

Neo-Classicism in 18th century France

- Reaction against the Rococo sumptuousness
- Laugier's primitive Hut and call to return to the noble simplicity of Greek architecture
- Visionary architecture by Boullée

The Oval Salon
Hotel de Soubise
(1737-1740)

Germain Boffrand

Paris, France

Marc-Antoine Laugier (1713-1769):
Essai sur l'architecture (Paris, 1753)

Return to the primitive

Unadorned rational construction:
functional and ethical

Purification of architecture by
rediscovering the essential parts of
the composition: the free-standing
columns, the horizontal lintel and the
rude pediment

*Marc Antoine Laugier, the primitive Hut, from Essai sur
l'architecture, 1753*

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

- A professor at the Academic Royale d' Architecture
- He found little opportunity to practice architecture
- His fame rest mainly on some one hundred unpublished drawings and a treatise on architecture he donated to the National Library of France
- Drawings: elegant, precise, visionary, appealing strongly to our senses
- Imaginary buildings of geometric simplicity and colossal proportions
- Seen w/an eye trained by modern architecture
- Not simply a return to the Classical architecture, but his architecture seems to search for & convey the timeless value of the classical form & space

“Greek architecture is recognized as being so superior that today its precedents are laws. Let me tell you that the Greeks decorated their temples with magnificent colonnades and it must be admitted that architecture possesses no other more majestic or more agreeable technique. It was therefore to be expected that there would be imitations of such beautiful examples handed down to us by our famous architects. Why then have our modern architects in their Temples substituted for the noble opulence of architecture a form of decoration that consists of cumbersome arcades, with straight, massive bases decorated with nothing more than a coat of plaster a few centimeters thick we architects call a pilaster!”

Boullée, *Essay on the Art of Architecture* (in *Boullée and Visionary Architecture* by Helen Rosenau), p. 91

The Theory of Character

“Let us consider an object. Our first reaction is, of course, the result of how the object affects us. And what I call character is the effect of the object which makes some kind of impression on us. To give a building character is to make judicial use of every means of producing no other sensations than those related to the subject. In order to understand what I mean by the character or expected effect of different objects, let us take a look at some of the beauties of nature and we shall see that we are forced to express ourselves in accordance with the effect they have on our senses. . .

(Continued)

As in nature, the art of giving an impression of grandeur in architecture lies in the disposition of the volumes that form the whole in such a way that there is a great deal of play among them, that their masses have a noble, majestic movement and that they have the fullest possible development. The arrangement should be such that we can absorb at a glance the multiplicity of the separate elements that constitute the whole. The play of light on this arrangement of volumes should produce the most widespread, striking and varied effects that are all multiplied to the maximum. . .”

Boullée, *Essay on the Art of Architecture* (in *Boullée and Visionary Architecture* by Helen Rosenau), p. 88-89

The Theory of Character
and
Difference between Architecture and building

“When an architect intends to begin work on a project, he should first of all concentrate on understanding its every essential aspect. Once he has fully grasped such aspects, then he will perhaps succeed in giving the appropriate character to his subject; and further study and speculation will enable him to grasp the fundamentals of the problem he has set for.”

- Boullee, Architecture, essay on Art (in Boullee and Visionary Architecture by Helen Rosenau), p. 90

Architecture of Sadness and Shadows

“Monument Funeraire, Caracterisant le Genre d’une Architecture Ensevelie”
Funerary Monument, typical of sunken architecture
Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

“Monument Funeraire,
Caracterisant

le Genre d’une Architecture
Ensevelie”

Funerary Monument,

typical of sunken architecture,
detail

“Monument Funeraire, Caracterisant le Genre des Ombres”
Funerary Monument, typical of a style of architecture of
shadows

Architecture of Sadness and Shadows

Example: Funerary monument

-Sunken architecture

-“An idea, as new as it was daring, came to me,” Boullée wrote. “I would create buildings that gave the illusion of being buried...As I considered the problem, I realized that only low and sunken lines would be appropriate. After pondering on the rule that the first element of architecture is a wall totally bare and unadorned, I decided that my sunken architecture would be exemplified in a building that was satisfactory as a whole yet gave the appearance that part of it was below ground.” (pp. 80-81)

“This type of architecture based on shadows is my own artistic discovery. It is a new road that I have opened and, if I am not mistaken, Artists will not refrain from following it.”

“it follows from these observations that to produce a sad, somber impression, it is necessary to try to present, as I did in my funerary monuments, an architectural skeleton through the use of an absolutely bare wall and to convey an impression of buried architecture by using only low, sagging proportions buried in the earth; and, finally, by using light-absorbing materials, to create a black image of an architecture of shadows outlined by even darker shadows.” p. 90

-“I can imagine nothing gloomier than a monument consisting of a plane surface, bare and unadorned, made of light-absorbent material absolutely stripped of detail, its decoration consisting of shadows outlined by still deeper shadows.” P.83

-All architectural ornamentation has disappeared, and the dark voids themselves become the decoration.

-They assume the form of a black columned temple façade, contained w/in the larger gray façade of the funerary monument.

-Impression of sadness; architecture skeleton; contrast with the vastness of the sky...

“Entrée d’un Cimetiere”
Entrance to a Cemetery

- The triangular portal dramatizes the shape of the pyramid
- The harsh silhouette against the moonlight illustrates what Boullée meant by an *architecture des ombres* (shadow)
- Immutability, noble, simple, eternal, and timeless

Entrance to a Cemetery, detail

Cenotaph in the Shape of a Pyramid

- Here Boullée has achieved an architectural form of extreme simplicity, following the dictates of pure geometry
- His conception anticipates the abstract language of forms
Simple but not dry b/c of effect of shadow
- Pyramids conjure up a melancholy picture of arid mountains and of immutability (not susceptible to change)
- Timeless geometry of purity, yearning for immutability as a constant of human history

The Palace of Justice

- The Palace of Justice rises above a basement prison
- a metaphorical image of Vice overwhelmed by the weight of justice

Palace of Justice

“It seemed to me that in designing this august palace elevated over gloomy dens of vice, I would be able . . . To present an imposing metaphor of Vice crushed under the weight of Justice.”

“ . . . To give fitting majesty to this courthouse, I have made it loom over its surroundings. It rises in such a manner that it seems part of the heavens; bathed in light, it becomes resplendent (shining brilliantly: characterized by a glowing splendor). I have appropriated the ground level for entrances to the prison as though the lowly earth were the precarious sepulcher (a place of burial) of criminals. And since architecture’s grand nobility comes from simplicity of mass, I have permitted no breaks in the façade of the building. The monument owes its special dignity to my arrangement of the decoration.” p. 65

The Big versus the Gigantic

St. Peter's, drawing of section after Michelangelo
Etienne Duperac

The big versus the gigantic

“Why then does St. Peter’s in Rome [or the St. Paul’s in London] appear much smaller than it is? This intolerable defect is due to the fact that the Architect has not given an impression of space by the mere presence of the numerous objects a large space should naturally contain but instead has reduced the overall effect by making each object of colossal proportions; and thus, instead of building *big*, as artists say, what he has built is *gigantic*.” p. 91

St. Paul’s Cathedral, interior (1675-1710)
Sir Christopher Wren

Bigness: “an impression of size has such power over our senses that even assuming that it is *repulsive*, it still arouses our *admiration*. A volcano breathing fire and death has a *repulsive beauty!*” “that an object appears large is indicative of its superior quality.”

The impression of immensity: a continuous series of visual vistas until we get an impression that we cannot count them any more

Spectacle of inconceivable space: “it is same on a balloon floating in the heavens, having lost sight of everything on earth and seeing nothing of nature but the sky. Wandering thus in immensity, in this abysmal expanse, man is *overwhelmed* by the extraordinary spectacle of inconceivable space.” p. 91

Metropolitan Cathedral, Perspective

Newton's Cenotaph

- By the end of the 18th c., many believed that Newton had discovered the absolute truth (The Cartesian view was replaced by Newtonian view)
- Boullée wrote of Newton... "Sublime mind! Vast and profound genius! Divine being! Newton!" p.83

“A Newton”

Newton's Cenotaph

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

“Cenotaphe de Newton”

Newton’s Cenotaph, plan

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

“Coupe de Cenotaphe de Newton”

Cross-section of Newton’s Cenotaph, interior night effect

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

“Vue Interieure du Cenotaphe de Newton”

Interior View of Newton’s Cenotaph

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

“Coupe du Cenotaphe de Newton”

Cross-section of Newton’s Cenotaph, interior day effect

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)

- The effects of light in this view by night are highly artificial
- A daylight effect is created by a lamp w/in an armillary sphere, suspended at the center of the globe

“I defy the most daring of our artists to suspend the sun or moon in the middle of his composition...I defy him to give us a sky like nature’ sprinkled w/glittering stars as it might be on the clearest night.”

- Boullée was less interested in realism than in the use of shadow to heighten drama and to create a mood of romance & mystery

- Interior night effect: natural light, filtering through holes in the vault, creates the illusion of stars suspended in the infinite universe.
- A coffin-shaped structure is the only material object in this cosmic space

The Mysteriousness of the Sphere

-Newton deserved to be buried in a sphere

-Why?

-The sphere is a noble form

For ex., “From whatever side we look at this shape...no trick of perspective can alter the magnificence of its perfect form.” P.35

“A sphere can be considered as incorporating all the properties of volumes. Every point on its surface is equidistant from its center. The result of this unique advantage is that from whatever angle we look at it, no optical effect can ever spoil the magnificent beauty of its shape, to our eyes, will always be perfect.

The sphere provides the solution to a problem which might be considered a paradox, if it had not been geometrically proved that a sphere is an undefinable polyhedron. This paradox is that the most infinite variety is derived from the most perfect symmetry. . .

The sphere has other advantages: it offers the greatest possible surface to the eye and this lends it majesty. It has the simplest possible form, the beauty of which derives from its uninterrupted surface; and, in addition to all these qualities, it has grace for its outline and is as smooth and flowing as it could possibly be.

(continued)

. . . The conclusion of all these observations is that a sphere is, in all respects, the image of perfection. It combines strict symmetry with the most perfect regularity and the greatest possible variety; its form is developed to the fullest extent and is the simplest that exists; its shape is outlined by the most agreeable contour and, finally, the light effects that it produces are so beautifully graduated that they could not possibly be softer, more agreeable or more varied. These unique advantages, which the sphere derives from nature, have an immeasurable hold over our senses.”

Boullée, *Essay on the Art of Architecture* (in *Boullée and Visionary Architecture* by Helen Rosenau) p. 86

-Shape of the sphere: largest surface to the eye, utmost simplicity b/c surface is flawless & endless...