ARCHITECTURE - 3

ARCHITECTS

Alberti and Brunelleschi

Brunelleschi's Passion for Lightness:

A comparison between Alberti and Brunelleschi, the two nearly contemporary architects, is extremely interesting and instructive. Both were keen students of the antique, both knew their Rome, both employed the characteristic elements of classical architecture. And yet it would be difficult to discover two architects whose work is more completely dissimilar. Brunelleschi's churches are divided into a nave and aisles by rows of tall, slender pillars supporting round arches. The details are classical and so correct that they might have been executed by Roman workmen. But the general design is not Roman, but Romanesque. The churches are simply "more spidery" versions of the eleventh-century basilicas. All is airiness and lightness; there is even an air of insecurity about these

1. Leone Battista Alberti (1404-1472), Italian architect, painter, author and musician.
   Filippo Brunelleschi (1379-1446), Italian architect.
interiors; so slender are the pillars, so much free space is to be seen.

Even to the enormous dome of Santa Maria del Fiore Brunelleschi contrives to impart an extraordinary lightness. The huge mass seems to hang — as if by a miracle — aerially from its eight ribs of marble. But a dome, however light you make it, is essentially an affair of masses. Brunelleschi was dealing here with masses; it could not be escaped. The result was that, treating the mass of the dome as far as was possible in terms of light, strong, leaping lines, he contrived to impart to his work an elegance and an aerial strength such as have never been equalled in any other dome. Brunelleschi studied the architecture of the Romans; but its majestic massiveness did not appeal to him.

Alberti's Fondness for Massiveness:

While Brunelleschi's is essentially an architecture of lines, Alberti's, on the other hand, is of masses. He took from the Romans their fundamental conception of masses and developed it, with refinements, for modern, Christian uses. In Huxley's opinion, he was the better and truer architect of the two, for Huxley, personally, likes massiveness and an air of solidity. While practitioners of the visual arts and, presumably, those who
appreciate them, must have some kind of feeling for form as such, not all are interested in the same kind of forms. The aesthetic passion of one artist, or one art lover, is solidity; another is moved only by linear arabesques on a flat scale. But passion may be misplaced. Excessive love of three-dimensional solidity may be carried beyond the field of painting, as in Michelangelo. Too great a fondness for linear effects may undo a sculptor as sculptor; the famous Diana attributed to Goujon² (but probably by Benvenuto Cellini) is one of these statues conceived in the flat. In the same way, architects should not be too exclusively interested in lines, unless you want the too slender, spidery elegance of Brunelleschi's work.³

Alberti, says Huxley elsewhere, was the noblest Roman of them all, the true and only Roman. Alberti and his followers in the Renaissance lived the ideal Roman life. They put Plutarch into their architecture, just as painters like Piero⁴ put him into their paintings.

1. Jean Goujon (c. 1515-1568), French sculptor of the Renaissance.
2. Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571), Italian artist, metal worker and sculptor.
3. Piero 'Rimini and Alberti': Along the Road; Chatto & Windus, 1948; pp.161-64.
If Alberti is known to be a worshipper of what is admirable in man, Brunelleschi is remembered as the architect who suspended on eight thin flying ribs of marble the lightest of all the domes and the loveliest.¹

Sir Christopher Wren

Proportion in Wren’s Architecture:

Wren² says Huxley, was a good architect. In all that he designed in his maturity we see a faultless proportion, felicitous massing and contrasting of forms. He conceived his buildings as three-dimensional designs which should be seen, from every point of view, as harmoniously proportioned wholes. But he was also a wonderful maker of façades; witness his Middle Temple³ gateway and his houses in King’s Bench Walk. In his great masterpiece of St. Paul’s every part of the building, seen from within or without, seems to stand in a certain satisfying and harmonious relation to every other part. The same is true

2. Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723), English scientist and architect; rebuilt St. Paul’s and many City churches after the Great Fire.
3. Middle Temple is one of the Inns of Court in London. To become a member of the English Bar it is necessary, besides passing certain examinations in law, to be admitted as a member of and to keep twelve terms (extending over a period of three years) at an Inn of Court.
even of the smallest works belonging to the period of Wren's maturity. In its smaller scale and different plane, such a building as Rochester Guildhall is as beautiful, because as harmonious in the relation of all its parts, as St. Paul's.

Wren's Resource and Originality:

Huxley also speaks of Wren's other purely architectural qualities. He was, to begin with, an engineer of inexhaustible resource, always to be relied upon to find the best possible solution to any problem, from blowing up the ruins of old St. Paul's to providing the new with a dome at once beautiful and safe. As a designer he exhibited the same practical ingenuity. No architect has known how to make so much of a difficult site and cheap materials. The man who built the City churches was a practical genius of no common order. He was also an artist of profoundly original mind, who could combine the accepted features of classical Renaissance architecture into new designs that were entirely English and his own. The steeples of the City churches provide us with an obvious example of this originality. His domestic architecture, that wonderful application of classical principles to the best in the native tradition — is another.

The Work of a Gentleman:

But Wren's most characteristic quality — which
gives to his work its own peculiar character and charm — is a quality rather moral than aesthetic. Of Chelsea Hospital, Carlyle once remarked that it was "obviously the work of a gentleman." Indeed, everything that Wren did was the work of a gentleman; one who valued dignity and restraint and who, respecting himself, respected also humanity; one who desired that men and women should live in a manner befitting their proud human title; one who despised meanness and oddity as much as vulgar ostentation; one who admired reason and order, who distrusted all extravagance and excess; in short, a finished product of an old and ordered civilization.

Wren and the Baroque Artists:

Wren, the restrained and dignified gentleman, Huxley adds, stands out most clearly when we compare him with his Italian contemporaries. The baroque artists of the seventeenth century were interested above everything in the new, the startling, the astonishing; they strained after impossible grandeur, unheard of violence, more suitable for theatrical cardboard than for stone. This baroque theatricality was vastly different from Wren's sober restraint. Though a master of the grand style, Wren never dreamed of building merely for effect. St. Paul's is a monument of temperance and chastity. His great
palace at Hampton Court is a country gentleman's house — more spacious, of course, and with statelier rooms and more impressive vistas — but still a house meant to be lived in by someone who was a man as well as a king. But if his palaces might have housed, without incongruity, a well-bred gentleman, conversely his common houses, however small, were always dignified enough to be the homes of kings.

The London of Wren's Dreams:

London, says Gumbril Senior in Antic Hay, would have been a much finer city if they had allowed Wren to carry out his plans of rebuilding it after the Great Fire. But, unfortunately, they did not allow him to, as they did not know how to think or to profit by experience. To quote Gumbril Senior: "Wren offered them open spaces and broad streets; he offered them sunlight and air and cleanliness; he offered them beauty, order and grandeur. He offered to build for the imagination and the ambitious spirit of man, so that even the most bestial, vaguely and

1. The Hampton Court Palace, on the Thames, fifteen miles south-west of London, is one of the greatest historical monuments in the United Kingdom, and contains some of the finest examples of Tudor architecture and of Sir Christopher Wren's work.

2. 'Sir Christopher Wren': On the Margin; Chatto & Windus, 1948; pp.175-81.
remotely, as they walked those streets, might feel that they were of the same race — or very nearly — as Michelangelo; that they too might feel themselves, in spirit at least, magnificent, strong and free. He offered them all these things; he drew a plan for them, walking in peril among the still smouldering ruins. But they preferred to re-erect the old intricate squalor; they preferred the medieval darkness and crookedness and beastly irregular quaintness; they preferred holes and crannies and winding tunnels; they preferred foul smells, sunless stagnant air, phthisis and rickets; they preferred ugliness and pettiness and dirt; they preferred the muddled human scale, the scale of the sickly body, not of the mind. Miserable fools!

After Wren:

In the course of the last two hundred years which have elapsed since his death, Huxley writes elsewhere, Wren's successors have often departed, with melancholy results, from his tradition and forgotten, in their architecture, the art of being gentleman. Infected by a touch of the baroque folie de grandeur, the architects of the

eighteenth century built houses in imitation of Versailles and Caserta—huge stage houses, impossible to live in.

The architects of the nineteenth century sinned in a diametrically opposite way—towards meaness and a negation of art. Preoccupied with details, they created the nightmare architecture of 'features'. The sham early Victorian Gothic yielded at the end of the century to a different affectation. Big houses were built with all the irregularity and more than the 'quaintness' of cottages; suburban villas looked like machine-made imitations of the Tudor peasants hut.

Today, however, there are signs that architecture is coming back to that sane and dignified tradition of which Wren was the great exponent. Architects are building houses for gentlemen to live in. The most profound religious emotions have been expressed in Gothic architecture. Human ambitions and aspirations have been reflected by the Romans and the Italians of the baroque.

1. Versailles, French town, eleven miles south-west of Paris. From 1678 to 1769, it was the principal residence of the kings of France. On the site of a hunting lodge of Louis XIII, Louis XIV had built the magnificent palace of Versailles.

2. Caserta, Italian town, fifteen miles, north-northeast of Naples. It was only a village until the King of the Two Sicilies built the grand royal palace here in 1752.
But it is in England that the golden mean of reasonableness and decency — the practical philosophy of the civilized man — has received its most elegant and dignified expression. Sir Christopher Wren may be said to have preached on the subject of civilization a number of sermons in stone.¹

¹ 'Sir Christopher Wren': On the Harzian; Chatto & Windus, 1948, pp.181-83.