

THE PALACE OF THE MIND

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INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION TO THE SESSION ON PALACES MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS, MONTREAL, APRIL 24, 1989

When the organizers of the meetings this year, Danny Curci, seconded by Betty MacDougall, asked me to chair a session dealing with the post-classical legacy of the Roman imperial palace, I agreed to do so on condition that we could treat it as a special occasion—a double session with superstar speakers who are friends and admirers of Phyllis Lambert—in homage to and celebration of the opening of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. The Centre is, as far as I can see, the first building and institution of its kind, devoted entirely to the study of architecture. Our session, perhaps the first coherent attempt to focus on the Palatine tradition, is therefore dedicated to what might aptly be described as the first Palace of Architecture.

I must confess that, although I am pleased and greatly flattered to contribute to the celebration, it is a doubly bittersweet occasion for me personally, for it recalls two of the most painful defeats I have suffered in a long and almost perfect record as a supporter of lost causes. This is about the first time I have had anything official to do with the Society of Architectural Historians since Henry Millon and I organized a joint meeting with the College Art Association in St. Louis way back in 1968. Henry represented the SAH, I the CAA. We were young Turks then and we revolutionized everything, and the meeting had a profound and lasting effect on both organizations: we invented the General Session, the

pocket-sized program, and the uniform use of 2x2 inch slides—in those days Bauhaus functionalism reigned supreme. That was one of the last times the two organizations met together. Shortly afterward, as a member of the SAH Board of Directors, I engaged in a major battle with the rulers of the CAA, in an ultimately futile attempt to prevent the two sister organizations from splitting apart entirely. I failed miserably and the results have been exactly as I predicted: the SAH has grown stronger and the CAA has been greatly impoverished by your absence.

My second failure has to do with the reason I was asked to organize this session in the first place. In an essay published in 1964, I tried to suggest that while the proper subject of architectural history is architecture itself, we also have much to learn from other forms of architectural imagination, notably literature. That essay took as its point of departure the description in a late medieval chivalric poem of a fantastical palace inhabited by a beautiful princess, and I sought to connect the millennial literary topos upon which the poet drew, with the history of real architecture. The case represented just one nugget retrieved from a vast and untapped mine of untold riches, but it failed completely to achieve my purpose—to establish a whole new field of study, the literary history of architecture.

I still believe, however, that some of the most profound architectural thoughts have come from non-professionals, and I want to offer two examples.

KUBLA KHAN; OR, A VISION IN A DREAM

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:
 Where Alph, the sacred river ran
 Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.

• • •

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
 Floated midway on the waves;
 • • •
 It was a miracle of rare device,
 A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!
 • • •
 I would build that dome in air,
 That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

Coleridge's use of the word "dome" here is nothing short of miraculous. He endows it with an unprecedented richness of meaning and association in what is at least a four-fold pun. Dome is a synecdoche for a whole building, a palace; steeped as he was in German culture, Coleridge certainly alluded to the German Dom, meaning cathedral, in keeping with the sacredness of the river Alph; dome also refers to the specific architectural form, the cupola, a mark of grandeur and nobility; last but not least, the term, derived from domes, exploits its etymological meaning as a dwelling place. This last dimension is especially important because the figure of Kubla Kahn is surely a metaphor for the poet himself, and the poem itself is surely a shimmering verbal domicile the poet builds for his own creative fantasy during a fitful, narcotic sleep.

The second instance I want to mention is Henry James's famous definition of the novel as a House of Fiction. He refers not only to the splendor and complexity of his literary structure, but also to its logic and order. Again here, architecture is a metaphor for creativity itself, through the notion of a dwelling place for the constructions of the mind (see the references to architecture in the prefaces to his novels, in Franklin, Rosemary F., *An Index to Henry James's Prefaces to the New York Edition*, Charlottesville VA, 1966, 3, 14); and it is no accident that palaces, especially the exotic palaces of Venice, are ubiquitous in James's novels (Ascari, Maurizio, *In the Palatial Chamber of the Mind: Comparative Essays on Henry James*, Pescara, 1997). The word palace, is perhaps the

most magical in the entire vocabulary of architecture, and what this session is intended to do is illustrate the process through which a scruffy little hill by the Tiber became the metaphor par excellence for the capacity of architecture to provide a home for the greatest and noblest thoughts to which our species may aspire.

The idea of architecture as the palace of the mind is already expressed in the fourteenth century Tuscan poem with which I began, where the building is identified as *l'anima col corpo*, i.e., man, and the proprietress, Madonna, is identified as *l'Intelligenza*. Some scholars had assumed that the palace description the poet had adapted was descended from an actual account of the imperial dwelling on the Palatine. In my view, it had from the beginning been invented as an ideal type, and in fact it was widely influential, beginning with an early legend of the Apostle Thomas, who was said to have been an architect. Thomas travelled preaching the gospel even as far as India, where he built a palace of this type for the fabled ruler Gundaforus, forerunner of the exotic Kubla Kahn.

I also tried to show, however, that the literary description did have a real-life counterpart in a vast tradition of palaces and villas of antiquity, as at Piazza Armerina in Sicily; and during the Middle Ages, in the east, as in the Omayyad palace at Mschatta, and in the west, as in the palace of Charlemagne at Aachen. Certain features were common to most of these complex and prestigious buildings, replete with many domes and apsidal chambers: an impressive approach, a monumental entrance, a vestibule or stairway behind leading to various rooms of assembly and ceremonial display, where the privileged visitor waited to be admitted to the inner sanctum. There, enthroned in the apse of the sanctum sanctorum, the August One reigned supreme. At Piazza Armerina the

pavement of the apse was decorated with a mosaic showing the nude figure of Hercules, of whom the head from a monumental cult statue was also recovered.

I am pleased to report that just such a palace has recently been found and beautifully reconstructed in a most out-of-the-way place, Montreal, also inhabited by an awesome, in this case female, deity. Some of you might suppose that this sensuous, nude figure now on the screen is Giovanni Bologna's portrayal of Architettura, the ideal, intellectual Mistress of the Palace of Architecture; in fact, it is a portrait of Phyllis Lambert, the real, physical Mistress of the CCA.