An Architecture for Our Time
The New Classicism

by

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Architecture in Our Time

Today's avant-gardist architects congratulate themselves on how cutting-edge their buildings are. But in reality, they are not responding to the needs of our time in the way that the early modernists responded to the needs of the last century.

Modernist architects of the early and mid-twentieth century were politically idealistic. Their architecture expressed their faith that modernization and progress would bring a better world.

Today, this technological optimism has faded, so our avant-gardist architects strain to create novel high-tech forms but have no social ideal to give these forms meaning.

If we look at why today's avant gardists have lost the idealism of the early modernists, it can help us understand what sort of architecture would meet the needs of our time.

The Ideal of Progress

The radical politics of the nineteenth century grew out of the faith in progress that spread as the industrial revolution made people believe that science and technology could improve their lives.

Around the time of the French revolution, the philosopher St. Simon wrote that industrialization would not only eliminate poverty but would also sweep away traditional forms of authority – the monarchy, aristocracy, and church – and bring a society managed by technical experts. Likewise, Karl Marx wrote a few decades later that the communist revolution would sweep away traditional forms of authority and bring a modern planned economy.

Early in the twentieth century, the American economist Thorstein Veblen advocated the most extreme form of this ideal of progress, which

he called "technocracy," the idea that society should be "managed by competent technicians with an eye single to maximum production…."[1]

The modernist architecture of the early twentieth century was politically radical in the manner of Veblen. Among the most dogmatic modernists, the slogan "form follows function" meant that design was a product of the efficient use of modern materials to fulfill a building's programmatic requirements. Like Veblen and the technocrats, these dogmatic functionalist architects believed that decisions in a modern society should be made on purely technical grounds, and that new technology would sweep away traditional forms.

Modernist architecture became popular because the ideal of progress was so influential during the mid-twentieth century. These gleaming glass, steel, and concrete buildings represented the faith in

Figure 1. Mies van der Rohe, IBM Building, Chicago, 1969-71: Modernist architecture expressed a social ideal, the faith that technology and progress would bring us a better future. (Photograph by J. Crocker.)

technology and economic growth that was a common belief of the time. This architectural style proclaimed that the modern era was so advanced that it could ignore models from the past and let technocrats redesign society on scientific grounds. It helped spread the faith that technology and planning could heal the sick, replace the slums with hygienic housing projects, and create affluence for all.

Modernism as the Status Quo

During the 1950s, modernism still had this radical spirit. It was not only on the leading edge esthetically but also on the leading edge of progressive social reform.

During the 1960s, the modernist vision was put into practice, and it failed. Modernist housing projects became vertical slums that were even worse than the old slums they replaced. Freeways spread sprawl and blighted older neighborhoods, and by the end of the decade, revolts by local citizens made it virtually impossible to build new freeways in most central cities.

Figure 2 Frank Gehry, Disney Hall (2003): Today's avant-gardist architecture tries hard to draw attention to itself, but it does not express any social ideal. (Photograph by PDphoto.org.)

During the 1970s, modernism became the status quo, and it was oppressive. The glass and steel high rises towering over the old downtowns of our cities and the high-rise housing projects towering over old neighborhoods looked cold and impersonal – like the impersonal technological economy that produced them. Social critics said that we lived in a technological society where ordinary people are powerless. Environmentalists created a political movement dedicated to controlling destructive technologies.

Modernism changed from a radical movement to the status quo because our society changed. The modernists criticized the traditional society of the early twentieth century in the name of progress. But they have no critical insight into the new problems of today's technological society.

By the 1970s, modernism was exhausted. Because the modernists' glass and steel boxes were no longer new and exciting, architects began to search for fresh novelties that could still shock and surprise people – leading to today's avant-gardist architecture, which will do anything to be new and different.

Today's avant garde produces futuristic architecture, like the early modernists, but the avant gardists are no longer capable of the social idealism of the early modernists because our society no longer has the early modernists' blind faith in progress.

Today's avant garde keeps the esthetic dogmas of early modernism – its rejection of historic ornamentation and its search for strikingly original designs – but their buildings no longer symbolize any social ideal. Avant gardists sometimes play at being radical by claiming that their architecture "subverts" conventional "paradigms," but they are just professors talking to other professors. They are not part of a larger movement to reform society, as mid-century modernist architects were part of the larger progressive movement of their time.

Traditionalism as Social Change

Avant gardists criticize the New Urbanism by saying that its traditional architecture is nostalgic, but unlike the avant gardists, the New Urbanists are part of a powerful movement to reform society. Hundreds of environmental groups across America support New

Urbanism and smart growth in order to fight suburban sprawl, to conserve energy, and to slow global warming.

The New Urbanists have changed our thinking about city planning by rejecting modernist planning and reviving traditional neighborhood design. They often use traditional architecture (though New Urbanism can accommodate modern architecture), which the avant gardists criticize, but even critics who dislike their architecture recognize their contributions to urban design.

Early modernist urban planners believed that the large-scale technological economy would inevitably take over all the functions of society, just as large factories had already replaced small workshops. In a modern society, housing would be in specially designed housing projects or suburban housing tracts, industry would be in industrial parks, offices would be in office centers, city governments would be in civic centers, and so on. These single-function zones would be built on large blocks, which would have internal streets designed for local access, and which would be surrounded by freeways and wide arterial streets designed to move through-traffic efficiently.

When modernist urban planning was put into practice, it produced our suburban landscape of housing tracts, shopping malls, business parks, and freeways. It created total automobile dependency, because separating land uses means there are no services within walking distance of homes. It created a bleak, ugly cityscape of strip malls and parking lots, because the single-function developments face inward and turn their backs to the streets that surround them.

The New Urbanists reject this modernist urban design in favor of traditional urban design. Instead of large blocks, they build small blocks, so traffic is dispersed on many streets. Instead of single-use zones, they build mixed-use developments whose street grid connects housing, shopping, and other uses, making it attractive to walk as well as to drive. Instead of inward-facing complexes with parking facing the streets, they design buildings oriented to the street and sidewalk. To save land and encourage walking, they build at higher densities than conventional suburbs.

They are building developments today that are like the railroad suburbs, streetcar suburbs, and urban neighborhoods of a century ago.

Figure 3: Modernist planning produced our suburban landscape of large single-function zones, such as these “office parks” in Pleasant Hill, California. (Photograph by Steve Price.)

Figure 4: New urbanist planning produces old-fashioned mixed-use neighborhoods, such as this street in Celebration, Florida. (Photograph by Steve Price.)

Their use of models from the past is a real challenge to the modern economy, because it implies that Americans would be better off living more simply. Suburbia and the automobile were the mainstays of postwar American economic growth, and the New Urbanists are saying that we would be better off if we lived in homes that use less land and in neighborhoods where we have the choice of walking rather than being totally auto-dependent.

Environmentalists support New Urbanist design because it preserves open space and reduces energy consumption, creating more sustainable neighborhoods. The people who move to New Urbanist neighborhoods like them because they have a stronger sense of community than conventional suburbs – you get to know your neighbors by walking to local stores – and because they let you avoid the tension of driving in congested traffic on high-speed roads.

If the New Urbanists’ neo-traditional neighborhoods are more livable than conventional automobile-dependent suburbs, that fact is a real challenge to General Motors, ExxonMobile, and Wal-Mart – while the self-consciously radical gestures of the avant gardists do not challenge the modern economy at all.

From Scarcity to Affluence

We no longer have the technological optimism of the early modernists, because the economic changes of the last century have made it obsolete.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, America had a scarcity economy, and modern technology promised to end the scarcity. In 1900, the average income in America was just above what we now define as the poverty level, and industrialization was increasing average income rapidly. It seemed that technology could bring everyone a decent standard of living for the first time in history.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, America has a surplus economy. Average income today is more than five times as great in real terms as it was in 1900, and most Americans are more affluent than anyone could have imagined a century ago.

For example, in 1900, middle-class Americans living in streetcar suburbs did not own vehicles; only the rich could afford to keep

carriages. Today, most American households own two or more cars, and there are more cars than there are licensed drivers.

Today, Americans are no longer impressed with the idea that modernization can bring everyone a decent standard of living, because most of us already have a decent standard of living. In 1900, America's urban workers lived in tenements where there was only one toilet per floor, where you filled a tin tub in the kitchen to take a bath, where inner rooms had no sunlight, and where children had nowhere to play except the streets. The early modernists wanted to help these people by building "workers housing," which was standardized and impersonal but at least had private bathrooms, playgrounds for the children, and windows that looked out over lawns. Today, most American workers live in the suburbs, and they certainly do not want to go back to this sort of standardized "workers housing."

Because most Americans today have the basics and more, the promises of technology and economic growth no longer seem as important as they did a century ago, when we were struggling for decent food, clothing, and shelter.

At the same time, "progress" has begun to cause problems that no one thought about a century ago. Economic growth has already begun to cause global warming, and it threatens to cause energy shortages. Bio-technology threatens to genetically reengineer nature and to change what it means to be human.

A New Humanism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, we needed to unleash modernization, so technology and economic growth could overcome scarcity. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we need to control modernization on human grounds.

We need to reject the modernists' belief in innovation and change for their own sake. Instead, we need a new humanism: we need to recognize that modernization is a good thing when it furthers human values but not when it undermines them.

We need a new humanism across our entire culture, and it has already begun to appear.

In moral philosophy, we need an ethics based on human nature. When a reductionist scientist like James Watson (one of the discoverers of DNA) says that we should use genetic engineering to improve the human race, we should answer that when you talk about changing human nature, you step into a moral void where the word "improve" no longer has any meaning. In fact, thinkers across the political spectrum are beginning to say this: from Bill McKibben on the ecological left, to Francis Fukuyama in the center, to Leon Kass on the right, social critics are beginning to warn us about the dangers of a "post-human future."

In economics, we need to realize that growth is valuable as long as it helps people to live fully human lives, but that economic growth for its own sake is stultifying. Today, Americans work such long hours to keep up with the suburban standard of living that they do not have enough time for their families, their friends, or their own interests. We need to let people downshift economically – to give people the choice of consuming less and working less if they believe it will let them live better lives. In fact, some ecologists are beginning to say that the growth economy not only threatens the natural environment, it also makes our lives less satisfying.

In art, we need to reject the avant garde's pursuit of novelty for its own sake, and return to the focus on human nature that we see in the long tradition of classical art, for example, in the discobulos and Michelangelo's David. In fact, neo-classical artists such as Alan LeQuire are now reviving this humanistic tradition. LeQuire's Musica (2003), a public sculpture in Nashville, does not make explicit classical references, but its celebration of human nature is in the classical tradition.

In architecture, also, we need to reject the avant garde's pursuit of novelty, its belief that new technology should sweep away the past, in favor of humanistic design. Christopher Alexander has laid the groundwork with his theory that there are common patterns underlying traditional architecture, which modernists have abandoned but which we must return to in order to build on a human scale.

New Urbanist planners have led the way by building human-scale neighborhoods. In ethics, economics, and art, the new humanists are still a small minority, but the New Urbanism has already established itself as our most important theory of urban planning.

Architecture can also help lead our society toward a new humanism. Just as modernist architecture helped to promote faith in

technology and progress during the twentieth century, a humanistic architecture can help promote the focus on human values that we need in the twenty-first century.

Modernist architecture symbolized the triumph of technology over culture, with decisions made on technical grounds. Today, we need an architecture that symbolizes the triumph of culture over technology, with decisions made on human grounds.

Chapter 2
Honest and Dishonest Architecture

The most common objection to reviving traditional architecture is the old modernist dogma that architecture should be an honest expression of modern materials and functions, without any "pasted-on" historical style. Today's avant gardists often make this point that historical styles are dishonest by saying that neo-traditional architecture looks like a "pastiche" of historical styles or that it looks like it belongs in a "theme park."

Yet a glance at architectural history will show that this objection does not apply to all historical styles. "Pasted-on" historical detailing did not look dishonest before the nineteenth century.

For example, renaissance architecture used pasted-on historical ornamentation based on classical models, but no one would say that it looked like a theme park. It looked honest because it was an expression of larger cultural ideal of its time, the revival of classical civilization.

By contrast, the eclectic architecture that became popular during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was designed to be picturesque, and it was not an expression of the real ideals of a rapidly industrializing society. This is why it looked dishonest.

Modernists were wrong to say that a style looks honest if it is an expression of materials and function. In reality, architecture looks honest when it is an expression of its culture's ideals.

The Greeks and Romans

Even early Greek temples, such as the Parthenon, used applied historical ornamentation, though no one says they look dishonest. The triglyphs over the columns in the Doric order were probably derived from the wooden slabs attached to the ends of the wooden beams of pre-classical temples, meant to protect the beam-ends from

becoming wet and rotting, and the stone guttae below each triglyph probably derived from the wooden pegs that kept these slabs in place. When they started building temples in stone, the Greeks kept these historical details from wooden temples as ornaments, even though they had lost their original structural purpose.

The Romans made much greater use of historical elements as applied decoration. They continued building temples using columns, but they built other public buildings using arches, which were an important structural advance over the Greeks' post-and-lintel stone construction because they could span larger spaces. But the Romans continued to use columns in these arched buildings, though they no longer had any function. Their public buildings have columns and pilasters pasted on in front of the arches.

For example, the structure of the Colosseum in Rome is made of three levels of arches topped by a wall. These arches, built of concrete faced with brick, were a remarkable structural achievement. But the colosseum also has half-columns of three different classical orders in front of the arches on its lower three levels and pilasters in front of the wall on top. Modernists would say that it is dishonest to use this sort of pasted-on historical ornamentation that has nothing

Figure 5: Colosseum (80 AD): The structure is made of three levels of arches topped by a wall. Columns in three orders are placed in front of the arches, and pilasters are placed in front of the wall, as decoration with no structural function. (Photograph by Dafialis.)

to do with structure. In reality, the half-columns and pilasters have an important cultural meaning: they symbolize Rome's position as the heir to classical culture and the importance of its public buildings.

The Renaissance

Renaissance architects made extensive use of two types of pasted-on historical ornamentation: pilasters (flat representations of columns) and aedicules (windows or niches framed with columns or pilasters on their sides and with a cornice and pediment above). The Romans had used these, and they became key features of renaissance architecture.

Pilasters are based on classical columns, which were structural elements of ancient Greek architecture, but the pilasters of the renaissance are taken out of their structural context and pasted onto the walls as ornaments.

Likewise, aedicules are made of elements that were structural elements of Greek architecture – the columns were structural supports and the cornice and pediment were the roofline of the Greek temple – but the aedicules around the windows of renaissance buildings are just pasted on as ornaments.

There are other structurally dishonest features of renaissance architecture. For example, it often uses hidden tie-rods to strengthen arches and vaults that are not strong enough in themselves to stand the outward thrusts: this sort of hidden support was used in the domes that are a keynote of renaissance architecture.

Modernists would say that all of this pasted-on historicism is horribly dishonest, but renaissance architecture does not look dishonest. It looks as if the architects believed in what they were doing because it was part of a larger cultural movement: it expressed the revival of classical learning and culture that was the ideal of its time.

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) were two inventors of renaissance architecture. Brunelleschi studied and measured ancient Roman monuments during his visits to Rome, and they were his inspiration when he designed the first buildings in the style of the renaissance. Alberti's *Ten Books on Architecture* carefully described the proportions of the classical

orders, the inherited classical vocabulary that could be used for fresh architectural expressions.

This scholarly revival of classical architecture was part of the larger classical revival that defined the renaissance. Petrarch was the first of many humanist scholars who rediscovered the classics and rejected the dogmatism of the middle ages in favor of the critical thinking of classical philosophy. Artists revived classical naturalism and the classical ideal of human nature; they were inspired by ancient sculpture, and they surpassed the ancients.

The renaissance named the period that preceded them "the middle ages" to imply that it was a barren and backward period between the fall of classical civilization and the rebirth of classical civilization in their own time. They named medieval architecture "Gothic" to imply that it was the architecture of the barbarian Goths who invaded Rome – which was untrue but was very effective propaganda. The rejection of Gothic architecture in favor of classical architecture was an important part of the larger revival of classical civilization.

Figure 6: Michelangelo and others, Palazzo del Senatore (1592-98). The pilasters on the upper two stories of the facade and the aedicules around the windows are pasted-on historical ornamentation, but they do not seem dishonest, because they are an expression of the ideal of the renaissance, the revival of classical culture. (Photograph by WikiBob.)

The Stage-Set Styles

The classical vocabulary of the renaissance continued to dominate western architecture for centuries, through the mannerist, baroque, and Georgian styles. According to modernist theory, all these styles should look dishonest because they use applied historical ornamentation rather than being pure expressions of structure and function. Yet even the most dogmatic modernist would not claim that these styles looked like a pastiche or a theme park at the time when they were built. These styles were natural expressions of the values of their cultures, whose literature and political theories, as well as their architecture, were rooted in classical models. And these styles still look natural and unaffected to us today.

Through most of the history of architecture, people took historical styles for granted, and no one considered them dishonest. Historical styles first began to look dishonest during the romantic period, when the romantics' love of the picturesque led them to design buildings that were essentially stage sets.

The romantics enjoyed reading novels about distant times and far-away places, and they built architecture that had the same exotic feel to it. A famous early example was Strawberry Hill, an eighteenth century impression of a Gothic castle built by Horace Walpole, the author of the first Gothic novel. Strawberry Hill was so exotic that a constant stream of visitors went to see it, as people today go to see theme parks.

During the eighteenth century, this sort of exoticism was a rarity, but in the nineteenth century, it became a dominant theme of architecture. For example, the Greek Revival style of the early nineteenth century turned classicism itself into something exotic: rather than using the living classical tradition of the Georgian and Federal styles, it built more accurate reproductions of ancient Greek temples, meant to evoke the feelings that we have when we see a building thousands of years old. This was one of a long series of revival styles meant to evoke romantic feelings.

The romantics also enjoyed reading poetry about untamed nature, and they built architecture that had a wild and picturesque feel to it. The Eastlake and Stick style, two typical Victorian styles of the late nineteenth century, did not evoke distant times or places, but they were picturesque

because of their multiple rooflines and gables, their turrets with witch's cap tops, their bay windows, and their elaborate ornamentation.

Despite its love of the picturesque, the nineteenth century still took architecture seriously. For example, John Ruskin and others hoped the revival of Gothic architecture would make industrial England into a more Christian society that valued the freedom of workers. There was a "battle of the styles" during the nineteenth century, a debate about whether Gothic or classical styles were the most appropriate expression of the culture of the time.

But the early twentieth century no longer took historical styles seriously at all. It produced a spate of historical styles that were purely picturesque and quaint, such as the Norman, the Tudor, the Spanish Colonial, and (most extreme) the Hansel and Gretel style. The idea of using any historical style began to seem artificial because there was a rapid succession of picturesque styles during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Figure 7: W. R. Yelland, Normandy Village (1928): The Hansel and Gretel style (hybridized with the Norman style here) was popular in California at the time when Hollywood was becoming the manufacturer of the nation's fantasies. This is architecture as a stage set, charming but not something you can take seriously. (Photograph by Charles Siegel.)

These picturesque styles reflected an inner split within their society. Victorian and early twentieth-century society was dominated by commercial values and by faith in progress, the real ideals that motivated people during the work week. But people tried to escape from this fact by moving from industrial cities to suburbs where they could live in picturesque houses and worship in Gothic churches, trying to deny that they were living in a modern industrial society.

Modernism: A Bygone Ideal

When the early modernists began to claim that all historical ornamentation was dishonest, they were reacting against the dishonest historicism of their time, which did not symbolize the real ideal of its society but instead tried to escape from it.

Modernism was so striking when it was first introduced, not because it was an honest expression of modern materials and functions, but because it was an honest expression of the ideal of its culture – the belief in efficiency and progress.

The icons of the modernist style, Mies van der Rohe's towers with steel skeletons and glass curtain walls, were striking symbols of the twentieth century's technological optimism, but they were not really an honest use of modern materials. Critics have pointed out that it would have been more efficient to use diagonal bracing, but this would have looked like the sort of thing carpenters did when they built with wood. Mies used hidden corner bracing, even though it was less efficient than diagonal bracing, in order to create a more striking image of the unprecedented capabilities of modern technology.

In reality, modernism seemed honest because it did not use a sentimental facade to deny the ideals of its time, as the historical styles of the nineteenth and early twentieth century had. It said frankly that the culture of its time believed in technology and economic growth.

For example, in the twentieth century, schooling began to focus on training students in the technical skills needed by the modern economy. But early in the twentieth century, it was fashionable to build high schools with Gothic facades, imitating Oxford and Cambridge, as if the new mass high schools were still ivied towers

where students pursued learning for its own sake. It seemed strikingly honest, by contrast, when modernists started building schools out of unadorned steel, glass and concrete, expressing the society's actual idea that schools were an extension of the technological economy.

Chapter 3
Avant Gardism Versus Humanism

During the 1970s, it became clear that modernism was exhausted in architecture, as it was across our culture. Critics called the period "postmodern."

In philosophy and literary criticism, postmodernism involved a rejection of "grand narratives" that give meaning to history. Modernists had read human history as the story of progress: increased control over nature, increased economic prosperity, increased scientific knowledge, increased freedom. Postmodernists rejected this view of history, but they did not want to develop another grand narrative to replace it. Instead, following Derrida's deconstructionism, they argued that texts did not have any unambiguous meaning and that many perspectives were equally valid. This combination was so popular in the universities during the 1970s and 1980s that it was nicknamed "Decon-Pomo."

Postmodern Architecture

In architectural theory, postmodernism had a different meaning. During the 1970s, it was used to describe all styles that rejected modernism, but in retrospect, we can see that these architectural styles actually fell into two different camps.

Some postmodern architects of the 1970s used traditional and popular styles ironically. An extreme example is Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, a garishishly colored replica of an Italian piazza that uses the five orders of classical architecture plus a sixth order with neon lights in its capitals, which Moore invented and named the "Deli Order." This building commented ironically on the futility of building traditional forms in modern America. With equal irony, Robert Venturi said that he liked "ugly and ordinary" architecture, and his best-known project was a very ordinary looking

home for the elderly topped by an oversized television antenna. Venturi also said that we should learn from the kitsch architecture of Las Vegas – and the main thing we should learn is to avoid the high artistic seriousness of modernism.

Other postmodern architects of the 1970s, such as Robert A.M. Stern, took traditional styles more seriously. These architects focused on the human scale of the traditional styles, and they tried to make use of these styles to create a humanistic architecture for our time.

These two versions of 1970s postmodern architecture led to the two styles that are in conflict in our day, avant gardism and neo-traditionalism.

The ironic, mocking architecture of the 1970s led to the avant-gardist style of our time, which also tries to undermine accepted ideas of what a building should be. The humanistic traditional architecture of the 1970s led to the serious traditionalism of our time, which tries to create a more human-scale architecture.

Avant-Gardist Architecture

The avant gardists' main theoretical goal is to overturn conventional ideas about building. Their main practical goal is to be shockingly new and different. Both these goals tend to make their buildings disorienting, uncomfortable places to be.

The members of this school are the best known architects of our time, called "starchitects" because their sensationalistic designs attract so much attention from the mass media that they have become stars. Their celebrity shows that the media is impressed by flashy novelties, and cares very little about substance.

Peter Eisenman

A leading theorist of this school is Peter Eisenman. Like many of Eisenman's buildings, his Wexner Center (1983-1989), an art center at Ohio State University, is based on shifted grids that collide with each other. Traditional buildings are based on a single grid, which means that all the walls are parallel and perpendicular to each other. By basing the walls of rooms on different grids that are not parallel

to each other, Eisenman disorients the people using the building, who expect a traditional layout.

Wexner Center has some forms that recall the old armory that was on the site previously, but these traditional forms are broken up into fragments, mocking the solid feel of the old masonry building. Wexner Center also has a famous column that hangs from the ceiling but does not reach the floor, mocking the traditional notion of what a column is, and undermining the user's expectations.

This building is on the cusp of 1970s postmodernism and today's avant gardism. Its style was called "deconstructivism." Just as the then-fashionable critical theory of deconstructionism tried to undermine the meanings of literary texts, architectural deconstructivism tried to distort and undermine the traditional elements of buildings by using fragmented structures and forms that clashed with the conventional rectangular grid. Deconstructivism became influential in the 1980s, and there was an exhibition entitled Deconstructivist Architecture at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1988.

Figure 8: Peter Eisenman, Wexner Center (1989). The broken fragments of traditional masonry forms clash with the modernist elements of the design. Inside, a column hangs from the ceiling and does not reach the floor. This sort of trick passes as profound in today's intellectual climate. (Photograph by Mike Evteev.)

The 1989 opening of Wexner Center came soon after this show at the Museum of Modern Art, and the *New York Times* architecture critic greeted the building with the establishment's usual adulation of the avant garde, calling it "one of the most eagerly awaited architectural events of the last decade." But a *New York Times* art critic felt very differently when he reviewed the first exhibit shown there; he called the building "a spectacular failure as a place to see paintings and sculptures," because "A visitor must constantly decide where displays begin and end, what is the preferred route from one section of the exhibition to another, and where to stand for a decent look at a given work." As usual, the architecture critics love the disorienting avant-gardist design, and the people who have to use the building hate it.[2]

Apart from the deliberate attempt to disorient users, there were a couple of other flaws in the Wexner Center's design: the skylight leaked, and the glass walls let in enough light to damage the art works. At first, the museum tried makeshift solutions to these problems, covering the skylight with a membrane and the glass walls with curtains, but then they decided that the building needed a complete overhaul. Just a decade after it was completed, they closed this avant-gardist icon for three years to do a $15 million renovation.

Frank Gehry

The best known architect in the avant-gardist school is Frank Gehry, who has become such a celebrity that he was featured on *The Simpson's* television show.

Gehry became famous for designing the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (1997), which looks like an abstract sculpture in the avant garde style of the 1920s or 1950s. This building was obviously influenced by the deconstructivist attempt to distort the building by using using forms that clash with the conventional rectangular grid: it disorients the user because its exterior does not have the horizontal and vertical surfaces of traditional buildings. It is clad in titanium – a material that is not practical because of its cost but that definitely is very new, very different, and very shiny.

After Gehry did a few buildings in this style, they no longer seemed quite as new and different as they used to, and Gehry branched out by designing the Stata Center at MIT, whose walls look like they are collapsing.

Because its leaning walls met its roof at odd angles, the Stata Center had so many leaks that that a *Boston Globe* columnist called it a "$300 million fixer-upper." The leaning walls also disorient users by making it seem like the floors and ceilings slope, though they actually do not. MIT professor Noam Chomsky said that, when he moved into his office in this building, he got vertigo whenever he looked up at the corner where the wall met the ceiling: he almost fainted the first time he used the office, and he finally made it tolerable by filling it with plants to hide the room's shape. Chomsky also said that it was hard for him to do his work in this office because he could not hang a blackboard on a leaning wall.[3]

When Gehry heard this, he said he admired Chomsky and was sympathetic to his problems, but that did not stop Gehry from designing a proposal for the Atlantic Yards complex in Brooklyn featuring leaning apartment buildings. The apartments in the leaning

Figure 9: Frank Gehry, Stata Center (2004): Even more than in Gehry's earlier buildings, the desire to be new and different inconveniences and disorients the building's users. (Photograph by Tjeerd Wiersma.)

buildings will have walls where you cannot hang pictures and cannot make full use of the space for your furniture. Some residents will probably suffer from vertigo. But no matter how uncomfortable they are for their residents, these buildings certainly will look new and different.

Though they have no deliberate symbolic content, Gehry's buildings inadvertently symbolize the fact that our culture is devoted to sensationalism and to novelty, no matter what the expense in human terms.

Avant Gardists at Work

Daniel Libeskind became the second most famous of the avant-gardist architects when he was chosen to design the Freedom Tower to replace New York's World Trade Center. Libeskind's extension of the Denver Art Museum (2006) has tilted walls and ceilings, which form sharp angles jutting out in many directions, and much of it is clad in titanium, like Gehry's Guggenheim museum. When it opened, a local artist wrote a letter to the Denver Post saying that the sloping walls of the galleries made him physically sick: "After less than two minutes … I had to leave. Art is visual, and the visual disorientation of the walls made me so nauseated and dizzy I could not enjoy the fabulous art, no matter how hard I tried." The director of the museum did not deny that the building caused feelings of vertigo; instead, he said "Those are what great architectural spaces do to you."[4]

Rem Koolhaas, another of the most famous avant gardists, recently described his work and the work of other avant gardists by saying, "Architecture has to become more extravagant, more exceptional, more unique to play its assumed role as icon. I'm never quite sure if I am supposed to present an intellectual discourse or to be a salesman."[5] Koolhaas's said this shortly after unveiling a design for a 52-story high-rise in Jersey City made of three slabs, with the middle slab perpendicular to the upper and lower slabs, so the building looks like three blocks that a child stacked up so precariously that they could fall at any moment. No one could take this building seriously as "intellectual discourse": Koolhaas is being a salesman – or, more precisely, a mountebank who will do anything to attract attention to himself.

But it would be monotonous to talk in detail about all our celebrity avant-gardist architects, such as Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, and Thom Mayne. They all have the same goal – being new and different, even if the building is uncomfortable and disorienting to its users. They all design buildings as abstract sculptural objects and as intellectual games, rather than designing good places for people.

Instead of making the same points about each of these avant gardists, we can look at the story of one of Peter Eisenman's early commissions that sums up the avant gardists' approach.

In the late 1960s, Eisenman was known for his fiercely polemical and hard-to-read architectural manifestos, but he had only built one project, an addition to a house in Princeton that he called House I. He met Richard and Florence Falk at a cocktail party in Princeton, and they were so fascinated by his dense architectural theorizing that they hired him to design a house on a farm that they had purchased in Vermont, which he called House II. Richard Falk recalled in an later interview that, when he heard Eisenman's theorizing at this party, "I don't know what it meant, but it sounded good."

When the Falks returned to their Vermont farm after a sabbatical, they found a house that was not yet complete but that would obviously be totally unworkable. It had a flat roof, which would not hold up under Vermont's heavy snow. It had a series of openings in the upper floors, which were meant to let light penetrate but which were also very dangerous for the Falk's one-year-old son. It hardly had any interior walls: there were just half walls between the bedrooms and no privacy even in the bathroom. Because there were not complete walls, sounds could be heard through the entire house, and the Falk's son was not able to play inside during his entire childhood because his parents needed quiet to work.

The Falks were able to make the house barely usable by doing a major remodeling a year later. Ms. Falk commented that Eisenman's design "was all about space, the eye moving with nothing to stop it" – which meant, she added, that it impressed their visitors but was very difficult to live in.

Three decades later, Eisenman was still bristling at the Falk's criticisms of his house: "I don't design houses with the nuclear family

idea because I don't believe in it as a concept. I was interested in doing architecture, not in solving the Falks' privacy problems."[6]

It is very clear that, when Eisenman talked about "doing architecture," he meant creating buildings that can be appreciated by the cognoscenti who are interested in obscure esthetic and theoretical issues. He did not mean creating buildings that are good places for the people who use them.

Humanist Architecture

While the avant gardists produce flashy buildings that get all the media attention, another school is doing the hard work of designing buildings that are good for people to live in and to use. This school has developed a new humanistic architecture, but it has not yet developed a coherent style.

The Ahistorical Style

Christopher Alexander is the most important theorist of this humanist school. For decades, Alexander has been writing and teaching about what he calls the "timeless way of building" that has been always been the basis of traditional architecture, a way of building that people are comfortable with because it fits human nature.

Alexander writes that all traditional buildings were based on patterns (which Alexander uses to mean groups of rules) that gave them the quality of being alive. These patterns do not dictate precise designs, but they do let people generate designs.

For example, peasants terracing hillsides for planting follow a few simple rules, such as building the terraces along the contours of the land and spacing the terraces in certain ways. As a result, the terraces are not identical but have a certain general resemblance.

The same is true of the houses and other buildings of traditional villages, towns, and cities. Builders follow patterns for each building type, which do not make the buildings identical but which do give them a general resemblance. The entire settlement has esthetic wholeness without uniformity. Rather than being centrally planned, it unfolds organically, as new buildings are added in a piecemeal way, all following the same patterns.

Patterns that produce buildings with what Alexander calls "life" – the same thing that we can call "human scale" – developed gradually on the basis of people's experience about the sorts of places that make them feel comfortable.

These sorts of patterns have been the basis of most building for many millennia, but they have broken down recently, Alexander says, because they have been replaced by patterns based on by-products of modern industry, such as plate glass and wall-to-wall carpeting. We react to this loss of organic order by trying to create artificial order based on centralized urban planning, mass production, and conventional zoning laws – but this makes it even more difficult to produce the combination of wholeness and variety that we find in traditional building.

Instead, Alexander says, we should consciously create patterns similar to the patterns of traditional building, and we should test them in practice by seeing how the buildings they generate make us

Figure 10: Christopher Alexander, Upham House (1992): A very appealing building, but the decorative detailing seems to deliberately avoid historical styles, as if he wanted to design a classical balustrade and cornice but did not dare. (Photograph by Charles Siegel.)

feel. Eventually, these patterns will become as natural to us as they were to traditional builders.

Alexander's book *A Pattern Language* codifies a large number of patterns that apply on a variety of different scales – from designing cities, to designing buildings, to designing entranceways or windows.

Alexander and his followers design buildings in an ahistorical, universal style that is based on these patterns but avoids particular historical styles. For example, Alexander's Upham House is a very appealing building because its massing and detailing give us the same human-scale that we find in traditional buildings, but the decorative detailing is not in classical style or Tudor style, or any other particular style. It looks as if he wanted to build a classical balustrade and cornice, but forced himself not to use these historical elements.

Alexander's theory does not really imply that we should build in this ahistorical style, since the traditional buildings created before the patterns deteriorated were often built in historical styles. Traditional buildings are built in a way that is rooted in history and culture, not in an ahistorical style that blurs cultural differences.

In reality, Alexander does not care about architectural style. He cares about the human-scale forms that his patterns generate. He has made an invaluable contribution to creating an architecture for our time by helping to define the forms that are needed for a humanistic architecture, but his stylistic details lack the meaning that comes from long usage and historical associations.

Eclectic Traditionalism

Most traditional architects practicing today are eclectic. Like Alexander, they concentrate on building the forms needed for human-scale architecture, and they have developed a neo-traditional architecture and urbanism that contrasts very favorably with the sterile modernism of the mid twentieth century. But they use decorative details in a variety of historical styles: the same architect might design buildings in classical style, Victorian style, streamlined moderne style, and also in a humanized version of the modernist style, with human-scale forms but without any traditional ornamentation.

Most of these traditional styles no longer have meaning. For example, no one who designs in streamlined moderne style today really means it, because no one today has the naive fascination with

streamlining that architects had in the 1930s, when radios, clocks, and buildings in this style were all designed with the same streamlining as the latest locomotives. Likewise, these eclectic architects do not really mean it when they design in the modernist style, because they do not have the blind faith in technology and progress that the early modernist architects had.

Without realizing it, these eclectic architects have retained a bit of the ironic spirit of 1970s postmodernism. They do not deliberately mock traditional architecture, as Charles Moore did in Piazza d'Italia, but they are not serious about traditional architectural styles: they put on different styles in the way that you would put on costumes.

This eclecticism is common among New Urbanists, who care about building traditional human-scale urban forms rather than about architectural style. There is a common notion that the New Urbanists promote traditional architectural styles, but in reality, many say that they do not care about architectural style. They use traditional styles because that is what the public wants, but they would be as happy to use modern architecture. To prove that New Urbanism can work with any style, they point to Tel Aviv and Miami's South Beach as places where modern architecture is used successfully to create traditional urban forms.

Because they care about urban form rather than architectural style, the New Urbanists have been very successful at building human-scale neighborhoods rather than sprawl, but their projects are sometimes architecturally incoherent. For example, as you walk around a New Urbanist neighborhood in Ipswich, England, you can pass through a street filled with wooden houses in the style of a New England town, then through a street filled with Scandinavian style houses, then through a Parisian boulevard, and then finally arrive at the Victorian-style main street.

This is why avant-gardist critics say that today's traditional architecture is a pastiche of historical styles, and that it looks like it belongs in a theme park.

Historically, as we have seen, architectural styles have seemed honest when they reflected the ideals of their time, and they began to seem dishonest when they were used as picturesque stage sets. Our eclectics are using traditional styles purely to create a picturesque effect, as architects did in the early twentieth century.

Because these traditional architects do not take style seriously, their architecture has not become part of the larger cultural conversation of our time.

Imagine if architects who actually did help to change their cultures had been like today's eclectics. If Alberti had said "As long as the forms are the human-scale, I don't care if the decorations are classical or Gothic," he would not have helped to create the classical revival of the renaissance. If Gropius has said "As long as the buildings are towers in a park, I don't care if the decorations are modern I-beams or classical columns," he would not have helped to create the technological society of the mid twentieth century.

Classicism

Though the eclectics are in the majority, a significant number of today's architects are serious classicists.

Eclectics sometimes accuse the classicists of being narrow-minded and rigidly following rules laid down in the past, but in reality, most of them see classicism as a living tradition that is changing as it deals with the challenges of the present, not as a fossilized imitation of the past.

The classicists' forms are human scale, and their style is in the mainstream of the western tradition. The new classicists mean what they are saying, so their buildings do not look like stage sets.

Chapter 4
Which Classicism?

I believe that, because we are reaching the limits of modernization, we need a broad revival of classical western values. We need to revive classical ethics, based on nature and human nature, in order to make human use of modern technology. We need to revive classical liberalism, in the Jeffersonian tradition, to create space for independent action within our centralized economy.

During the industrial revolution, these classical values were pushed aside to pave the way for modernization. Now, we need to revive them in order to humanize the modern economy.

Architecture could help bring this classical revival today, as it did during the renaissance, but architectural classicism is a language that can express many different meanings. Because it has been so important to western history, the classical vocabulary has been used to express very different ideals at different times: Louis XIV used it to represent the grandeur of his absolute monarchy, and Thomas Jefferson used it to symbolize the virtues of the American republic.

To move beyond the eclecticism of today's traditional architecture, we need to develop a classical style that expresses the emerging ideals of our time.

Classicism for Our Time

The modernist architecture of the early twentieth century was so powerful because it expressed the technocratic ideal needed at that time, when it was imperative to unleash the modern economy in order to overcome scarcity. Now that the developed nations have moved from a scarcity economy to a surplus economy, this technocratic ideal is obsolete.

Today, we need to subject the modern economy to human control. We need to modernize selectively, to use technology when

it is beneficial and to limit technology when it is destructive. If we think about the ways that our culture must change to counter the destructive aspects of the modern economy, we can sketch some features of a classical style for our time.

Simplicity

To counter the consumerism that is typical of the modern economy, we need an architecture that is restrained.

We should not imitate the indulgences of the baroque style or of the more ornate buildings in the Georgian style. Instead, we should be inspired by the simplicity and restraint of vernacular classical styles.

The ideal of simpler living – of a standard of living that is adequate to provide us necessities and comforts but that does not embrace consumerism for its own sake – is essential to create a society that is sustainable environmentally.

New Urbanists have taken a big step in this direction by promoting urban design that allows simpler living, with houses on smaller lots and neighborhoods where you can walk rather than having to drive. We also need an architectural style that symbolizes restraint and simpler living.

Decentralization

To counter the excessive centralization and top-down control that is typical of the modern economy, we need an architecture that symbolizes decentralization and pluralism – a society where decisions are made by many different people, not by one central authority.

We should not imitate the baroque and classical style of city planning that we find at St. Peter's and Versailles, where one building dominates the space around it to symbolize the power of the central authority in that building. We should not imitate the beaux arts city beautiful movement of a century ago, where one civic building dominates all the space around it.

Instead, we should be inspired by the diversity and informal layout of the Italian cities of the renaissance, which were not centralized empires and still had republican ideals. We should also be inspired by the informal layout of ancient Rome, much of it developed under

the republic, and by the informal streetscapes of the Georgian and Federal row houses of eighteenth and early nineteenth century America.

Leon Krier's design for the new town of Alessandria, Italy, shown on the cover of this book, illustrates this sort of informal classical design, which expresses the independence of each building and institution.

Human Scale

To counter the impersonality of the modern economy, we need an architecture that is human scale.

This is not just a matter of density. High-rise developments are impersonal, but conventional low-density suburbs with their faceless shopping malls are also impersonal.

We need to build walkable neighborhoods with local shopping, as the New Urbanists have already begun to do. They can be the density of traditional European cities that are four to six stories, or the density of street-car suburbs that have three- to five-story Main Streets within walking distance of homes. Ideally, these neighborhoods should be built by small developers of individual homes and apartment buildings, not by one developer who builds an entire neighborhood.

We also need human scale in architectural style: instead of the flat, featureless, and impersonal surfaces of modernist buildings, we need decorative elements that break up surfaces, to create human-scale proportions.

Historic Continuity

To counter the modern economy's tendency to discard the past, we need an architectural style that symbolizes historic continuity.

The modernists wanted to reject past styles completely and invent a totally new, rational style of architecture, just as they wanted to tear down existing neighborhoods wholesale and replace them with rationally planned housing projects. They saw this discontinuity as a source of hope: they were rejecting the past in order to build a better world.

Today, we see this sort of discontinuity as a threat. We have learned that modernist urban renewal destroys functioning communities. We know that global warming and genetic engineering threaten to change nature and human nature drastically.

To symbolize historical continuity in western Europe and the United States, we must use a classical vocabulary, the closest thing we have to a continuous style, running from the Greeks, to the Romans, to the Renaissance, to the Baroque, to the Georgian, to the Greek revival, Renaissance revival, Beaux Arts, Roman Renaissance, and Colonial Revival styles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Of course, we must accommodate change as well as continuity, in order to take advantage of new technologies. Some of our great classical buildings do accommodate new technologies and create

Figure 11: McKim, Mead, and White, Municipal Building (1907-14): The building's classical detailing symbolizes continuity of civic values, even though it used new technologies to create a type of building that had never existed in the past. (Photograph by Charles Siegel.)

something different from any past building. For example, McKim, Mead, and White's Municipal Building in downtown Manhattan was designed after the steel skeleton and elevator made it possible to build taller buildings, and after the expansion of city government made it necessary to build an office building to hold a large bureaucracy; but this building's classical detailing says that, even as it uses new technologies, it does not break with the civic ideals of the past.

Local Styles

To counter the globalization that is typical of the modern economy, which is imposing the same standardized corporate culture on the entire world, we need to create local classical styles.

Local styles should be adapted to the local climate and should use local materials. The modernists thought that heating and air conditioning technology would let us build the same glass boxes everywhere, but now we know that energy supplies are limited and that architecture should reduce the burden of heating and cooling.

Local styles also symbolize historical continuity. The architectural style that creates a sense of continuity with the past is obviously different in England and in Italy, for example.

Finally, local styles symbolize local control over technology – just the opposite of the modernists' international style, which symbolized the ideal of a global technocracy.

Culture Over Technology

To counter the modern economy's tendency to make technological decisions that ignore human values, we need to create a style that symbolizes the dominance of culture over technology.

The modernist style symbolized the autonomy of technology: design was supposed to be a pure expression of a building's materials and its functions.

If a classical style expresses all the values that we have already looked at, it would also symbolize the dominance of culture over technology: technology is not autonomous but is used in a way that embodies all these values.

In addition, a city's skyline can be a powerful symbol of the dominance of culture over technology. Neo-traditional urban designers say that what they call "fabric buildings" – housing, office buildings, commercial buildings – should have their height limited, and that important public buildings should be allowed to rise above the urban fabric.

This is a common design principle in traditional cities and towns. In older European cities, the cathedral rises above the other buildings. In Vermont towns, the church steeple rises above the other buildings.

This traditional design not only makes these places attractive esthetically. It also expresses the ideal that their common religious values are more important than their everyday activities.

Modern cities built according to this design principle would have a much more pluralistic skyline. In the center of the city, civic buildings, cultural institutions, and the major buildings of a number of religions would all rise above the utilitarian fabric buildings. In the neighborhoods, local civic buildings such as libraries and schools, and a variety of houses of worship would rise above the neighborhood's homes and businesses.

Currently, the skyline of most cities is dominated by high-rise office buildings, expressing the fact that we believe in uncontrolled growth. Sometimes there is mordant unconscious symbolism. For example, the 60-story Bank of America Corporate Center towers above all the other high-rises in the center of Charlotte, North Carolina, and this skyline makes it clear that the corporate bankers are in charge and have the power to develop whatever they want.

By contrast, a skyline where the major civic, cultural, and religious buildings rise above the utilitarian fabric buildings would symbolize the belief that there are more important things in life than getting and spending money.

Local Classical Styles

Some architects have already begun to develop this classicism for our time. We will look at a few examples, which are not meant to be a survey of contemporary classicism but just an indication of the direction that we should be moving.

Classicism in Europe

It is relatively easy to develop a local classical style in countries that have their own strong classical tradition, such as England and Italy.

A good example of a local classical style for England is Quinlan Terry's Richmond Riverside neighborhood in London. Terry often points out that this sort of traditional construction using local materials is more environmentally sound than modernist construction, because it needs less heating and cooling and because it lasts for centuries. This development also showed that traditional neighborhoods can be built at a reasonable cost. Unfortunately, Terry has generally worked on individual homes and has not had many opportunities to build this sort of major project because of the current prejudice against classical architects.

A good example of a classical style for Italy is David Mayernik's plan for the campus of the American school in Lugano, Switzerland. The planned campus is simple and restrained, with relatively little ornamentation. Though individual buildings are symmetrical, the design as a whole is informal and asymmetrical. It is human scale. It expresses continuity with the past and with local styles: the school is in the Italian-speaking portion of Switzerland, and it fits into its historical context perfectly.

Figure 12: Quinlan Terry, Richmond Riverside neighborhood (1984-1987). This project is in the style of traditional London neighborhoods. (Photograph by June Buck.)

Figure 13: David Mayernik, Exterior of the Fleming Library of the American School in Lugano, Switzerland (1996). New architecture that is in keeping with the local classical style. (Photograph by Roberto Paltrinieri.)

Figure 14:David Mayernik, Interior of the Fleming Library at the American School. This simply looks like the interior of a library should look, and users may not even notice that it is in a classical style. (Photograph by Roberto Paltrinieri.)

The interior of the Fleming Library on this campus shows very clearly that classicism can be a natural and unaffected style. This is obviously not a stage-set style meant to look picturesque. It simply looks like a library interior should look, and people using the library may not even notice the classical vocabulary.

There are many other examples in Europe of local classical styles that look natural and unaffected, such as Demetri Porphyrios' Pitiousa in Spetses; Marc and Nada Breitman's Le Plessis Robinson in Paris; Maurice Culot and Caroline Mierop's Rue de Laeken in Bruxelles; Jose Cornelio da Silva's work in Portugal, and Leon Krier's new town of Alessandria, Italy (shown on the cover of this book).

Classicism in The United States

It is harder to develop a local neo-classical style in much of the United States, particularly in the west.

On the east coast, the vernacular classical homes of the early nineteenth century and the later classical revival styles provide a link to the main classical tradition. Chael-Cooper's proposed Waterfront Quarter is a good example of a new project in a style based on the traditional classical style of the southeastern United States.

Figure 15: Chael-Cooper, Waterfront Quarter of Jupiter, Florida (not yet built). An understated vernacular classicism, with more prominent classical elements used in important buildings. (Drawing by Chael-Cooper.)

But in much of the United States, there is not a strong local classical tradition. The architecture is dominated by the picturesque styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and by modernism, but these places do have one common historical style that can serve as a basis for a new classicism, a style sometimes called the "classical box."

The classical box was popular among home builders in much of America during the early twentieth century. The boxy building is decorated with simplified classical columns around the front entrance, with one or two bay windows, and with a hip roof. Many houses in this style have some additional ornamentation, such as classical pilasters at the four edges of the house, or dentils at the roofline and above the windows.

This ornamented box is obviously less expensive to build than the houses with broken-up massing and multiple gables that many builders today use to give their homes some character. Ironically, the modernists rejected ornamentation in the name of efficiency, but now home builders go through so many contortions to break up the boring modernist box

Figure 16: Vernacular Classical Box (c. 1905 - 1910). The classical details and the massing give this style a feeling of stability, restraint, and continuity with the past. Without the historical details, the house would just be a box. (Photograph by Charles Siegel.)

that they build in ways that are very inefficient. A classical box with a bit of pasted on historical ornamentation would actually be a much more efficient design, and its proportions and classical detailing could give it real architectural character.

Our goal should be to create a classical style for fabric buildings that seems as unaffected today as the classical box, Georgian row house, and other classical vernaculars seemed in their time. The classical detailing is so central to our architectural tradition that people could begin to take it for granted again, as they did a century ago.

Important public buildings demand stronger design than these fabric buildings. A good example that would work in most of the United States is David Schwartz's Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville (2006), whose appearance is reminiscent of museums and symphony halls built a century ago.

Though it is in a classical style, Schermerhorn Symphony Center is very innovative technologically. It is the first symphony hall that has a motorized system to shift from the raked seating used during symphonies to a flat floor used during other events. It has acoustical

Figure 17: David Schwartz's Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville (2006) is reminiscent of museums and symphony halls built a century ago and is technologically innovative. (Photograph by Kerry Woo.)

panels that can be adjusted by pushing a button to fine-tune the concert hall's acoustics for amplified music or symphony performances. It has a TV system that lets latecomers see and hear the performance until there is a break that allows them to take their seats. To block external noise, it has a double concrete envelope and an acoustical isolation joint around the concert hall.[7]

In addition to being a good example of classical design, this building is a good example of a sensible attitude toward modernization. It uses the latest technology when it actually is useful to enhance the experience of concert goers. But it is not like avant-gardist buildings, whose entire design is based on showing off new building technology, whether or not it is useful.

Classicism Outside the West

In most of western Europe and the United States, we can symbolize historical continuity by using a classical vocabulary. In other parts of the world, we would expect architects to use their own traditional styles to symbolize continuity – but we would also expect them to come to grips with their cultures' encounters with western values.

When Peter the Great decided to westernize Russia, he built a new capital for the country in the western, classical style. He also forcibly cut off the beards of the men in his court, in imitation of the western style. The debate about architecture was a debate about culture, and Russian traditionalists preferred buildings with onion domes just as stubbornly as Peter preferred buildings with classical columns.

Today, most of the world is adopting some western values, such as democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech, and these values seem to be a real advance. Perhaps the ideal is a synthesis of each culture's traditional values with these classical western values – and if we took architecture as seriously as Peter the Great and the Russian traditionalists did, this would also involve a synthesis of the culture's traditional architecture with classical western architecture. Of course, each culture must decide this for itself, and we would expect conflicts between traditionalists and westernizers along the way.

Modernists sometimes say that classicists are working with a style that is a symbol of imperialism, but there is nothing imperialistic

about saying that each culture should use historic architectural styles as part of its own attempt to make sense of its history.

On the contrary, the real symbol of imperialism today is the modernist style – which was invented in the west, which claims to be valid everywhere, and which is being imposed on the world by modern multinational corporations.

Architecture and Culture

This chapter has sketched some features of an architectural style that would express the larger cultural changes needed in our time: simplicity to counter our economy's tendency toward consumerism, decentralization to counter our economy's tendency toward top-down control, human scale to counter our economy's tendency toward impersonality, historic continuity to counter our economy's tendency to throw away the past, local styles to counter our economy's tendency toward globalization, the dominance of culture over technology to counter our economy's tendency to make decisions on a technical basis rather than on a human basis.

But most traditional architects today are not engaged with these larger cultural and political issues. Most neo-traditional architecture is an esthetic statement against modernism, but it is not a statement about the direction that our culture should take.

Robert A.M. Stern, a great architect and the most important historian of the neo-traditional movement, says explicitly that this movement is not engaged with moral or political issues:

> "In Modern Traditionalism, … the moral issues of architecture are left to the political or ideological, rather than the structural, realm. The result is that … Modern traditionalism has many of the qualities of the eclecticism that enlivened nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture."[8]

This amoral and apolitical stance prevents us from developing a coherent new style to replace the modernist style.

Architecture cannot succeed – even in esthetic terms – if it only deals with esthetic issues and refuses to engage the larger cultural issues of its time. As long as our neo-traditional architects do not struggle to develop a style that expresses an ideal for our time, most

of their work will continue to look inauthentic, and modernist critics will continue to say that this work is a "pastiche" that looks like it belongs in a "theme park."

Chapter 5
Three Avant-Gardist Cliches

Three cliches, repeated endlessly by avant-gardist critics and academics, prevent us from developing the new humanistic architecture that we need today.

The first (as we have seen) is that all traditional architecture looks like it belongs in a "theme park."

The second is that, because it is futuristic, avant-gardist architecture is politically "progressive."

The third is that only avant-gardist architecture is "of our time."

These slogans are repeated so endlessly and so mindlessly that you sometimes get the impression that a parrot could become an avant-gardist architecture critic by learning the phrases "theme park," "progressive," and "of our time." But a bit of thought makes it very clear that these slogans are hollow.

Theme Park Architecture

When avant gardists say that traditional architecture looks like a "theme park," they forget that the original Disneyland included "Tomorrowland" as well as "Main Street, USA."

The modernists chortled when Disney corporation built Celebration, Florida, as our most famous theme park-developer created a New Urbanist town. But a few years later, we also had Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles, a building designed by Frank Gehry that looks like a shiny avant-gardist sculpture.

Which of these two is really like a theme park? By definition, a theme park is built to attract tourists by letting them experience environments that they cannot see elsewhere.

Celebration was designed as a Victorian town because that is the sort of place where its residents want to live. Its architecture is sentimental, but it was not designed to attract tourists like a theme park.

There is one architect today who is famous for his ability to attract tourists. When he built the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain, its futuristic design attracted so many gaping tourists that it was single-handedly responsible for revitalizing the town's economy. After that success, cities all over the world wanted buildings by the same architect to stimulate their economies by attracting tourists – and Los Angeles wanted him to design Walt Disney Concert Hall to revitalize its downtown by attracting those gaping tourists. There is no doubt that Frank Gehry is our most successful designer of theme park architecture.

When critics say that our traditional architecture looks like a theme park, they do not mention that our avant-gardist architecture looks even more like a theme park. Most of our traditional neighborhood developments are "historically themed," and most of our museums and cultural centers are "themed" in the avant-gardist style.

By contrast, buildings inspired by vernacular classical styles do not seem to be "themed," because the classical vocabulary is so central to the history of western architecture. For example, no one could say that the projects by Quinlan Terry and David Mayernik mentioned earlier look like theme park architecture. They simply look like they belong in London and in Italy. Likewise in America, David Schwartz's Schermerhorn Symphony Center does not look "themed": classicism is so engrained in our history that it simply looks like a civic building should look.

Progressive Architecture

As their second great cliche, avant gardists claim that, because their architecture is futuristic, it is politically "progressive." By contrast, traditional architecture must be politically conservative or reactionary.

When they are desperate, they even say that classicism is the style that was used by slaveholders, but this just proves how backward their thinking is. It shows that they are still fighting the political battles of the nineteenth century and have no idea at all of the political challenges that face us in the twenty-first century.

Figure 18: Theme Park Architecture: Which of these two recent buildings is designed to look like a symphony hall, and which is designed to attract gaping tourists, like a theme park? Above: David Schwartz, Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville, 2006. (Photograph by Kerry Woo.) Below: Frank Gehry, Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, 2003. (Photograph by PDphoto.org.)

Though they congratulate themselves on being progressive, the avant gardists' style actually has no political content. As we have seen, the modernism of the early to mid-twentieth century really was connected with progressive politics; these architects believed that they were helping to reform society and create a better world. But today's avant gardism is a purely decorative style. No one thinks that Frank Gehry's buildings are going to reform society and bring us a better world.

The avant gardists claim that their architecture is progressive because it is unconventional and futuristic, but it is actually the architecture of today's technological corporate economy.

It should have been clear decades ago that the glass high-rises of the mid-twentieth century modernists, far from being politically progressive, were symbols of the dominance of the modern corporation – towering over the city, expressing the power of the corporations that built them.

And today's avant gardists have inherited the modernists' corporate clients.

London's skyline was marred by boxy modernist office buildings decades ago, and now it is being ruined by larger avant-gardist office buildings with nicknames that describe their strange shapes, such as the "erotic gherkin," the "shard of glass," the "walkie-talkie" and the "cheese grater." The mayor of London explained to a journalist why he wants to build more high-rises in this style: "In the global tussle between world metropolises for investment and jobs, he says, companies will choose London only if they can occupy 'signature buildings.'"[9]

Despite their self-consciously radical posturing, these avant-gardist high-rises are corporate architecture, just like the earlier generation of boxy high-rises. In architecture today, the avant gardists are the corporate establishment, and the traditionalists are the reformers.

Architecture of Our Time

As a third cliche, avant-gardist critics claim that only their style of architecture is "of our time." But the last thing we need in our time is to ignore human values and to adopt every flashy technology imaginable purely for the sake of being new and different.

The modernism of the early twentieth-century really was of its time. This architecture was appropriate to a scarcity economy that needed to mobilize new technology to create prosperity. This architecture was in keeping with the technologically optimistic spirit of its time, which wanted to throw away any limits to progress and to build its way out of every problem.

This modernism made some sense when economic scarcity was our key problem, but it no longer makes sense today. Today, we need stable human ends that technology and growth should serve, so we can subordinate modernization to these human ends. We do not need design that uses any technology that is available regardless of whether it works in human terms – such as Gehry's Stata Center and Libeskind's Denver Art Museum extension, which cause feelings of vertigo and nausea.

Mid-twentieth century modernism seemed sterile and inhuman. Today's avant-gardists try so hard to be new and different that they seem deliberately anti-human. This is the meaning of the fragmented and twisted forms of today's avant-gardist architecture: whatever technology makes possible, we will do – even if it makes people feel uncomfortable and disoriented.

Avant gardists ignore the central political and cultural issue of our time, the need to humanize technology. Their architecture is a perfect example of the superiority of technology over human values.

One avant gardist has claimed that anyone who opposes this style is "afraid of the future." He does not realize that the sort of future we will have depends on the choices we make now.

If we use technology wisely, then by the end of this century, most people in the world can be comfortable economically and can have the leisure that is necessary to live a fully human life.

But if we do whatever technology makes possible without caring about its value in human terms, as the avant gardists do, then by the end of this century, we can expect ecological crisis and widespread use of biotechnology to reengineer nature and human nature.

The twisted, distorted shapes of the avant gardists' buildings are the perfect symbol of this post-human future.

Reconstructing Our Culture

Avant-gardist architecture is "of our time" only in the sense that it represents the worst trends of our time.

It represents a society devoted to sensationalism and novelty, where the media rush to cover anything that is new and different. The mass media always marvel at how "innovative" and "cutting edge" the avant gardists' buildings are, but they never bother to ask whether they are good places for people.

It represents a fascination with technology that says, if we can do it, we should do it. New techniques of computer-aided design make it possible to build twisting high-rises, and therefore we should build twisting high-rises – even if the people in them suffer from vertigo.

By contrast, humanistic architecture is of our time in the sense that it is contributing to the central task of our time, the task of humanizing our technological economy. Renaissance architecture and early-twentieth-century modernist architecture both contributed to the larger cultural change that occurred during their times, and today's architects can also make this sort of contribution.

In urban design, the cultural change has already occurred. The New Urbanists have become the dominant school of urban planning by showing that we should replace the sterile, impersonal neighborhoods built by modernist planners with cities and neighborhoods built on a human scale.

In architecture, the cultural change has not occurred yet. Mainstream culture still promotes avant-gardist architecture that focuses on flashy new technology, rather than architecture that subordinates technology to human values.

Our culture will be forced to change during the coming century, as we face global warming and other threats from uncontrolled technology and economic growth.

I believe we need a revival of classical humanism to subordinate technology to human values. I have argued that a revival of classical architecture should be part of a broader cultural change that also includes a revival of classical moral philosophy and classical liberal politics. Others may disagree and believe that we need a different architectural style – and a different direction for our culture.

When we all see that creating a vital architectural style is not just an esthetic problem, that it is also part of a larger cultural project, then a fruitful debate can begin.

Notes

[1] Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York, Viking Press, 1954, copyright 1921), p. 121.

[2] Both critics quoted in Robin Pogrebin, "Extreme Makeover: Museum Edition," *New York Times*, September 18, 2005.

[3] Steve Bailey, "The $300m Fixer-Upper," *Boston Globe*, October 29, 2004.

[4] Robin Pogrebin, "Altered Spaces: The Good, the Bad, and the Dizzying," *New York Times*, March 28, 2007, p. H18.

[5] John King, "Architectural Curios Dazzling But Unsettling," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 6, 2007, p. F1.

[6] Gwenda Blair, "A White Elephant in Vermont Reincarnated," *New York Times*, October 10, 2002, House & Home section, pp. D1 and D4.

[7] Paul Scarbrough, "Sounding Good: Inspired by the classics, the acoustician for Nashville's new Schermerhorn Symphony Center explains how architecture and acoustics take a concert hall into the future," archnewsnow.com, September 7, 2006.

[8] Robert A.M. Stern, *Modern Classicism* (New York, Rizzoli, 1988), p. 187.

[9] Graham Bowley, "Mayor Tugs Sprawling London Up," *International Herald Tribune*, March 7, 2005.