Architectural Principles in the Age of Fraud

Why so many architects pretend to be philosophers and don't care how buildings look

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Architecture, Philosophy and the Obfuscatory Turn

… and thou shalt have no other gods but these three: Chaos, Clouds and Blabbering.

Aristophanes[1]

The dominant role that obfuscation and philosophical posturing came to play in architectural discussions and writings during the twentieth century is one of the least studied aspects of the revolutionary changes that have shaken architecture for the past hundred years. The phenomenon became particularly vehement in the final decades of the last century, and it is fully appropriate to talk about the Obfuscatory Turn in architectural thinking during the era. This book is an attempt to contribute to the examination of this phenomenon, its manifestations and origins. Its aim is to describe and analyze the ways in which architects and architectural academics misemployed philosophy, philosophical works and philosophical arguments in order to advocate their approaches to architectural design. By "misemployment" I mean efforts that clearly indicate the poor understanding of philosophical sources, the miscomprehension of the arguments or conceptual distinctions on which they rely, the use of philosophical terminology without content or straightforward attempts to bamboozle readers, colleagues and the general public with philosophical terminology. These tendencies, I argue, are not mere incidents—rather, in important ways, they are constitutive of the profession that we call "architecture" today. They reflect many (prominent) architects' efforts to restructure the profession and its aims in accordance with their career aims, commercial and psychological needs, often in opposition to the interests of their clients or the general public, or even the long-term interests of their profession itself. While the resulting depiction

hardly gives reasons for enthusiasm about the world of contemporary architecture, one should not forget that during the same period other fields of the humanities have also suffered from similar phenomena. Architecture cannot be exempted from general trends dominant in a society.

The origins of the phenomenon go back at least to the 1920s and the theoretical positioning of the protagonists of the nascent modernist movement. This is the topic of the first chapter of this book. Modernist architects turned to the German philosophy of history in order justify their core claim that architecture should be appropriate to its time. This claim was vital for modernists in order to dismiss alternative approaches to design, such as Classicism or neo-Gothic architecture. Theories about the spirit of the time, *Zeitgeist*, on which modernist architects such as Walter Gropius or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe relied were part of the belief, dominant in the German cultural context of the era, that spirits of collective entities such as epochs, eras, cultures, nations, races and similar determine the creativity of individuals who belong to these collectives.[2] (We shall see that modernists outside Germany accepted this assumption only with some delay.) The major problem with this view, that the proponents of modernist architecture simply decided to overlook, was that faith in such spiritual substances was incompatible with the materialist worldview based on modern science. Modernists' Modernism was, one could thus say, anti-modern in its core assumptions. Modern scientific worldview has nothing to say about spiritual forces that belong to eras, historical or social contexts.[*] It was precisely because

* This modern, materialist, perspective could be, for instance, the view that the mental states, the decisions or the creativity of historical figures, including architects, are biological phenomena, that biological phenomena are chemical and that chemical states ultimately result from interactions between physical particles. On this account, social influences (economy, tradition, style, fashion) can spread only by means that can have a physical description, such as interactions between individuals. Consequently, even if the majority of architects design in the same style during an era, one cannot say that that style is exclusively appropriate for the time. Simply, there is no force that would underwrite the claim that a specific style is exclusively appropriate for an era. If someone makes such a claim, this can only mean that he or she associates a certain style with the given era. This leaves architects free to design in the style that they and their clients prefer. If they design in a style that one does not associate with their era, one needs to revise one's associations and not to condemn architects.

they subscribed to anti-modern intellectual agendas and opposed the materialist perspectives of modern science that German philosophers or historians of the era advocated the view that spirits and communal substances exercise causal impact on history. This paradox about the anti-modern nature of the ideology of architectural Modernism illustrates a common characteristic of architects' engagements with philosophy. It reflects a pattern that we shall see repeated over and over again through the book. Often, the main reason why architects engage with works of philosophers is to utilize them as support for their own agendas. Their aim is not to achieve new insights. They do not seek to develop further or apply theories of philosophers. It would also be quite wrong to expect that they derive their approaches to design or architectural agendas from the philosophical positions they claim to endorse. Rather, for the past century philosophy has been used by architects mainly in order to legitimize their design agendas. These design agendas do not necessarily have much to do with the philosophical positions that architects invoke in order to justify them. It should therefore not be surprising that in the 1970s, when the failure of modernist architecture came to be openly recognized, its theoretical or philosophical deficiencies hardly ever came to be discussed. Nobody blamed German philosophers or historians for its failure. No effort was made to establish the theoretical errors that produced the aesthetic inadequacies of Modernism.

The 1970s are particularly important for our discussion here since this was the decade when the aesthetic failure of modernist architecture became obvious to the general public. Comparisons of newly-built hectares of glass boxes and concrete bunkers with older architecture became increasingly painful. During that decade, the rift between architects and the general public was sealed and it has never healed till our present day. Even those who believed that architecture should express its time ought to have found it difficult to believe that an architecture so unloved in its time can be its time's authentic expression. Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to our House* is just one of many books that address the phenomenon. Today, there are web-pages and social media groups created specifically as a result of non-architects' efforts to understand the reasons for the ugliness of modernist architecture. At the moment I am writing these lines, a simple internet search that combines words "modern architecture" and "ugly" gives about 2.5 million sites where this combination of words occurs.

For our discussion here it is significant that the massive rejection of modernist architecture by the general public coincides in time, and I will argue in this book that it explains, another phenomenon: the rise of the Obfuscatory Turn. It was in the 1970s that architects and architectural academics massively started using obfuscation in their writings and discussions. Nothing similar can be found in the preceding decades of modernist optimism. Inept attempts to philosophize suddenly started to dominate architectural theory precisely in the moment when architects and academics would have been expected to articulate a clear response to the failure of the modernist project. This cannot be an accidental coincidence. For reasons explained later in the book, architects as a profession had no other choice but to continue to design modernist architecture even after its aesthetic deficiencies became widely recognized. Stylistic variations that have been introduced in later decades, until our present time, do not fundamentally depart from the same modernist paradigm. Similarly, architectural academics could not simply stop to teach Modernism. All other alternatives would have required exceptional efforts, fundamental re-training and force individuals who would take that path to swim against the current. The rise of the Obfuscatory Turn in such circumstances has to be understood as a desperate effort to justify the commitment to a paradigm that has failed and everyone knows about it. It is a strategy of denial. This is a very important point that this book seeks to make. A critic of contemporary architecture may get the impression that architects read books by some strange philosophers, get influenced by their ideas and then design the way they do. This is certainly wrong. Architects design the way they can, the way they know, and the way they have been taught. They are typically very cautious about their reputation and scared to do something that the rest of their profession would not approve of. Even today, it takes a lot of courage for an architect to step out of the modernist paradigm. In order to justify their designs, and in the situation when the general public often hates their work, they use words, phrases and ideas that they mine from books written by philosophers. Many academics base their careers on the fabrication of texts that use philosophical jargon in order to defend an approach to design that is hugely unpopular outside the architectural profession and academia. As for the understanding of or serious engagement with philosophical ideas, we shall see that it typically does not go very far.

Two core streams of the Obfuscatory Turn, "Phenomenology" and "Deconstruction" are discussed in the second and the third chapter.[3] Phenomenology is normally taken to include all those positions that put blame for the failure of Modernism on technology, the scientific worldview and rationality in general. The visual-aesthetic inadequacy of modernist architecture that the general public protests against is typically dismissed as an irrelevant concern, because visual perception is said to be always dependent on meanings, stories and narratives associated with architectural works. In other words, it does not matter how the building looks but what kind of story the architect can tell about it. Alternatively, it is claimed that concerns about the visual properties of buildings should be dismissed or not regarded as any more important than the way a building is experienced by other senses, the way it smells or even tastes. (In the second chapter we shall actually have to discuss the claim that the scale of a building can be established on the basis of how it tastes.) The alternative, deconstructivist approach sought to present a response to the critique of Modernism by relying on social Constructionism and anti-realism that were popular and influential in the final decades of the twentieth century. This was the idea that reality is merely constructed by forces such as language, culture, history, the social context or similar. Since human individuals and their biology on this account are social constructs too, traditional architectural concerns such as function, scale, relationship to the site and similar lose any relevance. Neither Phenomenology nor Deconstruction promoted a significant departure from modernist design practices. They have made no effort to address formal and visual-aesthetic deficiencies of Modernism. Rather, they provided the consolidation and defense of essentially modernist approaches to design under different names. Our topic here is the role that the Obfuscatory Turn and the (mis)use of philosophical ideas and jargon played in the formulation of these efforts. The second and the third chapter therefore aim to present a systematic survey of obfuscatory techniques and their typology. While architectural phenomenologists and deconstructivists relied on the same pool of obfuscatory techniques, their use was affected by the philosophical traditions they sought to emulate. We shall also see how these obfuscatory techniques were used in order to suppress concerns about the visual and formal-aesthetic qualities of architectural works.

The Obfuscatory Turn could have provided the justification of modernist designs only as long as recent philosophical production supplied philosophical works that could be mined for words, phrases and ideas. For almost three decades it was continental European, mainly German and French, philosophical works that were in the center of attention. This was natural because the alternative, English-speaking analytic philosophy was simply not suitable for the purpose. Analytic philosophers emphasize clarity and rigorous arguments in their writings. Their writings are often highly technical. Consequently, they provide limited material for the kind of reading that concentrates on mining philosophical texts for words, phrases and unusual claims. Probably for this same reason, continental philosophy came to exercise such a wide influence on the humanities departments at English-speaking universities since the 1970s. At the same time, it was never well received in English-speaking philosophy departments, where analytic philosophy reigned supreme. By the 1990s, however, continental philosophy was on its last breath. Younger generations of European philosophers increasingly turned to analytic philosophy. Philosophy departments at European universities eventually came to be predominantly staffed with analytic philosophers. This revolution in the philosophical culture on the European continent precipitated the crisis and ultimately the downfall of the Obfuscatory Turn in architecture. By the late 1990s it was becoming impossible to identify the new generation of prominent continental philosophers whose writings architects could exploit in order to legitimize their designs. Chapter Four describes the reactions to this crisis and the attempts that were made to overcome it. The crisis was additionally complicated by the fact that both the architectural profession and architectural academia faced the introduction of digital media during the same period. Finally, in the most recent decade, Object Oriented Ontology has provided a genuine philosophical perspective on architectural theory that avoids obfuscation. It has been largely endorsed as a reaction against social Constructionism (“Correlationism”) that dominated architectural theory in the preceding decades. However, it has failed provide successful methods to theorize visual and formal-aesthetic issues in architectural design.

Philosophical posturing and the use of obfuscation in order to defend an unpopular architectural style can hardly suggest a favorable perspective on contemporary architectural profession and academia. The fact that these reactions were particularly widespread among

architectural academics, who should have known better, is additionally depressing. Obviously, no historian can enter the minds and thoughts of the authors he or she is writing about or claim to be able to reconstruct their intentions. Also, people often act spontaneously and unconsciously when they defend and promote their interests. Authors that I write about in this book need not have employed obfuscation with conscious or malicious intentions. At most, one can point out when intellectual and theoretical positions coincide with commercial and career interests of their protagonists. This is certainly a relevant point to make when these positions are otherwise counterintuitive and their endorsement cannot be explained by some other motivation. A historian must always analyze not only what statements and documents assert, but also what they deny or conceal.

One may be tempted to compare this book with Alan Sokal's and Jean Bricmont's book *Fashionable Nonsense*. Sokal and Bricmont there collected and analyzed the false claims about physics and mathematics that prominent French post-modernists made in order to impress (or bamboozle) their readers. They were, however, dealing with a limited number of authors and a limited number of examples. In the case of architectural academia, the impact of the Obfuscatory Turn was so massive that any attempt to provide a comprehensive survey would take many thick volumes and many years of work. While working on this book I have had to limit my presentation to the most influential authors and seek the best examples of philosophical obfuscation and misunderstanding. Reading through the immense amount of meaningless texts that imitate philosophical jargon and that architectural academics produced in the 1980s and the 1990s in desperate attempts to improve their academic standing and show that they belong to the avant-garde is one of the most uninviting research projects one can imagine. It is also thoroughly depressing to think that these academics were doing the right thing insofar as they wanted to get prestigious jobs. They had no choice. One may have sympathy for them, but one should not forget that they have educated the architects who now build the environment we have to live in.

Beyond Salvage?

On 28 October 312 Emperor Constantine defeated Emperor Maxentius at Saxa Rubra, seven or eight miles north-east of Rome. The next day he entered the city itself. In order to please the new ruler, the Senate decided to celebrate the event by building a monumental arch next to the Colosseum. The poor quality of the sculptural program of this structure, that was completed three years later, has attracted comments for centuries. Parts were simply taken from older buildings and re-used on the monument. Reliefs that were made for the purpose suggest poor skill of the carvers. The ineptitude in the representation of human bodies is particularly striking in comparison with Roman sculptures from the previous centuries. Writing in the eighteenth century Edward Gibbon observed that the monument

> *remains a melancholy proof of the decline of the arts … As it was not possible to find in the capital of the empire a sculptor who was capable of adorning that public monument, the Arch of Trajan … was stripped of its most elegant figures. … and curious antiquarians can still discover the head of Trajan on the trophies of Constantine. The new ornaments that it was necessary to introduce between the vacancies of ancient sculpture are executed in the rudest and most unskillful manner.*[382]

A 1950s book by Bernard Berenson catalogues the sculptural deficiencies of the Arch.[383] Here belong undersized figures, the inaccurate size of animals, poor anatomy of human figures, huge heads out of proportion with bodies, and so on.[384] In the case of anatomically convincing parts of the sculptural program, Berenson managed to trace older Roman works from which they were copied.[385] Like Gibbon, he regarded such deficiencies as indications of decline. He also compared the sculptures from the Arch of Constantine with other sculptures of the era (the representations of contemporary Roman rulers that "look like yokels being photographed at a country fair") in which the similar

trend can be observed.[386] Berenson's book was intended to oppose the views of German scholars who saw in such sculptures anticipations of the *Zeitgeist* or the Artistic Will of the Medieval era.[387] In the case of the Arch of Constantine the use of ornaments from older buildings undermines the credibility of the belief in such spiritual forces that underwrite the artistic production of entire epochs. Had they indeed acted as harbingers of a new artistic style and had their preferences been indeed determined by the spirit of the new era, the architects of the monument would not have included so many ornaments from older buildings that reflect the decidedly different taste of the previous era. It is much more convincing to agree with Berenson and attribute the re-use of these ornaments to "the feeling that nothing could be done there and then as worthy of the occasion."[388] As he put it, it is reasonable to see in the Arch "a confession of inferiority to the past, whether economic or artistic."[389]

Another way to address the dilemma is to ask whether Roman artists of the era had the training, knowledge and skills to produce work on par with that of earlier generations. If their skills and the knowledge of anatomy had been insufficient to make more accurate representations, then the spirit of the era certainly could not have *made* them choose to make anatomically less accurate representations of human bodies. If they could not have done it, then they simply had no choice. In his book, Berenson was not interested in the social context that caused the changes in art production that he described.[390] However, if we take into account political events of the preceding decades, one can hardly be surprised by the poor technical skills of the artists who worked on the Arch of Constantine. In fact, it would be surprising had Roman artistic production of the fourth century CE manifested technical skills comparable to those of the early imperial era. For a large part of the preceding century the Roman empire was heavily shaken by endless internal conflicts.[391] As the central power lost its authority, it became increasingly possible for military units to proclaim their generals into emperors, which led to a series of civil wars. It is hard to imagine that in such long-lasting circumstances a credible system of artistic education could have survived. If one looks at Berenson's criticisms of sculptures on the Arch of Constantine, they pertain to issues such as the representation of bodies and their anatomy. These are precisely the skills that would have had to be taught in order to be mastered by younger generations of artists. Even exceptionally talented sculptors cannot be expected to master alone, on their own, knowledge that

generations of artists over long centuries had to discover step by step. Without systematic teaching such knowledge is lost. As T. S. Eliot observed once, a tradition cannot be inherited, it has to be acquired by hard work.[392] Certainly, the possession of skills and knowledge cannot *guarantee* creativity. Dogmatic methods of transmission are even likely to stifle it. The suppression of the transmission of skills and knowledge, however, can only guarantee incompetence.

Modernism, once again

Without doubt, the same applies to architecture as well. Architectural works do not come about independently of the social context that enables their creation, or at least fails to prevent it. This social context need not be conceived of as an immaterial, abstract, spiritual force that comes from above. An individual architect experiences the context in thousands of interactions with his or her clients, colleagues or authorities. Mies van der Rohe or Gropius, for instance, encountered the Third Reich in numerous interactions with state officials. These state officials did not act the way they did because they were inspired by some immaterial spirit of the Nazi era. They acted in accordance with their own motivations which had to do with their ambitions, fear from higher ranking officials or their personal endorsement of Nazi ideology. Similarly, the economic pressures and constraints that imposed Modernism after World War Two were not an abstract, immaterial force that came from above. Architects who worked in those days faced them through interactions with clients, developers, government officials as well as the draftsmen and the workforce that they needed to hire. Individual motivation, often in the form of the desire to contribute to the recovery of society after the war, certainly played a huge role too. Doubtless, many architects were willing to sacrifice the ornamentation of buildings and traditional approaches to design in order to help address urgent social needs.[393] The long-term aesthetic consequences for the built environment would become obvious only some decades later.

In other words, architects' statements about their work and their advocacy of theoretical views can only be understood if we take into account their position as individuals and in relation to the social interactions, constraints and opportunities they faced. This also applies to the leading protagonists of the modernist movement in the years after the first world war. The four most prominent figures—

Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier or Walter Gropius—were all autodidacts. The same applies to a good number of prominent modernists of the generation born in the 1880s.* Theo van Doesburg had no architectural education at all, Antonio Sant'Elia was a drop-out and Bruno Taut's three semesters at *Baugewerbeschule* certainly cannot count as equivalent to a full architecture degree. Social circumstances prevented Wright and Mies van der Rohe from getting an academic training in architecture. Le Corbusier possibly could have found a way to get academic education but opted not to. Gropius studied architecture for two years but dropped out, probably because of his poor graphical skills.[394] (In an era when architectural education emphasized rendering and watercoloring of classical details, poor graphical skills would have been a kiss of death for a future architect.) The lack of formal education would follow them through their careers. A biographer of Mies, Elaine S. Hochman, has described Mies's "deep, pervasive, and lifelong insecurity about his intellectual qualifications."[395] When his Farnsworth project ended in a lawsuit, the client, Edith Farnsworth, complained of Mies's ignorance of high school physics.[396] In fact, Mies's formal education finished at the age of fifteen and he did not attend a high school.[397] Le Corbusier's struggle with elementary mathematics in his *Modulor* is both embarrassing and comical.[398] He shows a page of calculations that were "done by a mathematician" that could have been performed

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* The most prominent advocates of Modernism in Europe before World War One—Peter Behrens (b. 1868), Otto Wagner (b. 1841), Adolf Loos (b. 1870) and Hendrik Petrus Berlage (b. 1856)—all had formal academic training. In the case of modernist architects who reached professional maturity after 1920, those with formal academic training (Erich Mendelsohn, Hugo Häring) never achieved prominence comparable to that of Le Corbusier, Mies or Gropius. Alvar Aalto, who is sometimes mentioned among the most prominent modernists of that generation, was actually more than ten years younger (born 1898). He is also a very anomalous figure among the modernists of his era, both because of his academic training and because of his intellectual background. In his youth he attended a tsarist-era lyceum that left him with a wide humanist education. See Schildt (ed.), *Aalto*, 16. As a result, the tone of his writing and theoretical positioning is by far more sophisticated than this is the case that of other contemporary modernists. One cannot imagine that some other modernist of the era would complain that "useless work is done by artificially seeking to mirror modern times in assignments that clearly belong to tradition in terms of content" or that "modernists make paintings which are travesties of the real art of construction or machines" or express the concern that Modernism can become "the caricature that free art becomes when it aspires to be a faithful mirror of its own era." Ibid., 63, 62, 61.

by any high school pupil.[399] At the same time, their exceptional talents are certainly beyond doubt. Works such as Mies's National Gallery in Berlin or Le Corbusier's chapel in Ronchamp are arguably major architectural masterpieces of any era. The fact that contemporary architectural academies failed to accommodate or even attract their authors when they were young certainly gives reasons to condemn the educational system of the era. In other fields too, the contemporary educational system was often more interested in the reproduction of privilege than in attracting underprivileged talents.

Since Wright was older and he lived in the USA, he did not face the same opportunities as Mies, Gropius or Le Corbusier after the end of the first world war. After 1919 their handicaps in education were massively compensated by the fact that many of their peers who did have academic training in architecture had died in the war. The opportunities that offered themselves were massive, even though they had no formal qualifications and only very meager portfolios of built work at that time. With only two years of formal architectural education Gropius became the Dean of an architecture school; in one single year, 1925, Mies came to be considered for prestigious positions in the *Kunstgewerbeschule* in Magdeburg, *Kunstakademie* in Breslau and the position of the *Stadtbaurat* in Frankfurt am Main.[400] (As mentioned, he never finished high school.) It is hard to imagine that this would have been possible had they had to compete against their peers with formal education who vanished in the tranches of the previous decade. Similar career opportunities became available to numerous young men without academic training who happened to survive the war and worked as draftsmen in architecture offices. Those who came to the forefront were those who excelled in self-promotion skills. A survey of modernist architectural theory such as Harry Francis Mallgrave's *Modern Architectural Theory* leaves one with the impression that it was primarily the use of advanced public relation techniques that the young modernists excelled in—rather than competence in the use of the latest building technologies. As Mallgrave pointed out, the ground-breaking aspect of Le Corbusier's *Toward a New Architecture* was the replacement of rational argument by a "visual catalogue specifically designed to seduce the architect."[401] The propaganda apparatus that Mies engaged in relation to the Weissenhof housing exhibition included sixty press agencies and forty correspondents.[402] Changes in personal lives also indicate ambitious positioning in relation to new opportunities. For more than a decade until 1921 Mies was carefully

building his career as a traditional architect working for the Berlin upper middle class. As the new opportunities became obvious, he re-invented himself as a modernist architect. That same year he separated from his wife (whose family until then provided contacts with potential clients in Berlin bourgeoisie) and changed the last name from "Mies" to "Mies van der Rohe."[403] "Rohe" was his mother's maiden last name while "van der" was invented clearly with the intention of producing fake associations with Dutch nobility.[404] Other young modernist architects did similar things about the same time. Christian Emil Marie Küpper adopted his stepfather's name, added the aristocratically sounding "van" and became Theo van Doesburg. (It is somehow hard to take seriously the commitments to modernity of architects who parade false aristocratic titles.) In republican France Charles-Édouard Jeanneret adopted an ancestor's name "Lecorbesier" but changed it into "Le Corbusier" in order to recall names of French artists such as Charles Le Brun or André Le Nŏtre.[405] Less concerned about social conventions, Wright lied about his age and presented himself two years younger than he really was.

It would be naïve to think that the theoretical positions that the protagonists of the modernist movement endorsed in the 1920s and the 1930s had nothing to do with their career prospects and efforts. Mies van der Rohe, Wright and Le Corbusier were never trained to use traditional systems of ornamentation, the classical orders or spatial composition. As a student with poor graphical skills who dropped out of architecture school, it is unlikely that Gropius ever mastered them. In order to take the advantage of the exceptional career possibilities that became available in the post-World War One era, Mies, Gropius and Le Corbusier had to argue against ornamentation and spatial composition. If they did not assert the irrelevance of the skills taught in architectural academies, they would have to admit their limited competence for the projects and commissions they aspired to get. This explains the fact, mentioned in Chapter One, that the tenets of the modernist approach to design were predominantly negative and centered on the rejection of traditional systems of ornamentation and spatial composition. These were the core elements of academic architectural training. The endorsement of flat roofs belongs to the same category. Early twentieth-century technology could not have inspired it since flat roofs leak even with technologies much more advanced than those available in those days. However, it takes more than a semester to train architecture students to design a traditional

roof structure. An architect without such training will naturally seek to avoid having to design a pitched roof. (Le Corbusier and Mies did design simple roofs early in their careers, but no complex structures.) For the generation of modernists that came to the forefront in the 1920s, the only chance to realize the immense career opportunities was to argue vehemently—as they did—that the education that they did not have was obsolete in the new era. Modernism was thus not a stylistic preference. It was a path chosen because it coincided with the career and commercial interests of its protagonists. Gropius's biographer, for instance, observes that already as a student he "resisted the … prevalent philosophy of clothing new buildings in historical styles."[406] It is, however, not clear that he could do it, considering his poor graphical skills. It is in the context of this disability that we also have to understand his later tendency to inveigh in his writings against the importance of drawing skills in architecture. [407] This also explains the suppression of the teaching of perspective in the Bauhaus.[408] In his writings, lectures and interviews Mies endlessly attacked the contemporary use of the forms that he claimed belonged to the past.[409] These forms, one cannot avoid to notice, happen to be precisely those that he did not master because he lacked academic training. The same applies to Wright's persistent attacks on the Renaissance, the Renaissance style, Greek ornamentation, and so on.[410] Similarly, Le Corbusier's statement that "to send young architects to Rome is to injure them for life" is more than a mere expression of envy.[411] It is an implicit act of self-advertising intended to present the lack of opportunity as an advantage. In the context of the first half of the twentieth century, the rejection of the classical orders and spatial composition were the only reasonable strategies in the view of the career opportunities that modernist architects without academic training faced during the era. Nevertheless, had it not been for the second world war and the economic interests that became dominant in its aftermath, such views would have probably remained merely a marginal episode in the history of twentieth-century architectural debates.

MODERNISM *IS* THE CRISIS

One important problem with ignorance is that can be infectious, if it results in the suppression of education. Within a decade after World War Two the global suppression of the teaching of traditional systems

of ornamentation and spatial composition was almost complete. The trend was global and it is not easy to think of architectural schools that did not follow it. This could have seemed a reasonable approach to education in an era when people believed that their fantasies about the future, rather than experiences from the past, could advise them better about building for that future. By the 1970s it became impossible to hide the disastrous consequences of Modernism for the built environment. On the one hand there was the massive dissatisfaction of the general public with the works of architects. On the other, the awareness of the failure of Modernism also shook the self-confidence of architects. Postmodernist experiments with classical forms merely showed that copying and pasting is not enough in order to re-acquire what has been lost. As Joseph Brodsky put it once, culture dies for those who fail to master it.[412]

In order to understand the crisis that modernist architectural education created, it is important to understand why the simple replication of architectural ornaments from historical buildings (especially in the case of the classical tradition) does not work. The claims that classical design merely consists in the copying of historical precedents have been endlessly repeated by modernist architects and theorists.[413] In line with this misunderstanding, even a very recent author such as Schumacher asserts that "Classical architecture … was strictly ruled by the reproduction of fixed building types, complete with proportional and ornamental system."[414] Such claims about copying or the belief that there are strictly defined rules about proportions and ornamentation merely reflect their proponents' ignorance about the complexities of classical design. There are certainly precedents and books by numerous authors such as Vignola or Palladio that provide advice about the morphology and the proportioning of ornaments. Their advices differ, and the application of the orders always depends on the architect's judgment in face of the compositional problems that arise on the specific building. Books about the orders provide advice about their *morphology* (shapes and proportions of ornaments) but say close to nothing about their *syntax*—the way they are combined. They do not explain, for instance, how to place the orders when different spatial units (such as the nave and the transept of a church) collide or how to deal with the proportions of pilasters in a staircase space, or how to relate the position of the columns on the façade to the position of internal walls. In some approaches (Palladio) the coordination of the columns on the façade with the walls inside the building implies a

direct (and sometimes very complex) proportional correlation between façade composition and internal spatial composition. Resolving these details can be a formidable task even on a medium-sized building.* This is precisely why classical design can be so time-consuming and a strong reason why the architecture profession had to drop it in the post-1945 building boom.

The inclination to overlook the complexities of classical design has been fostered by arrogant dismissals that modernist historians express when they write about non-modernist architecture in the twentieth-century. It is not unreasonable to suspect that arrogance sometimes hides the lack of competence to engage with classical design. As Leon Battista Alberti put it, "it is a common vice of ignorance, to deny what one knows nothing about."[415] In the first chapter we have seen that Cohen dismissed Pope's National Gallery as "a Pantheon wrapped up in a stone sarcophagus."[416] The columns of the portico on the Pantheon are, however, Corinthian, whereas those on the National Gallery are Ionic. This has significant implications for distances between columns and consequently for the dimensions of the central circular hall behind the portico and the composition of the entire building. There seem to be, consequently, two ways to understand Cohen's statement. Either he cannot tell the difference between the Corinthian and the Ionic order, or, even worse, he thinks that the distinction is irrelevant when discussing a classical building. The former interpretation seems more likely, considering that in the same sentence he also dismissed Cass Gilbert's Supreme Court building as a "Greek Temple hybridized with a rectangular box."[417] This "temple," however, is placed on a

* A good example of such complexities is Palladio's treatment of the relationship between the positioning of the façade columns of Palazzo Chiericati and internal spatial composition of this building. See Mitrović, *Learning from Palladio*, 97-140. On the one hand, Palladio relied on a list of preferable room length-to-width ratios and four rules for the calculation of room heights. These ratios and rules could not be used randomly; since a series of rooms on the same floor had to have the same height, there were definite ways in which rooms with specific length-to-width-to-height ratios could be combined. On the other hand, the walls orthogonal on the facade had to align with the position of columns on the façade, with the consequence that the proportional rules for the classical orders and the disposition of columns determined the possible positions of internal walls and the proportions of rooms had to be adjusted to this requirement. At the same time, the height of rooms (as mentioned, calculated on the basis of the length-to-width ratio of the room) taken together with the thickness of the ceiling, had to be equal to the height of the column on the façade plus the entablature.

platform that clearly indicates a Roman and not a Greek precedent. It is thus fair to wonder about Cohen's elementary competence when it comes to the classical tradition. In some cases we encounter, however, not ignorance, but malicious misrepresentation of facts, quite inappropriate for historical scholarship. In his *Pioneers of Modern Design* Pevsner described how George Gilbert Scott designed British Government offices in Whitehall.[418] Scott was a Gothic revival architect and he originally wanted to design a Gothic façade. However, Lord Palmerston insisted on the Renaissance and eventually got him to do it. Pevsner reports that Scott described how he "'bought some costly books on Italian architecture and set vigorously to work' to invent an Italian façade 'beautifully got up in outline.'"[419] The account conveys the impression that classical design consists in a simple procedure of copying details from books about Italian architecture. Pevsner describes this procedure as "comedy."[420] The report actually deviously misrepresents Scott's account to the point of being fraudulent. In his *Personal and Professional Recollections* Scott indeed described how he started by buying "costly books"—but then he worked on the design the whole autumn and good part of the winter, except for six weeks when his son was ill.[421] He also travelled to Paris in order to visit important examples of classical works there, and thus recover "lost feelings for the style."[422] The design was certainly not a matter of simple copying from the books. It took almost half a year and can hardly be described as "a comedy."

This also explains why the general public today may feel to have lost communication with architects and architecture academics, the way Gregor Samsa's family could not communicate with him after he became a cockroach. One cannot go to a modernist architect and commission a Palladian building, the way Lord Palmerston commissioned it from Scott. The point is not that architects today have more commitment to Modernism than Scott had to Gothic. The point is that they cannot do it because they wouldn't know how. Tschumi, for instance, says that the aim of his Parc de la Villette project was "to prove that it was possible to construct a complex architectural organization without resorting to traditional rules of composition, hierarchy, and order."[423] It is, however, not clear that he would know how to design a complex architectural organization based on the traditional principles of composition, hierarchy and order. It is unlikely that these principles were taught in the 1960s at ETH in Zurich where he studied. Maybe he made the effort to master them on his own, but his works do not

show that this was the case. It is therefore appropriate to be suspicious that the invocations of Derrida, deconstruction, groundbreaking novelties, the rejection of "tradition" are merely denials of one's own inability to do it. Talking about the USA in the 1970s, Tom Wolfe asks in his *From Bauhaus to our House*, "has there ever been another place on earth where so many people of wealth and power have paid for and put up with so much architecture they detested."[424] He observes (with apparent surprise) that great law firms of New York (and various "plutocrats, bureaucrats, board chairman, CEO's commissioners, and college presidents," he suggests) move "without a peep … into glass-box office buildings with concrete slab floors and seven-feet-ten-inch-high concrete slab ceilings and plasterboard walls and pygmy corridors."[425] There is, however, nothing to be surprised about. Money and power cannot make architects design buildings that they do not know how to design.[426] This fundamental problem could be, possibly, compared to the situation that the Gothic king of Italy Theodoric faced two centuries after Constantine. The mausoleum that Theodoric built for himself near Ravenna is covered by an imitation of a dome spanning almost 11 meters. The false dome is made of a single stone whose weight is estimated at 230 tons. The stone had to be brought to the site from Istria, hundreds of kilometers away. We do not know why an ordinary dome was not constructed. As in the case of the Arch of Constantine, some people may believe that the decision was intentional, that Theodoric wanted it so, or that the spirit of the era inspired him. But knowing the times, it is also possible that Theodoric (or his successors) had no choice. The relapse to Stonehenge-era technology may have been necessitated by the unavailability of architects who knew how to build a proper dome. If this was so, then Theodoric's predicament in matters of structure was equivalent to the one that Wolfe describes powerful American "plutocrats, bureaucrats, board chairman, CEO's commissioners, and college presidents" face in matter of aesthetics. No power or money are enough to obtain things that nobody knows how to make.

It is important to clarify that the core problem is not merely in the suppression of the classical tradition in architectural education. Because modernist buildings are often experienced as ugly additions to older urban environments it is natural to associate approaches motivated by aesthetic concerns with traditional approaches to design. The suppression of these approaches, however, is only a collateral manifestation of the anti-aesthetic ideology that dominates

the profession and architecture schools. Education in architectural academies of the early twentieth century did not merely teach classical composition or neo-Gothic detailing. Classical composition and neo-Gothic detailing were its tools to teach formal aesthetic concerns in architectural design. The important point is not necessarily in teaching traditional or classical design, but in teaching aesthetic concerns. Architectural production is unlikely to avoid visual and formal ugliness if architects are taught that visual and formal-aesthetic issues do not matter. Students who go through an education in which formal-aesthetic concerns are devalued, derided and suppressed will have to unlearn everything they were taught if they want to avoid polluting the built environment with ugly buildings. This is possible, and some students do rebel, but it is also rare. By now, architectural education has been run for generations by academics inclined to deny the relevance of formal-aesthetic properties of architectural works. Students who enroll to architecture schools are taught by design professors whose design professors were taught by design professors who opposed formal-aesthetic concerns in architectural education. In the 1980s *The New York Magazine* ran an article about Eisenman. The article opens with Eisenman telling to architecture students: "You are not just going to design a building and say, 'Isn't this pretty?' … Because that doesn't get us anywhere."[427] It is significant that a journalist writing for lay public would choose such an anti-aesthetic statement to open the article. Clearly, the statement made the point to the readers that the architect he was writing about had unexpected views about the importance of aesthetic matters. That is, in the views of the general public. Eisenman's very choice of the potentially devaluing term "pretty" clearly aimed at the dismissal of visual-aesthetic concerns. He could have chosen terms such as beautiful, nice, elegant. The statement "it does not get us anywhere" is also telling. The alternative view would be that making a building with aesthetic qualities is the highest aim an architect may seek to achieve. Arguably, there is nowhere else an architect would aspire to get.

Talking about "architecture" in the post-architectural era

More than a century ago Jacob Burckhardt stated in one of his lectures that "we shall never get rid of antiquity as long as do not become barbarians again."[428] The rise of the Obfuscatory Turn in the 1970s

reflected the awareness of architectural professionals and academics that this stage was reached and that there was no going back, because both architects and academics would have to retrain themselves from the beginning. Even if they did, architectural offices could not afford the return to more time-and-labor-demanding approaches design. For an architecture firm that needs to pay salaries, glass boxes and concrete bunkers are anyhow the way to go. Architecture academics who were trained under Modernism also knew that they cannot simply recover the training that most of them never received. Architectural discussions in such circumstances took the form of denials that were in line with the joint commercial interests of architects and architectural academics. Through this book, we have seen two major strategies that sought to avoid the criticism about the formal-aesthetic failure of modernist architecture and its progeny. One response was that the way buildings look, and their visual-aesthetic qualities are unimportant. Another response was that human subjects who protest against the ugliness of the newly built environments are irrelevant since it is only the views of the avant-garde that matter. All other views are to be dismissed as "populist."

Consider, as an example, the phenomenologists' claim that the problem is in modern disregard for place in opposition to space. Frampton in his article "On Reading Heidegger" complains about "our present all but total incapacity to create places."[429] "In our ubiquitous 'non-place' we congratulate ourselves regularly on our pathological capacity for abstraction," he says.[430] The cure that he proposes is "a profound consciousness of history and … a rigorous socio-political analysis of the present, seen as a continuing fulfillment of the past."[431] In his view, "[t]he receptivity and sensitive resonance of a place … depends first on its stability in the everyday sense and second, on the appropriateness and richness of the socio-cultural experiences it offers."[432] The problem is, however, that the profound consciousness of history, the rigor of socio-political analysis or socio-cultural experiences are perfectly useless as antidotes against formal ugliness. None of them can make people endorse a square, a street, a place, if it is surrounded by glass boxes or concrete bunkers that the people find ugly. Pallasmaa's struggle to suppress formal and visual aesthetic concerns belongs to the same strategies of denial. In the situation when visual ugliness generated by modernist architecture is a massive problem of contemporary urban environments, his protests against "aestheticisation" and claims that today's architecture purely serves

"for the seduction of the eye" can only be qualified as grotesque.[433] His claim that architecture is a multisensory phenomenon—that qualities of space, matter and scale are measured equally by the eye and by the tongue—is nothing short of preposterous.[434] People simply do not go around licking buildings. It is hard to explain the wide popularity of such claims among architecture professionals and academics if one does not see in this endorsement desperate efforts to avoid and suppress any discussion of visual and formal aesthetic qualities of architecture.

It is also hard not to see similar denials in deconstructivists' theorizing as well. Consider, for instance, Beartriz Colomina's redefinition of architecture:

> *… architecture, as distinct from building, is an interpretative, critical act. It has a linguistic condition different from practical one of building. A building is interpreted when its rhetorical mechanism and principles are revealed. This analysis may be performed in a number of different ways, according to the forms of different types of discourse; among these are theory, criticism, history, and manifesto. And act of interpretation is also present in the different modes of representational discourse: drawing, writing, model making and so on. Interpretation is also integral to the art of projecting.*[435]

However, *Oxford Language Dictionary* defines architecture as "the art or science of building or constructing edifices of any kind for human use"—and when it comes to the use of words such a respectable a dictionary can hardly be wrong. It is, at the same time, not clear that such an art (or science) has to be "an interpretative critical act." If architecture is defined by its "linguistic condition" and based on the analyses performed by means of theory, criticism, history and manifesto, as Colomina claims, then this means that purely visual and formal issues do not matter. Architecture and its aesthetic values are then constituted by ideas that can be associated with buildings through interpretation. On this understanding even drawings and models are architecturally relevant only on the basis of the interpretation that can be given about them. We have seen that Geoffrey Scott described this view as the "romantic fallacy." But Colomina is not merely proposing a neo-romantic redefinition of the word "architecture." The redefinition conveniently coincides with the career and commercial interests of entire generations of architects and architectural educators whose

education failed to provide them with skills and abilities to engage with formal, visual-aesthetic issues. It is normal that such architects and academics would seek to supplant aesthetic concerns with stories ("interpretations") that can be told about buildings.

All this came to be massively reflected in architectural education, where tutors' anxieties and insecurities play a decisive role in the structuring of education programs. Every year, thousands of students enroll in architecture schools with the expectation to learn to practice architecture. By "architecture" they mean what the *Oxford English Dictionary* says, since this is the standard meaning of the word. This is, however, not what many of their tutors can deliver, because the education these tutors received did not provide them with material they could convey further. What teaching can be delivered by a studio tutor whose own education was based on the assumptions that engineers do structures, developers decide about planning and aesthetic issues are unimportant and arbitrary? Bamboozling students is in many cases the only reliable strategy of academic survival. A tutor with phenomenological leanings will, for instance, tell the students to go to the site, smell the air and draw the smell. A deconstructivist studio tutor will turn student's well-crafted model upside down and place it on its roof. He or she will then tell to the student to be open minded and consider alternative approaches. In both cases, the advice will include the explanation that what matters is the process and not the end result. (As if architects designed processes and not buildings.) Sometimes obfuscation fails, students realize what is going on, and protest that they are not being taught. However, since neither students nor tutors know an alternative to the present model of "architectural education," such protests change nothing. In any case, rather than condemning tutors, one should have sympathy for them. They are the original victims. Their education did not provide them with skills or knowledge that they could convey to students. When postmodernists and deconstructivists talked, in the 1980s, about post-humanism in architecture, they were making an important admission. The point is not, however, that human subjects do not exist, that they are cultural, linguistic constructs or discursive functions. The point is that architects, with the skills that they acquire in contemporary architecture schools can do little for them.

The rise of the Obfuscatory Turn in architecture thus presented a desperate response to the crisis created by the failure of Modernism. It is a strategy of a vehement, emotional denial that modernist architecture—the only kind of architecture that by the 1970s architects

knew how to design and academics could teach—is visually, formally and aesthetically inferior to pre-modernist approaches to design. This connection between the Obfuscatory Turn and the failure of Modernism is further manifested by the lack of obfuscatory behavior on the side of those architects who rejected Modernism. By the late 1980s architects such as Quinlan Terry, Thomas Gordon Smith, Leon Krier, Allan Greenberg, Robert Adam, Demetri Porphyrios and others turned to the recovery of classical approaches to design. The preceding decade of post-modernist flirting with classical architecture had shown that (contrary to what modernists believed) classical detailing cannot be merely copied and pasted on the façade. In the pre-internet era, when old books were often difficult to obtain, re-discovering how classical architecture is designed turned out to be a formidable task. But the efforts of the architects and academics who chose this path have been fruitful and as a result of these efforts, classical architecture has a serious presence in the USA and the UK today, even though this work is often maligned in the media, vehemently opposed by large sections of the profession and architectural academia, and academics who want to teach it face huge difficulties when it comes to finding a job. For our discussion here this classical revival is interesting because its protagonists simply failed to engage obfuscation in their writings. Unlike the rest of the architecture profession, for the past forty years they made no significant contribution to the Obfuscatory Turn. This is hardly surprising, once we understand the Obfuscatory Turn as a particularly vehement form of the defense of Modernism. Those architects and academics who genuinely rejected Modernism had no reason to engage in its defense.

Obituary to a profession. ("Where things are going," once again.)

It is hard to say something optimistic at the end of a book like this one. Possibly it is not even necessary. The book merely presents a historical phenomenon and seeks to explain it. It is the collateral factors on which this description relies—the rise of Modernism, its aesthetic failure, as well as the persistent denial of this failure by architects and architecture academics—that are disturbing and depressing. They massively affect the environment in which we live. For more than a century architects and architectural academics have sought to redefine the aims of architecture by claiming that buildings should express their time, the nature of site, meanings, the absence of presence, that

it is actually the smell of buildings that matters and not the way they look—all this in desperate efforts to suppress the consideration of visual-formal aesthetic issues. Since everyone can see what is being built, the impression that such "theorizing" is merely evasion and an unconvincing denial is hard to avoid. As a result, the position and the credibility of the architectural profession and academia in modern society remains problematic. In the meantime, not only formal-aesthetic concerns have been abandoned, but also entire sectors of traditional architectural competencies, including engineering and planning, have gradually been surrendered to other professions. In our present time, after a century of frenzied relativism, it is hard to avoid the consequences. The optimistic conclusion for this book, some people may say, would be to express the hope that there is justice in this world and that a profession and academic training that contribute so little to society, and whose contributions the general public often so passionately loathes, will force itself into obsolescence and irrelevance.

The disturbing aspect of such "optimism" is not only that it is depressing, but that it is convincing. It is hard to conceive of an alternative perspective once one takes into account the powerful interests that dominate the architectural profession and academia. Nevertheless, one should differentiate here between the profession and the discipline of architecture. Things are what they are independently of the words we use in order to name them. Political circumstances or bureaucratic policies may enable individuals and groups to usurp names or impose changes in the use of words, but things do not change because we name them differently. To put it bluntly, there is architecture and then there is a type of activity that many people who call themselves "architects" call "architecture." These are not necessarily one and the same thing. The *discipline* of architecture is not necessarily tied to the *profession* that is called "architecture." Consider the question of whether purely formal-visual aesthetic properties matter in architecture. If they do not, then indeed everything that has happened for the past century with architecture was good, proper and the way it should have been. One cannot complain about the ugliness of the built environment we live in because there are no visual-formal aesthetic qualities, no ugliness or beauty, to complain about. Architecture is then nothing more than an endless series of fashions and individuals count as "architects" insofar as they follow these fashions, including (especially) fashions in verbal behavior. At the same time, it is not easy to think of anything else, in addition to architectural fashion-following, that these "architects" can

do better than other professions. All they can do, from this point of view, is to follow the direction where things are going, and, from the perspective of society at large, architectural profession today is going in the direction of irrelevance and obsolescence.

The alternative view would be that all this is indeed a problem of architecture as a profession, but not of architecture as a discipline. In other words, the response would be that purely visual-formal aesthetic qualities do matter when it comes to the built environment and that architecture is the discipline that provides them. Admittedly, the judgment of large sections of the general public is that people called "architects" have been failing in this task since World War Two. Comparisons with older architecture, from this point of view, suggest that in the past architects were more competent in achieving aesthetic qualities. All this admitted, this failure is always a failure of a large number individuals who should have known better, who should have been better trained (instead, entire generations opted to undermine the educational system) and who should have shown more resistance to peer pressures. The identity of architecture as a discipline from this point of view is an aesthetic issue, independent of the failures of the profession, academia or individuals who call themselves "architects." Once they cease to care about visual-formal aesthetic qualities of the built environment, the argument goes, they cease to do architecture regardless of the words they use to describe themselves and what they are doing. The predicament of our built environment is consequently not that plenty of bad architecture is being built, but that very little real architecture is being built at all, because there are very few people who can make it. Architecture is possible in every era, but only individuals who have the necessary formal-aesthetic competence can do it. Nowadays, for reasons described in this book, such people are rare. This is not a new thing. Similar periods of massive aesthetic deprivation have happened in the past, and they can last for long periods of time, but eventually human aesthetic needs always bring architecture back. Aesthetic needs and the good taste from this point of view are hard-wired capacities of the human mind. As long there are humans, architecture (though not necessarily people who call themselves "architects") will necessarily play an important role in human society, since the need for beauty and repulsion for ugliness cannot die. To conclude, one may cite Isaac Newton: "Errors," he said, and the same certainly applies to incompetence, "belong to artists and not to art."[436]

Philosophy exercises a massive influence on contemporary architectural culture and the understanding of the built environment. Discussions of architects and architectural academics are heavily loaded with theoretical ideas, concepts and views imported from the works of philosophers. At the same time this architectural employment of philosophy rarely goes beyond the tendency to mine philosophical works for ideas, words and phrases and use them, often without much understanding, in order to promote architectural agendas and embellish theoretical claims made by architects and academics. The book presents the history of this phenomenon for the past hundred years. It describes and analyzes numerous, often funny, entertaining as well as embarrassing, examples of false intellectual pretense and pompous but incompetent philosophical posturing by prominent architects and architectural academics of the era and their efforts to bamboozle readers, colleagues and the general public. The book presents a powerful criticism of modernist views on architecture and argues that the rise of obfuscation and philosophical posturing among architects and architectural academics is a defensive strategy intended to draw attention away from the failure of Modernism in architecture.

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