

ALLAN GREENBERG: A RETURN TO THE CLASSICAL TRADITION?

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August 1993*

South African-born Allan Greenberg, practicing architecture out of Washington, DC in the United States, is one of the most controversial practitioners anywhere. His followers perceive him as impressive intellectual force within the latter development of the Modern Movement, while his many detractors condemn him as an irrelevant practitioner who caters only to the privileged few. Greenberg architectural values, they claim, are imbedded in older world, most specifically in Classicism and neo-Classicism. His condemnation of the Modern Movement is justifiable to a large degree, but his architecture, which he considers as a counterpoint to orthodox Modernisms, is questionable, at best. His erudition is impressive and his idealism equal to none, but to his critics, his practice is incongruous and unsustainable in the modern democratic world of today.

For a mounting number of critics of Modernism, Greenberg being one of the more vocal one, the Movement is perceived as a tragic failure, a disastrous and unfulfilled undertaking. The view is that the premise of the Movement has contributed significantly to the demise of the older existing order that was more inclusive, less brutal and more accommodating to growth and change. The fundamental foundation for this failure has been its heroic but misplaced conviction that the New Architecture should bear no allegiance to the past. In its revolutionary zeal, Modernism rejected a three-thousand-year tradition.

The recent spate of "micro-movements" such as Post-Modernism, Deconstructionism, Neo-Rationalism, and Neo-Modernism, etc. were primarily subliminal expression of the deep frustration with twentieth century architecture. These various "isms" were short-lived mainly on account of their reactive rather than generative nature. Their intellectual superficiality, their single-minded concern with imagery, and their evasion of social issues hastened their demise. Standing ideologically apart from these various movements, but sharing in their opposition to Modernism, are some noteworthy architects in Europe and America who consciously attempt to reconnect architecture to its roots, to its true culture, and to its political role. Included in this roster of critics and practitioners are Leo and Rob Krier, Maurice Culot, Quinlan Terry, Colin Rowe, Robert Venturi, and Allan Greenberg. All are articulate advocates for the repudiation doctrine of Modern Architecture and condemn Modernism's iconoclastic view, and strives to make architecture an integral part of the historical continuum.

Greenberg is committed to make contemporary architecture once again heir its long intellectual and artistic tradition. As a proselytizer and as a practising architect, Greenberg is unique in America. No other architect has practised and spoken as he does about the need of returning to the Classical tradition, which is a means, he believes, to give architecture its due significance.

The seriousness of his architecture makes him a singularly potent and compelling force. At first glance, Greenberg's architecture reads as one of "correct" Classicism, limited to the practice of proper language and syntax and, servile to well-established academic rules. His work is interpretive to a degree, inventive, critical, and at ease with modern programmatic exigencies.

Greenberg's architecture is often compared to that of the British architect Quinlan Terry, but it would be more fitting to compare him to Edwin Lutyens. Both Terry and Lutyens were undeniably Classicists, but the comparison should end there. Terry's work is reconstitutive rather than critical and his buildings are a recitation in historicity. Lutyens on the other hand was an ingenious and talented manipulator of compositional design rules and produced a body of architecture that was original and of its time. Le Corbusier considered Lutyens the most inventive and important British architect.

Four private residences by Greenberg, the Landman Residence, the Sender residence, the Atlantic Seaboard Beach House, and the Cohen Residence, all built between 1990 and 1994, are most explicitly American in that they continue two great American architectural traditions: the Classical and the Vernacular. Classicism, as an expression and a celebration of the highest human values and the vernacular as an architectural idiom innocent of archaeology and codified rules but developed using forms and methods learned by tradition. Greenberg's residences are ambiguous and complex. Their architectural language is Classical, and their formal composition is governed by a sense of order and unity according to a rigorously organized hierarchy of figured habitable rooms. Yet, they reveal a modern, Lutyen-esque preoccupation with plan and program which leads to a manipulation and a transformation of the basic formal order. They are at once an intricate and comfortable blend of the scholarly and the vernacular traditions in American domestic architecture. They combine the formal with the picturesque. They speak of traditional values but attempt to respond to twentieth century living.

To Greenberg, Classicism is not a style but a conceptual and aesthetic "absolute" which transcends time and place. Its meaning grows out of its anthropomorphism, which he defines as "the quality by which buildings embody human attributes". It enables a work of architecture to be related back to human beings, through the manipulation of scale, order, iconography, and symbolic content. Greenberg's architecture is primarily significant for this consistent humanistic concern and its reinterpreted use of the classical language. Classicism is the means, not the end.

His most important realized project to date has been the U.S. State Department offices and reception rooms, which include the suites of offices for the Secretary of State, for the Deputy Secretary of State and the Treaty Ceremony Rooms (1985-89). The Secretary's offices are one of the epicentres of power in the world as well as an emblem of the Government of the USA. As a work of architecture, the project is exceptional, not only because of the extraordinary refinement of design and execution, but because of the ideas and ideals that are embodied in it. Greenberg's preoccupation, aside from those of language and syntax, is of symbolic content, which he explains as "the articulation of meaning and significance projected by architectural forms through their language, syntax and relation to their context". The offices are a celebration of order,

dignity,

Greenberg's buildings, no matter how new or how programmatically demanding, are endowed with a comfortable sense of familiarity because they are always well fitted in their context and establish a proper hierarchical relationship with their neighbours. These qualities, rare today, are best illustrated in the News Building in Athens, Ga. (1992), the Bergdorf Goodman store facade in New York (1983) and the Pater Noster Office Buildings proposal in London, UK (1991). Even though these buildings are understandably forceful and rich, they are ultimately modest and comfortable.

It is regrettable that several his important proposals, amongst them the Holocaust Memorial for New York City (1978-84), the Federal Triangle Competition (1989), the Darden Business School at the University of Virginia (1991) and the Pater-Noster Office Buildings in London, U.K. (1991) were never realized. Each of these projects constitutes a Classicist manifesto, equally important for its intellectual content as for the quality of the design and for its polemical stand.

Allan Greenberg's most personal and moving project is undoubtedly his proposal for a Memorial to the Martyrs of the Holocaust. Clearly inspired from Lutyens's Cenotaph architecture, it is a powerfully modern monument insofar as it expands the boundaries of Classicism beyond its traditional use. It is at once a modern and an ageless work of architecture. It is the epitome of Greenberg's tenets: that architecture must have its roots deeply set in the well-defined system of values and aesthetic tradition that define Western man, while being able to speak of its time. Despite Greenberg's intimate relationship to the issue of the Holocaust and the design of the Memorial, he totally avoids inappropriate self-expressionistic reflexes.

The Memorial is a gigantic quadrifons, a bi-axial arch, not unlike the cenotaph at Etaples in France designed by Lutyens. The quadrifons supports a ten-faceted truncated cone, a form often used in Neo-Classic funerary architecture. The Ten Commandments are inscribed on the facets of the cone. On three string courses wrapped around each of the four pillars, are carved the number of victims lost in each of the death camps. Two of the keystones are shaped like Torah scrolls. Greenberg's reductivist classicism intensifies the Memorial's sense of permanence and agelessness. And thus, the architecture becomes the fitting foil against which one appreciates the fragility of human life and the magnitude and the horror of the event.

Independently of the tectonics and the language of his buildings, there is a lesson to be learned from the architecture of Allan Greenberg: architecture must be a celebration of the highest human values and must concern itself with the well-being of its occupants; architecture must be understood as a public art in which every building owes an allegiance to the city, to its context and to the past. No building can be an island unto itself; all buildings should be heirs to a long tradition, from which they get their intellectual and artistic sustenance, and without which their meaning is impoverished.

The brutality and banality of the modern environment is to a great extent, the inevitable result of this impoverishment.

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