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Architecture, Memory, and the Idea of Nature

Norman Crowe

Past and Present

The practice of keeping old things primarily because of their association with the distant past has always been with us. In past societies it was the temple relic and the talisman. Today their equivalents are found in museum collections and archives. We seem compelled to seek tangible evidence of connections with the past, especially a past which can be seen as our own, that is, one from which we ourselves descended. Clearly, it must be very important to us to sense that we are an integral part of something which extends beyond our own moment in historical time.

This compulsion for maintaining links to the past manifests itself in less obvious acts than the direct retention of ancient artifacts. Subtle reflections of both conscious and unconscious efforts to bolster a cultural memory abound in all societies. Ritual chants, bardic poems, inscriptions carved in stone or cast in metal, simple though nonetheless ritualized acts such as a wedding ceremony or the inauguration of a political leader which stress ties to earlier, even ancient events: these are expressions of our quests for timelessness and the maintenance of links to our past.

Even more subtle, however, are the traces of the past we leave like palimpsests to remind ourselves of where something came from, vestigial reminders of an evolutionary descent to the present. Take, for instance, the design of men's suit coats, sports jackets and the like. They are

fraught with vestigial reminders of their descent from other kinds of garments. Throughout much of the world today, men wear business suits with collars that are never intended to be turned up against the cold. The sleeves have buttons sewn onto them where a cuff would be, but they do not button anything; and the necktie which is customarily worn the year 'round as part of this ensemble, appears to have descended from a scarf once worn to keep out the cold.

It is not uncommon, it turns out, that we enhance the dignity of a thing through the application of vestigial reminders of past uses or forms of that particular thing. Can it be that we use such reminders of the evolution of things to provide a sense of meaning in the context of change, even when we are not consciously aware of doing so?

The answer to why we go to such elaboration to reflect on the passage of time must certainly lie in the importance we give to our memory in reconciling our place in the scheme of things, even to the extent of leaving vestigial reminders among important artifacts to register *their* place in the passage of time as well as our own. This explains what lies behind Vitruvius' description of how the decorative features of the classical orders of architecture were themselves descendents of earlier forms of buildings, and that is what Vitruvius' near contemporary Cicero was referring to when he spoke of the importance of a symmetrical pediment above the columns of the traditional Greco-Roman

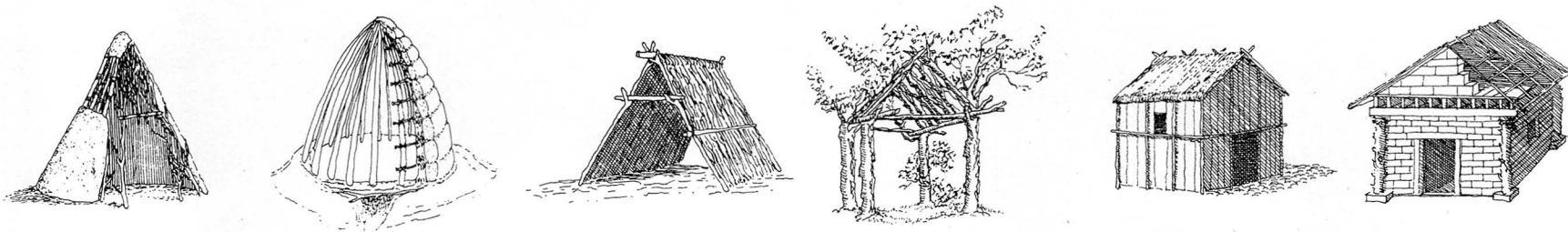
temple. Cicero wrote: "It is not for pleasure but out of necessity that our temples have gables. The need of discharging rainwater has suggested their form. And yet, such is the beauty of their form ... that if one were to build a temple on Mount Olympus — where I am told it never rains — one would still feel obliged to crown it with a pediment."

At one level, recognizing the pediment in its proper place is simply a function of comfortable familiarity, but at another level the pediment with its proper form and embellishment becomes a cultural object as well. It is necessary to the identification of "a temple." The pediment carries with it the memory of where it came from, the source of its form, and its place in the order of building. Its presence celebrates the temple's ascent from the rude and practical construction of the first hut.

Perhaps nothing is more reflective of the role of memory in architecture than the many versions of "the primitive hut" which appear on the opening pages of architectural treatises. When one first encounters the practice of so many treatise writers re-creating the primitive hut described by Vitruvius in his *Ten Books on Architecture*, it seems to the modern mind an obligatory and superfluous gesture. But a deeper look into the structure of classical architectural theory reveals the presence of the hut as evidence of the recognition that, for architecture to be integral with the culture, society, or civilization that spawns it, it must evolve along

with that culture, society, or civilization. In other words, architecture maintains its validity and credibility by reflecting its own historic past in each new work. In effect, each building embodies a memory of its own evolution. For instance, Vitruvius said that the temple of his time descended from a wooden prototype, and he described how its various decorative elements are vestigial reminders of important constructional features in that earlier building form. By this means architecture, or what we might refer to today as an architectural style, remains a part of the collective memory of a people so long as there are no abrupt or radical disruptions in the continuous process of its evolution. Thus, to remain valid and credible architecture must remain continually engaged with the on-going milieu. That is, to be significant, its meaning — or evolution, really — must not be forgotten, must not fade from memory.

Vitruvius' story of the origins of architectural embellishments clarifies the principle. For instance, according to his account, the alternating triglyphs and metopes of a Doric frieze make sense because the triglyphs recall former wooden beam ends, set as they are on a perimeter beam or lintel — the architrave — while the metopes recall the spaces between the beams which were once filled with a flat board upon which decorative embellishments were painted or carved. The guattae represent pegs driven from below into the beams to stabilize them, while the dentils were likely inspired by the pattern formed by formerly exposed



Primitive huts created by treatise writers on architecture following Vitruvius' description of how architecture evolved from crude shelter.

1. [beginning above, left to right] After drawings by William Chambers (1759), Claude Perrault (1674), Walther Hermann Ryff (1550), Marc-Antoine Laugier (1753), Francesco Milizia (1781), Jacques-Francois Blondel (1771)]

ends of squared 'sticks' placed under the roof tiles to support them between rafters, and so on. In other words, each bit of decoration fits into some sort of a logical pattern of development. Whether we consciously assess the relationship between those decorative elements and their evolutionary past or not, we sense the logic of their presence so long as the designer did not lose sight of the pattern which integrates them all with one another. Like Cicero's symmetrical pediment, they are comforting to both our conscious and to our subconscious memories of past form and meaning.

One writer has even suggested that these particular features of classical architecture had other, more ancient and primitive meanings as well. (Hersey, George, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*) Not only are such features as guttae and dentil courses vestiges of earlier constructional features, but he believes they might reflect ritualistic sources as well, having to do with sacrifice and linguistic circumstances from the time of their origin and formation. If he is correct, their meaning and 'logic' is strengthened by support from non-constructional quarters as well as from the constructional ones Vitruvius describes. And we know that when something enjoys double or triple meanings it is thereby doubly or triply enriched.

Memory, Cities, and the Idea of Nature

Memory is illusive. Neither its presence nor its importance is always necessarily

evident. But if it is disregarded in the design of something, its absence becomes conspicuous.

An important characteristic of our artifacts, whether they are buildings, tools, clothing, cars or whatever, is that they be recognized as part of particular classifications of things. For instance if a car is perceived as looking too unlike what consumers recognize as a car, it will likely be very difficult to sell to a broad market. Or if the design of a customary article of clothing is too radical a departure from expectations, very few people will be willing to wear it. We seek a kind of unity in the world of our own making, one where things change but at the same time are related to their predecessors in a directly recognizable way.

Cicero, always interested in the fundamentals, reflected on our 'need' to structure and distinguish our own world as a kind of unity or complete entity within the larger world of nature. Perhaps the key to the relationship between memory and the things we make for ourselves lies in this compulsion to distinguish what we build from what nature provides us. He observed that, "We enjoy the fruits of the plains and of the mountains, the rivers, and the lakes are ours, we sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilize the soil by irrigation, we confine the rivers and straighten or divert their courses. In fine, by means of our hands we essay to create as it were a second world within the world of nature." Our "second world," as he calls it, emerges as clearly distinguishable

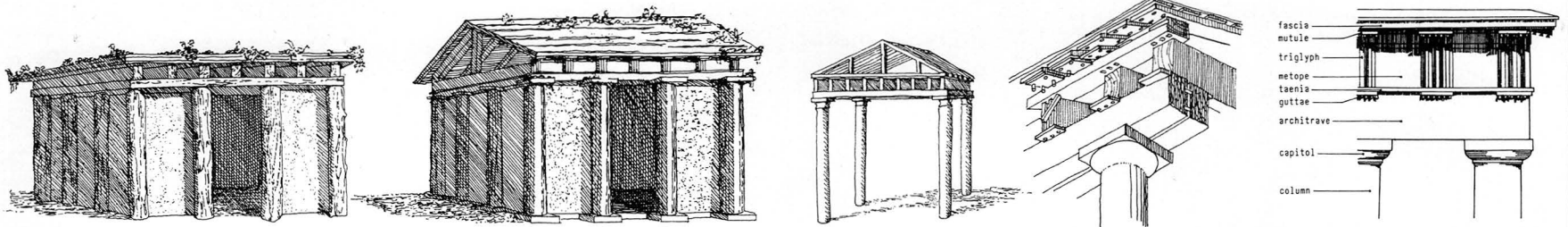
from the world of nature all around it.

Although written in the first century B.C., that statement could have been as easily written today. We recognize the presence of two worlds, the natural world with its intricate and delicate balances, and the one of our own making, the man-made world with its own special and sometimes even mysterious qualities. Seeing the world in this way, as a duality of man and nature, is integral to our culture and normal to our being. Our consciousness encourages us to experience the world as outside ourselves, to separate ourselves from nature and to see it as independent to our acts, even an adversary to our purposes. We are part of nature yet we possess this unique capacity for self-awareness. It is what separates us from nature and enables us to both reflect back on it and to create our own world, including our cultures. According to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "the horse — like the man — knows where to put his foot [on the rocky trail], but only the man knows he knows."

Might it be that the man-made world, like the world of nature, derives its essential sense and composition from its evolutionary character? By 'evolution' I am not referring to Darwinian evolution, but rather perceived changes across time, usually cyclical in quality, and understood through the experience of just a few lifetimes at the most. Perhaps we intuitively sense the natural world's continuous change through our memory, both our individual memories and the

collective memory of a society, as a means to reconcile our place, as well as the place of the artifacts we make, in relation to some sort of grand scheme for everything, a kind of subliminal cosmology. This is to say that we have a need to sense things in time, that is, temporally, as well as to know them as they are at the moment. And if we are denied that sense we are left with an uneasy feeling of detachment, the kind of detachment which separates us from time itself. And if this is true for architecture, it must be especially true for the city, the most elaborate and complex of man-made artifacts, one where architecture is the most all-pervasive and integral constituent and where the natural environment is most completely replaced by an environment that is man-made.

Aldo Rossi describes the traditional city as consisting of an ensemble of both permanent and temporary elements, combined with one another to strike a balance between stability and change. Palaces, religious and civic buildings of every sort, city walls, gates, bridges and so on are regarded as permanent by the city's inhabitants, while houses, places of production, and so forth are seen as more or less temporary. Colin Rowe has referred to the city as "a memory theatre." Rossi's "permanences," as he calls them, are the principal agents of the city's memory, while the contents of some of those "permanences," especially libraries, museums and archives, substantiate and enforce their existential roles consistent with their actual functions, as ties with the past. We refer to these as "civic buildings," their



Primitive huts offered by treatise writers to demonstrate a direct link between the hut and the Doric Order. Especially, note the wood temple construction after Choisy as the transitional building from timber to the refined stone temple, shown next to it.

permanence being related to the permanent stature of the community they serve. Traditionally their architectural expression has been classicism, an architectural expression in keeping with their roles as permanent monuments within the city and as representatives of the timelessness of the communities they were built to serve. These architectural “permanences,” along with the imprint of the original settlement pattern and pre-existent natural features such as rivers and hills, the waterfront and lakes or streams that fall within the city’s boundaries, act as critical datums to inevitable growth and change. They become the essential components of a balanced formula which seeks to maintain a sense of place in the passage of time.

Maintaining a harmonious environment depends, among other things, on striking a balance between stability and change. At one extreme may lie boredom and atrophy and at the other, disorientation, insecurity and anxiety. Somewhere in the middle there is a balanced condition which we refer to as harmonious, but its position is not fixed. There are times when the excitement and even the unpredictability of change is sought after, while there are other times and circumstances when the most static of conditions seems appropriate. Stability and change are understood through memory: all of us judge the state of things in relation to what we know of the past.

Thus, a properly furnished man-made world, like the natural one, consists of

both the familiar and the new in some sort of controlled relationship. When change takes place outside our control, it can be reconciled more easily if there can be seen a logical relationship with what preceded it. Sometimes it is a direct knowledge of the relationship between a former condition and a new one that sustains us, but just as often it is a sensed, or largely intuitive understanding of it. It is likely that this is the reason we sometimes consciously leave traces of former conditions, like palimpsests, to demonstrate the logic of a change having taken place. At other times, when such traces of the past remain as inadvertant bi-products of change — such as sleeve buttons, neckties and the lapels of suit collars — we sense their importance without necessarily recognizing or acknowledging that we do so.

It would appear that if we do indeed quest after the maintenance of a balanced relationship between things which we regard as constant and those which necessarily remain in flux, we might well be drawing some sort of unconscious analogy with nature. This is to say that we seem to want to reproduce something of our understanding of nature in our efforts to construct that “second world within the world of nature,” as Cicero called it. For instance, our most fundamental pre-scientific understanding of nature involves a clear sense of permanence amid constant change. Mountains remain while the cycle of the seasons changes their snow-capped summits and the hues of foliage on their flanks; rivers flood and recede,

tides ebb and flow, people are born and grow old and die and all the while the community, the ocean and the river remain. Primitive rituals often address this dynamism of nature’s world where time is marked by cyclical change amid stable and predictable “permanences.” A Shinto ritual recognizes the timelessness of a great stone placed by nature’s hand in the constantly changing forest; a native American tribe dedicates certain dances to a particular mountain on their horizon; and peoples everywhere enact rituals to effect some sort of control over the cycle of the seasons in the hope of a more substantial harvest.

If we assume that we do indeed impart an intrinsic understanding of nature in our creation and understanding of the world we build for ourselves, then the reasons behind such actions become clearer. Take for instance the comparatively recent growth of the architectural restoration and preservation movement, occurring as it does in the midst of an urban world that seems to be changing of its own volition, outside anyone’s real control. Those who champion such causes as architectural preservation soon find themselves trying to justify their intentions in pure economic terms as a means to avoid being challenged by developers, city officials, or others who use quantifiable data in their counter arguments. If a preservationist cannot find a convincing economic reason for his or her proposals, he opens himself to criticism for operating on the basis of a personal nostalgia set firmly against the community’s economic

2. [(above) After drawings by William Chambers (1759), (below, left to right) after drawings by Charles Delagardette (1786), Auguste Choisy (1873), William Chambers (1759)]

progress. Preservationists soon discover that the importance of memory can be effectively trivialized by simply equating it with “mere nostalgia.” On the other hand, consider the rise of such intellectual movements of late as the resurgence of interest in phenomenology and other “place theory” philosophical arguments which attempt to address the man-made environment in more inclusive terms than those offered by the more or less compartmentalized abstractions of sociology, political science and economics. Further, the return of “period styles” and the popularity of eclectic assemblages by “post-modernist” architects, along with the revival of classicism and a renewed interest in architectural typologies and overt historical references in general, can all be seen in some degree as attempts to address our feelings of detachment from time.

The Man-made World and the World of Nature

The world we make for ourselves — our cities, villages, and towns, and their constituent architecture — *is* our world. Just as the world of our distant ancestors was the forests, deserts, and plains provided them by nature, we now live essentially within a world of our own making, created in many respects as a reflection of the natural world of our ancient past. I believe we continue to equate the two worlds whether we are conscious of it or not. Especially, it is the qualities of passing time with which we seek to reconcile ourselves as we approach either the

natural or the man-made environment of our experience.

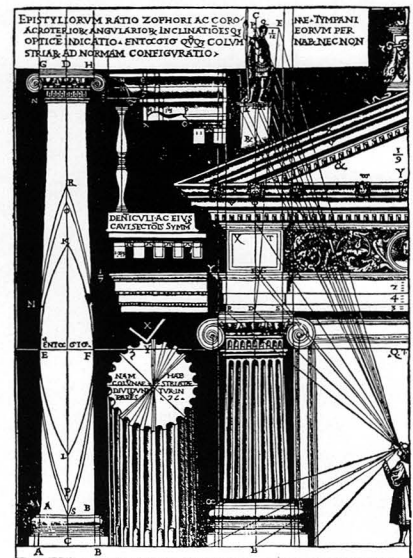
It is the custom of art and architectural historians to see the world of our own making in terms of static styles and passing influences. Unfortunately, this approach to recognizing the differences between one age and another fosters a tendency to trivialize certain salient characteristics of the things we make and the places we live. The differences between one thing and another become stylistic ones, characterized as passing fashions, each in turn discarded as we became bored with it and thus sought the stimulus of something new. There is, of course, no denying that boredom breeds change or that the drive to be *avant-garde* is a powerful force in shaping our environment. But the problem lies in ascribing such an inordinant importance to these more ephemeral and superficial features of places and things. Current architectural and urban theory abounds with buzz words and jargon, often bi-products of efforts on behalf of particular individuals to establish themselves or their approach to architecture as an integral part of the next movement. Powerful as it is, *avant-gardism* cannot be the focus of a serious inquiry into the more intrinsic reasons behind the way we shape the things we make and the places we rebuild for ourselves. At the moment of this writing 'invention' and 'intervention' appear among the more prominent buzz words of architects and urban designers in Europe, and 'deconstructivism' seems to prevail for the moment in the U.S. Each of these words represent ideas which have at their base profound and meaningful observations on the state of the present as well as imperatives for the future. But for the most part they are reflections of changing fashion, superficial glazes over the presence of important realities. And the energy accorded them obscures more important and intrinsic issues which would lead to a better understanding of the man-made world and its future. A recognition of our need to sense the relationship of a thing — such as a building or a city — with its past is probably one

of those important and intrinsic issues which supersedes fad and fashion. There are many others as well.

In our time we are inclined to abstraction and compartmentalization in the study of such complex things as cities, communities, and architecture. Sociologists tell us one thing, economists another, and historians still another. We have a tendency to regard those characteristics of people and things which cannot be crisply analyzed and quantified as unimportant. This is our attitude about memory, so called 'nostalgia,' and about those attitudes concerning emotional responses people seem to have about places and things. It might be argued, on the other hand, that these more illusive qualities are really the more important ones in the final analysis. How we perceive something is more important to our daily existence than what it really is in more abstract analytical terms. The ancient Greeks understood that when they warped the stylobate of temples to make the columns appear vertical, or when they increased the diameters of the columns that are seen silhouetted against the sky at the corners of the peristyle as opposed to those seen against the cella walls so that the corner columns would be perceived to be just as large a diameter as all the rest. In other words, they distorted reality to make things appear undistorted. And their insistence upon reflecting the passage of time by incorporating into every important building a kind of memory of its own evolutionary past is just another instance of their realization that architecture, as opposed to just 'building' relies as much upon the subtlety of our perception of it and attitude about it as it does upon a building's existence as an objective thing outside ourselves. And finally, they recognized that we perceive and understand the man-made world much as we do the world of nature. They saw proportions in architecture as deriving from the proportions of the human body, our understanding of proportions having come in the first place from a natural recognition of biological symmetry and balance. For them nature

and human nature was incorporated in their architecture through a long process of evolutionary development. Today we find the notion of universal proportions represented by Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the universal man based on Vitruvius' description of it as quaint only because we choose to understand it in a superficial way; or we see those representations of the mythical "primitive hut" as quaint because we fail to recognize its place in classical theory. The Vitruvian, or 'universal' man, and the hut are unscientific, but they are, or at least were, enormously effective.

Because we are endowed with 'memory' we may learn from the past. Further, because our cultures are products of our past, sensing the presence of the past in the world we make for ourselves is necessary to the vitality of those cultures. Clearly, a richer and more humane man-made world relies on the recognition of the role of memory as integral to its composition. And for a more harmonious balance between our world and the natural one in which it resides we need to take into account that our understanding of each is inextricably related — just as we have come to realize that the *reality* of each is also inextricably related.



Many treatise writers and artists drew their own versions of Vitruvius' description of the human figure related to geometry as a means to establishing a direct response to human visual perception and to the cosmos beyond.

3. [from a drawing by Cesare Ceseraino in the 1521 edition of Vitruvius' *De Architectura*] Drawings such as this demonstrated the problem of optical distortion and its resolution through the distortion of 'perfection' as a means to perceived 'perfection.'

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