



The Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, with Vasari's Uffizi Gallery

In Praise Of The Modern

What we build reflects the kind of society we are. Here, in a major essay published for the first time in Britain, leading architect **Richard Rogers** examines the crisis of modernity and offers a vision for the future

The making of patterns or order is instilled in all organisms. It is expressed in a flower, a spider's web or a symphony but only humankind *aspires* to impose order on the world. Architecture has developed from the need to order the world in space and time, and like all creative activities, is an expression of an epoch given form by the history of that epoch. When certain ordering patterns give pleasure to one or more of our senses, harmony is achieved.

-Harmony, which is the essence of beauty, consists of the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole, though it does not necessarily include mathematically-related proportions. For example, an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock, which is sensuous to the eye, contains ordering principles but is clearly not based on structured proportions. Unlike science, beauty cannot be proved and does not become less valid over time, although perception changes and develops as new information is absorbed. These changes in perception imply that the past can never be recaptured in its totality, a fact often misunderstood, leading to a lack of aesthetic clarity resulting in a pastiche of the past created in the present.

Philosophical ideals are not timeless. Platonic form, based on a belief in the rationalistic ideal that all genuine questions must have one true answer, has given way to the pluralist view that

there are only few, if any, timeless truths and that the only certainty is historical development and continuous change.

The categories and concepts around which every culture is built form an independent whole but vary radically across epochs. Any attempt to compare individual aspects of Greek, Roman, Florentine or 20th-century cultures, in isolation from the context which gives them their significance, is fraught with difficulties. However, this does not mean that the values embodied in diverse ways of life are entirely incommensurate. It is possible to understand and criticise other cultures and their values, since we have certain core, human and ethical values in common, although their importance changes with time and place.

The Renaissance

Confusion exists as to the reason and value of the use of classical language during the Renaissance. The re-examination of this phenomenon is important today, in a search for a way forward which encompasses a reevaluation of the role of history.

It is not uncommon to use Brunelleschi, Donatello and Masaccio's rediscovery of ancient Rome in the early-14th century as a rationale for contemporary historicism. I believe that the 'historicist' interpretation of this profound development is incorrect, and that far from being conservative, the message of these Renaissance artists was revolutionary. Brunelleschi, for example, used fragments of the classical language to help him break away from the past in order to build a brilliantly innovative architecture, far different from both the preceding thousand years of medieval architecture and the earlier Graeco-Roman architects. He claimed to be creating a new architecture which contained a birth which implied, equally importantly, an end.

The Renaissance building, much like its early modern counterpart, stood majestically on its own. It used the existing small, haphazard, medieval urban fabric as a backcloth to set off the difference between itself and the immediate past. This has been conveniently forgotten by certain protagonists of the historical approach, who suffer from selective amnesia, a malaise commonly blamed on the pioneers of the modern movement.

Imitation And Contrast

Contrary to the generally-held opinion that contextual harmony can only be achieved by imitating the neighbouring styles, I have taken the view - and this is manifest in our work - that such harmony can be achieved by two contrasting means. Of course, as Claude du Chastillon's *Place des Vosges* or Nash's Regent's Park illustrate, harmony can be realised through the employment of a typology over a number of buildings constructed at a

single time. However, an equally harmonious order can result from the juxtaposition of buildings of different epochs, each one being an expression of its own time.

This type of relationship is evident in King's College, Cambridge, which once stood isolated in a meadow and now is juxtaposed with medieval and classical buildings. The same relationship can be seen in St Mark's, Venice, where approaching from the sea, one is met with the most wondrous scenes of contrasting buildings: to the east, the classically-proportioned, four-square, arcaded, Byzantine Ducal Palace stands next to the glittering multi-domed Byzantine cathedral, one of the zaniest buildings of all times; while opposite, is Sansovino's white-stoned, classical library. The whole is pivoting round the slim, undecorated red-brick, green-pitched roof Campanile tower, standing isolated in space, setting off the square by its very difference to every other building.

In *Piazza della Signoria*, Florence, Vasari used the technique of contrast, as well as historical uniformity, when he was asked to build the Uffizi Gallery. He masterfully manipulated the space, incorporating all the latest visual and urban technology including forced perspective, at one end lining up the galleria on the slim tower of the medieval *Palazzo Vecchio* while at the other framing the beautiful river Arno. When, however, he came to repair and slightly extend the medieval *Palazzo Vecchio*, he studiously employed the architectural language of the past in such a way as to make the difference invisible. In each of the above three situations people of vision had the courage to put a further building of quality next to an already perfect building, thereby radically altering the balance of the existing spatial context.

It is disturbing to realise that had the conservative outlook of today prevailed, the magnificent buildings adjoining St Mark's Cathedral, King's College Chapel and *Palazzo Vecchio*, would have been denied planning permission on the grounds that their construction destroyed an already perfect architectural environment.

In considering whether to conserve or build, it is not possible to disregard today's greater consciousness of the role of the past and the effect of one building upon another, for clearly, beauty must be conserved. The only guide is for prejudice to be swept aside and for each situation to be judged on its visual and functional merits. Mistakes will be made - that goes without question - but if a carefully calculated, cultured approach is taken, damage will be limited and progress will be made towards creating living cities.

Far from being hostile to architectural conservation, I favour, on occasion, the extension or construction of period buildings which were planned but never built, or built but since destroyed. In our own work, we have

aspired to emulate the versatility of approach that was exemplified in Vasari's treatment of *Piazza della Signoria*. For example, in Covent Garden and the area adjoining the Royal Opera House, we recommended both the construction of contemporary buildings, as well as the reconstruction of the demolished 17th-century Inigo Jones quadrant. In this situation the result could meet the primary historical contextual need and also present day functional needs, especially as Jones had designed the arcade as a series of thin facade modules allowing other buildings to be attached. In the conversion of the 19th-century Billingsgate fish market into a trading floor for Citybank we have used the same approach, studiously replacing missing and damaged parts and boldly introducing new pieces.

The Modern Movement

At its genesis, the modern movement was a celebration of social, political and technological progress. It was not whimsical, sceptical, contradictory or timid. It was infused with the spirit of innovation, rose vigorously with coherence and, as ever, was greatly opposed. Intellectually and visually demanding, it was uncomfortably unlike architecture which copies the past.

Revolutionaries, political or aesthetic, come under attack for being different; to survive they deny the history of the immediate past by underlining its contradictions. They build a new ideology out of which myths are created, leaving the ideology open to critical attack. Modernism is to blame for having encouraged simplistic myths rather than serious self-criticism. Critical evaluation of success and failure, which would have shown the urgent need for further ideological development, especially in the face of social, political and technical changes, has not been carried out. If an ideology is to keep its validity after its initial primary goals have been achieved, its assumptions, ideals and contradictions must be continuously re-examined.

At the beginning of this century the modern movement developed an outstanding diversity of approach. The present crisis has been brought about primarily by modernism's inability both to adapt itself to changing needs and more specifically to learn from its mistakes. In particular, architects have tended to explore and develop only one of the many strands of modernism: the 'international' style. This has sapped the original vigorous strength of modernity, replacing it with exactly what it had opposed; a thoughtless, skin-deep styling. These developments have led to today's criticism of the role of the avant-garde by historicist and faddish designers of facades. On the positive side, the necessary questioning of some of the principles of modernity could have the potential to broaden the position of modern architecture. In fact, I believe and hope that in the long

run modern architecture will learn from and absorb these schisms and thereby be rejuvenated.

The postwar faceless functional international style is rooted in the oversimplification of the complex beginning of the modern movement. This tendency can be traced to Hitchcock and Johnson's 1932 exhibition 'The International Style', held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which excluded all architects who were not engaged with finite, reductive, white or glass cubes. The 19th-century steel pioneers, constructivism, expressionism, futurism, naturalism, plasticism were all suppressed. Today many architects are researching beyond the reductivist school, exploring these alternative approaches, such as Ludwig Leo, Gustav Peichel, Frei Otto, Coop Himmelblau, Peter Cook, Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava, Renzo Piano, Norman Foster, and Jean Nouvel; we would wish to be numbered among them.

Designing For Change

We see our work as a continuation of the modern movement, trying to expand its approach to meet constantly changing needs. We are searching for a more open and dynamic, yet harmonious order which offers the user freedom from the constraints of finite form: geometry which may be modified by new experiences allowing for planned and unplanned evolution but in which the totality has complete integrity at any one time.

We aim to create a building framework where the programme, ideology and form can play an integrated and legible part. The more successful the building in achieving this aim, the more it will need revision, for if in a technological society change is a constant, then a finite solution must constrain. This programmatic indeterminacy is an expression of the building resolved by the correct architectural balance between permanence and change, improvisation with a coherent totality. Some more permanent order is needed both to meet urban contextual priorities and to give visual coherence to the building itself.

Lessons may be drawn from other art forms which incorporate a theory of improvisation and transformation by which parts may be changed without losing the message of the whole, such as certain forms of jazz, abstract art, and nature, forms which have the capacity of consciously organising past experience against future contingency.

The buildings are organised in a hierarchy of legible parts from fixed to changeable: the long-life general-purpose spaces (with a life of 30-300 years) are separate from the short-life technically-dependent servant activities (with a life of 1-30 years).

This approach offers the potential of creating richly-layered and articulated buildings full of light and shadow which, with their changing rhythms,

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can respond to different contextual needs while offering clues to future users as to how the building may be best changed. This dichotomy between the complete and the open nature of the building is a determinant of the aesthetics of the building, especially as normally the life of a building is longer-lasting than the institution it is designed to house. If the result is successful, the life of the building will be extended as the user will be less restrained by an unchangeable form.

Process And Image

The bland, oversimplified buildings of the international school of modern architecture lack the normal visual coding that give legibility, and therefore interest, to the viewer. These buildings should not be mistaken for the modern beautifully-proportional and constructed masterpieces which they purport to emulate, such as the magnificent office buildings in New York: Seagram, Lever Bros, Pepsi Cola, and Ford Foundation, which perfectly reflect the modern commercial patron of our times.

Architecture glorifies shelter and as such it must communicate. The decision of what is visually expressed and the hierarchical order given to that expression is the message which is architecture. These complex and varied forms must be expressed by related building elements which are rigorously composed to produce a clear hierarchy of identifiable, legible spaces and volumes. Even the inside and outside of a building, though expressed in the same idiom, should be capable of responding to different public and private needs, the needs both of the viewer and the user.

As well as functional use and urban responses, buildings are given legibility through the expression of the process of building which in turn gives grain, scale, and ultimately harmony to the whole. Without the craftsman's understanding and control of the process of building there is no architecture, only ideas, with the architect becoming, at best, a designer of decorated packages, external wrappings of buildings and cities.

I believe in the rich potential of a modern industrial society - aesthetically one can do what one likes with technology, for it is a tool and not an end in itself, but we ignore it at our peril.

Buildings And Space

Planning needs vision and large-scale co-ordination. Until government becomes seriously involved in giving direction, rampant profiteering and petty political rivalry will rule and ruin our cities. Beautiful cities have always been the result of enlightened patronage by those in power, working with creative talents of the day. The great parks, the great streets, the great squares, public places, will not suddenly appear - even less today with the

complex technological needs of modern society.

In our project 'London as it could be', a study shown at the Royal Academy in 1986, we illustrated an approach based on limited change of the existing area to create a new heart of the city. The project based on this slight shift could have been realised with government interest and involvement. Left to diverse parties with totally different political and economic motivations: Westminster, Lambeth, the London Residuary Body, British Rail, the Water Board, the Port of London Authority and numerous commercial interests, it inevitably floundered. Without vision and leadership, only piecemeal development is possible and this will never solve the problem of a city fit for modern people.

The primary function of the city as a meeting place for people is being eroded by a wide variety of developments such as the invasion of the vehicle; the introduction of private activities into the public realm; the separation rather than the overlapping of working, living, playing and shopping; the positioning of buildings standing singly in space - more often than not a 'piazza' filled with cars; and the growth of cheap, dumb, commercial buildings standing in the public realm.

The architect's vocabulary should include both the design of buildings standing singly and proudly in space in the classic manner, as well as buildings which create a compact matrix which encloses space. We need an architecture that strengthens and enriches the grain of the city fabric by filling in empty spaces so that streets and squares become dynamic rooms without a roof.

Projects such as the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Stag Place, Lloyd's, Marseille Alcazar, the *Financial Times'* Bracken House building near St Paul's, and most particularly the Paternoster area adjoining St Paul's, are based on the principle of a continuous solid matrix of building enclosing spaces.

Greater variation in height has led to new views of buildings. Buildings respond to the view of the passer-by, and the roof therefore, must be treated as a fifth elevation. The tendency not to recognise the role of mechanical services has led to the destruction of our roofs by a jungle of uncontrolled plumbing.

Postmodernism

In all fields of endeavour, not least in architecture, it is generally accepted that to learn from the past is the way forward and that history is a prime generator. But to imitate historical form without recognition of the content is to degrade its very importance. A number of prominent modernists - now repentant - have tried their hand at historical revivalism. The results to date have been rarely successful and frequently ridiculous.

One cannot advance by creating a whimsical collage of disposable symbols such as palm trees, eggs, birds, decomposed Graeco-Roman orders or forms taken from Chippendale furniture. All are divorced from their original political, social and technical background and appear to have no relation to humanity's struggle to give order and harmony to an ever-reducing planet at the end of the 20th century. Though defended by its protagonists as being simple to understand and therefore popular, this language is even more abstruse and exclusive than the language it is designed to replace.

I welcome the opening-up of the arguments surrounding modernity, as I believe they will lead to a greater pluralism of approach: there are many ways of producing good architecture.

However, postmodernism has tended towards a caustic and superficial form of cartoon culture, whether referring to Adolf Loos' Chicago Tribune Tower designed as a Doric column or, some 50 years later, Graves' use of Egyptian motifs. High in image-content of a shallow formal symbolism, devoid of social aspirations and low in cost, this architecture is attractive to the fashion-conscious commercialism of the day.

Critical Value

Does architecture stand as the failure of our times? I do not believe that history supports this view. Modern architecture cannot be separated from the general and revolutionary achievement in the arts and science. I believe that modernism has produced both great ideals and great architecture. However, it is true that good modern architecture has affected only a small section of society because of the corrupting and ignoble forces of commercialism, the scramble for a quick profit and the ruthless pursuit of power which has led to a general crisis of values. The international modernist style perfectly reflects the victory of money and short-term aims over the long-term needs of a civilised society.

In the past decade modern architecture has been exposed to a barrage of criticism, principally from scholars and journalists of the new Right, who always claim to speak for the man in the street. Indeed, it has now become an axiom, unquestioned by either its detractors or its defenders, that modernism is loathed by the public.

My experience, arising from our own work, has been very different. Over five times as many people enter the Pompidou Centre as had been predicted: 70m visitors in 10 years, more than the combined total that visited the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. The National Gallery competition in 1982 drew immense public interest and our project, though uncompromisingly modern, gained the highest number of public votes (both for and against!). Just as many people go to see the

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interior of Lloyd's (up to 2,000 per day), as visit many of our national museums. What then of the public's antipathy towards modern architecture?

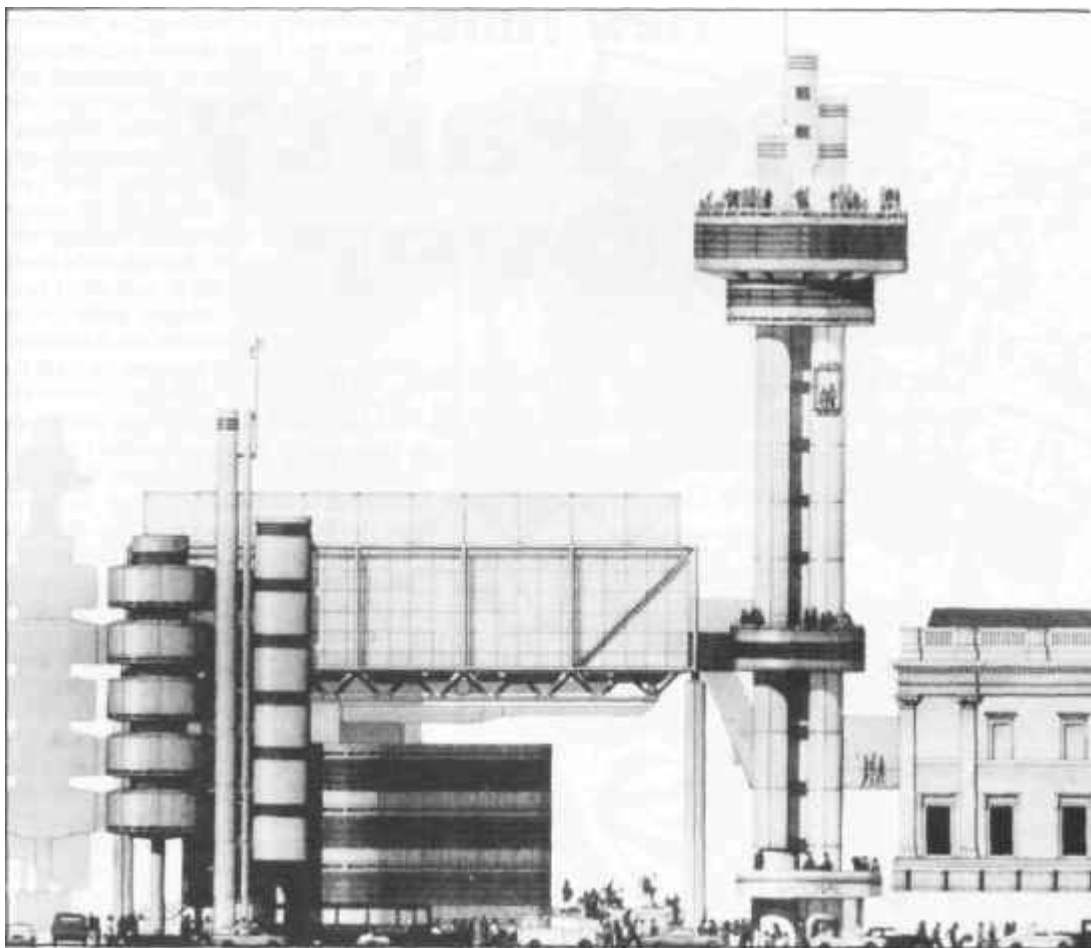
If popular approval was the only relevant indicator of a building's quality then it seems to me the work of our practice would have been clearly vindicated. However, architects are also artists and thus must follow their own creative light irrespective of current fashions. Although public involvement must be encouraged, the decision between being influenced by popular demands and taking an independent stand is not an easy one. The conflict is a familiar one whether to pander to the public or be isolated from it: the extreme between Van Gogh, who sold only one painting in his lifetime, and Annigoni, the painter favoured by our royal family.

Innovation

All departure from tradition has been met with ferocious controversy. When the first caveman left the shelter of his solid, waterproof, easily-defensible home for the lightweight, mobile hi-tech hut - where one couldn't even draw on the walls! - leaving tradition behind him, he and his family were no doubt stoned for being revolutionaries with no feeling for social and visual tradition. Innovation presents all of us with considerable difficulties of analysis and assessment. When confronted with something new we tend to fall back on the known and the proven. But if we are to advance through innovation it is largely a matter of abandoning prejudices about what we imagine the new is like and understanding and accepting its real nature.

Innovation is challenging and therefore often uncomfortable. It raises thoughts and feelings which have not been previously experienced. In order to make an impression and overcome our natural conservatism, innovators tend to overstate ideas and to exclude the more complex and sophisticated elements needed for successful revolutionary change and development. Neither their followers nor their critics appreciate the reasons for these overstatements; the followers take them as gospel and the counter-revolutionaries see them as dogmatic, inhuman dictates; both fail to probe conscientiously into the reasoning behind the ideas.

Today, we are living through a period of enormous scientific and technical advance; perhaps a second industrial revolution. The computer, microchip, transputer, bio-technology or solid-state chemistry should give us more time to work out our complex social and political problems. This could lead to an enhanced natural and built environment, including more rather than less individual control and fewer uniform spaces. For example, buildings will be directly affected physically and visually by the work of scientists and artists, in such areas as dynamically-adaptable polyvalent walls, solar-cell



Rogers' 'uncompromisingly modern' proposal for the National Gallery extension

energy systems, photochromism, low-emissivity coated glass, electro-reflective surfaces and the full development of dynamic-smart buildings.

Global Harmony

Up to 30 years ago human action did not affect the basic stability of the planet. We could rightly believe that our tribe or nation's ideas were worth dying for as this only affected a small part of the globe and those who lived on it. Since the advent of nuclear warfare this position is untenable.

The implications of ever-faster communication, the birth of space travel, international industrialisation and trading are extending humanity's responsibility for order and harmony, beyond the traditional limits of the family, to the global habitat, a habitat whose well-being is dependent on the flourishing of every human being. If this objective were taught at every school and reiterated at every opportunity by all those who are in a position of responsibility, we would be better able to control our destiny.

The present generation is responsible for passing on the legacy of a polluted planet, of countless millions without the most basic requirements for a humane existence, of massive arms expenditure and build-up. In architecture, great ideals have been demeaned by commercial greed, with the result that the common denominator is now a more or less decorated shed standing in an unplanned and

inhumane environment.

This is in stark contrast to our ability to develop, co-ordinate and utilise the modern, complex advanced technology when it is applied to war, space and national aggrandisement. For example, today we have successfully organised the raising and the spending of \$200 per head of the world's population on arms, to support our global policy of confrontation. If our aims were different, this would be more than sufficient to meet the basic needs of health, food, shelter and work.

The failure of modernity is not that of architecture but of ethics. The crisis we now face is that our scientific and financial potential has outstripped our ethical and social resources. To live in harmony, our tremendous advances in science must be matched by an ethically and culturally-equivalent development. The scramble for profit and power must not be allowed to erode our civilisation and destroy our beautiful planet. Humankind has created art, philosophy and science. They are the most beautiful, most enlightened and most enduring achievements.

With the advent of modern science we have the option of having all humanity living at a higher standard than anyone has ever known. To achieve this, we must question traditional beliefs, we must stop being defensive of our property, our market, our nations and our point of view. Civility implies living in harmony with the past, the present and the future. •

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