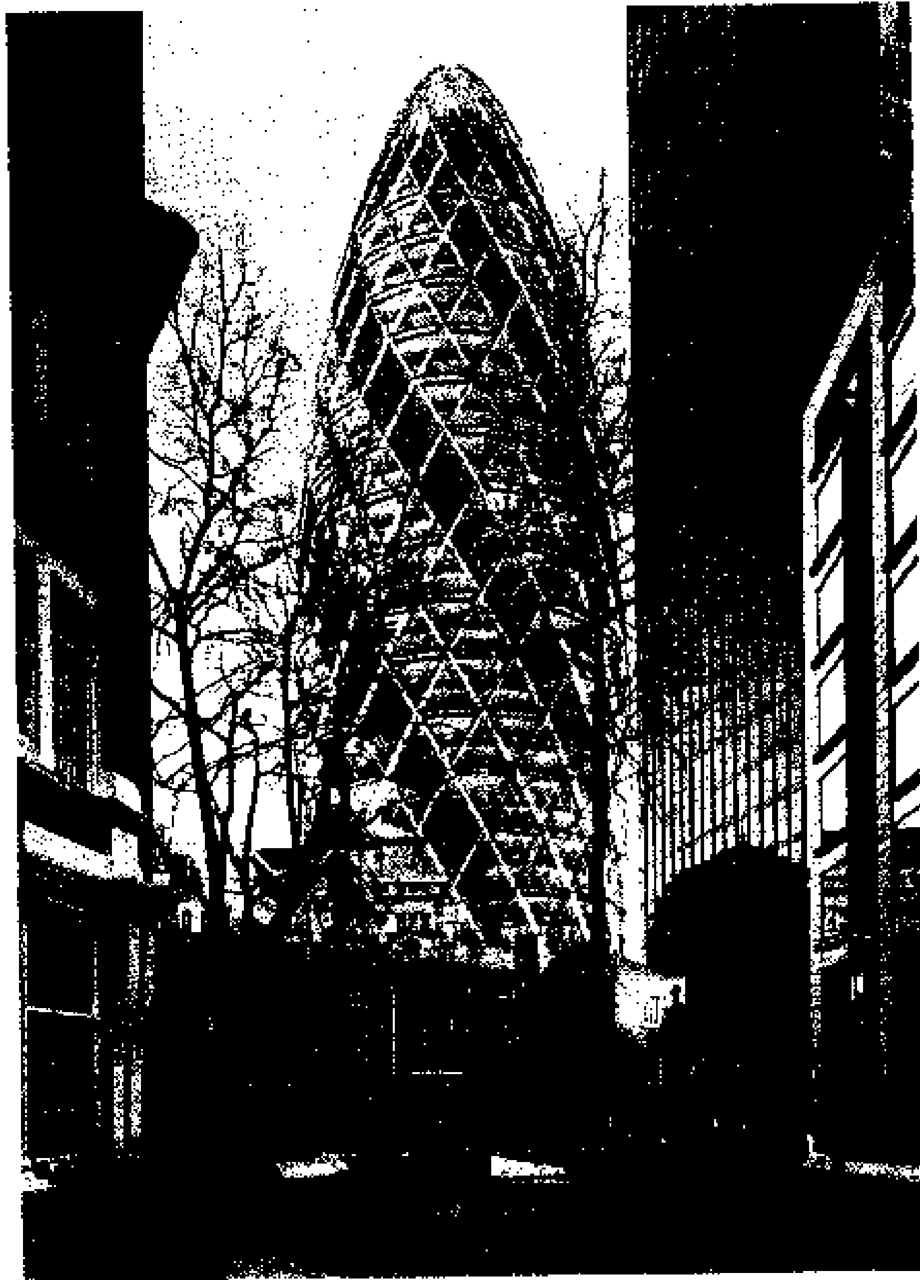

Morality and Architecture Revisited

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so it is not a comprehensive assessment of any of the individual critics concerned. The writings of many of the scholars discussed in the book have variety, richness, and a vast range of insights from which we can continually profit, so that when I criticize one aspect of their achievement it is with no wish to raise questions about the value of the whole but merely to contribute to a discussion of one theme in the study of architecture. Of no one over the past century is this more true than Professor Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. With his prodigious learning, energy, and enthusiasm for his subject he has been more successful than any critic since Ruskin in opening the reluctant eyes of Englishmen to works of art. Moreover, his almost incredible achievement in initiating and completing the *Buildings of England* series has made it possible for Englishmen of all types to understand and appreciate their architectural inheritance to an extent that would have been thought inconceivable before the war. All this is not in doubt and our debt of gratitude can never be adequately expressed. Without wishing to question the value of that achievement – of which, as a former pupil of Professor Pevsner, I have been a fortunate beneficiary – I would like to feel free to examine one of its postulates.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends inside and outside Peterhouse, in particular Professor Edward Shils, for helping me in writing this book.

Peterhouse, Cambridge, 1975 D.J.W.

Introduction

Exactly a century separates the publication of Pugin's *Contrasts* in 1836 from Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* in 1936. With a similar crusading tone each book argued for the adoption of a form of architecture not widely popular in England at the time of writing: Gothic in Pugin's case, International Modern in Pevsner's. Yet, despite the great difference between these two types of architecture, both critics use the same kind of argument to champion the cause of their chosen type: that it is not just a style but a rational way of building evolved inevitably in response to the needs of what society really is or ought to be, and to question its forms is certainly anti-social and probably immoral. In the present book, therefore, we shall outline the development in architectural writing since the eighteenth century of a tradition of ignoring the mysterious origins and the importance of 'style' and of explaining architecture away as a consequence or manifestation of something else. This 'something else' will be what happens to interest the particular critic most: religion, politics, sociology, philosophy, rationalism, technology, German theories of space or of the spirit of the age. The line of development from Pugin to Pevsner will be traced, taking in such writers as Viollet-le-Duc, Lethaby, Le Corbusier, and Giedion. Particular attention will be paid to Professor Sir Nikolaus Pevsner because his works are the richest in the corpus of architectural literature in recent times.

We shall not propose that architecture should be interpreted and judged solely in terms of visual style nor that that is the way in which it was interpreted until the eighteenth century. The idea that architecture is basically generated as a response to practical demands

was common to ancient and to medieval philosophers, as was discussion about the connection between the good, the beautiful, and the moral. But in the numinous vision of the universe developed by Plato and Aquinas, architecture was essentially peripheral. The extreme mechanistic and moral justifications of architectural form associated particularly with Viollet-le-Duc and with Pugin, to look no further for the moment, form a theoretical tradition which is scarcely supported by any interpretation of architecture found in Plato or Aquinas. This theoretical tradition is sometimes supposed to justify the forms of modern architecture, yet if those forms are to be justified – and it probably does not matter for the moment whether they are or not – then that justification would have nothing to do with the supposed 'theory of modern architecture' because there is no such theory, or at any rate none that has not been used to justify totally different styles of architecture during the past two centuries. What is often overlooked is that from Plato to Choisy there existed architectural traditions, mainly Classical or Gothic, so strong that successive debates about style were generally contained within them. Thus the solely rational or technical explanations of architecture were subordinated to that antecedent picture of what architecture would look like, so that their inadequacies never became apparent. Without this antecedent picture such explanations destroy architecture and lead only to hut-worship.† This is made perfectly clear by the writings of the greatest theorist of neo-Classical architecture in the eighteenth century, Laugier, whose mechanistic and primitivist interpretation led him to establish the hut of primitive man as the ideal and normative type of building. However, because Laugier lived in an age which, whatever fantasies it indulged, did not ultimately question the supremacy of the Classical style or of Antiquity as the norm, his simplistic and destructive theories were necessarily rendered harmless. Instead, they played a role in creating a stylistic transformation from Baroque to neo-Classical within an existing Classical tradition

† See J. Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968.

– the 'classical language of architecture' in Summerson's phrase – which Laugier accepted as the norm almost unconsciously. The same is true of Pugin who said the same things about Gothic that Laugier had said about Classical architecture. In fact Pugin knew before he formulated his theories what he wanted architecture to look like. If one did not know that what Pugin happened to be defending was Gothic architecture one would certainly not guess from his supposed principles. How, for example, can his austere doctrine that 'there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction, or propriety'[1] be supposed to justify the spire of Salisbury Cathedral and not the portico of St. Martin-in-the-Fields? The way the doctrine collapses when applied to real buildings of imaginative quality has never been sufficiently emphasized and it has consequently been used to sell modern architecture to an audience prepared to believe that there is only one logical solution to the problems presented to an architect by each new commission. In fact there are a hundred and one solutions, and the one adopted will always depend partly on the current fashionable notions of what buildings ought to look like.

Three of the most persistent explanations of architecture – in terms of (1) religion, sociology, or politics; (2) the spirit of the age; and (3) a rational or technological justification – can be seen as respectively English, German, and French in origin. It is not, of course, always easy or possible to separate them. Moreover, pervading many of these approaches is a romantic and collectivist populism which believes that the architect has no imagination or will of his own but is merely the 'expression' of the 'collective unconscious'. We shall find this theme in the writings of Lethaby and Herbert Read. With Pugin, though all three approaches are present, the first is manifestly the most important. A frenzied and sometimes confused convert to Roman Catholicism, Pugin claimed in *Contrasts* (1836) the same doctrinal justification for the forms of church architecture as for the truths of the Church's teachings. It was a unique heresy which the Church might well have condemned had she thought about it.

In fact long before he became a Catholic Pugin had evidently established, solely on grounds of aesthetic taste, that Gothic was the perfect style, but in his writings he obscures that point and implies that he selected Gothic because it was the embodiment of Catholic doctrine and structural rationality. It is clear, however, that like the rational approach of Viollet-le-Duc and others, Pugin's approach does not begin to explain and justify the forms of Gothic architecture. The Catholic Church, regarding herself as the permanent exponent of revealed truth, can claim that her members believe essentially the same doctrines in 1977 as in 1477, though their implications may in the meantime have been more fully developed and understood. Yet the forms of church architecture of the two periods are totally different. In other words, the differences cannot be explained away in terms of truths or doctrines which believers must regard as permanent and unchanging.

The religious interpretation is not fashionable today, but one consequence of it certainly is. This is the belief that architecture expresses social, moral, and philosophical conditions, and that if one knows enough about such conditions in a given period one can therefore predict what its architecture will be and declare what it should be. This view can be seen in some ways as the legacy of Winckelmann and, ironically, strongly coloured the work of Pugin. It sees architecture as an instrument for the attainment of social policy employed to achieve supposedly 'moral' ends. Thus for Giedion 'contemporary architecture takes its start in a *moral* problem . . . [and where it] has been allowed to provide a new setting for contemporary life, this new setting has acted in turn upon the life from which it springs. The new atmosphere has led to change and development in the conceptions of the people who live in it.'[2]

The notion that one could argue whether architecture might actually be 'true' in the sense that one could debate the truth of religious doctrines is another legacy of Pugin's which has been of far-reaching consequence. If architecture is seen as something that can be truthful it must be immoral for it to tell a lie, and this belief runs through the French rationalists and the English Arts and Crafts

theorists to twentieth-century propagandists. Viollet-le-Duc, Morris, Berlage, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier have all believed that their work was generated by truth to materials. Yet even when they used the same materials they always worked in completely different and immediately distinguishable styles. The idea that what distinguished one object from another is not style but morality has been very clearly stated by Pevsner who argued that 'sham materials and sham technique' are 'immoral'.[3]

The second of our interpretations of architecture is as an expression of the spirit of the age. Like the first, this sees the determinants of style and the criteria for assessing architectural style as lying outside architecture. It is particularly strong in the German-Swiss art-historical tradition from Burckhardt and Wölfflin to Giedion and Pevsner. To criticize some of the results of this tradition is not, of course, to deny that all history is necessarily selective and that the art historian must therefore have some organizing principle, some antecedent idea, before he approaches a particular period. This may simply be a keen ability to perceive common aims, visual and spiritual, in apparently dissimilar objects or achievements. At some moments these common aims and themes will seem so dominant in so wide a variety of media and fields of intellectual and social activities that we can reasonably speak of a spirit of the age, though this may only mean that men were more swayed by fashion then than at other times. Indeed, it may be impossible to write interesting art history without taking into account the extent to which fashions sometimes become so popular that they can dominate the mood of an age. However, art historians have often turned this tool of delicate inquiry into a crude bludgeoning weapon to be used against individual personalities in a process of making generalizations about the inevitability of particular changes. But we simply do not know why men become anxious to follow different fashions at different times. We do know, however, that since our personalities are highly complex, the reasons can only be equally complex: they will range from the trivial to the profound and some of them will be unconscious. We know, too, that our inclination to enjoy a thing precedes any attempt to rationalize or defend that

enjoyment.† This chronology should therefore be taken into account in any interpretation of such rationalizations or defences.

The ease with which the cultural historian can distort or abuse his sense for the mood of an age is illustrated in the view expressed by Read that to him between the wars 'it seemed elementary that a belief in Marx should be accompanied by a belief in, say, Cézanne; and that the development of art since Cézanne should interest the completely revolutionary mind as much as the development of socialist theory since Proudhon.' For Read

> the cause of the arts is the cause of revolution. Every reason – historical, economic, and psychological – points to the fact that art is only healthy in a communal type of society, where within one organic consciousness all modes of life, all senses and all faculties, function freely and harmoniously. We in England have suffered the severest form of capitalist exploitation . . . We have no taste because we have no freedom; we have no freedom because we have no faith in our common humanity.[4]

Read's argument is that the *Zeitgeist*, the 'one organic consciousness', inherent in a cohesive collectivist society will inevitably express itself in 'healthy' art, the whole forming an indissoluble unity as it makes steady progress towards the complete fulfilment of the revolutionary ideal. However, although we know or think we know what themes, techniques, and materials men chose to adopt and to reject in the various historical periods we study, we must not in every case conclude that it was all a reflection of the inevitable progress of an all-pervasive spirit, a development which could not have been other than it was without upsetting the march of history. This brings us close to what Sir Herbert Butterfield

† As E.H. Gombrich argues, 'Apologists for certain kinds of art often plead that if we would only understand it, we would also like it. By and large, I think, the sequence is inverted. Without first liking a game, a style, a genre, or a medium we are hardly able to absorb its conventions well enough to discriminate and understand.' (*Art History and the Social Sciences*, Oxford, 1975, p. 51.)

called 'the whig interpretation of history' and what Sir Karl Popper described in the following words as 'historicism': 'Historicism is out to find The Path on which mankind is destined to walk; it is out to discover The Clue to History.'[5] It is the combination of this aim with a fervent belief in the *Zeitgeist* which is responsible for the line taken by many historians of modern architecture. The historian of modern culture, who believes that if a *Zeitgeist* does not exist it ought to be created, will inevitably ignore or condemn those who question what are, or what he believes ought to be, the current orthodoxies. In this way even the general public has been persuaded that it ought to believe that certain current modes, whether it likes them or not, have an authority and an inevitability which it would be improper to question. A consequence of this view in the field of architecture is expressed succinctly and characteristically by Pevsner when he writes of Marshall Sisson's substantial rebuilding of Okeover Hall in the 1950s that 'to add neo-Georgian to real Georgian' is an act the need for which 'one must be permitted to deny'.[6] But what can it mean to imply that it is 'real' for Lord Burlington to look back to Palladio but not for Sisson to look back to Vanbrugh? This denuding of the artist of all cultural resonances, of all possibility of a tradition of his own, derives from a historicist and *Zeitgeist*-inspired belief that human nature has changed radically, that a new man has been born who must either learn to express himself in a radically new way which is externally dictated by economic and political conditions, or must himself be changed radically in order to conform to these new conditions. But according to an older belief, human nature does not alter from generation to generation. Moreover, artists develop traditions which are capable of interpretation and development by other artists. It is these facts which make possible the survival and development of tradition in a culture, though the forms adopted will have different meanings for different people at different times, and possibly also at the same time since individuals may differ as much from other individuals living at the same time as they do from those living at other times.

What we have called the historicist and *Zeitgeist*-inspired

historian will tend to regard modern collectivist ideas as right; he will be ever anxious to deal wholesale with 'humanity', to label individuals as types, to identify them in classes, and to seek for total consistency throughout all fields of intellectual, social, and spiritual activity. He believes in a state which is antagonistic to all groupings which come between it and the individual and which will allow no real power or autonomy to any subordinate structures, ranging from the family to the corporation. He expects to find in the past the same total consistency with a single overriding principle or pattern which he thinks political organization is trying to establish in the present. But if we begin to concentrate our attention on the individual we will know from looking into ourselves that this supposed consistency with a dominant pattern, easy enough to believe in when we are concentrating on theoretically constructed types, simply does not exist in fact. Nevertheless, this direction of attention away from the individual and from the particular traditions of the various arts with which the individual artist interacts, has been a powerful influence on the assumptions which underly much twentieth-century art history. These assumptions echo in varying degrees Alois Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen* which implies that the will of the individual is powerless against the *telos* of art and that it is not the artist but art that 'wills'. Professor E.H. Gombrich has drawn attention to the history of this tradition in art-historical writings, but less notice has been taken of the history of architectural history.

The third of the three interpretations which we have identified is the rational or technological.† From at least the eighteenth century, French critics, whether proposing Classical, Gothic, or 'modern' architecture, have generally argued that it was or should be the natural outcome of a rational intellectual discipline applied to the solution of measurable practical or technological problems. The inadequacy of this view may be instanced by the vault of a Gothic church where the details may be rationally worked out in themselves but are essentially a means to an end which cannot be

† See E.R. de Zurko, *Origins of Functionalist Theory*, Columbia U.P., 1957.

rationally justified since the real roof to the church is the lead and timber roof visible from outside though not from inside. The kind of imaginative leap involved in the decision to have an elaborately ornamented stone vault at all cannot be ignored when we describe how Gothic buildings came into being or when we draw up a programme for a present-day architecture. The mechanistic interpretation of Gothic is particularly associated with Viollet-le-Duc who summarized it when he wrote: 'There are in architecture – if I may thus express myself – two indispensable modes in which truth must be adhered to. We must be true in respect of the programme, and true in respect of the constructive processes.'[7] Here is the beginning of what we might call the 'programme-worship' of modern architectural theorists who believe that the elaborate specifications which the modern client, often a public body, hands to architects and engineers in the form of a 'programme' will and should dictate their own architectural solution. Sir John Summerson, a particular admirer of Viollet-le-Duc, has generally maintained too sophisticated and independent a stand to ally himself to the cause of the crusade we shall be investigating in the present book. None the less, his published lecture of 1957, 'The Case for a Theory of Modern Architecture', was pre-occupied with the search for a 'source of unity' in twentieth-century architecture and proposed that 'the programme as the source of unity is, so far as I can see, the one new principle involved in modern architecture . . . It is part of my case for a theory of modern architecture that it is the source.'[8]†

Significantly, the inadequacy of this view was exposed by a historian, Reyner Banham, and by an architect, Peter Smithson, in the discussion which followed Summerson's lecture. Banham pointed out that

† Summerson subsequently withdrew from this position and wrote of his R.I.B.A. lecture of 1957: 'I had to give the paper – I had committed myself and it was duly printed, but that was the moment at which I stopped being an architectural propagandist and, indeed, an architectural critic at all'. (*Architectural Association Journal*, lxxv, Feb. 1960, p. 151.)

> when Gropius was thinking about the Bauhaus teaching programme he thought of it in terms of neat rectangular rooms or drew rectangles and circles connected by long straight lines, like the circulation diagram of a Hertfordshire school. Once you started to think about the programme of the building you were committed to a set of symbolic forms.

Smithson put the same fundamental point in a more general way:

> To say that you can evolve a form from a social programme or from an analysis of the situation in terms of flow and so on is meaningless, because analysis without the formal content, the architect's particular specialisation, has one factor missing from it.

The comments of Banham and Smithson go some way to demolishing what we have called the morally insinuating and widely disseminated argument that modern architecture exercises some special unassailable claim over us since it is not a 'style' which we are free to like or dislike as we choose, but is the expression of some unchallengeable 'need' or requirement inherent in the twentieth century with which we must conform. This frequently repeated argument is wholly arbitrary: those who propose it construct first of all a picture of twentieth-century society to which they then impute 'needs' and as a result demand that architecture must conform with those needs. The technique is succinctly expressed in Pevsner's threatening assertion that 'unless a further levelling of social differences takes place in this country, no steady development towards the aims of the Modern Movement is possible.'[9] But the 'needs', of course, are the invention of the critics who speak of them. They are needs only in so far as they are needed to realize the beliefs associated with a particular political or social programme which could only be imposed by a party but which may by no means be widely shared. Even if they were widely shared they would have no necessary moral standing and certainly no proper authority over art and architecture. This technological, mechanistic, and political approach has affinities with the two approaches we

have already defined: those of morality and of the spirit of the age. In this third approach we are again faced with the imposition of a criterion external to architectural style itself. In this case it is an arbitrarily chosen technological, political, or social 'necessity'.

Programme-worship and the technological approach have recently gained new support from those whose approach to architecture cannot but suggest that the forms of architecture can be generated by mathematical modelling and the use of the computer. The implication here is that all human desires can be discerned by statistical, sociological, and psychological surveys and can be expressed numerically so that, as one modern critic has put it, 'architecture is the system of controls on which the arrangement of the urban scene is based'.[10] The inadequacy of this as an explanation of the forms of modern architecture can easily be shown in a building which, ironically, is elevated to key status in Reyner Banham's *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, 1969. This is the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast of 1903, a neglected pioneer in the introduction of air-conditioning. But the point we should note is that the sophisticated system of air conditioning was conceived as part of a building designed in a wholly traditional Victorian style. In other words, the presence of advanced technology need not determine the form of the building which contains it. The architect can certainly decide that he wants his building to look like a building that contains advanced technology, but that is an aesthetic decision which we should be free to accept or reject as we wish. None the less, the old views die hard. Sir Leslie Martin was still able to argue, in a paper called 'Architects' approach to Architecture' published in the *R.I.B.A. Journal* in 1967, that modern architecture rested 'on an important shift of attention and process' that took place in the 1920s and 1930s and from which 'three powerful lines of thought appeared'. These he defined as follows:

> The first came from the passionately held belief that there had to be some kind of complete and systematic re-examination of human needs and that, as a result of this, not only the form of buildings, but

> the total environment would be changed. The second line of thought, interlocking with this, was simply that change in the form of buildings, or environment, would only be achieved completely through the full use of modern technology. These two ideas produced a third, which was that each architectural problem should be constantly reassessed and thought out afresh.[11]

The so-called 'human needs' are defined arbitrarily, arrogantly, and with a complete disregard for the importance of tradition as a guide to the architect. The article was accompanied by illustrations depicting the realization of these principles in the form of Martin's scheme for the 'development' of Whitehall, first published in 1965 as *Whitehall: a Plan for a National and Government Centre*. These proposals, which were subsequently dropped by a Labour government, involved the elimination of numerous buildings of interest throughout a vast area both in and near Whitehall from the smallest shop to the largest public building. The large-scale destruction, socially and architecturally, of a historic environment in favour of the creation of a 'national centre', illustrates clearly the dangers attendant upon the assumption by architects that they have some special social mission allegedly based on a 'complete and systematic re-examination of human needs' so as to 'change the total environment'. However, Martin attached so much significance to the principles of the Whitehall scheme that he set up a research group at the Cambridge School of Architecture where they could be developed and extended. This was known, significantly, as the 'Centre for Land Use and Built Form Studies', a title which indicated clearly enough a belief that architecture as an art involving taste, imagination, and scholarship should finally be abolished and replaced by a scientifically plotted Utopia in which tamed collectivist man with all his wants defined by technology and gratified by computerized planning would contentedly take his apportioned place as in some gigantic rationalistically constructed beehive.†

† For a fuller account of the work of this 'Centre', see R. Scruton, 'The Architecture of Stalinism', *Cambridge Review*, vol. xcix, 16 Nov. 1976, pp. 36–41.

What is ignored in most of the interpretations we have so far outlined is that architecture is an art with its own traditions, and not a science, so that its concern with image-making[12] is at least no less vital than its solution of practical problems. Thus, as Mark Girouard put it, modern architecture 'has failed almost completely, for instance, to produce images of enjoyment or entertainment, or images of domesticity with which any large number of people can identify'.[13] Moreover, ideas on what is or is not practical and convenient vary so much from one individual, country, and time to another that an architecture devised solely as a 'communal service' based on the fulfilment of 'practical requirements' defined by architectural and academic doctrinaires, might ultimately be found more unpractical than one which gave stress to other considerations. An analogy with costume, an important subject largely neglected by art historians, may be helpful here. Like architecture, costume might be supposed by some to fulfil a basically practical role, yet, like the architect, the costume designer must create an image with which the public wishes to identify and it is perhaps surprising how little the public is concerned with what planners would deem practical. An unhappy example of this in costume would be the craze for 'platform shoes'; a happy example in architecture would be the Palladian villa in early eighteenth-century England which led Alexander Pope to comment wryly that modern patrons were 'Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door'.[14]

But since the mid-eighteenth century there has developed a conspiracy of silence about the truth contained in Pope's penetrating observation. Historians and theorists have ignored that, whatever else it may do, architecture cannot escape involvement with image-making. Instead, they have been searching 'for an ideological base which would remove architecture once and for all from the arena of Style and fashion',[15] a base from which they could propose ruthlessly rationalistic and collectivist solutions to 'the whole question of the relationship of the total environment to community need'.[16] Pevsner believed that the final solution of this question had been reached with the International Modern movement and that any deviation from it would be anti-social and immoral. This quasi-

religious commitment to a secular ideal acquires a particular emphasis in men who have abandoned formal religious belief themselves or who, like Pugin, have temporarily confused religion with architecture. Pugin argued that what he was defending was 'not a *style*, but a *principle*',[17] and that pathetic fallacy is echoed again and again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by men anxious to cling to some objectively existing truth in a godless world. Thus Ruskin wrote of the Renaissance that 'it is not the form of this architecture against which I would plead. . . . But it is the moral nature of it which is corrupt';[18] and even today Stirling, hero of the architectural *avant-garde*, can write of his student days at Liverpool School of Architecture in 1945–50: 'There was furious debate as to the validity of the modern movement, tempers were heated and discussion was intense. . . . At any rate I was left with a deep conviction of the moral rightness of the new architecture.'[19] The architect Marcel Breuer similarly claimed that 'to us clarity means the definite expression of the purpose of a building and the sincere expression of its structure. One can regard this sincerity as a sort of moral duty . . .'[20]

For Lethaby, as earlier for Viollet-le-Duc, the Gothic cathedral 'was not designed as beauty, it was developed along a line of experiment as surely as the great ocean liners were developed';[21] indeed, in his view 'a noble architecture is not a thing of will, of design, of scholarship'.[22] This particular torch was kept burning by Le Corbusier and handed on to Giedion who also asserts – indeed rather suspiciously over-asserts – the belief that 'there is a word we should refrain from using to describe contemporary architecture – "style". The moment we fence architecture within a notion of "style" we open the door to a formalistic approach. The contemporary movement is not a style . . .'[23] Finally, Pevsner stated the view in an extreme form when he attacked all European architecture from 1760 to 1860 on the grounds that like Art Nouveau it consisted merely of surface fashion, and that because 'it is based on individual inventiveness, a genuine universal style could not therefore spring from it.'[24] One of the developments we shall be tracing in the following pages is the consequence of the belief that modern

man should build a new collectivistic society based on a universally accepted moral and social consensus in which architecture would be an unassailably 'genuine' and 'universal' truth no longer marred by the 'individual' and 'inventive' traits of the old world in which individual taste and imagination were regarded as important.