

Anti-modernism and Architectural Rhetoric

The Case Of Prince Charles¹

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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.²

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.³



Fig 1 & 2: Photographs from post-war times, which express that the new architecture makes the old worthless and useless: United Nations in New York and Unilever Building in Hamburg.



Fig 3: A photograph from post-modern times which expresses that not only one building has collapsed, but also a whole era in any sense: demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe Complex in St. Louis in 1972.

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.⁴ 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 "gegliederte und aufgelockerte Stadt" to "Verdichtung und Durchmischung" by the middle of the 1960s.⁵ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ When the book was published, it had quite an influence on contemporary architects.¹⁰ 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".¹¹ 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 architecture: "Sometimes a great public building may dominate a city, [...] like our great cathedrals. We raise to heaven that which is valuable to us: emblems of faith, enlightenment or government. But this vision must also be supported by small-scale buildings, which reflect our intimate lives".¹² He emphasises values like religion and maintaining a modest home; values from a time when man did not use as much of his potential as he does today. In his eyes, only pre-modern traditions can define space, time and meaning: "Today buildings are designed for abstract principles", he says. By "abstract" he means 'without any human relevance'.¹³

Based on these aesthetic and moral ideas, he sees two kinds of architecture: on the one hand there is good, traditional architecture which is based on "an agreed framework"¹⁴, or "an accepted set of ground rules".¹⁵ Rules which have been obeyed for "2,500 years or more". On the other hand there is modern architecture, which, according to him, broke all these rules around 1947.¹⁶ After this breach, the entire architectural history is one bad development in his eyes. He makes no differentiation of phases and he sees no good inventions. His view of architecture is black and white without any intermediate shades. We can see this in the following passage, which I have quoted because it contains almost all his argumentation:

"The fashionable architectural theories of the 50s and 60s, so slavishly followed by those who wanted to be considered 'with it', have spawned deformed monsters which have come to haunt our towns and cities, our villages and our countryside. As a result of thirty years of experimenting with revolutionary building materials and novel ideas, burning all the rule books and purveying the theory that man is machine, we have ended up with Frankenstein monsters, devoid of character, alien and largely unloved, except by the professors who have been concocting these horrors in their laboratories [...] The rest of us are constantly obliged to endure the results of their experiments, and [...] very few people are pleased with the situation".¹⁷

He characterises the whole phenomenon of the post-war times as a thoughtless following of a fashion. His use of the phrase "deformed monsters" is a defamation of the architecture itself and when he talks of "Frankenstein monsters" which are a result of "experimenting with revolutionary building materials" it is a defamation even of technical progress. His picture of the 'burning rule books' maintains that modern architecture ignores every rule that predates the Second World War, and is therefore not involved in a 'natural' development. All three statements ignore facts. Also a simplification, reminiscent of those found in propaganda, is his construction of a 'them and an us': his rhetoric claims two groups which stand against each other, rather than the complex process it is.

The description of an unnatural breach represented by modern architecture precludes even a hint of historic respect for the existing. Moreover, he characterises the whole period after the war as a downfall: "The frenzied attack on long-established principles and values affected not only architecture, but also music, art and education".¹⁸ Since he judges the whole era as bad, he must explain why it ever happened at all. He says: "The architectural establishment or a powerful group within it [...] were extremely persuasive in their demonstration of the requirement for a 'new' architecture that would meet the need for rebuilding post-war Britain".¹⁹ So he claims that modern architecture came about through persuasion: 'They', the modern architects, were mighty, 'we' were weak.²⁰ I think there is a mistake in his logic when he states that something apparently wrong could just come about like that. Even if it was so, the fault would not be only on the side of the architects; 'we' would not be completely innocent, because 'we' were all involved in the process.

Prince Charles finds the downfall in architectural details, too. He makes three points relating to loss of meaning in modern architecture:

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.²²
3. One cannot see in which part of the world the building stands.²³

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. Internationalisation 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 modern architecture and the meaning it does have are not taken into consideration by the Prince.

To resume the rhetoric and the logic of argumentation in the book we have a clear polarisation, positive against negative:

before 1947 (traditional)	after 1947 (modern)
we	they
innocent	guilty
human	inhuman
beautiful	ugly
keep tradition	without any tradition (i. e. without tradition in the whole history of architecture and without tradition inside the history of modern architecture)
harmony ²⁴	without scale
comprehensible	incomprehensible, abstract
local	international uniformity

The core of the argumentation is that 'we' are 'innocent, beautiful and human', while 'they' are 'guilty, inhuman and ugly'. This black 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.

Cleansing is bore.

NOTES

1. I want to thank very much: Sigrid Brandt, Andreas Butter, Adrian von Buttlar, Thomas Steigenberger and Ben Wild.
2. The distinction between "prejudice" and "reasonable criticism" used here was also used in an example of Stadtbaukritik in the USA: M. and L. White, *The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright*, Massachusetts 1962.
3. The most important debate in Germany which had the described development, was the so-called "Bauhausdebatte" in 1953, where Rudolf Schwarz tried to resume debate with the Bauhaus. He did it in a very offensive way, with the result that his reasonable critique was ignored. See: R. Schwarz, "Bilde Künstler, rede nicht", in *Baukunst und Werkform* 1953, Volume 1, 9-17; U. Conrads et al., *Die Bauhaus-Debatte 1953*, Wiesbaden 1994, *Bauwelt Fundamente* 100.
4. Earlier critique in the USA, such as that by Lewis Mumford, is not quoted here because I specialize on Germany, where the following books had influence: J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961 (German 1963); W. J. Siedler, E. Niggemeyer, *Die gemordete Stadt*, Berlin 1964; A. Mitscherlich, *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte*, Frankfurt a. M. 1965. Basically this critique was constructive in the sense that it wanted to improve planning.
5. See: H. Mausbach, *Städtebaukunde der Gegenwart*, Düsseldorf 1965, pp. 22-29, as one of the contemporary analytic reactions on the critique from the side of an urbanist and G. Hassenpflug and P. Peters, *Scheibe, Punkt und Hügel. Neue Wohnhäuser*, München 1966, pp. 7-9, from the side of architects. The latter example shows how "Durchmischung" was seldomly fulfilled, whilst "Verdichtung" entered urbanism.
6. The change of public attitudes as a consequence of ignored criticism is analyzed in the case of the USA by Meredith Clausen, 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.)
7. The first example concerned one of the most important buildings of postwar Germany: the "Landesversorgungsamt" München by Wassili and Hans Luckhardt, which was knocked down in 1989. See: N. Huse, *Unbequeme Baudenkmale*, München 1997, p. 7f. For the building itself: H. Rimpel, *Verwaltungsbauten*, Berlin 1959, pp. 132-137; M. Fengler, *Skelettbauten mit Fassadenelementen*, Stuttgart 1962, pp. 46-49. Important monuments that are in danger today in Berlin: the "Fakultätsgebäude für Bergbau und Hüttenwesen", 1955-59 by Willy Kreuer, the "Schimmelpfenghaus" 1957-60 by Sobotka und Müller, the "Palast der Republik", 1973-1976, Kollektiv Heinz Graffunder.
8. Charles, Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture*, London 1989.
9. Ibid, p. 37 and 88f. Even in constructions like a bridge he propagates stone, ibid, p. 19.
10. "Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate", in *Architectural Design* 59/1989 Nr. 5-6.
11. Charles 1989, p. 15.
12. Ibid, p. 83.
13. Ibid, p. 85.
14. Ibid, p. 14.
15. Ibid, p. 77.
16. Ibid, p. 76.
17. Ibid, p. 7 and 9.
18. Ibid, p. 7.
19. Ibid, p. 9.
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?"
21. Ibid, p. 117: "London's Royal Free Hospital looks like an office block" or p. 56 and 81.
22. Ibid, p. 83, quoted above.
23. Ibid, p. 77: "... a kind of nondescript, mediocre, synthetic, international style of architecture, which is found everywhere from Riyadh to Rangoon." For his ideas of meaning in the form of recognizable location, ibid, 88f: "Each place has a characteristic scale and proportion: farmhouses in Nottinghamshire may be tall and thin and in Northumberland they may be low and squat."
24. Ibid, p. 84f.
25. See: R. Hillmann, review of the conference "Zur Sprache bringen - Eine Kritik der Architekturkritik", Cottbus October 2002, in: www.kunsttexte.de/4/2002.
26. Compare two examples: Ch. Hackelsberger, *Die aufgeschobene Moderne*, Braunschweig 1985, p. 64 and R. Lange: *Architektur und Städtebau der sechziger Jahre*, Schriftenreihe des Deutschen Nationalkomitees für Denkmalschutz, Volume 65, Bonn, 2003, p. 14.