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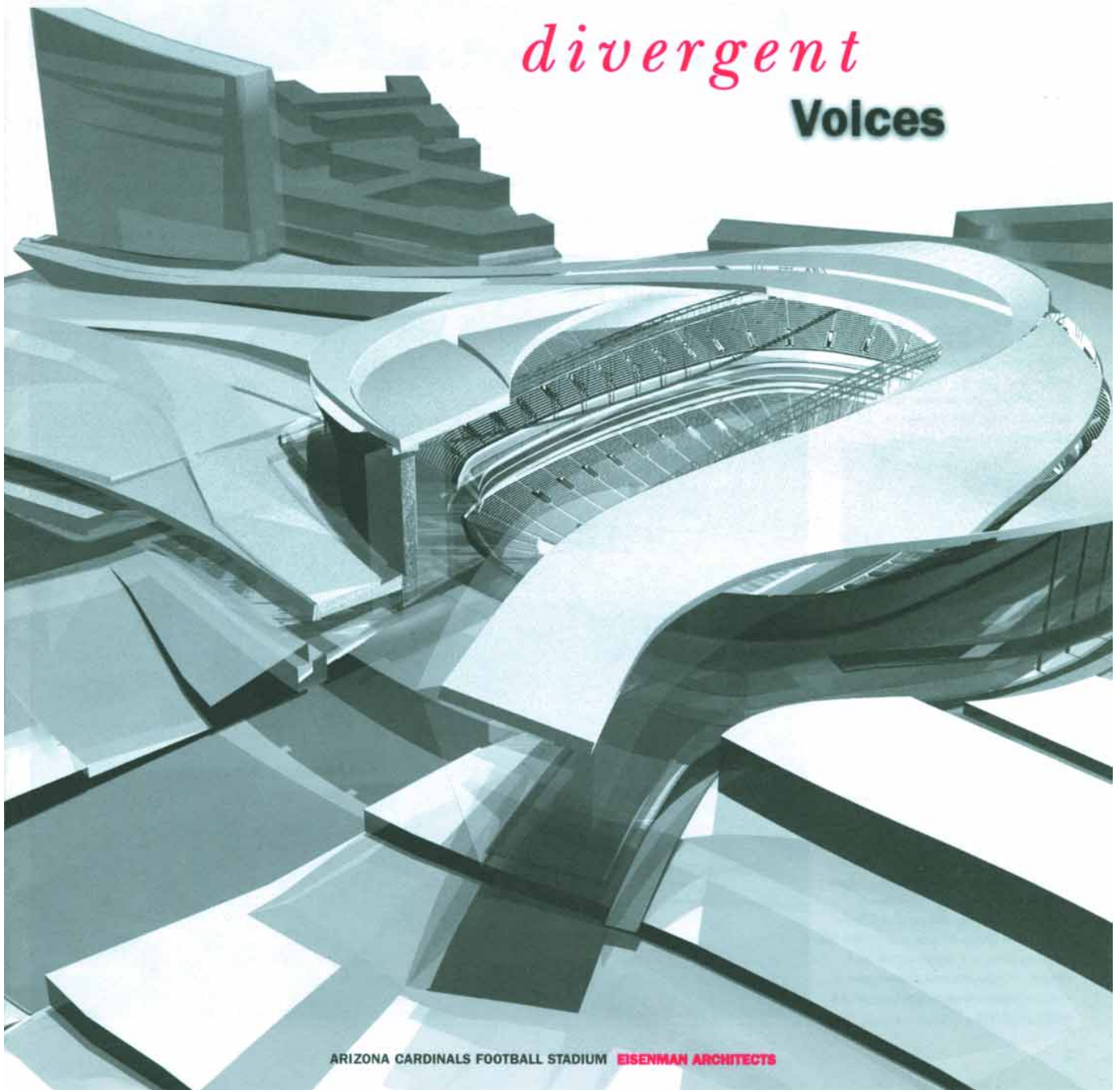
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# On the Future of Classicism

BY JAYNE MERKEL



THE BATTLE OF THE STYLES may be long past, but something like that old debate—now centered on “language” and the concept of mass versus space—remains very much alive, even vibrant, in fact. On March 4, an audience of several hundred showed up for a discussion on “The Architecture of Identity: The Future of Classicism” benefiting Sir John Soane’s Museum in London.

*New Yorker* architecture critic **Paul Goldberger** began: “You don’t have to be a classicist to admire Sir John Soane’s spaces-within-spaces, moving planes, reflections in surfaces,” noting how Modern the quirky Georgian architect Soane (1753-1837) actually was. But if Goldberger meant to smooth over differences in the role of moderator, that is not what the panelists wanted. When asked, “Are there rules to classicism?” classical architect (and cofounder of the Institute for the Study of Classical Architecture) **Donald Rattner** quipped, “There are rules, but not in the way you might imagine. Classicism is more proscriptive than prescriptive. It tells you what *not* to do,” he added, highlighting a difference between classicism and modernism.

Architects today not only resist rule-making, but they presume nothing cannot be done—except, maybe, work in classical styles—though even that prohibition was retracted by postmodernism. “Your inference is that rules inhibit creativity,” Rattner said to Goldberger. “I have to be humble enough to realize that I’m not on the same level as John Soane. This notion of focusing on the solitary genius and how far he stretches the envelope is a value of modernism. One of the values of classicism is the way it enables the rest of us to turn out architecture. This is why, with the [nineteenth century]

builders’ books, you have these buildings all over America that are beautifully put together “even though there were not any architects there.”

Goldberger ventured: “You’re hypothesizing classicism as a kind of safety net that will guarantee a certain level of decency and prevent a certain kind of horror?”

**Allan Greenberg**, a classical architect who teaches at Yale, returned to Goldberger’s question about rules, saying that “rules’ is a bad word. You have convention. And within convention, you have a certain latitude to do whatever you want.” Then he changed the subject to what irks the classicists most. “In the history books on the twentieth century, you have Frank Lloyd Wright at the turn of the century, steel-frame buildings in Chicago, some white boxy buildings from the 1920s and 30s—and nothing else. Two-thirds of what happened gets ignored. When Bob Venturi’s book [*Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966] came out, half the Yale faculty walked out.”

Goldberger replied: “Allan, I think your comment would have had far more validity a number of years ago, in term of the Giedionesque line”—referring to Sigfried Giedion’s 1941 book *Space, Time and Architecture*. “We’ve been looking at a much larger range of architects, such as Delano & Aldrich, who designed this building,” the 1932 Union Club of New York, at Park Avenue and 69th Street, where the discussion took place. “Architectural scholarship of the last twenty years has been much more catholic.”

But Greenberg argued that “the quality of commentary on architects like John Russell Pope is not very good. If you compare the National Gallery with Pope’s ear-

lier work, the National Gallery is very flat and every facade is asymmetrical.” He said, “I would propose Pope had been looking at the International Style.”

“We seem to have reached a point,” Goldberger asserted, “where classical architecture is not disdained. But there seems to be very little interchange between the two worlds.” Proving this, panelist **Charles Gwathmey** said, “I have a problem with all this stuff. History is not about isolating time but about renewal and continuum. You learn something, to speculate and comment on it. It’s really the principles rather than the language that are evocative to me. I also don’t like the word ‘rules.’ The idea of replication is offensive to me because it denies the rich notion of creation.”

“You can’t have the principles.” Rattner stated, “without the form. You cannot remove the elements.” However, Gwathmey disagreed: “You enter this room. It’s axial, with a very clear sense of organizing principles, and you could put any molding on it. It’s a language issue.”

“No. That’s an abstraction,” Rattner argued. “Modernism is about abstraction. Classicism is figural. That’s a very fundamental difference. There’s a syntax. It’s the way buildings communicate.”

“But I could put a peaked roof, an inverted barrel vault, and various wall treatments on this room, and in the end, it’s still a biaxial condition,” Gwathmey countered.

Goldberger interceded: “Donald Rattner and Charles Gwathmey have come into this room and seen very different things.” He turned to Gwathmey: “You look at this room and see space, whereas Donald is looking at this room and sees ‘surface.’”

Rattner qualified that statement: “I would say ‘sculptural form and model-



Philip Evans

A rural residence, Ferguson Shamamian & Rattner



Byrd Cunningham

A rural residence, Ferguson Shamamian & Rattner



Richard Owek

U.S. Department of State, Allan Greenberg, Architect

ing. It's not just wallpaper. Mass is primary. Space is secondary."

Greenberg suggested: "Why can't you both be right? What would you say of the Gardener's House [by Schinkel] at Charlottenhof?"

"I don't know the building," Gwathmey said, proving Greenberg's earlier point about the two schools of architects operating with different references. It was all Rattner needed to hear. He said, "One of the issues here has to do with education. The current generation has no education in classical architecture. Only one school in the United States—Notre Dame—is based on classical architecture. Schools today preserve the current fashion, and the work being done today is a kind of rococo degeneration of original modernism, which was a reaction against classicism."

### Can opposites coexist?

Can diametric opposites like classicism and modernism coexist? They do in our society today, where radically different ideas about everything else are embraced simultaneously. But a problem arises when somebody wants to build in an historic district or add a wing to a classical building. Should a modernist philosophy take precedence? Recently, the classicists, though they may have lost out in architectural schools, have had their way in the streets, where the predisposition to continuity and overt compatibility has guided landmark policy.

**Paul Byard** thinks knee-jerk contextualism is all wrong. His book, *The Architecture of Additions* (OCULUS, Dec. 1998, p. 18) argues that the new—and the whole composition—must be studied along with the existing fabric (and that they have always been considered in the best examples throughout history).

Byard is replacing Robert A.M. Stern as director of the Preservation Planning program at Columbia University. "I do chafe a bit," Byard said, "about what we've been saying—not about classicism as an historic tradition but about classicism as a pervasive societal discourse with a desire to make buildings comfortable even if they are false." He mentioned the use of Dryvit in Pei Cobb Freed & Partners' billion dollar Ronald Reagan Office Building in Washington, D.C., "with its references to Union Station and classical architecture."

Underlining the difference in perception, Rattner said, "The modernists hate that building because it's too classical. The classicists hate it because it's too modern." Goldberger thinks, "in many ways it's a perfect reflection of conflicting societal forces at this moment, when we all want it all. That's why it won the competition. There was pressure to literally reproduce the Federal triangle, pressure to not literally reproduce the Federal triangle, pressure not to spend too much. . . ."

"We have a multivalent politics, not a tyranny," observed Greenberg. Throughout the evening he demonstrated an ability to see the value in both modernist and classicist points of view, though his own work is solidly within the latter tradition. When Goldberger said he thought they would all agree that "classicism's great achievement was its ability to create a viable vernacular and the great failure of modernism was its inability to create one like that in Georgian London," Greenberg said, "I'm not sure that's true. I'm thinking of Morphosis' Kate Mantilini Restaurant, Norman Foster's work at Nimes and at the Royal Academy in London. I think it's possible to do almost anything if you do it well. Walking around St. Peter's today, very few of us can see

how Michelangelo's genius has been mauled by the twelve architects who succeeded him. There's a lot of schlock architecture in the classical tradition, too."

Gwathmey also conceded that "where the modern movement has failed is in its ability to establish an urban fabric." And Goldberger reiterated Greenberg's idea saying, "The lesson is not *what* you do but *how* you do it."

The evening ended with characteristically equivocal and provocative remarks from **Robert Venturi**, who was being honored at the event. "Context has been overly discussed and much misunderstood. Connecting with the context does not mean you're going to necessarily continue what was begun. You can have contrast," he said. "You need discernible order, broken." Venturi remains as skeptical of heroic originality as he was in 1966, when he wrote *Complexity and Contradiction*. Like Byard, he believes in "the importance of the evolving." And he predicted that "the architecture of the classic generic loft is going to be the architecture for the electronic age."

"I love classical architecture. I learn from it, especially the Mannerist tradition," Venturi said. In the [London] National Gallery extension what we did was literally replicate what was next door, but then we used it all wrong. Our rhythm was jazz. In our building, the ornament is a symbol. It does not go around the corner. The romantic originality, which modernism continued from the romantic era, is not for our time. We are not ashamed of designing buildings, buildings which are knotty and naughty."

Photos and illustrations pp 8-9 taken from Donald Rattner's *Parallel of the Classical Orders of Architecture*.