

Towards a Radical Eclecticism

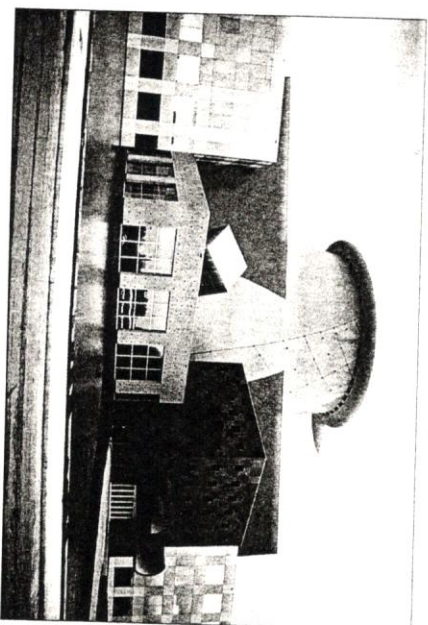
This essay was included in the catalogue of the First International Exhibition of Architecture held at the 1980 Venice Biennale, entitled *The Presence of the Past*. The exhibition, organised by Paolo Portoghesi, was one of the defining events of the Post-Modern movement. In the same way that the International Style exhibition of 1932 at the New York Museum of Modern Art helped crystallise the different strands of Modernism into a recognised style, *The Presence of the Past* focused the concerns of Post-Modernism for a wider audience.

What is Architecture to be About?

This is the question facing architects in a consumer society. The basic problems are social, political and metaphysical, not formal and technical. Our society is quite adept at reaching formal and technical standards of excellence, at least in Japan and America, but it has not brought forth either very exciting building tasks or metaphysical mandates. Hence the Surrealist fantasies (Bofill, OMA, Koolhaas), trying to fill a vacuum; hence the syndicalist utopias or modest attempts at participation (the Kriers, Eskine, Krohl); hence the great American attempt at revivalism and significant cultural form. All these Post-Modern tendencies are trying to give birth to a new architecture before consumer society has given it a mandate: it is the sound, as the saying goes, of one hand clapping. It may be, however, the only sound a consumer society is willing to allow, immersed as it is in the joys of private life. This culture is essentially passive, waiting for the directions from its self-appointed elites. What messages it receives today are extraordinary in their plurality and breadth. To discriminate among these messages, as well as send them, has also fallen to an elite, that is the 'communications industry'. So we are at a most curious juncture in history that isn't in fact a turning point at all. Rather we are in for 'more of the same', much more, in fact a recapitulation of all historical architecture including that of the recent past. We are, as you will guess, in a Radically Eclectic age, an age that makes the 1870s with its relative paucity of fifteen styles look like an integrated culture. We have more styles and ideologies than they did and they probably mean less; have less conviction and semantic meaning. Gothic Revival is now a-religious and doesn't carry Pugin's moralistic fervour; Stirling at one time had Gothic arcades for his Stuttgart Museum before they were changed into Romanesque. In our *musée imaginaire*, in

our museum city that has recapitulated world history, styles have lost their overall meaning and become, instead, genres – classifiers of mood and theme. This is a major point of Radical Eclecticism; it substitutes a time-bound semiotic view of architectural form for the monolithic view of the past, the Modern and Neo Gothic view. Its approach to style and meaning is relativistic, related to the context of the culture being designed for, and this entails changing those styles and meanings perhaps after they have swung too far one way, or, by contrast, need support or confirmation. The two ideas behind this are plurality and pluralism, the idea that, given the choice, people would rather have a variety of experiences and that, as history proceeds, a plurality of values, a richness is created on which it is possible to draw. These architectural loans must, to repeat a point, be repaid with interest, that is reinvention. In short the content of our buildings is not the Space Age or the Energy Problem, not the Machine Age or High Technology, but the variety of cultural experience, the plurality of psychic, social and metaphysical states possible to people. For the museum we have the museum city, for a single meaning of history we have all of history, for a single political view we have the res publica and for architecture we hope for an eclecticism that is radical. A Radical Eclecticism should be founded on requirements of function, hints of the place and the desires of symbolism; it should respond to the tastes of the users while, if it is radical, extending and challenging them with new meaning.

Extracts Source: *The Presence of the Past*, catalogue to the First International Exhibition of Architecture, La Biennale di Venezia, The Cordena of the Arsenale, Architectural Section, Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, Electa Editrice (Milan), 1980. © Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia Venice.



Ata Isuzaki, Disney Building, Florida, 1989-91 – from different systems, each selected for a special function