

Faith in Architecture

“Modern architecture is surely most cogently to be interpreted as a gospel—as, quite literally, a message of good news; and hence its impact.”

So Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, in a familiar passage of *Collage City*.¹ In a direct appropriation of religious language to architectural ends, the authors refer here to the gospel (literally, the good news) of *modern* architecture—not the gospel of architecture *tout court*, but the gospel of modernism, that artefact of architectural history. And historians can duly point to explicit articulations of this gospel among modernism’s founding documents. Walter Gropius’s well-known statement of faith, the 1919 Bauhaus manifesto, ends with a call to architectural action that is positively evangelical in its proclamation of the good news:

Wollen, erdenken, erschaffen wir gemeinsam den neuen Bau der Zukunft, der alles in einer Gestalt sein wird: Architektur und Plastik und Malerei, der aus Millionen Händen der Handwerker einst gen Himmel steigen wird als kristallenes Sinnbild eines neuen kommenden Glaubens.²

The words lose only some of their intensity in their translation into English:

Together let us conceive and create the new building of the future, which will embrace architecture *and* sculpture *and* painting in one unity and which will rise one day toward heaven from the hands of a million workers as the crystal symbol of a new faith.³

1

The careful reader of Gropius’s manifesto will note that this is more than just a casual call for the architectural expression of a new faith. There is a stronger claim being made here. The text calls on the reader to interpret architecture as an expression of faith, yes; but not only that: it seems to invite an understanding of architecture itself *as an act of faith*—as a public statement possessed of a fundamentally performative capacity. The new faith is itself, in other words, curiously architectural in its conception: one might al-

¹ Rowe Koetter 1978, p. 11. The book’s manuscript was in circulation from 1973—see Hays 1998, p. 88. I am grateful for help with this paper to colleagues and students at Yale School of Architecture, and particularly to Justin Hawkins, of Yale’s Department of Religious Studies. Remaining infelicities, errors, and heresies are solely mine.

² Gropius 1919.

³ Gropius 1938, p. 18. One might question several elements of this translation; but I have replaced only one word in order to reverse its softening of the original German, substituting *as for* like in “like the crystal symbol of a new faith.” For a slightly revised translation see Wingler 1969, p. 31.

most suppose that the exertions of the architect-sculptor-painter could themselves serve to bring it into existence. For a moment one might be inclined to imagine that architecture here provides not only the form, but also the content of the gospel.

4 Gropius 1970, p. 46. Originally published in the exhibition pamphlet for the 1919 “Ausstellung für unbekannte Architekten” organized in Berlin by the Arbeitsrat für Kunst. It bears noting that “architecture” is here used to translate the German “Baukunst”—a word with peculiar resonances that are not wholly captured in the English.

As if to clarify his intent, Gropius adds, in a text almost precisely contemporary to that of the Bauhaus manifesto, a direct response to a frequently repeated question: “What is architecture? The crystalline expression of man’s noblest thoughts, his ardour, his humanity, his faith, his religion!”⁴

This too is a passage that is familiar among the programmatic statements of twentieth century architecture, collected among the discipline’s sacred texts and translated for posterity.⁵ In fact, This articulation seems, perhaps, fresher and more sympathetic to our contemporary aspirations than its companion. Or, at least, we can still welcome the aspiration toward an architecture that might serve as an expression of our shared humanity. There is a glimmer of hope here that we might not yet wish to abandon. And here, too, faith and architecture seem to map onto one another in some regard.

5 Both documents appear in that slender monument of architectural pedagogy, Conrads 1964/1970.

We might of course wish to argue over whether Gropius’s formulation constitutes a viable definition of architecture, one that can successfully replace older conceptions of the discipline. And we might usefully wish to begin with an analysis of the terms of Gropius’s pronouncement. What, we might well ask, is the nature of the faith to which such a definition can appeal? It is no longer, to be sure, anything as predictable as the Christian faith of Europe’s prior generations, any more than the cathedral that forms the subject of Lyonel Feininger’s woodcut on the cover of the Bauhaus manifesto could be mistaken for an explicitly Christian cathedral. This faith is no longer, in other words, the proverbial faith of the fathers; it must be, as Gropius suggests, *a new faith*—one that corresponds to the call for *the new building of the future*.

That this phrase, *a new faith*, can be construed as something of a rash formation, perhaps even an oxymoron—a union of seeming opposites, an apparent contradiction—has not gone unnoticed. The words *new* and *faith* do not always coexist so comfortably. After all, are we not better advised to place our faith in that which has demonstrated its reliability, which has earned our trust, which is deserving of our confidence? We might think of pilots, partners, or even presidents—not to mention structural systems, or, for that matter, religions. New religions are inherently suspect, as are new gods. The Hebrew scriptures might narrate the genesis of a people, but their God is already present in the beginning. And it is no coincidence that the Greek New Testament is so deliberate in its articulation of continuity with—or even, less comfortably, fulfilment of—older texts, or that the biblical account of Pentecost should so explicitly present the Christian faith as part of a longer narrative. Islam, too, is supersessionist in its history, drawing older doctrines into the narrative of its own conception. The new is a revelation, a fulfilment, or even a reformation, of the old—indeed, this is perhaps a necessary attribute of monotheistic faith. And if today’s Western culture reaches readily for the more intentionally plural language of “faith traditions,” even there the word

tradition denotes the assumption of a longer trajectory. Indeed, to speak with assurance of a new faith is a perilous proposition, comparable to the confident assertion of a new tradition. And even the most committed modernist may speak of a new tradition only with great circumspection, as Sigfried Giedion might himself attest.

As it is, the notion of a *new faith* is a far cry from former conceptions of faith as something that is fundamentally *old*—or, at least, as something to be preserved, as something to be *kept*: a commitment comparable, perhaps, to the vows of marriage. This, for instance, is the traditional biblical conception of faithfulness that would doubtless have been familiar to Gropius’s original readers. To seek a new faith is, against this background, the counterpart to deserting an older faith—to *break faith* is tantamount to breaking the vows of your youth in search of a new lover. Such a new faith is a cover, in other words, for infidelity, for *in-fidelity*; in fact, if one were to appeal to the archives of the English language for earlier uses of the phrase, it is in precisely this context that Shakespeare, in his 152nd sonnet to the Dark Lady, uses the words “new faith”:

In loving thee thou know’st I am forsworn,
But thou art twice forsworn, to me love swearing;
In act thy bed-vow broke, and new faith torn,
In vowing new hate after new love bearing.

But today’s reader is liable to overlook the double scandal of these words.

This shift away from an older conception has, in turn, inflected our use of the language of faith. In fact, it is perhaps more violent a shift than mere inflection—it is, rather, a complete reversal. Reaching back beyond the linguistic formations of antiquity, the Hebrew etymology of faithfulness is tied, we are told, to the more typically architectural vocabulary of firmness and reliability—here the language of materiality is used to explain the immaterial. But the modern call for a new faith is accompanied by a broader and now familiar characterisation of faith as something that is essentially *blind*. This is, at least, consistent: the very notion of “blind faith” goes hand in hand with modernity’s self-conscious rejection of the old. Of course faith is blind, is it not? Is that not precisely, in today’s usage—and especially in the context of religion—our working definition of faith?

Today we are familiar, after all, with an assessment of religion as something that is tantamount to fiction, or even to fantasy—to a form of *make-believe*. From a broadly progressive audience, such an assessment is unlikely to elicit much in the way of vocal protest. Religion is construed as fiction, to be contrasted with the more substantive empirical certitude of that realm of enquiry that bears with pride the name of knowledge: *science*.⁶ It is hardly an oversimplification to suggest that the working assumption of our contemporary culture, and perhaps especially of the modern academy, is that religion is, on the whole, largely a construct, a fabrication: not a revelation from on high

⁶ But see Latour 1993, an “anthropology of science” that claims to demonstrate “how much of modernity is actually a matter of faith” (publisher’s promotional copy, back cover).

but rather something that we humans have developed on our own—something that tells us more about ourselves, about our histories, and about our prejudices, than it does about anything as absolute as ultimate reality. This is *religion understood as construct*—as social construct, and increasingly, perhaps, as individual construct.

It should be clear, if at first glance perhaps counterintuitive, that the orthodox believer—Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—would have to agree with this assessment: that religion is, on the whole, something of a fabrication. Or, at least, if claims about the one true and living God are held to be valid, then it doubtless follows that all other gods are, according to biblical terminology, “false gods”, or idols, or fabrications: products of design. And, precisely on these grounds, other religions are condemned as pagan, as idolatrous. This is presumably also at the root of the problem that our own pluralist culture must have with the very idea of monotheism, which comes across, increasingly, as a preposterous proposition. Are we not, after all—and precisely in this respect—still modern?

Conversely, there is room here, perhaps, for an account that would posit architectural modernism as a reversal of this arrangement. For the juxtaposition of Gropius’s statement of faith with Rowe’s assessment of modern architecture provokes an interesting question: if Christianity seeks to supersede paganism in its rejection of human constructions as idolatrous, does modernism seek to supersede Christianity in celebrating the capacity of human constructions to provide the basis for a new faith?

2

Faith as fiction, as construct, as fabrication. Faith, perhaps also, as object of derision.

If in fact it is valid to conceive of religion as a construct, to conceive of religion as an artefact of design, to describe it, in other words, in the vocabulary of architecture, even to conceive of religion as a product, in some regards, of architecture—at its most direct and most offensive, perhaps, to conceive of God as a product of architecture (and here the contemporary reader might turn to the work of Peter Sloterdijk)—then further questions present themselves. Is it also valid to critique religion using the language of architecture? Is it valid to judge God according to the criteria of architecture? Is it valid to subject our gods, in other words, to the demands of architectural studio culture, or perhaps to the demands of the pin up? How are we to judge architecture, anyway? This is, after all, a necessary counterpart to that frequently repeated question, “What is architecture?” What criteria are applicable to the criticism of architecture? Historically, the discipline has reached for such terms as firmness, commodity, and delight, or for such binaries as beauty versus function, or more recently, perhaps, for such categories as intellectual depth, conceptual coherence, or conviction. Some of these categories are perhaps fitting to an understanding of architecture as the crystalline expression of man’s noblest thoughts, his ardour, his humanity, his faith. But

are these—firmness, convenience, and delight, or perhaps beauty versus function, or intellectual depth, conceptual coherence, conviction—also valid categories under which to assess religion? To subject our gods to the demands of the pin up [...] to pin up, to nail up, for individual critique, perhaps rejection, maybe mockery. There is something there, no doubt, that demands further attention.

The counterpart to judging religion by the criteria of architecture is, of course, to judge architecture by the criteria of religion, or, perhaps, to expect of architecture that which was once sought in religion. What might that entail? And what are the implications for the architect? The ensuing demands are certainly not insignificant: it is not nothing to expect the discipline to deliver on such intangibles as fulfilment, transcendence, meaning, at certain moments perhaps even unity, truth, joy. This is dangerous territory, as we have learned: one may rightly think with a shudder of the ink that has been spilled, the concrete that has been poured, in the name of architecture-as-truth. But this also places massive pressure on the ethical function of architecture, and on the judgement of the architect's work, on the crafting of the architect's identity, not to mention the evaluation of the architect's success. The demands on an intellectually ambitious discipline are no doubt familiar. It is perhaps not immediately clear that the discipline has proved itself capable of sustaining such expectations, or of honouring the faith that is placed in it.

“Modern architecture is surely most cogently to be interpreted as a gospel—as, quite literally, a message of good news.” The assessment is optimistic. But those words are drawn from a chapter that is entitled, for good reason, “Utopia: Decline and Fall?”—the terminal question mark doing little to undermine the narrative of a deep-seated disillusion. Since Gropius's words were printed, as we know, the devout practice of modernism has fallen by the wayside. The new faith has itself become a relic of architectural history, relinquishing to its own hagiographies questions as to whether it demanded the singularity of monotheism in its loyalties, or whether it was inherently supersessionist in its ambitions. Modernist orthodoxy itself has now been roundly rejected; modernist dogma (and here too we routinely use a word that is drawn from the vocabulary of religion) is no longer accepted as the gospel truth that it was once proclaimed to be. And yet, despite such unbelief, the conception of architecture as message of good news remains a well-worn trope, still very much in active circulation today.

Gropius's statement of modernity's architectural faith has been reproduced many times over the past century, most often in collections of and commentaries on those declarations that might reasonably be characterised as modernism's sacred texts. It is quoted once more in Karsten Harries's *Ethical Function of Architecture*, in the context of a discussion, near the close of the book, that is organised under the chapter title “Dreams of Utopia.”⁷ Harries's book, too, registers in its opening words the rejection of “modernist orthodoxy”⁸. It was published in 1997, at a moment when architecture seemed (as he notes in the introduction) “uncertain of its way”, but it traces its ori-

7 Harries 1997, p. 329.

8 Harries 1997, p. 2.

gins to conversations with Kent Bloomer held at Yale School of Architecture more than twenty years earlier—to a period coincident with the conception of Rowe and Koetter’s *Collage City*.⁹ But in the manner that renders his work both so refreshing and so provocative, Harries lifts Gropius’s statement out of the narrower framework of its historical context at the origins of the Bauhaus, and exploits it instead as a means of questioning the aspirations of modernity’s architecture more broadly. Gropius’s challenge has not yet, he argues, been met, nor can it be dispensed with altogether. And this assertion remains valid even today, another twenty years later. Today, too, architecture is uncertain of its way; and indeed, in this regard it might be deemed to be in perfect harmony with the culture of which it forms a material expression—a culture that seems increasingly uncertain and conflicted as to its rightful ends. And what is our architecture? Is it in fact the crystalline expression of our noblest thoughts, our ardour, our humanity, our faith? Or might it not quite often, with some justice, be read in a rather different light—as the expression of our primarily selfish ambitions, our indifference, our lack of a serious commitment to a genuine humanity, our bad faith?

It is worth noting, no doubt, that Gropius’s assertion “What is architecture? The crystalline expression of man’s noblest thoughts, his ardour, his humanity, his faith, his religion!” is followed immediately in the original text by a burst of protest: “That is what it once was!” What follows is hardly more encouraging, even as it attempts to offer a message of hope:

Let us be quite clear: these grey, hollow, spiritless mock-ups, in which we live and work, will be shameful evidence for posterity of the spiritual descent into hell of our generation, which forgot that great, *unique* art: *architecture*. Let us not deceive ourselves, in our European arrogance, that the wretched buildings of our era could alter the overall picture. All our works are nothing but splinters. Structures created by practical requirements and necessity do not satisfy the longing for a world of beauty built anew from the bottom up, for the rebirth of that spiritual unity which ascended to the miracle of the Gothic cathedrals. We shall not live to see it. But there is one consolation for us: the *idea*, the building up of an ardent, bold, forward-looking architectural idea to be fulfilled by a happier age that must come. [...] Let us together will, think out, create the new idea of architecture [...] and become fellow builders, fellow strugglers for the final goal of art: the creative conception of the cathedral of the future.¹⁰

We might justly question Gropius’s historical assessment of prior generations’ achievements; but we cannot deny that he was keenly aware of the total lack of correspondence between his aspirations and his contemporary reality.

Writing of a secularization of dreams with biblical origins—of a secularization of the very conception of the City of God—Harries, too, quotes Gropius’s call to an architecture that might answer to the demand for the construc-

tion “of man’s noblest thoughts, his ardour, his humanity, his faith”¹¹. But, he continues, “‘faith’ here means faith in reason and in the solidarity of a liberated humanity.”¹² Such faith is today in short supply, just as the years immediately after the establishment of the Bauhaus proved hostile to dreams of a liberated humanity. Harries’s book on the ethical function of architecture is shadowed, after all, by a recognition that modernity’s architectures have not proved uniformly hospitable; they have not consistently maintained solidarity even with the most superficial of ethical ambitions; certainly they have not always lived up to expectations for the unified construction of a new faith that would rise up from the hands of a million artificers in a glorious unity of noble thoughts. Harries continues: “The architecture envisioned by Gropius answers to the longing for a new religion, a longing widespread at the time—we met with it already in Heidegger, whom it made vulnerable to the quasi-religious appeal of National Socialism.”¹³ And if this is not the place to rehearse the details of such associations, this is also not the time for hasty dismissal of the capacities of a highly-developed culture to descend to unspeakable depths.

11 Harries 1997, p. 330.

12 Harries 1997, p. 330–31.

13 Harries 1997, p. 331. See especially 331n10 for quotation of Joseph Rykwert on “the religious, or quasi religious postulates” operating at the Bauhaus.

3

Architecture as an act of faith. Faith as fiction, as construct, as fabrication.

We might compare this characterisation to the famous definition offered by the author of the biblical epistle to the Hebrews, who writes that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”¹⁴ This too, like the Bauhaus manifesto, is a familiar text, once memorized by generations of the faithful—*sperandorum substantia rerum argumentum non parentum*—but the emphasis here is different: the emphasis, curiously, is on the *substance*, the *evidence*, of faith. Faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen. It is a remarkable statement, no longer a perfect fit with our culture’s assessment of the nature of faith.

14 Hebrews 11:1.

And yet, the architect may today have reason to read this definition with new interest. *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. Is this not also a working definition of architecture, a viable response to that frequently repeated question, “What is architecture?” *The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. Is the task of the architect not precisely this: to imagine the as yet intangible, to give substance to things hoped for, to offer evidence for things not yet seen? Indeed, as it turns out, the text of Hebrews 11:1 is followed immediately by a description of God as architect, creating the visible universe by means of the invisible word. And is this conception of architecture not infused with the inheritance of the Renaissance, which celebrates the architect’s capacities of imagination, and insists that architecture’s legitimate means of expression is not the material act of building but rather the immaterial act of drawing? Is the very practice of architecture not, in this light too, an act of faith?

In fact, we have come full circle: from architecture understood as an expression of faith, to faith understood in terms of architecture. What are we to make of this?

On the one hand, we may wish to abandon the language of “blind faith”, just as we would be reluctant to speak of “blind architecture”. It is doubtless fair to say that even the most visionary act of architecture is, after all, most deserving of trust when it is established on a substantive foundation of prior experience. It is precisely here that such faith is least likely to be disappointed, and it is presumably this, too, that justifies the establishment of architecture as a discipline that is taught in the modern university. The concept of evidence-based faith is perhaps comparable to that much-abused term, evidence-based architecture—not in its narrow interpretation, but in a broader register that takes full account of the longer trajectory of experience and history. Here the modernists, too, might agree.

But we can surely go further, much further. Deeper into the eleventh chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, the reader finds that not only the act of faith but also the *object* of faith is interpreted in the vocabularies of architecture. This is the famous passage about the so-called “heroes of the faith”, men and women, much discussed. Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sara, Moses, Rahab—the heroes of the Hebrew scriptures interpreted in the light of the Greek New Testament (and it is clear why such a passage might generate debate). But it is pertinent to note that Abraham, in the text, is described as looking toward a city, toward a new city, toward a new architecture that is also an old architecture, toward an architecture that is more permanent and more real and apparently more satisfying than other architectures, than the products of the endeavours, presumably, of the architectural profession. “By faith Abraham [...] looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”¹⁵ *The city that has foundations* is here contrasted with our cities, with the objects of our attentions as architects, with our attempts at collage, always provisional. We are back here to the question of substance. And to return for a moment to Colin Rowe, this is not architecture interpreted in terms of the gospel, but the gospel interpreted in terms of architecture. There is, in fact, a message of good news here, as Colin Rowe might put it. If one of the more valuable skills to be developed by the architect is the skill of presentation, of being able to promote a good idea, to promote the gospel, as it were, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews might justly deserve the architect’s attentions—he has already translated the gospel into the vocabulary of architecture.

But of course, as an architectural culture, we no longer believe this. Instead, we have new pieties, we promote new gospels, we supply new faiths—be they the formal promises of parametricism, conceiving and creating the new building of the future, crowd-sourced perhaps, or the devout vows of sustainability, atoning for the sins of our fathers, and for our own sins, too, a movement that for once we should all be able to support (no?), or the good news promoted with such evangelical ardour by the latest start-up launches, with promises of a new and more effectively calibrated world by 2020, or perhaps the redemptive capacities of the architecture of social engagement, rising from the hands of a million workers. These are caricatures, to be sure, but carica-

15 Hebrews 11:9–10.

tures that are perhaps not altogether unwarranted. Modernity's architecture still attempts, after all, to offer a message of good news. Colin Rowe's assertion—"modern architecture is surely most cogently to be interpreted as a gospel—as, quite literally, a message of good news"—may need some updating; but the updates are relatively quick: a few redlines, a few timely adjustments. The creation of architecture is, in the end, an intractably optimistic exercise, and necessarily so—if architecture cannot be reconciled with the demand for a gospel, if there is no hint of good news, no promise of improvement, no hope of making the world a better place in some regard, then it proves difficult to justify such massive expenditure of time, of effort, and of resources.

And yet those architectural gospels seem so often to prove disappointing, to betray the faith that is placed in them. Which is, no doubt, why the demand for new faiths remains strong. But if the new faiths prove vacuous, it may be worth considering a penitent's return to an older faith.

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