



## It is not geniuses what we need now

JOSÉ ANTONIO CODERCH, published in Domus magazine, November, 1961.

In writing this it is neither my intention nor my wish to join the ranks of those who take pleasure in talking and theorising about Architecture. However, after twenty years in the profession, circumstances which I could not have foreseen have obliged me to give definite form to my points of view and in all humility write the following:

An old and famous American architect, if I remember correctly, said to another much younger architect who asked him for advice: "Open your eyes properly, look; it's much simpler than you think". He also said: "Behind every building you see there's a man whom you don't". A man; he didn't even say an architect.

No, I don't think that it's geniuses we need now. I think geniuses are events, not goals or ends. Neither do I believe that we need pontification about architecture, or grand doctrine, or prophecy, always a dubious affair. We still have something with a living tradition within our reach, as well as plenty of moral tenets concerning ourselves and our craft or profession as architects (and I use these terms in their best traditional sense). It is necessary for us to make good use of the little that still remains of a tradition of construction and, above all, morality in an age in which the most beautiful words have lost virtually all their real, true, significance.

It is necessary that the thousands upon thousands of architects around the world think less about Architecture with a capital A, or money, or the cities of the year 2000, and more about the job of being an architect. Let them work with a rope tied to one leg, to stop them from staying too far from the earth where they have their roots, and the people they know best, and let them stand on a solid base of dedication, goodwill and integrity (honour).Is

It is my conviction that any reasonably gifted and trained architect of today who is capable of understanding this would also be easily capable of producing work which is truly alive. For me, that is the most important thing, far more than any other consideration or aim which might have the *appearance* of belonging to a higher order.

I believe that a new and authentic living tradition will emerge, made up of works which, although they may differ in many respects, will have been carried out with a profound understanding of all that is fundamental and a great and fine awareness, unconcerned with the final result, which is, fortunately, always outwith our control and is never an end in itself but a consequence.

I believe that in order to achieve these things it will first of all be necessary to get rid of a lot of patently false ideas and a lot of empty words and notions, and work one by one with that goodwill which reveals itself as individual action and example rather than doctrinaire posturing. I feel that the best teaching is by example; by working in continual watchfulness so that human weakness, the right to make mistakes -a cloak which covers a multitude of things- should not be confused with the conscious superficiality, immorality and cold calculation of the self-seeking careerist.

I conceive of society of as a kind of pyramid, with the best and least numerous at the top and the masses forming the broad base. There is also an intermediate zone comprising people of every kind and condition who are aware that there are certain higher values and who choose to act in accordance with this awareness: these people are the true nobility on whom everything depends. They enrich the summit of society above them by their actions and their words, and the base by their example, since the masses enrich themselves only out of respect or through imitation. This nobility has practically disappeared nowadays, the greater part of it having given in to materialism and the cult of success. My parents used to tell me that a gentleman, a noble person, was someone who did not do certain things, even although the law, church and public opinion might approve or permit them. Each one of us, if we acknowledge this fact, might individually constitute a new nobility. This is an immediate problem, so pressing that it must be tackled at once. We must make a start without delay, and carry on advancing slowly and steadily without losing heart. The main thing is to make a start, to begin the work; then, and only then, will we be able to talk about it.

In place of money, success, the excess of property or profit, in place of

superficiality, hurry, the absence of spiritual life or awareness, we must set dedication, craft, goodwill, time, our daily bread and, above all, love, which is acceptance and giving, not possession and domination. This is what we must cling to.

Architectural culture or training tends to be thought of as seeing, teaching or knowing in greater or lesser depth the achievements, the external signs of spiritual richness of the great masters. The same procedures are applied to the classification of our craft as are employed (external signs of economic wealth) in our materialist society. Then we bemoan the fact that there are no longer any great architects under sixty years of age, that the majority of architects are bad, that the new housing developments all over the world are always without exception antihuman, that our old cities are being destroyed, and that houses and whole towns which look just like film sets are being put up all along our beautiful Mediterranean coasts.

It is something of an oddity that so much is said and published about the external signs of the great masters (very valuable signs, without doubt), and yet their moral value is scarcely mentioned. Is it not strange that their weaknesses are spoken or written about as if they were curiosities or mistakes, while their position with regard to life or to their work is hidden away as if it were something forbidden or of no real interest?

Is it not also curious that here we have Gaudí, so close to us (I personally know people who worked with him), and so much is said about his work and so little about his moral position and his dedication?

More curious still is the contrast between the great value placed on Gaudí's work, and the silence or ignorance on the question of the morality or of how to approach the problem of Gaudí, which is most definitely accessible to us.

Practically the same thing happens with the great masters of our own time. Their buildings are admired - or rather, the forms of the buildings and nothing else, with no examination of them to discover what they have within them, which is precisely what is within our reach. Of course, this would involve accepting a ceiling or limit on our own capabilities, and this is not done, because almost all the architects now want to make a lot of money, or become the new Le Corbusier, the very same year they complete their course and graduate.

We have an example of this in the case of an architect, newly qualified, who has already published a species of manifesto, printed on expensive paper, on the strength of having designed a chair, if we can call it that.

The true spiritual culture of our profession has never been entrusted to more than a few individuals. The attitude which makes it possible to gain access to that culture is available to almost all of us, but we refuse to accept this, just as we refuse to accept that cultured demeanour which ought to be obligatory and part of everyone's consciousness.

In earlier times the architect had solid foundations on which to stand. The majority of the people accepted a great many things as being good, or at any rate inevitable, and the organisation of society, with regard to social as well as economic, religious, political, and other problems, evolved only slowly. At the same time, there was a greater spirit of dedication, less selfish pride, and a living tradition to serve as a basis. For all their shortcomings, the higher orders of society had a clearer idea of their mission, and they were rarely wrong in their choice of the architects of value; in this way, the culture of the spirit was disseminated naturally. The little cities grew, as plants do, in different forms, but slowly, filled with a collective life. There was scarcely anything superficial, or slapdash or irresponsible. Work of all kinds was carried out with a content of human value which is an exceptional rarity nowadays. At times, but by no means often, growth brought problems with it, but happily without that sensation -which we cannot escape these days- that it is extremely difficult to forecast the evolution of society except in the very short term.

Nowadays, the ruling classes have lost their sense of mission, and the blood aristocracy, as well as the aristocracy of wealth, to say nothing of the intelligentsia, the political elite and the aristocracy of the Church, or churches, with the exception of a very few individuals, make a decisive contribution - through their uselessness, their greed for wealth, their ambition for power and their absence of concern for their responsibilities- to architecture's present malaise.

At the same time, the conditions which form the basis for our work are also in continual change. There are problems of many kinds -religious, moral, social, economic; problems with education, with the family, with sources of energy, and so on- which can quite unforeseeably change the face and the structure of our society, and bring the threat of violent transformations whose significance we are unable to grasp, which prevent us from making any satisfactory predictions for the more long-term future.

As I said above, we lack the clear, living tradition which is so necessary for most of us. The experiments carried out up till now, although in some cases they have contributed much, are not in themselves sufficient to show that way forward which the great majority of practising architects all over the world are lost without. In the absence of that clear living tradition, all too often a solution is sought in some kind of formalism, in the rigorous application of some method or routine and in mannerisms lifted from one or other of the grand old masters of present-day architecture, but devoid of its original spirit, removed from its original circumstances, and, above all, carefully hidden behind grand words and magnificent phrases, our great irresponsibility (which is often nothing more than a lack of thought), our ambition and our superficiality. It is naive to believe, as some do, that the ideals and the practice of our profession can be condensed into slogans such as sun, light, air, green spaces, social considerations and the rest. A formalist and dogmatic basis -especially if it is prejudiced- is a bad thing in itself, except under very rare and extreme circumstances. All of which suggests, it seems to me, that there should be some common feature discernible in the diversity of different paths followed by all of the conscientious architects, some one thing present in each of us; at which point I return to the beginning of this piece of writing, without wishing to lecture to anyone, with profound and sincere conviction.