Modernism removed, but not replaced, liberty quickly degenerated into licence, 'vernacular' into pastiche, and decoration into the flabby mass mediocrity that has become so reassuring a pawn of monetarism.

Even so, Post-Modernism soon proved to be easy, popular and saleable. Anyone could do it, and anyone did. Students and developers were equally quick to discover that the essentials of the style—the graceless, overscaled columns and arches, the pitched roofs and broken pediments, the half-round barrel-vaults, and gratuitous decorative squiggles that now distinguish mainstreet architecture all over the Western world—were effortlessly imitable, and provided easy answers for critics and planning-committees alike. Architects themselves, eager to keep up and lacking any more real discipline, soon followed suit. Long-chastised for their 'monkish elitism', they shed their principles with alacrity, donning instead the gaudy coats of born-again capitalism and strutting in the market-place with the rest, fervent now only in their desire for money and acclaim.

And who, you might say, can blame them? There was a cold wind blowing, and an ominous clanging in the corridors of power; one by one, minds were being closed, bolted against the future in favour of some mythical golden past. Venturi's celebrated polemic for pleasure and pluralism in architecture provided too easy an excuse for our natural intellectual laziness, and for the mindless laisser-faire stylistic which has resulted in the directionlessness of current architectural thought, and endless imitative banality of form.

People, it said, did not like Modern buildings any more, and if they didn't like them they wouldn't pay for them; something must be done. But in rejecting—perhaps rightly—the buildings, they also unthinkingly rejected the principles behind them; baby and bathwater both. Space, for example, was one of the casualties. Dethroned deity of the Modern Movement, Space had come to be seen as the enemy of the new favourite 'place', and was rejected outright, making way for the more material obsessions of the new regime.2

Modernism was out. All other styles, however, were approved, and freely available in the market-place—for a small (and ever-reducing) fee. Of these there was one which was easiest and most obvious: Neo-Classicism, unlike its original model, is about symmetry, stasis, and sheer physical weight. Hopes that it might further the small-scale planning ideals of those early freedom-fighters soon proved vain. On the contrary Neo-Classicism—or that pastel rendering of it that came to be known as Post-Modern Classicism—already had a long history of pastiche, and a pedigree free of any but the merest hint of spatial quality. For the new Materialism it was perfect, a gift.

Great minds have tried and failed to establish a necessary link between Neo-Classicism and political oppression. But one thing is certain, it is a style which in its various forms has given itself uncomplainingly through the ages to the adoration of cultures like ours in which status depends, once again and increasingly, upon the acquisition and display of material wealth. Post-Modern Classicism has brought us architecture-as-commodity, the object cult. It is a style which sits heavily and in fundamental opposition to the forward-looking, life-giving ideals of openness, freedom, and, in every sense, light which were embodied, however unsatisfactorily, in Modernism (and, ironically, in Classicism itself).3

ROMANTIC v. CLASSICAL: AN HISTORICAL DIALECTIC

Classicism is traditionally regarded as the dialectical opposite of Romanticism, and it is possible to see the history of art—for the New Spirit is undoubtedly one which realigns architecture as one of the arts—as a sort of rectified wave form produced by alternating periods of these two principles; regular pulses of questing, Romantic energy interspersed (and even at times coincidental) with periods of Classical calm.

The analogy is clearly simplistic, but if for the sake of argument we define the terms not according to the forms they produce, but to the spirit that guides them—Classicism as defined opposite and Romanticism as a principle of questioning, contingency and change—it will serve for long enough to suit our present purposes.

It allows us, for example, to see Classicism as a point of momentary equilibrium between times of great change; a state of maximum altitude, but zero velocity. And to understand Romanticism as something which can be either positive or negative, either a breaking-down of the old order, or a building-up of the new. An impulse which may culminate, briefly and almost incidentally, in stasis, but whose primary concern is with the process of change itself; uncomfortable, but invigorating.

It is clear that, in these terms, Modernism—itself initially heroic, explosive and revolutionary in opposition to the perceived decadence of the post-War I architectural establishment, but becoming gradually accepted and eventually despised—was composed, perhaps even from the start, of both Romantic and Classical impulses (encompassing the absolute, Rationalist geometries of Mies, the warmth of Aalto and Frank Lloyd Wright, the waywardness of Scharoun—and even the apparent contradiction of Le Corbusier, in whose work both impulses may be clearly seen).

And it is equally clear that Post-Modernism (having reached zero velocity, but hardly maximum altitude) should be regarded as at best an agent of decay, helping only to break down the Modernist dogma into a state of decay from which a fresh Romantic impulse could grow into new life.

The New Spirit is just such a Romantic Impulse.4 Restless, striving, searching; stirring-up and stripping-bare; never sentimental but, on the contrary, tough, iconoclastic, streetwise; acerbic, often aggressive, and very highly-strung. While trying at times to better the world in which we live, it rejects out of hand any tendency towards pretification or escapism, fierce in its determination to accomplish what Modernism shrank from: the acceptance and embrace of what the world is, in all its complexity and squalor.

But, this determination notwithstanding, there is a direct line of descent from many of the early Modern movements; the New Spirit inherits, and extrapolates from, not only Modern architecture’s concern with space,