

ARCHITECTURE AND PROGRESS IN THE WESTERN WORLD

by Pau Pedragosa*

What is the current outlook for architecture seen in the light of progress in Western history? The history of Western architecture reveals developments that in only a (very) limited sense can be considered progress. There are at least three basic aspects that have to be kept in mind in order to understand and evaluate architecture as a whole: the technical, the artistic and the social. Can we be certain that architecture has progressed technically, artistically and socially since its origin? It is necessary to analyse each of these three aspects in order to finally evaluate the relationship between architecture and progress in the contemporary world.

There is a unanimous agreement that techniques, in existence from the very beginning of humanity, have progressed to the technology and high-tech that current buildings ably display. The improvements that technological progress has brought to our buildings in terms of comfort and quality of life are indisputable. It is therefore correct to claim that architecture has progressed from a technological point of view. However, progress in one area does not imply progress of the whole. Technology is the defining characteristic of the modern era. It has given and still gives shape to buildings and cities. Nevertheless, it is precisely its spectacular nature and the fascination for rapid technological changes that bring to attention its fundamental shortcoming, its incapacity to improve other aspects of our existence. The effect of the rise of technology (inseparable from science) and its omnipresence in all areas of life is what Max Weber, writing at the start

of the twentieth century, called 'disenchantment with the world'. It was a term he used to criticise science and technology's tendency to reduce our lives exclusively to the very same values technology aspires to: rationality, efficiency and security. According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the absolutism of technological progress has converted the world into a homeless place. It is an 'efficient machine', leading to Man's loss of the meaning of the word 'to dwell' and it is the work of architecture to make our world, the buildings and cities once more our home. 'To dwell' means the complete experience of the concrete cultural and historical world we live in, which is not promoted in the experience brought about by technology¹. Can art, the other essential component of architecture, compensate for this unilateral element, overcoming its disenchantment and homelessness, and therefore promote 'dwelling'?



The German Pavillion was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, held in Montjuïc

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE HAS CONVERTED THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE (MODERN) INTO A NEW GLOBAL STYLE (POSTMODERN) THAT MERELY PROVIDES OBJECTS WITH SPECTACULAR, INTERESTING AESTHETICS THAT ARE AT THE SERVICE OF TECHNOLOGICAL OSTENTATION

Art is just as important as technique, as has been recognised throughout the history of Western architecture. Architecture forms part of the arts and, before Modernity, it was considered the most important since it united all the other artistic genres in an organic whole. This was the case of the Greek temple, the Gothic cathedral, it was still true in the Baroque era and the Bauhaus movement tried to make it so once again for our era, which was already defined by technology. Can we state that art progresses? It seems clear that we cannot, or in any case, it is not clear that we can state that modern art is better than medieval or Greek art. What we can say is that modern art has changed radically with respect to earlier eras. The radical na-

ture of this change is summarised in the Hegelian phrase 'the death of art', which means that the way in which art was understood before the arrival of Modernity (up to the Enlightenment) has disappeared to give way to a new concept of art, which is summarised by the expressions 'aesthetics' and 'aesthetic object'. This change is not only a substitution of terminology of the word 'art' for 'aesthetics', but rather it signifies a triumph, in both theory and practice, of an aesthetic conception of art over an older conception, the Greek and medieval, which we can call 'ethical'². If the latter consists of the capacity of art to articulate and make comprehensible a community's way of living, the aesthetic conception of art, in contrast, maintains that this is produced to exclusively provoke aesthetic experiences in the observer, that it is the object of the aesthesis, of sensations and feelings. This led to the emergence of the fine arts, taken to be those works that purely give aesthetic pleasure. As a consequence and in opposition to these, we find the appearance of applied arts, such as architecture, in which the aesthetic experience has to be reconciled with the functionality of the object, in a tense struggle³. Architecture ends up being divided between a highly technological functional structure and a decorative,



Fallingwater, Pennsylvania was designed between 1934 and 1935 by Frank Lloyd Wright and is considered his masterpiece

‘aesthetic’ covering. The equation ‘architecture = technological building + aesthetic decoration’ was to be the object of serious criticism at the start of the twentieth century by John Ruskin and Adolf Loos, among others.

DO WE RECOGNISE THE BUILDINGS AND THE CITY WE DWELL IN, DO WE FEEL AS IF THEY ARE OUR OWN AND WE UNDERSTAND THEM?

The new definition of modern art leads us to consider the third aspect of architecture, the social, precisely because the result of the substitution of the ‘ethical’ art of the past for the ‘aesthetic’ object is the elimination of its social function. From its beginnings architecture has had a social function in

the sense that it has given shape and significance to the spaces in which people’s activities, habits, customs and way of life have taken place throughout the different eras of history. They understand and recognise the spaces as their own. Can we confirm that modern architecture’s capacity to give shape to and transmit ways of contemporary life has progressed when compared with previous eras? Do we recognise ourselves in the buildings and the city we dwell in, do we feel as if they are our own and we understand them? The fact that the answer is not clear was made manifest in the middle of the twentieth century by Sigfried Giedion in his key work *Space, Time and Architecture*, in which he wrote that we find ourselves in a period at the start of a new tradition, the modern one. The principal job of the architect, Giedion argued, is to ‘interpret a valid way of life for our times’⁴. According to Giedion, the architecture that can accomplish this

task is the one which will follow and go beyond the modern paradigms of F. L. Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius (exponents of the International Style⁵). He opposes a 'type of playboy architecture', an architecture treated as playboys treat life, jumping from one sensation to another and quickly bored with everything⁶. Giedion therefore opposes a type of architecture that interprets the lifestyle of our era and has, in this fashion, a social function, to an architecture that, taking the aesthetic experience to its limits, seeks only to provide 'spectacular feelings' in order to avoid boredom, which is to say an architecture that is *intéressant*.

We can summarise the position of contemporary architecture as the separation and autonomy of the three aspects which make up (or used to make up) architectural unity. This atomisation and fragmentation is a reflection of the modern situation in general, a situation that is a result of progress in the West. The spectacular advance of science and technology forms part of the same phenomenon that endows art with an aesthetic autonomy and makes architecture incapable of representing the whole of society with recognisable forms related to a historic tradition that increasingly appears stranger and more distant. The elements that tra-

ditionally formed an organic, centred unity, now develop separately and appears as if they can only be connected through forming a collage.

Contemporary architecture has converted the International Style (Modern) into a new Global Style (Postmodern) that merely provides objects with spectacular, interesting aesthetics that are at the service of technological ostentation. However, when aesthetic invention is solely at the service of technology, then architecture becomes indifferent to the historico-cultural place that embodies the different lifestyles and it is thus unable to give individuals the sense of dwelling in a place. Architecture needs to provide an urgent answer to this situation. To this end it is necessary to call into question the current 'Global Postmodern Style' through a new appropriation or rereading of the Modern International Style, our architectural tradition. A true appropriation of Modernity has to be able to give form and meaning to the place of the different cultural identities and, simultaneously, articulate this place with the homogenisation of the global space defined by technology. Since this articulation is necessarily tense and conflictive, architecture has to learn how to provide the fragment, the *collage*, with the creative potential capable of reuniting technology, art and society in one complex, critical unity.

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1 HEIDEGGER, M. The Question Concerning Technology. Building, Dwelling, Thinking. *Conferencias y artículos* (Conferences and Articles), Ediciones del Serbal, Barcelona, 1994. The first article also has a Catalan translation: *La qüestió envers la tècnica*, in *Fites*, Editorial Laia, Barcelona, 1989.

2 HARRIES, K. The Ethical Function of Architecture. MIT Press, 1998.

3 KANT, I. Critique of Judgement, \$16. Editorial Espasa Calpe (publisher), Madrid, 1990.

5 GIEDION, S. Space, Time and Architecture. 5th Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, p. XXXIII.

6 International Style: Architecture Since 1922 is the name given to the essay and catalogue from the International Exhibition of Modern Architec-

ture, organised by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson at MoMA in New York in 1932, in which were shown buildings from around the world with certain common characteristics that identified them with the new International Style of the modern era. The most significant exponents were: F.L. Wright, W. Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, J.J. P. Oud and Le Corbusier.

7 GIEDION, S. Ibid, p. XXXII.