THE NEW SPIRIT

Post-Modernism is dead. Some have known from the start that it was no more than a painted corpse, but for others it has taken a little longer to work through the deceptively populist arguments of the pasticheurs, the quasi-Classicists and the toy-town tarter-uppers towards the realisation that while 'giving the people what they want' may sound like all-too-rare architectural humility, it has, with frightening rapidity, become no more than the pretty plaything of rampant capitalism. The success it has had (and is still, in its obedient, bankable way enjoying) has been achieved by offering an aesthetic path of least resistance and by appealing, after the demands and constraints of Modernism, to some of the least endearing aspects of human nature—indolence, ignorance, oppression and greed.

Now, however, something else is happening. Something new. After the relentless ossification of the Post-Modern era things are beginning to stir again. Like the first breath of spring after a long and stultifying winter, these first stirrings are signs of hope.

There are, of course, those who prefer winter. Who would choose the closed door, the airless room, the neatly shuttered mind over the demands of even the possibility of freedom. Those for whom the future holds only fear, for whom the past is something known and safe, to be therefore not only preserved but imitated, at any cost. For architecture, however, the cost has been silence, docility and despair; the tacit admission that there is nothing left to discover, nowhere left to go, and nothing left to say—in short, a sell-out.

It began honourably enough. Modernism may have been heroic, but it never won the affection of the populace. By the 1970s, widely misinterpreted and misapplied, it had become brittle and diagrammatic; the revolution when it came was driven by a craving for liberation from its strictures, both moral and aesthetic. Post-Modernists, in those very early days, seemed like freedom-fighters, dragon-slayers, heroes. From Schumacher to Venturi they fought to legitimise the small scale, the complex, the vernacular, the historical, the decorative and the popular—all things which had been ousted in the single-minded drive for a clean and brave new world.

Before long, however, the inevitable became apparent, and it was clear that Post-Modernism was not an independent freedom force at all, but a sort of mutant isotope of elemental Modernism, initially radiant but highly derivative, insidious, and programmed to decay. The rebellion, never anything more than a reaction against Modernism, had been doomed from the start to have a short half-life. Its freedom-fighters—unwittingly no doubt—were in fact architecture's harbingers of death.

WHAT PRICE POPULARITY?

In retrospect, it should have been obvious. Exuberant at first in its newly-won freedoms, but lacking a positive direction of its own, Post-Modernism has quickly become a meaningless mannerist charade. With the rules of