

"The City Is a Book"

A new translation of excerpts

from Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*

Richard Howard

Victor Hugo's fundamentally pessimistic view of the fate of architecture is manifested in the chapter "Ceci tuera cela" (This Will Kill That), which he withheld from the original edition of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, published in March 1831, but restored to the definitive second edition, published in December 1832. At the beginning of the chapter the archdeacon Claude Frolo declares: "This will kill that. The book will kill the building." Hugo offers the reader two meanings; either "The book of stone, solid and enduring, was about to be supplanted by the paper book, which would become more enduring still;" or "One art would dethrone another art. . . . Printing will destroy architecture." In Hugo's telling, with the advent of the printing press in the 15th century, "the store of strength hitherto spent by the human mind on buildings is now to be spent on books. By the sixteenth century, the press, grown to the stature of its fallen rival, wrestles with it and wins. . . . And besides, if, by chance, architecture be revived, it will never be mistress [of the arts] again."

In his *Autobiography* (1932) Frank Lloyd Wright says: "Hugo wrote the most enlightened essay on architecture that exists to this very day. . . . I was 14 years old when this chapter, usually omitted from most editions of *Notre-Dame*, profoundly affected my sensibility and my image of that art to which life was to destine me: architecture. His account of the tragic decline of the great original art has never left my mind."

Poet Richard Howard's fascination with Hugo's text has prompted a new translation of "Ceci tuera cela," excerpts of which appear below. Ed.

Our gentle readers will permit us to pause a moment in order to ascertain the idea hidden beneath the Archdeacon's enigmatic words: *This will kill that. The book will destroy the building.*

But beneath this first and doubtless simplest idea we discern another, newer one: the presentiment that human thought, by changing form, would change its mode of expression; that each generation's central idea would no longer be written with the same substance and in the same fashion; that the book of stone, so solid and so lasting, would give way to the book of paper, solid and more lasting still. In this regard, the Archdeacon's vague formula had a second meaning: it signified that one art would dethrone another. It meant: The printing press will destroy architecture.

Indeed, from the beginning of time down to and including the 15th century of the Christian era, architecture has been the great book of humanity, man's chief expression in his various stages of development in terms of either power or intelligence.

The first monuments were mere boulders that the iron had not touched, as Moses said. Architecture began like all writing: at first it was an alphabet. A boulder was planted upright in the ground,¹ and this was a letter, and each letter was a hieroglyph, and upon each hieroglyph rested a group of ideas, like a capital resting upon its column.² So wrought the earliest races, at the same moment of their development, the world over. We find the equivalent of the Celtic menhirs in Asian Siberia, in the American pampas. . . .

Later, words were formed. Stone was

set upon stone, these granite syllables were linked: the word attempted certain combinations. The Celtic dolmen and cromlech, the Etruscan tumulus, the Hebrew galgal are words. Some, the tumulus in particular, are proper nouns. And occasionally, when there was a great deal of stone and a vast expanse, a sentence was written. The enormous conglomeration of Karnak is already a whole magic formula.

Finally, books were made. The traditions had given birth to symbols, beneath which they lay hidden like the tree trunk beneath its foliage; all these symbols, in which humanity believed, increased and multiplied, interlaced, and grew ever more complicated; the first monuments no longer sufficed to contain them and were engulfed on all sides; indeed these monuments could no longer express the original tradition, which like them had once been simple, naked, prone upon the earth. The symbol needed to flower within the edifice. It was then that architecture developed, in company with human thought; it became a giant with a thousand heads and a thousand arms and fixed in an eternal, visible, palpable form this whole indeterminate symbolism. While Dedalus, who is power, measured; while Orpheus, who is intelligence, sang; the Pillar that is a letter, the Arcade that is a syllable, the Pyramid that is a word, simultaneously impelled by a law of geometry and by a law of poetry, grouped, combined, amalgamated, mounted, sank, and juxtaposed themselves upon ascending to the skies until they had written, according to the dictation of the general idea of an epoch, those marvelous books that were also marvelous buildings: the pagoda of Eklinga, the Ramesseum of Egypt,³ the temple of Solomon.

Meaning and Architecture

That mother-idea, the word, was not only at the heart of all these buildings but inherent in their very form. The temple of Solomon, for instance, was not simply the binding of the sacred book, it was the sacred book itself. And not only the form of the buildings but even their siting revealed the idea they represented.

Thought was free then only in this fashion, hence it was written completely only in those books called buildings. Thus, down to Gutenberg, architecture is the chief form of writing (we can distinguish two historical forms in the first universal script: the theocratic architec-



ture of caste and the architecture of the people, richer and less sacred).

Popular Architecture

The general characteristics of popular masonry are variety, progress, originality, opulence, perpetual motion. They are already sufficiently detached from religion to conceive and to cultivate their beauty, continually to correct their adornment of statues or of arabesques. They are secular. They have something human about them that they continually mingle with the divine symbol beneath which they are still produced: whence buildings accessible to any soul, any intelligence, any imagination, still symbolic yet as easy to understand as nature itself. Between theocratic architecture and this kind there is the difference between a sacred language and a vulgar tongue.

The Printing Press

In the 15th century, everything changes.

Human thought discovers a means of perpetuating itself that is not only more lasting and more resistant than architecture but even simpler, readier to hand. Architecture is dethroned. Orpheus's letters of stone will give way to Gutenberg's letters of lead.

The Book Will Destroy the Building

The invention of the printing press is the greatest event in history. It is the mother-revolution. It is the mode of expression in which humanity totally renews itself, it is human thought that sloughs off one form and assumes another.

Hence from the moment print is invented, we see architecture gradually withering, atrophying, denuding itself. It is this decadence that we call the Renaissance. A magnificent decadence, though, for the old Gothic genius, that sunset behind the gigantic press of Mainz, still permeates with its last rays that vast hybrid pile of Latin arcades and Corinthian colonnades. . . .

It is that sunset that we take for a dawn.

Decline

Yet as soon as architecture is no more than another one of the arts, as soon as

it is no longer the total art, the sovereign art, the tyrant art, it no longer has the power to retain the other arts. They free themselves accordingly, breaking the architect's yoke, and proceed each on its own course. Each art gains by this divorce. Isolation enlarges them all. Sculpture becomes statuary, imagery becomes painting, the canon becomes music.

Yet once the sun of the Middle Ages has set completely, architecture no longer expresses anything, not even the memory of the art of another age.

Paris

In the 15th century, Paris was not only a beautiful city: it was a homogeneous city, an architectural and historic product of the Middle Ages, a chronicle in stone. Since then, day by day, the city has proceeded to distort itself, to corrupt itself. Gothic Paris, beneath which Romanesque Paris had vanished, was to vanish in its turn. But can we say what Paris has replaced it?

Present-day Paris has no general physiognomy. It is a collection of samples, patterns, styles. Our capital grows only house by house — and what houses! Hence the signification of its architecture daily vanishes.

Let there be no mistake: architecture is dead, dead without recall, killed by the printed book, destroyed because it costs more. Imagine now what investment would be necessary to write the architectural book once more, to engender upon the earth once more authentic buildings in their thousands.

The great accident of an architect of genius may occur in the 20th century. The great poem, the great building, the great work of humanity will no longer be built, it will be printed. ■

1 Cf. Exodus 20:25: "If thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it."

2 Cf. Genesis 31:45: "And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar."

3 The funerary temple of Ramses II at Thebes, in Upper Egypt.