

# THE LORE OF HISTORY, LABYRINTH OF THEORY AND THE DILEMMAS OF PRACTICE

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*"Although born into a prosperous realm, we did not believe that its boundaries should limit our knowledge and that the lore of the East should alone enlighten us."*

– Montesquieu  
Lettres Persanes, 1721, letter 1.



*Capriccio, Alireza Sagharchi*

In my first year at The Polytechnic School of Architecture in London, now University of Westminster, I was confronted by the towering figure of a young tutor named Ralph Lerner, a tall American on a year's placement exchange from Harvard, who later became the Dean of the school of Architecture at Princeton. My first project with his studio was an analysis of the Urban Design of parts of Corby, a post war British Modernist New Town and its failings following the closure of British Steel, the largest employer in the town. For a young undergraduate, immersing oneself in the politics of the place was far easier than tackling a yet unknown art. Lerner's repeated advice was "look at the physical planning and not the politics", this still rings in my ears. Later in life the Modernists' 'derogatory' critique of the politics of classicism, seemed as banal as my approach as a first year student. The curriculum and teaching at the university was essentially the same as other 'Modernist' schools, except for a recently appointed crop of academic staff who argued a return to history and the value of theory in underpinning education, this to me sounded entirely natural and rational.

The first encounter with the importance of theory and history of ideas was in the course of lectures with a new young professor named Demetri Porphyrios, who later came to have a profound influence on my professional career and the ideas I hold about architecture. The fresh cohort of students was literally bombarded with the history of every 'ism' from

Hellenistic aesthetics to French Post-Structuralists. This was concurrent with other studio projects when the out-put of the students and the instruction was essentially Corbusian Modernism.

However, it was through the exposure to the lineage of architectural, and history of ideas that I understood Modernism. The schism of the architectural education and a strong sense of a place in history showed the current milieu as a mere episode in a long Architectural journey. This led me to think that there would have to be a more fundamental and transcendental system of values and ideas at play behind architecture, which go beyond the empiricist, contingent technological paradigms or arbitrary fetishes of a certain age.

A summer trip to the classical sites in Greece and a trip to Vienna reinforced the central position of history and tradition firmly in my mind. In later years during my fifteen years of working with Demetri Porphyrios, our repeated visits (sometime early morning to avoid tourists) to the Propylaea and Erechtheion in Athens, together with the later attempts at reinvigoration of classicism by the Danish Architects in the Trilogy refreshed and reaffirmed this connection. After my graduation the opportunity came up for me to work on the A.D., Architectural Design publication titled '*Neo-Classical Architecture in Copenhagen and Athens*'. This introduced yet another facet of classicism and Traditional Architecture, namely, the sense of adventure demonstrated in the architecture



*Villa in Meseela. Alireza Sagharchi*

The practice of Classical and Traditional Architecture forces one to examine one's conviction at the point of every decision being made from the design of the minutia to the grand project. In my case, the interest lies in the relationship of the language of Architecture as Art to the craft of building as a mode of production and the relationship of both to human scale and local tradition. The tenuousness and strength of the connections between building and architecture is where the success or failure of architecture lies. I have tried to examine these ideas in practice through a series of projects that happen to have been situated in vastly different territories. For example, the 'Apartment Building in Mayfair' examines the idea of continuity, craft of stonework and the artistic representation of the Classical details in creating a building that stands out and at the same time sits comfortably within a greater traditional context of an urban terrace. The specific Classical Architectural iconography clearly sets the building apart from the rest of terrace that is traditional yet is more to do with 19<sup>th</sup> century volume built housing.

The 'Chalet in Courchevel' on the other hand, is a direct response to the vernacular architecture of a region, local craft, availability of materials and climatic conditions. The mode of construction and the Architectural language are an intuitive response to nature. Whilst the 'Villa in Meseela' is

a building designed according to the principles of 'Islamic architecture', and make a tectonic as well as a cultural connection to the Classico-Vernacular architecture of a region. The traditional patterns and architectural devices that have been developed over generations to respond to a harsh climate all contribute together to the composition of the plan and the façades.

The Urban Design of the Val d'Europe project and Architectural language of its buildings is where a number of ideas of the European city and its Architectural legacy come together. The human scale buildings, public spaces, walkable neighbourhoods and the traditional materials and Architecture, create new urban spaces and buildings that preserve the time honoured tradition of city building that has been under threat.

Whatever success or failure of the individual Architect may be, the goal of each individual must be to preserve and enhance the legacy of millennia of patterns and mode of human habitation that we have inherited and with this knowledge, create harmonium and sustainable buildings and environments that we would want our children to inherit.

At a personal level perhaps, Rumi, the Persian poet, best sums up a life in architecture: *"let the beauty we love be what we do"*



*Val D'Europe Serris. New neighborhood. Alireza Sagharchi*