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Keynote I.

Architecture and the Culture of a Nation

Aristotle states that a necessary condition for any true polis is that it be composed of citizens living in one place. Secondly, a polis, or a nation must also be “in one place” in terms of political unity, or more properly cultural unity, to form “a people”, which remains in times of a lack of political unity.

Cities and nations express this cultural unity through cultural artifacts, the most permanent being civic art and architecture. While often done for purely political ends, nevertheless monuments and landmarks become part of a cultural identity and helps create a cultural unity that often outlasts the particular circumstances of the time of their creation.

After all, what Frenchman, regardless of his thoughts about Napoleon, would not identify with the Arc de Triomphe?

How then is a nation in the 21st Century to approach the creation of civic architecture? Nations and their architects are saddled with two problems. The first is the growth of a critical view of history that is a profoundly anti-cultural movement. This movement, political in nature, seeks to undermine the historic culture of a nation, leading to the undermining of institutions and manifests itself architecturally in the physical destruction of monuments.

The second problem is the anti-traditional, anti-cultural philosophy of Modernist architecture has established hegemony over the practice of architecture. The “International Style” of Bauhaus Modernism and its successors Brutalism, Post-Modernism, et cetera, of these styles share a common disdain for and rejection of historic styles of architecture, and pervasive need for novelty. Where Modernist

architects have been hired to create civic buildings, ones that ought to engender cultural meaning to a people, the results are almost universally failures. This is because Modernist architecture, by rejecting ornament and beauty, is quite simply incapable of symbolizing in such a way that a courthouse would be recognizably different from an office block.

This presentation will explore, through the lens of Aristotle's Poetics and Politics, the philosophical underpinnings of the modern critical anti-traditional movements. It will look at how they have come to be deeply rooted within the art and architecture of today, and how the destructive influence of these philosophies may be countered in art.

Finally, the presentation will focus on the necessity of traditional and classical architecture for civic architecture, such that a nation might properly symbolize its own culture and foster a sense of cultural unity. That through the use of ornament, symbolism and traditional forms that carry meaning, civic architecture would be able to transcend time and political upheavals so that it might create a people, a civitas, that lives in a place that is not only meaningful, but also beautiful, so that it may be loved as well.