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An Analysis of the Art, or How to Distinguish Good Architecture from Mediocre Architecture (1771-77)

Translated by Lyn Lemaire


After having covered most of the important elements of Architecture and the Sculptural ornaments relative to Architecture, here we will offer some new, and no less interesting, observations, of which the object is to treat in such a manner as to recognize, in the aspect of our French Buildings, the true beauty that inhabits the most famous of these, and the mediocrities of which the others are yet not exempt. We will put forth the precise idea which all of the various components of Architecture that we have just defined should produce in the Spectators' imagination. Finally, we will discuss the different means of combining them with discernment in our productions: a method that can lead to the sort of imperceptible nuance which escapes more vulgar observers, but which the learned Artist teaches us to grasp and which the enlightened Amateur leads us to applaud. Let there be no doubt, it is with the help of these imperceptible nuances that one is able to make a real distinction between two building projects that are of the same type, yet appear to be different, by favoring in the one a sublime, noble, elevated style, and in the other a naive, simple, true character; distinct, particular expressions that one must not confuse, that are not synonymous, that need to be felt, then discussed, and that contribute more than one might ordinarily imagine to attributing to each building its own distinct character.[…]

Of the Admiration that Architecture Can Cause

An Architecture could be called essentially admirable which combines all of the different degrees of perfection of the Art. Few edifices offer as many marvels because most of the beautiful aspects of Architecture, with the exception of its precepts, are considered by most young Architects to belong to a beauty of convention, which depends on the particular taste of the Artist; such that, by this independence, they have trouble convincing others to find their productions truly admirable: in effect, in order for an edifice to be thus esteemed, it would have to receive unanimous suffrage. Whereas this degree of superiority rarely belongs to Architecture taken in general; it is hardly found except in a few of its parts considered separately. For example, the decoration of a salon, the masonry [appareil] of a building, the exterior of one or several apartments may be cause for admiration, because the cause of this admiration is, so to speak, independent of the beauty of the edifice as a whole. […]

In order that an edifice, or rather, in order for Architecture to be found truly admirable, the beauty of the arrangement [ordonnance] of the exterior elements of a building, the layout [commodité] of the interiors, and the solidity of its construction, must not belie each other, and these three objects must appear united in a way that leaves absolutely nothing to be desired. Undoubtedly, what we seem to require is not without difficulty, because in general the particular knowledge associated with each of these three objects has always constituted three separate objects of study for some of our Architects; and in order for the arrangements, layout, and
construction of a public Edifice, a Palace, or a Hotel to be such as we desire it, one must first, during one's studies, do extensive research on each of its parts, then attempt to arrive at their perfect conciliation; their decoration must imitate, as closely as possible, the beauty and perfection of that of the Greeks and Romans, the solidity and lightness of that of the Arabs; and finally the convenience and charm of our French layouts.

In the end, in order for the decoration, distribution, and masonry of a building to be a truly admirable example, each of its own type, it must not be too servile in its imitation; in order for the different parts of the Art to earn this title, these three branches of the Architecture must bear a certain character of originality that distinguishes them from the ordinary. In order to achieve this, let us explain separately what we believe to be understood by an Architecture that, in its style, bears this character of originality of which we speak.

Of Originality in Architecture

It is said: This composition is new, the style of its arrangement is original, has nothing common or vulgar about it, while in its decoration one notes that the Artist's creative genius was able to surpass the limits of the Art, without nonetheless taking too much distance from received precepts, with the objective of spreading interesting Architectural forms throughout its production, and certain allegories in its ornaments; but these must be drawn from the motif that first gave place to the edifice. That whose movement observed in the distribution of exterior bodies, is in concert with the pyramidal parts of the façades: that which, having nothing trivial about it, is demonstrated in the character of its Architecture, a grave but noble arrangement; pleasant, but simple; grand, but never gigantic; these whose forms are strong also have the right to be admired, when these forms are applied in a manner analogous to the type of edifice: perfection, it is true, that one rarely encounters in our buildings, even as most of them are composed of architectural elements commonly used in decorations that are the most widely approved, but that, often laid out without discernment, without taste, in a word, in a manner opposite of that which we propose, present only a very imperfect arrangement.

The Meaning of Alteration in Architecture

It is said: This Architecture seems altered (when one notices several essential mutilations of its elements, which do not seem to be authorized by any legitimate excuse). It is not that one cannot remove a few elements of a cornice in order to render it more simple, or to give less height to an entableture; but to engage a column, penetrate its capitals, level a fanlight, convert a frame into a molding or, finally, recut a base without necessity, or because one is afraid to disturb the public paths on the outside, or the gathering spaces on the inside of a building, is to flaunt an uncertainty that one must absolutely protect oneself from, lest one be required to change one’s plan or style of arrangements. Architecture is also called altered which, by negligence or lacking knowledge of the principles of the Art, is missing several parts essential to the expression of order that presides over the façades, such as the triglyphs in the Dorian friezes, the modillions for the Corinthian cornices, the fluting often necessary in the shafts of columns; oversights that can not be tolerated and which, though often practiced by our predecessors, cannot serve as examples for our Students, the merit of the Art consisting not in the imitation of mediocre things, but of that which has been accepted by the authority of the time and the suffrage of Connoisseurs.
Otherwise, one abandons oneself to licentiousness; elements are flattened which should be in relief; futility is preferred to reasoning, or, on the contrary, a poor arrangement is presented, devoid of verisimilitude, where one should have produced something divine.