

The First Moderns. The Architects of the Eighteenth Century. By Joseph Rykwert. 585pp. + many ills. (M.I.T. Press), £27.50

To prevent any misleading expectations: Professor Joseph Rykwert's new book on the architects of the eighteenth century, titled 'the first moderns', is not another hand-book on the architectural history of the period, nor an encyclopaedic dictionary about the great men involved, nor a panoramic view of revolutionary theories and aesthetics. It is all of these and much more (*wissenschaftsgeschichtlich*).

This enormously learned study aims at a complex interpretation of the 'modern phenomenon' in eighteenth century architecture – revealed in the subtle shift from 'classic' to 'neoclassic' – by considering aspects of its philosophical, scientific and, to a lesser degree, its socio-historical background. Architecture is seen as the final result not only of changing abstract ideals but of various, often contradictory, tendencies and processes in cultural, ecclesiastical and general politics.

Rykwert's methodological approach (which for the readers' sake should have been explicitly defined by some introductory notes) is, as a sociologist might say, the 'definition of the situation' at crucial points of architectural history from Perrault to Soufflot, stopping short of the revolutionary and romantic classicism in the last decades of the century. His rich *tour d'horizon*, turning from France to England and Italy and back again, at once summarises and focuses on the re-examination of buildings, artists and theories in a wide context.

The author starts his investigation with the discussion of the new rationalising cartesian attitude towards the classical heritage in seventeenth-century France, that finally led to the rejection of Bernini's scheme for the Louvre, the establishment of the Academy of Architecture and the long-lasting quarrel between the 'ancients' and the 'moderns'. Perrault, in the *Ordonnance* added to his edition of Vitruvius [1674], departed from classical theory by his definition of an 'arbitrary beauty' that included an empiric, rational system of proportioning for the orders, derived from the best examples of the past.

Against all attempts to rescue Vitruvian authority by postulating a divine origin of the orders (from Villalpando's reconstruction of Solomon's Temple to the cosmology of the freemasons), Perrault and his adherents denied the unity of the noble senses, of musical and visual harmony, that hitherto had been the guarantee of the artifact's participation in universal order. Freeing architecture from that traditional nexus he could open up new modes for the Court Style, an architecture supposed at once to excel antiquity and to be national in intention.

Those new criteria of an 'arbitrary beauty' that were to penetrate the Vitruvian system are examined in the following chapters on the 'Marvellous and the

Distant' (starting with chinoiserie and culminating in the citation of Sedlmayr's brilliant analysis of Fischer von Erlach's Karlskirche, Vienna) and 'The Pleasures of Freedom', sketching briefly the growing licentiousness of the *style rocaille* up to Meissonier, who, in his project for St Sulpice, was ultimately outdone by Servandoni's sober neoclassical scheme.

In a central chapter on the English scene from Jones to the Adams ('Initiates to Amateurs'), Rykwert retells the story of English Palladianism in a new light. He analyses how the traditional concept of craftsmanship and the neo-platonic speculations of the philosophers, the mechanical and ideal aspects of architecture, united to form a new understanding of the architect's profession analogous to the 'Great Architect of the Universe.' Under the patronage of the Stuarts this vision materialised in Jones's work. After the dissolving of the Stuart court in the Civil war, the lodges of the freemasons, by including 'accepted' gentlemen, would become the secret fora for social and architectural reform. Here the secrets of the 'Royal Art', the eirenic and utopian impetus of the 'Rosicrucian enlightenment' (as Frances Yates put it) and traditional Vitruvian theory were amalgamated in the symbolic and metaphoric use of builders' instruments and terminology.

The establishment of purely speculative freemasonry in the Grand Lodge (1717) roughly coincides with the neo-Palladian movement and the spectacular dismissal of Wren, the French-biased court-architect. Many of the important promoters of Palladianism seem to have been freemasons, William Stukeley and Sir Andrew Fountaine, the Earls of Pembroke and, one might add, Burlington, Leicester and other members of the aristocracy – most of them important patrons and dilettante architects as well. Their common belief in the universal harmony of nature (and society) was fostered by Shaftesbury's humanistic and Newton's scientific deism. Especially 'Newtonism' in its inductive 'objectivity' was to become influential on the more liberal and egalitarian political concepts of the enlightenment.

Still, the historical position of this classicism remains ambiguous: Was it part of the great 'Instauration' and therefore the expression of an undoubted continuity from Vitruvius to Palladio, Jones and Burlington, as its own propaganda claimed; or was it here that the ancients first became 'moderns' through the consciousness with which they frankly copied and exhibited the copies of admired models (as for instance Palladio's Rotonda) in the new informal setting of their landscape gardens, thus distancing classical authority for the sake of new, associative values? Although Rykwert includes an excursus on gardens because of their 'inordinately important part' in the architectural theory of the time, he is not decisive about the calculated feedback of the landscape garden to architecture.

The new associational quality of decorum, however, is proved both in Morris's preference for a rationalistic cube-composition that reduced the orders to surface 'dress and garnish', and Batty Langley's attempt to incorporate 'gothick' as a national idiom into the sacred Vitruvian canon. Association in the landscape garden, which in itself should be regarded as a symbol of the new order (not only in its Newtonian conception of space), worked by an interpretation of history that was exemplary and moralising.

The scientific attitude towards the past established by Giambattista Vico (1725), provided the background for the development in Italy, the proper province of emerging neo-classical architecture. Rykwert comments on the interdependence of the new accuracy in archaeological inquiry ('Pleasure and Precision') and the rigorism and functionalism of Vico's adherent, Carlo Lodoli and his circle ('Neoclassical Architecture'); he examines Lodolian influences in Piranesi's work and traces the latter's connections with Winckelmann, with the English connoisseurs and the *pensionnaires* of the French Academy ('Ephemeral Splendors'), thus leading back to France, the revival of Perrault's grand manner and the neoclassical synthesis of Soufflot's Ste Geneviève ('Truth stripped naked by Philosophy').

Rykwert's book (to quote the cover) is a book 'that cannot be summarised' without distorting the author's intentions. It has to be read again and again – and surprisingly, despite the overwhelming complexity of detail and implication, the author successfully captivates the reader's attention by his lecture-like, narrative style. The uncovering of the network of personal and mental connections, of the hidden (often masonic) channels between the centres of neoclassical activity – besides everything else – becomes a thrilling experience to the reader.

The First Moderns is an enterprise probably too unconventional and too complex to escape contradiction in some respect but it will certainly be acknowledged and appreciated as the counterpart, complement and extension of Emil Kaufmann's *Architecture in the Age of Reason*, opening a stimulating historical perspective and a new understanding of the pre-revolutionary revolution in architecture.

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