

# The Politics of Traditional Architecture and the Reassertion of Culture

by [Michael Strand](#) (August 2024)



Miracle at the Rialto Bridge (Vittore Carpaccio. 1499)

Regardless of one's political persuasions, the recent EU Parliament election results could portend positive future

developments for proponents of traditional architecture, because a driving force among those who vote for populist candidates is a desire to “reassert cherished and rooted national identities over rootless and diffuse transnational ones.”<sup>[1]</sup> One thing that must be admitted about modern architecture (overwhelmingly preferred by the intelligentsia) is that it is rootless and transnational—it is not called the “international style” for nothing. And, it has been clearly demonstrated that few members of society “cherish” these modernist buildings—most people hardly look at them in fact, as Ann Sussman has shown,<sup>[2]</sup> since part of the modernist look is sleek featureless surfaces which human beings quite simply did not evolve to take interest in. Therefore, new voting patterns might coincide with new building patterns as well.

Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin have argued in their recent book, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, that populist politics is not a flash in the pan, not a last howl from cranky old white men, but is likely here to stay for years to come. Advocates of traditional architecture must continue to raise awareness and support for transitioning from the anti-human and ideologically-driven projects of greedy profiteers and hubristic starchitects to the healthier, human-friendly, natural patterns of wholeness and life. Already in recent years, thanks to a waking consciousness and new technologies, increasing attention has been focused on the problems and absurdities of modern architecture. All recorded history, common sense, and biological and psychological data oppose building in such an unnatural and deleterious manner. It is almost as if a group of isolated elites intent on desiccating the soul of humankind have conspired to sever every root to the past, which Alexander Solzhenitsyn knew was a sure way to destroy a people.

Modernism severs one’s ties not just to the past, but also to nature. Patrick Deneen identifies time, place, and nature as the “three cornerstones of human experience” which form “the

basis of culture.”<sup>[3]</sup> Modernism thus declares a war against the three things which give us our felt sense of belonging—a sense of place, a particular culture, and a continuity with the past. The disconnect from nature is especially concerning, since nature is not only the material upon which the creativity of the human being operates, but also the womb out of which mankind emerged in the age-old evolutionary process of becoming. Humanity must never forget its mother no matter how far it strays from home, and the further we distance ourselves from the biophilic affinities of our soul, the unhealthier we become. The *traditional city* is where the soul of humankind reflects in the water of nature and out of which emerges an artifact of supreme beauty. Architecture worth conserving and proliferating will be of nature, and by being natural it will elevate the soul as well.

As Plato showed in the *Republic*, the human soul is tripartite with an intellectual faculty (associated with the head), a spirited faculty (associated with the chest), and an appetitive faculty (associated with the stomach and below). Intellect is directed to truth, the spirited part to honor, and the appetite to pleasure. Ever since the dawn of modernity, the spirited middle portion of the soul has been slowly evacuated, leaving behind a rational ghost in a machine. With this rewiring of his being, modern man finds his reason subordinated to his appetite, and his spirited faculty nearly gone altogether—for Hobbes, reason is enlisted to “find the way to the things desired,” and for Hume, “reason is and always ought to be a slave of the [appetites].” So we see that the modern attitude is indifferent at best to spirit and sees reason as a mere instrument of carnal desire. This is the very opposite of what the ancients intended, since for them a rightly-ordered soul—as well as a rightly-ordered society—could only exist where reason ruled over spirit, and spirit over desire.

Reason and spirit just happen to be those faculties of the

soul which are uniquely human, and which prioritize beauty and culture, striving for self-transcendence in the process. Culture is the nexus between nature and spirit as man elevates that which exists around him and puts it in service of the common good in the most excellent and beautiful way possible. Spirit is that part of the soul which is capable of *passionate attachment to particulars*—be they one's team, one's ethnicity, one's nation, or one's culture. Modernists rely on a lack of spiritedness to advance their anonymous urban sprawl which speckles the landscape with banal glass, steel, and concrete forms, unaffiliated with any particular culture or people. And yet, societies the world over have fallen victim to the massive propaganda campaign convincing them that inhuman architecture is necessary for "progress." The true driver of building this stuff is global industry making an enormous profit out of a product that has nasty consequences.

Only a civilization dangerously deficient in spirit would create buildings devoid of cultural significance, without attention to detail, and lacking substantial beauty. Modernist architecture is an offense to the human spirit because it is not proportional to the dignity of man—but sadly many people are too numb to recognize the insult. Within a de-spirited culture, modern architects are more or less free to pursue their narcissistic and pathological aims without facing too much resistance. We should aim to awaken and rehabilitate that faculty of soul dwelling in each of us which knows it deserves better, healthier, more human environments in which to live and flourish.

Many of the same reasons and emotions behind the movement towards populism in politics are driving the rejection of sterile architecture in favor of the traditional practices and forms society rejected nearly a century ago. These "timeless ways of building" were jettisoned even though they existed precisely because *they had proven to work*. That is, "traditional" architecture is not actually a specific style,



but rather a framework and an adaptive method of building which, like the natural selection process in biological evolution, keeps what works and discards what doesn't.

Why was the time-tested and proven wisdom of thousands of years of building experience rejected? "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," right? Not for the ideology of modernity. The great myth propping up "modernity" is that history is linear, pointing in the direction of perpetual progress, to which we have a moral obligation to pursue. Supposedly, what comes after traditional architecture *must* be better *because* it is newer. Better how? Better for an extractive global construction industry supported by a fanatical ideology rooted in protected academia. Most people, if they're honest, would rather have the "old-style" buildings back, even if they have no idea *why* they prefer them. But there is no questioning the fact that most people *do* prefer the older ways. Let us now take a look at why this is the case, from the expert point of view of mathematician and architectural theorist Nikos Salingaros.

Salingaros has authored many scholarly books and research articles on architecture and urbanism, and we focus on his most recent article, *Architectural Knowledge: Lacking a Knowledge System, the Profession Rejects Healing Environments That Promote Health and Well-being*.<sup>[4]</sup> He describes how architectural knowledge has been developed mostly outside the academic walls of the architectural establishment, largely by non-architects. Mainstream education and practice have meanwhile continued to ignore scientific progress in understanding how architecture affects the health of the buildings' users. This is unconscionable, but it reflects the selfish actions of a system that seeks to protect its privileges by blocking revision and denying that its current ideology and practices are fatally flawed. Such behavior is typical of any profession that has isolated itself from criticism while acquiring hegemonic power; hence the analogy

to political systems established in this essay. In the case of the architectural establishment, catastrophic change is most eagerly welcomed.

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[1] Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*.

[2] Ann Sussman, *Cognitive Architecture*.

[3] Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*.

[4] Nikos Salingaros, Architectural Knowledge: Lacking a Knowledge System, the Profession Rejects Healing Environments That Promote Health and Well-being, *New Design Ideas*, 8(2), 2024.

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Michael Strand is an English tutor and lay philosopher living in Poland with his wife and three children.

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