Autistic modernism

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One of the more obvious kinds of voice to be found in a building comes from the architectural language deployed by the architect. That language may be modern or old-fashioned, engaging or distant, loud or soft. When a second architect extends or adapts a building, they have to decide how to respond to the voice that they find: whether to use the same language, or a modified version of it, or to use a different one.

In the past, this was a private matter for the architect, or the architect and their client. Today, particularly in the case of an existing building of significance or architectural interest, the choice of architectural language can assume a public aspect, forming part of a discussion involving not just the client but also the public, public agencies, pressure groups and amenity societies. Today's architects are used to the idea that they will have to negotiate their designs with professional representatives of various bureaucracies who may hold firm views about the right and the wrong way to approach existing buildings.

The language of architecture at the beginning of the twenty-first century is eclectic - confused, even. The banalities of post-modernism have been discarded, but no strong and coherent alternative has emerged. If there is a prevailing language, though, it is that of modernism, in the broadest sense - even if that underlying voice is increasingly presented in new forms.

On the face of it, modernism is an architectural style which, when applied in a relatively pure form to extensions or conversions, cannot easily establish a relationship with what is there already. One would think, therefore, that such an approach might not be easily accepted by those who have more interest in the old than the new. Oddly, though, a strange sort of consensus will often be found in which modernist interventions, if implemented with exquisite taste, will be felt to be more 'appropriate' as a response to existing situations of various kinds than something stronger and more personal, with an individual voice.

Yet in its engagement with the past, the language of modernism remains problematic. Modernism in its purest form has such a strong intellectual and ethical base, and generates such distinctive visual imagery, that it can at times seem almost autistic in its relations with buildings and neighbourhoods that pre-date modernism. That intellectual and ethical base was in its origins often expressed in terms of superseding the architecture of the past rather than engaging with it, and such sentiments are still echoed today in the more provocative statements of the *'épater les bourgeois'* tendency still to be found within the architectural avant garde.

I have always been fascinated by those English architects who have been prepared to plough their own furrow and experiment with architectural languages which clearly derive from those of the country's past yet are not simply reviving a style from the past. A tradition of strong and distinctive personal voices of this kind can be traced through the last forty or fifty years of English architecture. Architects such as George Pace, William Whitfield and Michael Hopkins have, successively, been drawn to qualities of mass and solidity in architecture that are difficult to realise within the canonic languages of modernism, and have as a result been able to design in the context of historic buildings a way that establishes a clear visual relationship between old and new. In each case, however, the results have been inventive, original and related equally strongly to the architect's own personal voice.

George Pace's **Palace Green Library** at Durham, hailed by some as a masterpiece on its completion in 1966, today passes largely unnoticed as part of the range of stone buildings which link cathedral and castle in a group which, Pevsner wrote, '..can only be compared to Avignon and Prague'. A heroic and masterly example of 'both-and' architecture, its modernist planning strategy, with a clearly articulated circulation tower looming over the river valley, is nevertheless not so far in its spirit from the

medieval architecture which surrounds it. The eclectic language, which pays close attention to the spirit of Durham's older buildings, allows this connection to be made readily in the mind of the viewer.

William Whitfield's **St Albans Cathedral Chapter House** (1982) is a comparable example of a 'strong' response to a powerful existing building. Its impressive solidity is clearly inspired by the medieval architecture of the cathedral, which is of the solid rather than soaring variety. Yet while there is little in Whitfield's building that is drawn from the language of modernism, nor is there much that is taken literally from the architecture of the past. The architecture is relaxed about making use of the structural properties of reinforced concrete, but exposed concrete, for example, is beautifully crafted in a manner that might have been appreciated by medieval masons.

Michael Hopkins is an architect who, from about the time of his projects for Lords Cricket Ground and Portcullis House, attracted the opprobrium of some critics, who felt that the new-found interest in tectonic qualities - and thus in history - was a betrayal of what they thought was represented by his earlier high-tech projects. To me, the later projects are far more interesting in their more complex responses.

His **Manchester City Art Gallery** project (2001) provided a major extension to Charles Barry's original nineteenth century Art Gallery and Athenaeum buildings, completing the urban block. The project makes an interesting contrast with Richard Meier's Frankfurt Museum of Applied Arts, which also extended an existing architecture of calm cubic volumes - in this case, a nineteenth century villa - with further cubic volumes. The planning strategies of the two buildings are similar: in each case, a rational and seemingly obvious, yet skilful, planning strategy suggested by what was there already.

The approach to architectural language, however, is rather different. Meier's architecture does little to modulate or inflect the modernist language he had already developed in other projects elsewhere. Hopkins, by contrast, adapts a language of expressed structure with infill panels used in earlier projects to sit comfortably with Barry's solid stonework. In each case smooth planes of stone are contrasted with carefully articulated detail. The interiors of the building, as is characteristic of Hopkins' best projects, demonstrate at least as much tectonic quality as the exterior – something rarely achieved today when buildings are increasingly stuffed with the paraphernalia of mechanical servicing. They offer a clear and straightforward reading of contained volumes adding to and comparable with Barry's, linked by open glazed connections which unite the parts – contrasted with the much more ambiguous relationships of Meier's project.

Many architects respond to the challenge of a strong existing voice with the safe and tasteful neutrality of modernism. The examples I have given suggest to me that it is possible for serious architects to develop stronger and more characterful responses to the voices that they find in existing buildings which are at the same time original and, in a relatively clear manner, derived from what has gone before. Such approaches, I believe, make many architects and critics nervous because of the perceived dangers of errors of taste, or descent into pastiche or kitsch. To such people, if there is to be a 'strong' rather than a 'polite' response, with a distinctive voice of its own, then one such as that to be found in Herzog and de Meuron's Tate Modern extension project (2006) - which proposes striking architectural imagery which is largely unrelated either to the original building or to the architects' own earlier conversion of it - is to be preferred.

Post-modernism was an architectural movement the stated intentions of which had something in common with the approaches referred to above. Yet the output of po-mo in England is now seen as adding up to little more than thin and trivial gimmickry, and its defining projects, with one or two honourable exceptions, already look as dated as the period red braces of the City stockbrokers of Mrs Thatcher's Britain.

In what way do these projects which I admire differ from the now largely despised flurry of the post-modern movement? The answers lie in a number of areas: the seriousness of the intentions

of the architects and their clients, and of the programme; the site-specific nature of the response; and in the quality and the solidity of the results. I believe that the examples I have given show that there are architects who can listen to the voices that they find in existing buildings and engage with them not in order to imitate them but as a part of the 'usable past' - in a way that was always part of the architect's working method in the past.

Government planning policies in England set store by 'local distinctiveness' - the idea that architecture should be place-specific, in contrast to the 'anywhere and nowhere' housing built all over England by volume housebuilders. As with so much planning policy, thoughtful architects find themselves caught up in the consequences of a policy intended to deal with thoughtlessness. Yet while such policies respond to a popular desire for continuity and familiarity, examples such as those given above show that a search for rootedness is not incompatible with invention, creativity and architectural integrity.

Just as modernism has been critically re-assessed and now flourishes again as the architectural language of the establishment in spite of its egregious failures, there is scope to reconsider the opportunities for an architecture that avoids both the autistic qualities of the purer forms of modernism and the superficiality of historicism – that is, an architecture which achieves a distinctive voice connecting it with the past not through abstruseness and metaphor, but by plain and direct, but inventive, reference to visual precedent.