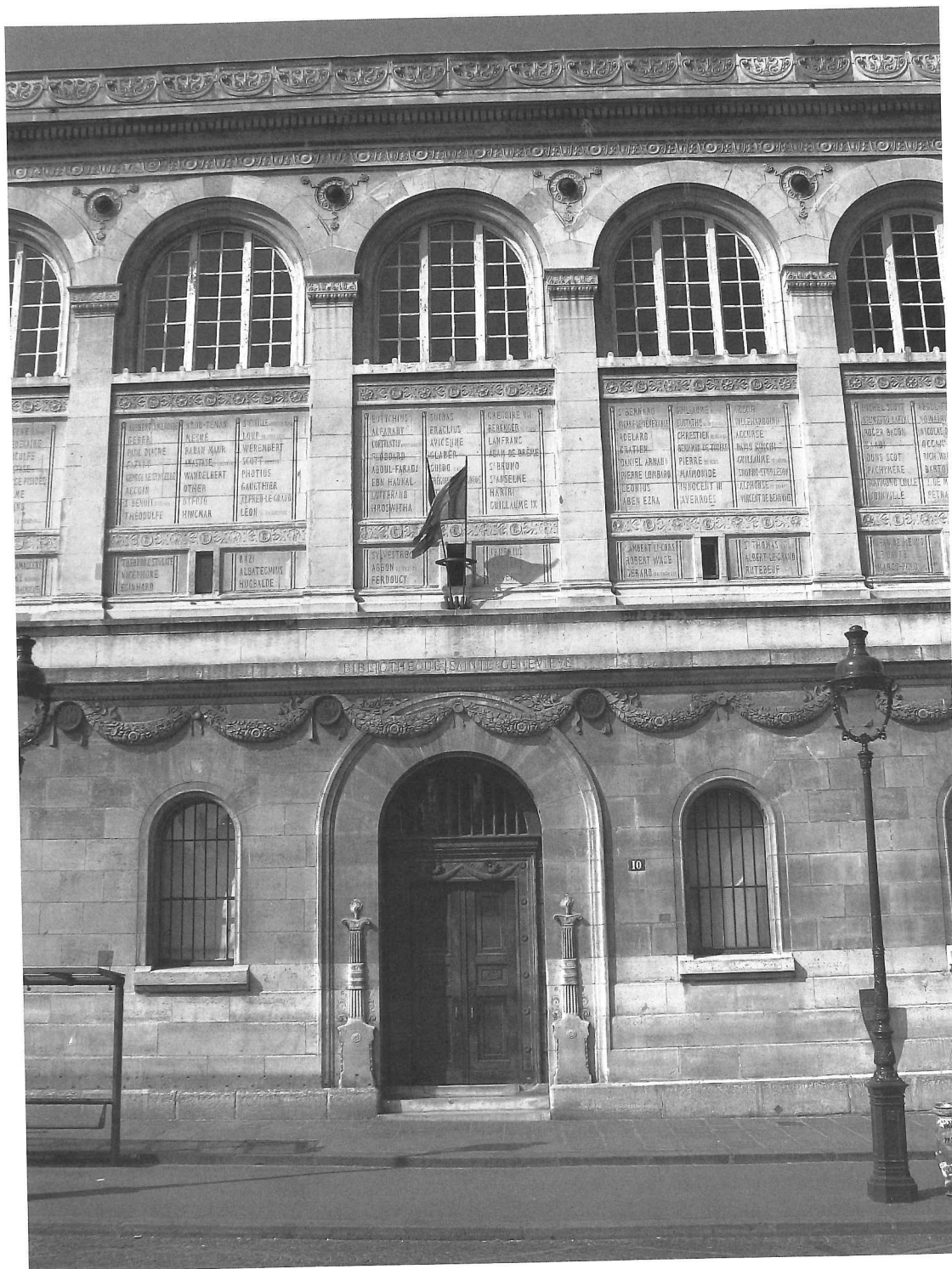


6.1. Bibliothèque Ste.-Geneviève, Paris, by Henri Labrouste, 1845–51.

The library is often celebrated as a “progressive” forerunner of modernism. Some of Labrouste’s sources were indeed foreign to the academic orthodoxy of the time, but he nonetheless displays a profound continuity with the classical tradition.



CHAPTER 6

Historicism and the Search for an Architecture of Our Time

Architecture is not the product of materials and purposes—nor by the way, of social conditions—but of the changing spirits of changing ages. It is the spirit of an age that pervades its social life, its religion, its scholarship, and its arts. The Gothic style was not created because somebody invented rib-vaulting; the Modern Movement did not come into being because steel frame and reinforced concrete construction had been worked out—they were worked out because a new spirit required them.

—SIR NIKOLAUS PEVSNER, *An Outline of European Architecture* (1943)

One of the most persistent ideas that architects and preservationists have inherited from the nineteenth century is the idea that art and architecture express, or ought to express, the spirit of the age. Whenever we hear contemporary design described as “the architecture of our time”—meaning not that it is the product of people living today but that it consciously embodies themes or concerns specific to this historical moment—we are under the influence of a complex of ideas philosophers call historicism. Essentially, this is the doctrine that each era or period in history has a unique and exclusive “spirit” or set of ideas and concerns exclusive to it within a greater temporal sequence that aims at the realization of some ideal of progress.

In the historicist philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) is revealed by developments in art, as much as by political, social, and technological change, and an individual artwork is little more than a symptom of its social and cultural context. The main task of the artist, critic, or historian is, therefore, to discern the spirit of the time and give it adequate expression. Hegel’s descendant, Karl Marx, viewed works of art and culture as either “progressive”—for

facilitating class struggle and the ultimate fall of capitalism—or “reactionary”—for inhibiting or obscuring that process. In both philosophies, art is judged according to whether it advances or retards the “imperatives” of a given age, however they may be defined.

By the turn of the twentieth century, historians indebted to Hegel and Marx (as well as to the evolutionary ideas of Darwin and Spencer) had classified world history into temporal periods, which they saw as subject to distinct phases of rise, development, and decadence. This historiographic program was perhaps best summed up by Oswald Spengler, whose *Decline of the West* (first published in 1918) posits a multiplicity of distinct and unique cultures rising and falling in temporal waves: “Each culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return. There is not one sculpture, one painting, one mathematics, one physics, but many, each in its deepest essence different from the others, each limited in duration and self-contained, just as each species of plant has its peculiar blossom or fruit, its special type of growth and decline. . . .” (Spengler, 1932, pp. 21–22.) In this view each historical period has its own exclusive concerns, methods, and

goals expressive of the spirit of the age, and it is the job of the historian to sort these out. Each period must only be judged by the criteria proper to it as a time-bound, never-to-return phenomenon. Conformance with the historicist program superseded any claim to universal values or criteria applying beyond the boundaries of a given period. Those artists or thinkers whose work seemed to epitomize their time were identified as the major figures; those who did not conform to expectations of their period could probably be safely ignored.

"Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space." "The new architecture is the inevitable logical product . . . of our age." "The architect's task consists in coming into agreement with the orientation of his epoch." These statements, respectively from Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier, "are among the cruder outcroppings of a theory of historical determinism, a sort of *Reader's Digest* version of Hegel which was abundantly taken in by the architectural and planning professions in the earlier years of [the twentieth] century." (Rowe and Koetter, 1978, pp. 28, 95–99.) These sentiments, with their underlying progressive social and political commitments, placed modernist architecture "on the side of the future." History was a series of significant ruptures or revolutions in which new forces and new ideas from time to time broke through the straitjacket of tradition. Moreover, the ruptures were the inevitable outcome of the historical process itself; the ultimate triumph of progress was assured. Modernism was the most recent—and perhaps final—instance of such cultural breakthroughs, one capable of realizing at last "the age-old promise to drag us out of the Dark Ages." (Ouroussoff, 2007.) But what is the end toward which progress in architecture aims? Until two decades ago it might have been the consummation of Marxist revolution; today it seems to be the perfection of technology. Architects have staked their profession and their individual reputations on experimentation with new construction methods and materials, as well as new ways of conceiving and representing architectural designs, so that technology itself—or at least the appearance of it—is no longer a means of environmental improvement but has become an end in itself.

Architectural education supported the progressive program, especially in the teaching of architectural history. Generations of students have absorbed the historicist narrative from

Sir Bannister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, first published in 1896 and still a standard textbook in the field. (Fletcher, 1928.) The influential writings of Sigfried Giedion and Nikolaus Pevsner presented the genesis of modernist architecture as the inevitable product of the spirit of the age and then retroactively identified as "pioneers" those historical designers whose work seemed to point toward modernism. Those architects or artists whose work either did not contribute to the founding of the Modern Movement or who continued to work in historical styles after 1925 were summarily excluded from the history of architecture. (Giedion, 1954, and Pevsner, 1960 and 1977.) Pevsner, for example, recounting the leading architects of the modern era, simply declares that for the first forty years of the twentieth century, "no English name need here be mentioned," thereby consigning the splendid work of John Belcher, Edwin Lutyens, Giles Gilbert Scott, Reginald Blomfield, Beresford Pite, Charles Holden, Charles Townsend, and many others to an oblivion that has only recently been remedied. (Pevsner, 1977, p. 394, and Watkin, 1977, pp. 114–15.)

Since the early 1990s, global confidence in a predetermined—or at least clearly identifiable—pattern of progress in history has largely disappeared from the world of politics, economics, and international affairs. Since the fall of Communism—the political expression of Marx's historical determinism—it seems that nothing is inevitable after all. But while the philosophical and political implications of historicism were abandoned nearly everywhere else, the historicist faith remains strong among contemporary architects and critics, many of whom cling to the idea that every age must distinguish itself from all previous ages by making new buildings look different from any previously built. This assumption not only drives much of the culture of novelty visible in contemporary design, but also provides the philosophical framework for mainstream preservation policies: the projection of "difference" between new construction and historic fabric arises from the historicist view that every period must present itself in terms uniquely expressive of its particular moment. Without making this difference conspicuous, it is thought, the clarity of the historicist narrative might become obscured and its authority undermined. (For a thorough review of the history and influence of historicism in architectural theory, see Watkin, 1977.)

Historicism and Historical Architecture

The historicist viewpoint in architecture rests on the axiom that buildings and cities are to be seen primarily as *documents of their times*. This is not an unreasonable assumption for a historian, for whom architectural artifacts can be an endlessly rich source of information about the designers, builders, and inhabitants of a historic place. Buildings and cities seem to be even more revealing than written documents or other evidence our predecessors might have left behind, disclosing substantial information about the larger culture of the time and place, including social organization, economic structure, political apparatus, technologies, and religious observances. For the architect or historian approaching historical fabric in this way, buildings and sites can indeed be splendid documents of their times. Difficulties arise when historic buildings and sites are seen as documenting a time for which a general framework has been established in advance by the historicist narrative. The human tendency, shared even by professional historians, is to find what we are looking for. By defining what they supposed a given period to have been about and focusing on those buildings that corroborated this characterization and deemphasizing those that did not, historians of the historicist school constructed an elaborate, but incomplete, picture of Western architecture based on an evolutionary model. Chronological criteria replaced aesthetic criteria for making judgments of quality, and conformance to period-stylistic templates supplanted the investigation of actual historical development for writing history. (Collins, 1967, p. 157.)

In order to keep the various periods distinct, historians emphasized the differences between them; ultimately it was these differences that defined history in disregard of the predominant continuity that binds one period to its predecessors and successors. For example, the differences between the thought and culture of the medieval and Renaissance periods in Europe, and concomitant differences between Gothic and Renaissance architecture, tended to be exaggerated. On closer scrutiny, the two traditions are more difficult to separate than their conventional presentation in standard histories would suggest, but a clean division between them better suits the historicist parcelization by period. Works that seem to combine or

straddle two periods or styles are especially disadvantaged because they frustrate a historicist evaluation; they are typically seen, at best, as examples of "transition." The Church of St.-Eustache in Paris, for example, is dismissed by Pevsner as "not amongst the historically leading works" because he values more highly those buildings that seem to "lead" to subsequent, even more esteemed, works. (Pevsner, 1977, p. 310.) (See fig. 3.1.) Valuing buildings primarily in terms of how well they conform to the presumed profile of their period or how clearly they seem to prefigure some later development imposes on the past a sort of temporal typecasting that deprives us of an accurate or complete picture of any historical epoch.

Every historian approaches the subject matter at hand with a point of view, historicist or otherwise; but an entirely different picture of history can be painted depending on whether one sees continuities or discontinuities as normative. If ruptures, revolutions, and daring innovations are what define the spirit of the time—as Spengler thought—then the historian will emphasize those and ignore the vast preponderance of buildings that continue along stylistic lines established earlier. This partially explains the standard critical approach to two other landmarks of Paris, Henri Labrouste's Bibliothèque Ste.-Geneviève (1845–51) and Charles Garnier's Opéra (1861–74). Labrouste's library, both technically challenging and stylistically innovative, is seen by many historians as progressive and a precursor to later modernist developments. Garnier's Opéra, on the other hand, falls outside the historicist narrative despite its vast inventive-ness and technological sophistication, because its more retrospective neo-Baroque style had no influence on the development of modernism, except as an example of what the Modern Movement deplored. But what is most striking about these two works is what they have in common—a strong commitment to the ongoing development of the classical tradition, a specific interest in ornament, the further exploration of their respective building types, and an incorporation of the most advanced technology their rapidly developing building culture afforded them. (Fig. 6.1) (See fig. 2.2.) Giedion, who claimed that "there are whole decades in the second half of the nineteenth century in which no architectural work of any significance is encountered," devoted an entire chapter to Labrouste but ignored Garnier. (Giedion, 1954,

p. 292, emphasis added.) Nineteenth-century architecture is treated with more respect by more recent historians, but the conventional view still holds much of the architectural community in its grasp. (For more balanced views of Labrouste and Garnier, see Bergdoll, 2000, and Watkin and Middleton, 2003.)

The historicist narrative fails to recognize the extent to which the art and architecture of any moment in history is driven by multiple impulses, even contradictory ones, that compete and combine in a continually jostling marketplace of works and ideas. Developments and new styles tend to come from the initiatives of individuals and groups, not from blind forces, abstract ideas, or steady evolution. (Collins, 1967, p. 28.) Architectural traditions, operating as described in Chapter 3, are motivated by the ongoing conversation about the models rather than by a desire to subsume the built evidence under some abstract idea or presumed *Zeitgeist*. Sometimes a building culture evolves slowly, almost imperceptibly; at other times a single building or event can seem to revolutionize a culture's entire conception of architecture and urbanism. In any case, there is no "spirit of the time" independent of the acts and works that are thought retrospectively to have embodied it, and these are typically too numerous and diverse to fit neatly in any temporal pigeonhole. (Scott, 1924, p. 27.) Despite Pevsner's claims to the contrary, it was because someone invented rib-vaulting that the Gothic style emerged, not because the spirit of the time required it. (Pevsner, 1977, p. 17.)

Like most clichés, the historicist view of architectural progress does contain a kernel of truth. There are many cases when a particular and well-defined line of development, once initiated, is pursued by a number of architects working on a specific problem over the course of a few generations or more. The development of the Greek Doric temple from Agrigento in Sicily to the Parthenon; the succession of Gothic cathedrals from Chartres to Beauvais; the recovery and extension of the classical language from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo; and the refinement of the American skyscraper from Louis Sullivan to Raymond Hood and William F. Lamb are all instances of progress along a clear line of refinement. Two caveats must be noted, however: First, these sequences do not necessarily fit into a grander scheme of development embracing them all, and second,

it would be wrong to see the earlier stages in any of these examples as being necessarily inferior to the later ones. Chronological placement in the sequence of development does not determine the aesthetic merit of individual works.

A corollary to historicism's emphasis on evolutionary progress is its emphasis on "ideas" and "meanings" at the expense of formal design. When architecture is seen as an expression of the spirit of the age, the indirect meaning associated with the political or social values held by the architects or believed to be represented by the building can outweigh consideration of the physical properties of the design as it actually appears. Examples of this are the commonplace nineteenth-century identification of the Greek temple form with democracy, the association of axial plans like Versailles with political absolutism, or the postwar tendency to view even the most abstract references to classical composition as representing Fascism. While one cannot deny the many connections between a given building and the ideas that may have been significant for its designer or that became attached to it during its subsequent history, neither can one assume that these ideas or associations determined the forms, are given univocal expression by them, were used exclusively by the persons or groups we associate with them, or will retain the meanings we impute to them in the future. The value of any building considered from the viewpoint of its status as a work of art ultimately rests on its relationship to perennial values that transcend, while still respecting, the concerns of any historical moment. (Olsen, 1986, pp. 281–85.)

In truth, only within a style can a specific form become reliably associated with a specific content or idea. Outside of a style, the correspondence between forms and the ideas they are thought to express is either accidental or perhaps projected onto the forms by a critic with a vested interest in proving a particular theory. Despite their frequent reluctance to do so, historians and critics of architecture must pay attention to the forms buildings and urban ensembles present to us—to what buildings look like rather than only the ideas they are thought to express—in order to understand how style allows forms to communicate ideas. Style, not "meaning," is the key to understanding the aesthetic achievements of historical architecture.

But this inquiry is hampered by the historicist identification of "style" with the

temporal category of "period." Each style is identified with the historical moment when it first appeared and developed its characteristic features; knowing this allows the historian to use style in dating works, since buildings may be assumed to belong to the period in which their style was prevalent. For the historicist, the notion that style might be independent of historical sequence—that one might legitimately build in a particular style decades or even centuries after it first arose—violates the legibility of the historical process and confuses the building's provenance. The deliberate imitation of a style no longer in fashion is therefore considered "false history"—it purports to tell a story contrary to the "true" history of stylistic succession as defined by the historicist narrative. This is the source of the common modernist distaste for stylistic revivals. Subsequent appearances of a style—Colonial Revival works from the early twentieth century, for example—are therefore considered inauthentic and labeled as "pastiche."

This prejudice can distort our evaluation of historic sites under consideration for designation as protected landmarks, tempting us to overlook important sites or overestimate unimportant ones on the basis of ephemeral associations. For example, the Richardson Dilworth House, a Georgian Revival-style building that contributes to the beauty and coherence of the Society Hill Historic District in Philadelphia, was nearly demolished in 2005 with the approval of the city's preservation commission when a new condominium tower designed by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates and was approved for its site. Because the house was built in 1957 by former mayor Dilworth to encourage the restoration and redevelopment of the then deteriorated neighborhood, it was viewed as potentially "historic"; on the other hand, it was seen as having little or no architectural value because its late Colonial Revival style ran counter to the authorized narrative of Philadelphia's architectural history. The house remains standing, but its future is still in doubt. (See fig. 3.2B.)

The narrow application of the historicist notion of "period" to historical buildings distorts the legitimate idea of authenticity. For example, in Paris, monuments such as the Louvre, the Conciergerie, or the Cathedral of Notre-Dame cannot be securely dated by visual inspection alone because their complicated histories of restoration and repair obscure the

chronology of their construction. (See Chapter 5.) In Rome almost nothing we see today is a pure survival from ancient times; everything has been rebuilt, restored, or transformed through the centuries. The Curia in the Roman Forum was last rebuilt in 1928, making it effectively a twentieth-century building rather than the second-century survivor it appears to be. (Fig. 6.2) To the historicist such stylistic anachronism is seen as a form of fakery. Consequently, current preservation policies discourage restorations or reconstructions that might create "a false sense of historical development," as expressed in *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*. But how can we present a true sense of historical development if the facts must be interpreted to save the presupposed narrative rather than allowing the narrative to be constructed in light of the facts? While we might also limit our designs for new interventions into the historic setting to the style of our time, what if the style of our time is in dispute? And how do we maintain the formal integrity and historic character of monuments if we are obliged to add to a preexisting setting only what is alien to it or in apparent contrast to it?

In truth, the historicist equation of style and period is a simple tautology: A building looks a certain way because that was the style of the time; we can identify the style of the time because buildings built then looked that way. But that is not what a style properly is. A style is like a literary genre that may be employed at various times and for various reasons, persisting and changing in the development of a literature. As I noted in Chapters 2 and 3, a style is *the conscious and public cultivation of the appropriate as discerned by a community*. Such a community may range widely in both space and time, so that styles often remain applicable in physical and temporal contexts different from those in which they first appeared. To build in a historical style is not to pretend to be living in another time; nor is it an attempt to deceive. It is an exploration of a formal language that may have application in and relevance to any number of times and places, even far removed from its original appearance. The rehabilitation of the concept of style independent of historical sequence is essential if we are to arrive at a "true sense of historical development" because only by means of the development of styles can there be "historical development" in architecture at all.

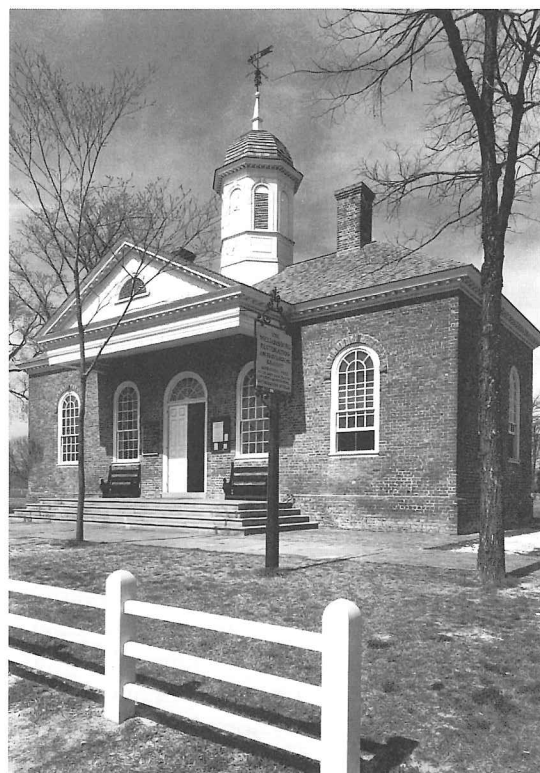


6.2. The Roman Forum, with Arch of Septimius Severus, Church of San Martino e Luca, and Curia Senatus, Rome.

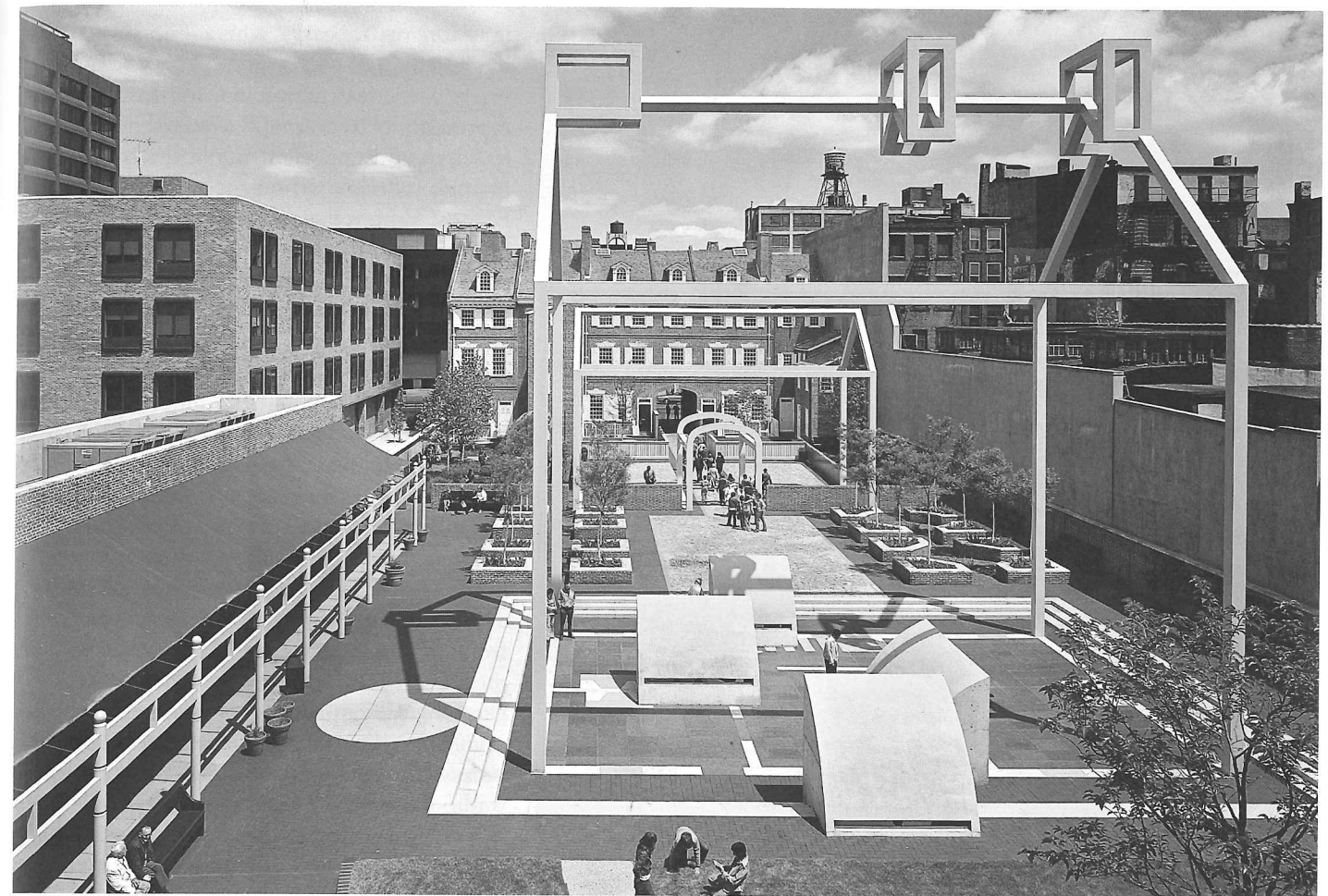
The Roman Forum is a veritable palimpsest of building and rebuilding. Next to a seventeenth-century church stands the ancient Curia (right), seat of the Roman Senate. Last restored in 1928, it retains significant elements and materials from its antique past.

6.3. Old Court House, Williamsburg, Virginia, eighteenth century, restored twentieth century.

The portico was to have Ionic columns, but these were not installed during the 1770s, and Doric columns added later were removed in the 1930s restoration. While historically accurate, the restoration misrepresents the builders' design intentions.



Another consequence of seeing buildings primarily as historical documents is that material authenticity tends to be exaggerated at the expense of formal design. Old buildings stand before us "imbued with a message from the past," as the opening words of the Venice Charter put it, and seem to reveal in their material presence what a particular past time was "really like." The primary goal of preservation or restoration then becomes "verisimilitude" rather than, say, integrity as a work of art. (Fitch, 1982, pp. 225, 241.) For example, the columns of the portico at the old Court House in Williamsburg are missing—the originally intended columns were never installed during the Colonial period and those installed later in the nineteenth century were removed by the restorers—in order to show the building as it would have appeared in 1770. Although there is no doubt that a row of Ionic columns was part of the original design, the historicist viewpoint would forbid installing them now. To do so would be "false history." (Fig. 6.3) Despite



6.4. Franklin Court, Philadelphia, by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, 1976.

Reaction against Williamsburg-style restoration prompted rendering the supposed outlines of Benjamin Franklin's home and workshop in "wireframe." An inaccurate rebuilding was avoided, but at the cost of preventing a view of the site as an element in an urban setting.

the seeming objectivity of this apparently "scientific" approach, it nevertheless betrays a Romantic fascination with the isolated fragment or the ruin as a metaphorical expression of the irrecoverable past. An excessive emphasis on material authenticity reinforces the historicist alienation of the past from the present as the remains of a bygone time become sacred relics, precious but untouchable, and powerful reminders that we no longer live in their world, nor they in ours. (Lowenthal, 1985, pp. 280, 384, 412.)

This cult of the ruin is illustrated vividly by the nonreconstruction of Benjamin Franklin's house and shop in Philadelphia by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, where the surviving brick foundations of Franklin's long-vanished home and the stabilized ruin of the commercial buildings along the street are presented to the public as if they were religious relics or the precious and inscrutable remains of a vanished prehistoric culture. The former structures might have been reconstructed based on

findings from the archeological investigation, documentary evidence provided by letters and descriptions from the period, and knowledge of the local building culture as revealed by contemporary buildings nearby. Even if we could not be sure we had precisely replicated the building Franklin lived in, an informed reconstruction would have been more illuminating than the three-dimensional cartoon that was constructed. The known outlines of Franklin's lost structures were limned in steel tubing, like ghostly intimations of a vanished history. The treatment of the site immortalized the physical evidence connected with a particular moment in time while disregarding the role of the monument in the formation of an enduring sense of place. (Fig. 6.4) While the restoration of the site stopped "at the point where conjecture begins," as the Venice Charter says, we are left with little basis on which to fill in the blanks in our own minds. This presentation of the bare archeological artifacts serves the historicist mission of isolating the past from the present



A

6.5. Greenwich Village façade renovation (project), New York, by Fairfax & Sammons Architects, 2003.

A. Existing street façade.

B. Proposed renovation.

Preservation authorities ruled against remodeling this insensitively modernized façade in the style of the building, but suggested restoring the offending curtain wall instead. Insisting on “differentiated” new construction immortalizes discordant features of the setting.

ignation or, in cases where “non-contributing” buildings or features may be removed, insert new construction in a contrasting idiom representing “our time.” What is not permitted is to add new elements in the style of the historic fabric based on the architect’s knowledge of that style; to do so would be “false history” and might confuse observers unable to distinguish the new and the old elements. Loss of continuity and integrity in historical character, therefore, becomes *the inevitable consequence of the preservation activity itself*, which is clearly a counterproductive outcome. (Fig. 6.5)

But why should allowing a place to evolve as it always had in the past be considered “false”? What if the historicist scheme of historical periods with their unique and exclusive styles is a fiction? What if there is no progress in architecture apart from the technical progress that comes from advances in engineering or the response to new programmatic needs? What if style is a genealogical rather than a chronological phenomenon? If there is a *Zeitgeist*, why should it necessarily lead to an iconoclastic rejection of traditions instead of a renewal of them? These questions compel us to examine more critically the historicist assumptions underlying current preservation policies and prompt us to reconsider the way we look at historic resources. Preservation must assure a future for—as well as safeguard the past of—the places we value enough to try to keep alive.

Liberation from the historicist narrative would allow preservation policies to base their judgments on appropriateness—the fitting and the exemplary—rather than on a temporal succession of chronologically defined styles. The differentiation between new construction and historic fabric would be the natural consequence of the different designers, interests, and varieties of craftsmanship involved in the development of a site over time, rather than a self-conscious dramatization of the differences between contradictory conceptions of architecture. Viewed from this perspective, the treatment of historic buildings and districts prioritizes the preservation of historic character over the introduction of new or contrasting character, and the historic district is seen as a zone in which the character-defining elements that give the district its identity are protected and new contributions to the built fabric are not permitted to remove, obscure, or diminish that character.

and keeping the evidence of each period safely contained in its officially determined chronological slot without fear of “false history.”

The cumulative effect of the historicist influence on preservation practices is the *decontextualization* of historic buildings—they become museum artifacts instead of remaining part of our living world. The very act of designating a building or district as a landmark subject to preservation regulation seems to place a moratorium on the continued life and change of that fabric and that place. According to present doctrine, preservation commissions can offer architects working in historic settings only three options: strictly restore historic fabric based on physical or other documentation, scrupulously maintain the conditions that existed at the time of des-

Historicism and Contemporary Architecture

Historicist attitudes also strongly color our views of the architecture we produce today. For example, historicism defines “contemporary” architecture largely in terms of opposition to historical practice: Just as each period has its unique concerns and formal language, so contemporary architects seek a characteristic style that expresses our time and vividly projects the “difference” between their work and whatever has been produced in the past. The “difference,” naturally, is explored in terms of the conscious rejection of precedent. But the commitment to pursuing innovative and purportedly unprecedented formal gestures seems only to blind contemporary architects to the precedents that nonetheless appear in their work. That virtually no building ever designed can truly be said to be unprecedented is a reality shared by both traditional and modernist architecture, although this reality is only admitted by the former.

While a general critique of contemporary movements in architecture is beyond the scope of this book, the relation between those movements and our attitudes toward historic buildings and cities is indeed relevant. Our view of historic settings is inevitably informed by our aspirations for the architecture of our own day and, therefore, contemporary fashions are of more than passing interest. This is especially the case when current architectural culture is dominated by a commitment to the dramatization of the difference between new and old construction and the fear that compromise in this projection of difference would undermine the philosophical premises upon which modernist architecture rests. The fear of “false history” in restoration work and a restless drive for novelty and originality in new work are opposite sides of the same coin. (See figs. C.2 and C.3.)

The self-conscious search for an architecture uniquely expressive of our time is handicapped by the absence of any single set of ideas or interests that clearly and uniquely defines our time in contradistinction to previous times. On those issues that count the most in human experience, little has changed in the last two and a half millennia, and many of our present discontents have roots stretching back into ancient times. (Sennet, 1993.) What *has* changed is our technology and the ways that its



B

advancement shapes the way we live and think; but architecture, as an exponent and beneficiary of technology, can more easily illustrate than comment on these changes. High technology can carve a Corinthian capital or deform a metal and glass curtain wall, but it no longer determines a priori how buildings ought to look, if indeed it ever did.

The ubiquity of the familiar image of the contemporary world as an arena of iconoclasm and self-invention tends to obscure an equally pervasive fascination with the past in popular culture. While often derided by contemporary architects and critics, traditional art, architecture, and decoration continue to exert a powerful attraction, especially in residential environments. If the “architecture of our time” were to be measured by the kinds

of environments that people actually choose to live in when they have the choice, rather than by what establishment architects and critics say it is, it would be a mixture of traditional styles. In truth, many modernist designers themselves choose to live in traditional buildings and historic districts—another instance of the split consciousness in which a sentimental regard for historic buildings competes with an intellectual commitment to their negation. Indeed, the most expensive places to live and work in most European and American cities are now the historic centers, demonstrating intense demand for architecture and urbanism minimally impacted by modernist transformation and placing these environments beyond the means of all but the most affluent.

These reflections lead us to question the definition of the “architecture of our time”—to ask by whom it is to be defined, and how it is to be expressed in material terms. The political dimension of any group’s claim to control the definition of progress must be taken into account. We might unmask the agenda underlying the “architecture of our time” by asking, simply: Who is the “we” implied by that “our”? (Brolin, 1981, pp. 12–13.) The imperiousness with which such assumptions are made can be breathtaking: Renzo Piano recently responded to popular resistance to his proposed glass skyscraper in Turin by characterizing his critics as being “afraid of the future,” as if it were beyond dispute that “the future” and his designs were synonymous. (Maltese, 2007.) Undoubtedly, it is not the future per se that frightens Piano’s critics, but the prospect of a future decided and enforced by architects and their powerful corporate clients without consulting the people whose lives are affected or showing respect for the historic center whose beauty will be diminished by the new tower. In a culture that pays lip service to nonconformity and the questioning of authority, the power of architectural elites has yet to be subject to the kind of public questioning now typically directed at political and economic ones; but perhaps doubts are now beginning to be expressed, and not only among those unsympathetic to modernist aims. (Kunstler, 1994, p. 226. See also Glazer, 2007, and Silber, 2007.)

Indeed, it is not the idea of progress—in the sense of reasonable improvements in technology or civic and social life—that critics of modernist architecture question, but the presumption that progress can be embodied only

in certain architectural forms believed by the avant-garde to represent our current stage in the historicist narrative. On the contrary, we are justified in evaluating contemporary design according to the same principles that underlie all architecture regardless of style, based on the familiar Vitruvian trinity of sound construction, accommodation of human need, and beauty. The role of the critic is, therefore, to judge the relative success with which a building or ensemble satisfies those principles and is likely to do so over the long term. From this viewpoint, the style of a new building may well be one drawn from the past but, in any case, should be decided on the basis of appropriateness rather than in subservience to the presumed “imperatives of our age,” with all the abuses implied by that notion. (Tiller, 2007.) It is up to us to determine, in the course of the decisions we make on a daily basis, what the “architecture of our time” ultimately will be.

Historicism and “False History”

Ultimately there is no such thing as “false history” in architecture. Truth or falsehood are qualities that we may attribute to historical accounts or interpretations but not to buildings, which may only be judged good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. Our understanding of the history of architecture at any given time is necessarily provisional, precluding the presumption that any one interpretation is uniquely “true” and therefore determinative of the quality or significance of architectural works simply based on their conformance with that interpretation. One may believe that designs based on historical models are distasteful or antiquated, but they cannot be rejected as “false.” Despite this, the fear of “false history” continues to govern much of the discourse in preservation today.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the argument against “false history” was articulated by Cesare Brandi in his *Teoria del Restauro* (1963). In Brandi’s theory an object produced by an artist or craftsman (including a building) that resembles similar objects made in the past can be considered a *copy*, an *imitation*, or a *falsification*. A copy is any new object that reproduces the appearance, the manner, or the style of a historical period not one’s own for purposes of documentation; an imitation is the same but for purposes of deriving pri-

vate pleasure from the reproduced object; a falsification is the same, but with the intention to deceive others as to the date, authenticity, or authorship of the object in order to benefit from a presumably higher market value. A copy or imitation made in the course of training or some scholarly pursuit is benign but, crucially, Brandi labels as falsification any copy or imitation created for public consumption *even without the intention to deceive*—the mere fact of its nonconformance with the historicist narrative makes it false and potentially confusing. Hence, any new work based on the continuity of a tradition, a formal language, or a building culture is deemed a falsification and therefore judged impermissible. (Brandi, 1963, pp. 65–69.)

In keeping with the historicist viewpoint, only a modernist design for a new building or object can avoid falsification because only modernist design is seen as giving truthful expression to the imperatives of our time. For this reason Brandi condemned the rebuilding of the Campanile in the Piazza San Marco in Venice after its collapse in 1901 and the reconstruction of the Santa Trinità Bridge in Florence blown up by the retreating Nazis in 1944 as “an offense against history and an outrage against Aesthetics, as if time were reversible and art works reproducible at will.” His preferred option for the Campanile would have been a “vertical element”—presumably an abstracted structure in metal and glass to represent “our time”—to preserve the tower’s urbanistic role; the bridge should have been replaced by a new design or left as a ruin but in any case not replaced by a copy. (Brandi, 2000, p. 46.) (See figs. C.18 and 5.4.) But the reconstructions of the Campanile and the bridge were not intended to provide copies of the monuments themselves; rather, they intend to retain the historic urban landscape of which they were essential parts. In its exclusive focus on the artifact, the doctrine of falsification tends to ignore this concern for the larger urban setting, its continuity and coherence, not to mention the deep attachment of the citizens to their historic environment—too often dismissed by the historicist as evidence of sentimentality and nostalgia. (Ceschi, 1970, pp. 105–6, 203.)

It is essential to understand both how radical Brandi’s theory was and how contrary to the practice of most artists and architects over the course of the last two thousand years. A consistent adoption of his criteria would con-

demn as “false” virtually all the greatest works of art in Western civilization prior to the rise of modernism, most of which are inconceivable without reliance on imitation—either of nature or of other artworks—beginning with virtually the entire output of ancient Roman sculptors, to a great extent copies or adaptations of earlier Greek models. Modernist design, while being no less imitative than its predecessors, fiercely denies that it is so and, in any case, carefully limits its models to its own recent productions, thereby presumably avoiding any “offence to History.” But the more we study architecture and building cultures the clearer it becomes that a strict distinction between “copies” and “originals” is impossible. In fact, there is no original, no pure concept, no primordial work compared to which all others are derivatives or copies. Every architectural work is in a sense a copy of some earlier work, which it regards as a precedent; but each new work is also an original in its adaptation to new conditions, presenting itself as a new beginning. (Bruner, 1994, p. 407.)

Brandi’s obsession with the threat posed by the circulation of “copies” in the world of fine and decorative art is, in part, motivated by the fear of forgery. In an art world that assigns values (and prices) to art works based on who created them and when, a misattribution or deliberate deception poses a risk to buyers and curators who depend on correct attribution to ensure the market value of their collections. Brandi then introduced this fear into the field of architecture and the city, so that a new building or addition in a historical style is seen as complicating our perception of the building’s provenance. But buildings and cities are not artworks whose value depends on authentication. We do not value a good building less because we learn that a lesser-known architect designed it; nor should we value it differently because it was built at a time when its style was unfashionable. The imposition of an inappropriate art-market model of authenticity on the world of architecture and urbanism has only served to promote the alienation of surviving historic fabric from contemporary production. (Marconi, 2003, pp. 28–29, 35.)

Brandi’s position also reflected a political commitment that viewed modernist architecture as a form of resistance to Fascism, which was irredeemably but counterfactually linked in his mind with traditional architecture. Like Fitch, Brandi saw architectural style as a battle-

ground in the struggle to overthrow capitalism, an aspect of the progressive program of the historicist worldview that attracted many among the architectural community in the decades after the Second World War. But as a review of the products of various political regimes over the course of the last two centuries proves, no architectural style has a monopoly on expressions of tyranny and exploitation or, for that matter, of freedom and human rights. Nevertheless, the identification of classical columns with Fascist political programs remains an unquestioned article of faith among many modernist architects, despite the absence of historical justification for this view.

The collapse of assent to historicist philosophy does not necessarily imply the end of modernist architecture. Even without historicism we would probably have something like a modernist style, but its adherents would not justify their work on the basis of the presumed historical inevitability of their formal choices, nor argue for its preservation on the basis of its place in a historical sequence of progressive experiments. Outside of the historicist framework, modernist architecture may be seen as a style like any other—albeit one whose premises are the negation of those underlying the traditional styles—and one that architects are free to use or reject, depending on whether or not they deem it suitable for realizing their aesthetic intentions in whatever time or place they work.

A Nonhistoricist Alternative

The emerging conservation ethic offers an alternative to historicism, based on an alternative view of history. Because there is no “spirit of the age” independent of the activities that are perceived to manifest it, the future depends entirely on our own choices, and these are not determined by any historical necessity. (Scott, 1914, p. 27, and Popper, 1963, p. 3.) The architecture of the traditional city, its urban structure and character, and the judgments necessary to maintain and extend that character in space and time, unfold within a history that is neither predetermined nor in need of being “expressed.” We are free to judge works of art and architecture on the basis of their *quality*—and their fertility for generating new works—rather than their position on a purported evolutionary timeline. We can reexamine the achievements of artists undervalued or

ignored by historians because their works were not found to have prefigured modernism. We can write a comprehensive history of twentieth-century architecture for the first time.

To deny a preordained program to history is not, however, to deny meaning or the reality of social, political, or cultural goals as motivating forces in our work and judgments. On the contrary, a sense of ultimate direction or moral purpose, a guiding narrative, a commitment to shared goals and publicly supported values—what Aristotle called a *telos*—is essential to any civilized social and cultural life. (Bess, 2006, pp. 11–15, and MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 52, 148.) Whether philosophic, aesthetic, or religious in its foundation, a *telos* is assumed and implied by every cultural act, including the design of buildings and cities. For us, as for Vitruvius, Alberti, or Jefferson, “a building is a form given to a moral proposition. When architecture is not a moral proposition, it is mere fashion.” (Westfall, 2006, p. 20.) This “moral proposition” consists of a vision of the nobler ends toward which humans direct their affairs, which is ultimately a vision of the ideal city or a place “in which citizens can pursue justice, elegance, and grace.” (Westfall, 2004, p. 20.) Since the *telos* rests not in some purported movement of history but, rather, in our nature, it transcends the contingencies of temporal succession. If, as the concept of *telos* suggests, the world is meaningful already and we need only discover that meaning, we still have no guarantee that we will definitively possess it. Our attempts to understand and describe meaning do, indeed, change over time—hence, we have a history that must be periodically rewritten. Our current knowledge is simply “the best we know so far,” and our convictions must be tempered by our recognition that they are inevitably provisional. (MacIntyre, 1990, pp. 64, 88–89, 124–25.)

Here we discover the great advantage of the traditional architectural languages—they are themselves sensible, and they help us to communicate to others whatever sense we find in the world. Our capacity for expressing our ideas and meanings is in direct proportion to our command of the language available to us and its capacity, once we have mastered it, to give adequate expression to our intentions. Of course, even the best language cannot guarantee the truth of what is said in it. Although the *telos* never changes, our inevitably incomplete or contradictory conceptualizations and attempted

realizations of it do change. But while art may advance in the short term, it is not progressive. Just when we think we have advanced in one direction, we find ourselves drawn in another or find that we have ended up where we began. We also tend to go off on tangents, which is why artists periodically take a step back, try to untangle the threads, and begin to weave the fabric anew in one of the periodic renaissances that have punctuated history. (Settis, 2004.) The resiliency and capacity for change of our formal languages facilitates this process; without them we would be at a loss to know where to begin or how to proceed.

Accordingly, a nonhistoricist architecture seeks to weave the threads of historic and contemporary building into a new wholeness, whether by completing work left unfinished in the past or by the addition of new construction designed to sustain rather than challenge the character-defining elements of a historic place. The architect has the obligation to *recontextualize* historic structures in the life-world in which they are now set. Historic and new architecture can be collaborators rather than antagonists, each enriching and informing the other, but only if the character of place is allowed to overrule the supposed imperatives of time.

An immediate benefit of our liberation from historicism is that art and architectural history become vastly more complex and interesting. Frank Lloyd Wright and Stanford White, Le Corbusier and Auguste Perret, Edwin Lutyens and Gunnar Asplund: we can evaluate these pairs of contemporaries by judging how each opens or closes possibilities for further exploration, how each expands or contracts the formal language of the discipline, and how each probes or disregards perennial concerns that motivate artists in all periods. Our judgments will be based on our cultivation of a sense of the appropriate, or what the eighteenth century called “taste” and which Geoffrey Scott

defined as “the disinterested enthusiasm for architectural form.” (Scott, 1914, p. 19.) Of course, by taste I am not referring to subjective individual preference, but to judgments that can be defended and shared with others. At any given time there is a plurality of tastes and styles, all competing for the attention and approbation of the general public and the patrons whose munificence finances the city and its architecture.

The breakdown of historicism offers us hope. What is best in human art and culture is not necessarily or exclusively time-bound; achievements of the past are not necessarily lost to us. As Henry Hope Reed once remarked, “What people have done once, they can do again.” It is not the time but the *telos* that needs expressing, and this is hopeful indeed, because while time passes and the past is irretrievable, human nature—with all its potentialities and limitations—remains. The instinctive desire for the ennoblement of human thought and action transcends all times because human nature is the one thing that we take with us throughout our journey in time. It is this nature that traditional architecture, in its nearly inconceivable variety and complexity, seeks to concretize in buildings and cities that aim for *beauty, sustainability, and justice*.

Architecture without historicism offers a new respect for the character of valued places as works of art persisting in time. More broadly, it offers a rebirth of *optimism* and a greater appreciation for the *contributions of both individual genius and artistic traditions*. We are free to make choices about the ways buildings and cities are built, and the architecture of our time, in all its multiplicity of appearance, may be judged by the same standards and criteria used to judge the architecture of any time. As Léon Krier has written, “Authentic architecture is not the incarnation of the spirit of the age but of the spirit, full stop.” (Krier, 1998, p. 71.)