Doing the Charleston

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2015)

‘In stately old Charleston,’ ran a headline in a recent edition of the *New York Times,* ‘New Buildings on the Block Are Struggling to Fit In.’ This is a very strange way of putting it: for it reverses the relation between Man and his own productions.

Buildings cannot struggle, not even metaphorically: they are not like fish in the talons of an eagle or a wart hog attacked by a lion. Admittedly one does not look to the *Times* for elegance of writing, perhaps not even for mere accuracy, though its layout looks as if it was designed by a professor of Aramaic philology at the University of Gottingen in about 1880. Pedantic layout, loose (though dull) writing: that more or less summarizes the *Times*.

What the headlines meant, I think, is that architects and city planners were trying – or struggling, to use the *Times’* more sensationalist word – to find a style of modern architecture that harmonised aesthetically with Charleston’s eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings. My guesses are a) that they won’t find it, and b) that they won’t try very hard.

Let me briefly return to the locution of ‘buildings struggling,’ that so deftly evades the fact that buildings do not design and erect themselves but require human beings to do both of those things (and not *for them*, either, for that would imply that buildings had intentions). I am reminded of Le Corbusier’s exclamation, ‘The plan, the plan must rule!’ First, of course, he provided no coherent explanation as to *why* the plan must rule: his writings are long strings of *ex cathedra* statements connected by no logic whatsoever and whose main interest is why anyone should have taken them seriously. To answer that question would require an examination of the zeitgeist in which they were received, which for the moment I shall leave aside.

‘The plan must rule!’ This way of putting it also disguises that plans do not make themselves, nor can they rule. What Le Corbusier meant was ‘I must plan and I must rule.’ His plan, incidentally, was for architecture in the whole world: not bad for a boy from a little town in Switzerland (or anywhere else, for that matter).

No doubt there are many instances in which the desires of men are transformed by language into impersonal imperatives, over which human purpose reigns no more than it does over a tsunami produced by an earthquake at the bottom of the ocean. It is one of the tasks of the citizen, certainly of the intellectual, to unmask this disguise, whether that disguise be conscious or

unconscious.

Now to return to the question of how hard the architects and city planners will ‘struggle’ to make new buildings fit in. This has not exactly been the obsession of architects in the recent past. On the contrary, their struggle has been more to make sure that their productions have been noticed or could not go unnoticed. No one, for example, who looked at the Pompidou Centre in Paris would think that the architects had made any effort to blend their building with whatever was all around it, or with Paris in general, rather the reverse. They wanted it to strike the eye like a punch in the face, and in this they certainly succeeded. Success in pursuit of a bad goal, however, is much more to be lamented than failure.

The question naturally arises as to why anyone would choose the goal that the architects of the Pompidou Centre chose: to which, I think, the answer is the egotism of architects, itself only a manifestation of a general social (or antisocial) inclination to egotism. In an age of celebrity, in which people feel anonymity as a wound, as an insult to their ego, they feel the need to do whatever is necessary to stand out in some way, whether it be by dress or conduct, or – in the case of architects – by building something that stands out, if necessary like an red ink-stain on an etching by Rembrandt. We are all artists now, even if we have no talent (except for self-promotion, the most important of all talents): and, as everyone knows, no one is an artist who is not original. The more a building clashes with its surroundings, then, the more original, and artistic, is the architect. The humility necessary genuinely to seek harmony with what already exists is not the first characteristic of architects of today. The jobbers among them care for nothing but their fees, the more ambitious for fame or notoriety. Better to be hated than unnoticed: indeed, given that some great artist (though actually rather few) went derided in their lifetime, excoriation is for some a validation of their work. I’m hated, therefore I’m good.

As it happens, I had a discussion in my local pub last night with a young man – I now think of 40 year-olds as young men – about architecture. He had grown to adult consciousness at a time when virtually all urban architectural harmony in his native country, Britain, had been wilfully destroyed by modernists who could, for reasons I have not the space to go into, leave nothing untouched, but whose logic was that of Macbeth. To adapt very slightly that character’s words, every British modernist could have said:

> I am in ugliness
> Stepp’d in so far that, were I to wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as to go o’er.

To stop their work of destruction would be an admission of guilt, and that they will never make.

My young interlocutor saw no virtue in harmony: rather he saw it in contrast. Of course, since harmony is not the same as uniformity, contrast can be, and often is, both interesting and graceful. But he was for contrast as clash rather than harmony: a gastronomic equivalent would perhaps be smoked eel and chocolate mousse on the same plate, or more to the point foie gras and a Krispy Kreme Donut (the latter appalling under any circumstances whatever).

Perhaps the difference between us was most evident when I mentioned that the city council of Bath, the once-fashionable Eighteenth Century spa town, intended in the 1950s to pull practically all the old buildings and replace them with the modern architecture of that aesthetically dispiriting epoch (modernity is, of course, the most fleeting of qualities). Fortunately the townspeople, or a large number of them, had better instincts than their elected representative, and civic action halted the council's barbaric plans – but not before 4000 Georgian houses, workmen's cottages for the most part that would now probably sell for $800,000 each, had been pulled down to make way for ugly utilitarian constructions.

My interlocutor said something that should not have surprised me, but nevertheless shocked me. He said he did not in the least mind the loss of 4000 Georgian houses because there were so many still standing anyway, all round the country. On this kind of logic, it would not matter if one pulled down mediaeval palaces in Venice, so long as some of them remained: nor would it matter what one put in their place, so long presumably as whatever it was sufficiently contrasting.

On one thing we were able to agree: that modern pastiche of eighteenth century architecture was often terrible, at least in Britain: but this, I said, was because, for one reason or another, pride perhaps, architects were unwilling to use the model correctly. As an instance, I gave the proportions of the windows: almost invariably, pastiche gets it wrong, though nothing could be easier than to get it right.

Now here my interlocutor said something was at least partly true and revealing: he said that the architects did not follow the proportions of the windows because of considerations of energy efficiency. And this I could well believe: in a climate like ours, it takes more energy to heat a room with large and generously-proportioned windows than with mean and narrow ones.

But note that here the premise of the argument against building in the Georgian style of architecture has changed. It is not that we do not want to build like the Georgians for aesthetic, but rather for narrowly utilitarian, reasons. We want to be kept warm as cheaply as

possible. Whereas we were once asked to celebrate the new aesthetic as being in some way superior to the old on aesthetic grounds alone, we are now told that we cannot adhere to the old aesthetic for reasons of conservation of energy. If it were not for those considerations, then, we should be only too delighted to build as they built.

As would be perfectly possible for us, though almost certainly expensive. On the other hand, are we not supposed to be the richest people who ever lived? How comes it, then, that the Georgians were able to build 4000 elegant (though no doubt cramped) cottages for workers, that probably housed at least 12,000 people, that is to say the equivalent of 84,000 people today, in one city alone, while we are incapable with all our wealth and technical brio of building anything remotely as fine, but are capable only of demolition? An architectural historian once said to me that it was simply because our building methods and materials had changed, but this answer left me dissatisfied on two counts: first that modernism is generally celebrated on account on its aesthetic, not on the grounds that it is the only style consonant with our new building methods and materials, and second that I find it impossible to believe that, with sufficient will to do so, we could not have found a way of mass-producing elegance by means other than the Georgians used. Our problem is not our methods but our priorities and our taste.

One of the things that most struck me about my interlocutor was what one might call his aesthetic pointillism. Each tiny portion of a townscape was for him individual and unrelated to any other. Thus for him it would not be a sacrilege to erect a Dubai-style skyscraper in the middle of Venice on the grounds that it would destroy the aesthetic unity of the city (which, of course, is very far from that of a unity of style of individual buildings). The loss would not be irreparable because the vast majority of the city would remain intact. Needless to say, no heritage could long survive this pointillism: it is aesthetic barbarism.

Another aspect of his aesthetics was historicism. When I said that British architecture of recent decades has been uniformly dreadful (of course an exaggeration, but a very slight one) he asked me about the Lloyds Building in the City of London. I said that it was an elaborate mess, an eyesore, whose originality was one of its great and many defects. He admitted that it was not nice to look at but, he added, I (that is to say I the author of this article) was forced to admit that it was ahead of its time. I said this was a worthless criterion by which to judge architecture: it was like saying that Houston Stewart Chamberlain or Edouard Drumont were good writers because they were ahead of their time, that is to say as nineteenth century intellectual progenitors of Nazism. His remark also reminded me of what Rossini once said of Wagner, that his music was better than it sounded. Architecture, being a relatively permanent and certainly very obtrusive art form (if it is an art form at all), it must be judged by what

it is here and now, not what it foreshadows. To a small extent you may judge a book or a picture by that criterion, because no one has to hang the picture on his wall or read the book: but a building is not like that. It forces itself on you, unless you blindfold yourself either literally or metaphorically.

Our conversation depressed me, though I soon wondered why it should. After all, I will be leaving this world sooner than he; and if he and his descendants do not mind the destruction of the heritage of the past, why should I who will soon no longer be present to enjoy it?

But still I grieve for what is likely to happen – or rather be done – to Charleston.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is