English Conservatism and the Aesthetics of Architecture

Michael Rustin

Prologue

Architecture seems a 'natural' subject for conservatives, and it is therefore fitting that it has become one of the main terrains for the advocacy of the intellectual perspectives of the New Right. Particularly, that is, of the New Right in England, where organic and traditionalist ideas have remained more influential than in the more individualist stream of neo-conservative thought in the United States. The critique of 'modernism' has been a major theme of the architectural journals in England for several years. Some months ago the Prince of Wales, probably by no means a 'new rightist' in general outlook, chose to launch an attack on the sins of modern architecture, and on the National Gallery Extension plans and the proposed Mies van der Rohe skyscraper in the City of London in particular. Two important books on the aesthetics of architecture have recently been produced by English conservative writers, David Watkin <1> and Roger Scruton <2>. A third member of the 'Salisbury Review' group, John Casey <3>, also writes about aesthetics. It is with the most substantial of these books, Roger Scruton's The Aesthetics of Architecture, that this article is mainly concerned.

Buildings, more than most human artifacts, are made to last. They thus physically preserve the spirit of the past. They are conspicuous markers of authority, of values, and of social relationships. The relative size of buildings - the preeminence of cathedrals or castles in one society, of skyscrapers or government offices in another - are one obvious index of the power of dominant institutions <4>. The relationship between buildings - in a town square, or around a village green - can signify more equal relationships, perhaps within a single social class in the way that the British Parliament, in eighteenth-century London, sought to express a spirit of equality within a narrow landed class, and the exclusion of those without. Municipal housing can encode an impersonal and massified view of citizens, or something more differentiated and human. Sometimes the symbolic form of buildings represents religious or social values in a kind of metaphoric translation. Wittkower's Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism <5>, cited as an exemplary work by Scruton, emphasises the Christian Platonism which underlay much Renaissance building, ideas of mathematical proportion being associated with divine harmony, and giving rise to the characteristic orderliness and proportions of Renaissance church architecture. A similar point is made by Von Simson <6>, writing about the Christian symbolism of Gothic cathedrals. The ideas of illumination and structure are linked by him to Christian conceptions of proportion and harmony. This conception of buildings bearing social meanings raises the issue for socialists of what meanings they would want buildings to have, and poses the question of whether the much-criticised aesthetic of 'modernism' has given a human form to contemporary architecture, or has failed to do so as its critics assert. Buildings preserve and continue the cultural forms of the past. Not least in England, where visiting 'stately homes' is a mass, leisure pursuit, especially of the middle class (the National Trust has over a million members), and where the qualities of old country towns and country houses are celebrated with loving care in fact and in fiction on television in many weeks of the year. If one wants to make an argument for the importance of tradition in social life, architecture seems to be the prototypical place to do so.

Yet the ideological nature of the recent repudiation of 'modernism' has been paradoxically because the intellectual field of architecture has been dominated until recently in England by the protagonists of the Modern. A generation of architectural writers and historians, which included Nicholas Pevsner, James Richards, Herbert Read and even John Summerson, argued for the proper linkage of a new architecture with a more democratic and egalitarian society. While the advocacy and practice of 'modernism' in England has taken the evolutionary and mild form that one might expect from other aspects of British social development, nevertheless it has been allied with historical progressivism since the First World War. Where in America, the principal patrons of modern architecture have been corporations and rich private individuals, in England it has depended on public bodies, such as local authority housing and education departments (such as the L.C.C. and Hertfordshire County Council), the London Transport Executive, the universities (including not least Oxford and Cambridge), and the municipal patrons of public buildings such as the South Bank site. There have been important industrial and commercial commissions of 'modernist' buildings, but not on the scale found in the great cities of the United States, in Manhattan or Chicago. The Festival of Britain in 1951, much derided by conservatives then and since, was an attempt symbolically to link the cause of modernism with Britain's post-war reconstruction under a Labour government. Whilst Nicholas Pevsner has traced a distinctively 'vernacular' course of development of modern architecture in Britain <7>, and has compared what is virtually a national cultural institution to compare with the Ordnance Survey in its implicit celebration of British topography (in his Penguin Buildings of England series), there was no contradiction for him, as there is now for conservative writers, in linking this development to the ideal of a more democratic and egalitarian society.

The recent repudiation of and challenge to 'modernism' has taken somewhat different forms in America and in Britain. In the United States, the most influential direction has been that of 'Post-Modernism'. It has been based on a critique of the rationalist impersonality and austerity of modernism, and of its more grandiose technocratic aspirations to transform the world. Ventury in his influential Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966) <8> argued against the false simplicity of 'Orthodox Modernism'.

In their attempt to break with tradition and start all over again, they idealised the primitive and elementary at the expense of the diverse and sophisticated. As participants in a revolution, they acclaimed the newness of modern functions, ignoring their complications. In their role as reformers, they puritanically advocated the separation and exclusion of elements, rather than the inclusion of various elements and their juxtapositions. But arguments like this are, as Charles Jencks <9> has pointed out in qualification of the English anti-modernist critiques, a development of modernism itself, not a repudia-
tion of it. Ventury advocated 'a complex and contradictory architecture based on the richness and ambiguity of modern experience, including the experience which is inherent in art'. He characterised an architectural tradition which he identified with 'middle-periods', and found exemplars of its distinctive complexity and ambiguity not only in Baroque and Gothic buildings, but also more immediately in many works of modern masters, including Le Corbusier, Aalto, and Kahn. This is less a return to tradition (meaning pre-modern building styles) than an active re-interpretation of it, drawing distinctions which transcend any simplifying polarity of ancient and modern.

Modernism saw itself as a revolutionary cultural force, seeking transcendence of the given world. Ventury, Scott and Izenour's Learning from Las Vegas (1972), on the other hand, is an exuberant populist text, even though its authors are in the last resort ambiguous and ironic about populism. 'Main Street is almost all right,' Ventury says in his first book; 'Billboards are almost all right,' says Learning from Las Vegas. But the main point of this book is a provocative architectural thesis, making an intriguing analogy between the communication most important on the Las Vegas Strip - electronic signs on and around the buildings - and the ornamentation of much classical architecture. This is in praise of a 'decorated shed' concept of architecture, contrasted with 'strip' or 'urban' architecture, and also directly contrary to any structural form, like the Dallas hamburger stand that looks like a hamburger. This principle of expression through structure was important in the early modern movement. Ventury and his colleagues enjoyed the brashness and vitality of Las Vegas commercialism, and claim to be on the side of suburbanites and other ordinary users of buildings, and against those who have a more genteel view of the past. Instead they assign the responsibility for much deadening urban improvement. Like Reyner Banham in Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies (1971), they see that the view from the motor car has its own aesthetic pleasures. But theirs is a complex position. On the one hand, they endorse the democracy of the market, and see that contemporary architecture can draw inspiration from 'post-industrial' technologies as early modernism borrowed from the iconography of the first industrial revolution. On the other hand, 'complexity and contradiction' is hardly a populist rallying cry, and its main intended audience was the architectural profession. Ventury's work, both in writing and in design, is a defence of architecture against the more grandiose ambitions of architectural purists.

Things are different back in England. Here, the institutions of industry and commerce have fewer surplus resources and lack the cultural confidence to boldly impose a corporate identity on the physical landscape. 'Modernism' has been, to a greater extent than in America, a cause of the public sector. Who is going to celebrate the aesthetic of a hamburger stand or a Shell petrol sign in Britain? Instead, English anti-modernists have been advocates of the vernacular and the traditional. They know more clearly about the buildings they don't want, than those they do. Instead of attempting to re-theorise the architectural tradition in ways which allow for a more complex modern architecture, a more affirmative voice has been on the whole modern movement. Though Scruton's own position is less crude than this, he leaves only the barest theoretical space in his argument for a 'tradition of the new'. Yet even though no one should want to knock down Chipping Campden, and all those other exquisite villages in the Cotswolds, the future of British architecture can't just lie in preservation and tactful compromise with the antique.

Many of the popular transformations that have occurred in post-war British commercial culture, in the fields for instance of interior design, fashion, and pop music, have also been expressive of ideas of classlessness and even youthful rebellion. They have sometimes been viewed on the right as attacks on traditional moral values and ways of life. The commercial success of Habitat was in its way a product of Bauhaus modernism, and Marks and Spencer has also been strong on design for practical use. (Incidentally, this Bauhaus design tendency is less pervasive in its influence in the USA, where it is hard to find a decently designed dustpan-and-brush.) There has been a market form of egalitarianism and modernism in Britain, as well as the more collectivist forms we usually associate with the Welfare State. 'Swinging London' was not an altogether congenial image for British conservatives, and commercial culture for the traditionalists is as much a problem as a solution. 'Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough,' wrote the late Poet Laureate, John Betjeman. Las Vegas thus has few takers in Britain, while the hard-faced Tories of the Thatcher school might have liked a militant commercial tone, they have tended to defer in cultural matters to the cultivated old guard. After all, commercial freedom in the arts as likely as not meant pornography. So Lord Whitelaw set up the exemplary and enlightened pluralism of Channel 4, and in state policies for the universities and the arts Oxbridge and what Robert Hutchison (1988) referred to as 'the opera class' remain more-or-less in control. While the ultra-traditionalist Tories of Peterhouse and the Salisbury Review don't really agree on philosophical fundamentals with the possessive individualists of Thatcherism, they seem to have decided nevertheless to give them unstinting support against the common 'progressive' enemy.

The shifting of emphasis from the built to the lived-in, emphasised tradition, vernacular styles, and the recently-neglected qualities of Victorian and rural England, in their contest with modernism and progressivism. The 'vernacular' at its simplest means the use of building forms originally developed to suit local materials and conditions, but continued for their sake of historical continuity and consistency. The preservation of old buildings (one of the main concerns of Morris as well as Pevsner) has been re-appropriated as a cause by the right. English cultural conservatism, unlike its American cousins, looks less to the abstract individual and the marketplace, and more to the traditions of the past for its fundamental values. There are individualists and organ­isers in currents of the right in both societies. But while in the United States even the traditionalist movements (for prayers in schools, against capital punishment, or against abortion) present themselves as the strident popular campaigns of ordinary citizens, in Britain a superior upper-class tone is more in evidence, in journals such as the Spectator and Private Eye, and the Salisbury Review, in the assertion of conservative values. The defence of a traditional status-order still seems a more viable option here than it has ever been in the United States.

An intellectual neo-conservatism is emerging in England which is markedly different from the new conservatism of America. Curiously, considering Thatcherite preoccupations with sociological subversion, the disciplines of sociology and anthropology have begun to provide a discourse for traditionalist counter-attack. Bernice Martin's A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change (11) is an intelligent critique of the radical individualist culture of the 1960s, in its various dimensions of popular culture, political ideology, and professional mission. It contrasts the radical individualism of the counter-culture, in its sexual, educational, therapeutic, and political practice, with traditional ideas of authority and social boundary. It plausibly suggests that the emergence of new forms of religious sectarianism among the young is a reaction to the catastrophic loss of identity and structure brought about especially by the drug-culture of the late 1960s, and after. It argues that in contrast working-class communities were wedded to more traditional conceptions of authority and an established way of life. This analysis does go some way towards explaining working-class support for the Thatcher school.
way of life' of working-class ethnographers of socialist sympathy, such as Hoggart and Seabrook, but argues that the values of such 'traditional' communities are wholly antipathetic to middle-class cultural radicalism. This critique points from the political right to cultural fractures in the 'class alliance' between working-class movements and the philanthropic middle class (or their professional descendants). The political importance of these divisions from a socialist point of view has recently been noted by Gareth Stedman Jones [<12>].

It is not difficult to see, especially in Seabrook's work [<13], a similar sense of loss and invasion, though he assigns responsibility for this to a consummationist culture tied to the betrayals of socialism, not to radical ideologies. This conservative defence of traditional communities of class is linked to the main subject of this article, since the replacement of old family housing and settled working-class neighbourhoods by 'comprehensive redevelopment' and the tower block have been seen by some as a symptomatic aspect of rationalist progressivism.

The Aesthetics of Architecture

Roger Scruton in The Aesthetics of Architecture has attempted to develop a philosophically substantial conservative aesthetic theory. This book fortunately lacks the gratuitous provocation and profaning of progressive beliefs - 'thinking the unthinkable' about race, capital punishment, etc. - which characterises his weekly journalism in The Times. Nor does it have the unattractive failings of The Meaning of Conservatism [<14], which makes use of the idea of 'rhetoric' to justify sententious posturing. The Aesthetics of Architecture (henceforth I shall abbreviate it to Architecture) is a serious and thoughtful book, and in this article I shall discuss only this and other of Scruton's works that bear on architecture. The more general assessment of this writer, whose work continues to be wide-ranging both in subject-matter and tone, is a task I do not attempt.

Scruton seems to have been more deeply exposed than we usually expect of conservatives to the cultural thinking of the new left, in Cambridge and elsewhere. One of his points of departure, like the early new left's, was F.R. Leavis's literary criticism (henceforth I shall abbreviate it to Literature). He is interested in the relations of architecture and society, and his central concept of tradition is a way of seeing architecture as an essentially social form. His critique of the abstract notion of tradition is a way of seeing architecture as an essentially social form. His critique of the abstract rationalism and expressionism of the modern movement relates to the 'organicist' critique of individualism and the market also developed by socialist writers, such as Raymond Williams (especially the Kleinian approach which has had, through Mulhern in his Moment of Scrutiny), and to the major modern theories of the 'culture and society relation' in Scruton, also support this growing disjunction between art and society. I shall in the final part of this article suggest a possible solution to this theoretical problem, through the idea of architecture as a symbolic container for different kinds of meanings.

In a different way the psychoanalytic view of art (especially the Kleinian approach which has had, through the work of Adrian Stokes [<18], most to say about architecture and which most interests Scruton) is also a social theory of art. It suggests that works of art symbolise states of human relationship in their most infantile and unmediated forms. In this respect the rejection of this view seems to be based on his failure to recognise the significance of symbolisation in Kleinian theory, and on his misreading of it as a kind of causal reductionism.

Semiology, which Scruton criticises as a misleading theory of language, but whose conception of language he makes use of, also depends on a view of languages (both literal and figurative) as social constructions, embodying
through their fields of difference the choices of social meaning and expression available to individuals in society. Expression, in this view, is less 'created' by the individual, than selected by him (or her) from a pre-existing set of possibilities. Scruton wants to emphasise the interaction between the individual artist and traditions within a culture, reminding us with this phrase both of Raymond Williams's use of this term, and also of an earlier definition of culture as tradition(s) by one of Williams's most important conservative adversaries, T.S. Eliot (192). The Nature of Aesthetic Experience

Scruton's philosophical arguments are derived principally from Kant, from Wittgenstein, and from Hegel. From the first, he develops a theory of imagination, and argues that this is the essence of aesthetic understanding. Imagination in Kant's work doesn't have its contemporary common-sense meaning of free-floating ideas and images separated from our perception of reality. This view of imagination (which is closer to the contrasting Coleridgean concept of 'fancy') would support an expressionist, romantic theory of art and architecture to which Scruton is opposed. Kant's theory of imagination refers to the necessarily 'conceptual' character of our knowledge of the world. We perceive through categories of thought. We make sense of the chaos of sensory experiences which assail us both through the play of the expectations and experiences, or we cannot understand them. An architect does convey a real affection for its subject, and an educator's concern to transmit this to others. While there are serious problems with Scruton's aesthetic theory, and he uses them as Leavis used textual quotations to ground and demonstrate his argument through examples which the reader can also consider and learn from. Architecture does convey a real affection for its subject, and an architect's capacity to communicate this is as important as other things. While there are serious problems with Scruton's aesthetic theory, and we will be able to respond to a particular building. The emphasis on tradition and style gives a conserva-
which demonstrates well that architecture is or can be 'ordinary', is a discussion of a railway wall in Westbourne Park Villas, London, in which its regularity and shapely form (much nineteenth-century railway architecture was built with a careful, Romanesque attention to form and detail) is nicely commended.

Scruton's interest in architecture as an element of universal human experience leads him to consider, and to attempt to refute, other theories which have attempted to explain it in broad social terms. Architecture is not only self-referential, he acknowledges. It has and should relate to religious beliefs and to ideas of a cosmic order - how can we make sense of Gothic and Renaissance architecture if we don't understand this? He conceives that there is something in the idea that a society's buildings are expressions of its social relationships. As Girouard says in the first lines of his English Country Houses (21):

> "What were country houses for? They were not originally, whatever they may be now, just large houses in the country in which rich people lived. Essentially, they were power houses - the houses of a ruling class. The size and pretensions of such houses were an accurate index of the ambitions, or lack of them, of their owners. When a new man bought an estate and built on it, the kind of house showed exactly what level of power he was aiming at."

Now Girouard is of course interested in specific architectural designs and styles, and not merely in sociological description. But a distinctive quality of this book (like Williams's The Country and the City (22), which makes some parallel observations about country houses and the literatures concerned with them) is that it explores the connections between social and stylistic meanings.

Similarly, Scruton acknowledges that at some 'primitive' level unconscious needs may have something to do with our response to buildings. Adrian Stokes, influenced by Melanie Klein, argued that relationship to an unconscious image of mother and mother's body was a primary aspect of our relationship to the world, not its sole aspect. Summer­son drew attention to this aspect of buildings in Heavenly Mansions (23).

> "There is a kind of play common to nearly every child; it is to get under a piece of furniture or some extremeposited shelter of its own and to exclaim that he is in a 'house'. Psychoanalysis interprets this in various ways (he makes reference to a work of Susan Isaacs).

I am not however concerned with such interpretations except in so far as they show that this particular form of phantasy cannot be dismissed merely as mimicry of the widespread adult practice of living in houses. It is symbolic of, a fundamental kind, expressed in play, may be now, just large houses in the country in which rich people lived. Essentially, they were power houses - the houses of a ruling class. The size and pretensions of such houses were an accurate index of the ambitions, or lack of them, of their owners. When a new man bought an estate and built on it, the kind of house showed exactly what level of power he was aiming at."}

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Scruton concludes by arguing that these are mere 'primitive' elements of aesthetic experience, rather than fundamental or constitutive of it.

The primitive anxieties which buildings evoke, but also contain for us, are more physical and basic even than a psychoanalytical account of this sort suggests. It may be that the elaboration and ordering of openings and entrances to buildings has functions which Scruton only indirectly evoke at the points where the wall seems not to be held up, where the outside can get in. It is not only the fanta­sied damage that our feelings do to the outside world that buildings symbolically contain and restore to wholeness. They also give symbolic elaboration to the ontological fears that arise from gravity, from light and darkness, from open space and enclosure, and from the harmful potential of solid objects themselves. They reassure us in the face of these primitive anxieties about the physical world.

The main grounds for Scruton's rejection of a psychoanalytical view of architecture is his denial of deterministic accounts of architectural meaning, whether the causes in question are socio-historical, materialist, or unconscious. But I think very few advocates of the Marxist, historicist, or psychoanalytical positions Scruton attacks in fact any longer hold such deterministic views. To an extent, in the area of cultural theory anyway, we are all idealists now. Of course the connections between social contexts and architectural meaning are most interesting when they are internal to works, and not merely the external boundary conditions, or causes. Scruton's stress on the press and broadcasting has become most interesting when it has gone beyond the more obvious issues of ownership and censorship, and explored the 'internal' professional prac­tices of editors and broadcasters. It is the ways in which 'ideology' becomes part of implicit codes that needs explanation. For years (following Leavis, in fact) all the best cultural work has been based on the powerful preconceptions of cultural and social forms. The reduction of the whole world to mere text or discourse is now a more besetting misdirection than economic determinism.

Similarly in psychoanalysis, and especially its Kleinian variant, it is the symbolic expressions of unconscious meanings that are the main subject of interpretive attention, not the symbolic effects of unconscious causes. A major theme of Kleinian psychoanalytic writing has been the emotional preconditions of the capacity for symbol formation, and in its later development, in the work of W.R. Bion (29), the forms and qualities of thought itself, in different (and sometimes extreme) mental states. In as much as buildings can symbolise basic states of internal relationship (between the self and its internal objects, internal ambivalences and conflicts in an ordered way, they become important representations of our inner selves. Since as human beings in a given society, and perhaps more generally, we share some basic life-experiences, buildings can represent these states of symbolic order as part of a common culture. Psychoanalysis provides a theory of symbolisation of unconscious desire and anxiety, not a mechanistic model of their effects. The basic experiences which Klei­nians place at the root of experience (the infantile relationship to the breast, for example) figure even in clinical work as the root of an infinite series of symbolic transformations in later experience, as one important source of the meanings we find in the world. Interpretations of this kind are hypotheses to be tested against the experience of patient and analyst together (Scruton rightly points out the clinical emphasis of Kleinian work), not an a priori schema that must be correct. Scruton has a less sensitive or well­informed picture of Kleinian clinical method than he does of the application of its insights to architecture.

The critical weakness of Scruton's account lies in the nature of the relationship between what he calls the 'prim­itive' elements of architecture (expression and bearing), and their essential imagin­ative or symbolic nature. His attack on sociological or linguistic approaches to architecture attempts to destroy the links of meaning between these 'primitive' elements of architectural experience, and its conscious and rational
qualities. He treats semiology as just another misleading theory, but a theory of architectural language of some kind is in fact necessary to all the other approaches he discusses, including his own.

The cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, in an essay in Local Knowledge <25>, refers (following Alton Becker) to four main orders of semiotic connections, for investigation in a 'social text'. These are the relation of parts of a text to one another (this equates to the principle of coherence); the relation of a text to others historically or culturally associated with it (inter-textuality); the relation of it to those who construct it (the intentions of authors); and its relation to realities conceived as lying outside it (theories of reference, of which architectural 'historicism', 'historical materialist', or 'class theories', and theories of unconscious meaning, are all examples). (Each of these approaches corresponds to a different 'aesthetic ideology' <26>.) What Scruton does is in fact to opt rather arbitrarily for the first and second of these approaches, leaving the concern for coherence (hence his approval of the classical Orders), and for tradition. Architectural meaning in his view is apprehended in these two main dimensions. But he is sensitive enough to realise that this hardly exhausts the matter, and would rule out of bounds the insights of many of the great architectural critics, like Wölflin <27>, Supersens, the 'mutual dependence of part and whole and the properties of the object, and on the differences between senti-mentality about objects and recognition of their true properties is also an insight important to Kleinian and other psychoanalytic theory.) The theory of language developed here is clearly not merely a descriptive one. Expression and judgement too are subject to rational order, and are thus formulated in language.

Scruton's argument here in Chapter 1 of Architecture is about the language of aesthetics, and not the 'language' of architecture itself. Nevertheless it seems strange to base an attack on the 'semiology' of architecture on a concept of language much narrower than that deployed for other important purposes earlier in his book.

Semiological accounts of various 'sign systems' have emphasised the expressive as well as the representational functions of language. Mary Douglas, for example, in Natural Symbols <28>, has demonstrated the choices made in the conventions of clothes and bodily appearance between the formal and the informal, the hairy and the smooth, the loose and the tight, and has seen these dimensions as symbols of the strength of social boundaries. Subsequent sociologists have sought to go beyond this empirical approach by appearances, not only in the indexical (sometimes representational or functional) forms of liveries, uniforms, etc., but in the more abstract and conventional codes of consistency, decorum, etc. The fact that representational truth is only one function of most aesthetic languages (though facial expressions, clothing and building styles can all misrepresent and thus 'lie'), is far from equivalent to saying that in their non-representational modes these languages convey no meaning.

One crucial point about semiology seems to be misunderstood in The Aesthetics of Architecture. De Saussure's and Barthes's great insight was to see that meanings are conveyed through discriminations between fields of differences, not through the representation of essences, or the externalisation of subjective intentions. Meanings are given to experience by the concepts which are available to language-users in a given context or culture. Language does not merely reflect the things of the world, but shapes and divides experience into discrete things and qualities. This is Kant's view of the category-impregnated structure of perception, given a socially-relative form by Durkheim, and by adoption, more widely. A linguistic form of the view is also consistent with Wittgenstein's view of languages as 'public', as forms of life it is implicit rules and conventions of understanding and behavior which are primary. It is odd that Scruton, who bases much on approaches derived from Kant and Wittgenstein, should revert in his discussion of semiology (itself a transformation of Kantian-
ism into a sociologically-relativist form) to a prescriptively representational and positivistic view of language.

The model of language does not however transfer simply to the field of art, in summary, as follows:

1) In language, change only occurs in one part of the system at a time. In aesthetic systems, change often occurs in the whole system, e.g., the change from Gothic to classical architecture, or from eclecticism to modern.

2) In language, change is always unintentional. In aesthetic systems, change is always intentional (though the intention may not be rationalised).

3) In language, the existence of precise perceptual degrees of difference in the phonic object is relatively unimportant. In aesthetic systems, however, precise degrees of difference are important - the differences between the interval of a third and a fifth in music, for example. In music the ability to distinguish degrees of difference is used to create structure which is interesting in itself, and to create meaning.

4) In aesthetic systems, unlike in languages, the sensible forms are interesting in themselves. Signs are conventional, but not arbitrary. Signs may resemble their object, or be analogous to it.

The main point perhaps is that art forms are among other things self-referential. The contemplation of the relationships of forms to each other, and to their objects, is part of aesthetic experience. Symbols in art are objects of attention in their own right, and not only in their external referents. Such a more complex view of aesthetic language does not mean that we have to abandon the idea of language in art. If we try to, we will merely find ourselves reinventing it, as Scruton in his references to architectural 'languages' and 'vocabularies' does. Yet his emphasis on the 'vocabulary' and 'syntax' of architecture - the positive value of decoration, moulding, and ornament, the classical principles of orders and their later continuations - is one of the most valuable emphases of his book. This concern for detail is quite consistent with a more recent and self-referentialist approach to the explanatory discourses of semiotics and its cognates. Other writers based in the USA, such as Colin Rowe, have also shown that the distance between classical and modern architecture - for example in regard to the concepts of harmony and proportion - is by no means as great as Scruton suggests. Le Corbusier is particularly singled out by Rowe for his commitment to classical ideas of proportion.

From these distinctions between the languages of art and languages per se Colquhoun derives the view that aesthetic language needs to be understood in a historical or diachronic dimension, as well as a systemic or synchronic one. The correct view that art forms are subject to change leads Scruton, in a later essay, to the ahistorical understanding, to prefer the idea of tradition to convention. But his failure to acknowledge the possibility and frequency of changes in artistic languages as a whole is one of the things that leads to his general rejection of modernism. It does not seem possible, in his view, to invent a new language.

Metaphor and Symbolic Transformations

Perhaps the key to this problem, and one which is more consistent with Scruton's view of imagination and 'seeing as' as the key to aesthetic experience than his preferred concept of style, lies in the idea of metaphor and metaphoric language.<33>. If we return to Geertz's types of

semiotic connection we find four kinds of meanings that 'texts' (in this case buildings) can contain. Scruton chooses to privilege two of these (coherence and inter-textual relations) over the others, but this seems a somewhat tautologising reason for this other than his own traditionalist leanings.

If we see art languages as condensations of many possible kinds of significance (imaginative perception means recognising what these might be), then referents which lie outside the work (to the power of the country-house owner in Giorouard, or to the mother's damaged but restored body in Stokes) become perfectly admissible. Also admissible as possible meanings are symbolic transformations from other artistic languages - the derivations of early modernist transformations from the idioms of the industrial and engineering constructions of the nineteenth century, and also from Cubism, for example, or the echoes of aerospace design that one can see in the smooth, light, aluminium-faced forms of some modernist buildings, like the Citycorp Center in New York (1977). Buildings can refer to objects and conventions outside the field of architecture (consider also the relationships between painting and architecture in the Renaissance); to their own past and contemporary styles (this may be both in synchronic and diachronic dimensions); and can express and explore human feelings and desires (for beauty, for example). Scruton's concept of creative expression, which he takes from Hegel and the early Marx, while on the surface and in intention admirably humanist, is in fact a somewhat inadequate and regressive concept for this reason. It implies an intuitive idea of what human needs and a human scale are, and misses the multi-valence and multiplicity of meanings that are in fact conveyed by buildings, and perhapsspecially need to be if they are to externalise our contemporary experience. The concept of 'creative', as used by Scruton, is over-specific, in a way somewhat similar to William Morris's use of this idea in the sense that it values some kinds of forms (those bearing the manifest imprint of human labour) over others. But jet aircraft, suspension bridges, the weight-defying and immaterial appearance of some glass-walled skyscrapers, or the miraculously fragile appearance of James Stirling's History Faculty building at Cambridge are products and aesthetic expressions of modern forms of human labour too, and have their own aesthetic meanings. Scruton somewhat reluctantly acknowledges this - he notes for example that the freeway design of the later work of Louis Kahn and I. M. Pei created an aesthetic of speed; he also points out some careful detailing in Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building in New York. But he doesn't appear to have much affinity for the modern, and his Hegelian view that 'only by transforming the world into the visible and tangible record of things rationally pursued can a man find a place for himself there; without that place there will be no self to furnish it' takes him back mainly to the classical forms of expression.

The language of architecture shares its multi-valent, self-referential, and ambiguous qualities with the other languages of art. The distinguishing features of symbolic forms of this kind is that they draw attention to themselves and their own qualities, but only according to one untenable aesthetic doctrine does this mean that they should have no relation to any meanings outside themselves. This doctrine is particularly unconvincing in its application to a useful and social art such as architecture. The mental process of 'seeing as' or imaginative perception, which Scruton sees as central to aesthetic experience, is the way in which we recognise these different possible meanings in the same object. Often the most interesting and complex works, as with literature, will be those which are most rich in (or receptive to) different meanings and valid interpretations. Meaning may be made possible by tradition, but it does not exist only in the dimension of reference to it.
The 'Langue' and 'Parole' of Architecture

If we could establish the multi-valent properties of architectural languages (and their various possible kinds of connotation and interpretation), it might be possible to arrive at elements about appropriate building design in a more understandable and productive way. We can see architecture as inherently a metaphor for many kinds of meanings. Architects use languages of conventional expression made available for them by their predecessors, but, in the nature of artistic languages, they are able, if they are original and creative to modify these languages, and perhaps transform them substantially. Individual buildings, and the work of particular architects are architecture's 'speech' (or parole), the traditions and conventions which are available to them, both in engineering and form terms, are its 'language' (or langue). If we understand the functions of language and speech, respectively, we can make sense of different kinds of work. If we understand the particular properties of architectural language as a language of art, we can see the relevance of different kinds of meaning in buildings.

The recognition that 'styles' or conventional systems of signification are inescapable is in this sense an advance, whether made in the context of a traditionalist aesthetic by Scruton, or in a post-modernist perspective by Venturi. Scruton's attention to the conceptual and philosophical habitat of the aesthetic is limited in terms of architecture substantially. Individual buildings, and the work of particular architects are architecture's 'speech' (or parole), the traditions and conventions which are available to them, both in engineering and form terms, are its 'language' (or langue). If we understand the functions of language and speech, respectively, we can make sense of different kinds of work. If we understand the particular properties of architectural language as a language of art, we can see the relevance of different kinds of meaning in buildings.

If we could acknowledge that buildings can convey many sorts of meaning, we might ourselves find a language for the expression of rational disagreements about preferences. In aesthetics especially, such disagreements are inevitable. Aesthetic perspectives are ultimately matters of choice, and can make as much use of the idea of architectural language and of the various possible metaphoric meanings of buildings, as anyone. Scruton's references to Hegelian concepts of self-realisation, though one might not share his particular traditionalist interpretation of this, points towards the idea of a world full of humanly created meanings which must remain central to socialist aesthetics.

It is also likely that conservative insights into the importance of traditions, and of established social and moral boundaries, will need to be reconsidered by the left. Modernism has not been without its technocratic and bureaucratic failings, and these are not wholly attributable to the unfavourable conditions of patronage under which many modern architects have had to work. The idea that architecture is a language which can convey many meanings also confers intelligibility and legitimacy on conservative points of view, such as Scruton's. Those who care for buildings, in their different ways, share a commitment which may differentiate them from others of the same political persuasion. They should, like those in political and procedural disagreement in other disciplines (such as historiography for example) be able to acknowledge their specific community of language and value.

Modernism in architecture is a language, like others. What we need, at this time, is a way of considering reflectively what elements of the modernist tradition can be fruitfully developed, and in what ways its impersonality and abstract, essentially 'middlebrow' narrative to more exploratory forms of writing, often wish modern experience, as well as its symbolic representations, would go away.

The enormous recent growth of interest in language and in its derivatives (sign-systems, etc.) is probably a consequence of the proliferation of competing forms of symbolisation in the modern world. It is no longer possible to refer to 'meanings' in a way which is consistent with all discourses - e.g., classical forms of literature - have lost whatever monopoly of attention of the educated they may once have had. So 'meta-theories' of culture are developed, centering around language itself, to bring these competing symbolic forms into some kind of order. The transformations which 'modernism' brought about in the form of art form, and is mostly now qualified by a strong element of idealist 'relative autonomy' and recognition of the specificity of cultural forms. So far as prescription is concerned, socialists might be expected to have a democratic and populist conception of architecture - one of their problems is the contradiction in the modernist tradition between this and affiliation to the elitism of the avant-garde. Scruton's own position is also somewhat contrary. His aesthetic preferences in architecture seem traditionalist and classical, but the ideas of a universal human aesthetic faculty which he takes from both Kant and Leavis may also point in a more popular direction. This was after all one pathway that led from Leavis to the cultural new left in the 1950s. It seems that socialists have as much need, and can make as much use, of the idea of architectural language and of the various possible metaphorical meanings of buildings, as anyone. Scruton's references to Hegelian concepts of self-realisation, though one might not share his particular traditionalist interpretation of this, points towards the idea of a world full of humanly created meanings which must remain central to socialist aesthetic theory.
communities which are sufficiently capable of self expression (such forms of expression have in the past always been social as much as individual), that modern architects have found it so difficult to design buildings, which correspond to important ideas, that there may be little or no reliability or continuity. Maybe a certain kind of sociological and political pluralism would be a first step. If we could start from the actual and possible communities for whom buildings are made, many of whom will be moral or functional, not territorial communities (air-travellers, members of universities, or theatre-goers, not local residents), and the types of building which might correspond to them, we might be better at finding idioms in which users could recognise their own values and purposes. Just as Gothic and Baroque architects had a very well-established idea of what a church should be and look like, so we need as starting points some agreed conceptions of what a school, an airport or a shopping centre is supposed to do and how it should appear. Only from established forms can come meaningful variations and development (on this essential point, Scruton is right). This is perhaps one reason why in practice modern architecture and design have succeeded in art, rather than in the arts, in new places, and particularly in the work of London Transport. In these areas, there has been the possibility to establish known idioms and precedents, sometimes relating (as in the Oxbridge case) to a long historical tradition. Part of the modern problem, as Colquhoun points out, is that individual modern architects have had so little influence, and have not been able to establish common styles. Instead, every problem is approached from scratch. Part of the attraction of Reyner Banham’s Los Angeles, or Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour’s Las Vegas, is that these places have developed recognised styles, in their inimitable ways. The aesthetic choices to be made in different contexts are somewhat arbitrary, but are often under-determined. This is what it means to say that aesthetic languages are subject to large-scale transformation, and that their signs are to some extent conventional. What is important is that within a genre there should be some consistency, some known forms, some continuity through which differences and individuality can have a significant meaning.

A more considered and balanced approach to the language of architecture, as the necessary frame and not the issue of debate, might enable the current battle of the ancients and moderns to be conducted in a more rational and fruitful way than is currently happening, especially in Britain. It is perhaps not helped by the characteristic forms of expression of architectural writing, as the declaration or manifesto (perhaps conceived on the model of the architectural project for an immediate occasion which commits no one for the future, rather than as the consistent development of a line of thought). To this necessary and difficult debate I think Scruton’s carefully argued book makes a valuable contribution, not least because of the unusually powerful way in which he seeks to explicate different theoretical positions. He might agree with the spirit of the idea that such a rational exploration of differences in architectural approaches is desirable, if not with the suggested foundation of this debate on the idea of a metaphoric language of architecture.

The idea that the meaning of ‘texts’ primarily lies in their relation to other texts (the ‘inter-textual’ approach) generates a traditionalist view of art. Also recently to a celebration of the virtuosity of the critic in uncovering these derivations and transformations.

(c) The relation of the text to its author’s intentions gives rise to romantic theories of art.

d) The idea of reference to a reality outside the text gives rise to a variety of conceptions, depending on the dominant concept of ‘external’ or ‘internal’ reality. For example, among idealists and Hegelians this gives rise to historicist theories. Among Marxists, to materialist or class theories. For Derrideans (viewing texts as the ‘collective representation’ of social structures and social norms) the interpretation will be sociological. For psychoanalytic theorists, the most interesting dimension is the unconscious formations derived from infancy. These approaches may minimally assert only that art is the symbolic expression of exploration of other important areas of experience, and varies in relation to these experiences in society and history. This view can be more or less dialectical and interactive in its view of the relationship between art and society. These approaches may minimally assert only that art is the symbolic expression of exploration of other important areas of experience, and varies in relation to these experiences in society and history. This view can be more or less dialectical and interactive in its view of the relationship between art and society.

An extreme version of this view, developed in ‘symbolist’ critical theory at the end of the nineteenth century, argued that the meaning of a work of art was contained wholly within the work itself – the idea of ‘pure form’.

For example, on pages 241, 250 and 256 of Aesthetics of Architecture.


15 A good account of F.R. Leavis and Scruton is given in Francis Mulhern, The Moment of Scrutiny, New Left books, 1979.


17 R. Scruton, The Aesthetic Understanding (especially chapters 1, 2, 13, 14, 15).


25 Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge (Chapter 1), New York, Basic Books, 1983.

26 The aesthetic ideologies which correspond to these semiotic connections may perhaps be sketched out as follows:

(a) The principle of coherence gives rise to classical theories of order in art.