

Address Given by Nikolaus Pevsner

At the Inauguration of the New Art and Architecture Building of Yale University

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There is a great fascination in standing in a new building. No rain has yet stained the concrete, no splinters have yet been broken out of the steps of the staircases, nobody has yet explained something by a rapid sketch on a wall. No human desires and disappointments have yet left their invisible but so unmistakable aura in the air. It is all still the dreams of the architect miraculously come to life.

But there is a great fascination also in standing in old buildings, because they - to quote a great master of fantastic architecture, Sir John Vanbrugh and quote him with special meaning in this particular building - produce "more lively and pleasing reactions ... on the persons who have inhabited them [and] on the remarkable things which have been transacted in them."

As a historian, moreover, I feel an intellectual fascination in the investigation of old buildings and in efforts to interpret them. You, Mr. President, have been unwise to invite a historian to address this audience on this occasion. The historian is by definition a relativist. For such an occasion you need an absolutist. The historian is a relativist in so far as he operates in comparisons. He takes it for granted that the insignificant stays outside his field of observation - and you had better not ask him how he arrives at decisions as to what is significant and what is not - and then compares the significant facts about 1250 with those of about 1300, those of 1500 with those of 1250. The result is the characteristics of Early English as against Decorated, of the High Renaissance as against Mannerism. In opening a new building, it should not be like that. The new building ought to be the one and all.

This chance, Mr. President, you have missed. What you are going to get instead, is a little history and a little of the historian's technique, inspired by the fact that this morning I went to look at the original building of this school, which is ninety-nine years old this year. Of course I cannot indulge in a comparison like that between High Renaissance and Mannerism, tempting as it would be. For 1864 and 1963 do not represent epochs

following one after the other immediately. And yet there are certain features in Street Hall and in this building which set off the historian in me.

Take Street Hall first. I am fond of it, though in a funny, indulgent way which has nothing to do with historical evaluation. If then I turn to history I would say this: In the middle of the nineteenth century opposition and even hatred against the eighteenth century was virulent. There had been a universally valid style of smooth facades with a minimum of decorative stress round the doorway, a neutral style, as it were. Windows were cut into the walls without any moulding. Roofs were hardly visible from below. In domestic architecture little differentiation was demanded. Beauty or its opposite was the result of the finesses of proportion, the relation of wall and void. Now all this changed. Street Hall represents - *en miniature* of course - a hard individualism. It represents what the architects themselves at the time called *reality*, presumably in opposition to what they felt to be spectrally thin, timid and anemic in the Georgian era. At all costs let there be no symmetry; at all costs no window without some strange and unexpected emphasis; crescendos from emphasis to over-emphasis, wherever possible; projections intensely stressed by square or polygonal shapes which pretend to be buttresses and turrets but are in fact introduced as geometry for geometry's sake. The same was true of the angular bay windows, and the improbable openings in the form of diagonally placed squares.

This is what Peter D. Wright designed in 1864 when he was twenty-six years old. And this is what the historian sees and what I, as a historian - I hope correctly - have described in words which were intended at the same time to characterize. May the historian go one step further and add a value judgment? I would now add, without enough time to state my reasons, that Street Hall is thoroughly provincial. I hope you will take this judgment from one who comes from the country of such giants as Butterfield, Street and Bodley. Such an uninhibited judgment is in my opinion all the more important, because it also demonstrates a historical fact. In the history of architecture the United States in 1864 - with a few exceptions - were still a backwater. One could write a history of Western architecture without mentioning them more than once or twice. But a few years after Street Hall all that was to change. Richardson's Brattle Square Church was begun in 1870, his Sherman House at Newport in 1874. And on we go to Sullivan, to Burnham & Root, to Holabird & Roche, and finally to Frank Lloyd Wright; that means

chapters of Western Architecture in which the Americans stand on the stage as important actors and here and there as the most important actors. From then there was no looking back, and what Paul Rudolph is designing now is heatedly debated at once from London north and Johannesburg south to Tokyo north and Auckland, New Zealand south, and to Toronto north and Buenos Aires south.

Now what has he been doing here? The boundary between history and criticism is a real boundary; yet, if the historian tries to be a critic or appraiser, all he can do is to use his historian's tools of description and interpretation to the best of his abilities. The situation today appears to me like this. In the course of the 1930's a style had gained international validity which, as you all know, had been created between 1890 and 1914 and which was the first style in architecture for nearly five hundred years to have invented its own vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. It was an exacting style. Discipline and service counted more than individuality. It was a neutral style if you like. Facades were smooth, openings were cut in without any mouldings. Roofs were flat. Not much differentiation was granted the individual building. Beauty or otherwise depended primarily on the subtleties of proportion, or relation between glass and wall. I grew up with this style, and I would be dishonest, if I concealed that this is my style, that it convinces me, and that in cases of fine grouping, composition, and proportions it "sends me" - to use a term which is at the present moment perhaps just as out of date as I am.

But am I? May I at least be granted that as a historian I try. This then is what in my opinion has happened here: In the late 1940s and especially the 1950s a decisive change took place. What I have just described appeared quite honestly to some of the older ones, and the majority of the younger generation, to be dull and even sterile, of a false finality. So we experienced a return to individualism. You can no longer mistake one building for another or one architect for another - at least not among the most important ones - and in the individual building not even one window for another. Violent stresses returned. In describing a design of Eero Saarinen one can hardly use the same terminology as in describing designs by Kenzo Tange, Aalto or our Paul Rudolph. What do we see here? Massive piers of concrete rise. Projections are over-emphasized throughout. Heavy slabs are crossed by thin slabs. Spaces inside cross too and offer sequences of most dramatic effects by unexpected vistas inside the building and even out of it.

It is all very exciting, a powerful stimulant for the students. May it not be too potent for them; too personal as an ambiance? I would have thought so, if it had not been for the fact that I, about six months ago, sat on the same platform with Paul Rudolph. It was at the annual convention of the American Institute of Architects, and we both had to make speeches. What impressed me most about him, and what made me hope that I would one day see his school in operation - a hope now realized- was what he proclaimed as his guiding principle, namely that a teacher of the young ought to have a very pronounced, perhaps even a provocative style, but that, for that very reason, he ought to help students to develop their own.

So my message to the students is simple and brief. You have the tremendous advantage of a controversial principal. Students will be students. You will worship him; you will tear him to pieces. Both will be equally salutary. But you must promise me one thing: don't imitate what you now have around you. Of course no young architect worth his salt imitates anyway. But the International Modern of the 1930s could be imitated at least with impunity. The result was always something rational, serviceable, unaggressive. But woe to him who imitates Paul Rudolph, who imitates Saarinen, Philip Johnson (I mean Philip the Second), or Yamasaki. The result will be a catastrophe. The great individualist, the artist-architect, who is primarily concerned with self-expression, is inimitable.

But halt - for now I am really and provably wrong. Is this building primarily self-expression? In this question lies its pervading fascination for me. May I return to that meeting between Paul Rudolph and myself six months ago? My own address was commissioned to deal with a very vague subject: "What makes for architectural quality?" I primarily spoke about the relation of architect to client. But since this new building houses one of the most excellent departments of the history of art in America - and I may add: my favorite of all - I may, from what I started, offer you not the words I used at Miami, but the words of Antonio Filarete who in his treatise wrote this about the year 1460:

"Lo edificio si rassomiglia all 'uomo. Adunque, se cosi e, e bisogno generare e poi partorire. Lo edificio per uno solo non puo essere creato."

“A building resembles a human being. If this is so, it must be conceived and then born. No building can be created by one man only.”

He then continues:

“Colui che vuole edificare bisogna che abbia l’architetto e insieme con lui ingenerarlo e poi l’architetto partorirlo.”

“He who wishes to build, needs an architect: they will conceive it together, and then the architect will bring it to birth.”

Now I can go back to what I said six months ago. Architectural quality is of course aesthetic quality, but it is not aesthetic quality alone. The work of architecture is the product of function and art. If it fails in either, it fails in quality. The guardian of the aesthetics of architecture is the architect, the guardian of the functional satisfaction is the client. His responsibility in briefing is as great as the architect’s in designing. If, out of the muddle-headedness, out of laziness, out of initial ignorance, he fails, the building will be an annoyance, and the architect will (in my opinion wrongly) be reproached. And, I continued, if the client gives inadequate information, because he is frightened of genius, he also deserves to be reproached, that is, if he does not say: “But if you put this window in this place in this room, I shall get a dark room,” or: “Your measurements of 26 ft. by 6 ft. for a bedroom for two people will give me a room of impractical, inconvenient proportions.” In sum, what I consider questionable in 1960 as against 1930 must be attributed to the indulgence of the client of the lack of a working partnership between client and architect.

It is just this that strikes me as so pertinent here today. For here none of these problems can possibly have arisen. The doubts which so often torture me today, being an inveterate functionalist of the 1930s, are here, must here, be absent. According to my definition, a functionalist is an architect or a designer or a critic who regards it as the primary task of the architect and the designer to take care that his building or product functions, and that no aesthetic feature is allowed access if it detracts from that task. Now, here we have the rare case where - at least very largely - the client is the architect and the architect is the client. I know few such cases. One of them was Rudolf Steiner’s Goetheanum; another Bauhaus at Dessau. If you wander round this building, as no doubt

you have done or will do, you must never forget that all you see and discuss is precisely in accordance with the program. I find this a most stimulating and useful demonstration.

And now, I have nothing more to add, except to thank you, Mr. President, you, Mr. Dean, and you Paul, for having singled me out from far away to do me the honor of dedicating this new building. This I am doing herewith. May God bless it and the good work that is going on in it.