RITUALS, OBSTACLES AND ARCHITECTURE
(FRAGMENTS OF AN ESSAY I WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO WRITE)

Pier Paolo Tamburelli
Photographs by Stefano Graziani and Giovanna Silva

I

In one of the few fundamental pieces of writing about architecture ever produced, Adolf Loos argued:

> Our culture is founded on the recognition of the all-transcending greatness of classical antiquity. Our manner of thinking and feeling we have adopted from the Romans, who taught us to think socially and to discipline our emotions. It is not mere chance that the Romans were incapable of inventing a new order of columns, a new ornament. The Greeks, who invented the mouldings, were individualists, scarcely able to govern their own cities. The Romans invented social organization and governed the whole world. The Greeks applied their imagination to the elevation, which is individual, the Romans to the ground plan, which is general. The Romans were more advanced than the Greeks, we are more advanced than the Romans. The great masters of architecture believed they built like the Romans. They were mistaken. Period, place, climate frustrated their plans. But whenever lesser architects tried to ignore tradition, whenever ornamentation became rampant, a master would appear to remind us of the Roman origins of our architecture and pick up the thread again (Loos, 1910).

Though hermetic as usual, Loos was precise here: he recognized the particular attitude toward architecture developed in the Roman cultural context and suggested that this experience still provided the basis for contemporary architectural practice. In other words, for Loos – no matter what changes have happened in the meantime – contemporary Western architecture was still "encompassed within the limits of the natural evolution of Roman architecture" (Grassi, 1997).

MONS CAELIVS

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MONS

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MONS AVENTINVS

PALATINVS

Circus Maximus

82

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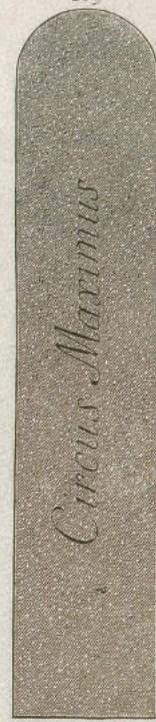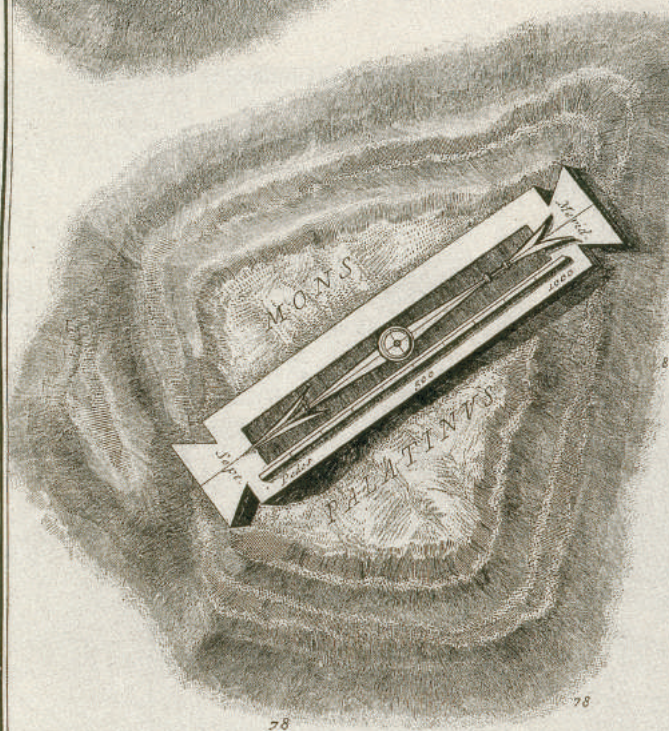205

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FORVM

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B

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MONS CAPITOLINVS

TIBERIS FLVVIVS

Transtiberim

62

A

What does this mean? Should we follow Loos's perspective even today?

II

In his *Invention of Law in the West* (2008), Aldo Schiavone writes that Romans *invented* the Law, thereby opening up a new space for interaction in human society. According to Schiavone, it was the particular formalism of their religion that provided Romans with the possibility of creating and exploring this new-found social dimension. Indeed, Roman religion relied on extremely codified procedures. In time, the formalism of these procedures survived the disappearance of the religious meanings associated with them and evolved into a set of secularized but still formalized (and thus juridical) interpersonal relationships. Schiavone speaks of the "invention of Law", just as Christian Meier locates the "origin of the political" in classical Greece (Meier, 1980), Karl Polanyi argues that "the free market was planned" in 18th-century Great Britain (Polanyi, 1944) and Edouard Pommier talks of the "invention of Art" in Renaissance Italy (Pommier, 2007). In all of these cases, what appeared was not altogether a new practice (the economy, of course, existed before the 18th century), but the possibility of individuating and exploring a new specific – and clearly separate – facet of the organization of society, or of looking at human behaviour from a new point of view – a *legal* point of view, a *political* point of view, an *economic* point of view, an *artistic* point of view. In these moments, the *legal,* the *political,* the *economic* and the *artistic* became independent and non-obvious: they appeared within the visual field and defined the set of possibilities of a new discussion. Jan Assman observes:

> What Christian Meier defines as *the political* is not just political order. It is something like an Archimedic point from where it is possible to reflect on political order and search for the best political institutions by comparing alternatives (Assman, 2000).

For the Romans, the relationship between places and actions was not obvious; landscape became available for transformation, *space* appeared. This *appearance of space* was a consequence, once again, of Roman religion's particular formalism and of its particular relationship to landscape.

III

The Roman gods were not as exuberant as the Greek ones. They were fixed, silent, relatively obscure figures who were precisely identified by a restricted field of competence and by an incredibly precise set of rituals to be performed. Indeed, there were no myths in Roman religion, at least before the Hellenization of the 3rd century. Roman mythology seems to have disappeared before historic times, leaving behind a collection of petrified scenes to be repeated over and over. Myths were somehow transformed into a series of rituals that were totally disconnected from the original narrations that would have imbued them with sense. A Roman priest like the *Flamen Dialis* operated as if he were a "living statue" (Kerényi, 1971), somehow staging a religious picture his entire life.

Roman religion required no faith (at least if we understand this word according to its contemporary meaning inspired by monotheism); the Romans simply had to perform a complicated set of rituals that punctuated both their calendar and their landscape (Sabbatucci, 1988). Not to repeat these procedures meant to destroy the equilibrium, to put the entire community in danger and to regress to a condition of brute violence. This *performed* religion touched all aspects of life: Romans had a ritual (and a terribly precise one) for every little thing. The correct execution of these rituals was essential:
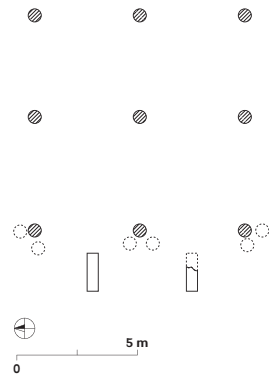
> Roman religion is based on the correctly performed (*rite*) ceremonial act. In this performance the *ius divinum,* or divine law – the relationship between the human and the divine – is realized (and concluded). For both *pietas* and *religio,* Cicero gives the following definition: *iustitia adversos deos,* "justice toward the gods." . . . What is essential for *religio,* is that no errors be made during the act of worship, that nothing is done incorrectly, that nothing conflicts with the proper application of the norm (Kerényi, 1971, quoting Wissowa, 1902).

For the Roman religion, places were directly linked with rituals, without the mediation of any myth, and so Roman architecture did not need to *say* anything abut the ceremonies it hosted. There was no narration associated with places – no concept, no figure – only a content, literally something contained inside: gestures contained in space, or contained gestures and containing walls. The temple did not directly relate to the gods, but to the ceremonies hosted within it; this, in later times, also influenced non-religious architecture: the thermae did not refer to water or to hygiene, but just to the sequence of warm and cold
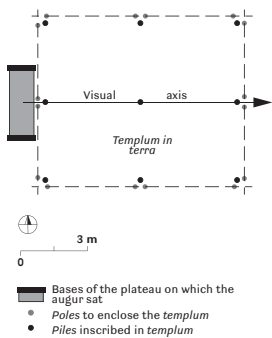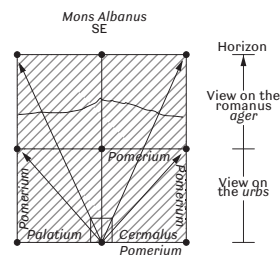
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Bantia, the templum (Torelli, 1969)

Bases of the plateau on which the augur sat
Poles to enclose the *templum*
Piles inscribed in *templum*

Bantia, observatory for the flight of the birds *(templum in terra)* (Carandini, 2000)

Reconstruction of the *templum in terra* (in grey) and the Roman *templum in aere* (hatched) used by Romulus to inaugurate the Roma Quadrata (Capanna)

baths. The surprising abstraction of Roman architecture came directly from the frozen world of the voiceless Roman gods.

In his *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein wrote:

> How do words *refer* to sensations? – There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and give them names? But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations? For example, of the word "pain". Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, natural, expressions of sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. "So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" – On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying, it does not describe it" (Wittgenstein, 1953).

In a similar way, Roman architecture *hosted* actions, but it did not *describe* them. And it *replaced* the actions it referred to with new (*formalized*) ones. Roman architecture operated as a technique for turning actions into rituals. The relationship between spaces and gestures was immediate but not literal. No explanation was needed. The relationship was just between the form and the gesture; there was no secret meaning, no hidden origin – just a certain gesture performed in a certain place and with a certain form. The abstraction of form enveloped and protected multiple dimensions of reality, somehow distancing and protecting the unpredictable, the inexpressible. The direct, immediate relationship between entirely abstract forms and fundamentally pre-rational gestures not only introduced a surprising complexity into Roman architecture, but it also charged the Roman space with a sublime potential difference. Abstraction and the unconscious coincided in a truly multidimensional *space.*

Roman architecture was formalist. "Formalism" here is not to be understood as an attitude *within* architecture (i.e., the formalism of Carlo Rainaldi or Richard Meier) but as a more general cultural attitude of the Romans that came before (and produced) architecture. Indeed, it was the formalism of Roman religion that produced Roman architecture. Formalism depended on the desire – which was religious in origin – to *give form* to the environment, to define the scene for ritual actions, to underscore and exalt gestures by building a stage around them. Everything needed to be more defined, more perspicuous, more apt to receive a precise position in memory. Formalism came from a

desire to turn circumstance into ritual: to *frame* gestures, to *stage* events, to *give form* to actions. Architecture *formalized* the given.

IV

The relationship between Roman men and Roman gods needed the mediation of landscape. For the Romans, it was simply impossible that a god would not have "his own place" (Dumézil, 1966). Cults had precise locations. Rituals needed to happen not only in certain places, but with certain orientations before certain elements of landscape.

In contrast to the Greeks, who were only interested in the exceptional points where the gods appeared, the Romans were interested in areas – the surfaces where human actions transpired and established a relationship with the gods. Roman architecture regulated activities on a surface that was never lacking in gods. Indeed, their original landscape, the *Ager Romanus,* was entirely sacred to the Romans.

Roman architecture was made of *plans* exactly because the Roman religious space was extracted from a *continuous surface.* Roman architecture was made of enclosures, gaps and obstacles in an extension of space that was meaningful from the beginning.

Roman architecture transformed a landscape understood primarily as a depository of platforms for rituals, machines for visualizing the divine in a given geographical context, devices that needed to be corrected in order to assure the precise execution of those very same rituals. The landscape was consequently adapted in order to comply with the requirements for a highly codified communication with the gods.

The temple (*templum*) was such a platform. Etymologically, a *templum* is a portion of space cut from the sky – an ideal column of space corresponding to a certain portion of soil (Carandini, 2006; Torelli and Gros, 2007), a *volume* depending on a *surface,* on a *plan.* The *templum* is a platform from which to look at the surrounding landscape, a room for observation, a machine of vision. The *templum* defines where one looks out from, what one looks at and how one looks at this (the Roman *templum* is not an object to look at in the way that the Greek temple is). For instance, the *auspicium* (a ceremony in which the augur interpreted the flight patterns of certain birds as an answer to a question raised by the person requesting the *auspicium*) depended on the reference grid defined by the *templum in aere* and the *templum in terra.* The two rectangles of the "temple in the air" and the "temple on the earth" defined a geographic/geometric construction that allowed the messages sent from the gods through the flight of birds to be decoded.
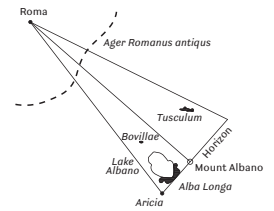
Scheme of Romulus's *templum in aere* for inaugurating the Roma Quadrata from the Palatine Hill (Capanna)
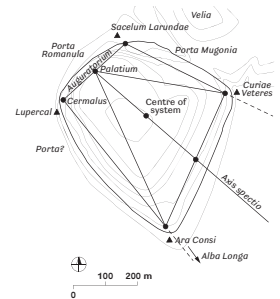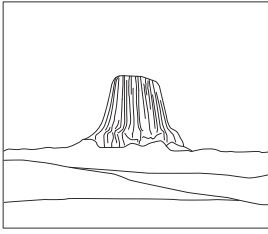

Scheme of Romulus's *templum in aere* for inaugurating the Roma Quadrata from the Palatine Hill. The drawing includes the visual axis, the vertices of the pomerium and the four places of worship chosen from Tacitus to localize the aforementioned vertices and the city walls with the three ritual doors (Capanna)

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Devil's Tower, Wyoming

The nature of these conversations with the gods does not seem that different from that of the attempts to communicate with aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.* The aliens land in a very particular area of earth's landscape (Devil's Tower, Wyoming); the Americans try to communicate with them through the unending repetition of hyper-formalized (and super-silly) keyboard melodies. The whole thing has a decidedly archaic Roman tone that is somehow similar to that of the description of the *inauguratio* of King Numa as narrated by Livy (1, 18, 5–10).

V

The Romans used construction as a means to ensure the correct repetition of rituals. The religious obligation to repeat complicated ceremonies in precise locations led the Romans to modify those very same places in order to avoid possible mistakes in the performance of future rituals. The interpretation of ritual was thus encoded into the physical organization of the place. By doing this, the Romans *invented* architecture.

This (quite uncommon, quite counter-intuitive) use of built matter as a tool with which to control human activity appeared simply because the Romans could afford no mistakes in their dealings with the gods. Following their characteristic combination of pragmatism and formalism, the Romans simply built obstacles to the potential misinterpretation of the landscape. Architecture thus emerged as a relatively practical tool for avoiding religious mistakes. In the gloomy atmosphere of ancient Rome, architecture became a technique for the correction of landscape aimed at the precise repetition of ritual gestures: a technique for *the repetition of gestures by means of physical constraints,* a technique for *the control of movement by means of immobility*, a *science of obstacles.*

The result of such a hyper-conservative relationship to their original terrain is the production of an entirely artificial (formalized) landscape. Out of the pure fear of possible misunderstandings in the future, the Romans ended up completely redefining the original geography they had initially aimed to preserve.

Roman architecture was an attempt to control the future, to make sure that the future would be precisely like the present and the past, and that the equilibrium of the present and the past would be maintained. Roman architecture was explicitly built *against* the future to reduce possibilities, to prevent mistakes. It was a *technology of repetition* born from a desire for correct execution.

By coupling rituals and places, gestures and spaces, the Romans opened up the possibility, to put it in contemporary terms, of relating space and programme to one another. Places were connected to gestures by means of construction; spaces were used to produce gestures, to enact behaviours. Here, the specific field of interest of Western architecture – the relationship between spaces and human activity – was clearly defined. The Roman technology of repetition was the starting point for innumerable further investigations of the relationship between spaces and actions. This link between spaces and actions, through time, underwent all kinds of different interpretations and, in the end, finally allowed architecture to perform as a mechanism by which to produce events:

> In 1966, I first heard of a brief moment in time – the Constructivists in the Soviet Union, 1923 – where the most intimate details of daily life became the legitimate subject of the architect's imagination. I could not resist my late participation – to think of architecture not as form, but as organization, to influence the way lives are lived, an ultimate form of script writing (Koolhaas, 2004).

It is possible to write this, and it is possible to criticize the violence embedded in 19th-century architecture as is done in Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* (1975), only because of the mutual influence of space and gestures introduced by the Romans. From this point of view, Jeremy Bentham, the Constructivists and OMA are nothing but Roman epigones. Architecture can be understood as a device for producing innovation, as the Constructivists did, only because it was originally invented as a device for producing repetition.

VI

If we now return to Loos's conclusions after these provisional considerations, what should we think? Do we still *build like the Romans?*

The answer is twofold: yes and no. Yes, contemporary Western architecture still considers the relationship between spaces and gestures (now understood – in a secularized version – as *programmes*) as the obvious centre of the discipline; but no, the relationship between gestures and spaces is no longer abstract the way it was in Roman architecture.

Indeed, Western architects abandoned the abstraction of Roman architecture shortly after achieving its unsurpassed masterpieces with Bramante and Vignola. Starting with Serlio's demented idea (in Book VI) that the gentleman's house should look different from
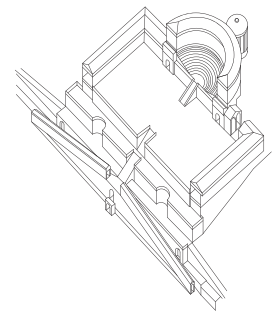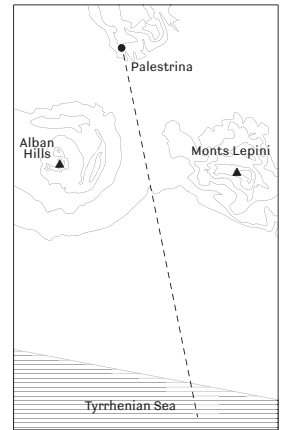
Palestrina

Axonometric view of Palestrina's sanctuary (Kähler, modified by author)
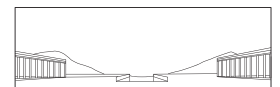
Perspective view from the upper terrace

Perspective view of the upper terrace

the tradesman's (sorry, why?), the immediate, abstract relationship between spaces and gestures inherited from Roman architecture was lost. Ever since then, all sorts of "modernisms" have desperately tried to produce buildings that could *describe* the actions they contained and *explain* how they should be used. This impatient desire for a *message* ended up erasing all complexity from architecture. Architecture started to be filled with its own content; it no longer accepted being hollow, and it immediately ceased being receptive to the world around it.

It would be better to do exactly the opposite of what is being done in contemporary architecture: to consider other possible approaches to architecture beyond the Roman one (which you can summarize as: Context!) and go back to the abstraction of Roman architecture (which you can summarize as: Fuck concepts!). In fact, only a conscious abstraction would allow today's architecture to respond to the complexity of our contemporary reality with the necessary precision and detachment. Architecture can be multiple, open, unpredictable, only if it is entirely abstract, conventional, separate, consciously empty, deliberately hollow. It is only without a content that architecture can be appropriated and inhabited; only if it is free from desires of its own can it accept external desires; only as a hollow container, as an empty receptacle, can it be filled: only a dry sponge is capable of absorbing events from the outside. Here indifference means generosity, and anonymity means richness. Or, to put it in other terms, abstraction is the precondition for realism; reduction is the precondition for curiosity; formalism is the precondition for attention; classicism is the precondition for a non-Eurocentric architecture.

VII
The fact that contemporary Western architecture is still based on the development of some presuppositions that are grounded in Roman architecture means, among other things, that we tend to attribute to all historical forms of architecture a character that is typical of only the Roman and post-Roman ones. In other words, we see all different historical manifestations of architecture through the lens of the Roman experience. So, when we talk about Mayan architecture or Khmer architecture, the word "architecture" is, to a certain extent, misleading, for its meaning in our society has been so fundamentally defined by the Roman experience that even speaking of "Mayan architecture" or "Khmer architecture" already gives a distorted interpretation of these phenomena, just like talking about "Incan law" or "the

Babylonian market". Recognizing architecture as *a Roman invention* is a first step toward defining the premises for a comparative approach to architecture: to understand what a certain society demands from buildings and allows buildings to do – what built matter is asked to do in a certain cultural context.

Recognizing *the Roman origins of our architecture* also allows us to understand that architecture is not a "natural" activity based on pure necessity. Architecture cannot be taken for granted; it cannot be considered a shared notion, independent from its cultural context. We also cannot be so naïve as to consider this difference in the cultural understanding of architecture as being something of the past – something that our contemporary globalized society has entirely surpassed. In fact, contemporary cities are more complex and dirtier than recent descriptions suggest. Traditions, superstitions and beliefs did not vanish (and certainly they will not vanish just because Western architects need to push their garbage according to their idiotic formats). The point here is that the confrontation of Western and non-Western architectural traditions can take the form of either an exchange based on the awareness of cultural differences (which needs, first of all, to be grounded in a new reading of the Western tradition) or as a marriage of two mutually mirroring ignorances, as in Dubai, if you need a clear example of a catastrophe that we kept on trying to consider *cool* (by the way, Dubai is not cool; slavery is not cool).

In its total lack of awareness of its own Eurocentrism, contemporary architecture is still unbelievably ignorant about other traditions, and unbelievably naïve in the receipts it stubbornly proposes everywhere. This Eurocentrism is not the product of any cultural agenda, however imperialist. Contemporary architecture is, in fact, just a tired repetition of some rotten modernist ideas that are now being repeated with the brutal, indisputable arrogance of contemporary "practical men" – the ones "who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence and are usually the slaves of some defunct economist", as J. M. Keynes once put it. This kind of automatic Eurocentrism is precisely what results from ignorance and haste. Still, a critique of the arguments of contemporary "practical men" also needs to involve a critique of the *defunct economists* who provided them with their ideas. A narration of the origins (ritual, plural) of Roman (Western) architecture is an implicit critique of the modern narration of its supposed origin (as being natural, necessary, individual, utilitarian). A detour through ancient Rome is an implicit critique of the sad and false fable of the "primitive hut"

(but we can discuss that another time). A serious critique of concepts, Dubais and all kinds of unfunny jokes needs to start from an apparently anachronistic critique of Serlio, Laugier and Ledoux.

Such a critique would provide the basis for a comparative approach to architecture. This would mean imagining a phenomenology of Hindu architecture in the spirit of Louis Dumont, a history of modern architecture in the spirit of Karl Polanyi or a critique of Laugier's "primitive hut" in the spirit of Marcel Mauss. A comparative approach to architecture would mean continuing the work that Aldo Rossi seemed to promise us in a few extraordinary fragments of *The Architecture of the City,* getting rid of our "obsolete functionalist mentality" and imagining an architecture that could give attention to the complexity of the world we live in: a *universal architecture* as realistic and as generous as the one in Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurff.* And certainly the places from which to begin developing an understanding of the complexity of contemporary cities are not the central business districts of "global cities". It would be better to look more at the background, the provinces of the empire, the unknown, dusty cities of five million inhabitants in Pakistan, Turkey, Vietnam, Mexico. These are certainly the laboratories of the architecture of the future, the places where new hybrid conditions have the potential to develop.

VIII

Contemporary architecture now has to do precisely what it did not do in the 19th century, when the classical tradition was, for the first time, confronted with other traditions: to know precisely – case by case – that all architectural traditions are one.

In the 19th century, Western architecture's reaction to this challenge – Eclecticism – was pretty obtuse. Classicism surrendered and Eclecticism emerged (and Eclecticism is not over, by the way; indeed, modernism and all kinds of postmodernisms are just versions of Eclecticism in which traditions are differentiated according to time instead of according to space). Eclecticism is the use of all formal traditions *because they are different;* in contrast, Classicism is the use of all formal traditions *because they are the same.* Eclecticism presupposes sameness and tries to produce variety, whereas Classicism presupposes complexity and tries to produce clarity. For Eclecticism, reality is boring and is in need of new inventions: architecture is *fiction.*

For Classicism, reality is already sufficiently rich: there is nothing to invent, and observing with precision is already enough.