

What makes a good building?

S. Cantacuzino/The Royal Fine Art Commission [1994]

Buildings in depth

If the appreciation of architecture is largely a matter for the eye, the practice of architecture is grounded in reality – social, economic and physical. A building to be successful must not only be pleasing to the eye but withstand the forces of nature and fulfil its purpose. Architecture, therefore, is far from being a pure art which can be judged in terms of aesthetics only – of composition, balance, scale, proportion, rhythm silhouette texture, contrast, etc. That architecture was a far more complex and contradictory art than, say, sculpture, was recognised by Vitruvius when he said that all building must possess the qualities of *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas*,¹ later translated into “commodity, firmness and delight”,² of which only the last is concerned with pure aesthetics.

It follows that we cannot make a fair judgement of a building without knowing a good deal more about the building than the appearance from outside. We must distinguish, for example, between building types. What makes a good power station does not necessarily make a good office building. Judging the merits of a design requires knowledge of the building’s function, of the way the building responds to specific needs like energy efficiency, of the way the building is constructed and the materials with which it is built and of the way it fits into the overall plan of the area. Design, as the Royal Fine Art Commission pointed out long ago, covers the plan and form of the building as well as the elevational treatment of the façade.³ A building therefore is a totality. It is much more than its external look. Its façade must not only address the street or

square in front of it but also bear some relation to the plan and section which lie behind it.

To speak of misrepresentation, deceit or falsification is not a moral judgement. Both functional and structural misrepresentation are common in architecture and may be justified by the result. At Trinity College library and Emmanuel College Chapel, both in Cambridge and by Sir Christopher Wren, the external appearance misrepresents the internal arrangement, but does this with the clear purpose of presenting an harmonious façade to the courtyard in which each building stands. Structural misrepresentation is even more common: of historical structural forms only the Gothic pointed arch is self-supporting. Unlike the round arch of Roman, Byzantine and Renaissance architecture, it does not have to be embedded, as Coventry Patmore noted, “in heavy masses of wall in order to make it constructively good and artistically beautiful”.⁴

Palladio’s churches in Venice are a good example of façades which express the plan and section of the building. Palladio took the traditional church plan of a central nave flanked by two aisles and expressed in section by lean-to roofs over the aisles butting into the nave walls which rise to carry a higher pitched roof over the nave. The principal space of the tall nave and the subsidiary lower spaces of the aisles are expressed on the west fronts of these churches by a major central temple-front flanked by two half temple-fronts. The interpenetration of the two temple-fronts produces an effect of great unity, reflecting the spatial unity and climax of the interior at the domed crossing and apsidal east end of the church. These west fronts, therefore, not only address the lagoon or the *campi* in