

THE DILEMMA OF CONFORMISM, THAT IS, OF CHAOS¹

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I ask you to please bear with me if this little lecture I am about to deliver does not primarily adhere to the previously given title. The reason for this is that some days ago I began to be preoccupied with some rather painful self-searching that I began to write down — and where, on what better occasion than in the company of my friends and colleagues, and on an occasion where we celebrate them, can I share these with you, than here and now.

The state of chaos has a way of increasing, of growing and multiplying of its own accord = immeasurably, and unpredictably, in its affective mechanism; — functional — applicable chaos is interpretation — sight — the chaos of verblativity, of the direction of the will — hierarchies — the chaos of models, — faith and distrust, wealth and poverty, aristocracy and populism all in chaos, — the chaos of nationalism and internationalism, — the chaos of formlessness, and of 'formed' forms — the chaos of spontaneous and of programmed, inner, forced doubts, the chaos of 'why's', and their own question marks and loudly proclaimed declaration, the chaos of politics and apolitics, of self-suggestion and manipulation, — and over and over again, in the guise of under- and over-construction, — architecture — the chaos of SPACE

I don't know when this confusion began — perhaps it started with Luther — or perhaps with the revolutions of the past century — or before, with the French Revolution — or rather perhaps with the industrial revolution and of urban explosion, of the end of the past century, — or perhaps with the First World War, in an esthetic sense with the modern age, —

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which only just now, with the 70's and the 80's, asserted itself, — and here has just now appeared, with the present, with today.

Chaos lives with its own question marks — , in the 'why', in the 'is it worth while?' Only in the past two or three years have I begun to put this question to myself — and now, I do this increasingly daily. Why do I 'drive myself', why do I start off to work at 1/4 to 7 in the mornings, why do I sit in my studio until 8 at nights, why the bad taste in my mouth, why the sense of un-ease, — why the sense of uncertainty. The feeling of un-ease can be a collective one as well — it is so fashionable to say this today, and of course there may be something to it as well. Political and social unrest, shaken (never believed) ideologies, and the ones of old which cannot be reconstructed impossible to find again. Impatience, nervousness, irritability, and problems seen through a magnifying glass, — pre-felt pain and suffering, amateurish struggles — and a thoroughgoing dilettantism everywhere. Fear for the nation, for the family, for the self — Country and City, — a fear for the acquired and held to be deserved, privileges and titles which others are constantly trying to take away or attack, — of a rank which I had thought I had unquestionably reached, — the fearful specter of the newly reincarnated humiliations that I thought long conquered, in another form now, — trembling because of the new challenges of LIFE, and of WORK, — and self-blame because of this trembling and fear.

The World around me — around us — has changed, the pulse and style of speech is different, the pace of life is different, behaviour and customs have changed, as has the hierarchy of importance; — the streets, grotesquely full of cars are different, as is the Inner City, now grown into a flea-market full of Arabs, and different is the taste of a fast-consumed beer. And also, different and changed is the presence of so many beggars, drunks, people camping out in the Metro, of crowding, of scuffling, the shrillness, — different, different, different!

I wanted this new World, and I do not like it. I longed for this 'freedom', which I have 'not yet' grown to love. I wished for a 'market' — and the new pushiness now forced on me bothers me. I wished for plenty, but the newly promised opulence puts me off. I am bothered by the new superficiality, the bluffs, pretensions, and the new style of deceptions; I am put off by the new forms of impertinence, and by the neo-style of aggressivity, — I am bothered by what others do, and also by what I create myself. I am bothered by the total falling apart of the world of OBJECTS, the crumbling apart of architecture, the indistinctness of taste, of culture, the inability to specify and articulate needs, the indigent condition that culture and taste have been reduced to, freedom bothers me, the unchecked multiplication of theories, the superficiality, the existential brutality of rudeness, the unformulatedness of laws, the bother of looks and glances bothers me.

Not long ago I calculated on the time when I would have preferred to have been born —, when it would have been worth while to be living in this NEW ERA. I must be careful in the calculation — a few years off, would mean tragic setbacks. Thus, it would have been fortuitous to be born around 1850–52 — growing up during the period OF THE COMPROMISE (after the 1848 Revolt against the Habsburgs) — to come of age then, and to produce and practice during the time of the MILLENIUM (celebrations of Hungary's 1000th anniversary, 1896) — during the turn of the century, the spread of the Art Nouveau, and then to be wounded, to go crazy from the horrors of the First World War (or go quickly from a quiet, but instant fatal blow, beforehand . . .)!

And of TODAY? How beautiful the 60's and the 70's were! Silent, careful, tolerant terror, understanding guys in uniform; SPACIOUS prison courtyard, almost invisible walls — and these decorated with leafy foliage and flowers; — it was good to work, and they actually allowed it, permitted it. Composed, ossified — but with some doing, some charming manouevring, tremblingly, — laws which could somehow be circumvented, — the only slightly perceivable whiff of freedom, — and of course, the interchangeability of STYLE and of FIXED MODELS.

Of course all of us, architects and people in general, complained. The stupid diletantism of power — then too, outraged us, as did the unspecifiedness of function, the unnaturalness of hierarchies, the humiliating pride of administration, of bureaucracy, to which one had to cow-tow. And still, as architects, it was easy for us to believe in something. We believed in the classical modernists — in GROPIUS, MIES VAN DER ROHE, in WRIGHT, AALTO, KENZO TANGE, in KAHN, and of course, in CORBUSIER, and later in SIREN, KORHONEN, PAUL RUDOLPH, and the list goes on at length.

We believed in the progress of the NORTH, in the seriousness of the English, in America's technical ability, in the playfulness of the Italians, in the surprises of the Japanese. The way was broad, and paved, — it was possible to travel it either in a straight path, or in an arched, round-about, zig-zag manner — the direction lead to the same, unmistakable spot. And the poor, down and out reality of things here in Hungary, the grotesque demands, the unacceptable carrying out of projects, the lack of available materials, and their terrible quality notwithstanding, architecture did not fall so glaringly below the levels of quality usual in the West, that had been held in such complete awe, — as today, when we stand in the open doorway of everything Western.

Our problem today — is, of course, complex, many-layered, and its causes are by far not self-imposed. Taking things merely from the stylistic point of view, seemingly, and perhaps just time, but the MODERN has collapsed; — more popular, praiseworthy, marketable gestures have ap-

peared, or are just appearing. Meanwhile, the situation, and the FACT — that here the bankruptcy of modernism has gotten much more attention, almost like a circus-production, than in the 'WEST', which in the stylistic sense is so much more densely supplied, as well as much more exposed, over a longer period of time. However this bankruptcy is the bankruptcy of well-being, — not, principally, of the needs of the masses, of society's question marks; — that is, it is not principally ours. It is undeniable that in the pluralism, and in the wealth of styles, are to be found some elementary, definable, seminal human needs and desires — needs and desires that come from age-old choreographies of motion, of the instinctual recognition of space, of territory, from the gestures of defense-mechanisms, and which feed on the fanciful description and formulation of the conventions and laws of form, and which the practitioners of MODERNISM — the classical modernists, have thoroughly and completely bled dry. Architecture has a primary function, which can work only by popular mandate, and this is its meaning. Any other form of art can allow itself to glance into the future, even a half century from now, — and with its problems and ideas, reach over the heads of generations.

Music does this today, as well as sculpture, and painting; — its self-assuredness and the pompousness of the intellectual sector guides it through the simple fact, that nobody actually needs it. These areas can allow themselves not to pay attention to the here and now, to today's world, and with their belief in themselves, they can succeed in explaining, and validating their existence. This is their ethical basis.

However, architecture which does not find favor today, is not ethical, — clothing that is unwearable, is not merchandise, — it is simply a rag. Frankly, I do not know who liked the avantgarde in its own time, the BAUHAUS, for example — perhaps they accepted it THEN. Of course, I still fail to understand who likes ROSSI, or TADAO ANDO; — they get commissions, there is a MARKET for them. POST-MODERNISM offers simple, over or pre-digested answers, — its popularity is a fact, but it is possible that it is only playing; it may be cynical, arrogant, impotent, — but then it may again, be ethical. RICHARD MEIER or STIRLING are surely honest, HARA too, — but whether GRAVES, or VENTURI are honest, is another question. The built world has become fancier, more interesting, more composed, and its theoretic-esthetic has become more confused, and contradictory. The theory that everything goes can stretch, broaden the paths of tomorrow, — experimentation can become valid on its own, but eclecticism, hardly. Yet, and on the other hand, this too is popular, — this historicising, Americanizing, and yet almost Hitlerian-Stalinian HIGH-TECH; — where then is truth, morality, progress, and the future?

I was in London some months ago, and saw the 'DOCK-LAND'; leading architectural firms are building the imitations of Lomonosov University, out of steel, — horses made of bronze rear in the middle of Baroque-imitation fountains, — patterns in which I recognized some traces of the motives of the 'Nagyszentmiklós Treasure', are impressed into the pre-fabricated concrete accanthus leaves, which have steel shingles. And in the middle of this strange, unbelievably scaled architectural panopticum, there runs the beautifully DESIGNED monorail, suspended train system, — run, driven by the computer, without human intervention, — between ribs painted bright red, and acrylic shells. Which object here is valid; — and who here is right — the one who is shocked by this anachronism run amock, or the one who accepts it, and deems it natural?

And here at home, — here where is the truth? What does the majority, the largely URBANIZED Hungarian desire, — a national architecture, which never existed in the sterility that they think it did, then, — but whose necessity has been forced on them with noble, nice 'shop window' methods; — they long for dented, arched roofs, and for RACIALLY PURE, 'TURÁNI' forms, humanoid, skeletal-motifs; — or for easily producible, liveable living-cells by the thousands, which may kill the soul, but serve well their elementary function, that of protection for the body, from freezing to death! Again the question: where is the boundary of the made-up, or actual, lasting or 'ad hoc' popular acclaim and ethics; where is the boundary of architecture's self-deception and masturbation, where is the boundary of what we believe to be ORDER — or actually, the lack of ORDER, where is the boundary of artificially composed LIFE, — where is the boundary of unpunished turning-out of THEORIES — how far can the good old sleep-walker, who believes in the existence of the THE OLD? THE BEAUTIFUL go, unprotected, — where is the boundary of necessary ADJUSTMENT, the CONFORMISM, by force?

The DILEMMA can be articulated, — but its answer cannot. Where is the line to be drawn between the respect that is due to the things of the PAST, and their knowledge, — that is, creative, positive respect — and the kind of respect that becomes cloying, overdone, adulation, and not directed toward the seminal elements, but is rather overloaded with administrative, eminent overtones?!

Where, and what is the nature of the firm point of departure from which the gesture of the desire to ADJUST, to INTEGRATE may spring; to what degree can this gesture be superficial and obvious — in the moral as well as the esthetic sense — stylistically, formally, and according to the state of the arts of the present — to what degree can this gesture be bought for small change, to put in absolutely vulgar terms, and to what degree can this gesture be made into a formula that officials and POWER

STRUCTURES can demand on sight, to what degree can a heterogeneous society's gestures — one that can hardly express itself, and buries itself in the cowardly reading of fashion-magazines, in a half-civilized gesture of attempted contact with the rest of the world, albeit unself-assuredly?

Where and when must we place limits on the attempts of the Age which itself is transitory, and thus unstable, — to find its ways and means of expression, and where and when is such interference amoral, — when is it the gesture of witch-hunting Jesuitical Inquisitioners, or one of self-declared LAW, which trembles in the face of its un-understood actions — and when is it mandatory — also on moral grounds as well, — to have wise and understanding discipline, some exacting strictness, the acknowledgment of rational, sensible limits and boundaries of behaviour? Is it really feasible to call the artificial resurrecting of obsolete customs, age-old, forgotten motion, thought, desires, emotions; the self-deception and forced, aggressive interjection and interference in the faith, life-rhythms, values of a different age, — adapting, joining-in, being in touch? Is it really adapting, joining-in, fitting-in, and being in touch, when every exaggerated dimension, every window-sill height is measured with ruler-exactness, is it being in touch to ape forms that were invented to serve a purpose now long obsolete — without even actually understanding them? The PRESENT cannot really assert itself in an architectural environment which can only be preserved for the future by its present actions; it really cannot further enrich such spatial entities with new, constructive ideas (with its function and forms) which have been relegated, stamped with the category of the protected historic monument. I am afraid that the answer to these questions is not forthcoming from architecture, — but from entirely different forces which have grown alien and foreign, directed by much more brutal, violent, laws which move according to strange (and still today, unknown) powers: that of vested interests, of gain, profit, and investments, and CAPITAL.

Our present WORLD, with its destabilized consciousness, unstable value-system, unformulated taste and needs, does not create a firm foundation for the architect, to express his will in the SPACE of national-social-community that accepts him — this is why and how his actions become imitable, and in his consciousness this is why the undigested past becomes all mixed up with the unconstrued present and the undreamed-of disharmony of the unpredictable future. His eyes are transfixed by the now unabsorbably communicative UNIVERSES every movement — and in this over-abundance of indigestible, unabsorbable stimuli, he loses his very identity, self, and all that he has to say: about SPACE, FORM, HUMANITY. In this way he comes to believe that it is valid to use the anachronistic, the KITSCH, which to him becomes humane, and proper for human consumption; he sees the past as indiscriminately valid, pru-

dent, functional, and everything associated with this, as international, as progressive lifestyle, even when it reeks with repeated eclecticism, and is in awe of the swaggering arrogance of the technicians whom he considers so up-to-date.

Please do not misunderstand me, — I am not making accusations against anyone, — I am not beyond blame myself, — I am constantly haunted by doubts, questions as well. Perhaps there is no solution. It is possible that we have to follow a path which, although posted full of signs, has no direction nor aim.

Nevertheless architecture is intrinsically, since its very beginnings in prehistory, instinctively optimistic; — and, because of its very nature as a service to humanity, as well as a consequence of its expressive, playful tendencies — it is basically moral, by nature. The teaching, the instruction of architecture cannot do other than underscore its virtue and morality, teach it, preach it. This profession can be saved only on moral terms, by understanding, appreciating the past, and, reaching deep into the wellspring of the past, analyzing the present, — stripping it of its manipulated colored rags, and weaving realistic dreams about a future in which it will not be necessary to listen to lines like the ones I have just delivered in this lecture. Yes, 'redemption' can only be understood as morally significant, moral in origin, — with roots akin to those of my ever-youthful friends in whose honor this symposium is being held.