Morality and Architecture Revisited

DAVID WATKIN

JOHN MURRAY
Albemarle Street, London
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than 'a striking proof of the utter disregard paid by architects to the purposes of the building they are called upon to design'.

We have argued that Pugin's writings lent support to those who believed in 'a way of building that was not artificial, not marked by human imperfections and that represented some inescapable reality'. Pugin hints at such an architecture when he states that 'a pointed building is a natural building', and that 'I trust, before long, to produce a treatise on Natural Architecture'. In such a treatise we would doubtless have been told frequently that 'every building that is treated naturally without disguise or concealment cannot fail to look well', though we could be equally certain that we would never be allowed to stray far from Pugin's belief 'that the beauty of architectural design depended on its being the expression of what the building required, and that for Christians that expression could only be correctly given by the medium of pointed architecture'. This notion of a natural architecture, so inevitable that its forms should not be open to question, has long outlasted the belief that it had already been achieved in Gothic. Pugin's mode of argument adumbrated the tendency which has been widespread since his time to deny or falsify the role of aesthetic motivation and to claim instead guidance from considerations of 'naturalness', utility, functional advantage, and social, moral, and political necessity, or simply from correspondence with the 'spirit of the age'.

2. Viollet-le-Duc

'Should anyone attempt to construct a theory of modern architecture in harmony with the conditions of thought prevailing today, he will discover no starting point so firm, no background so solid as that provided by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.' So Summerson wrote in 1949 in the first of two essays which argued that with all their strengths and weaknesses Viollet-le-Duc's writings were the basis of modern architecture. The essence of Viollet's Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle (ten volumes, 1854–61) was that he took it for granted that every feature of Gothic architecture
THE THEME IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

had a functional or technological origin and justification. He derived this from the French tradition of rationalist architectural theory from Cordemoy to Rondelet, which we have referred to elsewhere, and used it to justify propaganda for a new nineteenth-century architecture that would be based on a scientific exposition of Gothic. These principles were given clearer and more readable exposition in the two volumes of his Entretiens sur l'architecture published from 1858 to 1872. On the first page of Volume I the vital question is asked, what are the social conditions under which art best flourishes, 'Is man in becoming civilized, refined, tolerant, moderate in his tastes, and well-informed, -- such in fact as our social conditions can make him, -- thereby rendered more apt and capable in the domain of Art?' The answer is a resounding 'No': 'Philosophy, gentle manners, justice, and politeness constitute a state of society in which it is agreeable to live; but this state may be unfavourable to the development of Art.'

He therefore concludes that 'the value of art is independent of the element in which it originates and flourishes', and that to estimate the value of art which may have been 'highly developed and perfected under a very imperfect civilization' we must adopt 'laws which belong exclusively to the Arts, and are independent of the state of civilization to which nations may attain'. This calm and lucid approach, so French in its air of detachment, is very different from German Kulturgeschichte and from the 'social commitment' of twentieth-century architects and their defenders. So why does Summerson imply that Viollet-le-Duc will somehow be found to be 'in harmony with the conditions of thought prevailing today'? The answer is that once he gets into the body of his book Viollet soon drops his quiet detached air and it becomes clear that he has a very determined view of the only kind of society which can produce good art: it is secular, egalitarian, rationalist, and progressive. Moreover, he begins to rely on a belief in the Zeitgeist to

explain away his dislike of Roman and eighteenth-century architecture as expressions of social orders of which he could not approve. This lands him in difficulties with Gothic architecture which he is forced to explain not as an expression of the feudal and monastic Zeitgeist but as an attack on it.

As a great force for good in society, architecture is too serious to have anything to do with style or 'the caprices of that fantastical queen we call Fashion; [for] when it becomes the plaything of a people without fixed ideas or convictions, and when no longer reflecting national Manners and Customs, it is but an encumbrance, a thing of mere curiosity or luxury'. Once the Queen of Fashion with her wayward individual tastes has been deposed, Viollet-le-Duc will be there ready to set up the republic of fixed ideas. For him everything must be reducible to, and explicable in terms of, reason. Consequently for him, 'style depends only on the application to an object of the reasoning faculty', and all buildings are good if they show evidence of rationalist composition, bad if they do not. To illustrate the second volume of the *Entretiens* he designed a number of painfully hamfisted examples of rationalist construction involving blunt conjunctions of load-bearing iron and masonry assembled with no object other than that of seeming to fulfil measurable functional and technological requirements. There has been general agreement that, though interesting as intellectual exercises, these are thoroughly unattractive in every other way, thus disproving Viollet's belief that a well-reasoned and practically useful design must always be an aesthetically successful design. Moreover, the designs are structurally misconceived and are an early example of mock-engineering.

Viollet-le-Duc seems in certain passages to be one of those writers who see only two possible alternatives for architecture: either as capricious fashion, arbitrary and trivial, or as the expression of some external centre of gravity such as social and political ideals, technological necessity, or the spirit of the age. To those who adhere to this outlook, the existence of an artistic tradition with its own canons of judgement and its own standards does not occur.

Viollet's ideas about architecture derive in general as well as
in three important particulars, from eighteenth-century neo-Classicism: he has, first, an underlying Romantic faith in the truth and morality of Greek architecture and society which derives from Winckelmann and which was also developed by Marx who saw the essential quality and appeal of Greek culture as a reflection of the childhood of the human race; secondly, a related 'primitivist' notion that Roman and Renaissance architecture lost contact with the pure font of Greek truth, and is thus morally and stylistically in questionable taste; and, thirdly, a belief, deriving from the rationalist theorists of eighteenth-century France, that beneath the appearance of Gothic architecture there must lie some constructional system capable of universal application so that if only it could be isolated and defined it could serve as the key to all our present problems. For him Greeks and Goths link hands across a sea of troubles: 'the Greek arts are free and independent, the Roman arts are enthralled; and if the barriers placed between the two camps, ancient and modern, were thrown down, there is every reason to believe that the Greek artists would have a much more cordial understanding with those of the Middle Ages than with the Romans, who have been ranked as their allies, while in reality they are only their oppressors.' Trying to define the nature of this enthralment, he writes: 'one of the characteristics of Architectural Art at the close of the seventeenth and during the eighteenth century is the absence of style', and again: 'the style of Architecture during the declining years of the Roman Empire and that of the eighteenth century consist [sic] in the absence of style'. The reason for this is that they all 'show an evident contempt for the form really appropriate to the object and its uses'. Thus, 'if a Roman matron of the period of the Republic were to appear in a drawing-room filled with ladies dressed in hooped skirts with powdered hair and a superstructure of plumes or flowers, the Roman lady would present a singular figure; but it is none the less certain that her dress would have style, while those of the ladies in hooped

skirts would be in (the style of the period), but would not possess style.'26 Similarly, modern Classical architecture is 'a sin against taste, for taste consists essentially in making the appearance accord with the reality'.27 Compared with modern Classical architecture even ancient Roman begins to look truthful:

A Roman-Corinthian monolithic isolated column of marble or granite has style, because the eye, ascending this huge block of stone from base to summit without perceiving a single joint, comprehends its rigid function, which is perfectly indicated by the material and its homogeneity. But a Corinthian column composed of courses of stone, like those of the Madeleine, or the Pantheon in Paris, has not style, because the eye is disquieted at seeing such slender points of support formed of small stones piled one on the other.28

So the eighteenth-century column, like the hooped dress, is a sin against 'taste' because its outward appearance does not correspond with what its constructional reality is in the case of the dress, or ought to be in that of the column. The implication seems to be that technological function and materials left to their own devices will somehow suggest the form, so that the less man interferes in the process, with his imagination and caprice, the better. Gothic art is continually held up as a shining example of this laissez-faire materialism: Viollet writes of thirteenth-century architecture, 'in this general movement individualities soon disappeared, and architecture assumed the form of a science'.29 In this anonymous process of assembly no one will have to exercise the power of choice since everything can safely be left to the dictates of the 'programme': 'There are in architecture – if I may thus express myself – two indispensable modes in which truth must be adhered to. We must be true in respect of the programme, and true in respect of the constructive processes.'30

As we have already argued in the case of Pugin, this kind of language either means nothing at all, or is demonstrably wrong as when, for example, it leads Viollet to condemn columns made up of drums rather than monoliths. The dreary consequences of the
vain attempt to eliminate the human contribution to the art of architecture – with all the suppression of memory, taste, imagination, and tradition that this implies – are clearly spelt out towards the beginning of the final chapter of the first volume:

In the study of the arts of the past, therefore, we should observe a clear distinction between a form which is only the reflection of a tradition, a form adopted without consideration, – and a form which is the immediate expression of a requirement, of a certain social condition; and it is only the study of the latter that issues in practical advantage, – an advantage not consisting in the imitation of this form, but in the example it affords of the application of a principle. 

In his worldly or what might today be called his ‘consumer-oriented’ materialism, it did not occur to him either that the ‘reflection of a tradition’ might itself be the ‘immediate expression of a requirement’ which was more binding than a mechanical requirement, or that forms of which the motivation is primarily aesthetic can appear to be the consequence of technological necessity. Thus a persistent tradition in modern architecture, from the glazed staircases of Gropius’s Werkbund building of 1914 to Stirling’s glazed History Faculty building at Cambridge of 1964, has been the belief that glass has some special and unchallengeable role as the expression of the spirit of modernity. In fact its use is generally an aesthetic urge disguised as a technological necessity and in the History Faculty, for example, certainly cannot be justified by ‘convenience, construction, or propriety’. Thus without some antecedent aesthetic idea, no amount of faith that the ‘programme’ or the materials will somehow suggest their own solution will be capable of producing architecture.

As we mentioned earlier, Viollet-le-Duc has in fact a very clear picture of the only type of society which can produce good architecture, although there is a sense in which he pretends that he has not. He could not reconcile his picture of Gothic architecture as a truthful rational structure evolving inevitably from simple faith in programme and materials, with his knowledge that its builders had believed in God and authority and lived in a feudal society that was
inegalitarian and therefore, to him, irrational or untruthful. If Gothic architecture was just a natural way of building, the first thing Viollet had to do was to remove from it any suspicion of association with priests and particularly with monks, since if it is unnatural to be a priest it is still more so to be a monk. He did this by drawing a contrast between Romanesque and Gothic. Romanesque already stood condemned because it looked back to Roman art, the art of thraldom and oppression; it could now be further condemned as an art produced by monks:

We have an art that sprang from Roman traditions and Byzantine influences, — Romanesque art cultivated in the cloisters; in a few years we quit this for a new phase of art, practised exclusively by laymen — an art based on geometry and the observation of laws hitherto unknown — the equilibrium of forces; and this art continually advances; it soon transcends its original aim. The lower classes combine and obtain privileges by force or address; we become merchants, agriculturalists, and manufacturers.32

The tendency to make of history a mirror wherein we see our own reflection could hardly be more clearly demonstrated than in Viollet's picture of a Gothic world closely resembling the developments of nineteenth-century European society. In his false antithesis between Romanesque and Gothic, he conveniently forgets on the one hand the great strength of the Romanesque tradition in secular architecture and, on the other, that Suger, the patron of the first Gothic building, was a Benedictine monk. The note of fantasy, or at least of wishful thinking, which colours his interpretation of the relationship between Gothic design and Gothic society, is persistently maintained and developed. He writes of the origins of Gothic:

The Encyclopaedic spirit, and the application of the exact sciences engaged the attention of enlightened men; and the influence of the monks then disappeared for ever from the history of art. Architecture fell into the hands of laymen... The desire for political consolidation
and union, the tendency to investigation, to the acquisition of knowledge, and to the immediate practical application of what had been acquired, and the reaction against religious corporations were distinctly expressed by the architecture: men reasoned on every question that presented itself; they examined everything; they had a firm belief in the progress of science, and exhibited a daring boldness without pausing a single day in their rapid career. In this general movement individualities soon disappeared, and architecture assumed the form of a science.  

The interpretation of Gothic as lay, bourgeois, secular, almost Protestant, is probably inspired by the writings of the scholar-statesman, F.-P.-G. Guizot (1787–1874). To Viollet’s fertile mind the curious notion now suggested itself that this great body of laymen must have felt the need to agitate for political ‘rights’ like nineteenth-century workers, and that the cathedrals were somehow an attempt to sublimate those desires:

We must not forget that architecture was then cultivated only by laymen belonging to the common people, having under them guilds of craftsmen. It would seem that the middle class of society . . . felt the necessity of association . . . which should render it, so to speak, independent of the past, and allow it to follow an entirely new path. This class of artists and craftsmen, not being able to claim political rights, and not hoping to rival the power of the feudal noblesse, strove for enfranchisement by work; they made architecture a kind of freemasonry, to which initiation was requisite – an initiation that was constantly made more difficult: this middle class felt that they possessed no material vantage-ground, – that study and the practice of the arts could alone secure them a moral independence . . . For the rise of that architecture was but the awakening of the ancient Gallic spirit: a spirit which . . . forced a way to light and liberty through every available issue. Gothic architecture, at its commencement, was a protest against monastic influence . . . its stones speak; they do not
express 'suffering', as we were recently told by the Académie des Beaux Arts, but, on the contrary, enfranchised labour, – the triumph of an intellect which feels its power, which acts, which is asserting its independence, while ironically concealing its secrets from blind or indifferent masters, and which is conscious that it will one day become in its turn the ruling power.\textsuperscript{34}

Elsewhere we are told that 'in the thirteenth century the art invented by the secular school was essentially democratic',\textsuperscript{35} and that today we can recapture that spirit 'in spite of three centuries of oppression'; thus 'in our own times, as in all former periods, it is from below that the movement proceeds... the old spirit of the lay craftsmen of the twelfth century is being gradually awakened, for in France the humblest workman reasons and desires to understand what he is doing; and he conceives a passion for works in whose general plan as well as in the details he can detect a logical sequence. Our workmen are, in fact, of the same stuff as our soldiers...'.\textsuperscript{36}

It need hardly be pointed out that it is all a fantasy world of Viollet-le-Duc's own creation, and that a different and more realistic picture of the Gothic world has emerged from the patient researches of scholars ranging from Emile Mâle in 1910 to John Harvey in the present day.

Finally, we may observe in Viollet's writings how his belief in democracy and in the Zeitgeist led him to argue that phases in architectural development are produced collectively and from the bottom upwards. The unlikely thesis that 'it is from below that the movement proceeds' was developed in a book published near the end of his life, L'Art russe, ses origines, ses éléments constitutifs, son apogée, son avenir (1877), where he wrote:

It is never from above that those invigorating principles emerge without which art degenerates into imitation; it is from below, it is through the popular consciousness or instinct. Every renewal is the consequence of something worked out in the spirit of the people, of the masses: it is never the product of an élite.\textsuperscript{37}
It is characteristic of the populist democrat that he locates the
Zeitgeist in the Volk or le peuple: sociologism and Hegelian historicism are combined here, as they are in Marxism. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that we have painted in this chapter a full or balanced portrait of Viollet-le-Duc, or indeed that we have painted a portrait of him at all. We are concerned only to show the ways in which a particular theme has affected the approaches of different writers and scholars at different times.