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# On the Way to Figurative Architecture

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... denn wir leben wahrhaft in  
Figuren.  
Rainer Rilke

The reactions to postmodernism show that it has touched upon something essential. What is insignificant rouses neither enthusiasm nor aversion. Harsh attacks are always a symptom of the fear created by something that endangers one's own established world. Wasn't modernism good enough? Didn't it express our own epoch? Why on earth do the forms that for decades were forbidden appear again: pediments and arches, towers and domes? Aren't they just the manifestation of superficial nostalgia?

Postmodernism, however, did not start as a superficial play with forms. It came about as a protest against the sterile emptiness of "late modern" architecture. Venturi wanted to make architecture *alive* again, and Rossi emphasized the need for general *intelligibility*. Man does not live in a world of abstractions, they said, but is made up of a complex of *memories*. Therefore postmodernism took "known" forms into use. It wanted to tell us who we are and tear us out of the dull condition brought about by late modernism. With his *ultima maniera*, Le Corbusier already aimed at that and thus at the recovery of authentic plastic values. But the neoexpressionistic experiments of his followers did not lead anywhere; they remained arbitrary whims without possibilities of development. Thus they completed the late modern medal: on the one side the sterile diagram and on the other the casual outburst. Post-

modernism refused both and advocated a return to "meaning in architecture."<sup>1</sup> It is therefore a misunderstanding to interpret postmodernism as the freedom to do "anything." Rather it aims at the re-establishment of typical and significant forms. Many of its protagonists, therefore, show a keen interest in semiology and semantics or, in general, in the *language of architecture*.

Let me emphasize again that postmodernism came about because of the degeneration of modern architecture. One simply could not go on building curtain walls and *fenêtres en longueur* forever. And it did not solve the problem to "enrich" the solutions with pseudostructural inventions. But does not a third alternative exist? Did not Alvar Aalto create an architecture that is both modern and alive? And did not his followers, such as Utzon and Pietilä, develop its possibilities further? Certainly they did, but still the "organic" modernism of Aalto lacks what postmodernism searches for. Thus we approach the core of the problem: *What* does modern architecture lack, be it of the "structural," "expressive," or "organic" kind?

The answer is simple: it lacks a satisfactory reference to our everyday world of *things*. Modern architecture was always *abstract*, it drew away from reality or, rather, excluded its concrete aspects. We could also say that it became "non-figurative," because it abolished those "figures" that constituted the basis of the architecture of the past.

Thus it represents a parallel to nonfigurative painting, which rejected the concrete figure, and atonal music, which abandoned the recognizable melody. Why, then, did nonfigurative art come about? According to Giedion, it happened because the known forms, the "symbols," had been "devaluated" by nineteenth-century historicism. Forms that once had served as an interpretation of reality, have become mere status symbols satisfying the need for a "cultural alibi" of the *parvenu*. "Therefore," Giedion says, "we had to start from zero as if nothing had ever been done before."<sup>2</sup> In practice this meant that modern art concentrated its attention on the *means* of expression rather than the "literary" content. The means of expression were certainly used to solve concrete tasks, but rarely were they employed to create things possessing true identity. As a consequence the characteristic *Gestalt* or figure was lost, and everything dissolved into "patterns" or "structures."<sup>3</sup> That is what is implied when we say that modern architecture drew away from reality.

What, then, does "reality" mean in this context? Evidently the means of expression are also related to reality. Color, material, point, line, and texture are abstracted from our given world and reflect it, each in its own way. A nonfigurative composition based on such elements may therefore express something "real." What Husserl called the "everyday lifeworld," however, is lost. The everyday lifeworld does not consist of abstract elements but

of totalities, of concrete *things*. The world is *given* as a world of things, where, Merleau-Ponty says, “each one is characterized by a kind of *a priori* to which it remains faithful,” adding “The significance of a thing inhabits that thing . . . an inner reality which reveals itself externally.”<sup>4</sup> Thus our world consists of trees and flowers, rocks and mountains, rivers and lakes, animals and humans, houses and artifacts. These are the things we know, recognize, and remember. Language confirms this state of affairs, because it is the things that have *names*. We call the names substantives, since the things are the substance of the world. It is in this sense we ought to understand Husserl’s battle cry against the growing abstraction and quantification of modern science: “To the things themselves!”<sup>5</sup>

Louis Kahn understood that. He asked, “What does the thing want to be?” He answered, “A rose wants to be a rose” or “a school wants to be a school.” Kahn aimed in other words at giving architecture a new basis, starting from the totality rather than the parts, turning the approach of functionalism upside down. He may in a certain sense be considered the “father” of post-modernism. But he was still thinking in structural rather than figural terms, and it was his pupil Venturi who should take the decisive step toward a figurative architecture. It is told that Kahn realized the importance of this step and understood that he had been left behind.

What, then, is an architectural figure? It is easy to comprehend the

figural dimension of the pictorial arts. Painting and sculpture “portray,” although not necessarily in a naturalistic sense. A building, however, does not portray anything. And it is not a “sign,” which may be understood semiotically, as many postmodernists believe. Nevertheless it gathers and represents a more or less comprehensive world by means of imageable figures. To understand this fact, it is illuminating to compare architecture with music. Music does not portray either, but it is based on figures, *melodies*, which are known and recognized and which somehow express reality. Goethe’s definition of architecture as “frozen music” is therefore deeply meaningful. What the figures of music and architecture have in common, are their “spatial” properties. They move forward, upward, and downward rhythmically and thereby relate to the positions and movements of the human body. The architectural figures therefore do not correspond to the basic forms of geometry. Musical figures, however, belong to an abstract, mathematical space and are concrete: they visualize modes of being “between earth and sky” and exist in a space where there are differences between up and down, before and behind. Thereby they become images of human existence.<sup>6</sup>

In general we may say that the identity of an architectural figure is determined by how it stands, extends, rises, opens, and closes. This may of course happen in infinitely many ways, but some of these are *typical*. I cannot here discuss architectural typology in detail but

will point out that the basic types have names. Thus we say “tower,” “wing,” “rotunda,” “dome,” “gable,” “arch,” “column,” “window,” and “gate” and also “lane,” “street,” “avenue,” and “square.” The basic interhuman figures are usually called “archetypes” to distinguish them from the local and temporal forms. All these figures were abolished by modern architecture, and as a result it lost a basic reference to reality. Most of the pioneers of modernism, however, had a classical education, and the architectural figures therefore often came back unintentionally. Their younger followers, on the contrary, from the outset learned to conceive architecture in abstract, “functional” terms and produced built diagrams if they did not in desperation take refuge in all kinds of visual narcotics.

When I mention the word “classical,” many will certainly ask why classical forms again are taken into use. Aren’t they historically conditioned and therefore obsolete? Evidently the classical language of forms was determined by local and temporal factors, but it is also a fact that the Greeks recognized relationships of universal validity and were able to express the truth discovered in typical figures. It is therefore not a matter of chance that classicism kept alive for centuries and that it reappears today. But it is of course of decisive importance *how* the classical language is used. Superficial imitation does not mean anything, since adaptation to different circumstances demands a new interpretation. Today we ex-

perience many interesting attempts at such a renewal.

The basic aim of postmodernism is to recover the figural dimension of architecture. This is the common denominator that unites the various currents of the present moment. The purpose is to make architecture intelligible and thereby *human* in the true sense of the word. It is a misunderstanding to believe that architecture becomes human if we only use “natural” materials and forms.<sup>7</sup> What is truly human are the figures, the archetypes, and their interpretations, because they keep and explain our existence. Together the figures constitute a *language*, which, if it is used with understanding, may make our environment meaningful. And *meaning* is the primary human need.

Our task is therefore a double one: first, to understand the existential basis of architecture and, second, to explain how the existential content is kept and visualized by means of the language of architecture.

I have already asserted that the architectural figure is a manifestation of man’s being in space and, furthermore, that its identity is determined by its mode of standing, extending, rising, opening, and closing. How can we relate this general characterization to the concrete building tasks of society? To approach the problem, we may take the concept of *dwelling* as our point of departure.<sup>8</sup> In general the purpose of architecture is to help man to dwell, that is, to find a foothold in space and time. Dwelling,

however, is a complex function. It does not only mean private shelter but first the establishment of a meaningful relationship between man and a given environment. In psychological terms, such a relationship develops through an act of identification, or, in other words, in a sense of belonging to a certain place. We could also say that man finds himself when he *settles*, and his general mode of being in the world is thereby determined. On the other hand, man is also a wanderer. As *homo viator*, he is always on the way, which implies the possibility of choice. Thus he chooses “his” place and, hence, a certain kind of fellowship with other men. This dialectic of departure and arrival, of path and goal, is the essence of the existential spatiality that is set into work by architecture. The *settlement*, therefore, is the primary goal of existential space and the place where the life of the community may take place. This fact is proved by the common use of place names for self-identification, for instance, by saying “I am a Roman” or “I am a New Yorker.”

When settling is accomplished, other modes of dwelling that concern the basic forms of human togetherness come into play. Thus the settlement functions as a place of encounter, where men exchange products, ideas, and feelings. From ancient times, *urban space* has been the stage where human meeting takes place. Meeting does not necessarily imply agreement; primarily it means that human beings come together in their diversities. Urban

space, thus, is essentially a place of discovery, a “milieu of possibilities.” In urban space man dwells in the sense of experiencing the richness of a world. We may call this mode *collective dwelling*.

When choices are made within the milieu of possibilities, however, patterns of agreement are established that represent a more structured kind of togetherness than the mere meeting. Agreement implies common interests and values and forms the basis for a fellowship or society. An agreement also has to “take place” in the sense of possessing a “forum” where the common values are kept and expressed. Such a place is generally known as an *institution* or public building, and the mode of dwelling it serves may be called *public dwelling*. Since the public building embodies a set of beliefs or values, it ought to appear as an “explanation” that makes the common world visible.

Choices, however, are also of a more personal kind, and the life of each individual has its particular course. Dwelling therefore also comprises the withdrawal that is necessary to define and keep one’s own identity. We may call this mode *private dwelling*, intending those actions that are secluded from the intrusion of others. The stage where private dwelling takes place is the *house*, which may be characterized as a “refuge” where man gathers and expresses memories that make up his personal world.

Settlement, urban space, public building, and house constitute the

environment where the various modes of dwelling are accomplished. The language of architecture is founded on these modes and consists of the archetypes of settlement, urban space, public building, and house. To recover the language of architecture, thus, we do not primarily have to recall stylistic elements but study those figures that make the archetypes manifest. The figures are concrete entities that “are” in space in a certain way and “as something.” They have to be understood as manifestations of dwelling and explained in terms of built form and organized space. The archetypes are the essences of architecture, corresponding to the names of spoken language. They appear over and over again in different contexts and are given ever new interpretations. The figures, therefore, are general as well as circumstantial and represent a setting into work of man’s lifeworld. When we say that the lifeworld is made up of memories, we intend the general and circumstantial memories of being between earth and sky, as the Greeks realized when considering the goddess *Mnemosyne*, memory, the daughter of earth and sky. Being the mother of the muses, memory was understood as the origin of art.<sup>9</sup>

Not all postmodernists, however, have grasped the nature of figurative architecture. Many lose themselves in an arbitrary play with motifs, as James Stirling does in his “meaningless” museum in Stuttgart. Others use the types as ends in themselves and thereby become victims of a new kind of abstraction, as Aldo

Rossi, who repeats the same schematic forms everywhere. It has to be emphasized that a type does not become alive before it is adapted to time and place, that is, before it is set into work. Therefore postmodernism is not only interested in what is general but in what is local. In other words, it ought to incorporate an understanding of and respect for the *genius loci*. Some postmodern architects have realized that, as did Charles Moore, who always modifies the basic forms in accordance with the place and the building task.

In spite of the present confusion, we are evidently on the way to figurative architecture. When Michael Graves published his *Buildings and Projects* in 1982, he wrote an introductory text entitled “A Case for Figurative Architecture.” There he asserted that “the Modern Movement undermined the poetic form in favor of non-figural, abstract geometries” and that “the cumulative effect of non-figurative architecture is the dismemberment of our former cultural language of architecture.” To escape from this impasse, Graves says that “it is crucial that we re-establish the thematic associations invented by our culture in order to fully allow the culture of architecture to represent the mythic and ritual aspirations of society.”<sup>10</sup>

Graves illustrates his text with a drawing that immediately appears as an inventory of architectural figures: pyramid, rotunda, tower, colonnade, and he places them within a landscape consisting of the

figures of nature: mountain and plain, rocks, trees and clouds. The drawing is echoed in the text, where we read, “All architecture before the Modern Movement sought to elaborate the themes of man and landscape. Understanding the building involves both association with natural phenomena (for example, the ground is like the floor) and anthropomorphic allusions (for example, a column is like a man).” And he concludes, “Architectural elements require distinction, one from another, in much the same way as language requires syntax; without variation among architectural elements, we will lose the anthropomorphic or figurative meaning. In this discussion . . . , an argument is made for the figural necessity of each particular element and, by extension, of architecture as a whole.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Graves tells us that the meanings of the totality man-nature are mediated by the architectural figures. Accordingly modern architecture became meaningless because it abandoned the figural dimension.

Graves’s criticism of modern architecture demands a further comment on the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Since the latter came about as a protest against certain deficiencies, it might seem to represent a break with the former. It would, however, be most unfortunate to adopt this interpretation of the situation. Unfortunate because we *need* the achievements of modern art and architecture. Which achievements, then, do I have in mind? First of all I refer to what is known as “free plan” and



“open form.”<sup>12</sup> The new “global” world demands spatial freedom, and instead of the static compositions of the past, we have experienced the creation of the open *collage*. After the second world war, however, the free plan and the open form tended to degenerate into either rigid “structuralist” patterns or to dissolve into chaotic whims. Here the architectural figures come to our rescue. Figural motifs, thus, may be used both to *mark* paths and centers within space and to *characterize* these “as something.” By means of architectural figures we may in other words express the experience of arriving somewhere. And this may be accomplished without giving up the free plan and the open form. Therefore postmodernism does not represent a break with but a further development of modernism. Hence the words of Giedion are still valid: “One does not become an architect today without having passed through the needle-eye of modern art.”

When I have referred positively to Venturi, Moore, and Graves, I do not intend that their works should be used as models. Graves interprets the types in *his* way, and we have to arrive at *our* interpretations in accordance with the local and temporal circumstances. What is essential, however, is common, and therefore postmodernism opens up for mutual understanding. We all have to employ the same original language, which is general as well as pluralistic and hence truly democratic. Therefore postmodernism is not dangerous. It only becomes

dangerous in the hands of uneducated architects. In other words, it demands that we re-establish our profession on the basis of a thorough understanding of the language of architecture. This is the challenge of the present.

#### NOTES

- 1 The need for “meaning in architecture” was asserted already in *Meaning in Architecture*, Charles Jencks and George Baird, eds. (London, 1969).
- 2 S. Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), p. 26.
- 3 I call to your attention Christopher Alexander’s concern about “pattern-languages.”
- 4 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, 1962), p. 319ff.
- 5 E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften* (1936).
- 6 See C. Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling* (New York, 1985).
- 7 This maintained by many followers of Aalto’s “organic” modernism.
- 8 See C. Norberg-Schulz, *op. cit.*
- 9 M. Heidegger: “Was heisst Denken?” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen, 1954), p. 130.
- 10 *Michael Graves Buildings and Projects 1966–1981*, K. V. Wheeler, P. Arnell, and T. Bickford, eds. (New York, 1982), p. 11ff.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 See C. Norberg-Schulz, *Roots of Modern Architecture* (Tokyo, 1985).

**Corporate landscape**, Rome, 1981. From *Michael Graves Buildings and Projects 1966–1981*.