**Eclecticism - The Architecture of Liberal Democracy 8-31-18**

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When power and information are held by the few, innovation and freedom of expression are limited. This is just as true in architecture as it is in politics. After World War II, Modernism became the only accepted style in Academia, regardless of a building’s use or context. Whatever else a building’s design was meant to convey, it was always understood to be an expression of a patron’s power, be it the Church or State. This began to change with the growth of Liberal Democracy and globalization. The empowerment and enfranchisement of progressively more people would eventually undermine absolutism in both politics and the arts.

The rise of Eclecticism in the 19th century was not a style, but the inevitable result of stylistic pluralism. As the British poet William Cowper described the Eclectic, “He catches all improvements in their flight, spreads foreign wonders in his country’s sight, imports what others have invented well, and stirs his own to match them, or excel” [1]. In this paper, I will identify the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Eclecticism and why Academia should embrace it once again.

The political revolutions of 17th century England resulted in the first monarchy to be stripped of power in favor of a representative body. As Voltaire wrote, “The English are the only people on earth who have been able to prescribe limits to the power of kings” [2]. The vast wealth generated from its Maritime Empire and burgeoning industrialism gave rise to a middle class, which in turn began to demand a greater variety of choices in all aspects of culture. In architecture, this demand was met with the increasing availability of historic and foreign styles disseminated through the growth of printing and archaeological studies. As England’s merchants reached across the globe, they also brought home a variety of aesthetic choices to feed the appetite of its growing middle classes. The concurrent rise of consumerism expanded the arbiters of taste beyond the dictates of the few to the marketplace of the many.

Renaissance Humanism had inargurated a new cuture of Empiricism, with its emphasis on human agency. As Leonardo Da Vinci wrote, “If you find from your own experience that something is a fact and it contradicts what some authority has written down, then you must abandon the authority and base your reasoning on your own findings.” [3] For the merchant princes of Northern Italy, this meant a rejection of the Gothic tradition in favor of Classicism. The establishment of the new architectural profession was defined by knowledge in the liberal arts of antiquity, made possible through the proliferation of the printing press. Through the publication of competing treatises, architects claimed mastery of the new style called “All’antica”, which would eventually displace all other traditions of Europe.

By the 17th century, philosophers had begun to explore the basis of beauty as a sensory experience beyond an expression of God’s grace or Classical ideal. Empiricists were a school of 18th century British philosophers who sought to understand the psychology of Human nature on its own terms. Their belief that knowledge came through observation and experience rather than being handed down uncritically would eventually undermine not only Aristocracies claim to divine rule, but Classicism’s authority in matters of taste.

As English society democratized, philosophers began laying the ground work that would eventually undermine Classicism’s monopoly on taste. By analyzing the nature of human perception and more specifically, the feeling evoked by beauty, Empiricists elevated the psychology of aesthetics over academic formalism and dogma. Beauty was now thought to be both universal and relative. As the philosopher David Hume wrote “...each mind perceives a different beauty” [4].

Architecture’s patronage was enlightened by the proliferation of travel in the 18th century, bringing an expanded view of the world’s traditions. From the Sublime to the Picturesque and Rationalist to Romantic, new theories emerged to make sense of the growing aesthetic variety. The gradual displacement of Aristocratic taste in favor of popular taste was due to the rise of the middle class and the power of its purse. By the late 18th century, stylistic pluralism of the 18th and 19th century was the result of Absolutism’s decline and the spread of democracy, which begs the question; why does Academia continue to reject stylistic pluralism and Eclecticism?

As the world continues to shrink, bringing diverse cultures together, it is incumbent on us to allow for the variety of tastes, and build on what they have in common rather than highlight their differences. Academia’s denial of the variety of aesthetic expression belies the pluralism of the modern world.

Renaissance

Eclecticism and historic revivals in architecture are generally associated with the 19th century, though they both began at the dawn of the 15th century. The first style to be consciously revived was Roman Classicism, called ‘all antica’ to differentiate it from the Gothic style. The revival of Humanism in Florence led Filippo Brunelleschi to study the ancient ruins of Rome.

As the only treatise in architecture to survive from antiquity, Vitruvius’s *Ten Books on Architecture* became the new standard. Soon after, Renaissance architects were vying with one another to establish themselves as authorities on Vitruvian principles with treatises of their own. The first of many was written by Leon Battista Alberti, who reiterated the principle of classical beauty as the harmonious correspondence of all parts of a design. By measuring and reassembling the fragments of antiquity, Renaissance architects created the lexicon of forms we know today as Classicism. Patrons began to compete for the most talented artists and architects as a sign of their prestige and sophistication. In order to stand out in an competitive market, architects developed their own style, or ‘manniera’ from where the term ‘Mannerism’ is derived.

The rebirth of science and humanities that flourished in the city-states of Northern Italy was due in large part to their position at the cross-roads of a vast trade network. The enormous wealth generated fueled an artistic patronage that no longer relied on the Church or State. Believing that to beautify one’s city was both a virtue and a pleasure, merchant princes sought excellence in the arts as a sign of their newfound status. An illustration of this can be found in Siena’s constitution of 1309 where it states, “...our City must be honorably decorated and its buildings carefully preserved and improved because it must provide pride, honor, wealth, and growth to the Sienese citizens, as well as pleasure and happiness to the visitors from abroad.” [5]

Classicism was the first style to spread through the printed book. Prior to the easy availability of paper in the 14th century, medieval builders drew on local traditions for their designs. The proliferation of paper made possible a new way of designing whereby every detail could be studied, and with the introduction of illustrated treatises, builders could now draw from a much wider range of precedents. Tradition was no longer circumscribed by geography as architects could access the fruits of the classical world without having to travel.

Michelangelo

One of those who took full advantage was Michelangelo. Rather than measure the ruins on site, he learned by modifying and recombining the fragments of Roman architecture found in one of the first true pattern books, *The Codex Coner*. Michelangelo believed that the art of design relied on ‘ragione dell’occhio’, the idea that one’s eye took precedence over the intellect. His aesthetic approach inspired others to create novel compositions that became known as Mannerism. Michelangelo’s eclecticism led Vasari to write, “...all artists are under great and permanent obligation to Michelangelo, seeing that he broke the bonds and chains that had previously confined them to the creation of traditional forms” [6].

Renaissance eclecticism didn’t come without its critics, including Vasari, who worried about Michelangelo’s license in the hands of lesser artists. Andrea Palladio had a similar warning for architects, writing that “Although variety and new things may please everyone, yet they ought not be done contrary to the precepts of art, and contrary to that, which reason dictates.” [7] Despite these admonitions, even the Pope thrilled at the chance to get ‘qualche fantasia nuova’ [8] from Michelangelo.

In the artistic milieu of Renaissance Italy, novelty and variety were now understood to be a necessary aspect of artistic activity. As Alberti wrote, “Variety is without dispute a very great beauty in every thing” [9]. Whatever the architect’s manniera or temperament, the introduction of pattern books enabled a much broader range of expression.

17th C. England

Classicism came late to England due to years of civil and religious strife. It wasn’t until 1688, when Parliament was established as the ruling body that a sense of order was reinstated. England emerged as the wealthiest, most liberal and technologically advanced society in Europe. Britain’s economic and military might had raised its standing, and just like other European nations with Imperial ambitions, they adopted Roman classicism.

With the shift of power from the King to Parliament, so too began a shift in taste from the few to the many. The public’s increasing interest in aesthetics was noted by Shaftesbury, who wrote, “Almost everyone now becomes concerned, and interests himself in...public structures ...when a great man builds, he will find little quarter from the public” [10].

By the early 18th century, Classicism had finally taken hold in England, in large part due to the publication of two lavishly illustrated books, the translation of Palladio’s *Treatise* and *Vitruvius Brittanicus* by Colen Campbell. At the same time, its expanding maritime empire established the first truly global trading network. Ideas as well as goods came in from all over the world, fueling the taste for novelty and the wealth to indulge it. Particularly striking to English eyes were the designs of Chinese gardens, whose picturesque beauty reminded the gentry of their own estates. One of the earliest accounts of these gardens came from a diplomat named William Temple, who wrote in 1692, “Where the beauty shall be great, and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts that shall be common or easily observed” [11].

As the middle class grew, so did their appetites for consumer goods. The first shopping districts sprang up around London in the late 17th century. As the economist Nicholas Barbon noted in 1690, “It is not necessity that causeth the consumption. Nature may be satisfied with little; but it’s the wants of the mind, fashion, and the desire of novelties and things scarce that causeth trade.” [12]. Traditional markers of class became blurred as more people could afford them. The peasants who flocked to the growing cities found they could reinvent themselves as gentlemen, with a little education and a new suit. The contemporary periodical *British Magazine* noted the changes in society in 1763, writing: “The present rage of imitating the manners of high life hath spread itself so far among the gentlefolks of lower life, that in a few years we shall probably have no common folk at all…” [13] It was during this period of increased social mobility and insecurity that words such as dilettante, kitsch, and parvenu came into vogue to distinguish the upstart from the upper classes.

The Picturesque

This openness to new ideas was reflected in the painter Joshua Reynolds’ essay, ‘Discourses on Art’ from 1786, where he writes, “The barbarick spendour of those asiatick buildings...may...furnish an architect… with hints of composition.” [14]. Another influence came from architects who had taken the Grand Tour. Aspiring gentlemen were expected to take in the sights of Antiquity as part of their liberal arts education. Classical ruins set in medieval Rome and its country side where especially admired for their picturesque qualities. Similar to the Chinese gardens, the upper classes began erecting follies for their picturesque qualities and historical associations. The country side became all the more appealing as urbanization sped up. If one couldn’t afford the Grand Tour, they were induced to travel closer to home.

Growing interest in the Picturesque encouraged architects to explore other styles more suitable to achieving the same effect. As Reynolds said about the use of compositional accidents, one should “...follow when they lead, and to improve them, rather than always to trust to a regular plan.” [15]. The table was now set for a revival of other historic styles.

Uvedale Price was the first writer to articulate an aesthetic theory of the Picturesque in 1794, writing: “That where an object or a set of objects are without sweetness or grandeur, but turn their intricacy, their sudden irregular derivations, their variety of forms, tints, and lights and shadows, are interesting to a cultivated eye, they are simply picturesque.” [16]. Price explicitly tied the Picturesque to Eclecticism, noting the charm buildings that had grown over time.

Another author who recognized the inherent picturesque qualities of Eclecticism was Richard Payne Knight, who said, “The best style of architecture for irregular and picturesque houses, which can be adopted, is that mixed style.” [17]. Knight advocated for the mixing of styles on the basis of associational aesthetics, the more associations the better.

Greek Revival

The archaeological discoveries of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Paestum added to Classicism’s range. With Greece’s emancipation from Ottoman rule, its architecture came under the scholar’s microscope. The Society of Dilettante was founded in 1733 as a group of amateurs and professionals dedicated to the study of Antiquity. One of their most influential publications, *The Antiquities of Athens* introduced the public to a new interpretation of Classicism. As the first non-Roman style to be introduced, the Greek Revival signaled the opening of stylistic pluralism.

The debate between the superiority of Greek versus Roman Classicism was to play out between the German historian Winkleman and the Venetian architect Piranesi. Winkleman raised the battle cry for Greek Classicism as a pure style before it was corrupted by Rome, while Piranesi lobbied for Roman supremacy because of its origins as an amalgam of Greek and Etruscan styles. Piranesi justified eclecticism so long as the emphasis on harmonious beauty was maintained, writing: “Let all the variety of graces be given to architecture that can be desired but let them be such as agree with it...to make them harmonize with the whole…” [18].

One of those aspiring gentlemen who traveled to Rome was the Neo-Classicist Robert Adam. By incorporating the recent archaeological discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum, he developed a distinctive style that bore his own name. Adam anticipated the Picturesque in his use of what he called ‘movement’, “by which we mean the rise and fall, the advance and recess, with other diversity of form, in the different parts of a building, so as to add greatly to the picturesque of the composition” [19].

Enlightenment

 The Enlightenment grew out of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. The belief that an educated public would benefit all of mankind informed the editor of the first *Encyclopedia*, Denis Diderot, who wrote: “...the purpose of an encyclopedia is to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe...so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy…” [20].

Whether questioning theology or the aristocracy, Enlightenment thinkers enshrined the idea that the truth could only be found through unbiased empirical observation, the very essence of Eclecticism. In his *Encyclopedia*, Diderot defined the eclectic philosopher as someone “who, trampling underfoot prejudice, tradition, antiquity, general agreement, authority - in a word, everything that controls the mind of the common herd - dares to think for himself, returns to the clearest general principles, examines them, discusses them, admits nothing that is not based on the testimony of his experience and his reason” [21].

As archaeologists catalogued the various cultures around the world, the question of whether human nature was universal or not occupied some of the greatest thinkers of the time. Since the Renaissance, beauty had been thought to be objective, but how else to account for the variety of aesthetics found across the globe? To understand these differences, 18th century philosophers engaged the inner world of the mind with the same open-ended empiricism that scientists where using to explore the outer world.

Empiricism

British Empiricism began with John Locke, who stated that direct experiences of the senses and reason were the source of all knowledge. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke declared “The perception of the operations of our mind…(have) nothing to do with external objects.” [22]. This prompted philosophers to question the source of our aesthetic pleasure; was it in the quality of an object’s composition, the product of an individual’s mind, or a combination of the two.

In his essay *Of the Standard of Taste*, Joseph Addison noted, “The great variety of taste, as well as opinion, which prevails in the world is too obvious not to have fallen under everyone’s observation” [23]. Addison distinguished between two kinds of pleasures resulting from beauty; primary pleasures from the object’s composition, and secondary pleasures from memories and other mental associations an object evoked. He also identified the role of novelty, which could hardly be ignored in 18th century England. In his ‘Essay on the Pleasures of the Imagination’, Addison outlines the reasons for these pleasures as the “Great, Uncommon, or Beautiful” [24]. By elevating the subjective aspects of beauty such as novelty and the role of personal associations, Addison opened the way to a plurality of styles that began to appear.

Following in Addison’s footsteps, Francis Hutcheson called for a mixed type of beauty, noting that “...Relative beauty along with some degree of the original kind, may give more pleasure, than a more perfect original beauty separately.” [25] Hutcheson believed that mental associations could only augment the perception of beauty, so long as the public was able to read them. Like Addison, he maintained the importance of a ‘universal’ or objective beauty defined as that “which we perceive in Objects without Comparison to anything external” [26].

Bishop George Berkeley, on the other hand took a more cerebral view, writing that “beauty...is an object, not of the eye, but of the mind” [27]. Rather than striking the ‘mind with an inward joy’ as Addison described it, he believed beauty to be “...relative to some certain use or end” [28]. Berkeley explained that since the beauty of an animal’s proportions is tied to its function, beauty is something one reasons before they feel. At the height of Palladianism, Berkeley’s formulation also challenged the basis of Classical authority by tying proportions to their perceived utility. In Berkeley’s analysis we see the seeds of a rationalist or utilitarian view of architecture that was to manifest itself throughout the 19th and 20th century.

 By the 1750’s, British ships were sailing to all corners of the globe, bringing back with them a full view of the world’s diversity. As the Empiricist David Hume said...“The great variety of taste, as well as opinion, which prevails in the world is too obvious not to have fallen under everyone’s observation.” [29]. Hume took an all-encompassing view on the question of aesthetics, writing that “...beauty is such an order and constitution of parts, as either by primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul.” [30].

By emphasizing the universality of the human mind over the universality of Classical proportions, Hume saw the unity in variety of man’s common nature, regardless of culture. According to Hume, aesthetic differences had as much to do with temperament as culture, writing: “All humans seek happiness and that all humans have similar associative psychologies and similar passions, but in different mixtures and degrees” [31].

Edmund Burke identified the ‘sublime’ as an equally pleasurable sensation to beauty. Defined as a ‘delightful horror’, the sublime would eventually be employed by Romanticists who were more drawn to the majesty of Gothic cathedrals. In contrast to classical beauty, which Burke defined as “that quality in bodies by which they cause love” [32], he wrote: “all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime, ought rather to be dark and gloomy” [33].

British Empiricism prioritized the emotional nature of beauty and its causes, be they objective or subjective. The Sublime and the Picturesque joined the Classical ideal of beauty as another option. Stylistic pluralism was based on the Enlightenment’s optimistic assumption that architecture would benefit from a broader range of expression, so long as a harmony of parts was secured. But where some saw opportunity, others saw confusion.

Eclecticism

Even though architecture had always been understood as a blend of science and art, the commercialization of culture drove some to seek a deeper rationale than the whims of the marketplace. By the early 19th century, various schools of thought began to emerge. Historicism focused on archaeological accuracy, Rationalism on structural honesty and utility, and Romanticism tended towards the picturesque, regardless of association. Eclecticism had never been in conflict with Classicism’s aesthetic ideals, it simply expanded the range of styles with which to achieve them.

One of those who inveighed against pluralism was Augustus Pugin, who employed various arguments in his advocacy of the Gothic Revival. Dismayed at what he saw as the vulgarization of architecture, he sought to reform architecture through structural honesty and stylistic purity. The conflation of architecture and morality was given the name “to Puginise”, defined as “to mix up political and theoretical speculations with architectural ones.” [34]

Classicists vied with Gothicists in the Battle of Styles to reestablish the dominance they once enjoyed. Neo-Classicism itself had become eclectic by now, drawing on everything from the severity of Greek temples to the sensuality of late Roman palaces. Just as the 16th century Mannerists sought novel compositions for pictorial effect, so did the eclectic architects of the 19th century, but with a more liberal approach to precedence and a more democratic approach to decorum. As the early 19th century German architect Friedrich Schinkel said, “the essential lessons of antiquity lie in harmonic and constructive relationships rather than in precise copying of mouldings and ornaments” [35]. With the spread of industrialization, the demands of the new middle class increased. The Reform Act of 1832 expanded enfranchisement in the growing industrial cities while culture became popularized in the form of theaters, libraries, and museums. With the locomotive opening up the countryside to development, the middle class could now choose from a variety of picturesque styles for their “country house” on a suburban lot. As the French writer Stendhal said, ”There are as many styles of beauty as there are visions of happiness”.

Aestheticism

By the middle of the century, architects had mostly given up on the Battle of Styles and their accompanying theories. Without a reigning school of thought, eclecticism became increasingly aesthetic, incorporating a variety of styles under its umbrella. As Charles Garnier, the architect of the Paris Opera House, said, “I have a great fear of all definitive theories in the arts which are framed in an exclusivist manner because if aesthetics becomes nothing more than the execution of an over-reasoned formula, it will mark the death of imagination, the spontaneous, and even of the incorrect, which are not to be disdained in human creations” [36].

Aestheticism was a reaction to the architectural polemics that accompanied the 19th century Battle of Styles. ‘Art for art’s sake’ declared beauty to be a good in and of itself, regardless of style. The first truly eclectic style of architecture, the Queen Anne, drew from a global range of precedents, including Dutch Renaissance, English vernacular, and Japanese design in the pursuit of beauty. As Walter Pater, one of Aestheticism’s leading exponents wrote, an aesthete “...will always remember that beauty exists in many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal” [37].

American Eclecticism

Nowhere was the freedom to choose more apparent than in post-Civil War American architecture. An eclectic country by birth, the blending of different cultures was in the country’s DNA, especially in the immigrant rich cities of the North. The need for new types of buildings to house its expanding industrialized economy, further encouraged experimentation. The opening of the West through the railroads, coupled with one of the largest migrations of people in history, created an economic boom similar to the one that fueled both the Renaissance and 18th century England.

Aesthetic eclecticism was introduced to America at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 at the same time that architectural periodicals became widely available. As the Boston architect and critic Henry Van Brunt put it: “We Americans occupy a new country, having no inheritance of ruins and no embarrassments of tradition on matters of architecture; we are absolutely free from historical prejudice…all the past is ours; books, engravings, photographs, have so multiplied, that at any moment we can turn to examine the architectural achievements of any age or nation” [38].

This openness to experimentation attracted the attention of European architects for the first time. The prominent French critic Cesar Daly, commented that “The American advances without turning his head. Not chained to the artistic ways of his ancestors, he does not search for rules in the past; he sees only an arsenal of forms from which he draws freely thus creating the most unexpected and also the most bizarre effects, for his liberty often leads to license” [39]. America’s relative lack of traditions emboldened its architects to experiment more freely than their European counterparts. One of the leading Chicago architects of the late 19th century, John Wellborn Root, described the creative energy of the times, writing, “Aberrations from purity of type, expressions of personal moods, occasional absence of discipline, experiments in form and in the sentiment and application of ornament...are themselves unavoidable incidents of a condition of a vigorous progress and signs of a living art” [40].

Conclusion

Eclecticism’s decline began just as the world became more authoritarian. After the horrors of the First World War, some European architects called for an end to all traditions in an effort to break from the past. Tradition was seen as complicit in the War’s destruction and the pursuit of beauty was deemed traditional. Architectural styles and the harmony of their parts were declared to be obsolete relics of a vanished past. From now on, all architectural expression would be confined to the narrow bandwidth of Modernism’s aesthetic.

America, which had not suffered nearly as much as Europe, was less inclined to this line of reasoning. As the Detroit architect Albert Kahn said in 1932, “Good taste, sound judgement, laws that have governed the best in architecture heretofore are just as applicable today as ever. Many of those espousing the ultra-modern would have one believe that employment of precedent, no matter with what intelligence, is only archaeology; that a building, to be worthy of consideration, must resemble nothing ever done before; that cold logic must replace all romance; that light and shade, composition, proportion, detail, are all inconsequential; all that is decorative, objectionable” [41].

After the Great Depression and the trauma of a Second World War, America’s academics were ready to embrace the stripped down forms of Modernism. Almost overnight, schools abandoned their traditional emphasis on beauty and composition in favor of functionalism and abstraction. After a century of revivals and invention, architectural schools rejected the very notion of style as corrupt. The problem with this construct was that people are born anew with each generation. The beauty of a Greek or Buddhist Temple shines as brightly today as it did for those who first built them. As the 18th century philosopher Lord Kames said, “With respect to the common nature of man, in particular, we have a conviction that it is invariable, not less than universal; that it will be the same hereafter as at present, and as it was in time past” [42].

Empiricists set out to discover the inner world of human experience and psychology. The more variety they saw, the more unity they found. Today, buildings of various styles go up side by side in our world of fusion cuisine and music sampling. Given the eclecticism of the modern world, why does Academia still not allow for a plurality of styles, especially given what science tells us about universality of human nature? As the British architectural historian Banister Fletcher said, “In a liberal, pluralist, and global world, some form of eclecticism is inevitable” once we have “eaten from the tree of knowledge” [43].

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