

"Newness" and "Age-Value" in Alois Riegl

Alois Riegl's essay "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin" sheds interesting light on the changing connotations of the words *modern* and *historical*.¹

The categories Riegl uses in this essay took shape at the dawn of what has recently come to be called "modernism"—at a time when the artistic avant-garde of Vienna was calling for an art and architecture which would reflect modern life. Although his own purposes were limited to the theoretical and institutional problems associated with the preservation of artistic monuments, his remarks are clearly influenced by the historical context in which he lived and are, at the same time, sufficiently general for it to be possible to apply them to the contemporary situation in architecture.

Riegl distinguishes among three kinds of response to artistic works of the past. Such works may be interpreted as *intentional monuments*, as *unintentional monuments*, or as possessing *age-value*. He defines "age-value" as that which is "rooted purely in its value as memory . . . [which] springs from our appreciation of the time which has elapsed since [the work] was made and which has burdened it with traces of age." He continues:

These monuments are nothing more than indispensable catalysts which trigger in the beholder a sense of the life cycle, of the emergence of the particular from the general and

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its gradual but inevitable dissolution back into the general. This immediate emotional effect depends on neither scholarly knowledge nor historical education.

He sets these categories in juxtaposition to two further concepts: that of the *Kunstwollen* (which attributes to works of the past its own artistic values) and something he variously calls "newness," "completeness," and "essential art-value" (which he defines as the essential quality of all new art of whatever period).

The notions of "age-value" and "newness" seem particularly apposite to the problems of contemporary architecture. Although Riegl attributes "newness" to all historical work when new, it is difficult to avoid the impression that he had in mind the ideas and work of contemporaries like Otto Wagner, and one is tempted to extend the concept to the modern movement which followed. The justification for this lies in his remark: "In our modern view, the new artifact requires flawless integrity of form and color as well as of style . . . *the truly modern work must recall . . . earlier works as little as possible*" (my italics). Therefore there should be "newness-value and the overwhelming aesthetic power it assumes whenever the circumstances are favorable."

Riegl himself establishes a sort of complementarity between this notion of "newness" and that of "age-value." He says that recognition of age-value depends on its contrast with new and modern artifacts:

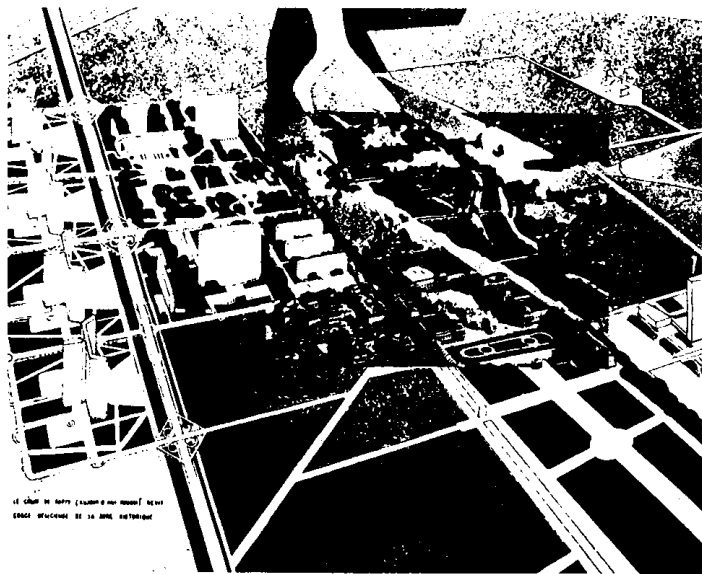
From man we expect accomplished artifacts as symbols of a necessary process of human production; on the other hand, from nature acting over time, we expect their disintegration as the symbol of an equally necessary passing. . . . What must be strictly avoided is interference with the action of nature's laws, be it the suppression of nature by man or the premature destruction of human creations by nature.

Therefore, although the two ideas are antithetical and must be kept rigidly separate, they are also complementary and dependent on each other. This idea corresponds closely to the ideas of the modern movement, in which the preservation of historical monuments sometimes went hand in hand with the destruction and rebuilding of the city (see Le Corbusier's 1936 Plan Voisin for the center of Paris). Historical works have here lost their meaning as part of the fabric of time and space and are preserved as emblems of a generalized and superseded past.

It is clear that the idea of "newness" does not have the same complementary relationship to the other two categories of historical awareness specified by Riegl—those pertaining to *intentional* and *unintentional* monuments, which, as Riegl points out, both depend on their commemorative value. In the first case historical awareness is the result of a point of view "which is still normative, authoritative, hence antique-medieval, and not historical in the modern sense,

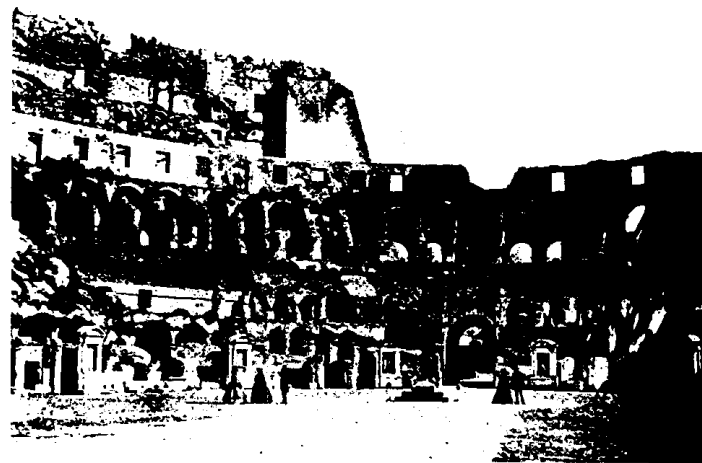


Le Corbusier, Project for a business city in Paris,
1936



et leur le noir (sombre et lumineux) leur
 regard brusc de la zone historique

Le Corbusier, Project for a business city in Paris, 1936, photomontage showing new and old sections of Paris. Le Corbusier's caption reads: "Les nouvelles dimensions modernes et la mise en valeur des trésors historiques apportent une grâce délicateuse."



Tourists visiting the Colosseum in Rome, c.1860. Collection of Piero Becchetti, Rome.

since it did not recognize development." There can therefore be no real distinction between the new and the old. In the second case, although there is consciousness of historical development, historical knowledge requires that the old be accurately reconstructed and be made to look as new as possible. In this historicist perspective the old takes on a surreal contemporaneity, historical time being simultaneously affirmed and annulled, as in the reconstructions of Viollet-le-Duc.

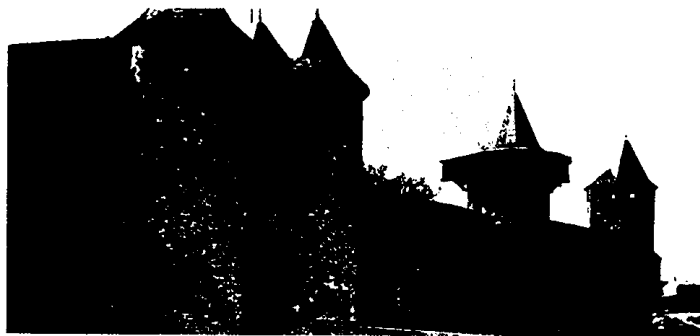
The pair "newness" and "oldness" therefore belongs to a specifically modern sensibility to which Riegl was evidently acutely sensitive and whose future he vaguely anticipated. In terms of his own thought, one characteristic demand of age-value was that monuments should be allowed to grow old gracefully and exhibit the depredations of time, though in cases where the monument still has a practical or symbolic usefulness the idea of its "natural" decay could be made to include that equally "natural" arrest of decay which comes from continued use and repair. This point of view still saw something almost organic in the process by which the new superseded the old; it did not (and could not) anticipate the onslaught on the fabric of the past that was to characterize both the ideal city plans of the 1920s and 1930s and the actual urban planning of the mid-twentieth century, and which was, as a reaction, to bring a new level of consciousness to the problem of the relation of the new to the old in architecture. Yet it is precisely in considering this reaction that Riegl's categories take on a new meaning. Although evidence of decay is no longer, as it was in Riegl's day, the most crucial element in our sense of age-value, it would seem that it is still the "age" of historical buildings that constitutes their value today, rather than their qualities either as intentional or unintentional monuments. The past is valued for its "pastness" and not because it provides models for a normative architecture or represents timeless architectural values (as it did from 1450 to roughly 1800), nor because it can be accurately reconstructed as evidence of the organic relationship between monuments and the societies that produced them (as was the case in the nineteenth century).

There are two ways in which this can be demonstrated. First, the old is still defined, negatively, in relation to the new rather than in terms of positive qualities. The difference between "postmodern" and "modernist" points of view does not reside in any radical reassessment of our relationship to historical culture; it lies solely in the fact that, whereas according to the modernist ethos the sense of the new had positive value and an "overwhelming aesthetic power," it is now often denigrated as a symbol of reductivism. The complementarity of the new and the old still persists, but one of its terms is now missing.

Second, historical monuments no longer have that commemorative power which Riegl said was an essential feature of both intentional and unintentional



The Ramparts of Carcassonne before the restoration by Viollet-le-Duc, 1852



The Ramparts of Carcassonne after the restoration by Viollet-le-Duc

Bull, Field, Volkman, Stockwell, Venetian
Gardens development, Stockton, California,
1974-77



monuments. Likewise, the aesthetic rules and the rules of propriety that were an integral part of their meaning no longer have any force. Contemporary eclecticism is based neither on a belief in the absolute norms of beauty, nor on the capacity of style to evoke definite sociocultural meanings.

It seems, therefore, that we are still in the period that Riegl defined as dominated by "age-value," even though the problems connected with this concept are no longer those that confronted Riegl himself.

Note

1 Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," trans. in *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982).