

Editorial
by
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The Words and Silence of Architecture

Words of Classicism

Of the twenty-four Chinese Schools of Architecture the Beijing Tsinghua University School of Architecture has long ranked first in merit. Establishing relationships with its professors is an important aspiration for us Westerners, but also for the Chinese academics of the other twenty-three schools. The main building is rather modern, not very large, along the right side of the entrance to the university city. Entering for the first time, you feel a slight sense of apprehension, as you are greeted to a very bright and pleasant two floor high rectangular hall, with white walls. If you are new to the environment, in that space you will certainly require a few minutes to orient yourself or to wait for someone to accompany you to your appointment. In that brief wait, looking around as if searching for a familiar appearance, inevitably noting a faithful copy of an ionic column on the left wall: a sample of the Classical Order reproduced in white concrete, complete with all its parts: *krepidoma*, base, shaft, capital, epistyle, frieze and *cornice*. If you were an Italian architect you would certainly approach it and examine it as if you were competent, while you feel that subtle awe is transformed into a satisfied sense of cultural superiority: looking at the base of the column you enumerate its parts in the mind – two *tori* separated by a *scotia*. “Right”, you think, “since the order represented also had the *frieze* above the epistyle; it is the Attic version of the Order that came from the Asiatic Ionia”. And perhaps to yourself you continue with a certain relief: it is from the age of Pericles, therefore, when his architects harmonize the orders of the different Helladics on the Athenian Acropolis to signify the unity of the Greek families under the guidance of Athens. Reassured by the depth of your historical knowledge and the obvious pre-eminence of your culture even in so foreign a land, you return with renewed spirit towards the center of the hall. Surely, you then note, on the opposite wall, the faithful model of an

ancient Chinese structural element, represented in the same dimensions as the Ionian Order just examined, certainly placed there so as to represent the architecture of the Middle Kingdom's leveled challenge to the proportional and symbolic law of our classical architecture. When, after several trips to China, you have finally become better acquainted with the history of ancient and modern Chinese architecture, you will probably return with a more serene and serious spirit to compare the two opposing Orders in the hall of the Beijing School of Architecture. Prompted by the deferent ardor of a neophyte, perhaps you will really wish to examine the Chinese Order of the Tang Dynasty more carefully, represented there in white concrete, in three dimensions. If you do, please have with you the book entitled *Chinese Architecture, A Pictorial History* written in 1946. You will easily find it in the school library; you can compare the features of that example of Chinese Order with the extremely accurate drawings illustrating the most minute details and the rich nomenclature, revealing the vocabulary of architecture and the syntax which that Order is composed of. That extraordinary book concludes the heroic studies and establishes the immense glory of its author, Liang Sicheng, the Master of the Masters of modern Chinese architecture, the founder of the Beijing School of Architecture, the discoverer of the universal "classicism" of Chinese architecture which, according to its passionate illusion, has always been ready to provide the model of structural rationalism that, in the forties, despite horrendous conflicts and tremendous revolutions, "resonated with both the classical system in the West and the burgeoning modernist architecture being constructed around the world".

Silence of the Sublime

"Qal'at Sim'an should absolutely be visited in the beginning of spring. In Syria it starts very early". Paul Cuneo urged me while entrusting me with three large containers of photos on the architecture of the vanished Christian cities of northern Syria. He corrected himself, "the Vanished Cities of Aleppo". "Call it that when you talk to the minister". Beautiful black and white photos, he took himself in his pilgrimages to study the Near East. Abandoned churches, deserted villages, solitary walls of monasteries beautifully built in light colored limestone but not white,

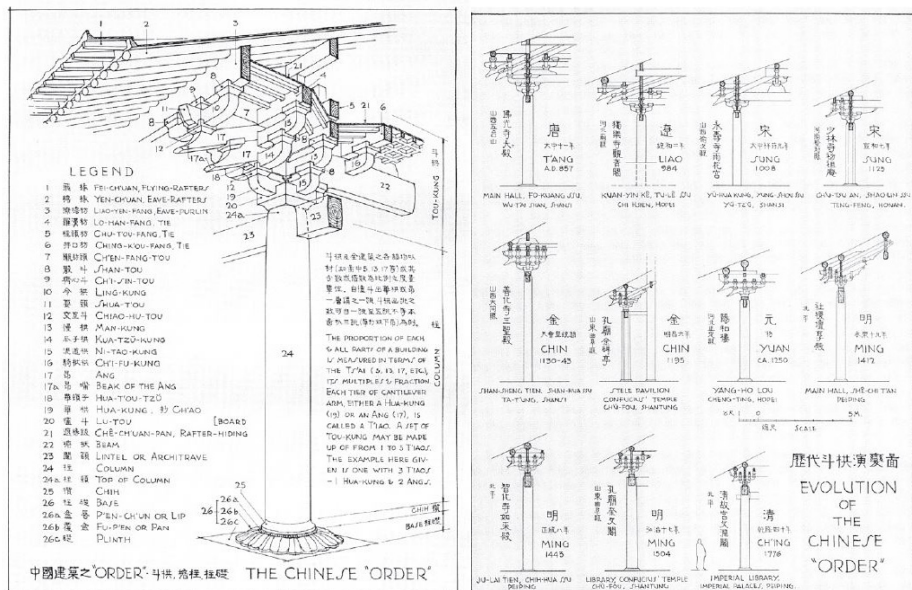
“slightly amber,” said Paolo, “... the sun brings it to life”. Like travertine? I asked. “Softer. A softer patina ...” he replied. He spoke to me with that seemingly hasty look with which he seemed to want to diminish the importance of what he said. The idea was for me to ask the Minister of Tourism of the Republic of Syria – still called United Arab Republic then – backing for a detailed study of some of those forgotten wonders, lost between Aleppo, the lake of Apamea and the Turkish border, towards Antioch. “There are more than three hundred small towns, Byzantine stone villages, fortified monasteries...” Three hundred? I said, “Yes, perhaps more than three hundred,” he answered “abandoned after the end of the Crusader kingdoms. They resisted a long time. But the old tolerance between Muslims and Christians was now but a memory. Byzantium no longer counts. The Venetians saw to that with the fourth Crusade... And then, to decidedly conquer that corner of Syria, the Arabs destroyed the irrigation system.” We left the room where he kept his most precious portion of his library - foldable metal shelves, full of well-classified books – and sat down at the table in the next small room, for reading and working. We began to browse the photos gathered in the three containers. Paolo continued: “Stone here, as in Armenia - and also in Georgia I would say - cut perfectly in regular blocks, sculpted with precision to reproduce cornices and austere decorations, seems to have suggested to the builders to not take into account the spatial and plastic development of Byzantine architecture, but follow the constructive logic of the stone wall to its extremes. Some scholars call this architecture Romanesque, for the constructive vigor which resembles – dimly – the Pugliese Romanesque or that of Lanfranco ... but it is much older; and it’s something else.” While he was talking, he would pause from time to time on a detail evidenced by a photograph while quickly flipping through the pages to show with his images what he meant. “Late Ancient” I took the liberty to add, continuing: “rather than classical Romanesque – I’m thinking of Antelami – a natural extension of the experiences of the Late Antiquity it seems.” I indicated on the photos he was showing me, the linear development of stone cornices on the stone facades in perfect continuity, with no interruption even when they were raised tracing semicircular arches resting on simpler capitals. It was as if the innovation of the arch

set directly on the column die – which I had admired at Leptis Magna – was the first step so here, after three centuries, in the land of Syria and much of the Byzantine East, another “modernity” was to be attempted, while in Constantinople and Ravenna the spatial revolution of San Sergio and Bacco, of San Vitale, of Santa Sofia was to be shaped. Talking about architecture with Paolo Cuneo was a gentle endeavour. We continued unassumingly; he, of course, knew infinitely more than me. After graduation he had dedicated himself intensely, I would say almost exclusively, with a group of friends – Tommaso Breccia, Ludovico Micara – to study in the field of the historical architecture of the Near and Middle East. A careful, unpublished, study of a true scientist in the history of architecture. I, while inhabiting that same geographical space, tried to devote myself instead to the much more artisan craft of the architect. But Paolo and I had attended the faculty of architecture in Rome together. Therefore classmates: same professors, same books, same dawning intellectual passions. Even after ten years we understood each other on the fly; this is why Paolo let me interject his conversation. He knew in advance what I would say and kindly tolerated. However, he was able to interrupt me to return to Qal‘at Sim‘an, with which he had begun. He opened another container of photographs and said: “San Simeone Stilita” almost solemnly rotating the hardcover of the book that contained only photos dedicated to that famous sanctuary-fortress. “Qal‘at Sim‘an as the Syrians say, the fortress of Saint Simeon the Elder,” he added, “Mar Sim‘an, San Simeone, as the Lebanese say. You must absolutely go and visit it. But at the beginning of spring, I insist; which comes very soon in Syria.” I went there March 15, in fact. Thirty years later. Flowers: that was the reason for that recommendation. On the narrow ridge where there still are natural stone ruins of the sanctuary, in mid-March the cherry and almond trees and the Judas trees are all in perfect bloom; pink, white and the particular lilac color of the *Cercis Siliquastrum* inhabit the space that extends between the baptistery, the four converging churches and the remains of the monastery. The blooming trees, slender not tall, lined up on the right and on the left of the natural terrace and rest, as if to protect themselves, against the backdrop of Aleppo pines delimiting the West and East borders of that fateful ridge – for centuries a war-torn

border between Christianity and Islam. The pines are all bow dramatically towards the East: the great wind from the Mediterranean blows against the East, constantly and in vain. I would like someone among the few who will read me, when the war is over, to visit Syria and even go to the sanctuary of San Simeone the Elder; it is not far from Aleppo. Go there in the spring, of course, that starts very early there. The poetry of the place – I am sure – will be admired; the full presence of history and heaven and earth, and the extraordinary architectural strength of the most famous of those monuments: the four converging churches, the baptistery unit that I particularly love, absolute masterpiece of the ritual stone architecture of the ancient Mediterranean. I need speak about it again. But I want to recommend the new pilgrim of architecture to reserve enough time to explore what remains of the monastery, seemingly almost only an accessory to the large cluster of churches. I entered almost by chance coming from within the ecclesiastical halls. I found myself inside a large rectangular area delineated by the remains of the cloister, built with large regular stones. The stone worked to perfection in large blocks, its smoothness, the sense of mass and great stability that it transmits even lying ruined on the ground, the color it reflects under the sun, everything in that site brings you back to the memory and senses of the experience of visiting the great archaic monuments of Greece and Magna Graecia. In fact, it as if it wants to send a message from even more remote times: the South-East corner of that dismantled cloister awaits you at the back of the courtyard as an architectural scene that enchants and terrifies. Looking at it silhouetted so against the sky, I recalled three Greek words from my school days – I had a terribly neoclassical professor: “ὕψος μεγαλοφροσύνης ἀπήχημα...” I did not continue with Greek. But I remembered roughly the translation ... “sublime is resonance of a great soul ... even without words it may happen that you admire the naked thought, in itself alone, because of its intrinsic greatness.” I was truly before that naked thought, architecture without polished words that accompany and explain and make the trilithic system of classicism sing; and they transmit its spirit. No reference to bases, cornices, capitals, nor to one of the many architectural structures mediating between vertical and horizontal elements; not a hint, then, to the formal liturgy that

officialiates the change of the static function of the stone in the same architectural party where, if raised so as to constitute a pillar, ponderously manages each load, while seemingly unable to conceal an inner groan if placed horizontally between two supports and subjected, then, to tractions and cuts for which it is ready by nature only to a small extent. Nothing. Before me stood a wall made of three overlapping thrilithon orders, all that remained of a large structure once inhabited by monks and pilgrims; a two-foot thick wall over forty feet, made up of large similar stones arranged in trilithic rectangles – windows? Facing overlapping arcades? – Raised like a heroic petrified banners to celebrate now that collective great-hearted soul, which – at the moment when antiquity was falling apart because of its own enzymes – to continue it had to start over, nullified symbols and words, retreating with serene conviction from the world of the architectural Orders to that of the constructive order, which no longer bears to hide the native accents of the construction material under the drapery of a refined, but weary universal speech. I approached the monumental scene almost cautiously and realized that only the pillars of the first order, the one that stood out on the ground, had a trace of a capital. What am I saying? They bore, sculpted right under the first oriented stone, the simulacrum of two human arms – as I interpreted them – like the limbs of a Telamon, just hinted to remind us all that every stone that becomes a supportive element of architecture conceals within itself – and signifies – the destiny of man: that is the measure of all things. And is called to support them.

The Architectural Order therefore, together with the idea of constructive order, declined in every language, in every culture – from Greece to China and beyond – in its universality, in its glory, in its refusal and tenacious survival, in its conscious use, implicit or necessary, therefore, is worth more than just an issue of a magazine that wants to talk about architecture, such as ours. For this reason, in the meantime, we continue to speak of it in this issue, the second which, directed by Ludovico Micara, opens to wider horizons. With the pledge to return and speak of it once more as soon as possible.



In alto: Liang Sicheng, *L'evoluzione dell'Ordine cinese*, pubblicato in *Chinese Architecture. A Pictorial History* – scritto nel 1946 – a cura di Wilma Fairbank, MIT Press, 1984.
In basso: Chiostro del Monastero di San Simeone Stilita il Vecchio, Siria.