

Traditional Architecture and Urbanism

*A noted architect and
planner argues the case.*

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE and urbanism are frequently criticized as “nostalgic” or “unimaginative.” But we enthusiasts of traditional architecture and urbanism should be grateful to our opponents because they have discerned the threat that our ideas pose to theirs. By attacking the New Urbanism from their illustrious institutions, they have provided us with a world stage. We should thank them also for maintaining such a high level of strategic ineptitude. How easy they have made it for us to take territory outside of their circumscribed world. We thank them for how much they concede by sticking to irrelevant ideologies; by their fascination with the

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THE WORLD
OF NEW URBANISM

transient, the unworkable, the uncomfortable, the irreproducible, the unpopular, the expensive, the intangible, the unbuildable, the useless, the repellent, and the unintelligible.

Modernist architects of great talent willingly perform for the applause of a tiny number of critics. And they do so knowing that these critics have a history of raising them up and then discarding them once they are bored. We have seen in our own time the marginalization of brilliant architects—Paul Rudolph, Charles Moore, Robert Venturi, James Stirling, Robert A. M. Stern, Michael Graves, and Peter Eisenman—all once raised to the heavens and then dismissed, even when at the peak of their powers. As with Paul Rudolph, these architects will outlive the critics, but in the meantime it is a terrible waste of cultural resources.

Our firm has taken a different course. We seek judgment, not from the critics, but from the public at large. When people ask, “Aren’t you worried about what the *New York Times* critic wrote about your work?” I answer, “But I don’t know anyone who matters to our practice who knows him.” What the critics write has no effect. For the time it would take me to write a publishable response, I could edit an urban code that might affect hundreds of buildings. Besides, if we were to respond, it would only empower critics by granting them visibility in our world.

What is this world of the New Urbanism, and why is traditional architecture important to it? There are many reasons, but primarily it is because traditional architecture is a common language of the American middle class. This enormous middle class is the group that really matters, and yet they are the only consumers of architecture not addressed by the modernist schools and the professional periodicals. There are good reasons for this—beyond snobbism. The middle class, unlike the poor, has choices in the market—and they have chosen tradition. Their ability to reject modernist buildings (which paradoxically the poor in housing projects cannot do) confuses architects. But it does not confuse us. It is through the good reputation of traditional architecture that we enlist the middle class to our cause, which is to have them inhabit again a walkable, compact, and diverse urbanism.

But isn’t the American middle class culturally trivial, you ask? The answer depends on your conception of culture, which can be either the late modernist idea of cultural activity as critique, or ours (coinciding with the early modernist concept) of cultural activity as action. Modernists attempt to express the condition of the world, while ours attempts to *reform* the condition of the

world. This is a crucial difference, because the lifestyle of the American middle class is one of the root causes of our current environmental problems: the way we supersize our houses, the way we consume as entertainment, the way we drive to do the most ordinary things, the way we so freely allocate land to our uses, and even how we choose to eat. It is our lifestyle—and its exported version in Asia, India, the Persian Gulf, South America and Eastern Europe—that is responsible for the environmental problems we will all suffer.

The current revival of traditional architecture must be seen not as a single event, but as a process. A first generation restored the old and sturdy citadel that is the discipline of the classical language. The current generation can continue to unfurl beautiful banners from the ramparts, in the hopes that all will recognize its virtue—so it can sally forth to occupy territory. And there is much territory to occupy. I do not allude to the small area held by modernism, but to the vast areas held by production builders, by the green gadgets that pass for environmental buildings, by the ubiquitous plan books, by the junk-space of civic buildings, by the junk-products from Home Depot, and by the hapless mobile home industry. These are blights on our physical and cultural landscape that can be redeemed only by traditional designers.

P R E S C R I P T I O N S

The best proof that traditional architecture has been well and truly revived is that it can be dependably taught. Classicists today can be as good as their masters—even while still young. It is the rigor of the classical canon that enables this instruction. But in teaching the canon we should take care that students not become overly dependent on bookish authority. They must not fear to be “incorrect.” The measure of a building should be what Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk calls “plain old good architecture.” After all, we are building primarily for the commons, not the patrons or the experts.

The key question is whether this new generation of architects will bore deeper into refinement and elitism, or will endeavor to spread classical architecture to a broad, democratic, indeed populist, future. Will architects continue reprinting ever more esoteric treatises, or will they write new ones conceived to serve not the sixteenth or even the twentieth century, but the future that is soon upon us?

I propose a new ethos, one dedicated to extending the classical canon of ancient and Renaissance architects. Because this process cannot be allowed to devolve into neo-postmodernist dissipation, it must be based on the authority of old masters and old masterpieces. But we must transcend the closed historic treatises, and rescue that

Figure 1: The Erechtheion, Athens, Greece.



which was discarded in the reductive process of writing them. We must also appropriate those transitional nineteenth- and twentieth-century architects who have been assigned to the modernist camp—where they reside as the foundation of their authority—but who are, in fact, the last great flowering of classicism.

Take Frank Lloyd Wright, for example. It is possible to regard the Prairie School not as early modernism, but as the last of the Greek Revivals. Wright was among those who, instead of the Parthenon and all of its proprieties, took the Erechtheion and all of its freedoms as a model for contemporary architecture (Figure 1).

If the Erechtheion—its dynamic massing and multiple columniations, its agile engagement with topography, its free repertoire of moldings, its localized symmetries and rotated approaches, its complex, multi-levelled interior, its contradictions and unresolved tension—is classical, then Wright is certainly among the great masters of classicism.

Another master of the canon is the Slovene architect Joze Plecnik, who knew the classical language perfectly. Like Shakespeare, who found literature in moribund Latin and translated it into his native English—with vitality to spare—Plecnik shows us the workings of what my brother

Douglas calls “the vernacular mind.” Not “the vernacular” that is a style, but the vernacular mind, which is the way of folk art, the ability to compose from memory and circumstance, to work sequentially through anything and everything, with craft but not perfection. The folk tradition, which Plecnik brought to classicism, is the essential tool, I think, to withstand the withering that the twenty-first century might impose upon us. I would also bring into the canon the work of earlier masters such as Friedrich Gilly, Sir John Soane, Alexander “Greek” Thompson, Tony Garnier, Auguste Perret, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, Gunnar Asplund, Marcello Piacentini, Giuseppe Terragni, John Russell Pope, and Charles A. Platt, as well as the work of contemporary practitioners: Robert A. M. Stern, Michael Graves, Leon Krier, Demetri Porphyrios, and Rob Krier. We are almost there. We have only to climb one last Everest.

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