

# Style

The movement called New Urbanism had its origin in the initiative of a group of architects, all of us with active or recent ties to academia. Curiously, this movement since its inception has found its staunchest resistance, its most trenchant criticism, and its most demeaning caricature in schools of architecture. Sometimes it seems that everybody welcomes the New Urbanist proposition more openly than our closest colleagues. It is easier by far to interest public housing officials and their tenants, planners, developers, politicians, bankers, even traffic engineers in the cause of New Urbanism than it is to engage architecture faculty or their students.

There is a reason for this. The mission of architectural academy is generally thought of, explicitly or implicitly, as a phenomenon related to time—the tenor of the times. It is what the *Zeitgeist* ethic in the architectural histories we grew up with told us, from Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* in 1941 to Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* in 1960, style is linked to time, and the primary cultural problem of design is giving expression to the dominant technologies of the time. All these years later, these same ideas about time and style still dominate the education or, perhaps one should say, the indoctrination of architects.

Colin Rowe spent much of his life writing about this missionary zeal about time, and the people of my generation who were shaped directly or indirectly by the aura of his teaching know his litany. It is the

architect in his role as the future's messenger that leads to the triumph of the timely over the timeless. It is the Zeitgeisters marching to the drumbeat of Hegelian dialectics that trample the fabric of the traditional city. And there is object fixation, all the reasons from the dawn of the modern movement that root modern architecture in the making of *things* as opposed to *places* and favor disengagement of those things from what is around them. To this, we must add the star system and media-based careers that are intertwined with the great power of photography to decontextualize architecture as effectively and much more perniciously than the white wall of the gallery decontextualizes art. In the photographer's studio, what architecture does to the city around it is the subject of cropping.

The antipathy between the academy and New Urbanism comes from the refusal of New Urbanists to accept the eternal quest for temporal expression as an issue of any remaining importance. The willingness of New Urbanists to use architectural style, in some cases even—dare one say it—historical styles, as a weapon in the struggle against the dreadful tide of homogenization of places is an affront to the fundamental ethos of orthodox modernism, which is still rooted in a condition that long ago ceased to exist.

At least since its introduction to the United States in the 1930s, orthodox modern architecture has had a weird and hypocritical relationship to the concept of style. Among the seminal events in the story of modern architecture in America were the 1932 Museum of Modern Art show *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, the accompanying book entitled *The International Style*, and the appointment of Walter Gropius as chair of the Department of Architecture at Harvard in 1937. Much of Gropius's own work formed the core of the museum exhibition and book by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson. It is significant that Gropius did not like the formalist emphasis of the exhibition and the book, and most of all he detested the term "International Style." The "International" part was OK, but "Style" (especially when capitalized) was a concept completely anathema to his conception of the modern.

Modern architecture to Gropius was a purely positivistic operation, nothing more or less than the systematic application of scientific method to the problem of habitat. Style had nothing to do with it. If a Harvard ar-

chitectural student in the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s were to design a building that was not a grouping of flat-roofed, eaveless boxes with strips of ribbon windows, he would have been told, not that he had violated a stylistic canon, but that he had failed to understand the social and technological imperatives of the times. The tension between architecture and urbanism would not now be so acute if the architectural academy had been able to sustain this original hypocrisy and simply operate as if a stable canon of design were rooted in some mysterious essence of the times. Then there might be more places like Vancouver or parts of Tel Aviv, where a consistent urban fabric is built over time out of a decidedly modernist language of architecture. But, despite the efforts of some of the best modernists, that is not what happened.

The combined effects of the denial of style (architecture is *truth*) and the harsh realities of media culture have precluded the possibility of a stable canon. The most meteoric architectural careers are based upon a particular form of nimbleness—that is, the ability to produce work that simultaneously is *news* and *truth*. The combination of both phenomena is essential. For the publication and exhibition opportunities that careers depend upon, the news part is crucial but by itself insufficient; it has to be news about social and technological imperatives. This means that the social and technological imperatives of the age have to change all the time. Of course, not all architects are adept at coining new imperatives as the occasion demands, and an important function that the media serve is to transmit newly minted imperatives of the times from their discoverers to their awaiting legions of acolytes. Since building technology and social conditions do not change rapidly enough to keep up with media culture's demand for news, new architectural imperatives have to come from extrinsic sources farther and farther afield—linguistics, poststructuralism, airplane design software, feminist literary criticism, global consumerism, and so on. Soon, architectural discourse will require its own channel, like C-SPAN, where tenure candidates and others whose livelihood is involved can keep abreast of fast-breaking events in the realm of Zeitgeist imperatives.

To be fair, it must be said that there is resistance to all of this within the modernist establishment. Some of the world's most celebrated modernists have chosen to act as if the original canons of modernism were

as true and stable as they claimed to be. Richard Meier's relentless excellence assumes that the formal language of Le Corbusier is an inexhaustible and sufficient resource for whatever comes along. Switzerland's Herzog and DeMeuron treat the architecture of Mies van der Rohe in somewhat the same way. There is nothing wrong at all with this kind of supremely refined, revivalist architecture, except the absurdity of its denial to be what it is. Just talk to some of the subcontractors for Meier's Getty Museum about how hard and demanding it was to build, about how much every detail cost, and then make some claims about the technological imperatives it is based upon. The refinement of Meier's architecture is anything but the automatic by-product of the technology of the times.

Since the hegemony of mainstream modernism, there have been two fiercely held ideas about style: first, that it doesn't exist; second, that it is inexorably linked to time. Both of these ideas have crippled architects' ability to respond stylistically to the demands of place, which is in fact specifically what people most frequently hire architects to do. This divergence of view causes most pedigreed architects to think of much of their potential source of patronage as hopelessly philistine and kitsch, and it causes significant segments of society to run as far and as fast from pedigreed architects as it possibly can.

It is possible to accept the existence of style in a way that it is not in fact a phenomenon related to time. I think it was no less than Diana Vreeland, the legendary editor of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, who made the distinction between style and fashion, claiming that style, unlike fashion, has a timeless component to it and that the truly stylish are frequently somewhat indifferent to fashion. Style, in fact, can be all sorts of things. It can be related to place, as in the buildings of Charleston; related to time, as in Art Deco; or personological, like Frank Gehry's style or Picasso's.

In the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century, the architectural world's concept of style was a bit more like Diana Vreeland's and less like the Zeitgeist ideologues of today's academy. One sees this phenomenon clearly in Northern California. From the late 1890s until the end of the 1920s, the public institutions of Northern California were built for the most part by a small group of immensely gifted and su-

perbly well-trained architects, educated at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. For the whole of their prolific careers, this little group, which included Bernard Maybeck, John Galen Howard, Willis Polk, Arthur Brown, and Julia Morgan, built a world that was in urbanistic terms a very satisfactory place. They built city fabric, public monuments, rural retreats, grand campus plans, and retail streets of great vitality, and they did it all without any theory to speak of (they were too busy for theories), but with virtuoso skill, unabashed eclecticism, and a complete absence of Zeitgeist hang-ups and ideological proscriptions. Julia Morgan had no problem at all leaping from Renaissance Florence as a source for the Fairmont Hotel on top of Nob Hill in San Francisco to rustic timber vernacular for the Ahwahnee in Yosemite. It was exactly because this eclectic skill was considered so out of date after World War II that she was denied all further opportunity to build.

Unlike Gropius and his generations of progeny, Julia Morgan's contemporaries did not pretend that style did not exist or that it was a bad word denoting a bad thing, like *masturbation*. The Gropius dogma had effects not unlike those of the Cultural Revolution in China, another instance of crazy pieties run amok. Architects systematically unlearned how to do architecture. For forty years, there has hardly been an architect alive with a fraction of the sheer skill of Arthur Brown or Julia Morgan. Drawing, detailing, building, site work and garden design, solving problems in plan, understanding how architects throughout history had done these same things—practically no contemporary architects come close to them. They were masters of style and, to a lesser degree, inventors of style, and they used whatever was stylistically appropriate for what and where they were building.

Architects who love cities can rummage through the history of architecture to find times and places like Northern California in the 1920s, when time and place were not adversaries, when architecture motivated by the stirrings of the new was built in the service of the city. One doesn't have to go far to find architecture of this kind. Certainly, a little of it is being produced right now, and some was produced throughout what we must now call the last century, but as a general convention you have only to go back to the first two decades of the twentieth century worldwide, to the generation that Nicholas Pevsner referred to as the "pre-

moderns." There you can find an abundance of architecture that might serve as a model for those who think that place making is the most important thing that architects have to do these days. Otto Wagner in Vienna, Gunnar Asplund in Stockholm, Eiel Saarinen (not Eero) in Finland and then in the United States, Puig and Domenic in Barcelona (more than the hyper-mannerist Gaudi), Placnik in Lubiana, Berlage in Amsterdam, Sullivan in Chicago, Maybeck in Berkeley—the list of master stylists and place makers is easy to write.

In considering this list, it is interesting to note that Eiel Saarinen's magnificent and timeless Cranebrook campus was where young Wu Liangyong went to study in 1951. Eero Saarinen, Eiel's gifted son, had a meteoric career producing spectacular modernist monuments until he died in 1961 at age fifty-one. For the most part, Eero Saarinen's flashy works have not stood the test of time and now look as dated as the cars of the 1950s. It is Professor Wu who is the true spiritual heir to Eiel Saarinen.

What Professor Wu learned from his great mentor is what all architects should learn from the so-called premoderns. It is a concept of style and a mastery of styles that allowed them to be interested in the new, but not obsessively, and interested in the past, but not slavishly. It was a concept of style that never produced a dogma more important to them than the places in which they built. Architecture in the service of place demands stylistic literacy that was all but banished from architectural education as anachronistic, just as all classical Chinese learning was denounced as feudal during the Cultural Revolution. We, too, are now faced with repairing the damage caused by an ideology of unlearning.