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THE HOUSE WITH TWO COLUMNS OR MORE. IMPERMANENCE AND PERMANENCE IN ARCHITECTURE

The fleetingness of architecture and the permanence of architecture can be best illustrated by a look at columnar architecture. Again and again the column appears and vanishes as an architectural demand to represent minor or major pretensions.

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It is quite amazing how architects persist in the design of permanence though materials rot, money vanishes, states collapse and climates change. It may be the general desire of human beings to hold on to some safety net in view of the always foreboding future. But it may be the pharaohism of architects to be with one's designs still visible in the future. In this sense columns present some kind of walking stick, some kind of crutch to walk or totter into the future (Loos). And the re-invention of Pyramids (Pei) as a mausoleum for brilliant architectural ideas.

One may accept this as a kind of spirited flexibility in dealing with the vagaries of life to hold on Vitruvian architectural concepts without being constantly thrown into the abyss of architectural possibilities. But it seems to be also a flexibility to stay with the status quo, despite the fleetingness of time, despite the dictum of past, present and future in the history books. Not only architects go with this but seemingly everyone else. The column has become the "rock bed" of "civilisation". Travelling from Wladiwostok to San Francisco, from North to South, through Africa or Asia, columns are abundant. No culture goes by now without it. Of course, there is a lot of architecture,

a lot of buildings, which goes without it. But when it comes to the crunch, when it comes to an architect's view of himself, to a client's aspiration for status there it goes, columns again.

Underpinned is this now and then by architectural theorists or historians [1] or by whole movements [2].

Only once were architects and clients alike (of course, still a minority though a considerable one) courageous enough to relegate this columnar retro-architecture. The modernist avantgarde being fed up with history (Gropius) stepped bravely into the future, for once two steps advancing, and only one step backwards as opposed to one step forward and two steps backwards (Lutyens).

How deeply the latter is ingrained can we see in the architecture presently deployed in Astana or Shanghai. Not that columnar architecture is celebrated particularly. It is more the big-ness of architecture which engages the architect, and therein the use of stereometric forms (pyramids, cylinders, cubes). The last monumental statement of the column as retro-design was Adolf Loos' competition design for the Chicago Tribune 1922 somewhat contradicting his essay "Ornament and Crime". Architecture now is more a kind of performance art albeit less fleetingly and

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with millions of dollars sunk into it. But paradoxically because of its event character a lasting permanence is not guaranteed. Ecological strain will make sure of it if things do not fall off earlier.

Where columnar architecture is surviving quite healthily is outside the prominent architectural realm. In the suburbia of Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin, Shanghai, Washington or London the hedonistic bourgeoisie is aiming to celebrate again albeit rudimentarily the elements of classical architecture. One is inclined to observe that whenever money is on the loose columns make their appearance. Mortgages, too, can be arranged for one, two or more columns. They appear mostly as garnish of entrances encapsulating baroqueish doors from OBI or likewise builders' yards. If one wants ill then one could say that these elements of suburbia characterize a deeply conservative society, less democratically inclined as columns, particularly the Doric are used for an association with heroic Athenian democracy. To be fair, architects are

here less employed than one might presume. If so it seems to be as so often before in the employ of the few potentates still around who desire to be part of what I would call the Roman look. The time of the Stalinist, the Francist, the Hitlerist columns are fortunately gone. We have now the columnar architecture in the hands of suburban dwellers, oligarchs or otherwise, in the hands of confederate sentiments in the USA or nearer to us used by Sarmatian or Chopinesque [3] souls.

What I ironize here though will soon be no theme. Because, as a reviewer of the present Post-Modernism Exhibition in London writes, the new digitised media presents us with an instant, nearly complete catalogue of the architectural past: so that an architect, a client would waste a lot of time to think deeply about a new columnar construct. We are part of a new eclectic age where everything goes (Venturi) and where the column will only play a role amongst many architectural details on the racks, not yet of IKEA, but soon.

ENDNOTES

[1] John Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*.

[2] viz. *Post-Modernism: Style and Subversion 1970–1990*, Exhibition Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2011/12.

[3] viz. Zelazowa Wola.

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