Anti-modernism and Architectural Rhetoric

The Case Of Prince Charles

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Roman Hillmann studied Classical Archaeology, History of Art and Conservation at the Freie Universität and the Technische Universität Berlin and was awarded his M.A. in 2001. He learned building archaeology in practice at the Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege. His PhD thesis, titled “Post-war architecture in Western Germany: Questions relating to the aesthetic and monumental value”, begins with a research into the history of the reception of post-war architecture. In this part an analysis of Prince Charles’s book, “A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture” has a prominent place as a striking example of a system of prejudice against modern architecture.

Prejudice has been a constant companion to modern architecture. This has not helped people to understand it, but ignorance of reasonable criticism did not improve the modern movement either.

Generally speaking, this is prejudice: the disregard of one method of architecture for the belief in another, which is thought to be the only right one. This disregard leads to ignorance. Not only are architectural qualities ignored, but also important criticism of the actual architectural ideas or dogma. The early modern movement at the turn of the century and the "Klassische Moderne" after the First World War thought of their new architecture that should overcome the styles as the right architecture. The Bauhaus ignored important criticism which was levelled at some modern dogma. The frustration over suppressed dialogue hardened the prejudice on the side of the critics and criticism became lamentation.
After the Second World War, modern "functionalist" architecture became, step by step, a leading canonical way of building. The broad variety of styles, even incorporating traditionalist ideas, ended by the end of the 1950s and in the 1960s a real international, consequently modern style was consolidated. It was in the first half of this decade that substantial criticism of the modern town and architecture began. The aims of this critique cannot all be reviewed here, but it spoke against the "monotony" and "dullness" of the new town and architecture, which were seen to be standing against the "diversity" of old quarters. By the planners and architects this was just interpreted as a hint for diversity that led to a change of town planning from the "gegliindete und aufgelockerte Stadt" to "Verdichtung und Durchmischung" by the middle of the 1960s. The more complex and fundamental critique which described architecture as a form of power, shaping the lives of people, was not heard. It did not, however, change the general tendency of renewing the old town by replacing structures and buildings. The destruction of pre-modern buildings and the functional abandonment of town centres continued. That is why public protest against destructive modern town planning became widespread in the middle of the 1970s, and was successful: appreciation for old structures and architecture became a new ideal in town planning and restoration. But also the typical, always identical phrases expressing dislike and hate against modern architecture as a whole became pervasive. Today, in Germany, we have in fact a situation whereby the hatred towards modern architecture leads to the destruction even of important monuments of this period. So the hatred the Bauhaus propagated against historical architecture was simply replaced by hatred against post-war architecture. Hateful prejudice always ignores and destructs. (fig 3)

In reviewing architectural history, it is important to get a historic view of the conflict. A better understanding and classification of reasonable criticism must round out the historic view of the period. Nevertheless, it is only possible to get a clear look at the immense worth and quality of modern architecture, and especially post-war architecture, by analysing the prejudice.

For this purpose, Prince Charles's book "A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture" turned out to be a very good example. This is because compared to other anti-modern books Prince Charles's view includes all the typical anti-modern prejudice and little reasonable criticism. This makes it possible to analyse the logic and rhetoric of argumentation against modernism in its pure form.

The book, published in 1989, continues the Royal Family's tradition of patronage concerning architecture. In his book, Prince Charles criticises post-war modern architecture. He proposes an England of completely traditional architecture, in design as well as in technique. In contrast to post-modern architects he rules out concrete, even as a material for construction. When the book was published, it had quite an influence on contemporary architects. But since a small town Charles patronised in Wales, Poundbury, turned out to be too expensive to be a general example, the ideas have lost their importance.

Prince Charles's architectural criticism is both aesthetic and moral. He says, "We all need beauty [...] We should therefore no longer be nervous about aesthetic questions". He claims that "people" know what beauty is. What is accepted by their taste is real beauty, and not functionalist aesthetics which he says develop from "abstract principles". By this he denies that the design of modern architecture is itself the work of artists, which it is. He denies that the aesthetic judgement is subjective, and cannot be objectified by quoting the opinion of a majority, which it cannot.

His moral view of architecture stems from his conception of hierarchies in society, something he sees as obligatory. This picture of a society should also be present in planning from the "gegliindete und aufgelockerte Stadt" to "Verdichtung und Durchmischung" by the middle of the 1960s. The more complex and fundamental critique which described architecture as a form of power, shaping the lives of people, was not heard. It did not, however, change the general tendency of renewing the old town by replacing structures and buildings. The destruction of pre-modern buildings and the functional abandonment of town centres continued. That is why public protest against destructive modern town planning became widespread in the middle of the 1970s, and was successful: appreciation for old structures and architecture became a new ideal in town planning and restoration. But also the typical, always identical phrases expressing dislike and hate against modern architecture as a whole became pervasive. Today, in Germany, we have in fact a situation whereby the hatred towards modern architecture leads to the destruction even of important monuments of this period. So the hatred the Bauhaus propagated against historical architecture was simply replaced by hatred against post-war architecture. Hateful prejudice always ignores and destructs. (fig 3)

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Anli · Modernism

1. One cannot see the function.21
2. One cannot see the meaning of the building or its value in relation to the other buildings of a town.21
3. One cannot see in which part of the world the building stands.21

Considering this, I wonder how one can tell the function of a museum of the Victorian period in comparison to a bank, if one has not entered it before.

Internationalization in style has been a phenomenon of architecture since the Renaissance; in technique it is much older. The relative values are a typical idea of the Prince, as we have seen in his picture of the town with a cathedral and small-scale buildings. I would suggest there are simply a lot of differences between traditional and modern principles. The tradition within the story of architecture is variety and a living history for the citizens.

Cleansing is bore.

before 1947 (traditional) after 1947 (modern)

innocent guilty

beautiful inhuman

ugly without any tradition (i.e. without tradition in the whole history of architecture and without tradition inside the history of modern architecture)

harmony without scale incomprehensible, abstract

local

The core of the argumentation is that we are 'innocent, beautiful and human', while 'they' are 'guilty, inhuman and ugly'. This block and white picture ignores all intermediate shades and so leaves out a lot of facts.

I agree with Prince Charles when he says that we all need beauty and should not suppress aesthetic questions. This is because I believe that scientific evaluation is influenced by a personal perception of what is beautiful and what is ugly, too. I agree with him that the opinion of the layman is as important as that of professionals, because professionals do not all agree on one opinion and therefore variety of opinions is a phenomenon both amongst professionals and laymen. But since aesthetic judgement is subjective and cannot be objectified, a tolerance of other opinions is very important. It cannot be one person who decides what is beautiful and ugly.

The potential of a scientific view, in natural science and in liberal arts, is that it discovers things which previously were not noticed. Professionals and scientists can help the understanding of the layman by giving him facts. They can broaden one's view. That is why I chose to write my thesis about the qualities of post-war architecture.

Through objectification I wish to make my belief understood that post-war architecture is beautiful. Dangerous are personal statements such as Prince Charles's, which incorporate pseudo-science, but really ignore and defame. With a black and white picture and defamatory arguments such as his, it would be unnecessary to take a closer look. This shows how prejudice closes the eyes to the possible pleasure in discovering and understanding the modern. It is a pity to see how prejudice is also to be found in some literature with a scientific approach. I do not want to discriminate against aesthetic judgement or reasonable criticism myself. “But the qualities must be researched and they must be understood!”

My vision is this: the qualities of our towns lie in the variety of architectural utopias, which were begun, suddenly outlived, and were never fulfilled. These fragments form our city. They are the variety of our towns, which is variety and a living history for the citizens.

I want to thank very much: Sigrid Brand, Andreas Butler, Adrian von Butlar, Thomas Steigerberger and Ben Wild.

The distinction between "prejudice" and "reasonable criticism" used here was also used in an example of Stadtbaurat in the USA M. and L. White, The Intellectual Versus the Civic. Penn.

Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright, Massachusetts 1962.

The most important debate in Germany which led the described development, was the so-called "Bauausschrieb" in 1953, where Rudolf Schwarz tried to resume debate with the Bauhaus. He did it in a very offensive way, with the result that no reasonable criticism was ignored. See:


Earlier critiques in the USA, such as that by Lewis Mumford, is not quoted here because I specialize on Germany, where the following books had influence:


2. See: H. Muschack, Städtebauspannung der Gegenwart. Düsseldorf 1965, pp. 22-29, as one of the contemporary analytic reactions on the critique of the side of an urbanist and G. Hasenclouph and P. Peters, Scholle, Punkt und Higol. Neue Wohnbauten. München 1966, pp. 7-9, from the side of architecture. The later example shows how "Durchmischung" was solemnly fulfilled, while "Verdrängung" meant urbanism.

3. The change of public attitudes as a consequence of ignored criticism is analyzed in the case of the USA by Meredith Clawson, who will publish her book The Pan Am Building and the Collapse of Modernism at MIT Press in 2004. She has a thesis for the USA that "far more important than the book [by Jane Jacobs] was the building of the Pan Am Building in New York" which was built "despite the public outcry, despite the outrage on the part of the professionals" and changed the public attitude towards modernism. (Quoted from her paper by kind permission.)


12. Ibid, p. 83

13. Ibid, p. 85


15. Ibid, p. 77.

16. Ibid, p. 76.

17. Ibid, p. 79.


20. Ibid, p. 59: "How could those in control become so out of step with so many Londoners who felt powerless to resist the destruction of their city?"


23. Ibid, p. 77: "... a kind of nondescript, mediocre, synthetic, International style of architecture, which is found everywhere from Kyoto to Rangoon."

24. Ibid, p. 84f.


NOTES