INTERIORS

MARCH 1983

"ORNAMENTALISM IN ARCHITECTURE"

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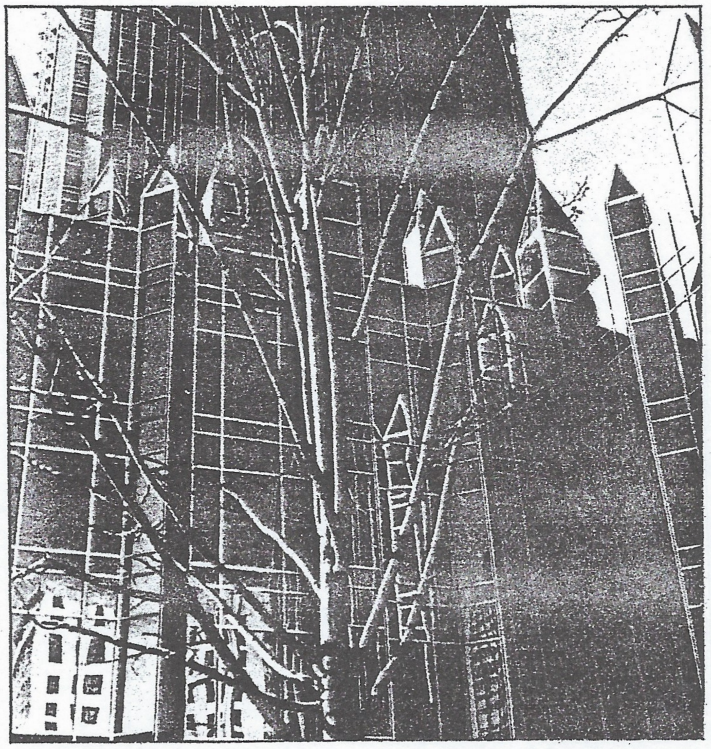
Neo-Classical Post-Modernism is pushing architects and designers to reconsider the organic sensibilities of Gothicism in which ornamental embellishment derives more from the natural environment than industrial or classical motifs. By Kent Bloomer.

Several years ago speculations about a late twentieth century Gothic Revival seemed, when occasionally uttered, like the eccentric stuff of art-fiction. But today, in the midst of an extraordinary burst of Neo-Classicism, discussion of Neo-Gothicism is not only serious but able to make positive reference to current projects. Indeed, the original Revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began as a challenge to classical architecture, a challenge not only to the principal rules governing traditions in Graeco-Italian design, but to the very belief in European classical authority, i.e. that modern culture is the absolute lineal descendant of an earlier civilization which had already achieved the highest and most seminal forms of art.

Actually, the Gothic Revival in England and the United States sought to liberate architecture from a stale antiquity by conducting a bold series of experiments in designing buildings suitable to a new industrialized and individualized age. The Gothic-Victorian architecture spawned by that Revival was ultimately to claim a greater "honesty" in engineering and construction, more flexibility in plan, and a truer semblance of the structure of earthly nature, in sharp contrast to the classicist's preoccupation with the abstract ideals of geometry.

Why then did the nineteenth century theorists call such a movement a "Gothic Revival," words which rather precisely infer a return to the darkness of medieval times? Pugin and Ruskin, perhaps the most powerful spiritual leaders of the movement, both perceived the middle ages as producing an authentic art of building which preceded a decline into false methods. For Pugin, medieval stone and woodwork revealed the most direct and functional use of materials, while for Ruskin, much of the beauty in the antique stones was traceable to the hand of joyous craftsmen whose feelings remained expressed in the ornament. For both critics the factories of the industrial revolution were producing an artless inventory of repeated and regulated shapes applicable, perhaps, to the "geometries" of architecture, but not to a more natural beauty demanded by the sensibilities of modern life.



Above: Nearing completion in Market Square, Pittsburgh, PPG Place, is a towering gesture to Gothicity and appropriate response to the Victorian and industrial spirit of the capital.

But how could that reaction to industrialization succeed in developing that peculiar character of the Gothic Revival architecture which chose to express, indeed dramatize, the bold structural shapes of engineering in glass and iron? Why was it that the industrial centers of Manchester, England and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, became the most "Gothic" of nineteenth century cities? The apparent paradox may be resolved by emphasizing the importance that the revivalists gave to the forces of nature. Both Pugin and Ruskin demanded a more natural or less artificial design of buildings, and "nature" for the nineteenth century intellectual was becoming less mysterious. While man was responsible for the creation of nature, he was discovering ways to control the natural environment. He harnessed and regulated enough energy to produce the steam engine and by mid-century he could rigorously comment on, and consider the possibility of manipulating, the biological evolution of the species. Indeed, this new vision of nature's workings imagined a world which was rather organic and made up of distinct and wonderful parts, all interacting in a cacophany of nearly asymmetric motion. Thus a naturally organized building was to be more organic-qua-machine-like (in respect to nineteenth century imagery) while the more classically organized building was thought to be static and somewhat lifeless.

If we postulate that the Gothic Revival sought an architecture that was a natural (organic) expression of building then we can proceed to review the two major directions that Gothicism pursued. Pugin's concern for "honest" construction and function led to a model of planning in which the spatial functions were expressed as separate interacting entities such as tower, chimney, entrance portico, sleeping quarters, chapel, etc., to be assembled in an organic composition of succinct volumes. Like the plants, trees, rocks, and lakes in a natural landscape, different functions in a buildingscape were to express their individual spatial forms

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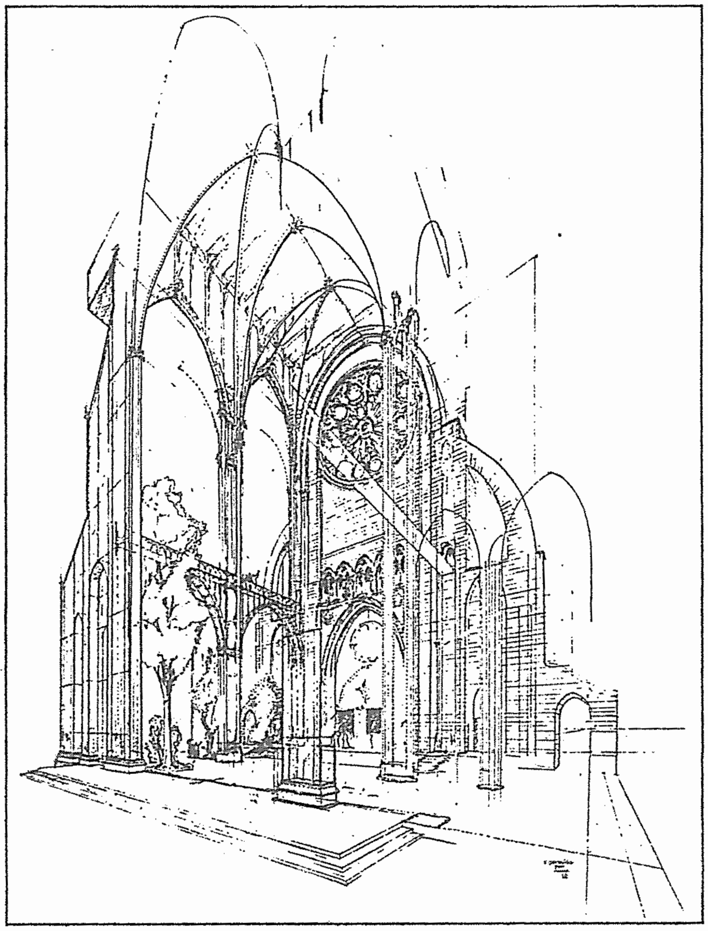
rather than being regulated and absorbed by a unifying geometric concept. This direction tended to prescribe an architecture that was complex, picturesque, and composed from a rambling kit-of-parts.

The battle of styles and concepts of technology that spawned the modern movement, in extreme the natural versus the geometric, is forcing a debate rather than a positive succession into Neo-Classicism. Gothic ornamentalism emerges as a serious and positive alternative in current projects.



Above: Contemporary transformation of the Gothic Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York incorporates a bioshelter to teach the imperatives of nature as ornament.

The other direction was articulated by John Ruskin for whom the Gothic Revival had more of a social-qua-artistic purpose. Ruskin required that architecture express cultural values external to its technological and spatial functions. In the *Seven Lamps of Architecture* he cited Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory, and Obedience as the properties which distinguish architecture from mere building, and for which (according to one of his Lamps) we must make sacrifices to achieve. For example, in the Lamp of Memory, he describes the potential of a building to become "memorial," i.e. to record important events preceding and belonging to a specific location. He cautioned against the vanity of a man who might "build for the little revolution of his own life only," and suggested that architecture, through its ornament, could acknowledge both the natural landscape and the human history to which it was bound for the sake of "futurity."

Yet he did not condone a thoughtless imitation of an earlier architecture. While details from the past could be imitated with "vitality" and "audacity," new expressions should pay attention to the true nature of materials at hand and could be modified by the creativity of the craftsman. Indeed, in *The Stones of Venice*, he defined Gothic as "changing" and "savage" and thus altogether without the rules that a more doctrinaire style might prescribe. The rules governing Ruskin's Gothic Revival centered on the need for an intensely meaningful and natural ornament preferably located in an economic, legible and somewhat classical plan.

The principles that governed the Gothic Revival did not vanish completely from the mainstream of twentieth century architecture. It was more a matter of their becoming sterilized almost to the point of non-recognition. Pugin's concern with structural expression and the identification of spatial functions anticipated the technological exhibitionism and laundry-list programming of recent times. Unfortunately, the laundry-list was to become utilized more as a vehicle for the practical zoning of interiors rather than the architectural dramatization of the zoned parts; hence a major entrance might be merely a door (not a place), and a staircase a zone of vertical circulation (not a stage for the rites-of-ascent).

Ruskin's fate was equally catastrophic. His appeal for human expression and figurative ornament in architecture anticipated the arts-and-crafts movement which in turn indirectly fostered the machine-esthetic of the Bauhaus in which the craftsman (who was given the status of "designer") was educated to prepare elegent prototypes for mass production. Moreover, if Ruskin appeared today he would most likely be appalled at the current polemic between the modern artist, architect, and worker-craftsman all of whom seem bent on maintaining their own specialized worlds. The Gothic ideal demanded a dependence between art and architecture in light of a shared vision of nature.

GOTHIC EXAMPLES

The interior of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History is the masterpiece of Ruskinian Gothic, designed by Deane and Woodward in 1855 and profoundly influenced by Ruskin's writings and his participation in decisions governing the design of the Museum. Here the Gothic Revival is seen as a secular expression (rather than ecclesiological), as a demonstration of modern technology (rather than antiquity) and as extremely original architecture. The architects had seen the Crystal Palace by Paxton, begun five years earlier, and were evidently unimpressed by its radical, repetitive, and empty shapes. The narrative purpose of the Oxford Commission was, in the words of Dr. Henry Acland, the principal commissioner, "to give the learner a general view of the planet on which he lives, its constituent parts, and of the relations which it occupies as a world among worlds," and thus they saw an architecture metaphoric of a rich, temporal, and sensual life.

Each column in the upper corridor surrounding the courtyard identifies a particular stone and district in England from which it was quarried, metal sculptures of native swamp herbs sprout from the capitals, and boughs of chestnut foliate the branching arches above, literalizing the notion that this gothic structure is an echo of the forest. Like the medieval cathedral, the museum's architecture is a material textbook, an instructional place and an architecture of learning; although unlike the cathedral it is neither liturgic nor political.

Nearing completion in Pittsburgh's Market Square is Philip Johnson's PPG Place, a towering gesture to Gothicity, and an altogether appropriate response to the Victorian and industrial spirit of the city at the confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers. Basically

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a modern skyscraper situated within a cluster of new buildings, plaza, and wintergarden, PPG Place revives a medieval silhouette featuring a tower with four corner turrets, buttressed walls with pyramidal caps, and an entrance arcade of four rather geometric painted portals. Picturesque and refined, it carries on the technological spirit of the nineteenth century revival by utilizing the advances of glass curtain-wall construction and pushing them to the ultimate, structurally and metaphorically.

Contextually the turrets and pyramidal caps echo the tower of the nearby Allegheny County courthouse by H.H. Richardson, an American architect particularly admired by international scholars of the Gothic Revival. However, unlike the courthouse, where magnificent stone lions protect the entrance facade, there is no evidence, as yet, that figurative ornament or foliation are planned as part of this architecture.

BIOSHELTER FOR A CATHEDRAL

David Sellers, architect for the René Dubos Memorial Bioshelter in the south transcept of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, may contribute more to the original spirit of Gothic Revival than Ralph Adams Cram's design for the main body of the Cathedral. Cram's scheme, magnificent in the interior, nevertheless represents an end-of-the century loss of nerve and a reversion to a literal replay of medieval building in which the structure was fabricated exclusively from stone. Deviation from antiquity had to be taken in very respectful steps by the orthodox medievalist in marked contrast to Seller's approach which requires that the new transcept must, in all urgency, belong to our own age, and furthermore be able to teach the imperatives of nature as we comprehend them today.

Sellers and his associates begin with the assumption that man's connection with the earth is becoming more distant, a tendency equivalent to departing from life: and thus Acland's words "to give the learner a general view of the planet . . . as a world among worlds . . ." are reissued by the proposal that the transcept be a teaching bio-shelter, metaphoric of the natural world, yet rendered in the distinct language of architecture both *past, present*, and *future*!

That distinct language includes the visual rendition of the medieval Gothic vault, not only in respect to the existing building, but also because a Gothic hall is a powerful metaphor of a grove of trees. Indeed Gothic piers are particularly suited to the efflorescence of capitals; and the pointed arch, as Ruskin argued in the Lamp of Beauty, reflects the familiar form of a leaf.

A stone gateway and Rose window link the transcept to the crossing, and cast iron piers and enameled steel vaults function to support walkways, platforms, ornament, and mechanical systems. An outer perimeter of glass shelters the colony of plants, animals, water, art, and people from wind and rain, and establishes the room for the performance and instruction of the bio-shelter and transcept.

Even in the nineteenth century, Gothicism failed to displace Classicism. "Honesty" of structure and narrative ornament is expensive, and a complex storyline can be mysterious and demanding. An architecture-of-learning is not necessarily comfortable and may not deliver the precise orientation, the ease, of a geometrically explicit design.

THE DEBATE OF TWO STYLES

However, considering the last several thousand years of architectural history, Gothicism is a relative newcomer among architectural traditions. The magnificent Classicism of Greece and Italy had a considerable head start and has acquired an air of assurance, indeed authority. Nevertheless, it is becoming clear that the debate between Classicism and Gothicism is not over or the new Classical revival would not be so self-consciously labeled. The battle of styles and concepts of technology that spawned the modern movement in architecture, at least in England and North America, revolved around formal issues inherent to both revivals (in extreme, the natural versus the geometric) and we can see in the New Classicism one force in the reappearance of that debate rather than a positive succession to the modern movement.