



FORMS, FABRIC, FREEDOM

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Contemporary Issues
Harvard University - 1976

PART 1

*"The non-oppressive environment does not depend on the quality or quantity of the products which populate it but on the relations of its inhabitants."*¹

Eleven years ago, Christopher Alexander published Notes on the Synthesis of Form. More recently in 1975, there has appeared his The Oregon Experiment. The first text was directed towards an explication of the possibilities of a scientific architecture based upon a rational articulation of the program.² The second text appears to represent an almost complete turnabout. If the first book proposed a solution to our problems via the activity of the enlightened 'management' or an informed bureaucracy, the second seems to propound a solution or a way out in terms of participatory democracy contributing to an organic and pluralist whole.

Never-the-less, it seems to us that both books are connected by a thread of doubt. This is a doubt about the ultimate value of forms, objects, and architecture; and it is to this widespread conviction as to the gratuitousness of aesthetics that we would first like to address ourselves. It is of course by now a very old conviction and it was obviously central to the polemic of the early modern movement. Thus one can recall a continuous theme of Mies Van Der Rohe's thoughts:

*"Architecture is the will of the epoch translated into space: living, changing, new."*³

*"We refuse to recognize problems of form but only problems of building."*⁴

*"Form is not the aim of our work, but only the result."*⁵

*"Form by itself does not exist."*⁶

*"Form as an aim is formalism: and that we reject."*⁷

*"We should not judge so much by the results as by the creative process. For it is this that reveals whether the form is derived from life or invented for its own sake."*⁸

*"I hope you will understand that architecture has nothing to do with the inventions of forms."*⁹

*"We put up what has to be built, and then we accept it."*¹⁰

Traces of the same mentality are abundant in Le Corbusier from whom perhaps one need only recite the following:

*"Not in pursuit of an architectural idea, but guided simply by results of calculations (derived from principles which govern our universe) and the concept of a living organism, the Engineers of today make use of the primary elements and by coordinating them in accordance with the rule, produce in us architectural emotions and thus make the world of man ring in unison with universal order."*¹¹

'The will of the epoch', 'Life,' which Le Corbusier characteristically renders physical as the 'Engineer' are all evidently conceived of as agents of emancipation, of release from convention and routine as means of overcoming the status quo.

This continuous bias of the modern movement to which one may well respond could be allowed to present two questions:

1. Are we to accept this bias as a basis for a program of action, or
2. Are we to interpret it as an index of a particular psychological state or condition which was once significantly creative, but which today may be residual or largely residual?.....

PART 2

Our on-going argument might now be sustained by a further sequence of quotations. Habermas says:

"Those who proclaim the end of art - whether artists themselves, literati, or middlemen of the culture industry - and now make up the chorus for a revolution that makes its entrance as illusion are impelled by the experience of resignation. The verbose death notices are motivated not by hope for the realization of symbolic meaning and expression, but by doubt of the credibility of aesthetic means. The more radical among them assert that the artist must lay down his paintbrush or pen because the categories of beauty have gone over from the world of aesthetic allusion to that of political action. The more liberal, who know that after the declarations are completed they will return to their studio or desk, leave open some loopholes: one may abandon art, but only at one's own risk. Finally, the more conventional believe that the Cultural Revolution is given its due by reducing art to agitation: reportage replaces belles-lettres. Analogous declarations, though more poorly formulated, are made at the universities. Here the goal is the abolition of knowledge: while art at least, is only ideology, knowledge is direct repression. The New Knowledge will emerge spontaneously, as it were, from political practice, the immemorial stream of life..."¹²

And Igor Stravinsky to Robert Craft says the following:

R.C. "And 'modern'?"

I.S. *The only sense in which I think 'modern' can now be used must derive from, or so I imagine, a meaning similar to the 'devotio moderna' of Thomas a Kempis. It implies a new fervour, a new emotion, a new feeling. It is 'romantic', of course, and it suffers (pasehein, to suffer, is also the root of pathos; incidently) for it cannot accept the world as it is."¹³*

And from the footnotes of w. H. Auden's A New Year Letter:

" Definition of ethics: the rules of the game.

Definition of aesthetics: the most difficult game known to man.

Definition of a saint: he for whom ethics have almost become aesthetics.

*Definition of God: He for whom everything is child's play."*¹⁴

In this sequence Habermas comments upon a contemporary situation which we know very well while Stravinsky is observing the phenomena of modernity as a compassionate but evidently skeptical commentator with perhaps the greater perspective which presented itself to him in his later years. 'Modern suffers ..., for it cannot accept the world as it is.' And then according to our reading, Auden proceeds to provide some definition of things as they are. That is: he presumes the necessary co-existence of both the ethical and the aesthetic, the parallelism of moral acts and artistic constructions. The notion that aesthetic fabrication can be (must be?) the analogue of ethical performances; and that, therefore, it is the reverse of superfluous. And that in a fallen world, ethics and aesthetic can never be fused, the obligation to make the attempt (the root of the saint) must always remain both crucial and futile.

These remarks could be allowed to constitute a basis for argument. Architecture is a social institution, that is, it must inevitably partake of the virtues and deficiencies of any given social situation; therefore, and ipso facto while it can never be wholly good it can never be entirely bad. Architecture may merely reflect convention but architecture can, however inadequately, postulate a social order transcending convention. With this conviction in mind the following statement may be considered rather odd:

*"The utopian architect stands _____ as a critic, not as a producer or a contributor to either oppression or non-oppression."*¹⁵

For were not such great 'architects' of the political order as Plato, Edmund Burke and Karl Marx essentially critics? And is there not an exceptionally thin line to be drawn between those who are 'critics' and those who are 'contributors'?

PART 3

Again a sequence of quotations:

*"Great men are superfluous."*¹⁶

*"The individual is losing significance. His destiny is no longer what interests us. The decisive achievements in all fields are impersonal and their authors for the most part unknown."*¹⁷

*"The cult of the ego has delayed the acceptance of sound trends in modern architecture ... Remnants of this mentality must be eliminated before the true spirit of architectural revolution can take root among the people everywhere"*¹⁸

With these quotations we again re-enter the world of the Weimar Republic where 'great men' can apparently become anonymous as no more the sensitive instruments of destiny. We might enlarge our picture of the Weimar Republic with information provided by Stephen Spender:

"Ten years after the War, Germany was full of peace, it dripped with peace, we swam in peace, and no one knew what to do with all the German peace. They built houses with flat roofs, they sunbathed, they walked with linked hands under the lime trees, they lay together in the pine forest, they talked about French art. Above all, everything was new, and everyone was young. They liked the English very much and they were sorry about the War. They talked about the terrible time they had during the Inflation.

*This was in Hamburg. I used to bathe, and I went to parties of young people. I had never enjoyed parties before and I never have since, but these were like living in the atmosphere of a Blue Period Picasso. Everyone was beautiful, and gentle, everyone was poor, and no one was smart. On summer evenings they danced in the half light, and when they were tired of dancing they lay down in the forest, on the beach, on mattresses, on the bare floor. They laughed a great deal, smiling with their innocent eyes and showing well-shaped, but not very strong teeth. Sometimes they let one down, sometimes the poorer ones stole, for example, but there was no sin. I am not being ironic. There really was no sin, like there is in this kind of life in Paris or London."*¹⁹

The atmosphere of a Blue Period Picasso! It could be a Picasso of the Rose Period as well. But is this not the environment into which everybody wishes to enter, in which we all wish to exist? And when we hear of the

possibilities of a social existence, relief from oppression, if we do not think about Giorgione and/or Titian do we not or does not the instance of the early Picasso constantly leap to mind.

But if the Utopian dream is apparently dismissible and if the Arcadian dream apparently retains almost its full force should we not now consider the scenario to which the Weimar Republic inevitably led? And may we not inquire as to whether the Weimar Republic simply turned itself inside out? We think of the Weimar Republic as a political order determined to promote the rule of love, emancipation from all forms of oppression and/or coercion; but to what extent is the Third Reich its inevitable sequel? To enlarge our picture of the Weimar Republic and its sequel still further, we again refer to Spender:

*"Of course it was all very superficial, it has been blown away now. I could not dance. I could not speak German. I stood rather outside it. I think now of the sad refugees who were the exquisite, confident students of the Weimar Republican days... Perhaps it was all fictitious, but now in letting the mirage fade from the mind, I got very near to the truth, because everything in Germany is inclined to be fictitious. The German tends to think of his life as an operatic cycle emerging from a series of myths. There was the War, then there was the Inflation, then there was the youth and the Weimar Republic then there was the Crisis, then there was Hitler."*²⁰



Plate 1



Plate 2

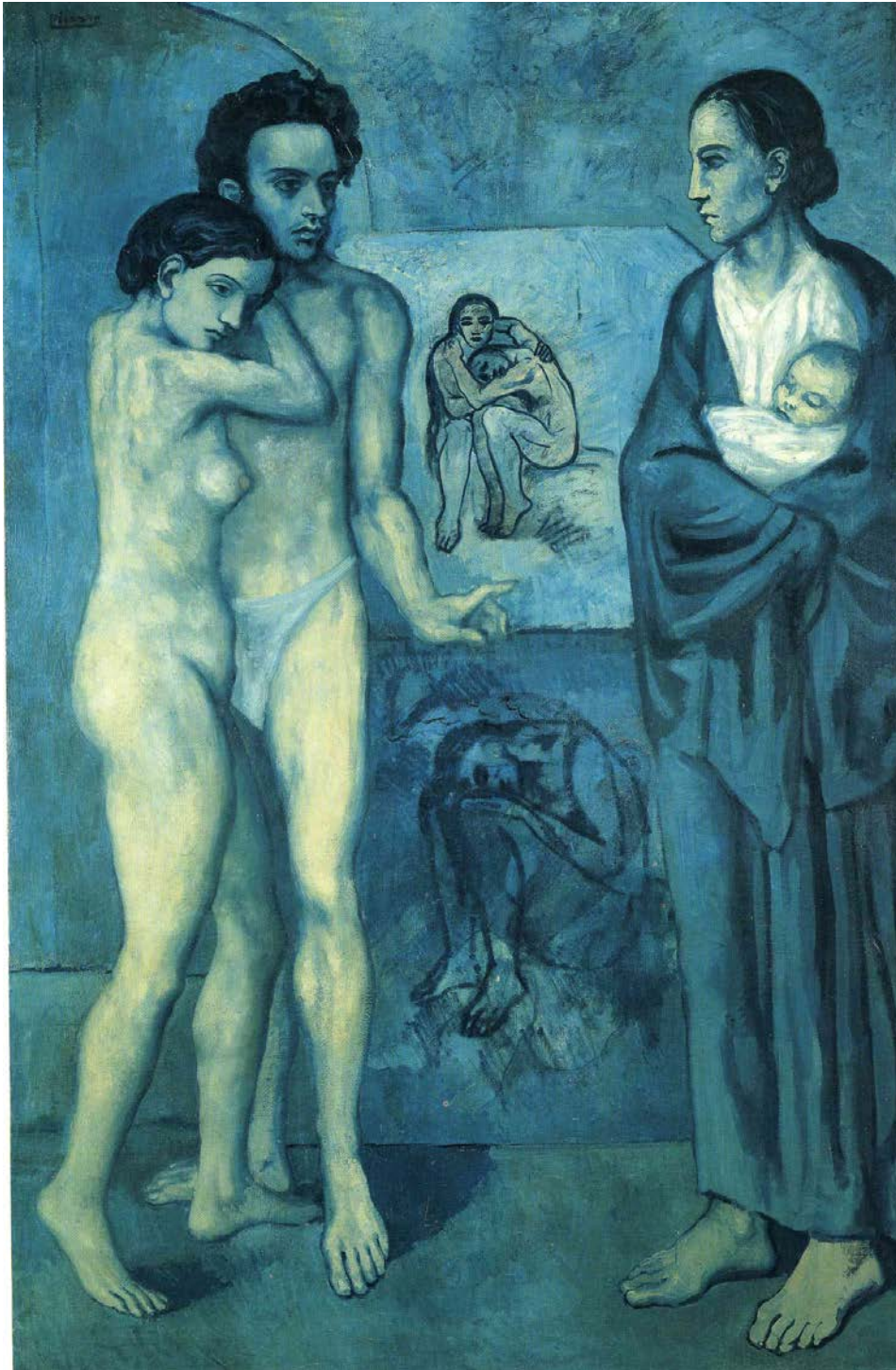


Plate 3



Plate 4

PART 4

"I think, then, that the species of oppression by which democratic nations are menaced is unlike anything that ever before existed in the world; ... The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives... Above this race of man stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate..."²¹

"Men living in democratic ages do not readily comprehend the utility of forms: ... yet this objection which the men of democracies make to forms is the very thing which renders forms so useful to freedom; for their chief merit is to serve as a barrier between the strong and the weak, the ruler and the people, to retard the one and give the other time to look about Thus democratic nations naturally stand in need of forms more than other nations and they naturally respect them less. This deserves most serious attention."²²*

If de Tocqueville were alive today, it could be supposed that his efforts would all be enlisted upon the side of what is often called the emancipatory interest. But as a staunch liberal writing in the 1830's he is concerned with the positive and negative aspects of revolutionary emancipation. How do we mediate between the tyranny of the few and the tyranny of the many? How do we mediate between the rulers and the ruled? How do we accommodate an ideal of universal management, presented as based upon scientific certainties with the ideals of local and specific freedoms? These were some of de Tocqueville's concerns. He disbelieved in the possibilities of revolutionary tabula rasa and thus it could be convenient to relate his position with that of such a 20th century thinker as Karl Popper with his insistence on the values of tradition.

For Popper is equally of the opinion that tabula rasa is impossible and that traditions in society occupy approximately the same role as do hypotheses in science, that both act to Structure experience and knowledge but that both must necessarily be subject to criticism.

However, even with the word Structure we might be dragged into another orbit of criticism. Indeed we might be reminded of Claude Levi-Strauss and his quote 'the precarious balance between structure and event.'²³ Our title, Forms, Fabric, Freedom alludes to Levi-Strauss. For Structure, might

not one substitute Fabric; and for Event, might' not one substitute Form; and from the interplay of fabric and form might not one suggest that freedom derives? The American experience with its populist democracy and legal arbitration (as possibly the best that can be hoped for) might be allowed to corroborate what is here suggested.

Excursus:

"The arbitrarily separated static pieces on which designers previously focused have lost their meaning and usefulness in the larger social and ecological complexity."²⁴

On which basis might one ask do people really want the world without the Eiffel Tower, L'Arc de Triomphe, the Empire State Building, the Golden Gate Bridge, St. Peters, Big Ben, the Statue of Liberty, the Pantheon, King's College Chapel, Grand Central Station, the Acropolis, Crown Hall, the Seagram's Building, and the Piazza San Marco and its Campinile? These are part of the furniture of the world which everybody recognizes. And there are images which apparently act to Structure society for better or worse. These are also images whose disappearance society would protest. Can the world be imagined without these items?

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Tzonis, Alexander, *Towards a Non-Oppressive Environment*, "Problem Solving," Boston, 1972. p. 100.
- ² It has since been dismissed by Alexander and its short comings lucidly discriminated by Alexander Tzonis in *Towards a Non-Oppressive Environment*.
- ³ Johnson, Philip C., *Mies Van Der Rohe*, Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1947. p. 188.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- ⁹ Mies Van Der Rohe, "Architecture and Technology", *Arts and Architecture*, October, 1950, Vol. 67. p. 30.
- ¹⁰ "Mies Van Der Rohe's New Buildings", *Architectural Forum*, Nov. 1952, Vol. 97, #5. p. 94.
- ¹¹ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, London, 1927. p. 33.
- ¹² Habermas, Jurgen, *Towards a Rational Society*, Boston, 1968 pp. 38-39.
- ¹³ Craft, Robert and I. Stravinsky, *Igor Stravinsky, Memories and Commentaries*, London, 1960. p. 114.
- ¹⁴ Auden, W. H., *New Year Letter*, London, 1941. p. 89.
- ¹⁵ Tzonis, Alexander, *Towards a Non-Oppressive Environment*, "The Hopeless Arcadia", Boston, 1972. p. 108.
- ¹⁶ Le Corbusier, source unknown.
- ¹⁷ Johnson, Philip C., *Mies Van Der Rohe*, Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1947. p. 191.
- ¹⁸ Gropius, Walter, *Scope of Total Architecture*, New York, 1954. p. 93.
- ¹⁹ Spender, Stephen, "From September Journal", *Horizon's History of War*, London, 1953. pp. 3-4.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p 4.
- ²¹ de Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, "Despotism in Democratic Nations," Vol. 2. p. 3 3 6.
- ²² *Ibid.*, "Continuation of the Preceding Chapters," p. 344.
- ²³ Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chapter One, "The Science of the Concrete," Chicago, 1966. p. 30.
- ²⁴ Chermayeff, Serge and Tzonis, Alexander, *Shaping of Community*.

Illustrations:

Plate 1: Giorgione, "Fete Champetre"

Plate 2: Titian, "Bacchanal"

Plate 3: Picasso, "La Vie"

Plate 4: A last tribute from Adolf Hitler, ruler of the Third Reich, to the Kaiser of the Second.