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The Palace and the Row House, the Park and the Square: Transformations and Interpretations of History

David Spaeth

Although not specifically cited in this essay, I am indebted to the work of Patrick Wright and George Hersey. In *On Living in an Old Country* (Verso: London, 1985), Wright makes the distinction between *history* and *the past*. History is an accurate listing of facts, dates, places, etc. The past is the cultural perception of history, the collective unconscious of the meaning of that history. Implicit in Wright's distinction is the idea that history can be used (or misused) to sustain a particular view of the past—an extreme example of this is the political ends to which history was put during the Third Reich. In *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture* (M.I.T. Press: Cambridge, 1988), Hersey argues that the current ("workaday") associations of the vocabulary of classical architecture render this vocabulary meaningless. In the pre-Christian era, "temples were read as concretions of sacrificial matter, of the things that were put into graves and laid on walls and stelae. This sense of architectural ornament is very different from the urge to beauty" (p. 149). Directly and indirectly, Wright and Hersey argue against both misunderstanding and misapplying the patrimony of history.

The eighteenth century marks the formal beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Technology had been around from the beginning of human time; however, during the eighteenth century, technology reached critical mass and began to have an increasing impact on daily life—on commerce and manufacturing, on transportation, on the design of cities or, at least, parts of cities, as well as the design of buildings. Lastly, the Industrial Revolution had an equally profound impact on nature, not only how the landscape might be changed to serve the needs of mankind and the machine, but how nature was viewed philosophically: as an equal with the built environment.

The period from 1700 to 1800 has been called "the English century," for, despite the loss of the American colonies, during this time vast wealth, supplies, energy and power poured into the

British Isles. The wealth came from raw materials *and* their transformation into manufactured goods for sale to what was, essentially, a captive market, the colonies of Great Britain. Indeed, it is no overstatement to describe Great Britain's market influence as world-wide, dominated and directed by London, continued control of which ensured that England would rule the waves in order that the *Pax Britannica* might be maintained and business proceed as usual.

As a direct result of the profits from trade and the sale of manufactured goods, a new class arose in England and elsewhere. Historically, it was a class that, if it owned land at all, owned it in very small quantities. Suddenly, in the span of perhaps a single generation, unprecedented and uninherited wealth was readily available for investment in real goods and real estate. The emerging class needed housing appropriate to its new status. To accomplish this, ancient estates in the vicinity of London and adjacent communities were subdivided and developed for housing this new class anxious to imitate the manners and values of its social superiors. The typology of this subdivision of land is the residential square, a tranquil and polite green space surrounded by multi-story houses with common walls between, of similar materials, i.e., the row house. These row houses, leased to the newly enriched, provided a pleasant, open, stable, and socially acceptable structure for upper-middle class urban life, a life whose characteristics were fiduciary as well as architectural and spatial restraint, external control, and careful definition of values and aspirations.

The basic typology of the open, residential square surrounded by essentially similar houses was repeated many times in London and in many cities on the Continent, especially Paris. The origins of this spatial type can be traced to the gridiron. The gridiron, rooted in Greek and Roman ideas of city planning, stands in marked contrast with the condition of urban form at the start of the eighteenth century when medieval squalor and formless sprawl were very much in evidence, when the need to increase density and to provide for the common defense took precedence over unproductive open space. Curiously, the residential square has something of the feel of the Middle Ages about it. It is inwardly focused; it provides a protective wall to the outside world; it is more like a cloister; and it provides a clear, formal order and a defined hierarchy. The application of the gridiron to planning problems in the eighteenth century provided order and a physical

structure in a time of great social and economic flux. It was an easy and convenient way to subdivide land. It suggested a certain egalitarian outlook. It made a distinct break with the immediate past, a past the new class was more than anxious to ignore or forget. With minor modifications, as planning ideas the gridiron and the residential square could be applied to a variety of locations and were, especially in the New World.

The spatial and architectural differences between the New World and the Old, especially in terms of urban design, may be seen to derive from differing attitudes and expectations regarding the importance of the individual and his new place in society. To the eighteenth century mind, the gridiron, with its references to Greece and Rome, was emblematic of both civic virtue as well as individual freedom within an overall structure or order, two qualities necessary to sustain a different form of government, the republic. In England and in Europe, the landed and titled aristocracy derived its wealth and power from the existence of an hereditary monarchy and was, therefore, obliged *as a group* to physically and spiritually support the reigning monarch as well as the idea of the monarchy. The citizens of the New World owed little to monarchs, especially to those kings or queens who caused them to have to take up residence in a raw land. Further, one's formal social position in the Old World did not necessarily help in clearing that land or in building shelters on it. Whatever might be earned in the New World was done (essentially) by individuals, from their own sweat, with their own muscle. As a result, the individual and his free-standing house, not the social class or a row house, came to symbolize the American ideal, an ideal so quickly institutionalized that it became a profound measure of personal worth very much in evidence at present.

However, even this ideal had its roots in the English and European countrysides. The individual residence, palace or villa, in a park-like setting, was much-valued during the eighteenth century. During this time, it was increasingly achieved and maintained with monies earned from investments or commerce and not always from inherited wealth, the impression the emergent middle class strove to convey. The most desirable estates were owned by aristocrats. However, the newly enriched might purchase land of lesser value that could be enhanced by the addition of large sums of money. Lowlands might be drained, streams diverted, pastures improved, fallow fields cleared, and

bare hillsides replanted. Within a few decades, the whole might resemble an inherited ancestral seat. Very frequently, land adjacent to the country manor was taken out of cultivation and landscaped. This "improvement" of the existing condition of the land, returning it to unproductive use, served as a not-so-subtle reminder as to just how much wealth the resident of the manor had, an obvious form of conspicuous consumption if ever there was one. The resultant "parks" are, though, more than living, green monuments to crass consumption. Their carefully planned vistas and landscaped spaces reveal something else about the spirit of the times: a new attitude toward and appreciation of nature.

In the seventeenth century, the characteristic attitude toward nature was one of domination. To demonstrate his dominion, man bent nature to his will. Whole forests were planted in parade-rest rows of trees; shrubs were trained and pruned into fantastic and fanciful shapes; flowers were cultivated in patterns resembling not so much open fields as the tightly woven designs of Oriental carpets. Nor was architecture immune to the virus of domination, of power. As monarchs and monarchies asserted themselves and nation-states emerged from the loose confederations of cities in the Middle Ages, dominating the urban condition and the countryside were no longer the church or cathedral but the monarch's palace. The power and aggrandizement of an individual substituted for the glorification of God. Nowhere is the replacement of the sacred by the profane more clearly realized than at Versailles in Louis XIV's palace and gardens. Here a simple hunting lodge was transformed into something almost beyond mankind's ability to comprehend; here a patterned landscape extends to the apparent horizon; here man demonstrated his ability to control, to change, to improve, and, lastly, to dominate nature.

Mankind's desire (or need) to superimpose his will on nature continued to figure prominently throughout the eighteenth century. In England, as nature and natural forces gradually gave way to increasing industrialization and the imperatives of the Industrial Revolution, the domination of the landscape took a more subtle form than at Versailles. The Naturalistic school of landscape architecture was born. Although an entire village might be relocated to improve a vista, hills regraded, and streams diverted or dammed to form water features, to the adherents of the Naturalistic school it was essential that the hand of man be kept

imperceptible, even to the trained eye: means were always to be kept subservient to effects.

Gradually, while the park remained, the highly-ordered and highly-patterned landscape characteristic of the seventeenth century became the naturalistic landscape, an approach no less highly-ordered than its predecessor, but predicated on the *recognition* of natural systems rather than the imposition of abstract ideas of geometry. In the seventeenth century, then, buildings and landscaped spaces formed a spatial and intellectual continuum based on the same aesthetic philosophy. In the eighteenth century, recognition of the existence of a spatial continuum was of lesser importance. Of greater importance was the need (or requirement) for the eighteenth century mind to make a clear distinction between man's work, buildings, and nature's, the (landscaped) garden or park. Clearly, this was an artificial distinction. The resultant landscape was not "natural" in the sense that it had been arrived at without man's intervention.

The necessity for maintaining separate identities for these two spheres—the natural and the man-made—cannot be dismissed as simply a reaction formation, i.e., a conscious (or unconscious) rejection of the values and ideas animating philosophical and aesthetic discourse during the preceding century. No, the question of separation is more deeply rooted in the eighteenth century mind. It represents the determined efforts of intellectuals to come to terms with (or to attempt to come to terms with) the machine's (or technology's, or the Industrial Revolution's) increasingly pervasive impact on daily life. As the separation between the man-made world and the natural became less and less distinct, the need to maintain the distinction (no matter how artificial) became more and more acute. For those of us who have grown accustomed to the accelerating rate of technological change, it is, perhaps, difficult to appreciate the Industrial Revolution's impact on all facets of eighteenth century life, especially the social and philosophical aspects. The resolution of the dichotomy between philosophy and technology was attempted by returning to classicism. That the architectural ideas of the time might be rooted in classical Greece and Rome is not particularly surprising, especially when we consider that these ages were "golden" to the mind of the Enlightenment.

In eighteenth century Europe and England, Greece and Rome, during their respective golden epochs, represented stability, order, a

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universe constant and unchanging. That the increasing rate of technological change, and with it social change, threatened to undermine these notions of stability and order is to be expected. The result of the social and aesthetic anxiety the Industrial Revolution produced can be seen in the plethora of architectural revivals that characterize architecture in the nineteenth century. In retrospect, these revivals can be seen as an attempt by society and architects to come to terms with the Machine. However, these attempts were predicated on a faulty premise, i.e., that the past held the key to understanding a present totally unlike the past. As a result, they were doomed to failure from the start, i.e., they could not sustain themselves for very long; they produced no viable progeny.

At the dawning of the eighteenth century, thoughts of failure— aesthetic or other—were absent from daily intellectual discourse. Much in evidence were discussions concerning the spiritual values of Arcadia and the purity of Greek and Roman architecture. It was to these ancient seats of power and learning that gentlemen in the eighteenth century journeyed. Their purpose: to acquire a first-hand appreciation and understanding of classical architecture. With translation and publication, in England and on the Continent, of the architectural treatises of Vitruvius, Alberti, and Palladio, it was widely held that the principles of classical architecture could be readily taught and applied to a diverse set of building types, in diverse settings. At the most superficial level, this meant that pediments and porches, supported by columns of various antique orders, were applied to the facades of churches, schools, banks, government buildings, museums, private clubs, cemetery entrances, residences, palaces, railway stations, and row houses.

However, to understand classical Greek architecture, it is necessary to understand that it is a visual record of a physical act: the ritual sacrifice involving the spilling of blood. Its formal vocabulary of columns (and architraves, pediments, and so on) is really the transformation of the sacred grave in which the sacrifices took place into the temple's ordered forest of trees, just as the triglyphs and guttae are transformations of literal acts in the ritual, the binding together of the thighbones of the sacrificed animal or the collection of its blood, into another material.

Like the sculpture embellishing Gothic cathedrals known and understood by all, especially the uneducated, the vocabulary of Greek temple architecture informed the participants as to the nature and meaning of the sacrifice and made an institution of the

ritual itself. As the Gothic cathedral links believer with his faith, with his God, the architectural elements of the Greek temple remind both celebrant and celebrant alike of the cult's link with the past, a physical connection, then, between man, animal and nature.

We do not, nor can we be expected to, fully understand this link which, forged over centuries and rooted in the pre-historic past, came to be so much a part of the collective unconscious of the ancient Greeks.

In the hands of the merely competent, these applications were reasonably well done. With more creative individuals, not only were the proportions more sensitive but new building types were developed, within the language and formal order of Classicism, using the vocabulary of Classicism but not the meaning held or contained behind the surface. Of architects able to master this synthesis, the best conceptualized architecture not simply as isolated buildings but as parts of greater wholes, influencing and being influenced by the larger context. Early in the eighteenth century, this context might be expanded to include only adjacent structures as was the case in the row houses built around London's squares planned after the Great Fire of 1660. Previously, it was only the "rule of taste" in Georgian society that prevented these houses from clashing violently with one another. Under such circumstances, architects could only hope for reasonable treatment from their peers. However, adopting a uniform architectural treatment for a row of houses seemed an eminently logical solution. It was, and as exploited by John Wood the Elder and John Wood the Younger building in Bath, England, throughout the eighteenth century, it was spatially and urbanistically exciting and innovative. Constructing palace-like facades to define space and to articulate and regulate movement through that space, father and son broke open the almost claustrophobic quality of earlier residential squares. With the Circus and the Royal Crescent, whose focus is a spacious, gently sloping greensward, the extreme opposite of Versailles was reached. Nature became the equal, not the servant, of architecture. This took place near the end of the century; and even if it had taken nearly one-hundred years to realize, it was, nevertheless, a profound accomplishment. Thirty row houses are contained behind the Royal Crescent's semi-elliptical façade which is animated by giant Ionic columns. By such simple devices, John Wood the Younger provided suitable housing of sufficient grandeur and with appropriate restraint for aristocrats and

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nouveaux riches alike. Its design also resulted in the development of a new urban typology, the synthesis of park and palace and the residential square.

As is so often the case, in times beset by anxiety, the arts (including architecture) flourish, reaching new heights of genuine creativity. In the best of circumstances, architecture, landscape architecture, and planning can provide the sense of security and order life frequently lacks. Such was the case in the eighteenth century. Neo-classicism in architecture provided the comfort and security of familiar forms and details with the appropriate connection to the past. The naturalistic approach to landscape architecture returned the larger environment—no matter how highly manipulated—to the realm of nature, Arcadia revisited; and the new topologies that emerged attempted a synthesis between the past and the demands of the present—the eighteenth century present, that is. The isolated palace became a row house; the park and square were merged to become a dynamic urban greenspace.

All in all, it was not an unpleasant time. Cities expanded in a reasonable manner; the necessity for urban design manifested itself. Technology, though gaining in power and influence, was still under apparent control. The quality of domestic life improved as residences were made more convenient and comfortable—all of this was accomplished while paying homage to nature and the Golden Age. Had this Golden Age been achieved or at least been realistically recreated, the qualities we admire and that we find appealing about life in the eighteenth century—to say nothing of neo-classical architecture—would have come down to the present (essentially) unchanged. But equilibrium, as we understand it, was not achieved; nor was it reasonable to think it might have been. The stresses and anxieties that lay below the eighteenth century's carefully ordered surfaces sought release: society's tectonic plates could not be constrained by the imposition of classical order. What, in retrospect, we understand as an unreal, distorted comprehension of the Golden Age, the eighteenth century sought to recreate and to maintain, and at any cost.

In large measure and for a surprisingly long time, the myth *was* maintained, sustained by some seductively attractive inner force and the power and resources of a far-flung colonial empire. Presently, with support from His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, eighteenth century ideas about architecture, landscape architecture, and planning are enjoying a certain vogue. With a

misreading of history similar to his eighteenth century counterparts, Prince Charles advocates returning to an age that may never have existed, at least as it is now presented. The Prince's position is worth examining because it reveals a basic anxiety of this age as well as a desire to escape to a period when life was, or appeared to be, simpler, more clearly structured, and animated by appropriate gestures to the past.

Like the eighteenth century's misunderstanding of Arcadia and ancient Greece and Rome, His Royal Highness ignores the real factors influencing and giving form and expression to the built environment we call architecture. Further, Prince Charles assumes that architects occupy the cultural driver's seat. While we might like to believe such a conceit, it just isn't so. Architecture is a response to those forces animating the age, a force. Other forces are politics, the economy, a value system, density, the environment, and on and on. In other words, Prince Charles's criticism, while it makes good press because he has found an easy target, is directed at the wrong people, architects, and the wrong profession, architecture. He should look to the culture itself, to the forces propelling or compelling it in a particular direction, to very particular ends. However, to do so would require that His Royal Highness take a public stance that would have placed him in direct opposition to Prime Minister Thatcher's government. By law, he cannot do this; he must confine his remarks to areas of English life or topics with which government policy is not identified. Architecture and planning are such areas—especially the aesthetic components of each. Such easy targets as architecture and planning can be attacked with relative impunity because both professions operate in a highly visible manner in the public sector, and virtually everyone has an opinion about architecture and planning. To be fair, there is an element of truth in the Prince's attacks. There are a number of bad modern buildings; much of contemporary planning has been insensitive to the pedestrian and has allowed the automobile to dominate the urban landscape. But not all modern architecture is bad any more than all Georgian buildings are good, a point His Royal Highness seems to have overlooked or ignored.

I suspect that what we can fairly and truly learn from the eighteenth century is that *it was a time when mankind attempted to understand natural systems and to employ his understanding as he attempted to solve new problems*. It was also a time when a particular

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vision of history was allowed to corrupt a more reasoned understanding of the built world. It was also a time when craft was still appreciated and when the machine began to be used to make aspects of life easier, more comfortable—if only for a few. All of this was accomplished at a cost. For some it was a high price: child labor, depressions, a gradual decline in wages; for many a separation from nature, an increase in urban poverty, a general and gradual impoverishment of values and culture.

By limiting our appreciation (understanding) of the past to surfaces and appearances to the exclusion of content, we run the risk of attempting to recreate life—or a period in history—as it *did not exist*. We would be (are?) guilty of rewriting history to suit our own ends. This attempt is a little like what has happened in Williamsburg, Virginia, where, in the guise of archaeological and architectural authenticity, a highly sanitized version of eighteenth-century life has been created, *not recreated*. Animal waste does not foul the dustless, carefully tended, tree-lined streets. Pigs and chickens do not roam unattended; nor are slaves in evidence. All buildings—including the privies—are uniformly well-maintained. This is the eighteenth century as we wish it to have been, flawless, without offal and odor. It is very much like Disney World, but with the moral imperative that it is a lesson in history—our history.

All of this has something to do with history, with our understanding or misunderstanding of it. Finally, we are obliged to come to terms with this fact: Prince Charles is no more wrong in his appreciation of the architecture of the eighteenth century than we are in ours. However, he appreciates it and wishes to see it reemployed for all the wrong reasons. Perhaps this is because His Royal Highness, like many British aristocrats, still lives in the eighteenth century. His is an attempt at holding the future at bay by constructing a fragile present out of the architectural pieces of the past. It ignores the real meaning of the language of Classical architecture. It ignores architecture's imperative to speak to its time. It ignores the presence of technology. Technology (and its daily impact) is very much a part of our lives as liveried servants are not. Technology is the force that drives our society, that animates our culture. The sooner we learn to accept this and work to master technology rather than being its slave, the sooner real architecture, genuine architecture, will come forth.