

# On Classical and Modern in Architecture - In memoriam Zoltán Szentkirályi

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## Abstract

*We use the terms classical and modern naturally in everyday practice. One, usually to refer to eternal values, the other to the present, to what we consider up to date. We experience more the normative side of the first, and the operative character of the other. Classical, however, has never been something closed, to be simply revered, copied or imitated; on the contrary, it has been permanently working, by influencing and balancing us throughout ages, as a constituent part of every "following", every "present". Classical and modern belong together in this sense, preconditioning each other inseparably in their mental and social function.*

## Keywords

*idea · practice · style · classical · tradition · modern*

Architects firmly believe that buildings they have designed will function properly, and will be in this sense both "true" and therefore, also beautiful. This is not always the case, much architecture, often after a short time, cannot be used effectively, and proves to be odd, even ugly and disturbing for posterity. The builders, in one sense, must have misinterpreted or misdesigned, perhaps they were captured too much by "actual necessities". Many people live in such environments unable to find a solution for something better, and while longing hopelessly for the more beautiful, fall victim to the rudest commercial manipulation. This suggests that unlike everyday technical products, architecture has always been evidently more than simply actual or functional, and it has always had a much broader significance. The anthropological and practical function of individual self-projection beyond pure immediate reality can hardly be denied. Such human mental procedure must have created what we call ideas more than two thousand years ago. Whatever we think of the philosophical background of this question, countless inherited buildings and environments have justified that to ignore this broader perspective, either in the spirit of a short sighted "up to dateism" and pragmatism, or for the sake of an unlimited self-expression, it has been an obvious mistake in the long term, undeniably dangerous and harmful for man and society. Idea and practice have had much more in common than we have supposed. The Greek word *phronimosz* exactly means practical wisdom, uniting the active and contemplative dimensions of human action. [5] Classical, at first sight, seems to have remarkably little to do with modern. It has been considered as something remote and timeless; modern means, on the other hand, that which functions in the present. One has usually been imagined as a normative standard, the other as something that operates. We rarely think of the fact, that once, while being generally honoured and revered for some reason, classical was also everyday practice. Exactly the kind of practice we still do and have been doing so for centuries, different from those completely forgotten, or familiar to us from history; although, doing them now, in the present, would no longer make sense. The ancient Greek theatre, the statue, the temple,

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the stoa were neither “classical” nor “art”, but tradition, debate, assembly, confrontation, game, celebrity, cult, meeting and cooperation, constituted a certain unity of man’s social actions, and a reverence of values beyond human relevance at the same time. Classical has, in this respect, a clear operative character; its continuously returning achievement seems to balance every “present”. “Classici” has meant the better, the best, the most outstanding.

The term was first used by the Romans in the age of the Roman Kingdom. Throughout history, classical has gradually started to mark and mean things, those which people found again and again reasonable, valid, right, good, and beyond this, capable of uniting beauty and truth. It has been experienced by generations, as a living part of the present, collecting and finally guiding the natural divergence of the contemporary, making it possible to step forward, into the successive, into what follows. Similarly, the term modern was also used by Romans in the first centuries of Christianity. Those, having adopted the new state religion called themselves *modernus*, to separate themselves from pagan Romans, whom they considered belonging to the past. Modern has been understood since then as the successive present, which distinguishes itself from what it looks at as the past, either for acknowledging its achievements and considering it as its predecessor, or on the contrary, for refusing it for its obsolescence and anachronism. To feel modern has meant to be capable to form, define and create one’s own age and identity with responsibility, considering the fate of past and future fellow humans at the same time. We can say in this original sense that classical and modern belong and function inseparably together and that it does not make sense to understand them as opposites. We naturally use the term “classical modern architecture”, referring to emblematic works of great masters of the early twentieth century like Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, or movements like the Bauhaus or the De Stijl. We think of these buildings as an established, canonized legacy on one hand, and of the obvious affinity of these masters to the tradition and methods, inherited from antiquity and revived by the Italian Renaissance, on the other. They worked according to similar principles, without copying the historical vocabulary of those past epochs. Le Corbusier invented “Modular”, and created many of his buildings following the proportions of the “Golden Section”, well known and refined since antiquity, as the “natural” series of proportions. Mies, educated in the German tradition, throughout his lifetime from the Barcelona Pavilion until the National Gallery in Berlin, was clearly interested in developing a kind of modern steel “order” after the example of the classical ones. Both of them worked in the spirit of the classical, without applying concrete rules or elements of classicism. Neither classical nor modern are simply custom, fashion, trend, taste, model or style, at least, not in the sense we use these terms today. Modern has meant throughout centuries the own age, simply distinguishing the contemporary

from the ancient, and no epoch has been given this name by posterity. Their unique relationship was revealed in a new way, different from all the previous changes in European culture, with the rise of modern aesthetics and productivism, by their definite denial of any practical relevance of the past to the present. Art and architecture had nothing to do with imitation or the correction of nature and history as formulated by late nineteenth century industrial academism, ultimately based on the principles of classicism. On the contrary, they created and produced life directly, and in doing so, they were also equal to nature and modern industrial technologies. Guided by the general belief in these technologies, the “first machine age” [2] started to attribute the term “modern” to all aspects of life, stressing its total uniqueness unprecedented in history. Modern self-consciousness turned away from all established kinds of representation and refused the pluralism of historicism, which was not least the result of the developing field of archaeological research, supported by natural sciences and modern technologies in the previous centuries. It prohibited the application of not only all codified rhetorical sets, but consequently, much practical knowledge already at public disposal, and instead proclaimed a new rigorous, exclusive and normative set of rules. Style, as a morphological set of representations, became the key notion of historicism in the nineteenth century because of the scientific need to find and formulate the logic of the past, and interpret it as historical progress. The new spirit, as a following reaction to historicism, tried to annulate it with all its consequences, and was eager to deny the operative function and relevance of the past to the present. It considered itself naively and strictly “objective”, being able to finally overcome this question. Trapped by this, exactly in the nineteenth century interpretation of style, it soon declared itself “De Stijl” and shortly after, the “International Style”. These well-known developments allow us to analyse in relation to the classical, the numerous generations of classicisms in a more subtle and constructive way. The modern need to define classical by exact methods of the intellect led to classicism, which was a notable development of early European modernity. In the course of the exploration of the sensual, natural world from the middle ages on, man inclined increasingly towards finding beauty in the terrestrial, and the human phenomenon again, and as a consequence, also recognizing his own achievements in the past. The most outstanding examples were found in the works of ancient Greeks and Romans by discovering in them the ideal harmony of nature and man. Revitalizing the Greek concept “*idea*” to create a supreme principle for truth and beauty, it was declared, as a conclusion, that there could not exist better, more beautiful and more truth, than works of antiquity, interpreted and corrected by the most outstanding “modern” masters of the Italian Renaissance like Vignola, Scamozzi and Palladio. [3] The creation of a rational, “objective” set of rules based on the laws of nature in art and architecture was related and parallel to the

advancing methods of natural sciences in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, and became a source of twentieth century modernity as we can clearly observe in the art and architecture of the Enlightenment period. We can assume in this perspective that both the evolution and the history, and in addition, also the late twentieth century critique of modernity, involve a more complex view of the coexistence of the classical and modern. This critique announced itself in the late seventies as post-modernism, first neglecting the risk of such hasty proclamations, well known from history. As a consequence, the quarrel between the new radical neo-eclecticism and its immediate counterpart, the similarly militant neo-modernism in the eighties and nineties was a clear symptom of mental disorientation in architecture and the intolerant simplified wave of progress of the post-industrial society, often using the rhetoric of both sides at the same time for its own interests of representation. Both anti-modern vulgarism and neo-modern orthodoxy considered classical and modern as opposites, totally excluding each other. Since then, their rigid positions have considerably inhibited a more constructive approach to the question. The German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, analysed the origin and historical role of modernity in his famous lecture "Modernity an incomplete project" [6] held in Frankfurt am Main in 1980. He pointed out that modernity, by denying all relevance of the past to the present, and increasingly tolerating only its own premises and doctrines, declared itself gradually as an "objective" norm. Giving up its "modern" critical function, it simply became a "status quo" instead of being a profound self-regulatory process in history, which could not yet be regarded as finished. By distinguishing the operative and normative character of modernity, Habermas attracted attention to the possibility of a similar interpretation of past epochs too. In these years of the general revision and critique of the modern achievements of the post war period, beside numerous anarchist and pessimistic attacks, several contributions arose that offered a more complex, realistic and constructive view of modernity and modern architecture. Among others, Simo Paavilainen analysed the influence of the classical tradition on twentieth century Nordic Classicism, [8] and Kenneth Frampton outlined the operative role of the classical tradition in the rise of the European Avant-Garde. [4] The term classical was used in both essays as "classical tradition" distinguishing it from classicism, neo-classicism or romantic classicism, which marked certain periods in the history of art and architecture. The national Romantic Movement in the Nordic countries discovered the decorative vocabulary of folk art and architecture at the end of the nineteenth century, and following the spirit of the epoch, intended to raise it to the rank of a national style. Folk culture, however lovely and decorative it appeared for modern man with his academic education, was not simply decorative at that time, but moreover real life, everyday practice, living tradition, and similarly to the classical, still preserved the unity of the

practical and the artistic, thus the ontological and representative character of human action. Similar interest had already appeared in Western Europe in the seventeenth century, as a part of the developing modern self-consciousness on the eve of the Enlightenment, opposing the ultimate relevance of eternal values represented by the emerging classicism. Early modern man already felt the loss of that living unity in academism, and turned, - in quite a "modern" way - beyond ancient, and later, also medieval patterns, increasingly towards the contemporary, and to the vernacular, exemplified among others by the famous "Querelle des Ancients et Modernes" in France. Compared to Western Europe, folk art and architecture became a constitutive part of the national culture in Northern and Eastern Europe, only later, by the early twentieth century; this was a result of systematic ethnographic research, initiated and led besides scientists, often by the most outstanding artists and architects. This process took place during the evolution of the new technical devices in architecture and engineering, which finally opened the way for the "white" modernism of the twentieth. Due perhaps to the bilateral impact of the still living ontological relevance of constructive folk tradition on one hand, and the related new, intrinsically constructive spirit of the age on the other, modern doctrines were received with reasonable critique by Nordic architects; the transition towards modern architecture was more articulated, less bound to the visual formalism of non-figurative, avant-garde painting. The historical achievement of "Nordic Classicism" was in this sense quite progressive, it could avoid being a simple revival of the nineteenth century classicism of Hansen, Bindesbol, or Engel, and was able to successfully integrate the national, the vernacular, and even the classicist traditions into a unique modern character. These have often been referred to since then as Nordic modern architecture, represented by theorists as Rasmussen [9] Norberg-Schulz [7], or Andersen [1], and architects like Asplund, Lewerentz, Aalto and others. Frampton analysed the primary, ontological function of architecture as shelter, and its narrative capacity in society as public representation, in his essay [4, pp.168-170] in connection with the architecture of Heinrich Tessenov. He considered the first as a type of syntax, the other as a set of semantics in architecture. It seems that the unique consistency of a work of architecture that fully impacts us, captures the senses and mind and attracts our attention to our inevitable responsibility as builders, has been assured exactly by the equilibrium of the ontological and representational dimensions, the latter being able to realise, to evoke and transcend the former. It may seem a paradox that only the material perfection of such extremely "hard" [10] structures has been able to be truly open, to inspire and challenge posterity to try to follow, to actually go forward, and thus to be truly modern. Everything else has been nothing more than the eternal seduction of the "interesting". Our epoch has been dominated by the rational attitude of man, searching the ultimate reasons of phenomenon based on the practice and

tradition of natural sciences. The humanities, however, have sought to identify the causes and consequences of human actions in history and their evaluation at the same time. While architecture is a response to the challenges of nature, it cannot escape the necessity to constitute values in its decisions, which relates it to the humanities. Their methods include beside and beyond notions like reason, phenomenon, cause, and others like origin understanding, or responsibility. We can observe the origin of understanding in the wonderful development of children. A careful, conscious orientation, transmitted with the

frankest devotion, but fulfilled with spontaneous emotion and pleasure on the part of parents, and the marvellous interplay of repetition of the experience and creation of their own on the part of the children, leading to the immense set of mental and social skills that we call personality. To build human atmosphere and create an ambience to live in, we try to remodel, again recreating this rich and flexible process more or less consciously, one which any architect would find hard to deny. Whether we attain this level or not, it can be verified by the work we have done, but truly qualified only by posterity.

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