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P. Z.
THE NEED FOR A NEW MONUMENTALITY

By

SIGFRIED GIEDION

Motto: Emotional training is necessary today. For whom? First of all for those who govern and administer the people.

INTRODUCTORY REMARK

The "American Abstract Artists" are preparing a volume on their activities and their problems, and invited two of my friends and myself to collaborate. It happened that we sat together one evening and speaking about this invitation, we found it much more effective if all of us were to write on the same subject, each from the outlook offered to him by his own field, Fernand Léger, from the point of view of the painter, J. L. Sert, from that of the architect and urbanist, and myself from the historical side. Finally, we tried to sum up our opinions in a common resolution of nine points, which will be published together with our articles in the forthcoming volume of the American Abstract Artists. I am indebted to this Association for the permission to print my article in advance, so that the discussion on monumentality may reach the architects at an early date.

All of us are perfectly aware of the fact that monumentality is a dangerous affair in a time when most of the people do not even grasp the elementary requirements for a functional building. But we cannot close our eyes; whether we want it or not, the problem of monumentality is lying ahead in the immediate future. All that can be done within the limits of our humble efforts, is to point out dangers and possibilities.

—S.G.

Modern architecture had to go the hard way. Tradition was mercilessly misused by the representatives of the ruling academic taste in all fields concerned with emotional expression.
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The buildings of perennial power, the Acropolis, the sensitive constructions of Gothic cathedrals, the geometric phantasy of the Renaissance churches and the exquisite scale of eighteenth century squares were all in existence. But they could not help. They were dead for the moment. They were frozen temporarily in an icy atmosphere, created by those architects and their patrons who, in order to compensate for their lack of expressive force, misused eternal names by robbing history.

In this way the great monumental heritages of mankind became veiled and even poisonous to everybody who touched them. Behind every great building of the past grinned the face of its misuser.

This is the period of pseudo-monumentality. The greater part of the nineteenth century belongs to it. The models of the past were not imbued, as in the Renaissance, with a strong artistic vision leading to new results. There was a helpless undirected and, at the same time, routine use of shapes from bygone periods. They were used indiscriminately everywhere, for any kind of building. Because they had lost their inner significance, they had become devaluated, mere clichés without emotional justification. Clichés cannot be handled by creative artists. For this purpose professional eclectics are necessary, and the creative spirit had to be banished wherever public taste was being formed. These obedient servants of the ruling taste have devaluated and undermined the taste and the emotions of the public and brought about an extreme banalization which still exists today.

Periods which are dear to our memory, whose structure and work grew far above their temporal existence, have always known that monumentality, because of its inherent character, can seldom be used and then only for the highest purpose. In ancient Greece monumentality was used rarely and then only to serve the gods and, to a certain extent, the life of the community. The masterful discrimination and discipline of the Greeks in this respect is one of the reasons for their lasting influence.

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Contemporary Architecture Takes the Hard Way

Contemporary architecture had to go the hard way. It had to begin anew just as painting and sculpture. It had to reconquer the most primitive things, as if nothing had ever been done before. It could not go back to Greece, to Rome, or to the Baroque to be comforted by their experience. In certain crises man has to live in seclusion, so he may become aware of his own feelings and thoughts. This was the situation for all the arts about 1910.

Architects found traces of the undisguised expression of their period far removed from monumental edifices. They found them in the market halls, in factories, in the bold vaulting problems of the great exhibition buildings, or in the only real monument of this period, the Eiffel Tower (1889). There was no denying that they lacked the splendor of buildings of bygone periods, which had been nourished by handicraft and a long tradition. They were naked and rough, but they were true. Nothing else could have served as the point of departure for a language of our own.

Three Steps of Contemporary Architecture

Architecture is not exclusively concerned with construction. Architecture has to provide an adequate frame for man's intimate surroundings. Individual houses as well as the urban community have to be planned from the human point of view. Modern architecture had to begin with a single cell, with the smallest unit, the low cost dwelling, which to the last century seemed beneath the talents and attention of the artist. The Nineteen Twenties and Thirties saw a resurgence of research in this direction, for now it seemed senseless to go ahead before having tried to find new solutions for this task.

The main impetus lay in the fact that this problem involved social and human orientation. But looking back we understand that an architecture which had to begin anew found here a problem where utmost care had to be given to exact organization within the smallest space and to the greatest economy of means. Of course, at
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the same time, houses were built for the middle or upper classes where, for the first time, a new space conception could be carried out. But the housing for the lower income class taught the architects the exactitude of planning which had been lost in the nineteenth century.

From a human point of view and from the architectonic as well, houses and blocks are not isolated units. They are incorporated in urban settlements and these are parts of a greater entity, the city. An architect who is not interested in the whole scope of planning from the heights of a kitchen sink to the layout of a region is far removed from contemporary building. From the single cell, to the neighborhood unit, to the city and the organization of the whole region, is one direct sequence. Thus it can be said that the second phase of modern architecture was concentrated on urbanism.

The third step lies ahead. In view of what had happened in the last century and because of the way modern architecture had come into being, it is the most dangerous and the most difficult step. This is the reconquest of the monumental expression.

The people want buildings representing their social, ceremonial and community life. They want their buildings to be more than a functional fulfillment. They seek the expression of their aspirations for monumentality, for joy and excitement.

In the United States, where modern architecture has had up to now rather a limited influence and because it is more or less confined to houses, housing, factories, and office buildings, it may perhaps seem too early to speak about these problems. But things are moving fast. In countries where it has been recently called upon for solutions of museums, theatres, universities, churches, or concert halls, modern architecture has been forced to seek the monumental expression which lies beyond functional fulfillment. If it could not stand up to this demand, the whole development would be in mortal danger of a new escape academicism.

MONUMENTALITY AN ETERNAL NEED

Monumentality derives from the eternal need of the people to own symbols which reveal their inner life, their actions and their social conceptions.

Every period has the impulse to create symbols in the form of monuments, which, according to the Latin meaning are “things that remind,” things to be transmitted to later generations. This demand for monumentality cannot, in the long run, be suppressed. It tries to find an outlet at all costs.

Our period is no exception. For the present it continues the habits of the last century and follows in the tracks of pseudo-monumentality. There is no special political or economic system which is to blame for this. As different as they may be in their political and economic orientations, whether the most progressive or the most reactionary, there is one point where the governments of all countries meet: in their conception of monumentality.

One could compile an immense square of “monumental edifices” of the whole world, erected in recent years, from the “Haus der Deutschen Kunst” at Munich (1937), to the “Mellon Institute” at Pittsburgh (1937), the new museums in Washington, or the representative buildings in Moscow.

The palace of the “League of Nations” at Geneva (finished 1935) is perhaps the most distinguished example of internationally brewed eclecticism. The moral cowardice reflected in its architecture seems to have an almost prophetic affinity to the failure of the League itself.

How can this be explained?

Those who govern and administer may be the most brilliant men in their fields, but in their emotional or artistic training, they reflect the average man of our period plagued as he is by the split between his methods of thinking and his methods of feeling. Here the thinking may be developed to a very high level, but the emotional background has not caught up with it. It is still imbued with the pseudo-ideals of the nineteenth century. Is it, then, any wonder that most official artistic judgments are disastrous, or that the decisions made for urban planning, monuments, and public buildings are without contact with the real spirit of the period?
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J. N. L. Durand
1760-1834

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PSEUDO-MONUMENTALITY

Pseudo-Monumentality has nothing to do with Roman, Greek or any other style or tradition. It comes into being within the sphere of the Napoleonic society, imitating the manner of a former ruling class. Napoleon represents the type that gave to the nineteenth century its form: the self-made man, who became inwardly uncertain.

The origin of pseudo-monumentality buildings can be found in paper architecture, in lifeless schemes, that later became reality everywhere.

The model is the scheme for a museum by J. N. L. Durand (1760-1834), as it is represented in his lectures "Précis de leçons d'architecture" (1801-05) which were frequently translated and reprinted and were used by architects of every country. They are forgotten today, but the buildings which came out of their studies are still standing and new ones are added in a continuous stream since 140 years. The recipe is always the same: take some curtains of columns and put them in front of any building, whatever its purpose and to whatever consequences it may lead.

Munich 1937
Adolf Hitler's "Das Haus der Deutschen Kunst"

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Pittsburgh 1937
The Mellon Institute

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THE LOST SENSE OF MONUMENTALITY

Periods of real cultural life had always the capacity to project creatively their own image of society. They were able to build up their community centers (agora, forum, medieval square) to fulfill this purpose.

Our period, up to now, has proved itself incapable of creating anything to be compared with these institutions. There are monuments, many monuments, but where are the community centers? Neither radio nor television can replace the personal contact which alone can develop community life.

All this is easily recognizable, but accusations alone do not help. We have to ask: what can be done?

The question as to how to keep the people from going further astray cannot easily be solved. Only complete frankness will be of any use, frankness toward both sides, toward those who have to re-create the lost sense for monumentality, and toward those who will profit by it; in short toward artists on the one hand and patrons on the other.

We outlined the reasons why architecture had to be cut off from the past, and why architects had to concentrate on functional problems and to grow up by them. This had its consequences.

Did not the architects tend to ignore the higher aspirations of the people? That this danger still exists cannot be denied. In countries where modern architecture had won the battle and was entrusted with monumental tasks involving more than functional problems, one could have observed of late, that something was lacking in the executed buildings. This something was an inspired architectural imagination able to satisfy the demand for monumentality. What is more, architects, sculptors, and painters had become unaccustomed to working together. They had lost contact with each other. There was no collaboration. Why? Because all three had been banished from the great public tasks.

If, for instance, in 1927 Le Corbusier's scheme for the palace of the League of Nations had not been killed by the leading politicians of the League, the development of monumentality in contemporary architecture would probably be today on another level. It is in identifying these dangers that we affirm the power of contemporary architecture to overcome them and to satisfy monumental aspirations. Buildings such as the Ministry of Education in Rio de Janeiro (1942) already move in this direction. But emotional training is necessary. For whom? First of all for those who govern and administer the people.

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On the Emotional Life of the Community

The situation of the modern painter is today different in many respects from that of the avant-guardists of the late nineteenth century. Paul Cézanne was proud when he could sell one of his pictures for 100 francs. Today, many private and public collections are filled with the paintings of Picasso, Braque, Léger, Miro, and others. Modern art is regarded as a sure investment and America owns the most important collections.

But in one respect the situation remains unchanged: art is still regarded as luxury, and not as the medium to shape the emotional life in the broadest sense.

Only in exceptional cases (Picasso's "Guernica" 1937, ordered by the Spanish Loyalist Government) were the creative contemporary artists allowed to participate in a Community task. Precious artistic forces, able to provide the symbols for our whole period, are lingering about, just as in the nineteenth century, when Edouard Manet had vainly offered to paint, free of charge, murals depicting the real life of Paris on the walls of the City Hall.

Yes, the best known artists today have a good market, but there are no walls, no places, no buildings, where their talent can touch the great public, where they can form the people and the people could form them.

Again and again it has been reiterated that modern art cannot be understood by the public. We are not sure that this argument is absolutely correct. We only know that those who govern and administer public taste do not have the necessary emotional understanding.
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Is the artist estranged from life? There are several reasons to believe that he is not. But the artist has not been able to do anything about it because he has been artificially expelled from direct contact with the community.

There are reasons to believe that the modern artists are right. We remember that throughout the whole nineteenth century, the masses, poor and rich under the domination of the press, academy, and governments, were always wrong in their taste and judgment, and that all the official art of that period appears so ridiculous.

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today, that the museums no longer show it to the public. Those artists, on the other hand, who had been driven into seclusion, reveal today the creative spirit which permeated the nineteenth century.

The same situation persists today. Nothing has changed in this respect. I have seen in painting, sculpture, architecture, and poetry, a long row of artistic leaders (and I mean those who shape our emotional life) living their isolated existence, far from the public and the understanding of those who could have brought them in touch with the community. How is it possible to develop an art "satisfying" the people, when those who embody the creative forces are not allowed to work on the living body of our period?

Not the second-hand man, but only the imagination of the real creators is suited to build the lacking civic centers, again to instil the
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Public with the old love for festivals, and to incorporate all the new materials, movement, color, and the abundant technical possibilities. Who else could utilize them for opening new ways to invigorate the masses?

I am not aware of any period which, to such a frightening extent as ours, has wasted the few available creative forces.

The demand for a decent social life for everybody has finally been recognized after a fight of more than a century.

The demand for shaping the emotional life of the masses is still out of the picture. It is regarded as unessential and most of it is in the hand of speculators.

PAINTING FORECASTING MONUMENTALITY

Painting, the most sentient of the visual arts, has often forecast things to come.

Painting first realized the spatial conception of our period and discovered methods of representing it.

Later, in the thirties, by these same artistic means, the horror of the war was foreshadowed many years before it came, when, for instance, Picasso—around 1930—painted his figures with strange abbreviations and sometimes terrifying lines which most of us did not understand until the forms and the expression were verified by later events. His monument en bois of 1930, this head with the terribilità of a Michelangelo, may illustrate this phenomenon.

Now painting announces another period at a moment when we are living in blood and horror. This is the rebirth of the lost sense of monumentality.

One trend could be observed in recent years which is common to nearly all of the leading painters. Together with the urge for larger canvases appeared brighter colors, full of inherent hope. At the same time there was an impulsion toward simplification. This occurs when after a development of three decades modern painting becomes ripe for great tasks. Great and unresolved complexes have had to be expressed in the shortest, most direct way. What began
We are aware of the fact that spectacles of "Ephemeral Architecture," as the modern form of fireworks were called, require a sequence representing the development in time of the different stages. The sketch in itself does not give more than a hint, it just indicates what is happening at one particular moment.

These spectacles form one of the rare events where our modern possibilities are consciously applied by the architect-artists. They use the structural values of different materials as the medium to intensify the emotional expression, just as the cubists liked to introduce sand, fragments of wood, or scraps of paper in their paintings. In this case, the architect made use of different "structural" values: incandescent and mercury light, gas flames, colored by chemicals, firework, smoke, water-jets, painted on the night sky and synchronized with music. To give insight into how this method works, a description of a specific case may follow: "The Spirit of George Washington" represents the symbol of the American Flag by three colors: red, white, and blue. To get the maximum of luminosity and depth in the colors, the red was obtained by interference of red glass between incandescent light, water-jets and smoke (which gives it volume and scale). The white was obtained by a combination of incandescent and mercury light. The blue was formed by the interference of blue glass over mercury light only. The three national colors were given additional force by means of gas fires into which chemicals were blown and by proper grouping of red, white and blue firework shells.
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as necessary structural abbreviations emerges now as symbols. The work of Arp, Mirò, Léger, and many others is moving in this direction.

The modern artists created these symbols out of the anonymous forces of our period. Nobody has asked for them, they just had to appear. They have no factual content, no other significance at the moment beyond emotional response. They are not for those whose emotional life is still imbued with the last century's official taste. But children can understand them, because these figurations are as close to primitive life as to our complicated civilization.

For the first time in centuries artists have gone back to the simplicity which is the stamp of any kind of symbolic expression. They have shown that the elements indispensable for monumentality are already at hand. They have re-attained the rare power for mural language.

Once more painting may forecast the next development in architecture. But not only in architecture; it may forecast a new integrated life far removed from the devastating idolatry of production.

Great changes are necessary in many spheres to accomplish this demand; and not least in the emotional domain. This is the moment, when painting, sculpture and architecture should come together on a basis of common perception, aided by all the technical means which our period has to offer.

Corn is planted for the winter. Wars have been prepared in peace. Why shall not peace be prepared in war? The means for a more dignified life must be prepared before the demand arises. Will these means be utilized?

TECHNICAL AND EMOTIONAL MEANS

There is an enormous back-log of new means and unused possibilities held in reserve by engineers and inventors of all kinds. There exists at the same time a tragic helplessness to use these treasures and to merge them into our human emotional needs. No period has had so many means and such a lack of talent to use them.

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In one of his essays, T. S. Eliot says of the poets of the seventeenth century: "They possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience." (The metaphysical poets, 1929). Their emotional and their mental apparatus functioned like communicating tubes. The technical and scientific experiences inevitably found their emotional counterpart, as it is revealed in the artistic creations of this period. This is just what we lack. Today, this direct contact, this coherence between feeling and thinking has vanished.

Now, after the greatest horrors of our period, age-old, perennial problems will arise again. We have banned from life the artistic expression for joy and festivities. Both have to be incorporated into human existence and are as necessary for our equilibrium as food and housing. That we have become incapable of creating monuments and festivals, and that we have lost all feeling for the dignity of civic centers, all this is tied up with the fact that our emotional life has been regarded as unessential and as a purely private affair. Behold the patterns of present day cities!

CIVIC CENTERS AND SPECTACLES

Civic centers will originate when cities are not regarded as mere agglomerations of jobs and traffic lights. They will arise when men become aware of the isolation in which they live amidst a kicking crowd, and when the demand for a fuller life, which means community life, becomes irresistible. Community life is closely connected with a sense for relaxation, with the urge for another vivifying influence beside the job and the family, an influence capable of expanding men's narrow private existence.

No civilization has existed which did not fulfill the irrepressible longing for institutions where such a kind of broader life could develop. In different periods these institutions had different aims, but whether they were called the Greek gymnasion, the agora, the Roman thermae or fora, the guilds, the medieval market places or cathedrals, they all contributed in developing human values. These
institutions were never conceived of as financial investments. Their function was not to produce money or to bolster a waning trade.

The civic center of the coming period will be surrounded by greenery, it will never be a neighbor to slums. It should not be financed by bond issues on the basis that its cost would be self-liquidating within a period of years. The means will come out of the community.

Community centers? What has the economist to say about the large expenditures involved in their coming about?

The hope of our period is that diverse groups are moving unconsciously in parallel directions. The liberal economists, such as John Maynard Keynes, are stressing the fact that economic equilibrium can only be obtained by a surplus production not destined for daily use. Goods have to be produced which cannot be conceived of in terms of profit or loss, supply and demand. Keynes does not speak of civic centers, he deals with the theory of employment and money. He observes that today the necessary large scale expenditures for non-consumable goods are only admitted for catastrophes, as earthquakes, war or "digging holes in the ground known as 'gold-mining which adds nothing to the real wealth of the world. The education of our statesmen on the principals of classical economics stands in the way of anything better."* Why not keep the economic machinery going by creating civic centers?

Pablo Picasso: Monument en Bois. 1930.

Oil Painting.

(By courtesy of the Valentine Gallery, New York)

Sketch for a modern sculpture of enormous scale (the human figure at the lower left corner may indicate the approximate dimension). Picasso did not specify for what purpose his studies for a monument in 1930 were meant. But it is now clear that these sketches forecast the reality and that the inherent significance of the symbol has not revealed itself until today.

It symbolizes our attitude towards the war. It does not glorify war in a heroic gesture as the Napoleonic "Arc de Triomphe" on the "Place de l'Etoile." It stands as a memorial to the horror of this period and of its tragical conflict: to know that mechanized killing is not the way to solve human problems, but that it has to be done nevertheless.

It is frightening. It tells the truth. Its forms have the "terribilità" that—for his contemporaries—emanated from Michelangelo's late sculptures, a threatening which Picasso translates in present day language.

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The problem ahead of us focuses on the question: can the emotional apparatus of the average man be reached? Is he only susceptible to foot-ball games and horse races? We do not believe it. There are forces inherent in man, which come to the surface when one tries to evoke them. The average man, with a century of falsified emotional education behind him, may not be won suddenly by the contemporary symbol in painting and sculpture. But his inherent, though unconscious, feeling may slowly be awakened by the original expression of a new community life. This can be done within a framework of civic centers and in great spectacles capable of fascinating the people.

Whoever has had occasion during the Paris exhibition of 1937 to observe the hundreds of thousands, lined up in the summer evenings along the banks of the Seine and on the Trocadero bridge, and to see them quietly waiting for the spectacles of waterplays, light, sound and fireworks, knows that the perennial predisposition for great representation, even in the form of abstract elements, has not been lost. There is no difference in this respect between Europe and America. In 1939, at the New York World’s Fair, while aerial plays of water, light, sound and fireworks were thrown into the sky, did not a sudden applause arise, when, on one occasion, three enormous rectangles of watercurtains arose and hovered in the night sky, one of them blue, the other white, the third red?

Everybody is susceptible to symbols. Our period is no exception. But those who govern must know that spectacles, which will lead the people back to a neglected community life, must be re-incorporated into civic centers, those very centers which our mechanized civilization has always regarded as unessential. Not haphazard world’s fairs, which in their present form have lost their old significance, but newly created civic centers should be the site for collective emotional events, where the people play as important a role as the spectacle itself, and where a unity of the architectural background, the people and the symbols conveyed by the spectacles will arise.

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STYLISTIC TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

By

GEORGE NELSON

From the vantage point of the third year of war in America, it is easy—suspiciously easy—to review the turbulent and ultimately successful progress of the contemporary movement in architecture and to evaluate its sometimes divergent trends.

That the battle for acceptance is practically over can no longer be doubted, and one of the strangest phenomena of our period is the crusader, still unaware that the battle is won, who goes on attempting to trade blows with adversaries who in some bewildering fashion are becoming his allies. The crusader, too, like his adversaries has changed in many instances, for his unwillingness to realize that the conflict between modernism and eclecticism is approaching an end is directing his opposition towards the processes of life itself, with reproaches to his one-time heroes for having progressed beyond the limited formulas of the 1920’s.

That this confusion should exist—and exist in the minds of many more than the noisy group constituting the ultra-left in architecture—should not be the occasion for any surprise, for the success of modern architecture has come about with incredible rapidity. It reached its first peak with the Chicago school and Sullivan and Wright, only to succumb to reaction; it hit another with the completion of the theoretical work of LeCorbusier and others; a third