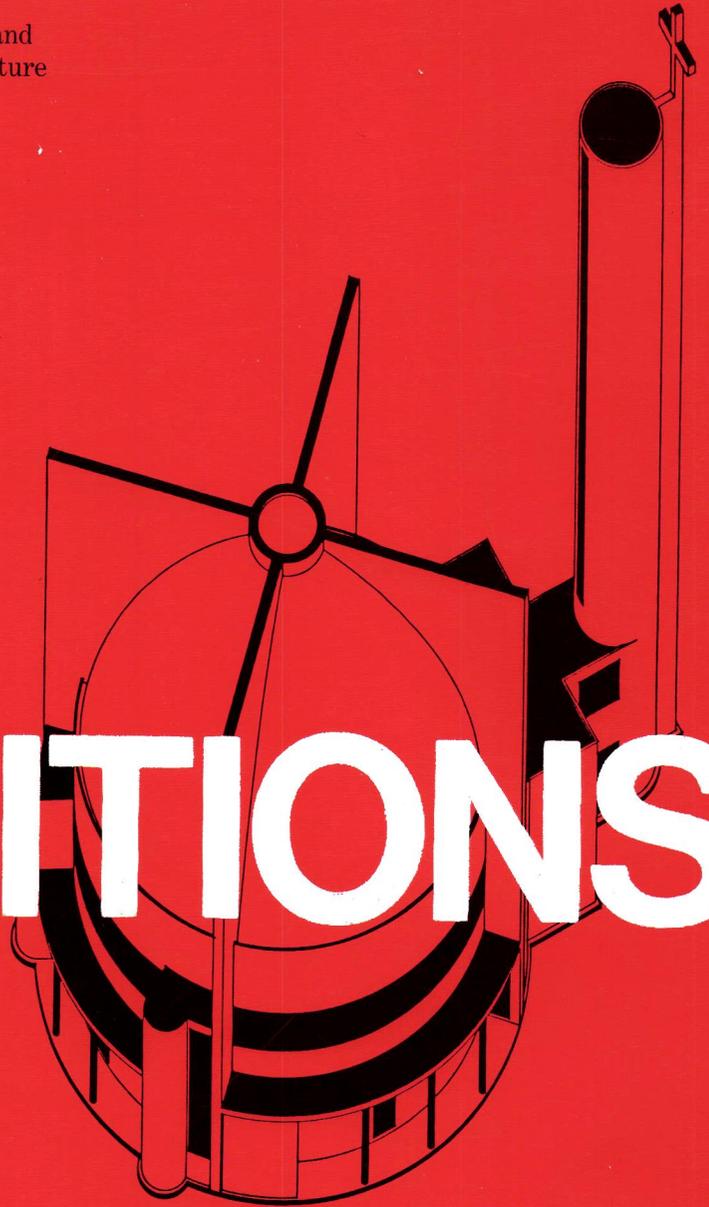


A Journal for Ideas and
Criticism in Architecture

OPPOSITIONS



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Criticism in Architecture

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The word “historicism” has, since the 1950s, been somewhat uneasily associated with a theory of historical determinism on the one hand, and a relativistic eclecticism on the other. While Karl Popper has seen in historicism a teleological theory of history that has, for him, totalitarian implications, Nikolaus Pevsner has warned against what he regarded as a “return to historicism” in the work of the late fifties, by which he meant a return to the eclectic, stylistic allusionism of the nineteenth century. Popper was, of course, referring to those idealizing schemes of historical development that, following Hegel, saw history as some giant impersonal force replacing God or Providence as the implacable instrument of human destiny. Pevsner, however, was using the word in an entirely different sense simply to denote a resurgence of historical “quotation” of the sort that Modernism had thought to ward off once and for all by a combination of abstraction and the machine aesthetic. “Historicism” for Popper represented a “poverty,” a flattening of the pluralistic nature of human existence; for Pevsner it signalled a lack of “authenticity,” a betrayal of the manifest conditions of modernity as proclaimed by the Modern Movement.

These two negative understandings of the nature of historicism, while apparently mutually opposed, in fact both refer to the sense of the word as it first occurred in English as a translation of the German *Historismus* and the Italian *storicismo*. Here the sense of the word was entirely positive, derived from the perception, common to historians like Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Meinecke and philosophers like Benedetto Croce, that a new vision of history had been developed in the nineteenth century. With its roots in the “Scienza Nuova” of Vico and the careful philology of Leopold von Ranke, this historiography (generally called the German Historical School) was thought, in the 1920s and 1930s, to constitute the very essence of modernity: opposed to the Natural Law philosophies of the Renaissance and the universalizing rationalism of the Enlightenment, it held that the characteristics of each historical event were unique and particular, that they were to be understood, not through any preconceived system of judgment, but solely through the standards of their own time. The idea of a uniform and constant rule, permeating the universe as a whole and governing the life of natural species as well as that of mankind, was in historicism overthrown in favor of a vision that concentrated on the individual nature of each age, according to values derived from inside the period itself. The “science” of nature and the “science” of human institutions, culture and society were for ever separated; not only was the object of study different, but the methods utilized to understand each were radically opposed. Rather than searching for a universal causation for natural and human

phenomena, historicism stressed the understanding of human historical events on their own terms. Underlying this sense of historical specificity was of course the quasi-organic notion of unity proposed by the Romantic Movement, a unity constituted at any one time by an individual, an institution or culture, which was immediately manifested by every production of that culture. Styles, languages, social forms, laws and customs were all, in each period and place, bound to each other as symptoms of a “character” which was unique to that age and to no other.

2 Here we can see the intimate relations of historicism as a theory of historical enquiry to nineteenth century stylistic eclecticism. For the assumption that each age possessed its own style allowed each style so identified to be assimilated to the values and ethical standards ascribed to that age. Each different style became in some way, thereby, an emblem of its society, a reflection of the morality and historical meaning of events; like language itself, a style was seen as revealing and “standing for” its speakers. Styles, historically understood, were thus loaded with the “meaning” of their societies and might be used as “signs” of that meaning. Abstracted as they were from their original conditions of formation, the historical styles signified, as it were, by themselves. Behind the eclecticism of a Piranesi, a Pugin or a Morris, lay this idea of history: that the style was endowed with *authenticity* by virtue of the historical idea of the society that first gave birth to it. This “idea,” at once historically specific and morally redolent, was carried by the style of its time; so much so, indeed, that the style alone might act, in another time, to stimulate the *re-birth* of the original social and moral conditions of its first formulation. Style and society were linked like cause and effect—a neat reversal of the terms of historicism, but one logically derived from its premises. In this sense, Pevsner, himself a historicist historian, is correct in viewing the apparent eclecticism of the fifties as a return to nineteenth century historicism.

But, according to the tenets of historicism itself, such a “return” was bound to be “inauthentic.” While the phenomena of nineteenth century eclecticism might be understood, as Hegel himself pointed out, as deeply rooted in the individualistic and autonomous position of the post-Romantic artist, that of the twentieth could be explained with no such ease. For had not the Modern Movement called for, and to a large extent produced, an art entirely characteristic of the modern age? Had it not, by breaking decisively with the “styles,” and rejecting the weight of tradition, forged a new language consistent with the demands of the new epoch? Had it not, indeed, finally fulfilled the latent requirements of historicism itself, that the style and the age be in perfect harmony? The recognition of a specifically modern *zeitgeist* was after all an essentially historicist act. This all the historians of the Modern Movement in the twenties, thirties, and forties recognized; they were, after all, themselves deeply historicist in their methods and preconceptions. The predictions of nineteenth century historiography were seemingly being dramatically confirmed by events. Emil Kaufmann, writing his celebrated essay “From Ledoux to Le Corbusier” did not have to elaborate the point that was obvious from his title: that the intimations of bourgeois modernity, found in the “abstract” forms of Ledoux, had found their appropriate resolution in Modernism. The internal laws of history had once again

demonstrated their truth; the architect was simply an agent of their implacable development. From these presuppositions, and others linked to them in the Hegelian canon, came the “method” of the first historians of modern architecture as they searched for “origins” of ideas and forms, tried to follow their “development” and culmination in a phase of history that itself was called a “movement.”

The Post-Modernist age has, we are continually reminded, no such easy faith in the laws of historical development, nor so strong a belief in the authenticity of abstraction as the basis of modern expression. As the utopia of the Modern Movement has come under social attack, so its aesthetic has been criticized as lacking those dimensions of humanistic reference, of pluralistic statement, that might prevent what many have seen to be the “creeping totalitarianism” of Radiant City. The reaction, as Pevsner noted, has been toward a revival of historically based images, quotations from historical styles, assimilation of “contextural” incidents in literal and realistic ways. As Collage City, the visual counterpart of Popper’s “piecemeal” reformism, replaces Radiant City, and as the direct emulation of classical or gothic motifs gradually covers the bare surfaces of Modernism, we have to recognize that, despite any nostalgia, the aesthetic of the twenties and thirties has itself become a style of the historical past, consumed and implicated by the very history it sought to suspend.

This is not, however, to say that the premises on which this new allusionism is based are themselves any more soundly formulated *historically* than those of Modernism. Indeed, they rely absolutely on the very fiction promulgated by Modernism that it had succeeded in breaking with the past; they demand the myth, so dear to the avant-garde of the twenties, that a rupture, a discreet shift had been effected between the old eclectic world and the brave new one. For “Post-Modernism” self-consciously tries to “heal” that break, overcome that “rupture”; in the search for consolation, or, more cynically, for ever-renewable consumable images, it turns to the “history” of architecture, its “rich tradition” of meaning and form, as if, in disinterring the signs of a homely past, the deserted present might once more be domesticated. But while the myths of the Modern Movement are thereby sustained while being challenged, the “Post-Modern” architects and their ideologues are no longer served by the same theory of history, the *historicism*, that once gave meaning to eclectic and Modernist alike. The historical city and its historical architectures are referred to, but without the coherent framework of ideology that, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, endowed specific styles with overtones of particular politics and moralities, or in the early twentieth century, that gave sense to the Modernist project. We cannot, then, with Pevsner, see the recent rash of historical allusions as a simple “return” to historicism. Not only the conditions for referring to the past, but the very possibilities for ideological signification, are profoundly different.

In one sense this difference has to be blamed on the prior existence of Modernism itself. By asserting the primacy of abstraction—with all the attendant values of spatial or volumetric order, typologies of pure form, geometric absolutes—Modernism did, in some way, “end” the possibility of an architecture firmly based on an historical style. Not only were the