

John Summerson  
The Case for a Theory of 'Modern' Architecture  
(1957)

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[...] The most interesting, indeed the dominating question, in a search for the modern *principia* is: where, if not in antique forms, or some equivalent substitute, is the source of unity? [...]

Bruno Zevi has investigated various recent uses of the word [organic] and in his book, *Towards an Organic Architecture*, devotes a whole chapter to 'the meaning and scope of the term organic in reference to architecture'. He does not discover any evidence of strikingly profound thought on the subject; nor does he commit himself to any precise meaning. But he does write off various spurious or out-moded interpretations and, at the end of his study he does, in a single, rather casual remark, hit what I conceive to be the nail exactly on the head. He says that the organic conception of architecture is based 'on a social idea and not a figurative [I take it he means formal] idea.'<sup>1</sup> That rather wide interpretation would, I suspect, command almost universal agreement.

Zevi throws out this comment as if its truth was pretty obvious and I suppose it is, but I want to underline the proposition and see how it relates to the picture of the developing theoretical process which I have outlined. I suggested a few moments ago that although the rationalist writers of the 18th and 19th centuries tended to exclude antiquity as the ultimate authority, antiquity remained insistently there as the *source of unity*, the focus at which the architectural design was realized. Where, I asked, if not in antique forms, can the source of unity lie? Zevi's remark points to the answer. The source of unity in modern architecture is in the social sphere, in other words in the architect's programme.

From the antique (a world of form) to the programme (a local fragment of social pattern): this suggests a swing in the architect's psychological orientation almost too violent to be credible. Yet, in theory at least, it has come about; and how it has come about could very well be demonstrated historically. First the rationalist attack on the authority of the antique; then the displacement of the classical antique by the medieval; then the introduction into medievalist authority of purely social factors (Ruskin); then the evaluation of purely vernacular architectures because of their social realism (Morris); and finally the concentration of interest on the social factors themselves and the conception of the architect's programme as the source of unity—the source not precisely of forms but of adumbrations of forms of undeniable validity. The programme as the source of unity is, so far as I can see, the one new principle involved in modern architecture. It seems to be the principle which can be

discerned through the cloud of half-truths, aperçus and analogies which is the theoretical effluent—not a very nice word, I'm afraid—of the Modern Movement.

Whether you accept this statement as a basic principle and a specifically modern principle depends upon a number of things. Mainly, there is the question, what a 'programme' is. A programme is a description of the spatial dimensions, spatial relationships and other physical conditions required for the convenient performance of specific functions. It is probably impossible to write out a satisfactory programme without a certain number of architectural relationships being suggested on the way and the character of these relationships may well be something different from the relationships in a predetermined stylistic discipline. The chief difference is that they involve a process in time. It is difficult to imagine any programme in which there is not some rhythmically repetitive pattern—whether it is a manufacturing process, the curriculum of a school, the domestic routine of a house, or simply the sense of repeated movement in a circulation system. Of course this pattern does not dictate a corresponding pattern in the architect's plan or anything crude like that but it does sanction relationships which are different from those sanctioned by the static, axially grouped dominants and subordinates of the classical tradition—different, but carrying an equivalent authority. The resultant unity can, I think, quite reasonably be described as a biological or organic unity, because it is the unity of a process. Moholy-Nagy<sup>2</sup> and after him Giedion<sup>3</sup> would see it as a space-time unity and you will recall Giedion's brilliant analogies between modern architecture and the concepts of modern physics on the one hand and the Picasso revolution in modern painting (involving the concept of simultaneity) on the other. Not that such analogies prove anything; and there is always the danger that they may seem to prove far too much; they are phantasms of the *Zeitgeist*. The actual reason why the principle embodied here is new is this. It is only in the past half-century or so that the programme has ceased to be evaluated merely *quantitatively* and has come to be evaluated *qualitatively*. This has to do with the fact that programmes have become more complex, more challenging and therefore more susceptible to qualitative generalization and evaluation. It has also to do with very much wider issues involved in the social revolutions and re-orientations of our time.

If we accept this principle—unity deriving from the programme—as truly a basic principle of modern architecture, how does it look when lined up with the inherited principles which we found that Le Corbusier had re-illuminated in *Vers une Architecture*? Here comes the crux of the whole matter. The conceptions which arise from a preoccupation with the programme have got, at some point, to crystallize into a final form and by the time the architect reaches that point he has to bring to his conception a weight of judgment, a sense of authority and conviction which clinches the whole design, causes the impending relationships to close into a visually comprehensible whole. He may have extracted from the programme a set of interdependent relationships adding up to a unity of the biological kind, but he still has to face up to the ordering of a vast number of variables, and how he does this is a question. There is no common theoretical agreement as to what happens or should happen at that point. There is a hiatus. One may even be justified in speaking of a 'missing architectural language'. Gropius<sup>4</sup> has stated the difficulty as the lack of an

'optical "key" ... as an objective common denominator of design'—something which would provide 'the impersonal basis as a prerequisite for general understanding', which would serve 'as the controlling agent within the creative act'. That is a precise description of the functions served by antiquity in the classical centuries! The dilemma is really an enlargement of the flaw already apparent in mid-18th-century theory—the flaw that while antiquity was eliminated as an absolute, nothing was introduced which took its place as a universally accredited language of architectural form.

The flaw seems now to have widened into a veritable dilemma. Can it be resolved? Well, I can think of two possible approaches to its resolution. The first involves an extension of the rationalist principle into the sphere of engineering and the second involves a reconsideration of the geometrical basis and limitations of architecture.

Let us take the engineering question. The engineer is the heir to the basic tenet of the old rationalism—economy of means in construction. So long as traditional methods prevailed the architect could keep his eye on this ball, or at least persuade himself that he was doing so; but with the development of the science of the strength of materials and the application of mathematics to design he was rapidly overpassed by the engineer. The engineer ran away with the rationalist ball. It is no use pretending that we can lop off this issue as a stray limb of the rationalist process which has got outside the scope of architecture, because if we let the rationalist principle go modern theory collapses in a heap. No. It is necessary to declare that no theory of modern architecture can be logically complete which does not postulate the collaboration, immediate or remote, of architect and engineer; and here collaboration must stand for the design of components in factories as well as the personal achievements of a Nervi or a Candela.

But let us be clear about what the engineer's role really is and how different it is from that of the architect. For the architect, the source of unity for his design is, I have suggested, the programme. The engineer seeks unity in another way and another direction altogether. He seeks it within one component—even if it is a very complex component comprising the whole sectional trace of a large building. And it is a unity of interdependent calculable issues adding up to a total whose criterion is performance. His search for finality and the architect's are as wide apart as they can be. It would be altogether too facile to suggest that they are even complementary. Nevertheless, a whole view of architecture must necessarily extend to this latest metamorphosis of the rationalist process in the hands of the engineer.

The idea can be and sometimes is upheld that the engineer, as a result of his enforcement of the rationalist principle, invents forms and formal arrangements which the architect then absorbs into his vocabulary of expression and uses, sometimes in a strictly engineering way—and sometimes not.<sup>5</sup> This certainly happens. But the engineer is concerned strictly with components and although he may contribute significant inventions he cannot contribute a continuously related system of inventions—i.e. a language.

Thus the engineering issue does not wholly resolve the dilemma of modern architectural theory, and so we turn to the ancient axiom that architecture is fundamentally concerned with the regular solids and simple ratios. It is getting to

have an old-fashioned look, this axiom, especially in an age which has discovered geometries other than Euclidean. Moholy-Nagy was eager to go behind the axiom to 'biological assumptions'. Mr Banham, in an article of 1955,<sup>6</sup> has offered us the attractive red-herring (I think it's a herring) of topology. In the field of practice, unfamiliar and complex forms are cropping up. Candela has built a concrete church in which all the surfaces are hyperbolic paraboloids. But surely the axiom stands as an over-all absolute necessity. Even if plans wriggle in the wildest of 'free' curves, even if engineering science introduces forms of great precision but visually unreadable complexity, we shall always seek to read through the complex to the simple, to seek the assurance of those simplicities which must be implied even when they are not stated. Very well. On this principle of geometrical absolutes it is possible to erect systems or disciplines to guide the architect towards that final ordering of form which he must achieve. Of these systems the most celebrated is Le Corbusier's *Modulor*. But the *Modulor*, like any other apparatus of the kind, is a system of control, not of expression (Le Corbusier says this as clearly as it could be said). It is not a language. And if I say that in my opinion the erection of proportional disciplines—purely intellectual contrivances—does bring the *principia* of modern theory into satisfactory relationship to each other and to actuality, it may well be objected that this theory excludes almost everything that has been most valued in the art of architecture as a means of expression in the past three thousand years. In answer to that, I have two things to say. The first is that if you accept the principle that the programme is the source of unity, the crucible of the architect's creative endeavour, you cannot postulate another principle, another crucible, at the other end of the designing process to satisfy the architect's craving for conspicuous self-expression. You cannot have it both ways. You certainly cannot have two sources of unity. Either the programme is or it is not the source. It is part of my case for a theory of modern architecture that it is the source. If you do not accept this case, I think you must consider whether, after all, architectural theory does not stand very much where it stood in 1920, or 1800, or even 1750, and whether the position of an architect who is concerned about expression or style is not that of a man feeling his way back to classicism or neo-classicism, or, to put the finest possible point on it, crypto-Neoclassicism.

The second thing that I would say is that it is quite possible that the missing language will remain missing, and that in fact the slightly uncomfortable feeling which some of us have that it ought to exist is nothing but the scar left in the mind by the violent swing which has taken place in the lifetime of one generation from an old order of principles to a new.

I have tried to demonstrate that in the light of all that has been written on architecture in the past thirty years a specifically modern theory of architecture does exist and that it exists not as an arbitrary invention of our time but as a new stage in the long evolution of theory since those forgotten men whom even Vitruvius knew as the Ancients. Modern theory is part of the history of ideas. It is, I believe, only as the history of ideas that it can be taught. The main thing is to get that history right and to get it clear.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Zevi, *Towards an Organic Architecture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1950), p. 76.

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<sup>2</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture*, (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, inc. , 1932), p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 432.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Gropius, *The Scope of Total Architecture*, (New York: Harper, 1955), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this point by an engineer, see Ove Arup, 'Modern Architecture: the Structural Fallacy', in *The Listener*, 7 July 1955.

<sup>6</sup> Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism," in *Architectural Review*, December 1955.