

# The world is becoming ugly. What can we do?

It is our strong belief: the world is becoming ugly. To us it seems impossible to express this without appearing impolite and anti-progressive. But plenty of reasons for our conviction can be found simply by looking at the world around you. Look around and you will see, concrete and glass eroding urban space and countryside; towers rising out of the sites of childhood memories; pavements and cobblestones receding as asphalt advances; and suburbs gobbling up space and creating frightful zoning belts that are strangling the life out of city centres...!

The world is becoming ugly. Soon it will look like one enormous supermarket carpark, with few other than tourists believing in the existence of 'landscape'.

We are neither the first nor the only ones to point out that the built environment is getting progressively worse. But whatever we say, we know that prejudice within the system will refuse debate and discussion and instead seek to silence us. This reaction is hardly surprising. It comes from fear of thought, neither new nor complicated, that is seen to pose a great threat to the modernist establishment. This thought is not new, nor sophisticated, but it is a danger to the dominant modernist system. This thought, then? Here it is: progress is a joke; an illusion; a false ideal.

Progress is a joke that works well in bids, and progressives are its beneficiaries. Faced with the relentless deterioration of cities, their multiple amputations and the globalisation of their architecture, they continue to affirm that the future of man lies in innovation and that innovation - ladies and gentlemen - is the expression of a new architecture. To our great misfortune, the new architecture of which they bear the banner boils down to overloading the earth with huge housing boxes without worrying about their quality but only the profit they generate. Soon, the architects who propagate it will become useless: due to straight lines, abstract shapes, smooth facades, due to stripping the buildings of the slightest ornament, they will realise that this heart-breaking architecture, diminished, can be performed just as well by engineers, and they will thus lose their jobs!

So be it - it does not move us. On the other hand, the suffering that they inflict by their non-architecture on the inhabiting victims, through the deformation of their living spaces - the cities all alike, from Brussels to Beijing, the new housing which is falling into disuse after ten years of existence, HLM bars which are rabbit hutches - this suffering revolts us. We suffer it too. Since the end of the war, modernism has imposed its law on things and ideas. This is meaningless: by reducing the individual to a few simple functions - consuming, working, entertaining - it denies its particularities, transforms it into homo-economicus, indistinguishable from his peers and offers him a comfortable but grey life, situated under the mythological sign of progress. This man without qualities, reduced to the sum of his needs, is therefore no longer sensitive to the beauty that surrounds him, which has become unnecessary. Hence the abolition of aesthetics. "*Everything is the same*" or "*to each according to their taste*", one says this in order to hide the immense sham of modernism when compared to old styles. Moral and aesthetic relativism is the foundation of Western modernity, it is included in its architectural expression.

Contrary to relativism, we affirm that the Beautiful exists. It's under our noses: it's heritage! It is up to

us to step into it, linger in it and put it to good use - not as a museum rent under the auspices of mass tourism but as forces, alive with a contemporary renaissance. Since modernism has deceived us and led us into the ugly underworld, and since it has been *pastiching* itself for almost a century, we must turn away from it and unashamedly choose to look back. After all, the most fertile styles are all born of a U-turn: neo-Gothic idealised the Middle Ages, neoclassical was nostalgic for the Renaissance, while the latter dreamed of ancient perfection. However, we have a heritage in excellent condition, on which is active a multitude of crafts - carpenters, cabinet makers, stonemasons, slate makers, window makers,

master glassmakers, mosaicists ... which act a source of know-how that can instruct young architects in traditional techniques, helping bring architecture back to life in the future.

Against the modernist system, we advocate traditional architecture which is based on common sense and the use of aesthetic codes, traditional techniques and natural materials within coherent urban sets. Traditional architecture if well built is beautiful, adapted and crosses centuries and generations. As it respects the identity of the places it suits, and the privacy of the people who live there, its vocation is popular. Its exercise meanwhile, is difficult. It requires a solid historical culture combined with an empirical knowledge of artisanal trades. To bring traditional architecture to life, it is therefore urgent to train today and develop a pool of architects and craftsmen who are competent, sensitive and attentive to the general will.

Finally, to those who would retort that this architecture is very beautiful but unrealistic under current conditions, we say that promising examples already exist, which prove that it adapts wonderfully well to the needs of our century: Witness Ksar Tafilelt in Algeria, Poundbury in the UK, Le Plessis-Robinson, Port Grimaud and Port Royal in France, Seaside in Florida and the new town of Cayalá, Guatemala. All over the world, traditional architecture is resurfacing at all scales. It is the sign of a beautiful and worthy insurrection of the peoples against the modernist illusion which is pushing its last breath.

This insurrection is salutary; it is worn by hundreds of architects, artisans, historians and curious people of all kinds who, in all countries, are waiting for the time when architecture will return to its primary vocation: to beautify the world.