

HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

THE ESTHETICS OF THE SUBLIME
AND THALIA THEATRE, LISBON

During the 18th century the notion of sublime gained great prominence. Amid widespread commotion and political turmoil, the sublime expressed shock and awe as men faced shattering events. A visual emblem of the sublime was the ruin, resulting from wreckage and weathering. As Georg Simmel noted later, »the aesthetic value of the ruin combines the disharmony, the eternal becoming of the soul struggling against itself, with the satisfaction of form, the firm limitedness, of the work of art.«¹ The presence of ruins in the field of the visual arts and architecture during this period was paramount. What about today, amid a globalized world overtaken by unrest? Can ruins still play a part as symbols of awareness or are they simply destined to be archeological curiosities and glimpses of war in the media? The article seeks to answer these questions by proposing a historical overview of the notion of sublime and its role in architecture, followed by the description and analysis of a contemporary case study: the Thalia Theatre in Lisbon.

First discussed by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the notion of sublime considered »whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant

about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror.«² Sources of the sublime were »productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.«³ In order to provoke this, these sources had to seize the attention, »so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.«⁴ The discussion extended onto aesthetics, in order to identify and apply this force to art and architecture. It defined an ideal, and canon, for paintings or buildings. While often unsettling, works made under this stance strived to set off an impressive experience. Discussing the same subject, Immanuel Kant declared »the sublime moves, the beautiful charms.«⁵

Due to certain effects, architecture was able to produce this kind of emotion. Edmund Burke described these effects in detail, prescribing their use to attain such a goal. Among others, he mentioned succession and uniformity or magnitude. According to him, light was also crucial:

*I think then, that all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime, ought rather to be dark and gloomy, and this for two reasons; the first is, that darkness itself on other occasions is known by experience to have a greater effect on the passions than light. The second is, that to make an object very striking, we should have it as different as possible from the objects with which we have been immediately conversant; when therefore you enter a building, you cannot pass into a greater light than you had in the open air; to go into one some few degrees less luminous, can make only a trifling change; but to make the transition thoroughly striking, you ought to pass from the greatest light, to as much darkness as is consistent with the uses of architecture.*⁶

An example of this proposition can be found in the work of Étienne-Louis Boullée.⁷ Contemporary with the writings of Edmund Burke and

Immanuel Kant, his designs employed light in dramatic fashion. This feature served to imprint buildings with ambience, suited to their use. Shadows, in particular, were used to convey gloom. Boullée resorted to them based on personal experience:

Finding myself in the countryside, I strolled round the woods under the moonlight. My silhouette, cast by the light, struck me. Due to a particular disposition, the effect of this simulacrum appeared to be extremely sad. The outline of the tree, cast by their shadows, made the most profound impression upon me. My imagination made this scene even bigger. I realized, then, the somber things of nature. What did I see? A mass of objects cast in black under a dim pale light. To my eye, nature seemed to be dressed in mourning. Arrested by these feelings, I decided to apply them to architecture from that moment on.⁸

The description was related to the appearance of funerary monuments, or cenotaphs. Due to their function, these buildings should instill sadness. Obscurity and shadows engulfed them, as an indication of character. It concerned »the effect that results from that object and causes a particular impression upon us.«⁹ Along with Jacques-François Blondel or Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, Étienne-Louis Boullée discussed this notion with regard to architecture.¹⁰ Quatremère de Quincy theorized it as a process of transposition, explaining »architecture has character when a certain quality prevails upon the senses, becoming a dominant tone.«¹¹ Buildings were given a persona, according to what they were meant to convey. Hence, cenotaphs should be melancholic. Boullée envisioned these memorials as such. He, »and the other architects of the late eighteenth century who sought to give their creations significant, >eloquent< forms, brushed aside metaphysical obstructions such as the sense of guilt or the imminence of death and allowed imagination free rein.«¹² Endowed with this power, their minds strived for the expression of an idea as form. Namely, melancholy. This sentiment, associated to the notion of sublime,











prompted an experience of reality contemplating the high and low points of human existence.

The aesthetics of the sublime disrupted the creed of rationality professed during the Enlightenment. Works under this stance confronted beliefs from this epoch with a sense of awe or terror. They reflected unease towards the present, amid ruins of the past. As Denis Diderot wrote, »everything gradually crumbles and vanishes, only the world remains, only time lasts.«¹³ This awareness implied a disquieted conscience of history. Wavering between demise and progress, the course towards the modern ages stirred the imagination. The sublime stood at its threshold, under the guise of forms that gave shape to sensations and thoughts. They could be triumphal or desolate, like the shadowy cenotaphs of Étienne-Louis Boullée. Melancholy and architecture merged as one in a »space of absence« that turned »matter into spirit.«¹⁴

Thalia Theatre in Lisbon (2012) – designed by Barbas Lopes Arquitectos and Gonçalo Byrne Arquitectos – is a contemporary example of similar aspirations. Described as »a mash-up of the Neues Museum, a Peter Brook performance and a Rachel Whiteread sculpture,«¹⁵ the building reconverted the ruins of a nineteenth century theatre into a multipurpose space that can host conferences, exhibitions, performances, and other events. The old building, roofless and rundown, was used as scaffolding for several additions and subtractions. First, the neoclassical frontage was infilled with stucco and limestone to create an updated version of its original style. It is neither a pastiche nor a replica, but rather a contemporary evocation. The stage and audience spaces were coated with a terracotta concrete shell using the remnants of the dilapidated masonry enclosure as lost formwork. Like a sarcophagus, this monochromatic and monomaterial surface encases the ruins and treats them as relics. Finally, a three-story annex of marginal importance was demolished, giving way

to a one-story pavilion that lodges program such as a cafeteria, reception, and restrooms. This structure, built mainly in glass and steel, serpentine along the site of the building, first facing the street and then leaning inwards into an adjoining garden. In this triumvirate – foyer, stage and audience, pavilion – parts are bound to each other forming a single entity and setting up a dialogue between seemingly contrasting tectonic nuances – mannerist, brutalist, modernist – that nevertheless compose an exegetic assemblage.

Thalia Theatre, however, was also embedded with other strata of meanings. They regard the inception of the building and its symbolism. The theatre inaugurated in 1843, under the patronage of a local aristocrat – the Count of Farrobo – who wanted to welcome his entourage in a private facility where plays could be staged and extravagant parties held. The place was lavishly decorated with mirrors, chandelier and gilded wood. The flamboyance of the soirées there quickly became the talk of the town – »while the generous and magnificent light of the chandeliers shined on jewelry, piercing the eyes as if they were a shower of fire, outbursts of joy pearled with silvery sounds the ripe feminine mouths like a single string vibrating many electric bells.«¹⁶ One day, though, in 1862, everything went down in flames. By then, the aristocrat was penniless and eventually died in a state of dejection. The charcoaled carcass of the theatre testified, for over 150 years, the rise and fall of this eccentric figure. It stood adrift amid the surrounding manor – with a palace, boulevards, gardens, and follies – where this vision of fantasy first came to be. The project for renovation of the theatre is an attempt to tell this story once again and pay tribute to its main protagonist. By doing that, it adds one more chapter to it rekindling ancient memories today. Thus, the classicist elegance of the foyer recalls the anticipation of gala nights, while the pavilion casts an ornate world of glimmers and reflections by means of reflexive glazing and aluminum profiles. The stage and

audience, however, were left unadorned and scarred from the ill-fated fire. This provides a solemn pathos to entire space, prompting new scenic settings inside, and constitutes a material index to the life and death of the building.

In what sense, though, can this intervention be the provider of a contemporary experience of the sublime? Is this experience even possible, given the current cultural and societal conditions? Thalia Theatre glorifies ruins like »a reverie before the encroachment of oblivion.«¹⁷ As Jean Starobinski argued, »the poetry of the ruins is the poetry of what has partially survived destruction, though remaining lost in oblivion: no one must retain the image of the intact building.«¹⁸ Yet, in a world of mass consumption and massive circulation of imagery there seems to be little room for poetry. In order for architecture to strive for a certain kind of transcendence, it must find situations that challenge the prevailing overflow of information and events. On this particular case, there are two instances that should be highlighted. The first is a Latin inscription at the tympanum of the frontage of the theatre – HIC MORES HOMINUM CASTIGANTUR – admonishing those who are about to enter. Like an omen, visitors are warned that »here the deeds of men shall be castigated.« Then, inside, there is a single skylight at the roof of the stage. Placed in a corner, it dimly illuminates the space which, for the rest, is engulfed in shadows. This contrast, between a narrow source of brightness and overwhelming darkness, in the midst of ruins strives to stage a sublime frame of mind. It is rooted in a premise under the lines of an observation by Louis Kahn, »light, the giver of all presences, is the maker of a material, and the material was made to cast a shadow, and the shadow belongs to the light.«¹⁹

The sight of ruins shrouded by shadows should convey a sense of transience, and thus also of melancholy. However, the ubiquity of a society of spectacle with short attention span hinders this possibility. Hence, it

is necessary to reclaim the hidden layers of the remains of the past. The ruin »leaves room, among its empty vaults and vistas for the invention of a new future; and most unsettlingly perhaps, it conjures a future past, the memory of what might have been.« Architecture should anticipate this potential, of its own inevitable demise. Here today, gone tomorrow. —

¹ Simmel, Georg, »Die Ruine«, in: *Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essays*, Alfred Kröner, Leipzig, 1919. Cited after the english translation: »The Ruin«, in: Kurt H. Wolff (ed.), *Georg Simmel. 1858 – 1918*, Columbus (OH), Ohio University Press, 1959, p.265.

² Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, London, R. and J. Dodsley 1757, Adam Phillips (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.36.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p.53.

⁵ Kant, Immanuel, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, Königsberg, Johann Jacob Kanter, 1764. Cited after the english translation: *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, tr. John T. Goldthwait, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 2003, p.47.

⁶ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 1998, p.74.

⁷ Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728 – 1799) worked as an architect during the period of the French Revolution. Along with Claude-Nicolas Ledoux or Jean-Jacques Lequeu, he was considered one of the »Revolutionary Architects«. For a study of his utopian designs under this label see Kaufmann, Emil, *Three Revolutionary Architects. Boullée, Ledoux And Lequeu*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia (PA), 1952.

⁸ Boullée, Étienne-Louis, *Architecture. Essai sur l'art*, circa 1796, [Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscript 9153], Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), Paris, Hermann, 1968, pp.136 – 137. Translation D.L..

- ⁹ Boullée, Étienne-Louis, *Architecture. Essai sur l'art*, 1968, p. 73. Translation D. L..
- ¹⁰ Cf. Blondel, Jacques-François, *De la distribution des maisons de plaisance et de la décoration des édifices en général*, Charles-Antoine Jombert, Paris, 1737 – 1738; Le Camus de Mézières, Nicolas, *Le génie de l'architecture, ou, L'analogie de cet art avec nos sensations avec nos sensations*, Paris, Benoit Morin, 1780.
- ¹¹ De Quincy, Quatremère, »Caractère«, in: *Encyclopédie Méthodique. Architecture*, vol. 1, Paris, Panckoucke, 1788, p. 498. Translation D. L..
- ¹² Starobinski, Jean, *L'invention de la liberté. 1700 – 1789*, Geneva, Skira, 1964.
Hier zit. nach engl. Übersetzung: *The Invention of Liberty. 1700 – 1789*,
tr. Bernard C. Swift, Geneva, Skira, 1964, p. 202.
- ¹³ Diderot, Denis, *Salon de 1767 / Salons*, vol. 3, Jean Seznec, Jean Adhémar (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963, p. 228. Translation D. L..
- ¹⁴ Cf. Etlin, Richard A., *Symbolic Space. French Enlightenment Architecture and its Legacy*, Chicago (ILL), Chicago University Press, 2004, p. 172 ff.
- ¹⁵ Pritchard, Owen, »Thalia Teatres«, in: *Icon*, no. 112 (October 2012), p. 102.
- ¹⁶ De Carvalho, Pinto, *Lisboa d'outros tempos*, Lisbon, António Maria Pereira, 1898, Lisbon, Fenda, 1991, p. 107. Translation D. L..
- ¹⁷ Starobinski, Jean, *L'invention de la liberté. 1700 – 1789*, Geneva, Skira, 1964.
Cited after the english translation: *The Invention of Liberty. 1700 – 1789*,
tr. Bernard C. Swift, Geneva, Skira, 1964, p. 180.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Kahn, Louis I. (1969), *Silence and Light*, Zurich, Park Books, 2013.