

Is this the end of the architectural style wars?

10 May 2013 | By [Ellis Woodman](#)



Last week's debate saw a tentative rapprochement between classical and modern

If there was one thing that all the attendees at last week's seminar, *The Future of Classicism*, seemed to agree on, it was that the event was long overdue. "Twenty years ago one couldn't imagine an evening like this happening: it is an indication of how much things have changed," remarked one audience member, George Saumarez Smith of Adam Architects.

Hosted jointly by BD and The Prince's Foundation, the event brought together four speakers: Demetri Porphyrios and Craig Hamilton, representing the neoclassical camp, and Peter St John and Stephen Taylor, drawn from the growing number of British architects who, while eschewing the use of the orders, are making work that is indebted to the classical tradition. The evening was billed as a debate but the aim was to interrogate the common concerns among the speakers as much as the points of difference.

Stephen Taylor began the evening by claiming Peter Behrens' AEG Turbine Hall of 1908 as a building that "sealed the end of classicism as we might recognise it as derived from antiquity, whilst at the same time revealing how it entered the modern movement with the same powerful aspects of composition, rhythm and order, presence, weight and figuration."

In describing two recent projects, he explained how his own work sought to embody these qualities. Taylor argued that, while built in concrete and employing highly abstracted detailing, his Shatwell Farm cowshed could nevertheless be viewed as a variety of the barchessas that are a common feature of villas in the Italian Veneto.

Here the choice of imagery relates to the building's location within a rural estate, configured around a neo-Palladian house. In the very different setting of east London, the facade of his own office draws on the robust detailing of local 19th century industrial buildings and the elemental but ultimately relaxed composition of Georgian street elevations. Again the models are highly abstracted. What Taylor extracts from the past is ultimately a way of thinking rather than a repertoire of forms.

Edwardian adventurers

And yet, the argument that Behrens' building marked the end of a vital classical tradition based on the use of the orders was speedily rebuffed by Craig Hamilton.

"In the early part of the last century in this country and almost everywhere else in the world, classicism was at its most adventurous and confident," the South African-born architect maintained.

He argued that the work of a generation of Edwardian architects including JJ Joass, Arthur Beresford Pite and Vincent Harris represented a particular high-point of British classicism and a little-explored source of potential leads for the re-emergence of an inventive classical tradition today. Those influences were strongly in evidence in drawings he showed of one of his most ambitious projects to date — a private chapel currently under construction near Henley.

Hamilton also described the inspiration he had drawn from the work of Scandinavian classicists of the early 20th century, in particular the Danish architect Hack Kampmann. He presented Kampmann's police headquarters in Copenhagen (1918–22) as a model of inventive classicism, identifying the project's radical synthesis of sources including Michelangelo's Medici Chapel and Charles V's palace in Granada, both from the 1500s, and CF Hansen's work in Copenhagen of three centuries later.

A living language

Peter St John also located Caruso St John's interest in classicism in its capacity for innovation. "We are interested in classicism because it's a language," he said. "It's a set of rules of great familiarity but also of incredible sophistication that has shown itself to be capable of constant reinvention, reinterpretation and renewal."

While stressing that classicism represented just one of the styles he felt was available to the contemporary architect, he presented a series of Caruso St John projects that drew on a classical inheritance directly.

In the café that the practice has built in the grounds of Chiswick House, he showed a building characterised by some of the same elemental abstraction found in Taylor's projects. However, the new chancel of the baroque cathedral at St Gallen, in Switzerland, represents a more forthright embrace of classical imagery, its terrazzo floor featuring an elaborate vine-leaf pattern rendered in inlaid marble.

Rejecting modernism

Finally Demetri Porphyrios gave the most polemical contribution of the evening, identifying classicism as the sole available means of building a city imbued with human values.

The architect described his journey from studying under Michael Graves and Peter Eisenman at Princeton to employment in Alvar Aalto's office and his concurrent discovery of the Scandinavian classicists which ultimately persuaded him to reject his modernist education.

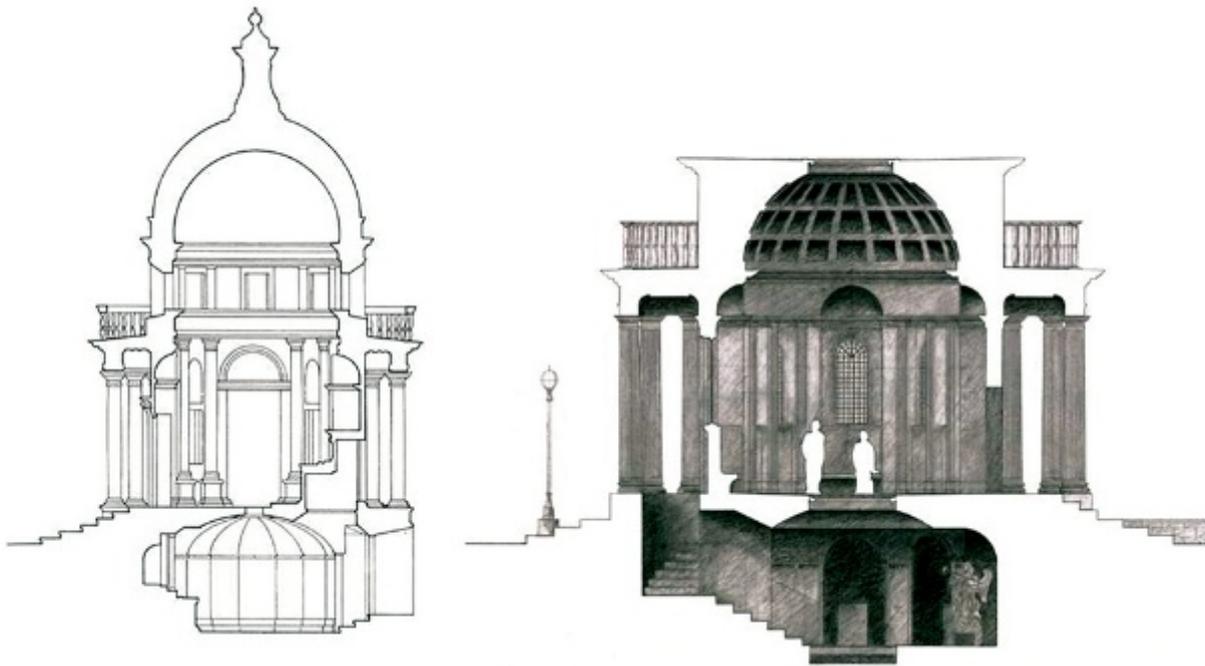
He argued that architecture had been diminished both by the fragmentation of the discipline into separate specialisms — architect, urbanist, landscape architect, interior designer — and by the abandonment of craft in favour of the assembly of off-the-shelf products.

The classical ideal, he argued, offered a model of integration to which the contemporary architect could yet aspire.

Flatly dismissive of the talents of the Smithsons and unpersuaded by St John's enthusiasm for the mixed scale and architectural character of modern London, his presentation suggested a cautious embrace of the sudden outbreak of peace between the modernist and traditionalist camps.

"A lot of us started in the 1970s when it was impossible to have a discussion because the polarisation was so extreme," he observed. "The fact that the polarisation is now less extreme is quite something but we shouldn't fool ourselves — it's still us and them."

How classical became the new radical



Kingston student Peter Folland's proposal for a new mausoleum outside the Royal Exchange was inspired by Bramante's Tempietto.

The subject of architectural education was a focus of the audience discussion at last week's event. Here, George Saumarez Smith recounts the challenges of securing a classical education: "When I started studying at Edinburgh 20 years ago we were asked to design a building in the Royal Botanic Gardens and I proposed a classical project. It was clear there was something in the air at the first crit. The tutors felt discomfited. The message was: we know all about classical architecture but it is no longer relevant.

"It is still very difficult to know where to study if you are interested in designing in the classical tradition. Peter Hodson taught a course in the classical orders at Portsmouth but that has recently been cancelled. The only university that I know to be sympathetic is Kingston, where Jonathan Taylor and Timothy Smith teach a second-year unit.

"A couple of years ago a student of theirs designed a classical building and was awarded the drawing prize. The head of school initially thought it was a measured drawing of an existing building but was delighted to find out it was a new design.

"For the last two years they have stipulated that their students work solely using the classical language. They have been studying architects like McMorran & Whitby. "I think it's the most radical thing you can do in architectural education at the moment."