come to symbolise liberal reawakening. Viva Eva Jiricna!

Secondly, and more important, much of what popularly passes for modern architecture is not architecture at all. I know that when I am asked whether I am a 'modern' architect, the term is not being used either in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary sense of 'pertaining to the present' (a sixteenth-century meaning incidentally) or in the particular historic sense of the Modern Movement, which took place during the first decades of the century. What I see reflected in the mind's eye of the questioner are the worst buildings of the 1960s: system-built flats, multistorey car parks, windswept pavements, and that concrete irony, the DOE building itself. This was not architecture. It was a betrayal of architecture, from which our professional reputation has yet to recover.

Why did architects allow themselves to become the agents of these disgraceful events? Should they not have refused, resolving the conflict between their long-term ethics and immediate financial interest? No architect, however good, can champion values which are not shared by his clients or understood by the community or the press. Architecture will only emerge out of a commitment to quality combined with a realistic grasp on the part of critics of the conditions and constraints within which architects work. For example, excessive plot ratios have aesthetically inescapable effects, as the ongoing sagas of several city redevelopments bear witness.

Simply to lay blame at the door of modern architecture as a style says a great deal about the limited horizon of architectural criticism. The tragedy is that confusion between style and quality and failure to understand the conditions which constrain building design has profoundly arrested the development of contemporary architecture in Britain and obscured its real successes.

That despite this, modern architecture continued to evolve in Britain, with the vigour and conviction which only the genuinely creative can have, is some-thing of a miracle. The sense of how alive all this has been and how impoverished the home debate has become fills me with deep frustration. For there are so many images of real architecture from the period of the 1960s and 1970s which bear no resemblance to the concrete jungle to which the term modern

architecture is still attached in Britain. It is noteworthy that what remained of real architectural patronage was mainly that of professional institutions, universities and the new towns which produced the unsung successes of public housing.

The tendency of the current debate to get caught by arguments about style can be avoided if a distinction is made between style and quality. There are many qualities of architecture but I propose to consider two which, because of their polarity, have a creative tension. One is the intrinsic quality of architecture; its capacity to describe its own making, to root its expressiveness in its own nature as construction joined and proportioned against gravity. This is architecture representing itself. The other is the extrinsic quality of architecture; its capacity to make external relationships, to project its clients' culture, to relate to its surroundings, to reflect history and conjure associations.

I am convinced that these two aspects of architecture must connect, and must resist the forces tending to drive them apart. On the one hand the building industry becomes ever more determined in its pursuit of economy and faster building methods and on the other hand the historical stylists want buildings to conceal the reality of their construction with extraneous façades. I am reminded of the late Rayner Banham, in *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, who made the chilling prediction that the advance of technology would require the jettisoning of what he called the 'cultural baggage of architectural history'.

Are we then faced with the prospect of two unreconciled kinds of construction? On the one hand that which carries no cultural load but is the closest fit between utility and cost and, on the other hand, that loaded with cultural significance and designated for heritage sites? The peculiar difficulties presented by historic contexts such as Paternoster or the National Gallery are so consuming that they divert attention from the more modest but universal purpose of architecture which is to find quality in the ordinary construction and requirements of everyday life.

Classical pastiche disconnects style from construction. It has diverged from the eighteenth-century theory that Classicism grew out of vernacular building, out of available technology. It is at odds with the twentieth-century inversion of that process which sought to rediscover the equivalent vernacular of modern conditions as exemplified by the work of Tessenow and Scandinavians such as Asplund, who inspired the fine simplicity of the elevations of the RIBA itself. This tradition is close to the Modern Movement ideal of the perfection of necessity, the transcendence of economy.

Mies van der Rohe's 'less is more' has been easily perverted by the mean spirited but remains a fundamental expression of this idea which Mies found in the aesthetic theories of St Thomas Aquinas. I was reminded of this when the designer Jean Muir, an assessor of the RFAAC Sunday Times Architecture Award in 1989, described the Financial Times printing works as like 'an inlaid box studded together with incredible neatness' and said, 'I remember Aquinas' definition of aesthetics – "clarity, integrity and proportion". The building has exactly that.'

This enjoyment in the making of things links a wide range of British architecture, from the vernacular of traditional construction on the one hand, through a continuing arts and crafts movement to high-tech, all linked by William Morris's sense of the connection between usefulness and beauty. The best architects can make great buildings which are outstanding and always aim to be as decent as the vernacular buildings of the past. This is the great affirmation in the work of Hampshire County Council and this year's Royal Gold Medallist.

I have emphasised what I believe still remains one of the strong ideas of modern architecture - to idealise construction and craftsmanship. But I am also acutely aware that, to regain public confidence, modern architecture needs to relate to the past, evoking tradition without compromising authenticity. During my term of office I intend the Institute to involve itself with those who doubt us, with amenity groups and conservation groups. I have already discussed with English Heritage the setting up of an international symposium directed towards perceptions of new architecture in historic settings. The future direction of architecture must increasingly respond to the specific culture of clients and to the sense of place, time and tradition. It must do this by an intuitive understanding of the past, incorporated into the very process of design itself without add-on symbols, cobbled together superficially.

Frank Lloyd Wright's place in the history of modern architecture distinguishes itself from the more revolutionary European movement because he achieved the kind of reciprocity to which I have been referring. He has been called a radical conservative and in his early houses he managed to capture the broad popular sense of American house style: the suburban shingle style of the beginning of the century. From within this general form, he conjured a new sense of space and light which clearly owes much to the traditional architecture of Japan but in its organisation is deeply imbued with the discipline of neo-Classical planning. Here then was a new architecture, recognisably part of its Chicago suburbs, drawing on history for its principles of organisation and projecting out of those retrospective concerns a new and vigorous direction for architecture, a flywheel of creativity which Wright kept spinning in decade after decade of new inventions.

I could equally dwell upon the work of Asplund and Alvar Aalto in their search for architectural significance in the transformation of traditional form, their sense of occasion. In the late work of Le Corbusier at La Tourette and Chandigarh, we also find a deep absorption with the past. 'To be modern is not a fashion,' he wrote. 'It is necessary to understand history and he who understands history knows how to find continuity between that which was, that which is and that which will be.'

Closer links with Europe make us aware of architectural practice, particularly in Italy and Spain, which stands apart from mainstream Modernism and from the hectic over-reactions of PostModernism. Giancarlo de Carlo has worked quietly for decades in his chosen community of Urbino, offering them and us a magical - sense of architecture in his great underground amphitheatre, the plan of which recalls the subterranean archaeology of a Roman citadel but appears as a glass crescent cut into the hillside, a modern reflection upon the past.

He has written: 'To design in an historic place one should first read its architectural stratification and try to understand the significance of each layer before superimposing a new one. This does not mean to indulge in imitation, as this would be a mean spirited approach, saying nothing about the present and spreading confusion over the past. What is called for is the invention of new architectural images to be authentic and at the same time reciprocal with the existing images.'

The 1980s saw a remarkable architectural revival in Spain where the verve and delicacy of Modernism became fused with an older sense of form. Work such as this offers a way to negotiate an end to the style war which will satisfy a public sense of history and continuity while allowing the modern tradition to work out its own course.

There are many ways in which this reconciliation can be achieved. Let us take, for example, the problem of greatly increasing the floor area of a commercial headquarters situated in an eighteenth-century country house. A neo-Classical extension might have overwhelmed the original, so Cullinan's strategy for the client of the RMC Headquarters was to conceive the extra space as an inhabited parterre which hints at the idea that there was once a formal garden set out beyond the house, a re-creation of a past that never existed. At Worcester College, Oxford, Hawksmoor's plan is a sequence of thresholds - entry court, loggia and quadrangle - originally intended to be raised to view the lake. In the Sainsbury Building, this sequence was re-created to include the raised level (in this case above a common room) to offer the prospect of the lake, intended in the original scheme. Both entrances to the college share the same narrative sequence; to unlock and reveal the magic garden concealed from the town.

The reciprocity which Giancarlo de Carlo asks for is found by an interpretation of place which works by analogy rather than by imitation, transforming and recharging the meanings of the past - a cross-fertilisation which is necessary to keep both alive. If history is the present understanding of the past then architecture conceived in this way affects that understanding.

We also find this kind of relationship between the new and old in the work of Carlo Scarpa, in which the intervention of the new causes us to readdress what exists. At, for example, the Castelvecchio Museum, the intervention is literally and metaphorically an instrument of interpretation - a modern circulation system through a medieval complex and a continuous aesthetic counterpoint, conversing with the existing structure. In a specific way this is what has been achieved in the interior conversion of Billingsgate Market, where the suspended structure gives the existing Classical interior an extra sense of compressive effort. At Bracken House the wrought quality of the curved and faceted metal and glass wall recollects the articulation of Richardson's original ground floor window cases and gives the remaining masonry book-ends of the building a significance they did not have before.

Modern architecture can be successfully inserted into sensitive historic situations as Truro Courts prove - large public buildings, with an appropriate monumentality, forming an acropolis in counterpoint to the cathedral. In a very different situation, Arup Associates at Broadgate created a highly successful series of urban spaces, traditional spaces in the idiom of the present

day.

The meaning of tradition in religious architecture makes it particularly sensitive as an object of design but I am convinced that it is possible to recharge that tradition by rediscovering it rather than making the Ruskinian assumption that its truth resides in conventions of appearance. Moral analogies in architecture are risky but far from uncommon, so I will venture to suggest that the distinction here may be between those who search for their truths and are delighted, and a little surprised when they find them, and those confident that they are always right.

Paolo Portoghesi's mosque in Rome is a profound reflection upon the geometry, space and light of Islamic architecture but is influenced by other structures, perhaps by Borromini's and Guarini's churches in Rome and Turin, which lead the Islamic geometry into his technology of ribbed precast concrete. Our unbuilt project for Tonbridge School also sought to reconcile a ribbed structure with the centralised plan of modern liturgy using Baroque, Islamic and Gothic influences. This scheme was defeated by a successful local campaign for restoring the old building which had burned down. What a relief it was to visit Benson and Forsyth's prizewinning Oratory at Grange-over-Sands and find that the clients, the sisters of St Augustine, had total faith in their architects and, in the completion of this tiny space of opalescent glass, an unqualified fulfilment of their own sense of tradition.

In conclusion, I want to consider our professional standing. The problems which Wren encountered with the designing of St Pauls, Lutyens with the Viceroy's House and Frank Lloyd Wright with the Guggenheim are reminders that, however celebrated the architect, the client can still remain sceptical and give his architect a bad time. Nevertheless, I remain deeply concerned about what I perceive as a lack of understanding of the value of what one might call our intellectual property and there are many symptoms of this. The National Contractors Group, in its publication *Building Towards 2001*, hardly mentions the word design and yet every part of our built environment from the smallest component is designed. Design is an unseen energy like electricity, the force from which everything originates, unimaginable to the unimaginative, it is only manifest in what it produces.

This lack of an understanding of design and creativity in the industry may be why architects increasingly look abroad for components of quality; why there is a balance of payments surplus in the trading of architectural skill and a deficit in building products. It is an attitude which also overlooks the fact that the more routine and quantifiable activities of the building professions such as standard engineering calculations and costing will sooner or later be incorporated into CAD. In spite of this, the Government seems deeply sceptical of design education and is ever probing to find ways to reduce its commitment. Yet, here we have a training that enables people to resolve a range of disparate matters: feasibility, usefulness, cost, environmental impact, energy consumption and aesthetics. I would have thought this skill analogous to the most complex political decision making, except that, unlike in politics, our propositions really do have to stand up!

Another symptom is the opportunistic way in which the competition system is being used.

Competitions can be an excellent way of finding new talent but, increasingly, they are used indiscriminately by clients who do not know what they want and are more interested in the contest than the product.

Those who set up competitions ought to appreciate the enormous intellectual and emotional commitment required to create real works of architecture, most of which, by definition in the competitive system, will remain on paper, unbuilt and not paid for. What other profession would do this? Can one imagine master chefs producing banquets uneaten and unpaid for or composers writing concertos which would not be commissioned or performed? There is another kind of competition, fee competition, which may become compulsory in the public sector so that the cheapest rather than the best architect gets the work. A senior politician recently assured me that local government recognises that, as a service, there is a difference between architecture and refuse collection but he did not go on to define exactly what the difference was. Does government really mean to take architecture back into the 1960s?

In spite of all this, in spite of the recession, we have a great opportunity to take advantage of public interest in architecture and to seize the imaginative potential of the millennium and to invigorate ourselves with a new dimension of European practice. Cities like Paris, Barcelona and now Berlin will challenge London, known in the eighteenth century as the 'Pearl of Europe', to discover its international identity.

We must seek alliances, throw off our defensiveness and open up our Institute as a forum of public debate. To this end I have been talking to the RSA about a joint symposium on patronage, to the RFAC Education Trust about a joint symposium on visual education and to English Heritage about building in historic contexts. Architecture has unprecedented support from the chairman of the Arts Council, Lord Palumbo. I have also had an approach from the Chair of Public Art Forum to take part in a national lobby to central government for the creation and recognition of high quality environmental schemes. I intend to get the Architecture Centre started at the Institute, not initially by spending money but with the fundamental resource of people and ideas to push the whole project forward. I am convinced we have a great opportunity to change the architectural climate in Britain. I am committed to taking advantage of it now!