Emilio Ambasz

POPULAR PANTEON

Emilio Ambasz was once curator of design at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. He is now a product and graphic designer as well as architect and interior designer.


(‘One space stretches through all that is: inner world space. The birds fly through our self. ’)

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart is unquestionably, a work of excellent architectural craftsmanship, practical and functional, cleverly respectful of its historical context, and curiously attuned to its urban surroundings.

As in the best of Pelletier’s fluxes, this museum is full of breathtaking vistas. Not even the most disheartened disciple of the Single Grand Concept in architecture could avoid feeling delighted in the uniquely proportioned exhibition rooms of this new museum, or refraining from tipping his hat to the brilliant concept of connecting the old and new museums with a bridge, wittily furnished as an ante-chamber framing the views to the Schloßmuseum and the Schloss.

Also, like Pelletier, Stirling is an artist who deals masterfully with ambiguous meanings and iconically juxtaposed fragments, as he defines it in pseudo-professional diatribe: ‘Astract versus Representation;’ and ‘Traditional versus High-Tech.’ Any observer soon realizes that the Neue Staatsgalerie is a work full of paradoxes. Witness the self-deprecating reference to past influences as evidenced in the entrance ramp’s exaggerated High-Tech S-curve, and the neo-humanist entrance canopy. Those of us who believe self-mockery constitutes a laudable instance of moral courage cannot but admire Stirling’s ironic, identification—malgré lui même, with that spirit of the British spirit which persists in confronting us with the very concept of vulnerability to art. Should we accept it as a gift, as a gift, we believe that its preservation is full of modernist rationality. As contemporary architecture finds itself today, so are places of popular entertainment—what we consider more appropriate as a setting than an accentuated value?

As in his other works, parody plays in the Neue Staatsgalerie a definitive role. It doesn’t criticize either the Post Modern, the High-Tech, or the Neo-Classic modes but in, rather, self-critical of his own use of those devices. Stirling renders this reversal of criticism acceptable by anticipating a mocking. Moreover, he seeks to bend us to it. It is what Rilke calls ‘pseudo-parody to disarm criticism.’ But one could also suspect that Stirling is a Romantic who sees architectural parody to disguise his passionate love for architecture. So much for Sturm and Drang with a Liverpoolian twist.

These episodes of architectural parody, brilliant as they are, rapidly recede into the background. When, in awe, we call to the fore the powerful, earthy sounds which seem to emanate from the marble columns composing the circular courtyard, the ramp can be perceived as a transitory, the wall openings as barren continua, and the open sky as a crown. But they cannot, by themselves, explain the powerful secular power which pervades this chamber as if it were sprouting from a gigantic mountain horn. This courtyard is one of Stirling’s most memorable creations to date. To walk inside is to enter into a magical domain where architecture is conformed to its essentials. The courtyard is a procession stage set where the spirit of architecture permeates its hieratic presence.

Not unlike Camus—who died a few months ago in provincial St. Peter’sburg’s imperial dreams—but has taken again upon a British architect—the greatest since Hogarth—to stay with a marble statue the incisive carvings of the German and for a secular chamber where to celebrate a Zeus in a quiet grandeur. In this courtyard dwell both the spirits of Stirling and Schütter. If one sees the present culture scene to declare that its language has found permanent embodiment, Germany would have to point to this courtyard. It is the formulation of this recurring archetype of the Pantheon, but with a roof made of transient clouds. By providing a monumental frame for movable rituals, this courtyard stands as metaphor for the spirit of the building, and so doing, raises it to the endless band of memorable architecture.

Oriol Bohigas

TURNING POINT

Oriol Bohigas is partner of Martorell Bohigas & Mackay of Barcelona. He has been head of the school of architecture in Barcelona and Director of Planning for the same city, initiating the current programme of new plazas and restoration (AR July).

Stirling & Wilford’s new Staatsgalerie sums up the most positive aspects of the current turning point in architecture. The best of contemporary architecture, far from being in a state of phony crisis and reactionary ‘Past’ stances, is following a process common to periods of stability and continuity throughout architectural history. Today, the root of this process can be found in the national period of the Modern Movement. The process is one of gradual re-adjustment to the postulates formulated at the beginning of the period in a challenging and Utopian spirit.

Without getting involved in too many of the great things, nor wishing to be exhaustive, one could define the present moment by analyzing a few of its characteristics: a renewed interest in public buildings versus the former emphasis on social housing; the adaptation of Modern Movement prototypes to the urban context; a move beyond the merely functional, as a compositional device, to now include the monumental; the use of colour in lieu of monochromes; an upgrading of the pioneering days’ stylistic norms by legitimizing eclectic in a critical re-evaluation of history.

All this is obvious in the magnificent Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. The new museum brings together, in an almost polemical way, the grandeur of monumental public buildings. Inside and outside there is simultaneous expression of architectural and urban forms as well as of functional and symbolic requirements.

The interiors not only constitute a complete art gallery design, but also enforce sequences of rooms that go far beyond their immediate use and constitute an extension within the building of the city’s forms and symbols. The exterior spaces, on the other hand, not only allow for pedestrian movement from one street to another, but constitute as itinerary with constant visual references to the museum.

There is no strain between the building and the urban environment. Further, interiors and exteriors cannot be understood as positive and negative aspects of the same composition. The building becomes city and the city becomes building. In a way, the Statehouse reviews the great works of engineering’s long past tradition, in which a logical relationship was automatically established between functional problems and the transformation of the environment, in other words, in a way, was once a functional requirement.

The way types and models are used in another respect, a selection of the current attitudes in architecture. At times, Stirling has referred to his projects for the Glass/Mass and Cologne Musées as models for Stuttgart. It is obvious that the L-shaped plan and the central court are a priori concepts which find their sources in a number of historical examples. However, these models are used only as a point of departure for a much more complex composition.