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Context and Continuity—Universal Versus Situational in Architecture

Juhani Pallasmaa

Prologue

In *Poetics of Music*, Igor Stravinsky, the arch-modernist of music — whom one would expect to have fought for the cause of liberating music from its classical rules — surprisingly reveals a suspicion of modernity and a deep reverence for tradition.

I shall come back to Stravinsky's little book, based on a series of lectures held in 1939, but I shall start by quoting a line that sounds like an outright controversy of concepts. The intention of my presentation is to show the insight in this apparent paradox.

Stravinsky writes: "*Everything that remains outside of tradition is mere plagiarism . . .*"

Modern Tradition?

A year ago, and international symposium was held in Venice under the title "La Tradizione Moderna" — the Modern Tradition. About a dozen architects from around the world were invited to this meeting organized by the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Raccolta Alvar Aalto in Venice, and the Venice Biennale.

The apparent paradox of concepts in the title — modern and traditional — was intentional. The incongruity of discussing modernism in Venice, the archetypal environment of historical contextuality, was equally provoking.

The controversial title of the Venice encounter deliberately wanted to suggest that modernity is already a tradition. A history of almost a century should justify the notion of tradition in relation to modernity. The universal acceptance of the International Style should suffice to confirm its significance as the genuine style of the twentieth century.

But let us discuss the meaning, the anatomy, of tradition to see how far the architecture of our age can be compared with the traditions of the past.

The Process of Tradition

Tradition is the self-consciousless process of form-making in unspecialized societies, as Christopher Alexander pointed out in his influential *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*.

Tradition advances through consensus. It provides a context and continuity to the course of evolution. It is significant that tradition is cumulative in character. It favours normality and strict obedience to its patterns and accepts change only through the severe test of social use and acceptance. Consequently, within its own cultural context, the mechanism of tradition increasingly adapts to existing conditions and accumulates a growing stock of knowledge.

Tradition is a centripetal force which molds a style by forcing individual in-

ventions and experiments towards a common course. Tradition is the course of time made conceivable and tangible. Tradition is not concerned with the expression of a moment. It is not concerned with progress either, but evolves unconsciously in unnoticeable steps. A live tradition implies gradual transformation, not a continuous attempt to reform. Tradition is not concerned with individual creativity. It provides a code within which buildings or other artifacts can be successfully constructed without a deliberate creative attitude or capacity for invention. Stylistic evolution in tradition is based on the constant interaction of high and low culture, the suppressed ingredient of self-conscious creativity, and commonplace mass application. The commonly shared meaning or role of the artifact is more important than its shape. Within a style, form and meaning become inseparably fused. Now, we can look at the essence of Modernism as a cultural phenomenon to judge its capacity for becoming a tradition.

The Process of Modernity

The relationship of the Modern Movement to tradition — both vernacular and of high style — has been rather problematic. The Modern Movement has even deliberately attempted to break the fabric of tradition, to create a discontinuity in history. Tradition was thought of as carrying the vices, miseries, and injustices of the past; the

emancipated modernist wanted to create a totally enlightened civilization and a new emancipated man. Tradition implies directing the course of development from the past through the accumulated knowledge of past generations, and this has been, of course, an unbearable thought for the self-assertive and arrogant man of the twentieth century.

The mere notion of modernity has implied an attitude of self-sufficiency, arrogance, and pugnacity.

"The Modern Movement is a genuine and independent style," said the influential historian Nikolaus Pevsner. Or "the International Style is its own justification," Philip Johnson recklessly announced at the outset of the style.

Modernism is obsessed with the notion and ideals of progress, novelty, and the mythical Spirit of Time. Whereas tradition implies a continuum in time or a certain timelessness, Modernism implies a point in time, a consciousness of present, and a voyeurist interest in the future. Modernity takes its foothold in the present and reaches towards the future. It is intellectually, artistically, and socially highly conscious of its role and means.

Modernity is based on the arrogant confidence in continuous creativity and reform, if not of outright revolution. Consequently, the value of a modern object of art is judged by its

degree of revolutionary change. It is praised for what it breaks rather than for what it preserves or restores. Significantly, the sole contextual strategy in modern architecture has been that of contrast, both in relation to nature and man-made setting.

The capacity to create something profoundly new is very rare, more rare than today's enthusiasts of creativity training are willing to accept. "Only poets and criminals are able to overcome convention," wrote Marshall McLuhan in the 60's. What we tend to label as creativity is most often a mere re-application and recombination of existing elements. This is certainly to our advantage, since we have an inherent need to experience security, stability, and continuity. The utopian society in perpetual revolutionary change would most certainly be a mentally unbearable situation.

Modernity lacks the cumulative quality of tradition. It is cross-sectional knowledge instead of the longitudinal knowledge of tradition. It celebrates uniqueness and tries to avoid repetition of previous formal solutions. As the capacity for new creation is exceptional, the style of perpetual reform is doomed to contradict its very ideal and becomes repetitious. The requirement for uniqueness is satisfied by cursory fashion. The profound change implied by the requirement for uniqueness is replaced by artificial acceleration of changes in taste. As the guiding framework of tradition is missing, commonplace application of the style is condemned to perpetual mediocrity or total failure.

As building in our age is losing its cumulative quality (and this may well apply to all our activities) the technical skill of the architect is decisively weakening, not to mention his artistic sensibility. Architecture becomes an intellectual or even a computerized game in problem-solving of the most

prosaic kind and a cynical speculation with tastes and emotional effects.

Thus, we are tragically confusing the notions of information and knowledge. Undoubtedly we possess more information than past generations, but our capacity for knowing and perceiving ought to be questioned seriously. As a consequence of this confusion our acts — whether in the field of architecture or of economics and social reforms — lose their contextual foothold in tradition and become blind and detached, without cultural coherence.

Yes, it is evident that modernity is an anti-style compared to the cultural mechanism of traditional styles. Modernity is a centrifugal force that pushes artistic products away from its invisible core in an explosive manner.

Paradoxes and Compulsions

Paradoxically, within its cultural entity, tradition works towards universality of application, but achieves a uniqueness; modernity aspires for uniqueness, but results in universal sameness.

The reason for the first contradiction is that in tradition the situational factors have always been relatively overpowering in relation to the available physical or technical means. In our time, the inherent universality and brutal power of hard science and technology, as well as the unifying mental forces of a consumer society, have become stronger than our neurotic desire for individuality. Besides, in its essence, our outspoken cult of individuality seems to mask a deep desire for surrender to the benumbing suffocation of materialist mass culture. Beneath the aspiration of individuality we seem to be hiding a profound fear of individuality.

Within a unifying code, minor differences and nuances are expressive,



HVISTTRÄSK, Kirkkonummi. Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen, 1902.

while in the middle of our stylistic anarchy extremes of form only contribute to the feeling of losing the code of being deprived of a center. Traditional Japanese architecture and behaviour are, an outspoken example of the subtle richness of minute variation within a strict cultural code.

The number of variables conditioning an architectural form define its scope of variation. The traditional mechanism incorporates a multitude of factors related to geography, climate, economy, available materials and skills, cultural conventions, mythical beliefs, and metaphysical aspirations. The design and building practice of the industrialized world is dominated by the single cause of overpowering quasi-rationality and universal technique.

The notion of paradoxed intention is used in psychiatry to refer to the disturbance of behaviour in which an intended act involuntarily becomes its opposite under the compulsive forces of repressed psychic contents. The architecture of our day, as well as our whole controversial social ideology, bears a close resemblance to this curious mental distortion. We accomplish the opposite of what we desire.

Modernism has been widely condemned both by *vox populi* and an increasing number of our colleagues who have lost faith in modernity. The formal rigidity of the doctrine and its inability to create variation and carry mental meaning have most often been named as reasons for the failure.

But I find it rather naive to accuse a style or its originators, for our own inability to create humane architecture. The mere persistence of the International Style suggests a collective mental compulsion. The inhumanity of our cities cannot be a result of any particular style (as if styles would exist independently of us) but an unavoidable reflection of our mental contents, our imagery. Architecture is no more a realm of creativity independent of its cultural context than religion, science, or the practice of agriculture.

In a recent article, I have attempted to connect the psychiatric notion of obsession or compulsion neurosis to the vulgarity of the architectural expression of our age. We seem to have an obsessive fear of hierarchical differentiation, a compulsion for boundaries, a defensive desire for meaninglessness, and the hubris of manipulation. And the uneasiness of

modernity with tradition seems to result from our obsessions with time and freedom.

I shall not go deeper into this analysis of collective mental factors conditioning the manmade environment, but I shall discuss the two obsessions affecting our relation to tradition: the obsessions of time and freedom.

The Obsession of Time

An essential mental motif of artistic expression is the unconscious fear of death. By transferring our world view and experience into a material shape, we believe to continue our limited existence. In architecture this aspiration to immortalize man's life is particularly clear.

"A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusion of stability," wrote Gaston Bachelard in his enigmatic but influential book *The Poetics of Space*.

Or as Alvar Aalto wrote in his youth: "Form is nothing but a concentrated will to eternal life on earth."

Time is also an essential psychic dimension in art in another sense. A work of art condenses both collective and individual history to the moment of artistic experience. Hence, art experience is a multi-dimensional time experience.

Industrial Man has a frustrated relation to time. The frustration results from a repressed attitude towards aging and death. Turning the cyclic time concept into a linear view with an absolute beginning and end brought the frustration of irreversibility to our experience of time. Industrial Man tries to hold time to the present tense in order to live a timeless youth. Time has been turned into a materialized commodity. The natural and inevitable aging of men, buildings, and objects is repressed. In a welfare



**Stock Exchange, Helsinki
Lars Sonck, 1911.**

society, old people are transferred to the outskirts of consciousness; aging and wear are hardly conceived as desirable factors, and objects of use are discarded before their old age. The requirement for modernity in the arts reflects the same irrational compulsiveness in our relation to the element of time.

The American psychotherapist Gotthard Booth has stated, "The natural satisfaction of life comes from a vigorous participation in the life that extends beyond the life of the individual."

A way of life which exceeds the limits of individual life is participation in the progression of tradition. Modernism has programmatically attempted to interrupt this progression. Having discarded tradition and thus the possibility of participation in a supra-individual pattern of life, modern man has obliged himself to seek his psychic essential experience of continuity in the spatial dimension instead of time, (i.e. in place instead of time). Instead of works intended for eternity, Industrial Man attempts to expand his life by expanding his acts in space — today, expanding all the way to outer space. Participation in the fabric of

tradition has been replaced by a compulsive desire for universality.

The aspiration for universality has resulted in the loss of situation and the emergency of alienated intellectualism a kind of universal neutrality and contextlessness.

As the consumption ideology turns ideas into products of consumption, the nature of artistic quality is obscured. Rejection of tradition results in the inherent value of novelty and uniqueness and a gradual privatization of culture. Modern art has become totally identified with the notion of novelty.

Igor Stravinsky deliberates on the privatization of the language of art and the consequent loss of communication capacity: "The requirement for individuality and intellectual anarchy . . . constructs, its own language, its vocabulary and artistic means. Use of proven means and established forms is generally forbidden and thus the artist ends up talking in a language with which his audience has no contact. His art becomes unique, indeed, in the sense that its world is totally closed and it does not contain any possibility for communication."

Rejection of tradition explains the drifting of architecture towards a deadening uniformity on the one hand and towards a rootless anarchy of expression on the other. Architecture, as art of language in general, can only progress meaningfully through the process of a cumulative tradition which balances reforming and preserving elements in expression.

The Delusion of Freedom

Modern thinking, social ideals, and art aspire to freedom an unchallenged independence from Nature, tradition, established conventions, and limitations of matter. This desire for

freedom has also developed into an inherent value.

The question of the ultimate possibility of freedom is a philosophical question of perpetuity, but Industrial Man is satisfied with the mere illusion of freedom. Limitations of freedom in the form of superstition, religious belief, or earthly tyranny may indeed have disappeared, but our freedom is even more unconditionally restricted by the invisible forces directing industrial materialism. The illusion of freedom and choice have to a tragic measure become the basic strategy of our consumption society.

Even freedom or openness of evolution may prove a delusion. Herbert Marcuse stated, "Beneath its conspicuous dynamism, our society is a thoroughly stagnated system of life; in its suffocating productivity and useful uniformity it is automatically bound to repeat itself."

Marcuse's thought is easily associated with that contradiction: regardless of our neurotic appreciation of individuality, we produce environments without individuality.

Erich Fromm has shown that at the same time that Industrial Man has a compulsive yearning for freedom, he has a panicky fear of freedom. For example this is reflected in building in the discrepancy between the unlimited possibilities opened up by technology and our hanging on to conventions.

Psychoanalytic theory includes the notion of defense. A defensive mechanism represses an undesired matter from consciousness by transforming or shifting it into an acceptable guise. One of the psychic defense mechanisms is called rationalization. As a psychoanalytical concept, rationalization means the unconscious explaining of deeds or their

motives as something other than they actually are.

The rationalizing characteristic of our society reflects a clear defensive behaviour against open and unprejudiced confrontation with reality. The popular attempts to explain away the art of building by construction of logic, measures, and figures is not only a positive search for clarity, but simultaneously and perhaps more significantly, a defensive attempt to chain the inborn unconscious substance of art. This defensiveness appears frequently in the aggressive denial of art among the technocrats.

The neurotic appreciation of freedom is reflected in the valuation of uniqueness which has turned art into another realm of fashion. The task of art ought to be a deepening of our reality experience, but it has been turned into another medium of estrangement and alienation.

Great artists hardly ever speak of the dimension of freedom in their work. They emphasize the role of restrictions and constraints in the shaping of their personality and style. They bring forth the disciplinary, tradition-bound character of their art form rather than speaking of their longing for freedom.

Leonardo considered resistance more important for an artist than freedom: "Strength is born from constraint and it dies in freedom."

In his humane memoirs *My Life and My Films*, Jean Renoir writes about the "resistance of technique" while Stravinsky speaks of "the resistance of material and technique."

Stravinsky scorns any yearning for freedom: "The ones who try to avoid subordination support unanimously the opposite (counter-traditional) view. They reject constraint and they nourish a hope — always doomed to failure — of finding the secret to

strength in freedom. They do not find anything but the arbitrariness of freaks and disorder, they loose all control, they go astray . . ."

Manifestos and histories of modern architecture speak frequently of 'liberating' architecture. Le Corbusier's wellknown and influential "Five Points of New Architecture" of 1926 exemplifies this tendency to see the evolution of architecture as 'liberation.' Louis Kahn was the first to bring the opposite of freedom to contemporary architectural thought the eternal themes of construction. He was concerned by what "brick and vault themselves wanted to become."

The obsession with freedom in the name of liberating artistic expression has however, led architecture to the unfortunate rejection of its timeless rules and disciplinary structure. 'Liberation' of architectural expression has most often meant mere denial and rejection of its deepest emotional means.

During the past decade demands have again been frequently voiced to liberate architecture sometimes from "the *cul-de-sac* of functionalism," sometimes from "the straightjacket of rationalism or "the chains of purist aesthetics," But, rather should architecture in our era of ultimate confusion be tied back to its tectonic-mythical substance, the eternal traditions of construction?

Tradition in Modernity

I have concluded that modernity differs significantly from the mechanism of the traditions of the past.

When we speak of the "tradition of modernity" we are using the notion in another meaning than in the case of earlier traditions.

Another interesting question is this: to what degree have elements of tradi-

tion been consciously or unintentionally absorbed in Modernism?

The pioneer generation of Modernism was educated in the classical tradition and, consequently, its work is based on mastering the traditions of the trade and the classical language of architecture. The vivacity of early Modernism results from its origination at the confrontation point of tradition and reform. Even the most expressive and touching works after the pioneer period, by Louis Kahn, James Stirling, Luis Barragan, Alvaro Siza, or Mario Botta, reverberate with tradition, while the products of most virtuoso utopianism and futurism remain mere demonstrations of technical skill and fantasy without touching our souls.

The emphatic aspiration of the new vogues in architecture during the past decade or so has understandably been to rediscover the lost and nearly forgotten tradition. The history-conscious post-modernist wants to start again from the crossroad where modernists took the wrong turn, the super highway to universal meaninglessness.

Most of us here in the North, however, and here in Finland, in particular, tend to judge these retro-traditionalist attempts as fundamentally false interpretations of culture and history on the one hand, and the role and language of architecture on the other. Manipulation of history is equally far from a vigorous culture as the rejection of tradition. Eclecticism easily reveals its lack of contact with primary creativity — it conveys an unintentional air of necrophilia. In the middle of the growing demands for absolute rejection of modernity we have begun to feel that, regardless of its rejection of history and its other vices, Modernism has irreplaceably taken root in our society.

In our country, modernity seems to be enrooted in tradition by two op-

posite forces. Our whole history of art facts is a history of self-restraint and simplicity. Modernity became accepted exceptionally quickly in our society because it satisfied two opposite mental expectations. Modernism implied moving towards symbols of progress — urbanity, industrialization and internationalism — and, at the same time, returning to the ideals of natural simplicity of peasant tradition. In Finland, modernity has become an integrated and inseparable part of our view of the world and our way of living. Modernism is our mere identity.

Epilogue

To end my paper, I want to go back to my first quote by Stravinsky: "Everything that remains outside of tradition is mere plagiarism." I hope I have been able to interpret the logic and the lesson the enigmatic sentence. A cultural continuity and context is the soil for artistic creation no matter how revolutionary it is. Experience of contextuality assures us of our belonging somewhere in space, while continuity helps us feel that we are somewhere in time. Reverence for tradition, its crafts and skills, fertilizes the search for the profoundly new. Art that programmatically rejects the context of tradition is bound to remain a fabrication of isolated individuality, a mere curiosity that plagiarizes the qualities of previous works of art.

Today, instead of trying to invent yet another new architecture, we should search for the everlasting disciplines of the art of building. We have to refine and strengthen the frail tradition of true modernity.