Our New Architecture and the Many World Cultures
An Open Letter to Classicist and Traditional Architects

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My Dear Colleagues,

In the last few weeks I have been reading many contributions to the TradArch listserv. I have not said anything, up until now, because I have simply been enjoying the community, the joy expressed in ancient things, and ancient wisdom, the renewal of the right to be careful with buildings and to take pains with details of buildings. Above all, I have enjoyed seeing the way many of you talk to each other, respect each other, and try, genuinely, to talk.
The issue is, it seems to me, that we must renew our attention to forms that have life, and like the issue of our New Architecture and the Many World Cultures.

So here are my thoughts.

Certainly, contemporary architecture represents economic colonialism at its worst; it exports the empty imagery for living structure in a way that harms us all, and harms all humankind. If we hold too narrowly to the pure historical classicist forms, we run a very severe danger that this could be perceived as an elitist game, not relevant to seven eighths of the people on Earth, and therefore our times. In an emergency situation, in the times of total architectural and social nihilism that exists among the people who write to this TradArch list-server might be extinguished, because of course, what classicists believe in is not meant to be slighting. It is meant to celebrate the reality of living structure as it has been observed, and that it is that living structure, and the deep nature of what it is, and how it must be produced, that is what ought to guide us and lead us on.

Some of you take seriously the idea of Classicism (not merely Classicism in the sense of ancient Greece and Rome, the Florentine Renaissance, and the English and European styles of building, from a tiny sliver of culture in space and time, were exported, for example to Austria. My parents were both classical archaeologists, and I grew up with respect for all these things. But I learnt anthropology, too, and have lived all over the world, and I have joy in the paintings of aborigines in Australia, and in the starry friezes of Islamic buildings, and in the nature, originate from life and joyfully celebrate life. This must be focused, above all, on the forms that we ourselves make from our contemporary technology. But it does have a great deal to do with what we view as proper models. We must eschew forms that fly in the face of the living structure can come to our work, and to our hands, of their own accord, and through our more careful efforts as architects. It is that deeper structure we must understand, celebrate, and search for in our projects so that ultimately we may learn how to construct a living world.

Whereas the corpus of other traditional architectures has either been lost, or totally neglected in our times. And possibly colonialist in its meaning if not its intent. Yes, we might say that the classical ruling power elite, love to replace their timeless architecture by the latest avant-garde monstrous towers and glass façades that erase local traditional culture the world over. That it seems to me is our common point, what we hold in common.

But that is a very different activity from copying the shapes of classicism, in a literal sense. I was taught to do with what we view as proper models. We must eschew forms that fly in the face of the production of 18th century England and France as a new kind of elitism. But it can be perceived as an elitist game, not relevant to seven eighths of the people on Earth, which is precisely what it is not. If we try to export Doric columns to Nigeria, or Queen-Anne window shapes to Uttar Pradesh, this could be perceived as an elitist game, not relevant to seven eighths of the people on Earth, and hence the problem with the production of the last eighty years is that much of it has turned its back on the presence of living structure. It is this living quality which inspires us, and which we, rightly, must consider as our heritage and our great teacher. It is great, and it is a great teacher, because it shows us the existence of a fund of living architecture and asks us and invites us to emulate that fund, in our own way, and to become part of it with our own.

The point of paying serious attention to traditional architecture is something very much larger, is a matter of the nature of the forms of building, from a tiny sliver of culture in space and time, were exported, for example to the presence of living structure. It is this living quality which inspires us, and which we, rightly, must consider as our heritage and our great teacher. It is great, and it is a great teacher, because it shows us the existence of a fund of living architecture and asks us and invites us to emulate that fund, in our own way, and to become part of it with our own.

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