

just as Beauvais Cathedral collapsed when its late medieval builders pushed its nave too high. The failure will not come as a result of misunderstanding gravity, wind, or seismic forces. It will come as a result of the relentless competitive push to perfect one idea or aesthetic sensibility at the expense of all others. If catastrophic, such a failure could represent the same kind of culmination and gamble as Beauvais and would serve as a reminder to us about the dangers of single-minded architectural excess and the importance of balance.

Every life (or design) experience is not a growth experience, as some contemporary pundits would have it. Nor is life foolproof, fail-safe, or no-fault. Without wisdom and discipline, we make mistakes, some of which are irrevocable, even fatal. This is not to say there is no room in the classical view for optimism and growth. Classicism is not so much pessimistic about human nature and perfectibility as it is realistic. It acknowledges and tries to reconcile the conflicted, dualistic nature of the human condition, something with which contemporary American culture has trouble dealing. As the late humanist Allan Bloom pointed out: "The images cast helter-skelter on the wall of our cave ... present high and low, serious and frivolous, without distinction or concern for harmonizing contrary charms."¹

Limited space, limited form

There was a noticeable shift in the 1970s and 1980s from treating both architectural space and natural resources as unlimited and open-ended to treating them as finite and bounded. A sense of finitude was perhaps the one and only convergence of environmentalist, regionalist, and Postmodernist design—a happy and significant conjunction given the divergence and pluralism of contemporary architectural thought. The Modernist conception of architectural space—Cartesian, universal, and continuous—gave way during those two decades to a static and finite conception, which was sometimes also specific to site and region. This non-Modernist or Postmodernist (even anti-Modernist) conception was a more hierarchical and classical representation of the world. Despite its tectonic and social shortcomings, it was more than a knee-jerk reaction to Modernism and was based on a more realistic and balanced understanding of human and ecological forces. Balance and harmony may be values that are too bland for today's media, but they have been of vital importance to

Postmodernists, as well as environmentalists, Neo-Traditionalists, and New Urbanists.

During this same period, there was also a shift from treating architectural form and space as abstract and asymmetrical toward treating them as figural and symmetrical. Figural forms are finite by definition, and natural forms are often symmetrical. The residual space often left over around Modernist "object" buildings has been rejected in favor of background buildings that enclose positive outdoor space. This figure/ground reversal represents a profound paradigm shift in urban design—perhaps the most important overt formal difference between Modernism and what preceded and has followed it. The outdoor "rooms" of urban streets and squares have become more valued than freestanding buildings surrounded by either the empty windswept plazas around downtown office towers or the grass perimeters and parking lots of suburban office parks.

Background or collateral buildings gain their strength from the public space they define. They also get strength from figural composition and detailing of the facades rather than from the bold footprints, gymnastic sections, and minimalist elevations that often characterize Modernist buildings. The quintessential Modernist building was like a prismatic Modernist sculpture—a freestanding, abstract, minimalist object in unbounded universal space. The stand-alone building has given way to the infill building, where more design attention is lavished by the architect on the composition of facade than on the logic of the plan or the bravado of the section.

By opposing the two axes on which there have been these diametric shifts, a map is created on which the work of influential twentieth-century architects can be plotted. The contemporary celebrities have staked out extremist positions, which get media attention. The "Modern Masters" who have stood the test of time occupied a more balanced, centrist position. Le Corbusier, Mies, Aalto, and Louis Kahn seemed to be driven more by philosophical, social, technological, and formal ideas and values that were bigger than themselves. Or so it seems after the passage of time, which has exalted their position in history but also covered up or at least dimmed some of their architectural sins.

No one working today in any architectural mode—whether it be Postmodernist, Regionalist, New Urbanist, Deconstructivist, or Neo-Modernist—seems to have yet achieved a comparable maturity, mastery, and wholeness, with the possible exception of some high-tech firms. Today's stars seem mainly interested in aesthetic ideas and formal expression, as well as