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**ONCE UPON A TIME THEY ALL LIVED
HAPPILY EVER AFTER or WHAT
HAPPENS IF THE BIRDS EAT ALL
OUR TRAILING BREAD CRUMBS
AND WE'RE LEFT FACE TO FACE
WITH THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE?:
SOME THOUGHTS ON "POST MOD-
ERN" ARCHITECTURE**

"Bourgeois society substituted the fairy-tale for myth and religion." – Sedlmayr

Ours has been called an age of irony, but it might better be dubbed an age of cynicism. Irony is ennobling; it implies an acceptance of existential inconsistencies, a sophisticated awareness of both what is and what might be, which in contemporary society is too often obscured by our immersion in the particular and the immediate.

According to Greek legend, Theseus, son of Aegus the king of Athens, braved the dangers of the Labyrinth at Crete, slew the hideous Minotaur, and then found his way through the maze with the help of Ariadne's thread. However, excited by his victory and impatient to return home, Theseus unwittingly disobeyed his father in neglecting to lower and replace the ship's black sail of death. Weeks later, Aegus spied the returning vessel's black sail on the horizon and is said to have died of grief. And more, though Ariadne's love and resourcefulness had encouraged Theseus' success, he soon forsook her. In a continuing series of myths, Theseus organises a constitutional government, fights the Amazons, and becomes one of the Argonauts.

These descriptions of the Attic landscape, the overseas journeys across the unknown world, the actions and foibles of supernatural deities, and the heroic confrontation of adversity all establish the complex and wondrous workings of an elaborate cosmology. Greek legends invariably present an intricate weave of human experience which seeks to describe the world as it is and to explain why things happen as they do; all the while providing for attendant philosophical speculation. Pervasive throughout is the value attributed a noble countenance, the appreciation accorded noble action and the demands of responsibility for consequences. Notable too is the dramatised position of man as separate from, but paradoxically a part of, both supernatural and natural forces. Greek mythology presents a way of seeing the world, a coherent abstraction of relevant issues and a unifying ideology.

Late nineteenth century industrialism marks a fundamental perturbation of the humanist tradition. Baroque life was a recognisable heir of the Greek epistemology. Its reverence for absolute truths (far too many) and for hierarchical order succumbed in the face of radical changes wrought by the new science and industrial technology. It was revolution the likes of which had not been seen "since Constantine set up the cross in 310." Bourgeois society, about which this essay necessarily revolves, is the product of a materialistic, capitalistic system which transfigured political and social order. Arising as it did in the midst of a cultural and moral vacuum, it sought out an "existential foothold."¹ Continuity had given way to fragmentation, and men realised they could no longer pretend to orchestrate a reality which no longer slowly evolved but which was ever likely to be suddenly changed. In an age of uncertainties, bourgeois society sought out permanence and a comprehensible world order, however inappropriate or illusory. At the turn of the century much of the world lapsed into a somnambulistic romantic sentimentality; only to be revived (and then only briefly) by the Titan efforts of men such as the early Modern architects. But meanwhile, traditional genres of expression had become increasingly irrelevant. It would seem reasonable to consider one genre, the fairy tale, as a significant, uninhibited (and unconscious) exposition of sociological concerns.

Two thousand years after we no longer have Theseus, torch in hand, unwinding thread as he descends into the Labyrinth, we have, rather, Hansel and Gretel leaving crumbs behind as they wander through the evil forest. Their innocence and immaturity marks a significant shift in protagonist stature. These modern "heroes" are delivered by their own means from the dangers of an alien (if caricaturised) natural world. Endeavor, which in the modern context was increasingly directionless, is embraced in most fairy tales as an end in itself. Action, however circumstantial or unconscionable, is divorced of consequence. Universal concerns are abjured for a simplistic and introspective setting of pedestrian problems. Past, present and future are conveniently categorised in a gratifying exorcism of human fears and dilemmas – all of which seek resolution in terminal happiness. Fairy tales, however wondrous, are escapist fantasies which entertain but fail to acknowledge (and suggest ways of coping with) a contemporary context.

Just as fairy tales obscured the essentials of the mythico-religious tradition, so too did their architecture, a picturesque eclecticism, separate image from meaning.

The early Modern architects rejected decadence, reacted against convention and constraint, engendering a renewed rigour and an unencumbered vision which suggested a new way of living. But World War II largely shattered the promise of the First Machine Age. Callousness and the numbing effects of fifties affluence led to an inevitable non-appreciation of Modern architecture's ideology. Its unilateral acceptance and integration into capitalist society fostered a simplistic purity and a narcissistic preening and gross mis-interpretation.

"Post Modern" architecture seeks to address areas of concern seemingly abdicated by Modern architecture. It encourages communication with a less abstract and more vital language with its "rehabilitation of architectural history."² A richness of material and texture is emphasised over purity of form. It reacts against "grandiose pretensions," embracing "messy vitality over obvious unity," all in an effort to depict "the richness and ambiguity" of modern experience.³

Modern architecture was heroic in its concern for the "poetics of modern experience." "Post Modernism," in its rejection of abstract semiology, seems dangerously encumbered by particulars. Vernacular expression tends to circumvent rigorous intellectual application in favour of emotional and sensual gratification. While easily identifiable, the imagery of "Post Modern" expression is often incapable of evoking adequate response.

In its inclusiveness "Post Modernism" is seduced by the trivial. A demeaning aesthetic hedonism threatens contemporary society just as it threatened the mores of the early nineteenth century. We should seek today an enabling mythology – one whose inclusive particularisations of existence suggest, rather than deny, larger, more abstract and universal fundamentals.

¹ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

² Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1977).

³ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).