

The New Criterion

Features June 2018

The future of classicism

by Clive Aslet

On the state and prospect of classical architecture.

Classicism is a broad river that has run through Western architecture for two-and-a-half millennia. A generation ago it seemed that the stream had reduced to a trickle. Only a small phalanx of recondite architects really understood the classical language of architecture; they were generally employed by private patrons whose social as well as architectural ideas were not at the cutting edge. And yet now, if not quite in full spate, the river has recaptured a degree of vigor. The flow has quickened, the banks are beginning to brim. What has happened, and what does the future hold?

Since this represents a revival, a word should be said on this subject at the outset. Revivals are a constant—indeed inevitable—theme of classical architecture, to the point of being almost a defining feature. Even Greek architecture, later regarded as the *fons et origo* of the classical system, evolved out of—and harked back to—an ancient tradition, now lost. It may have been deliberately archaic, using past forms beyond their natural sell-by date. To engineers, post-and-lintel construction, which forms the basis of all Greek architecture, is inferior to the arch, which can be built cheaper, using smaller pieces of stone. And yet the Greeks cannot have used it in ignorance of the arch; arches were being used elsewhere in the ancient world and travelers must have seen them. Trabeation had a meaning for the Greeks, perhaps rooted in earlier phases of their culture.

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The classical orders—Doric, Ionic, Corinthian—are similarly mysterious. We cannot be sure what they conveyed to the Greek mind.

During the Enlightenment, the Jesuit theorist Laugier believed that classical architecture had developed from nature itself and

mankind's primitive needs. A Doric temple such as the Parthenon expressed the same building principles as a hut made from tree trunks; a more sophisticated society had substituted marble for wood, but vestigial traces of the timber origins could still be seen. But one only has to look at the

broadly contemporary Temple of Apollo Epicurius at Bassae, on its Arcadian hilltop, to realize that such rationalist explanations do not suffice. At Bassae, the interior Ionic order is attached to spurs or fins set at an angle to the walls of the cella, the focus of which is the earliest known use of the Corinthian order. This does not, however, appear on a screen of columns, but rather on a single column, in a central position in front of the sanctuary. Was it somehow related to a representation of the deity within? The meaning is lost. We can imagine, though, that the form developed from an earlier tradition, whose symbolism would have been obvious to the community. An early instance of reinterpretation—or revival? The Parthenon itself can be construed as revivalist, since it was built as an act of national reaffirmation after the buildings on the Acropolis were destroyed by the Persians in 480 B.C. After the destruction, the sacred stones of the old structures were gathered up and buried before the new temples were built. The new buildings were rooted in the past. Classicism always looks back as it moves forward.

Every subsequent phase of classicism after the Greek period was to some extent a revival, invoking the associations of a golden age. The Romans borrowed the architectural clothes of Greece. In the eighth century, Charlemagne, declaring himself Holy Roman Emperor, sought to revive the glory of Rome. The Carolingian gatehouse at the Abbey of Lorsch, in Germany, may not look immediately like the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome because it is faced in red and white tiles and is surmounted by a pitched roof with a bell turret. But materials—or even appearances—are not the point. Its creator was restating an idea as best he could—reaffirming a continuity. This attitude can even be detected in the Middle Ages. To our eyes, a twelfth-century cathedral looks radically different from a Roman basilica. But the monk in the choir stall may hardly have noticed the structural distinction created by the use of pointed arches and rib vaults. A pointed arch was still an arch—*arcus*, in Latin; he used no other word. Just as painters showed ancient heroes and emperors dressed in the fashions of their own day and place, so, it would seem, the architectural world had no sense of anachronism or stylistic development. An image of the glory of Rome was present to the mind of some writers, although it was more likely to be the Rome of the Emperor Constantine than of Augustus.

Since the Renaissance, a more scholarly approach has prevailed. Architects have been specific about the periods they were reviving: Palladio for Inigo Jones and Lord Burlington, the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian in Croatia and the newly discovered frescoes at Pompeii for Robert Adam, the purity of Greece for the followers of Winckelmann, and so on. It ended with a grand battle of the styles between Renaissance-inspired classicists and morally convinced Gothicists in the nineteenth century. After that, the age of innocence was well and truly over: history had been sliced up into discreet phases, which shared no common point of view and were indeed at war. Recently the war against classicism has been waged by modernists rather than Gothic revivalists.

A favorite criticism made by modernist architects is that the work of the modern classicists is pastiche. They mean not that it is a hodgepodge of different styles, or an exact quotation (both of which are definitions of pastiche), but that the McCrum Yard at Eton College, in Berkshire, or the

Boardwalk of Disney World, in Florida, are derivative and revivalist. But of course their architects—respectively John Simpson and Robert A. M. Stern—are using an established vocabulary and reviving certain forms that have fallen out of common usage; that’s what classicists do. Indeed, it is the essence of classicism. But they are applying these forms to new purposes, and in so doing producing buildings that look quite different from those of Ancient Rome, Renaissance Florence, or the Beaux-Arts cities of the Gilded Age. This has also always happened. The Romans invented the triumphal arch; it took the Renaissance to invent the balustrade. In the twentieth century, Giles Gilbert Scott applied the principles and vocabulary of classicism to the different versions of the red telephone box. Today, Craig Hamilton uses them for a swimming-pool-cum-gym.

Classicism is now undergoing one of its periodic revivals. There are also, as I have hinted above, many classicisms to revive. The classical river was not always as pure as previous generations believed. One of the distinctive features of the revival now taking place is the weirdness of some of the precedents being quoted.

But this is to anticipate. What happened to classicism after the 1950s? I can answer this, from a British perspective, from experience. When I began writing about architecture in the 1970s, the river of classicism had dwindled to a stream. Asked to give a series of lectures to the Architectural Association around 1980, I took twentieth-century classicism as my theme. I hoped to prove that a tradition continued beneath the radar, that the river was flowing underground. I marveled at the “Swedish Grace” of Stockholm City Hall and Gunnar Asplund; I traveled to the island of Funen to see Carl Petersen’s Faaborg Museum—a gem of Nordic classicism, completed during the First World War; I exhausted myself tramping around the Giorgio de Chirico-like monuments bestowed on Italy by Mussolini’s regime; I looked at the Trocadero in Paris and the classically derived Art Deco of New York and Washington, D.C. I explored (through photographs) the work of Jože Plečnik in Prague and of Vladimir Shchuko in Moscow. But wherever I looked, the thread appeared to have been broken in the 1950s or soon after. Such works as existed appeared analogous to the last gasps of the Gothic style, observed as a death rattle in some interesting but obscure seventeenth-century buildings whose creators wanted to express their religious or dynastic continuity, or had perhaps failed to notice that they were out of date. If I had been able to travel more widely around the United States, I would probably have seen more examples of civic architecture in the deeply rooted Greek Revival style; with so many porches to repair and build, a good living is to be had from manufacturing columns. In Britain, the classical landscape was, by the 1950s, as shattered as some of the battlefields that Allied troops had lately

Even before 1939, the classical river had become pretty turgid. There were few practitioners of distinction. Even the great Lutyens, than whom no architect more beguiles, was crushed by the expectations of commercial clients such as the Midland Bank. His rivals, like Sir Edwin Cooper, were elephantine. As yet the Modern Movement had barely scratched the surface of national life. But when the Second World War finally came to an end, an exhausted country wanted something new. There had been nothing very lovely about the classicism of the 1930s; it did not provide a point of departure. So when Churchill was thrown

out as Prime Minister, with him went the imperial vision that had, architecturally—for obvious reasons of association—been Roman. In his account of the Profumo debacle, *An English Affair*, Richard Davenport-Hines remembers the replacement of the sedate Regency carriage ride on the eastern edge of Hyde Park with a divided highway, on which the town palaces of the old order had given way to the Playboy Club and the Hilton Hotel: “My father loved the swift new Park Lane as a reminder that England was finished with slowcoaches.”

Sadly, this fury of activity took place when British architecture was at a low ebb. There was a shortage of building materials after the Second World War, a shortage of investment, and a dearth of talent. Before 1939, Continental modernism—the style of Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier—had scarcely taken hold in Britain. Clients and the public barely knew what to make of it. Few good architects made it to the top. For speculative office blocks, the lion’s share of commissions went to Colonel “Richard” (in fact Reubin) Seifert, a Swiss, pipe-smoking, Rolls-Royce-driving hustler, able to squeeze the maximum floor area out of any given site, thereby boosting rents. Little joy was to be had from these sub-Corbusian structures: wind tunnels at ground level and uncomfortable within. (Believe me on this: I worked in one for years.) Completed in 1965, Seifert’s thirty-four-story Centre Point, in London’s West End, scandalized a nation anxious about the housing shortage by being allowed to stand empty for nine years; the millionaire owner was cynically waiting for rents to rise. The demolition of the magnificent Euston Arch—the gateway to the Victorian Euston Station, which was itself torn down for a dismal new station surmounted by an office block—became a byword for the anti-conservationist rapacity of developers. There’s now a proposal to rebuild it.

A more noble, though equally misguided, mission was pursued by the council planners who wished to cleanse Britain of its slums. Nowadays these same “slums” would be converted to bijou residences, but the prevailing wisdom of the 1960s was that these rotten terraced streets, with privies at the end

of the back garden, should be razed. In their place arose new blocks of flats, with electric appliances and proper bathrooms, surrounded by communal parks. Nobody, however, had thought to ask the opinion of the tenants of the properties that would be demolished. They proved to be inconveniently attached to their grubby terraces, where housewives could chat over garden fences while hanging out the washing. In the new towers, families with young children couldn’t get prams and bicycles into lifts or let their children play unsupervised outside. In any case, the lifts, before long, had broken down and smelled of urine. Vulnerable tenants became terrorized by gangs. How appropriate it seemed that Ernő Goldfinger, the architect of the prominent and nationally reviled Trellick Tower, finished in 1972, should have lent his name to Ian Fleming’s villain. By then, opposition to modernism had already crystallized, following the partial collapse of

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a tower block called Ronan Point in the impoverished London borough of Newham, in 1968. Four years later, the leader of Newcastle City Council, T. Dan Smith, and the council's architect John Poulson were sent to prison: their reign of aesthetic terror, during which swathes of Newcastle's elegant Georgian center were sacrificed to make way for monstrosities, had not only been architecturally pitiless but corrupt. These were dirty decades for architecture. Here was no soil in which classicism could flourish.

And yet, with the tenacity of the poppy, which flowers on waste ground and whose seed can remain dormant for dozens if not hundreds of years, it survived. A very small number of architects kept the sacred flame alight. They included, most famously, Raymond Erith, though the opportunities that he had to build were for the most part limited to country houses, Oxbridge colleges, and Inns of Court—erudite perhaps, but out of the mainstream. Erith had, of necessity, to apply his genius to making grand statements out of small buildings, such as the Provost's Lodgings at Queen's College, Oxford, where broad stretches of unbroken masonry above rustication give an effect of monumentality, unexpected in a quite modest undertaking. Frustration could make him perverse: his brilliant façade of Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford, derived from one of the gates in the ancient walls of Rome, condemns students to the use of a windowless first-floor passage (lying behind another run of monumentally blank masonry). As a rationalist, Erith cherished the hope that classicism could be reconciled with modernism, in a synthesis that would humanize the one while offering a future for the other. This was not to be. Clients wanting to commission classical buildings were, at this time, apt to be tweedy and unreconstructed: certainly they provided the backbone of Francis Johnson's practice in Yorkshire. But with taxes on investment income running at 90 percent, opportunities were limited. Where country houses were desired, they often replaced older homes on a scale that was now too large to run. After the oil crisis of the early 1970s, most people's dreams did not extend beyond a suburban home near a golf course, with low maintenance costs and an accessible train service to London.

The picture changed dramatically in the next decade. Tax rates were slashed under the Thatcher regime. There was a heady rush of prosperity, typified by the comedian Harry Enfield in a 1988 skit as "loadsamoney." The City of London boomed after the liberalization known as Big Bang. Shooting again became a popular activity, and country houses on attractive estates with sporting rights became fashionable. Old ones were restored and new ones were built. Raymond Erith's surviving partner Quinlan Terry was on hand to help. His love of classical ornament—urns, finials, and the orders—suited the age; old ways of life, which it had seemed would be lost forever, were being rediscovered with panache. Terry's example showed that modern stone carvers were just as skilled as those of the Georgian period and, contrary to popular belief, could still be found, at a price.

In 1984, the Prince of Wales addressed the Royal Institute of British Architects at Hampton Court on the occasion of the organization's hundred-fiftieth anniversary. Rather than stroking their self-esteem, he laid into a profession that had become distinguished for its arrogant disregard of public

opinion. He famously likened the proposed extension to the National Gallery to “a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend.” His subsequent championing of classicism helped rehabilitate it, while strengthening the impression that it was a style for the elite. Later in the decade, his intervention helped to defeat a scheme for office towers on a site next to St. Paul’s Cathedral, in the City of London, and to replace it with one by the classicist John Simpson (eventually executed using his ground plan but not architecture).

The Prince’s engagement precipitated a new Battle of the Styles—modernism versus traditionalism—which is still being fought by some elderly warriors, such as Richard Rogers. Classicists, led by Quinlan Terry, thought of themselves as the Church Militant. In the end, doctrinaire modernism died of natural causes, being overtaken by the exuberance of postmodernism. Less was no longer more; ornament ruled. Classicism was referenced, though in the form of witty quotations: postmodernists did not seek to revive it as a complete and consistent language. To true classicists, this was anathema. Nevertheless, by helping to soften the previously entrenched opposition to decoration of any kind, postmodernism made more classicism possible.

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It can now be said that the fight is pretty well over. The plucky classicists who battled through the 1980s on scraps of commissions are now firmly established figures, at the top of their profession, with full order books.

Younger figures, such as Alireza Sagharchi,

have inherited the peace; they have identified the niche that they will inhabit, both in Britain and overseas (Sagharchi has recently built a large villa in Kazakhstan). They live in a world of pluralism. Classicism is one style among other styles—but it is a valid style, recognized as such by almost everyone except some retardataire planners, whose job gives them the luxury of remaining true to the old modernist faith. But even they can usually be circumvented. Harmony reigns. Increasingly, it is a classical harmony.

Ideas of world domination have been foregone. What is appropriate to the Queen’s Gallery at Buckingham Palace, for example, has not been adopted by the developers of the many new luxury apartment buildings that have sprouted along the length of the Thames. But classicism dominates in some areas. It has become the obvious style for commemoration, as can be seen from the work of Liam O’Connor, which includes the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire; the Commonwealth Memorial Gates in London; the Bomber Command Memorial in London; and the D-Day Memorial now under construction in Normandy. There are country houses and town palaces galore. Classical architects are favored for historic buildings because of their sympathy for the old work; this makes it easier for them to find a path through the planning system. Georgian remains popular as the expected style for a country house; clients have grown up with it as an ideal and it evokes a high-status way of life. As has ever been the case, French styles are popular with new money, which may come from overseas.

It is vulgar to talk about money, perhaps, but it is inescapable. Any major building project involves expenditure. For architects who, like many classicists, rely on private patronage, the fact that there are so many more extremely rich people in the world, quite a number with homes in or around London, is a wonderful thing. The opportunities presented by the colonization of London's most prestigious streets by families wanting to live not merely in the manner of the Georgian, Victorian, and Edwardian builders, but on a significantly increased scale, are prodigious. What have always been large houses are being enlarged with swimming pools, gyms, and cinema rooms, often provided in new basements. Recently I saw Cherry Hill, a house on the Wentworth Estate, an area of expensive homes in Virginia Water, near Windsor. Built in the 1930s, this was a glamorous piece of architecture by Oliver Hill, in the Streamline Moderne style; it was built for Katherine Hannah Newton, whose wealth derived from her family's important heavy-industrial interests in the north of England. The house was originally called Holthanger; the name changed after it was bought by John Hay Whitney, then the U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom, who renamed it after the Cherry Hills Country Club in Denver, Colorado, where he used to play golf with Dwight Eisenhower. Whitney hung his art collection there but felt no need to enlarge it. Now, however, the house has been almost doubled in size by a property developer; life at the top end operates on a vastly inflated scale, in comparison to that of sixty years ago. Architects are the beneficiaries.

So there are jobs for classicists, and—strange as it may seem—modern life favors this always backward-looking style. While, in the 1980s, Quinlan Terry struggled to convince a skeptical public that the craftsmanship still existed to produce top-quality classical work, nowadays that work is becoming cheaper to commission. While the best carving is finished by hand, much of the drudgery which leads up to that point can be performed by computer-controlled machinery. Classicism depends on repetition and repetition is the stock-in-trade of computers. In the design process, detail that is hand drawn can be replicated *ad infinitum* on the computer screen; if the proportions remain constant, detail can also be enlarged or reduced. These are wonders of the New World; they have arrived at a time when the skills of the Old World are often still in commission. French decorating firms have retained all of the craft knowledge that was available to Mewès and Davis, builders of the London Ritz, at the turn of the twentieth century. In 2017, the Georgian Group celebrated its eightieth anniversary with an exhibition entitled “Splendour! Art in Living Craftsmanship.” It demonstrated that the opulence of the Georgian mansion is not a thing of the past; the luxuries of craftsmanship are still available, either from old firms that have soldiered on or from new ones that are satisfying new needs.

So classicism has a space to occupy. This being so, the number of architects who are trained in it will increase. The generation that emerged in the 1980s virtually had to teach themselves; now, however, they are teaching others. But will it ever break out of the gilded cage which the rest of the profession, and the world at large, is happy for it to inhabit? I believe so. Because the big future lies not in the country house, but in the city.

Cities are one of the big issues facing the planet. Hundreds of new cities are expected to be created across Africa and Asia in the course of the next century. Researchers believe that, if current population trends continue, Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria, could develop into a vast, sprawling metropolis of over eighty-five million people. Niger has the highest birth rate in Africa; Niamey, its capital, is expected to explode in size, from less than one million people to forty-six million by 2100. Unfortunately, the urban expansion that has already taken place across the developing world has been ramshackle. Much of it has taken the form of shanty towns, where groups of shacks are crowded together with little sanitation or governance. This is brewing an obvious problem. The example of the West is, alas, little more encouraging. Much new development takes the form of suburban sprawl, which is wasteful of precious land, and has little character of its own. Young people are frustrated because they cannot break out of parental nests; the elderly feel isolated. And yet the pressure to build more housing—for reasons of immigration, increased life expectancy, and the creation of more households due to divorce—will increase, not abate. The need for master-planning has never been greater.

Master-planning is not the exclusive preserve of the classical movement. But following the public disgust at the failure of the tower blocks of the mid-twentieth century (in Britain, Grenfell Tower, a tower in North Kensington which burned in 2017 in a

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catastrophe apparently caused by the attachment of cladding intended to remedy some original defects of the specification, has become a *cause célèbre*), the Corbusian vision is dead. So modernism has borrowed the language of classicism: there is now hardly a wafer to put between Foster + Partners and Prince Charles. Both advocate sustainable neighborhoods, which have strong senses of local identity, and where people can walk, bicycle, or use public transport; communal streets, where neighbors meet each other going in and out of local shops, are good, selfish motorcars bad. But the visual results will be different. Modernism is not naturally local—it's international. Nor is it human in scale—it favors the big, the spectacular, the mass-produced. But classicism has for centuries been making the towns and cities that—in Britain at least—house prices suggest people most want to live in. Its principles are universal, being based on the human form. But the classical language has dialects that differ from place to place. It is comfortable with traditional building technologies; this makes it particularly suited to less prosperous parts of the globe. Here is demand, on an epic scale, and here, too, the solution. It is appropriate that classicism should occupy a niche—or as one might term it, an aedicule. But there could be a great destiny for practitioners who climb.

Will more do so? There is now an established school of traditional architecture at the University of Notre Dame, in Indiana. This summer in London, a summer school will serve as the precursor to a graduate program in traditional architecture that will be offered by the University of Buckingham in 2020. In time, there may be an undergraduate course, too. The first wave of classical revivalists after the Second World War were necessarily a stubborn bunch, who refused to be bullied by the

orthodoxies of modernism and only prospered after many decades in the wilderness. The next generation will have it easy, by comparison. They will be the inheritors of hard-won freedoms, to the benefit of the world.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 36 Number 10 , on page 23

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