

BOOK REVIEW

The history of architecture. Antiquity

Gyula HAJNÓCZI

Textbook Publishers, Budapest, 1967, 462 pp. 632 figures

The Department of the History of Architecture of the Budapest Polytechnical University has started a series of textbooks with the aim to offer an insight into the universal history of architecture by a series of richly illustrated books not only to future architects but to the public at large. No better choice could have been made than asking Gyula Hajnóczy to write the first book of the series. He has graduated both from architecture and from archeology and studied ancient architecture on the spot during his travels in Italy, Greece, the Near East and Egypt.

The book covers the history of architecture from the oldest known constructions of the ancient Near East to the Constantinean period. The division of the book permits the various periods and territories to be discussed in ample details (about half of the book is taken by the architecture of the Near East and that of "transitional" cultures, Greece occupies a quarter, Roman architecture somewhat more than a quarter of the volume). The book is written in concert with the modern conception of investigations into Antiquity and with the prevailing aspects of the theory of architecture. Although in our opinion the value of the aesthetics of Greek architecture has remained invariably unique, we know better and have a higher appreciation of the architecture of the Near East in Antiquity and that of the preclassic cultures of the II-I millennia B.C. as in many respects they may be considered as a forerunner of modern architecture and space shaping. Even more decisive is the attitude, generally accepted today, that contrary to the classicism of the 19th century does not conceal but stresses the path-breaking role of Roman architecture both in the relation of space-shaping construction as we understand it now and in laying the direct fundamentals of European architecture as a whole.

A survey of ancient architecture so full and paying due attention to its interconnections is a pleasure in itself born out of the practical requirements of the history of architecture and educational aspects. It is a well constructed counterbalance to fractional insights generally offered by writers on archeology and cultural history. Special research and syntheses usually do not go beyond summing up the architecture of single cultures or, in the best case, units as an isolated survey of the architecture of the Ancient East or Greco-Roman architecture. No need to stress here the importance of a synthesis unlike the former publications especially in the field of elucidating aspects and interrelations and considering the architecture of Antiquity as a historical entirety. This importance is not negligible even if the vast material and limits in book size make certain simplifications inevitable.

The sequence of discussion, the structure of single chapters reflects the author's care

to meet the demands of education, the accuracy of subject and built-up and give the necessary theoretical information.

Within major units a short and articulate introduction is given about the geographical situation, economic and social conditions, history and culture of the part under survey. Then follows a detailed description of technical elements and structures in the given architecture that makes the reader acquainted with concepts returning in the passage that makes out the bulk of the work and is about the history of architecture. After the description of a culture, author gives a short but deep-going summary of the ways of expression, art of space and volume, facade construction habits and the historical role of the architecture of the period. These ingenious summaries supported by interesting and demonstrative schematic diagrams are the most valuable parts of the book for the theoretician. To sum up the fundamental characteristics of an architectural culture in a few pages is a most difficult and bold venture deserving appreciation even if it is made by making use of compilative methods, and especially if—as is the case in this instance—it is the result of individual judgement done with a strict adherence to uniformly prevailing principles. It would be unjust to set further demands to a work offering such a high standard of concentration. Thus it is rather a suggestion for the future than any remark on the quality of the present efforts if we say that it needs but a single step to arrive at the theoretical generalization of historical regularities from here: to expose the interconnections of the established norms of architecture with the economic, social and cultural features discussed in the introduction of the chapters. Such final interconnections are often referred to in a clever way in the course of historical discussions.

The book is made even more valuable by the rich illustrative material serving primarily teaching purposes. The best part of the photos was made by the author himself and is a proof of his deep sense for photographic art. The demonstrative, fine and well-composed designs prepared under author's guidance praise the know-how of Gyula Istvánfi.

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